

The Postmodern Ghost Tour

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Do you believe in ghosts? Whether or not you do, the pre-modern belief in the supernatural is far from eradication in quotidian reality. Following the dawn of the Enlightenment, it was predicted by modern theorists that the belief in supernatural tradition was destined for an imminent demise, as rational and secular dispositions increased in modern society. Yet as I was led on a ghost tour around St. Bartholomew's Church and Cemetery, rational thought was discouraged as I was suspended in a desire for anachronistic belief. Contrary to the image of the Enlightenment, this site is the postmodern epitome of the past haunting the present. So much so that even its location – perched on top of Prospect Hill, directly overlooking power transmission towers, the M4 and the Great Western Highway – reflects the comingling of pre-modern traditions and contemporary commodified culture. I argue that what modern theorists had underestimated, was the ability of supernatural traditions to be reinvented in order to prevail in modern society. And so this essay will question, how has the postmodern condition allowed for the irrational belief in the supernatural to flourish within the destructive age of modernity? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to develop a symbiotic approach between the two schools of thought – tradition and postmodernity. Using these two lenses of viewing the world to analyse the history of St. Bartholomew's Church and Cemetery, further informs our understanding of how certain traditions manage to continue from the past into this present moment.

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In pre-modern society, tradition had provided the thread needed to keep the fabric of social life from unravelling. Without tradition, there would be no values, beliefs, or guidelines, and society would be thrown into moral and social decay. In his work, *The Past in Ruins: Tradition and the Critique of Modernity*, David Gross (2009, p.8) defines tradition as, 'a set of practices, a constellation of beliefs, or a mode of thinking that exists in the present, but was inherited from the past.' This definition suggests that for a tradition to exist within quotidian reality, its way of life, ideas, and beliefs, must be continuously reified over time. Berger and Thomas (cited in Anderson 1990, p.39) describe reification as: 'the apprehension of the products of humanity as if they were something else than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will.' Therefore for any tradition to be authentic, it must not merely have the force of temporal duration behind it, but must also carry spiritual or moral significance. For instance, Christianity is a reified and deified tradition that claims to hold a universal system of values and beliefs for society. It is noteworthy then that St. Bartholomew's Church and Cemetery was not only the first to be built in Prospect, but also the first to be enthusiastically funded by both the government and its local community. Today, St Bartholomew's stands as an example of the 1840s Church Act which 'promoted the building of churches and chapels and to provide for the maintenance of ministries of religion' (Heritage Group 2004). Gross (2009, p.21) notes that due to the overwhelming influence of the Church in traditional society, adherents will assert the need to preserve the social structures of the past as 'without this connection, the world runs the risk of being cut from meaning.' Therefore, it is evident that St. Bartholomew's was built in a period of time where Christianity functioned as a key social and political institution, of central governance in all aspects of life.

Although from the late 1850s onwards – coinciding with the onset of modernity – the bricks which had upheld religious dogma at St. Bartholomew’s Church and Cemetery gradually came crumbling down. Literally. In 1961, the Archbishop of the church had announced at a service attended by 350 people: ‘In a few years, this church will become the centre of a parish in its own right once more, and the restoration of the church will be so important to the community’ (‘300 attend 120th anniversary of historic church’ 1961). How wrong he was. By 1963, it became clear that the parish faced a growing difficulty in maintaining the physicality of the church: ‘The corrugated iron roof sheeting was rusting with some sheets having lifted off. The original timber floors of the nave had been attacked by termites’ (St. Bartholomew’s Church n.d.). By 1967, the social function of the church had caught up with its aesthetic disarray. Due to a gradual dwindling in attendance and a lack of financial support, St. Bartholomew’s Church held its last service. How did this happen? Was not Christianity the social cement of human life? According to Inglis and Holmes (2003, p.52), ‘As rationalism became the primary mode of elite perception of the world and the entities that existed within it, the ghost was banished to the peripheries, both mental and geographic.’ This perspective suggests that a central tenet inherent in the pursuit of modernity is secularity. Secularisation theory predicted that scientific knowledge would undermine religious traditions, while societal institutions that had developed since early modernity - the nation-state, formal education, industry, and the market, among others - would eventually erode the function of religion. Max Weber theorised that as scientific knowledge expanded and rational thinking became the norm throughout Western culture, this would ultimately result in a decline of the use and belief in magic, God, and myth. The world would become, ‘characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world”’ (cited in Gerth and Wright Mills 1974, p.155). Modernity, therefore, not only entails a ‘ruthless break with any or all preceding historical conditions, but is characterised by a never ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself’ (Harvey 1989, p.12). It seems as though for modernity to occur, and its encompassing desire for unified progress and social betterment, religion and supernatural belief was destined to be stamped out from quotidian reality.

But were Weber and other modern theorists correct in their prediction that secularisation would bring an end to tradition? Although the closure of St. Bartholomew’s Church provides strong evidence of how Christianity had lost a great deal of its clout in modern society, its current primary function would seem bizarre to any modern theorist. Since its restoration in 2000 by the local government, more visitors to St. Bartholomew’s Church and Cemetery today come not for their Christian faith but for their desire to see a ghost. It is clear that spiritual fulfilment is no longer limited to being part of an organised religion. Instead, as one tourist review notes, ‘if you are in the mood to encounter an atmosphere beyond that to which we know, then a Ghost tour here will satisfy you’ (WeekendNotes 2012). Although it may seem anachronistic to believe in ghosts in this so-called scientific age, Anderson (1992, p.182) asserts that ‘beneath the rational surface of the more-or-less secular "realism" that is supposed to be our official worldview... lurks a seeking cauldron of cults and faiths of all description.’ Gross (2009, p.4) echoes this standpoint by suggesting that because the concept of tradition has become so heavily influenced with conservative meanings and implications, we carelessly overlook the ability of tradition to be reappropriated in a modern setting:

‘The demise of tradition, though real, can easily be exaggerated. Many traditions continue on in the nooks and crannies of modern life. They exist privately even where they have eroded publicly. Some survive by

underground, others by reconstituting themselves in such a way as to live on in new forms and guises' (Gross 2009, p.4)

And so, it seems that we are in a world with more belief in the supernatural than there has ever been before. However the growth is quantitative rather than qualitative. As a result, 'most of us now are not so much believers, but possessors of beliefs' (Anderson 1992, p.19). This statement suggests that the rise of postmodernity has allowed a mosaic culture to form where numerous realities may exist. We may now freely cut and paste various belief traditions together to suit our own desires. Therefore, 'secular explanations of the world have not made the world less wondrous, and have not undermined the validity or the authority of our wonderment' (Wood 2011). The seeker after spiritual faith may try on not one belief, but any number of them. Welcome to the postmodern world.

Postmodernism has dissolved the boundaries between tradition and modernity. Despite that the two concepts were once preconceived as antithetical to one another; such rigid classification is considered anathema to the postmodern condition. Prominent postmodern theorist, Jean-François Lyotard (1994, p.36), has defined the postmodern condition as an attitude of scepticism, involving a state of 'incredulity towards [all] metanarratives.' This definition suggests that while we once liked to believe that our constructions of reality came from beyond us, the emergence in postmodern ideals allowed humanity to discover that man was the creator of its own reality. Therefore a postmodern attitude strives to reveal the workings of reality-creating institutions by challenging pre-existing notions and established ideas which claim to hold an absolute truth. In saying this, even the definition of what it means to be postmodern is continuously debated amongst its theorists, where all that seems to be agreed upon is that postmodernity is 'remarkable elusive, and the definition of its boundaries exceedingly difficult, if not per se impossible' (Huysen 1986, pp.58-59). Thus, it is an attitude where one is encouraged to latch to the uncertain as there is no single truth but a multiplicity of theoretical standpoints. In his work, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*, Walt Anderson (1992, p.3) describes the postmodern condition as:

A seed of discontent. It fills our daily lives with uncertainty and anxiety, renders us vulnerable to tyrants and cults, shakes religious faith, and divides societies into groups contending with one another in a strange and unfamiliar kind of ideological conflict: not merely conflict between beliefs, but conflict about belief itself (Anderson 1992, p.3).

Thus, the postmodern condition addresses social realities less as physical sites and more as environments in which competing beliefs vie for dominance. In this world, traditions are no longer permanent fixtures of social life but may transcend time and space. This idea is presented in Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994), in which he illustrates how traditions of the past have the ability to come and go in contemporary society. Using the figure of a ghost, he coins the term *hauntology* to describe the paradoxical state of the spectre which is 'neither soul nor body, and both one and the other' (Derrida 1994, p.6). Hauntology suggests that the belief in ghosts cannot be properly said to belong to the past, for the temporality to which the ghost is subject is paradoxical, as at once they return *and* also make their apparitional debut. However such a transcendental state is not a given, Gross (2009, p.5) asserts that most traditions today appear to be 'thinner and more anemic than in premodern times'. Therefore, as society becomes ever more conflicted by a myriad of different traditions over time, traditions which struggle to be of relevance in quotidian reality, run the risk of being thrown to the margins of society, and within a greatly diminished sphere of influence. The paradox then is that no one knows for sure whether anything actually exists, but that doesn't stop us from ultimately believing what we choose to believe. So as traditions are

socially constructed and are thus dependent on an active body of adherents to flourish in modern society, the increasing belief in ghosts is not a far-fetched concept in a postmodern world.

How then has the belief in ghosts risen with the onset of modern society, while the desire for conventional religion has but diminished? A history of St. Bartholomew's Church and Cemetery reveals that much of the change in its societal function is due to the emergence of a consumer culture with the onset of modernity. It seems that for traditions to survive in modern society they must be 'fragmented, re-engineered, and reinvented as experiences for visitors to enjoy' (Goldstein 2007, p.211). Therefore, a postmodern perspective recognises that the religious sanctity once attached to St. Bartholomew's Church and Cemetery is but an idiosyncratic experience, not an inherent truth. The Church exists in name, but not function. This idea is presented in a newspaper article, 'Church goes all out for Mammon' (Blacktown City Sun 2001), which boldly states: 'The once ruined St. Bartholomew's Church at Prospect is back in business for dollars, not souls... It has been back conducting "ghost tours" at \$5 per person in the churchyard cemetery which contains the graves of many famous colonial pioneers.' The ghost, therefore, is no longer to be exorcised, but has been brought down to earth, as an everyday commodity. So much so that since this newspaper article was published, the price today to see a ghost at St. Bartholomew's Church has risen to \$20. As Maria Blanco and Esther Preen (2010, p.xiv) note in their work, *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*:

'The ghostly has become everyday as the effort to live with ghosts has superseded the traditional tendency to exorcise ghosts and lay them to rest... Whereas it used to be common to find ghosts trying to drag the living out of the everyday into a world of horrors on "the other side," what contemporary ghosts want more than anything, it seems, is to be normal' (Blanco & Preen 2010, p.xiv)

This quote illustrates the normativity of supernatural belief in quotidian reality. This is apparent in the notion of ghost hunting as an only slightly-out-of-the-ordinary hobby and in the way many ghosts in current fiction, film, and television are portrayed in an exceedingly mundane manner. As this belief in the supernatural has been taken over by popular culture in such a big way, Gillian Bennett (1999, p.1) goes so far as to provide a classification system for popular notions of ghosts. She illustrates three levels of which ghosts may be allowed to exist in contemporary society: The "Scooby Doo" level – 'where they are either tameable or friendly or turn out to be frauds and fakes'; the "Haunted Inns of England" level – 'where they are regarded as tourist attractions, a specialty of the house, synthetic (and profitable) thrills'; Finally, they may appear at "Stephen King" level – 'where they are allowed to be threatening, but only to those deliberately seeking to be (safely and temporarily) threatened.' Thus, the mass media makes it easy to artificially sustain traditions as well as create and disseminate new structures of reality. As Anderson (1992, p.9) notes, 'a new reality does not have to convert the entire society; it merely has to find its buyers, get a share of the market, and locate enough customers to fill up the theatre.' Never before have we so freely become consumers of belief, and allowed beliefs to become merchandise themselves.

From a commercial standpoint, the commodification of supernatural belief at St. Bartholomew's Church and Cemetery has been a godsend. Its contemporary function as a venue for ghost tours has allowed it to enter the tourist market and ultimately retain its historical significance. So what is the problem? What seems to make us most uncomfortable about the commodification of supernatural belief is illustrated by Bennett's (1999, p.1)

assertion, 'Where it is not campaigned against by religious groups or sneered at by rationalists, the supernatural is often trivialised by the mechanisms of commerce and officially demoted to the nursery, commercial or fantasy worlds.' Commodification then strikes at the heart of supernatural seriousness, as it has the effect of sensationalising tradition as a form of entertainment, as well as an eroding effect, resulting in fragmentation. This notion is supported in David Morley's work, *Postmodernism: The Rough Guide*, in which he suggests that the postmodern condition has created a three minute culture – 'a hyperactive, hyper-real, spectator unable to focus and addicted to change'. Morley (1996, p.61) argues that the cost of being able to pick and choose beliefs is our memory. He claims:

'We are, increasingly, an 'amnesiac culture', where everything is jumbled up together in an over-polluted swamp of images and sensations- a kind of fast food culture for the mind, served up in easy to chew, bite-sized sections, where everyone snacks all the time, but no one (hardly) ever consumes the intellectual equivalent of a square meal.' (Morley 1996, p.61)

Morley's assertion suggests that our representations of the world do not simply depict reality, but create reality itself. Thus, the act of consuming culture is a culture-altering force. As Jean Baudrillard (1988) claims, we are seduced into a hyperreal world of pure floating images, behind which there is nothing. In order for St. Bartholomew's Church to stand a viable chance in surviving the destructive forces of modernity, ghosts must be presented as an imminent part of St. Bartholomew's history. Spectators are encouraged to suspend all sceptical thought in hope that they may have a supernatural encounter. The ghost tour then becomes a paradox as the supernatural is both a theatrical performance and an experience beyond control. The tour merges the boundaries between the real and simulacra – the simulacra begins to infiltrate reality and by doing so creates a new reality, the hyperreal. In reference to the functions of the real, simulacra, and the hyperreal, Baudrillard (2001, p.170) states, 'Since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.' Therefore, when one goes on a ghost tour at St. Bartholomew's Church and Cemetery, they enter a hyperspace, a virtual location in reality that does not quite invade the realm of the real.

From analysing the changing role of St. Bartholomew's Church and Cemetery, from the past to the present moment in which we live, it is clear that the postmodern condition has played a significant role in the creation of new and different contexts for the serious exploration and expression of belief. While theorists of the Enlightenment held a notion of supernatural traditions as antithetical to modern thought and therefore destined for imminent demise, the postmodern condition challenged this disposition by offering a world of numerous realities where one reality is no more rational than another. A world where we stand sufficiently above traditions of which we may manipulate and reengineer. However, as traditions are malleable and must reinvent to be of relevance in quotidian reality, our world has become an unregulated marketplace of realities in which all belief systems are commodified and offered for public consumption. Although commodification has developed negative connotations, it is 'not just an aggregate of merely commercial activities; it is also an ideological framing of history, nature and tradition; a framing that has the power to reshape culture and nature to its own needs (MacCannell 1992, p.1). Therefore, commodification does not reduce us to be passive receptors of cultural productions but allows us all to affirm or negate the social configurations in which we live. And so with the extent of contemporary belief in the supernatural so widespread in contemporary society, the question is no longer 'Do you believe in ghosts?' but 'Why don't you believe in ghosts?'

Notes on Contributor

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