# IS GOD REALLY DEAD?

## The postmodern approach to religion in Douglas Coupland's novels

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For my Dad, who believed I could do it.

For Helen Cooper, who believed it, too, and helped me made it happen.

For God, who did not smite me for my blasphemy.

Thank you!!

**‘God is dead.’ – Nietzsche**

**‘Nietzsche is dead.’ - God**

# DECLARATION

**"I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Bournemouth University. The work is original except where indicated by special reference in the text. No part of this work has been presented to any other University for examination in the United Kingdom or overseas."**

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# ABSTRACT

The question whether postmodernism can accommodate religiosity and spirituality is a matter of whether postmodernism is inherently nihilistic or whether it is a new, progressive way that, in spite of its central focus on questioning grand narratives and certainties, can provide meaning and hope.

Douglas Coupland, as one typical postmodern writer, has become renowned for exploring religious themes, therefore this paper aims to provide an examination how he manages to bring the concepts of religion and spirituality together with the concept of postmodernism, even manages to provide a postmodern approach that accepts and incorporates religion.

For this debate, three of his novels that relate to this issue have been analysed; Generation X (1991), Life After God (1994) and Hey Nostradamus! (2003).

The analysis focused on identifying potentially nihilistic elements in the novels, and showing how Coupland uses these elements to point out that religious impulses and the need for spirituality are an inherent trait of his characters. He shows that their search for, and gradual discovery of, meaning provides them with hope that is necessary for their survival and for them to keep, or even rediscover the essence of their humanity. More so, it will be demonstrated how their lives, even though they may appear depressing, reflect how real archetypical religious concepts and myths are to them.

It concludes that Coupland's postmodern approach with its increasing focus on myth-creation closely resembles Christian mysticism and echoes e.g. Paul Tillich's theology. This way it does indeed emerge that postmodernism and religion are not mutually exclusive concepts per se, but that postmodernism can be a new vessel to explore religions and religious concepts, that includes and respects the life conditions of contemporary society and seeks to give an understanding of how these religious concepts are and can be embedded in a postmodern society.

# INTRODUCTION

Douglas Coupland is one of the postmodern writers who had a huge impact and success in popular culture. His novels struck a unique chord with his audience, meshing philosophy and the condition of life in contemporary society in a way that many readers can relate to. The Canadian's novels are significant because they have often been cited and used as a reference for describing postmodernism. Most of his novels feature classic postmodern characteristics, his themes feature postmodernist ideas and his characters often have postmodern mindsets.

Coupland is also important as his novels have often been referred to by religious groups, because selling faith to 'Generation X' has been a major concern for evangelical churches these days, and because his characters often communicate forms of a new spirituality which helps understand the contemporary climate and attitude towards religion (Tomlinson 1995; Codrington 1998; Stockman 2001; Lynch 2002). This relates to another debate his novels have stirred. Even though Coupland is a postmodern writer, and the argument is that postmodernism is essentially nihilist and is said to reject religion, religious themes, imagery and symbolism trail like a red line through Coupland's novels, subtly as well as overtly. Coupland's fascination with the subject of religion and spirituality and the search for meaning in life in the context of a postmodern setting has become increasingly obvious over the years, which can be followed as a development in his novels. This is especially relevant to the debate of good postmodernism versus bad (i.e. nihilist) postmodernism (Bhogal 1995), because it is questionable whether a postmodernism that deals with deep and existential questions and needs can be brushed off as nihilist and vain.

This study will argue that even though Coupland's novels contain elements of nihilism, Coupland uses them as a stylistic device in order to communicate a message

that emphasises hope and the search and elemental need for spirituality, for meaning and hope in life. This way, instead of condoning a message of nihilism, Coupland expresses through his novels that the creation of myth, of narratives, the search for meaning and the following and expression of one's religious impulses are an innate part of being human and cannot be replaced, which completely opposes the claim of nihilism that religion – or God – is dead.

This study will analyse three of his key novels – Generation X (1991), Life After God (1994) and Hey Nostradamus! (2003) – by identifying these elements of nihilism and explaining to what end Coupland uses them, as well as what his style communicates, to get a positive message across. Also, it will interpret what these novels imply about whether and how the concept of religion can be incorporated in the concept of postmodernism.

All three novels have been chosen for a reason. Generation X is Coupland's debut and includes first hints of spirituality – imagery and themes – without mentioning them overtly. Life After God has moved on to address overtly how a generation that has grown up without religion deals with its religious impulses and seeks to make sense of the world, its place in it and its own existence. Hey Nostradamus!, one of Coupland's latest novels, is relevant because it deals with the big questions in life – love, death, suffering, hope – while challenging the contemporary American Christian subculture as having become inadequate in dealing with them, and as having missed the point of their existence, this way challenging traditionalised and 'mechanicalised' religiosity.

Although these three novels have largely received enthusiastic reviews, there have been negative reactions. This is relevant, as this feeds the very debate about postmodernist nature being constructive or nihilist. Especially Life after God, the most

postmodern out of the three novels, was received with 'mixed feelings'. Some slashed it as *"depressing", "confusing", "written from the perspective of navel-gazing fools"* and devoid of *"any though-provoking ideas"*. However, there is a common theme in the overwhelmingly positive reviews, explaining its appeal: He strikes a chord with his readers in describing human fears, hopes and despairs, or altogether the human condition as it manifests itself in contemporary society, to the extent that he is often described as 'the voice or spokesman of (t)his generation' (Gilbert 1994). *"I can fully relate to almost every story...it's pretty much...me"*, writes one reader, echoing many (Review 1a). Another states: *"this is great to read if you are depressed… not because it will make you happy, but at least you will know there is somebody out there who feels and thinks like you do, so at least[you know] you're not crazy"* (review 2). Undeniably, Douglas Coupland's novels are seen as symptomatic of their time. It suggests there is truth to the idea that the postmodern generations are more introspective – or narcissistic – and the books' success shows that they like being understood, no matter how depressing the revelations are. This, ironically, manages to give consolation and therefore, hope: *„The book will tell… you… about life not really being real anymore. Part of the biggest joy is feeling again with the narrator. It's powerful. It's really joyful"* (Review 1b).

In order to have a discussion, however, some key terms need to be defined. Postmodernism is a much discussed concept not only in the world of literature. However, actually defining it has been, time and again, a problem, especially in regards to literary theory and philosophy. In simple terms, *"postmodernism is… a term which attempts to describe the condition of contemporary society coming to grips with the failings of modernity"* (anon[1]). Scholarly arguments normally rely on adequate definitions, but as Linda Hutcheon pointed out, *"[postmodernism] takes the form of a*

*self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement"* (1989, p1). In fact, one of the most prominent features of postmodernism is that it *resists* definition (Bennett and Royle 1995, p178). The problem with definitions is that they impose limitations, suggesting what something is not, and that is what definitional attempts of postmodernism, if at all, managed to achieve. Bauman suggests that *"the postmodern mind is altogether less excited than its modern adversary by the prospect… of enclosing the world in a grid of neat categories and clear-cut divisions"* (1997, p167). Therefore, it is best to describe postmodernism with a set of traits and characteristics through which it manifests itself.

Postmodernism is *"an attack on the myth of modernity"* (Mestrovic cited Smethurst 1996), its clear-cut certainties and grand narratives of science, progress, but also religious doctrine (Hutcheon 1988, Lyotard 1984). Its critical stance derives from its development out of an era that witnessed the collapse and failure of grand narratives, which aimed to explain how the world worked and which doctrines should consequently be subscribed to as 'true', such as Marxism, human progress through science and rationalism, as well as capitalism and religion. Instead it states that the world is much more complex and contradictory than these narratives claim.

Stevenson (1993) points out that *"postmodernism extends modernist uncertainty, often by assuming that reality, if it exists at all, is unknowable or inaccessible through a language grown detached from it"* (cited Smethurst 1996), but unlike modernism, postmodernism has made its peace with this. Because it sees reality as a matter of perception rather than believing in an independent, objective reality, no narrative is more legitimate than the other. This is especially relevant to this debate, as a central feature of Coupland's novels is their portrayal of how these grand narratives have failed mankind, and how this impacted the characters. His characters have lost their faith in them, after realising the emptiness of their participation in the capitalist 'rat race'

(Generation X) and through being haunted by the impending nuclear holocaust of the Cold War years as a product of human rationality and science (Generation X, Life After God). Not even religion can provide them with comfort or answers when they face death and suffering (Hey Nostradamus!). The only comfort and sense they achieve is through their own narratives, stories and epiphanies which prevent them from 'cognitive chaos' and help them understand the world based on their own experiences, not what others have dictated upon them. Therefore, the question postmodernism – and also Coupland's characters – ask is no longer 'is it true?', but 'does it work?'.

The disillusionment that led to the rejection of the grand narratives led to a perpetuating scepticism about and distrust in the notion of certainties (Hutcheon 1988, p57), which essentially describes the key condition of Coupland's characters. They are aware of the equal validity of small narratives, and stress the importance of their individuality, and this pluralistic individualism, while accepted and embraced by postmodernism, leads to the self-doubt that is characteristic for them, and consequently to a hyperawareness and hyper-self-consciousness, as there is no more yardstick (i.e. grand narrative) to help them assert the validity of their opinion. The postmodern mindset is therefore extremely introspective, which is sometimes negatively described as narcissism by its critics, as the reviews of Coupland's novels have shown.

What makes postmodernism appear so nihilistic and idle is because it admits its own fallibility. Its doubtful relativism creates irony, even sarcasm, and in a worst-case scenario, nihilism and apathy. This all-pervading distrust then leads to dissociation between the self and its environment, also called alienation, and indeed, being ironic and alienated are more features of Coupland's characters.

Indeed, possessing these characteristics can let postmodernism – and Coupland's novels – appear as negative. Much of the academic focus seems to have been on the

downside of postmodernism, or *"bad postmodernism"* (Bhogal 1995), which expresses itself in the vain play of depthless images which *"do not represent anything transcendental"* (Bhogal 1995). This perceived superficiality threatens to lead to nothing but unthinking apathy. Some scholars, such as Habermas (1981) and Bordo (cited in Giroux, 1994), have described the postmodern mindset as essentially nihilist, believing in nothing and doubting everything. Bauman writes that *"the sin of postmodernity is…[that it] has done next to nothing to support its defiance of past pretence with a new practical antidote for old poison"* (1992, p xvii). Even Lyotard, usually a defender of postmodernism, states that *"there is a sort of sorrow in the* zeitgeist *[which] can express itself by …reactionary attitudes…but never by a positive orientation offering a new perspective"* (cited in During, 1999, p144), which is echoed by many (e.g. Thompson 1996). This is an important aspect of Coupland's novels, because the characters are sceptic of grand narratives and do not have any alternative to replace the system they reject. This is why they have been accused of being passive 'malcontents'; however, this study will show that they *have* found an alternative lifestyle at least on an individual level, and know that the solution for them is to recover their essential sense of being human and being alive, or even, reconnect to their soul. After all, merely implementing another grand narrative to replace the old would equal 'making the same mistake again'. The characters are not about inventing another grand theory – they merely try to listen to their own needs and follow their instincts. The above mentioned negative attitude towards postmodernism, while it may have valid points, ignores what postmodernism – via, for instance, these characters, has to offer. Here it shows how central the concept of postmodernism is to Coupland's novels, and how it sets the basis for the debate.

One paradox, however, which will be a major point of this argument in regards to the view of religion in Coupland's novels, is that grand narratives may be rejected, yet they are also sought after, because it is part of human nature to try to make sense of life. Religion has been one vehicle for this, and some argue that postmodernism has discarded religion. One argument of this study will be that this is not entirely true, as religious impulses, recognised or not, paraphrased and defamiliarised or not, still play a big part in the characters' lives and demand an outlet. Of course, here, religion needs to be defined. It must be pointed out that any definition of religion is reductionist, as it is such a personal issue depending on a personal understanding of the term. The Latin word *'religio'* literally means 'to re-tie", "re-bond" or "re-link", used in conjunction with the divine; it can then be said that religion is man's attempt to touch, understand and rebond with the divine, which can be, but is not necessarily linked with institutional religion and religious doctrine. In this study, religion will be treated as rather a transcendental phenomenon, an all-pervading universal truth just beyond the grasp of expression and perhaps even perception, based on Paul Tillich's theology of a greater reality which could be called 'God' (Lynch 2002), which finds various manifestations in Western culture. To be more specific, this study will refer mainly to Western Christian thought, as this is the predominant religion in the cultural setting of the novels. Of special interest is the concept of 'epiphany' (Greek: *epiphania* = manifestation, in Britannica online), meaning *"a comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realization"* (anon[2]), as this is the main mode of 'insight' in the novels to be discussed. This is again linked to the concept of transcendence, which does play a big role in Coupland's novels (Coupland, cited in Draper 1997), and it does challenge a nihilistic interpretation of postmodernism. It suggests that postmodernism can embrace the concept of an absolute truth, however, that it always needs to be seen directly linked

to an individual and his or her life, not as an overarching formula to life that is supposedly valid to everyone in the same way.

This dissertation will argue against the nihilistic view that postmodernism has nothing to offer in terms of hope, depth and meaning of life, but that they can reawaken the questions in readers which may have been dismissed as perhaps insignificant. Postmodernism in these novels may appear as depressing, even nihilistic, as they portray the agony of emptiness, deadness, nothingness in the life of the characters, their despair as a response to this life, and the lack of answers they find.

However, this condition can raise awareness to the cause of that depression contemporary life may bring with it, nudging the reader to resume a journey which s/he may have given up on a while ago. The little moments of 'truth', the glimpses of hope that occur in the novel, promise that this search may be worth it. The novels do not preach, do not instil doctrine but trigger questions, demanding of the reader to make up his/her own mind, emphasising the importance of  This does support the idea of postmodernism as an individualistic mindset.

In this paper, three novels by Coupland will be analysed by identifying some of the most significant characteristics of postmodernism in them, followed by the argument  in what way these characteristics create either nihilism and depression or a spiritual awakening and hope.

The novels will be discussed in chronological order, to explore whether there is a form of development in them in terms of approaching spirituality, religiosity and religion. This is especially significant because Hey Nostradamus!, the third novel to be discussed, has been labelled as a piece of work suggesting Coupland has 'grown up',

outgrown his midtwenties angst and returned and accepted, perhaps, a more conservative mindset.

This dissertation will argue that this is not the case, because even though Hey Nostradamus! is largely set in a conservative Christian subculture, it does not condone it. On the contrary: everything in this culture is challenged and questioned. The characters constantly question their own views, are self-conscious of their own flaws and the flaws of the teachings they received, because these cannot live up to reality, which suggests that doctrine detached from interaction with reality is pointless. The approach towards religion in this third book, even though the questions may not be new (although still valid), is still postmodern. All Coupland did was to approach the subject from a different angle: in this, the characters have not grown up without religion, but rather, in the midst of it, in the typical American culture that includes often strict religiosity and religious traditions, but that they, completely in the spirit of postmodernism, question it.

It will then be concluded that, in spite of its nihilistic tendencies, the postmodern approach to religion, as shown in Coupland's novels, can offer hope and optimism, and, in fact, a whole new perspective on religion that is far from Nietzsche's claim of God being dead (1887, cited in Hayes 2002).

# CHAPTER 1 - GENERATION X

> *"I have often wondered why some stories are so fascinating. It is possible that stories have power over us because they are compelling us to recognise something in ourselves."*
> (Sarup 1996, p39)

Generation X (1991) is the first and most significant novel by Coupland, and presents a starting point in his writing as well as a starting point for this debate. Generation X is also one of the most poignant novels of postmodernism, not least because it coined the term for a whole generation and because it has been referred to often as describing this generation and the *zeitgeist* in which it lives. Churches such as Willow Creek in Illinois, USA, and youth pastors such as Graeme Codrington use this book to understand how to reach this generation with their messages (Codrington 1998). Also, Generation X rather is a social commentary in story form than it is a traditional novel: originally, Coupland was contracted to write a non-fiction guide to Generation X (Chung 1995), which is highlighted by his use of statistics in the appendix of the novel, but instead he turned it into the story of three mid-20s society drop outs who comment on and characterise the society they are shaped by and which they are trying to escape. Andy, Dag and Claire are the faces of this generation, commenting from the outside and this way defamiliarising the lifestyles the reader may take for granted.

Generation X has been criticised for being negative, and this chapter will consider these arguments. However, finally, it will argue against this supposed negativity by showing that, in spite of some elements which can be interpreted as nihilistic, the message of Generation X is inherently positive and optimistic. Coupland shows this for instance in how the characters break the bonds with a society that objectified and atomised them, and resort to a simpler life in which they gradually discover their individuality and an identity that is not determined by consumerism, and this way excavate their humanity and sense of wonder.

Even though religion is not addressed directly in this novel, it will be argued that first hints of religious impulses can already be identified, which will, in the analysis of the following novels, be elaborated on. The search for identity that is central to this novel can be seen as a prerequisite, if not an aspect of the search for meaning. This is aimed to prove that even though Coupland uses elements of nihilism to emphasise the spiritual state of his characters, his real intent is to emphasise that religious impulses and the search for meaning and purpose is an innate trait of humanity which cannot be ignored, abandoned or replaced.

Generation X has been accused of being nihilistic for several reasons. Firstly, because it appears at first look that the characters deal with the discontents of their lives in passive, even destructive ways. Displeased with the direction their lives are headed, determined by spirit-crushing yuppie careers, which is most explicitly exemplified by Dag in the chapter *"I am not a target market"* (pp20-27), they all move to Palm Springs. They believe something "*has gone* very very *cuckoo"* (p69) with society. They spend their free time criticising the world they live in by telling each other stories which reflect their fears of a nuclear holocaust (p71) and the deadly effects of a destroyed environment (p9). Dag is even prone to occasional bouts of vandalism (p5, pp133-4), supposedly as an act of revenge against the recklessness of the parent generation: *"This is not the first time he has impulsively vandalized like this. The car…bore a bumper sticker saying WE'RE SPENDING OUR CHILDREN'S INHERITANCE, a message that I suppose irked Dag..."* (p5).

Malicious tongues have described Generation Xers as *"cynics, whiners, drifters, and malcontents"* (Morton, 2003), who witnessed the rise of patchwork families and grew up with a sense of impending doom through economic instability, political changes and the threats of environmental destruction and nuclear holocausts (Morton

2003; Codrington 1998; Lynch 2002), and who *"live with the very realistic expectation that something bad will probably happen to them… They are alienated…"* (Mahedi and Bernadi, cited Lynch 2002, p17). Coupland's characters Andy, Dag and Claire seem to exemplify this. For instance, Claire comes from a vast dysfunctional patchwork family where members fake heart attacks for attention (p43), to which she only responds with cynicism: *"He does this three times a year – just as long as he has a big audience"* (p43). It seems that the characters have nothing constructive to offer, but instead resort to a passive, navel-gazing, cynical pessimism.

Secondly, even the stories they tell each other are pregnant with disillusionment and devoid of any comfort, so it can be questioned as to how far they are a way of coping or coming up with a constructive alternative. Many of these stories are (post)modernised fairy tales which end on a cynical or tragic note. Completely in the spirit of postmodernism, the style of these stories is "*concerned with collage, pastiche and quotation, with the mixing of styles which remain… historically distinct"* (Strinati 1995, p234). For instance, the story in the chapter *"Shopping is not creating"* (pp45-52) is a mix of science fiction and romance. It is full of pop culture references, many of which are undermined in their original meaning. For instance, Buck the Astronaut is (as opposed to Buck Rogers, the TV space hero) a liar who uses the smitten daughters of his hostess to save his own life. Other pop culture signs, such as the references to *"TV game shows"* (p46), *"Easy Bake ovens and Nancy Drew mystery novels"* (p48) function to trivialise the setting and mood of the story. Coupland uses these elements to parody the idealist formula of these stories, reflecting the cynicism and disillusionment of the storyteller, the loss of his/her faith in goodness prevailing that is normally the central message of fairy tales, and their incongruence with reality. According to Giroux (1994),

*"reality seems too despairing [for Xers] to care about"*, however, it is questionable as to how far their stories are meant to bring comfort.

Even in the few moments where the characters use the stories as escapism, for instance, when *"Dag and Claire pretend they inhabit that other, more welcoming, universe"* (p19), it is only a passive notion which does not really seem to accomplish anything to change their lives for the better, letting them rather appear as the under-accomplishing slackers Generation Xers have been accused of being.

Thirdly, a nothingness and vanity pervades the story, which will again be explored in Life After God. This nothingness is a theme common to postmodernism and largely responsible for it to be accused of being nihilistic. It appears, for instance, in Graham Swift's Waterland, which speaks of *"the great flat monotony of reality, the wide empty space of reality"* (1983, p17). Bauman attempts to justify why metanarratives have been discredited, saying: *"the stories lived by modern men and women are, indeed, engrossing"* (1997, p176), however, in this novel this is precisely what the characters are missing ("Here *the three of us merely eat a lunch box on a land that is barren"*, p19). The plot has no significant ups and downs, no real climaxes and turning points; only trivialities seem to happen to the characters, randomly, without being linked. The only disruptions are illusionary, in the form of stories the characters tell each other, and one could argue the characters have to invent these stories in order to forget about the emptiness of their lives and the drudgery of their *"McJobs"* (p6). Therefore it is questionable whether their escape to the desert really made a difference.

Fourthly, even though they have escaped to 'find themselves', much of their ways of gaining identity are still determined by the consumerism, the commodity fetishism they condemn and tried to leave behind. For instance, to Claire, her

*"apartment must be perfect"*, and she *"will go to great lengths to get the desired effect"* (p84-5). It is filled with decorative items (p85) which Dag finds *"charming"* (p84), but which denies his former criticism of *"buy[ing]…[and] aquir[ing] so much* stuff" (p28). Also, Claire seems to find her identity through the commodity of fashion: *"she likes retro looks"* (p18). And Andy's response to the *"coiled-up antique bead belt with GRAND CANYON written on it in bead-ese"*, he at one point receives from Dag, is: *"Dag! This is perfect! Total 1940s"* (p86).

Generation X questions the idea whether and to what extent one can rid oneself of one's cultural conditioning. The characters fail to live up to their own standards, as they seem unable to fully escape the consumerist culture they came from.

All this seems to confirm the negative view of postmodernism, which sees it as nothing but a superficial play on words and signs, that at best the characters' verbal interaction is to 'hear themselves speak', a narcissistic and passive business, creating a culture that is unable to provide deeper meaning and *"advance social change"* (Best & Kellner 1991, p10).

Yet, in spite of the existence of elements in Generation X that can be seen as exemplifying negative or 'bad' postmodernism (Bhogal 1995), its central message is inherently positive. This is partly shown in the response the novel received from its readers. For instance, one writes: ***"****There is just something so appealing about the journey of the protagonists that you can read it and feel like you've escaped from life too"* (anon[3]).

It is necessary to look past the immediate nihilism to show that Generation X does have something positive to offer.

Firstly, even though dropping out of society may at first appear as only a weak and passive criticism of it, Coupland – who has repeatedly written about society dropouts, for instance in Life After God and Miss Wyoming (2000) – shows that the purpose of Andy's, Claire's and Dag's escape does achieve something positive. While nothing may be changed on a large scale, the characters change what they *can* change, which is their own involvement with the society they fled from. They have taken their identity development into their own hands. Coupland shows this through their search for something deeper, for an identity that is their own and not constructed by consumerism. They want to rid themselves of the conditioning of their 'old life', which they describe as: *"We had compulsions that made us confuse shopping with creativity"* (p14).
It is in their stories about their former lives where their fears and criticisms of this society emerge. For instance, Andy fears the loss of his self and of individuality in a mass culture in general, which crystallises for instance when he quotes his brother: *"Where you're from feels sort of irrelevant these days ('since everyone has the same stores in their mini-malls', according to my younger brother, Tyler)"* (p5). Dag describes his work life as something where people work like cattle in *"veal-fattening pens"* (p23) where corporal greed ignores the *"Sick Building Syndrome"* making workers ill (p24), and his former boss in a cynical-mocking voice:

> Martin, like most embittered ex-hippies, is a yuppie, and I have no idea how you're supposed to relate to these people…. Dickoids like Martin who snap like wolverines on speed when they can't have a restaurant's window seat in the non-smoking section with cloth napkins (p25).

He expresses his alienation from these people and his fear of becoming like them by describing them as life-less, as *"androids that never get jokes"*, as *"empty hologram people"* that *"calculate"*, that *"have no aura"* (p25). Their escape is their attempt to rid themselves of *"the taint marketing had given"* them (p33), in search for something deeper they are still unable to name but can sense and yearn for nonetheless.

Coupland communicates this best by having them tell their stories of who they used to be as a contrast, what they were like when they first came to the desert, emphasising this with a tone of contempt. As Dag describes:

> I was…one of those putzes you see driving a sports car down the financial district every morning with the roof down and a baseball cap on his head, cocksure and pleased with how frisky and complete he looks (p22).

Comparing the beginning of the novel to the end, one can see a definite improvement in their life quality – not in terms of commodities, but in terms of living life. When the characters first move to the desert, Coupland describes their state metaphorically as

> We arrived here, speckled in sores and zits, our colons so tied in knots that we never thought we'd have bowel movement again. Our systems had stopped working, jammed with the odor of copy machines, Wite-Out, the smell of bond paper and the endless stress of pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause. (p14)

and juxtaposes this almost immediately with Andy's comment: *"now that we live here in the desert, things are much, much better"* (p14). This is finally reinforced in the end of the novel for Andy's character when he experiences an epiphanic, even hierophanic moment in a field, when a group of mentally retarded teenagers offer him comfort after he has been scratched by a bird.

> The man with the beard came over to yank them away. But how could I explain to him, this well-intentioned gentleman, that this discomfort, no this pain, I was experiencing was no problem at all, that, in fact, this crush of love was unlike anything I had ever known (p207).

What the characters are actually trying to find is never made explicit, but the paragraphs suggest that it is the feeling of being alive, of being whole, being individual that they are looking for. In many ways they reflect Ted Hughes' belief that

> the story of the mind exiled from nature is the story of Western man. It is the story of his progressively more desperate search for mechanical and rational and symbolic securities, which will substitute for the spirit-confidence of the Nature he has lost (Hughes cited Scigaj 1983, p132),

and that this is precisely what Generation X's main characters have grown aware of and try to

combat. Coupland communicates the 'ineffable' by using these characters' stories, parables and metaphors, trying to, as Lyotard put it, *"present…the unpresentable… in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable"* (cited in Bhogal 1995).

For instance, when Andy says

> we are all born with a letter inside us, and… only if we are true to ourselves, may we be allowed to read it before we die… Mr Takamichi had somehow mistaken the Monroe photo …for the letter inside himself, and…I, myself, was in peril of making some sort of similar mistake (p65)… So I came down here… to try and read the letter inside me (p66),

it is clear that Andy is on a search for himself, which reminds strongly of the spiritual quests characteristic for many religions. A move to the desert or wilderness in order to clear one's mind, to *"erase all traces of history from [one's] past]"* (Andy) or *"empty [one's] brain"* (Claire) (p41), is an old religious image that is not exclusive to Christianity (i.e. Jesus' 40 days in the desert; Matthew 4:1-11), but also appears in the religions of the Native Americans, as a retreat to the wilderness in search of a vision, or meditation in Buddhism.

It is here that a religious theme emerges in the novel, something which may come as surprising considering that postmodernism is supposed to reject grand narratives such as religion. Neither of the characters comes from a religious background (in fact, Coupland makes the alienation from traditional Christianity explicit in Life After God (1994) and Hey Nostradamus! (2003)). Even though Bauman argues that *"the case of the 'innateness' of the religious drive in the universal human predicament… has not been proven"* (1997, p170), it seems to be suggested that these spiritual urges are not necessarily tied to a grand narrative but are simply part of being human.

Of course, it may be argued that Claire uses fashion to express herself. But while Sarup points out that "*consumption is a… way of gaining identity*" (1996, p105), the

characters reject blind consumerism and the idea of being classified and thus dehumanised as *"a target market"* (p20; Draper 2003), Coupland points out that feeling alive is still possible outside a consumerist hedonism of which the postmodern generation is often accused. For instance, Claire's friend Elvissa asks "*I want to hear one small moment from your life that proves you're really alive"* but she makes sure to say that *"fake yuppie experiences that you had to spend money on… don't count"* (pp104-5). They believe that money does not buy a life, which Dag 'proves' by eating the $50 bill he wins in a bet (p21). Even though the characters use pop culture images and products to express themselves, as a way of referencing or as an interpretative framework (Strinati 1995, p239), they do not allow it to *control* their identity. According to Sarup, *"objects are actively used rather than passively consumed"* (1996, p126), which in this case is the postmodern technique of *"bricolage"* (Collins 1992, p337) which suggests that this play with signs is anything but empty. Claire, for instance, uses retro looks as a way of creating identity for herself (p18) – as Stuart Hall suggests, *"to signify who [she is]"* (cited Sarup 1996, p125), a*"retro-nostalgia"*, as Strinati puts it (1995, p230), to express her yearning for a mythical time she perceives as previous to man's loss of innocence. By letting Claire consciously wear cliché outfits, Coupland also turns the idea of fashion as a form of identification into irony, echoing Sarup's view that: *"persons are more than what they wear, that there is the possibility of multiple identities within the same individual… [which is] characteristic of the transition from modernity to postmodernity"* (Sarup, 1996, p126). But since Claire also likes these looks, it achieves the typical postmodern contradiction and ambiguity, which is playful and therefore does not give consumerism the importance it perhaps might like to have.

Also, the characters' move to the desert was not merely exchanging one rut for the other. The characters have chosen this life for a reason. They moved because there are no other voices in the desert to impose an identity upon them:

> We live small lives on the periphery; we are marginalized and there's a great deal in which we choose not to participate. We wanted silence and we have that silence now (p14).

Many may see that as 'slacking', but that is certainly only the case if they support the dominant values of a capitalist society. To Andy, Dag and Claire, the accelerated life they previously experienced had no 'nutritional value'. While they work low-prestige jobs, these are not jobs they define themselves by. The difference between their old life and their new life is that *"they work so that they can enjoy a life outside of work"* (Codrington 1998), in contrast to their old lives where their job *was* their life. They escaped the work drone mentality of their old life because *"identity is always related to what one is not – the Other… identity is only conceivable in and through difference"* (Sarup 1996, p47).

Secondly, the characters' storytelling serves more than the purpose of 'whining' and entertaining. The characters need stories to make sense of life, of who they are and what they feel. For instance, when Andy demands to know: *"Dag, what the hell are you doing in Nevada?"* and Dag struggles to explain, Andy suggests: "*Then make a story out of it!"* (p77), which enables Dag to communicate what motivated him. Andy and Dag also explain why they moved to the desert in story form. It seems easier for them to communicate their feelings into the context of a narrative than phrasing it in one sentence. Here, stories serve as a parable, or metaphor.

Furthermore, the stories function to create a bond between the characters that ultimately makes up for their previous atomisation and loneliness and perhaps even replaces the bond they felt they were lacking in their families. According to Codrington (1998), one

typical characteristic of Generation Xers is that they bond via *"common interests"*, and their friends often "*act as surrogate families"*. Claire expresses this by saying, *"I'd like to go somewhere… and be with people who wanted to do the same thing"* (p41), and Andy explains: *"this is why the three of us left our lives behind us and came to the desert – to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process"* (p10). This is also echoed in Hey Nostradamus!, where Jason and Heather are bonded by the secret fictional world they share.

Also, the three characters' stories are saturated with pop culture signs not just to trivialise, but, more so, to provide a framework to relate to each other rather than through conventional clichés and phrases. For instance, *"Snoopy plush toys"* and "*Nancy Drew mystery novels"* (p48) are accessories given to the imaginary sisters' room in the Buck the Astronaut story to provide a shared link of identification. Bauman argues that *"in the world of imagined communities, the struggle for survival is a struggle for access to the human imagination"* (1992, pxx). Dag, Andy and Claire are such an imagined community, to which people like Tobias and Claire's and Andy's family are outsiders. Coupland shows this by how they treat Tobias: *"Dag and I, both on our stomachs, look at each other, grimace, then tell Tobias in stereo to 'get a life'. …"What are* you *looking at, yuppie boy?"* (p103).

Furthermore, their stories help them to face and vent their fears and disillusionments and in this way take on the form of discursive therapy. For instance, through his character Otis, Dag faces his fear of a nuclear holocaust (*"maybe I can free myself of Bomb anxiety"* (p780)), saying:

> …atomic bomb mushroom clouds really are much smaller than we make them out to be in our minds. And he derived comfort from this realization – a silencing of the small whispering nuclear voices that had been speaking continually in his subconscious since kindergarten. There was nothing to worry about after all (p79).

Andy, the narrating character, and also Claire, address the function of storytelling more directly. To him, telling stories is part of finding out who he is and what happened to him. Just as philosopher Madan Sarup (1996) asked himself: *"why am I writing? Is my writing an attempt to put it all together? Does one have to rewrite the past in order to understand it?"* (p92), Claire believes that *"it's not healthy to live life as a succession of isolated cool little moments"*. The three characters agree that *"this is why the three of us left our lives behind and came to the desert – to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process"* (p10). What they seem to say in this is that a sense of continuity, purpose, perhaps even a sense of plot to their lives, something which has, in the 'olden days', been provided by the certainties of grand narratives and which is now, after their disintegration, necessary for them to survive. Montali (cited Popham 2004) argues that *"in times of war and crisis we are hungry for security and certainty. The stories feed that hunger for certainty. We can't do without them."* Considering that Andy, Dag and Claire have grown up in a time of uncertainty, it makes perfect sense that storytelling is central to their lives. Coupland shows this way that storytelling is a creative way for them to deal with their problems, and not just a sign of empty escapism or endorsing nihilism.

Stories also help to recreate myths, which had been in decline under the oppression of the reductionist rationalism during modernity. The consequent disillusionment is painful to Dag, Andy and Claire, and they combat this by *"remythologising"* their lives (Worsfold 2000). This is shown, for example, by Andy, when he gives directions in English to the Japanese tourists even though he can speak Japanese: *"why ruin their desert USA fantasy?"* (p60).

After all, story-telling and myth-making are "*a primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more-or-less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social*

*order, and the meaning of the individual's life"* (Cupitt cited Coupe 1997, p6; also Bettelheim 1991). Seen from this angle, Andy's, Dag's and Claire's stories can even be read as quasi-religious parables, replacing the old religious myths which have been discarded by a secularised society. This is especially evident when considering the intertextuality of not only their stories, but the whole novel with religious texts. The recurrence of biblical themes, such as the move to the desert to escape spiritual death and seek spiritual renewal, the ideas of coping with death, apocalypse (e.g. the nuclear blast), of love and betrayal, sacrifice and resurrection (e.g. Buck the Astronaut and his Texlahoma girlfriend) may be subtle and lost on some readers, but are undeniably present. For example, the white bird in the burnt field (p206) is a symbol of hope and renewal, or resurrection (Pugh 2000, p29), and it is no coincidence that it is there that Andy experiences an epiphany of hope and joy. Another religious myth that occurs here is the death to an old life and the rising to a new life, which Andy is just undertaking by moving to Mexico, and which is a theme that emerges in Life After God, as well. These are old myths in a contemporary setting that is more relevant to these characters, which suggests that the 'big questions' that religion used to address are still relevant, even though religion as a metanarrative may have been discarded. The stories, in this case small narratives which characterise postmodernism, certainly fulfil the same functions, as they are a way of *"mak[ing] you…able to cope not only with what's going on now but whatever tsunami it is that's coming toward us in the future"* (Coupland cited Watkins 2003). Therefore, the point of storytelling and myth-creation is not escapism but the creation of hope. That Coupland sends up the classic formulas of fairy tales suggests that myths and stories which do not reflect the experiences of the narrator fail to serve their purpose of providing hope and comfort or an explanation.

Altogether, storytelling is an important tool for the characters to explore themselves and rebuild their lives, which is anything but nihilistic.

All in all, the supposed negativity and pessimism of the characters, instead of suggesting nihilism, is rather a symptom of a society that is ill. For instance, Dag replies to the accusation of being negative:

> Negative? Moi? I think realistic might be a better word. You mean to tell me we can drive all the way here from L.A. and see maybe ten thousand square miles of shopping malls, and you don't have maybe just the weentsiest inkling that something, somewhere, has gone very very cuckoo? (p69)

The characters' comments rather serve as a form of diagnosis of the ills of society – as a first step to healing. To them, the world they live in is not just the world 'as it is' – which is what nihilism suggests – or the world as it should be. To them it is a sick world that needs healing.

Many aspects of living in modern society which may be taken for granted by readers are 'sent up' and defamiliarised by Coupland, using sarcastic humour. His characters criticise society in a creative way by seeing through its 'warped' mechanisms as a first step and inventing truisms about it, such as: *"we spend our youth attaining wealth, and our wealth attaining youth"* (p12). Coupland also emphasises and achieves this is by creating slogans, partly as chapter titles (*"Purchased experiences don't count"* (p96)), partly embedded in graphics (*"You might not count in the new order"* (p184)) that break up the pages along with new terms like *"Bambification"* (p54), *"poverty jet set"* (p7) and *"café minimalism"* (p122) that describe phenomena of that time in a way that challenges and mocks them. In fact, the slogans echo Jenny Holzer's 'Truism' project that started in the late 70s, a discursive art project consisting of slogans such as *"AN ELITE IS INEVITABLE"* which were *"pasted to walls and lampposts"* throughout Manhattan (Geyh 2002, p173), using the idea of advertising slogans to *"provoke thought"* (Geyh 2002, p174) and invite conversation, and to serve *"as an ironic commentary on… impassioned political discourse, or even, as Holzer herself suggests, "as a caution about what happens when people are whipped to a frenzy, and don't think about what they are being fed""* (Geyh 2002, p176). These 'soundbites' are merely

meant to describe old phenomena in a new way – defamiliarise – to make the reader think, not to provide pre-packed answers, something which postmodernism defies. Nihilism is this way identified as a problem, a symptom, not something which is condoned or advertised by this novel.

In conclusion, the negativity in this novel is actually a tool Coupland uses to show what this society turns people into: either they are people who play by the rules and gain from this system, but become hollow and 'lose their soul' over it, or they become people who see through it and are pushed to the verge of a breakdown, or to extreme reactions in order to cope.
While their contradictory attitude can be viewed as undermining itself in its effectiveness to communicate their plight, it really just acknowledges their realistic approach to life.

Dag, Andy and Claire have chosen their new lives and make the best of them. They want to live for their lives and not their jobs, they have become cynical about the capitalist world and the work drones it creates, the damages it does to health, the way it alienates people from a real purpose, a real life, but is all about 'plastic culture', masked personalities, roles to play to fit into the system in order to 'make it'.

It shows that having an identity and finding oneself is a crucial part of life, and that materialism cannot replace the notion of spirituality and a deeper meaning in life, which utterly revokes the suggestion Coupland's novels may be nihilistic. These impulses are as essential to human existence as eating and breathing. As Simon and Melia state, *"a myth that works well is as real as food, tools, and shelter are"* (cited Coupe 1997, p69).

One main part of this chapter was to show that many of the characters' impulses can be interpreted as religious, but are not overtly stated as such. The search for identity,

for the sense of being alive and of what it means to be alive, can be seen as being of religious nature, yet they are not overtly identified as such in this chapter and presented in a defamiliarised way, by placing them into current society and pop culture. However, the same or similar impulses are central to the characters in Life After God, and the following chapter will argue that in this novel, they are identified as religious, which presents a development in Coupland's treatment of the subject.

# 2 - LIFE AFTER GOD

> *"Truth is… a fixed point… not a point of arrival (not the end point of the learning process) but the starting point of all knowledge, a point that cannot be created but only found, recovered if missed – or lost… the point was fixed before I was born, I myself was 'fixed' by it before I began to think of points or of anything else – yet finding this point is still my task… I must seek that point actively, and then choose what is not a matter of choice: to embrace voluntarily the inevitable, to submit by choice, in full consciousness, to that which has been present all along in my subconscious."* (Bauman 1999, pxxxv)

Life After God (1994) continues the search for self and for meaning in life that has been the main theme of Generation X (1991), however, it expands on it by diagnosing not only the failures of Western society at large and its spiritually destructive consequences for the main characters, but more so by identifying the emptiness and consequent misery of a generation dealing with the "*soullessness of post-baby boomer life"* (Chung 1994) as neglected spiritual needs, going into more detail about how unfulfilled religious impulses manifest in the lives of the characters.

Life After God is in many ways the most postmodern of the three novels, in terms of structure and themes. It is also the one novel out of the three which has been accused the most of being bleak and nihilistic. Yet the novel's success – as the reviews in the introduction showed – suggests that something in it must have been of some appeal to the readers. This chapter will therefore identify the elements which make the novel appear nihilistic, but also argue that these elements serve the purpose of providing an atmospheric canvas, which is criticised by the characters' misery and which, by contrasting it, ultimately highlights their need for meaning, wholeness and spiritual fulfilment, which does anything but condone nihilism.

The main feature of Life After God that may leave a taste of bleakness and depression in readers happens to be the most characteristic one of postmodernism:

namely the criticism, if not straight-out rejection, of grand narratives. Life After God, for example, devotes an entire chapter – 'The Wrong Sun' – to questioning the grand narrative of 'progress through science'. This chapter is a collection of short descriptions of how different people in different situations experience the 'flash', the nuclear holocaust, and it is left unclear whether this is a 'fantasy' of the narrator or reality – "*the dead [that] speak"* (p113). Coupland uses this blur of fiction and reality, which is characteristic for postmodernism, to create uncertainty and leave the reader with a greater sense of harrowing fear. This suggests that fear alone – un-real events – have the power to affect someone's life, not just the real event, which is emphasised by the obsessive repetition of the theme of apocalypse. The graphic descriptions of melting *"Vidal Sassoon shampoo plastic bottles"* (p117), *"burning pedestrians"*, a *"plastic cape melting over Laura's skeleton like cheese over a hamburger"* (p118) adds to bring the fear and disillusionment with this grand narrative home to the reader. The defamiliarising style of the descriptions increases the impact: Coupland avoids clichéd descriptions of the blast, but instead uses familiar signs of pop culture, for instance, references to brand names in familiar settings such as a *"Simpsons cup from Burger King [melting] sideways on the counter"* or contemporary objects such as a *"telephone turning to mud in my palm"* (p116). (The destruction of these signs, mass-produced commodities, also works as a criticism to capitalist mentality, suggesting that in an apocalypse all this will lose its meaning.)

There is a bitter irony in the title of the chapter, in recognising that this sun is 'wrong', not a sustainer of life, but a destroyer. The Bomb serves as a prime example for the failure of the grand narrative of science, and the failure of man-made morality and humanism, because all it seems to have brought about is bringing mankind to the brink of destruction. What could be interpreted as nihilistic is that this criticism seems to stop at the point when it should offer alternatives and become 'constructive'. As

Thompson (2000) states, *"the concept of Postmodernism thrives by highlighting the shortcomings of other doctrines and discourses and therefore it is a negative ideology that offers little hope or comfort"*. The narrator focuses on describing the experience, without stating a moral or solution or even appeal, it seems mere playing, mere 'gluttony' of experiencing the experience. This is why many critics of postmodernism recognise it as empty and vain, and accuses its 'practitioners', the Generation X, as mere narcissistic and apathetic *"whiners"* (Morton 2003).

Secondly, the characters appear impotent in dealing with or even stopping the downward spiral of their lives. Their powerless apathy is another element suggesting nihilism, as *"nihilism tends toward defeatism"* (anon[4]), which then suggests that there is no point in changing the world as nothing has value anyway. The characters in this novel are anti-heroes who experience increasing emotional deterioration. Scout, the main character, confesses this openly:

> I think I am a broken person. I seriously question the road my life has taken… I have lost the ability to recapture the purer feelings of my younger years…My life is not what I expected it might have been when I was younger (p309-10).

His friends are divorcees (p281), drug addicts (p301), alcoholics (p281), AIDS victims (p279), failed characters who try to recapture the magical feeling of their youth, of being alive, and a sense of hope. Contrasting their youth and the disillusionment about how their lives have gone wrong is like an anticlimax; as Scout puts it, *"our lives oddly ended up in the same sort of non-place"* (p279). Coupland creates this contrast very suddenly, by describing their youth as carefree and innocent, even magical:

> we would skinny-dip, my friends and me…we would float and be naked – pretending to be embryos… sometimes we would join hands and form a ring like astronauts in space; sometimes… we would bump into each other in the deep end, like twins with whom we didn't even know we shared a womb (pp271-2).

The images and words Coupland uses here evoke a sense of childhood nostalgia and togetherness. But this is abruptly changed by the narrator making a 'time leap', where he contrasts the idealistic past with his present dependence on antidepressants, and a summer month with a winter month:

> The swimming pools were a decade-and-a-half ago from last July. This was the month in which my doctor had given me… a certain type of little yellow pill. It is January now.
> I had been going through one of life's rough patches – depression and anxiety mostly, and not simply a case of 'the blues'. Nothing cute like a hug or a cluster of silver balloons would cure the moods that had been eating me for the few years prior then. (p275).

This despair goes so deep, it even manifests in the stories Scout tells his child. All his story characters are *"beautiful little creatures who were all supposed to have been part of a fairy tale but who got lost on the way"* (p24).

Thirdly, even the sources of comfort or compensation for the bleakness of their lives are destructive to the characters in the long run. They find different ways of feeling alive, but it all comes at a price. For instance, Donny achieves his thrills by injuring himself: *"Donny actively invited stabbing into his life"* [thinking] *"that it was… kind of cool"* (pp60-1). Ironically, what makes him feel alive ends up killing him (p66). Similarly, Scout has to take antidepressants to cope with the despair, but while they numb his depression, they numb his joy, too (p275).

Moreover, they feel that what they lose can never be recovered, and that this loss is inevitable. For instance, Stacey laments: *"Why couldn't they just have told us, 'Kids, this is as good as it gets. So soak it all up while you can'?"* (p281). Scout's outlook is similarly hopeless: *"Somewhere, years ago, so many of us broke the link between love and sex. Once broken, it can never be fixed again"* (pp284-5).

Even the last links to this magic – their memories – are slowly dissolving, making their life appear as nothing but a continuous death. Scout's friend Mark describes his life in

almost precise nihilistic terms: *"I guess that's what I feel is happening to me. I'm becoming nothing"* (p280).

Fourthly, the structural choices Coupland made for this novel leave a bleak and confusing aftertaste. Life After God has no traditional plot, instead, it consists of a collection of memories, fantasies and moments of soul-searching by which Scout, the narrator, tries to understand why his life has turned out the way it did, what has shaped him and this way understand where his life is headed. The absence of a coherent plot reinforces the sense of alienation and disconnectedness Coupland is trying to communicate about his protagonist, what Scout calls feeling 'lost' (p24). It makes it more difficult for the reader to make sense of the novel, which helps him identify with Scout and his friends who have difficulty in making sense of their lives.

Furthermore, the novel's sense of ambiguity and uncertainty leaves the reader confused about what can be trusted, and consequently with mixed expectations. Coupland, for instance, creates ambiguity with the title of the novel as well as of one chapter – "*Life After God*". *"Life After God"* may speak of life in a world that has lost faith in God, in all-explaining grand narratives, a world devoid of religiosity, something of which Nietzsche may have spoken, a period following one in which belief in God was not unusual.

However, it may also speak of a life trying to model itself in God's image, *after* God's intentions. This openness to interpretation is exactly what postmodernism is about. In the end it is up to the reader what he understands the novel's message to be, but the *"moral responsibility"* leaves him with the uncomfortable *"loneliness of moral choice while simultaneously depriving [him] of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised* (Bauman 1992, pxxii). This lack of guidance reinforces the notion of

human alienation, causing, consequently, loneliness and despair. This is finally stressed by the novel's ending, when Scout submerges in the cold mountain stream without re-emerging (p360), which can be interpreted as a suicide, as death being the only way out of life's misery. This, once more, points toward nihilism.

However, even though these points seem to make a strong case for a nihilistic view, nihilism has, in this novel, not the final say. Instead, it, similar to Generation X, identifies the symptom of an 'illness'.

Firstly, this shows in how the nothingness is responded to. All the characters try to escape it. Their search for *"peak experiences"* (Maslow, cited in Bauman 1997, p179), such as in Donny's self-harm, is the postmodern equivalent to a search for life, for meaning – an *ersatz* religiosity. It is not the destructive aspect the characters seek. Rather, it emphasises their despair, that they risk death to at least have felt alive once, that this is their last resort. While their means to feel alive may be destructive, the impulse or need they follow denies nihilism 'its way'.
These extreme experiences, which are *"felt to demand a human response"* (West 1985, p16) get the characters in touch with the elemental powers Ted Hughes spoke of, to 'resuscitate' the soul and make one feel alive again. Donny puts this into accurate words when he says: *"man, when that blade first digs into you it makes your soul leap out of your body for just a second, like a salmon jumping out of a river"* (p61). The 'peak experiences' serve as some sort of emotional landmark in the emptiness of reality (as in Swift's (1983) Waterland), which is something all of the characters crave.

Secondly, the characters do not accept the current condition of their lives, but mourn what their lives have become. Scout and his friends despair over the possibility

that they may have lost the ability to love, to be *"a bit past love"* (p335), which peaks in Scout's last confession (p359). They do not want to accept their lives that way and therefore reject nihilism. Even more so, they recognise that this is not the natural state of things, but that they have been conditioned. For instance, Stacey says that *"we were trained to believe our world wasn't magic – simply because it was ours"* (p281). There is also a sense of guilt in Scout's saying that

> the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to fully believe in love; instead, we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched. And I wonder if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God (p273).

This suggests that they have brought this kind of living death onto themselves. It is here that another religious archetype emerges via the tool of intertextuality: The characters' fear that *"once broken, they can never be fixed again"* (p285) hints at the biblical Fall of Man and his being trapped in this state without being able to save himself. Therefore it can be argued that Life After God subtly accepts Christian beliefs without openly subscribing to a doctrine. Instead it suggests that grand narratives are not rejected per se, but that they can only be accepted if they manifest themselves in some way in an individual's life. Life After God's view on religion then seems to imply that blindly accepting a grand narrative is not the point of religion, but rather to come to understand it via one's own life. Religion then is not imposed from outside, but discovered and put together like a jigsaw puzzle which each individual does differently. The point also is not to come to the same conclusions but to find it relevant to one's own life.

Thirdly, the lack of plot actually serves as a criticism of nihilism, as it is merely Coupland's tool to illustrate the quality of the character's lives, and to emphasise their feeling lost. Also, this collection of memories is closest to reality, which helps the reader to relate to the story. This disrupted kind of narrative is one way to criticise grand

narratives, because these cannot be applied to the incoherence of real life. This is exemplified by Scout, when he listens to a radio preacher and yearns for the certainties of a fundamentalist faith, but finds himself *"cut off from their experience"* (p183). Similarly, the drifter Scout meets in the desert fails to offer *"salt-of-the-earth insight into life… garnered from all his years of drifting"* (p204) – the reality is that Scout recognises him as what he is: *"simply a very far-gone desert rat"* (p207). While this incoherence and the parodying of conventional myths may reinforce the nihilist belief that life has no sense and meaning, there is, at a closer look, no nihilism. Because each of these experiences, however bleak they may seem, end in some sort of epiphany. For example, what the drifter gives Scout with the food is an unexpected lesson of kindness, helping Scout to believe in kindness again, and giving him the hope that *"bad, as [his] situation was, at least it would not be forever"* (p209).

This leads on to the fourth point: namely that epiphanies play a major role in Coupland's novels, and they, by nature, defy nihilism. If nihilism claims that life has no meaning, and makes no sense, epiphanies do the opposite. In Coupland's novels, they provide a major insight into what shape religion may take in a postmodern context. Kolakowski rephrases the meaning of epiphany in religious terms:

> If God exists, he gives us clues about how to perceive His hand in the course of events, and with the help of those clues we recognize the divine sense of whatever happens (cited in Bauman 1997, p168).

This definition implies a greater transcendent reality in the terms of Paul Tillich's theology, as described in the introduction, as well as echoing the notion of religious mysticism.

The epiphanies (if not hierophanies, manifestations of the divine) emerge in the stories and reflections of the characters, describing either the human condition or glimpses of the divine. They, for instance, stress the importance of love (*"Make sure you two stay*

*together. You're the only chance that either of you is ever going to get"*, p53), of authenticity *("when he is older, he will wake up and the deeper part of him will realize that he has never allowed himself to truly exist"*, p50), and of what constitutes human failure (*"The people to feel saddest for are people who once knew what profoundness was, but who lost or became numb to the sensation of wonder"*, p51).

Essentially, this makes storytelling and reflecting a religious act: as a way of making sense of life based on one's own stories and experiences, "*attempting to turn 'profane' back into 'sacred time"* (Eliade cited in Coupe 1997, p59). It is this incessant self-reflecting which brings the narrator back in touch with his inner life which used to be dead. Communicating his alienation by the use of defamiliarisation awakens the reader to the many absurdities of contemporary life, leaving him behind to practice the very thing the narrator does: self-search and reflection. If Coupland meant to endorse nihilism in his novels, the search for meaning would surely not be on his agenda.

Coupland's very choice of his main character's name reinforces this. Scout spends most of his time in almost obsessive contemplation of his life, which is symbolised by his name, which means 'explorer', 'discoverer' or 'seeker'. This is supported by the recurring image of Scout pressing the seek button on his radio, trying to find the station that will bring him a personal revelation (p204), not a pre-packed doctrine as presented by radio preachers, which is *"whacked out"* to him (p183). Ironically, even though he rejects traditional religion as an option, he still is trying to discover his salvation, his ability to love and live life instead of being worn down by it. He does not only openly acknowledges that *"we have religious impulses – we must – and yet into what cracks do these impulses flow in a world without religion?"*, but he also stresses how important these are for him: "*Sometimes I think it is the only thing I should be thinking about"* (pp273-4). What he essentially fights is exactly nihilism and defeatism, or the loss of hope and purpose.

Finally, the ambiguity of the novel's end, and its implications, is rather an invitation to the reader than it is meant to confuse. Here, the narrator, Scout, after retreating deep into a forest, offers the reader his final and long-anticipated confession:

> My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love (p359).

This scene is symbolic in many ways: suggesting a return to nature, a sense of going home that reminds one of the Christian parable of the Prodigal Son returning home (Luke 11:15-32, The Bible). It reminds of Native American spirituality, of the practice of retreating into the wilderness to receive a guiding vision (for example, in Louise Erdrich's (1990) Love Medicine). Scout, realising what he is missing in life, and what can save him – even if that salvation is not necessarily to be understood in the Judeo-Christian sense – undresses and walks into a stream of freezing water, submerging completely (p360). Even if it is a suicide, which may be tragic in a conventional sense, a sense of joy or relief persists – the sense that Scout has found peace. This is supported by the image of *"the roar of water, the roar of clapping hands…the hands that care… that mold"* (p360), triumphant like an applause. But actually, Scout's submerging into the pool suggests a baptism, especially because it follows his admitting his need for God. This completely opposes nihilism. Furthermore, that he does not re-emerge merely reinforces the typical postmodern belief that life is open-ended and cannot be understood in a totalising way. If Scout had resurfaced, it would have been a mere reinforcement of the Christian doctrinal practice of baptism as a simple turning point and therefore a return to the 'closed' grand narrative of religion. This would have defied the purpose of the novel (and of postmodernism, for that matter) – which is that answers are not presented on the silver platter of grand narrative. The ending's uncertainty avoids this finality. The reader is left without the comfort of answers, forced to continue

his own search, so to speak, to *"work out [his own] salvation"* (Philippians 2:12, The Bible, NIV). In addition, here the baptism is continuing. The re-birth thus becomes rather a process than one point in time, suggesting that Scout needs to undergo a continuing purification to return to a state of innocence. After all, the ending echoes the very beginning of the last chapter, in which Scout and his friends floated in a pool the same way, when they were still innocent and whole, *"pretending to be embryos…with whom we didn't even know we shared a womb"* (p272). So it seems he is trying to become that way again by copying that moment, by 'returning to the womb', to reach a state of mind purified by *"the words that tell us we are whole*" (p360). This serves to wake up the reader to his or her own spiritual needs without artificially imposing doctrine from the outside.

Also, this scene echoes the last scene in Generation X, repeating the religious myth of resurrection and renewal. Here, similarly, the baptism in Life After God, another religious archetype, symbolises the death to a *"former existence and being reborn"* (Coupe 1997, p4), which is part of many religions. Coupland uses these archetypes to emphasise how important and innate to humanity the search for meaning is.

In the light of these archetypes, the theme of nothingness that is so important in Life After God, and in postmodernism itself, reveals a 'religious' purpose, a place in a grander scheme, as Scigaj (1985) explains:

> In order to [become liberated], the psyche must first experience the … state of emptiness, of death to the analytic Western ego, and recognise the fullness of nothingness, the fullness of all creation (p137).

The nothingness, which, as long as it is viewed isolated, may give this novel a nihilistic air. However, Coupland interweaves religious archetypes with a contemporary

context via intertextuality, which shows that these universal spiritual notions are not just relevant for a bygone age.

In conclusion, Life After God as a title seems to suggest a humanist life in which man has taken his fate into his own hands, but the further the novel advances, the more it reveals the irony with which this humanist metanarrative is encountered. Man seems to have failed his humanist aspirations miserably. Life After God questions what mankind has become after losing the connection to its spirituality, and it demonstrates how unfulfilled religious impulses manifest in the lives of people. Life After God questions the supposed progress through science and civilisation that was meant to replace religion, even suggesting that in some regards it damaged more than it helped. It suggests that discrediting the grand narrative of religion does not eliminate these impulses, which again suggests that modernism, when rejecting religion in its campaign for the superiority of rationality and reason, has perhaps thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Yet there is no cynicism, but only despair growing out of an almost hypochondriac self-examination, a lamenting over the loss of innocence, without offering an alternative grand narrative. Instead, it offers the prerequisite to faith: to recognise the need for it. This and the newly gained humility, rather than doctrine, is the soil for a new postmodern faith. All characters try to make sense of their lives, of what happened to them, based on their own experiences, not based on a prescribed creed to which they cannot relate. Their beliefs *have to be* grounded in their own experiences, because in a world where everything is acceptable, there is no other way of asserting it. This is what the 'little narratives' of postmodernism are all about. Scout's *own* narratives reveal his spiritual need which leads to his confession. Also, the recurring epiphanies and hierophanies suggest that a greater reality is out there that may not be

immediately accessible as a whole but still is revealed through little glimpses, suggesting that life, even though it may sometimes seem like it, is not meaningless. If Coupland tried to communicate that the true nature of the world is nihilistic, then it can be argued that his characters would not be haunted by these questions.

What this novel then suggests is that all postmodernism asks for is a re-evaluation of one's beliefs – to see how much is blindly adopted, how many of one's views are merely cultural conditioning. In this respect it offers hope, suggesting that renewing a faith in God based on a need for God, by acknowledging and following those religious impulses – given, as said before, that this faith is a result of needs and understanding oneself, and not a mimicked doctrine, as seen in Scout's former friend Dana, a former male porn model trying to escape his past by turning into a fundamentalist Christian (p297-8). The ambiguity and open-endedness of Life After God demands of the reader – in the spirit of postmodernism - to make up his or her own mind about what he/she is to make of this reading experience, and perhaps even his own spirituality, which he cannot do unless he challenges his habitualised views. But whatever the reader decides, it will be authentic to him – and authenticity is a core value of postmodernism, and of Coupland's novels. This is a theme which is elaborated on in the following chapter.

To say it metaphorically, Life After God hangs up a light in the room to make one aware that the room is in a mess (Harvey, cited Dohle 2001). Precisely this has been the most immediate response to this novel: readers were compelled to find that 'they were not crazy', that their experience is shared. This way, this novel is an expression of self-search, a therapy session and reassessment of what effect modern and the consequent postmodern mentality had on today's way of coping with life.

All in all, ending the novel with Scout's baptism seems to suggest that a return to religion may provide a solution, that people like Scout would perhaps have been better off *with* it. However, this line of thought is not taken up lightly and without scepticism by Coupland, because Hey Nostradamus! (2003), as discussed in the following chapter, takes a closer, not uncritical, look at religion in contemporary society, exploring its merits as well as failings.

# CHAPTER 3 – HEY NOSTRADAMUS!

> *"Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns."*
> Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte, 1847

In Hey Nostradamus! (2003), Coupland directly links the concept of religion with the 'universal' questions of love, suffering, death and hope. Similarly to Life After God, Hey Nostradamus! stresses that even if the grand narrative of religion has been discarded as obsolete, the 'big questions' it addressed and the spiritual impulses of man remain valid. However, here, Coupland acknowledges that the secularisation process of modernism in the Western world is indeed an *"incomplete project"* (Habermas 1981, p98), and that traditional religion – i.e. Christianity – still has a big part in it. Hey Nostradamus! appears to be a response to the implicit question Life After God (1994) poses: whether discarding religion has been a mistake, and whether it can offer a solution to the kind of problems the characters in the three novels are facing. It discusses whether old time religion in its prescriptive grand narrative nature and its claims to absolute truth still stands a chance in contemporary postmodern society.

Surprisingly, it appears as if the answer to this is no. Hey Nostradamus! rather poses a criticism of the contemporary evangelical subculture and the traditional practice of Christianity in the Western world. Still, this does not mean Coupland dismisses the idea of religion completely. Rather, this chapter will show that he, in spite of his criticism, develops the new angle on religion he already hinted at in Generation X (1991) and Life After God.

This chapter will therefore discuss how Coupland criticises contemporary religion, but then argue that his criticism is merely directed at the subcultural practice than at the religion itself.

Firstly, Hey Nostradamus! appears to reject religion as a solution, because it seems to assert a big point of nihilism, stressed by Sartre and Nietzsche: namely that religion, in particular, Christianity, has failed to improve mankind, because, in spite of a 2,000 year history, man still is corrupt and violent, and in the case of the novel's three assassins, for no apparent reason. Religion has proved to be a failure to bring out the good in people, and has, perhaps, even relinquished its relevance to modern life. Ironically, the most religious people in the novel, namely the Youth Alivers! and Jason's father Reg are, especially at the peak of their religiosity, the most unsympathetic characters. They are blind, cruel, manipulative and controlling, causing more pain than offering comfort. Reg, for example, is a *"bitter and prideful crank"* (p75), who claims, based on his warped theology, that his *"son is a murderer"* (p77) or that *"one of [Barb's twin] boys may not have a soul"* (p83). His religious legalism achieves the opposite of what his religion aims for: instead of harvesting love and a sense of community, he alienates his son and his wife (p51, 59, 78). Similarly, the Youth Alivers! *"spied on [him and Cheryl] for weeks, likely with the blessing of [Jason's religious] older brother Kent"* (p50) . Their piety and following their textbook beliefs to the letter reminds of robotic motions. They are modern 'Pharisees' who seem to have missed the central tenet of their faith entirely.

Secondly, as argued in the previous chapters, the uncertainty and ambiguity of life undermines the grand narrative of religion. This shows especially in the way the ambiguity of morals is portrayed. The biblical commandment *"Thou shalt not kill"* (Exodus 20:13, The Bible, KJV) may look simple and straightforward, but becomes more complicated in real life. Jason kills the gunmen to stop their killing spree, yet his father accuses him of murder. Coupland uses the confrontation between Reg and Jason

to show the relativity of morals and the problem of applying rigid laws, which remain theoretical in the face of 'real life'. Van Buren puts this in accurate words:

> Christianity's former stress upon the dependence of man on all-competent deity, who holds final responsibility for human destiny and the future of the world, rings hollow in the ears of man who are becoming painfully aware of their own responsibility for human life and the course of this world (1972, p13).

Reg's accusations, which seem so simple in theory, are absolutely ludicrous in real life. If Jason had not stopped the killers, he would have become a murderer, too. Therefore, the ambiguity of the situation does not allow for a black-and-white judgment based on absolutist laws.

Similarly, Jason's attempt to comfort Heather with an elaborate lie after his disappearance could be both considered acceptable because of its purpose and unacceptable because of the way it was done. How relative morals and values can be also shows in Barb's desire to have Jason's babies (p138) her willingness to fly to Las Vegas to marry him to accomplish this (p139) – which also parodies the absolutist religious rejection of premarital sex – and even kill for it (pp144-5) which seems to make sense to no one else but her. All this suggests that there is no black and white morality as claimed by fundamentalist religion, and that it is difficult if not impossible to know what is right or wrong, which echoes Nietzsche's and Sartre's claims that *"there are no absolute laws… or absolute values we should live by"* (cited in Lynch 2002, p110). This whole passage illustrates how difficult it is to apply a set of absolute commandments to a life which mostly seems to consist of moral grey zones. The whole purpose of religion to give orientation collapses here.

Thirdly, Christianity as a grand narrative has failed to explain the massacre that sets the basis for the novel. The theoretical, theological explanations for suffering as given from many pulpits, which are partly echoed in the first chapter's prayers, lose their substance in the face of reality and question the value of a grand narrative. The

traditional Christian religiosity, as presented in this novel, fails to offer comfort. Cheryl hears the prayers of people who, without exception, range from simply being unable to make sense of the event to being on the verge of losing their faith over it (*"I'm going to stop believing in you unless you can tell me what possible good could have come from the bloodshed"*, p14). They question the moral scheme they have been taught in their churches, the forgiveness which is central to the Christian faith. One prayer, for instances, says: *"Dear Lord, I pray for the soul of the three killers, but I don't know if that is right or wrong"* (p27).

The praying characters question whether what has been mechanically taught in Sunday school does now apply. They question the contemporary manifestation of suburbian religiosity and traditional understanding of Christian doctrine, parodying it by the use of vernacular and by putting it into contemporary terms. Another prayer exemplifies this:

> Lord, I know I don't have a fish sticker, or whatever it is I'm supposed to have on my car bumper, like all those stuck-up kids who think they're holier than Thou, but I also don't think they have some sort of express lane to speak to You, so I imagine you're hearing this okay. I guess my question to You is whether or not You get to torture those evil bastards who did the killings, or if it's purely the devil's job and You subcontract it out. Is there any way I can help torture them from down here on earth? Just give me a sign and I'm in (pp21-2).

Yet, the supposed loss of faith the anonymous characters seem to express in their prayers concerns less the notion of the existence of God itself than the teachings of popular Christianity as an all-encompassing and absolutist, but simplistic explanation of how the world works, and more importantly, why the inexplicable happens.

However, calling the book nihilistic because it did not have clear-cut answers to offer or because it featured some supposedly nihilistic elements is far-fetched. Critics of postmodernism often use postmodernism and nihilism interchangeably, however,

> though [postmodernism] is often described as a fundamentally nihilist philosophy … it is important to note that nihilism itself is open to postmodern criticism: nihilism is a claim to a universal truth, exactly what postmodernism rejects (Bhogal 1995).

Firstly, it is illustrated perfectly, especially in comparison with the previous chapters, that the elements of uncertainty and ambiguity do not necessarily create a nihilistic message. Rather, Hey Nostradamus! demonstrates that ambiguity is a perfectly normal part of human nature that needs to be acknowledged and accommodated by religion. Cheryl does acknowledge this ambiguity and her own fallibility and contradictory nature, for instance, by wondering

> Was I a hypocrite? And who was I to even judge?... I used the system simply to get what I wanted. Religion included. Does that cancel out whatever goodness I might have inside me? (p7).

As Bauman states, *"the postmodern mind is more tolerant [and]… humble"*, because it does not just point out the flaws of other narratives but is *"aware of its own weaknesses"* (1997, p165) and therefore it is quite content with the ambiguity it finds (Bauman 1997, p167). Coincidentally, Kolakowski echoes this when he defines "r*eligion [as the]… the awareness of human insufficiency"* (cited in Bauman 1997, p168).

Of course, it may fill the reader with despair, wondering what and who, can then be trusted at all. It basically suggests that we cannot be *absolutely* certain that God is there, or if he is, what his plans are, and what the absolute truth is fundamentalists speak about. But postmodernism does not see uncertainty as a problem. What it tries to do, after all, is to *"present the unpresentable"* (Lyotard cited Bennett and Royle 1995, p185), to lay bare social and cultural constructs as what they are, rejecting the pride of modernity that believed it could know the mind of God. The removal of certainty puts a new emphasis on faith and its purpose, which is Coupland's central message in this book. "*There has to be hope"*, he says. *"And the hope has to come from believing in God or living for something higher"* (Draper 2003). That this rejects nihilism is stating the obvious.

Secondly, Cheryl very much symbolises the spirit of postmodernism, yet at the same time she is a devoted Christian, which denies the idea that there is no room for religion in postmodernism. During her life she did not feel like she fit into any category of students, and even in her death she is in between places: *"I am no longer part of the world and I'm still not yet a part that follows"* (p9). She cannot seem to decide whether *"God is nowhere/God is now here"* (p9), but in spite of all her doubts, has a strong religious faith to which she sticks: *"I did want Jason, but, as I've said, only on my own terms, which also happened to be God's terms"* (p16). Even though she does not feel part of the subculture, she feels that "*her faith is very much hers*" (Stockman 2003). Her conversion is her own, authentic, based on an epiphany, an intense emotional experience (*"I closed my eyes and faced the sun and that was that – ping! – the sensation of warmth on my eyelids and the smell of dry cedar and fir branches in my nose"* (p32)) that is typical of postmodern characters, echoing many scenes in Life After God, never expecting *"angels or trumpets, nor did any appear"* (p32). This shows that postmodernism can incorporate religiosity – it just explores it from a different angle, putting a new emphasis on experience, instead of prioritising doctrine, which has been hinted at already in the previous chapters.

Thirdly, the mocking of the Youth Alivers!, Reg and the questioning of the traditionally taught Christian doctrine is not an attack on Christianity as such. Rather, the negativity of religion is more an attack on the way a sectarian subculture has manifested it, identifying Christianity's negative aspects as based on cultural interpretation and constructs rather than the religion itself. In an interview with Coupland, Draper (2003) points exactly this out:

> The soul-destroying pettiness of the young Christians in Hey Nostradamus! … [is] a painful representation of the kind of religion that's based more on middle-class values than anything deeper.

Also, Tomlinson critiques this *"culture religion"* in The Post-Evangelical, claiming that *"[many Christians] identify Christianity with the standards, values and attitudes of their own culture"* (1995, p133).

That Hey Nostradamus! attacks contemporary evangelicalism and its fundamentalist claims is seen in the way it parodies the myth of the 'modern martyr' Cassie Bernall (anon[5]), on whom the character of Cheryl Anway is based. It makes the reader wonder about how much of this story has been constructed in order to legitimate a certain expression of religion over others, by contrasting the views of Cheryl's family and Jason with the behaviour of the Youth Alivers! who turn Cheryl's funeral into a celebration, *"with no regards for [the Anways'] wishes"* (p111), even a covert evangelisation by claiming that Cheryl's scribbling of *"God is nowhere/God is now here"* (p9) is no coincidence, something that Cheryl father described as the religious equivalent to *"a twelve-year-old girl plucking daisy petals. 'He loves me, he loves me not'"* (p111). This creates uncertainty again: what some interpret as a miracle may really just be a coincidence.

Coupland also uses Cheryl's character to criticise and satirise the behaviour of the Youth Alivers!, some of the novel's representatives of this subculture. Cheryl observes the Youth Alivers! in a detached 'I and them' way. Even though she is part of their group, their collective, cultish mentality is alien to her ("*their faces seemed so…young to me"*, p11), even ridiculous. She likes playing with their rituals of lunchtime confession (*"I always made mine up"* (p10), *"giggling"* at their in-group vocabulary ("*You and Jason… fornicating"*), finding that *"forcing them to name the deed was fun"* (p11). She points out the absurdities of their behaviour, such as warning her of the temptations of a beach job, *"as if listening to screaming babies and groping for the last purple Popsicle…could be a test of faith"* (p15). She looks through their self-serving manipulations, for instance: *"Jason's father Reg always said "Love what*

*God loves and hate what God hates" but more often than not I had the impression that he really meant 'Love what Reg loves and hate what Reg hates'"* (p28). She observes and characterises the subculture's mentality with sharp wit:

> …there can be a… meanness in the lives of the saved, an intolerance that can color their view of the weak and of the lost. It can make them hard when they ought to be listening, judgmental when they ought to be contrite… (p28),

yet is self-conscious about becoming self-righteous as well (*"preachy me"*, p17).

This demonstrates that what Hey Nostradamus! so blatantly criticises is not Christianity as an idea, but the evangelical subculture in North America, following the postmodern notion to 'deconstruct' cultural constructs in order to question their assumed 'naturality'. McLaren (2002) even speaks of the necessity to defamiliarise religion as the Western world knows it:

> We are talking about trying to see how modernity has (unwittingly…) truncated, reformed, and perhaps deformed the gospel to such a degree that we need to go back and see the gospel again in a new light.

This is something Coupland accomplishes by allowing the reader to view these constructs through the eyes of the distanced, dead Cheryl, the alienated Jason, the agnostic Heather and the absurdities of Reg's behaviour. While it deals with the common questions religion addresses, namely suffering, love, grief and loss, it does not give the conventional pre-packed answers. Instead, it explores these issues by allowing these four very different characters to share how these issues affect them and how they try to cope with them. These four characters symbolise the diversity of contemporary society and the validity of everyone's narrative because that is how they experience things. This way the novel demonstrates the postmodern *"acknowledgement that we live in a beautifully diverse world, the acceptance that each of us sees truth only in part"* (Eck, cited Ward 2004).

Thirdly, what postmodernism stresses as the point of faith instead is, as argued in the previous chapters, the creation of hope. Its critique of Christian subculture and mechanistic indoctrinated behaviour does not shake at the Christian faith itself, rather, it shifts its focus from religion being the means to an end, not a goal, placing religion at the service of mankind rather than enslaving humans to religion. Coupland makes this point by demonstrating that it is the praying characters whose faith is shaking that are most human, that are speaking most from their heart, and that Reg only becomes human when he acknowledges his doubt, runs out of answers and drops his piety for a humbler attitude. As Coupland himself comments:

> Reg [is] a miserable bastard who you hate… and yet he's the one who actually ends up being humanised . . .. he had to lose everything… sort of like Job, and … the moment he shatters a legalistic doctrinaire thinking and began actually questioning things for himself, suddenly he became real (cited Watkins 2003).

It is only then that he becomes aware of the needs of others. For instance, in a moment of crisis he becomes a good listener and a comfort to Heather (*"Have some wine. Calm down a minute."* , p212), as opposed to the fundamentalist-religious, inhumane way he behaved toward Jason after the massacre (*"What I understand is that my son experienced murder in his heart and chose not to rise above it."*, p77). Yet his change does not mean he has lost his faith. This way, Reg becomes a key character to the approach the novel takes on religion, demonstrating the value postmodern religion places on authenticity and hope. And indeed the novel ends on an epiphanic moment for him, when he manages to relate the story of the Prodigal Son to the reality of his own life:

> But I haven't lost you, my son… And you will find one of these letters… You never missed a trick of mine, so why stop now…. I'll shout over and over, 'Awake! Awake! The son of mine who once was lost has now been found!' (p244)

Furthermore, at a closer look, Hey Nostradamus! – even though it criticises the cultural manifestation of religion - actually acknowledges, similarly to Generation X

and Life After God, some biblical truths, hence separating Christendom from the concept of Christianity. For instance, Cheryl expresses the biblical idea of the fall of man several times: *"humanity alone has the capacity at any given moment to commit all possible sins"* (p3) and *"animals have never left God – only people did"* (p27). The shooting here constitutes an epiphany, confirming the old Christian doctrine, which, however, only found validity in Cheryl after her experience: *"What happened that morning only confirms this"* (p3).

Using contemporary signs and terms as a frame of reference, the characters explore the same concepts, and by this defamiliarisation manage to understand their faith in whole new terms, that directly applies to their lives, shedding worn-out and habitual ways of seeing their faith in for some that are relevant to them.

In conclusion, what Hey Nostradamus! criticises is not the idea of religion itself, and therefore does not condone nihilism. Rather, it considers certain ways of interpreting and practicing it as outdated and not in touch with the realities of a postmodern, pluralist society. As Draper (2003) suggests, *"judging from Hey Nostradamus!, […] 'binary' Christian answers remain, for [Coupland], in question."*

Hey Nostradamus! points out the flaws in traditionalist, literalist religion, as it fails to answer the questions that plague the characters, fails to soothe, and actually does more damage than help. Reg is an example for how rigid doctrine is a cast-iron mould one cannot squeeze anything living into. The novel communicates that life and its big questions are not reducible to simplistic terms, neither is there a simple formula for dealing with it. The juxtaposition of the four narrator characters, presenting their different viewpoints and different personalities, different backgrounds and hence different interpretations of the shooting and the following events emphasises this.

Hey Nostradamus!, similarly to the previously discussed novels, does not say that some ultimate truth does not exist, but merely that no man can claim to know it and that it cannot be accessed completely, which opposes especially the views of the North American evangelical subculture.

The characters escape the stranglehold of doctrine and rediscover their faith in God as means to hope, love and self-understanding. Even though the ambiguity, created by the relative morality and the different viewpoints, threatens to undermine the notion of religious guidance, as it can be questioned how uplifting this novel is if one is left without certainties, the novel makes a clear point: what it, in the end, boils down to is faith. And the main product of faith is not certainty, but hope, and hope is what keeps these characters alive. Because as Coupland himself says, "*There must always be hope,"* (Draper 2003).

# CONCLUSION

Is God really dead? has sought to debate the old controversy about the nature of postmodernism being either nihilistic and vain or progressive and hope-giving, by using three novels by Douglas Coupland as prime examples of popular postmodernist literature reflecting this ambiguity. Indeed, Coupland's novels refuse to deliver any straightforward and simple messages. Instead, Coupland makes suggestions on a rather subtle level, which allude to the concept of spirituality without subscribing to any particular grand narrative. In fact, there has been a development through the three novels which reflect Coupland's own increasing involvement with the theme of spirituality. The analysis of three of his novels in order to understand whether they, by nature, are nihilistic or communicate a message of hope and optimism has produced interesting results, and this analysis will provide a basis to understand what these novels suggest about what postmodern religion may look like in the late 20th and early 21st century.

Clues and characteristics of nihilism could be identified in all three novels. All of them reflect disillusionment with and the consequent breakdown of grand narratives as a blueprint of how the world runs without offering a better, alternative narrative as the solution, which ultimately can be seen as making this criticism a vain and aimless enterprise. However, this nihilism, instead of advertising itself, is merely a tool. It is presented as the symptom of a soul-illness, following the breakdown of the grand narratives of modernism. It serves to criticise the societal and cultural conditions which have led to the disillusionment and mental breakdown of the characters. This way, it actually accentuates the needs of the characters for something else: for meaning, hope, even spirituality, and for their lives to make sense and serve a purpose. The characters seem to be in mourning for their loss of belief in love, innocence, and their ability to

live to the fullest. The nihilistic atmosphere actually encourages the reader to re-evaluate his or her own life and perhaps recognise needs which have previously been ignored.

The development of rediscovering spirituality and becoming aware of one's religious impulses begins in Generation X (1991) with the frustration with the materialism of an 80s yuppie life style, the dehumanisation of being a target market, and the loss of individuality as well as the sense of being alive being suffocated by the live-to-work mentality which has reduced human beings to nothing but profit-generating cattle. It diagnoses the damage this has done to the human soul. With their escape, the three characters rejects the notion that *"that the attainment of material riches is the supreme object of human endeavour and the final criterion of human success"* (Tawney 1922, p286), their disillusionment and cynicism criticising the *"idolatry of wealth"* which is the heart and 'religion' of capitalist societies (Tawney 1922, p286). The emptiness and lack of substance in the lives of Andy, Dag and Claire drives them to a search for an identity that is not constructed by the values of a capitalist society but is based on their own needs and their individual ways of understanding the world. They use story-telling – myth creation – as a way to narrate meaning into their lives to fill the void, to cope with their fears and to nourish to their dreams, echoing Ted Hughes' ideas of creating myth in order to heal (West 1985) and to reconnect to the *"elemental power circuit of the universe"* (cited in Gifford and Roberts 1981, p12) enabling them to live a more intense and meaningful life. Not any pre-constructed narrative will do here: to have any relevance to them, this storytelling needs to reflect their own life experiences.

The disconnectedness from one's origins, from nature, even a purpose is given an increased focus in Life After God. It echoes Ted Hughes' philosophy that *"the story*

*of the mind exiled from nature is the story of Western man"* (cited Scigaj 1983, p132). In this novel, Coupland expressed greater awareness that the problems are of a spiritual nature, caused by spiritual deadness, a loss of belief in love (p273) and a consequent cynicism and loss of hope. The bleak atmosphere and disruptive structure of this novel is reflected by, and serves to emphasise, the inner damage of its characters. Mainly Scout, but also his friends, seek to recapture the vibrance and sense of being alive that was characteristic of their youth (p309), that they have lost in their adult life when they realised it *"[their] life is not what they expected it might have been when [they were] younger"* (p310). Here, the need for spirituality, a way to help them *"coming to grips with what the world is truly like"* (p310), the need for a sense of being part of a greater whole (i.e.God, p359), is directly addressed. As mentioned before, at this point one may conclude that this novel suggests a return to traditional religion as a 'cure for the illness', which is signified for instance by Scout's confession (p359) which echoes, in many ways, the classic evangelical sinner's prayer, as well as the traditional religious image of baptism in the final scene of the novel.

Both Generation X and Life After God (1994) reject the grand narrative of human progress by reason and science, by their obsessive reflection on e.g. the nuclear holocaust which was a stark possibility in the Cold War years in which the novels are set. Hey Nostradamus! (2003) rephrases this in religious terms, saying that *"humanity alone has the capacity at any given moment to commit all possible sins"* (p3). The characters have lost their belief in the superiority of man, at times even suggesting that 'animals are the better human beings', as creatures who are still in touch with their roots and their purpose. This is shown in how Claire in Generation X admires the dogs (*"You don't have to worry about snowmobiles or cocaine… You just want a nice little pat on the head."*, p13), as well as in Scout's admiration of the animals' *"simpler state of*

*being"* (p81) and Cheryl's view in Hey Nostradamus! that *"animals have never left God – only people did"* (p27).

Even though the end of Life After God seems to suggest a renewal of traditional religion as a solution, this is discarded in Hey Nostradamus!. This novel criticises the traditional Western Judeo-Christian subculture by depicting the pious religious characters as heartless, cruel, hypocritical and self-righteous, such as Reg and the Youth Alivers!. This suggests that religion has anything but improved their character, as well as implying via the character of Reg, as he accuses Jason of murder, when in fact he has stopped the massacre by killing an assassin, that believing to know the 'ultimate truth' is prone to be used as a weapon rather than a source of comfort. This suggests that religion is just another example of a grand narrative failing to live up to its promises, that *"the social doctrines advanced from the pulpit offered, in their traditional form, little guidance…They were abandoned because, on the whole, they deserved to be abandoned.… because the Church itself had ceased to think"* (Tawney 1922, p185). By parodying the fundamentalist Christians in this novel, Coupland shows the constructed artificiality of traditional religion, and exposes the religious subculture in the novel as a mix of cultish, separatist behaviour, doctrine and middle-class values, rather than a living spirituality. An alternative is not explicitly offered, which may leave a nihilistic aftertaste to readers who expected to be served a new gospel as a way to explain reality.

However, what the three novels emphasise instead is a faith (e.g. in God, in life having a meaning, in a greater reality) that is personal, authentic and true to self and the conditions of one's own perception of reality, which is too complex to allow for black-and-white categorisations. They suggest that, in order to be genuine and make sense, faith needs to grow naturally, out of one's experiences and epiphanies, implying that

faith is revelatory in nature. Coupland achieves this by refusing to offer a new pre-packed doctrine or grand narrative, forcing the reader to pursue his own spiritual path and hence demanding a genuine experience of him rather than memorising a catechism.

Furthermore, it emphasises humility as a necessity for growth and a prerequisite for being able to receive hierophanies, those little revelations of the greater reality. This becomes particularly obvious in Reg (Hey Nostradamus!), who transforms from a fierce fundamentalist into a broken man who is then finally able to face his flaws and become human. It also shows in Scout's statement that he is *"a broken person"* (Coupland 1994, p309), and in symbolically in the burnt field where Andy experiences an epiphany, at the end of Generation X. These moments reflect an archetypical experience that is part of many religions. For instance, Scigaj (1985) suggests that:

> In order to [become liberated], the psyche must first experience the … state of emptiness, of death to the analytic Western eg, and recognise the fullness of nothingness, the fullness of all creation (p137),

which is also reflected in the Bible's Psalm 51:12 + 17 (KJV):

> Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me… The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

This archetypical experience is reflected especially in Generation X and Life After God, where, in order to have a clean slate for personal and spiritual renewal, the characters need to break down first and disconnect from their former life: The three Generation Xers escape their career life to the vast emptiness of the desert, and then to Mexico, and Scout, after experiencing a period of a nervous breakdown and depression, symbolises this new start through his baptism, through 'dying to the old life and be raised again to a new life' (Life After God). The humility which is so characteristic of

postmodernism (Bauman 1997, p165) is the crucial prerequisite for this re-discovery of spirituality.

Finally, the postmodernism in Coupland's novels proves not to be of a nihilistic nature because it does not deny per se that an ultimate truth or reality exists – which is what nihilism does – but simply that one cannot access or understand it as a whole. Rather, the characters in all three novels get little insights through epiphanies and hierophanies, "*moments…when we have a fleeting glance of being part of a greater reality than ourselves…"* (Lynch 2002, p114-5). These do not tell the whole tale, but merely promise that the tale exists and that it is worth looking for it. The theologian Paul Tillich claimed that

> even in the midst of our most profound despair at finding any meaning in life, we are never cut off from ultimate reality". For him, "the true meaning of the notion 'God' is that there is a greater reality of which we are a part, a greater reality sustaining our individual lives… which we cannot reduce to particular images or concepts (cited Lynch 2002, p113).

Hierophanies therefore suffice to keep one leading one's life creatively, with hope and in tune with one's self and nature, in spite of dark realities (Lynch 2002).

This new postmodern approach to religion as reflected in the novels places a greater emphasis on experience than abstract concepts. For all characters in all of Coupland's novels, experience is the main way of finding meaning, whereas they cannot relate to preached doctrine, which is made explicit when Scout listens to the radio preacher (p182-3) and to his newly converted friend Dana (p297-8). 'Generation Xers' acknowledge the concept of an ineffable God which is why they rely on their experience rather than on "*ill-fitting vestments*" of language to understand this greater reality (Woolf, cited Falck 1994, p161), which has been shown in all three novels: the moments of feeling alive (Elvissa in Generation X), the ability to feel intensely (Life

After God) and the epiphanies and moments of hope the characters experience in Hey Nostradamus!, such as Cheryl during her conversion.

In Coupland's approach to religion, dogma subordinates to experience, as only religious experiences are genuine and authentic and dogma is to be understood in terms of experience. Falck (1994) echoes this in saying that *"the authentic religion of the future can only be: authentic living… The religion of the future will be a religion of full experiencing"* (p170).

For instance, to Cheryl the doctrine of human sinfulness becomes only real in the school shooting, and for Scout his need for God only becomes real when he is at the end of his own resources. This way the supposedly 'woolly', non-committed way of the postmodern approach to the doctrine of a religion actually appears to be a neo-mysticism: "*in connection with the endeavour of the human mind to grasp the divine essence or the ultimate reality of things… God ceases to be an object and becomes an experience"* (Pringle Pattinson, cited Inge 1969, p31). The process of re-mythologizing is then an effort to express the inexpressible (Lyotard 1979), the *"luminous halo"* of life (Woolf, cited Falck 1994, p161).

In other words, in order for a 'truth' to become significant and accepted, it needs to manifest in the life of an individual – it will not be accepted in theory. Whatever Coupland's characters accept as valid in terms of (quasi)religious truths has been scrutinised by their own lives first.

The closest man then will ever come to a grand narrative, will be like anticipating or having a presentiment of the complete picture of a jigsaw puzzle, by what the pieces give away, not imposed from the outside, but put together by the own small narratives of each individual.

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