

# Jesus in Disneyland, by David Lyon

reviewed by [Mark U. Edwards](#) in the [September 12, 2001](#) issue

According to Canadian sociologist David Lyon, the theory of secularization based on Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*--a "metanarrative" of the secularized academy--is dead. While modernity and postmodernity have seen the weakening of organized religion in the West and the corrosion of some elite theological formulations, religion continues to thrive in forms that both resist and adapt to (post)modernity.

Lyon uses the metaphor of Disneyland for (post)modernity because it combines cultural elements of the modern--for example, high technology and instrumental rationality--with trends that distinguish the postmodern--especially ever-rising consumerism and the expansion of new communication and information technologies. Religion grounds itself in "communities of memory," offers hope that transcends human accomplishment and makes authoritative claims about reality and human identity. Disneyland offers simulated fantasy worlds that sell a nostalgic past and a rosy technological future and invites humans to define themselves by what they consume. By juxtaposing Jesus with Disneyland, Lyon asks his reader to consider with him the changing fortunes of religion in postmodern times.

Media mediate and shape the message sent and influence how it is received. To show how this affects religion Lyon explores the ways in which sacred symbols are conveyed and appropriated, first by liturgy, then by the modern mass media and finally by cyberspace. In this shift, signs float ever more free of the reality (including transcendent reality) to which they point. They increasingly compete in one commodified market that offers a bewildering array of religious "options" from around the world, out of which the consumer assembles a religious identity "right for her," bypassing the conventional authority of traditional religious leaders, practices and institutions.

Lyon describes how sociologists have conceptualized this process. Manuel Castells, for example, suggests that "legitimizing identities" provided by traditional organizations and places are less significant today than they have been in the past.

Instead, the postmodern individual may feel threatened by contemporary culture and adopt a "resistance identity" such as fundamentalism. Or she may find a way to combine her faith commitment with aesthetic or emancipatory concerns and adopt a "project identity" such as feminism or environmental activism. Or she may adopt a playful "plastic self" that flexes with mood, desire and imagination; she may become an avid but flitting consumer of religious variety.

Or she may try to march to an authentic inward voice, exhibiting an "expressive" and often "therapeutic" self. Or she may feel the need to subsume her self in something greater and give herself over to a strongly authoritarian form of religion. This "subsumptive self" resembles Castells's "resistance identity." Most postmodern selves combine aspects of these ideal types, and even those people whose sense of self resonates with traditional mainline denominations (a prominent source of "legitimizing identities" in Castells's classification) are likely to incorporate elements from other identity types.

In postmodernity social space and place have been restructured by flows of cultural information through a global network, giving new meaning to such notions as proximity and distance, where two nodes on the network are "closer" than a node is to its unwired, disconnected hinterland. Global flows of religious belief and practice are filtered and shaped by local conditions: Pentecostal Christianity takes on local color. Religion becomes more of a cultural resource than a fixed identifiable entity. The whole globe contributes to the cultural marketplace from which the individual consumer may pick and choose.

In Disneyland, Frontier Land, Main Street and Tomorrow Land all abut each other. In good postmodern fashion, time is thereby collapsed into an endless present, ready to be consumed. Memory is reduced to sanitized nostalgia; hope shrivels into a shallow and optimistic sense of (often technological) progress, which is then simulated and experienced virtually. This Disneyfied approach to time undercuts religious "communities of memory." It undermines any redemptive dynamic beyond human accomplishment. And in so doing it does not (necessarily) give any relief from the tyranny of highly disciplined time, an unhappy product of modernity.

Christianity played a significant role in the rise of modernity and has subsequently both accepted and resisted elements of the modern project that it saw as either compatible with or inimical to Christian belief and practice. With the rise of postmodernity and the decline of institutional religiosity, the burden of both

adaptation and resistance, Lyon notes, falls more on the individual. In his final chapter Lyon revisits his major points and suggests some implications of the trends he has explored for individual adaptation and resistance within his own faith community, Christianity.

I was led to *Jesus in Disneyland* by my interest in Christianity and the Internet, and must leave to sociologists any professional quibbles. But I can testify that Lyon provides the clearest overview of the major sociological literature on postmodernity and religion that I have found, and does so with a minimum of undefined sociological jargon. His analysis struck me as clear-headed, nuanced and cogent. While I object to sociologists reducing identity formation to consumption, it is a quarrel I have with the larger field, not with Lyon. Once one compensates for some overly reductive contrivances, there is a wealth of sermon topics in this slender volume, and rich insight for anyone concerned about Christianity's (or religion's) future.