

## POSTMODERNITY

Of the several currents that have swept through the American academy this century, few have been more pervasive or more perplexing than postmodernism. Indeed, part of what makes postmodernism so perplexing is its very pervasiveness. Included under its label are such apparently disconnected phenomena as architectural design by assemblage, the rise of identity politics, self-referential gestures in cinema,, multicultural programs, the new discipline of cultural studies, mixed-genre fiction, deconstructive readings of literary texts, the genealogical critique of social institutions, and the culture of Las Vegas--to name but a few.

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Postmodernism is in its infancy. Yet its devastating influences have penetrated almost every aspect of our lives

- + In the English and History Department, comes the challenge of deconstruction
  - the impossibility of communicating meaning in a text and hence the inability of God to communicate through His Word
- + In Geography: ideas about space which suggest identity is fluid and mutant.
- + In Gender Studies: to talk of God creating sex and gender in a particular way is outmoded and repressive.

### **Premodern, Modern and Postmodern**

It would be easier to navigate through this befuddling landscape if we could use such terms as premodern, modern, and postmodern.

## **The Premodern Period**

This describes the period before the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. Some refer to it as the precritical period when the criteria of truth was not yet made narrowly stringent

- + this period is said to have ended in a time somewhere between the invention of the printing press in the 15th century and the high Renaissance in the 16th century
- + Life in the premodern period was dominated by a belief in the supernatural realm
- + Without the printing press the truth or falsity of these gods was largely communicated through oral tradition and hand-written texts which were rare and precious

## **The Advent of the Modern**

Pinning such dates down is not easy.

- + Many consider the Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries as the turning point.
- + Still others believe it began with the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries.
- + During the Renaissance people began to discover the means to harness the powers and resources of the earth this was the period of inventions and discoveries that led to what may be termed an optimistic humanism or a high confidence in humankind.
- + The Renaissance was followed by the Enlightenment where still better telescopes and microscopes enabled people to unlock the secrets of the universe. And this gave rise to the idea that the universe and the human body resembled machines and could be understood in purely mechanistic terms.
- + The 18th century saw such rapid progress of science that people gave unwarranted credence that science would eventually be able to explain everything.
- + Knowledge came to be seen as that which could present itself as logically or mathematically certain. Only brute objective data which can be weighed, measured, quantified, induced or deduced from fact may qualify for the status of truth.
- + Modernism placed human reason on a pedestal and rationalism as an epistemology reign supreme and before long it is believed that truth is found only in that which could be proven rationally to be true.

The modernists are the heirs of the enlightenment. Truth has got to be rational or mathematical.

Reason is the only reliable means to knowledge.

- + This influenced theologians to seek to validate faith in a rational manner.
- + Rene Descartes for example sought to give an argument for the existence of God which would be beyond doubt. His ontological argument for the existence of God is significant in that it made a clear departure from starting with God as the measure of all things and in its place make human reason the sole arbiter of truth.
- + From here, science began making assertions without any reference to God.

In a sense Isaac Newton took his cue from Descartes

- + Inspired by the rationalism of Descartes Newton begin to think of the universe as a playing field in which everyone knows the rules. He considered the cosmos to be an orderly machine.
- + Few would contend the fact that both Descartes and Newton thought their ideas would lend support to their own Christian beliefs. But their ideas were in reality taken to support just the opposite perspective of their Christian faith. For if though reason alone one could arrive at God then one could arrive at a knowledge of truth without any reference to God.
- + Consequently doubt was cast over the legitimacy of the oral and written truth claims of the Christian faith.
  - + With the confidence of the human rationality running high, basic tenets of faith such as the incarnation, deity, resurrection, ascension and the coming *parousia* of Christ began to be held with uncertainty. Employing the scientific method, such beliefs could not be validated.
- + The purported truth-claims of Darwinism further made religious truth- claims look antiquated.
- + In response to the scepticism of David Hume in the 18 C, Immanuel Kant came up with a new perspective of knowledge. He affirmed that knowledge came from data received by the sense which was then formed into understandable ideas by the workings of what he called "categories of thought" in our own minds.
- + Kant believed that we are incapable of knowing things as they are in themselves (*noumena*). We can only know things as they appear to us (*phenomena*).
  - + The world can be known with the equipment of our own minds. In short, Kant held the belief that the thinking person is the sole arbitrator of truth.

## The Demise of Modernity

After a reign of over three hundred years, modernity became a spent force.

- + It took all that time before some made the charge that the modernist project was based on a fallacious proposition that there is such a thing as "objective truth".
- + If the modernists demand indubitable knowledge, postmodernists deny the very possibility of true knowledge.
  - + Truth is the construct of our own imagination and desires.
  - + There is no one single account of reality that covers everything. There is no such thing as a "one size fits all" metanarrative.
  - + Truth is found in a plurality of beliefs.

Frederick Nietzsche is said to have seen rather early in time that the rationalistic philosophy which puts such great confidence on human ideas was fundamentally flawed.

- + Nietzsche developed what is now called "perspectivism". Nietzsche affirmed that there are many possible conceptual schemes, or perspectives which determine any possible judgment of truth or value that we may make and that therefore, no particular way of seeing the world can be taken as certainly "true".
  - + He affirm that truth is a function of the language we employ and exists only within specific linguistic contexts.
  - + In *Will to Power*, he wrote: "Every belief, every considering something-true, is necessarily false because there is simply no true world"

(Frederick Nietzsche *Will to Power* [notes from 1883-1888])

- + There is similarity of doctrine on this point with Foucault. They both embrace an aesthetic nihilism with respect to modern existence. They found no premium in admitting to the meaninglessness of life. They have chosen instead to affirm the prospect of our human becoming by giving our most treasured values new meanings.
  - + If nihilism taking to its logical extreme ends with "no true world," then it follows that everything is ultimately "a perspectival appearance". If there is no absolute truth, the human person stands alone in remaking his own values. In this respect, Nietzsche claims there is no 'true world'.
  - + If for Nietzsche, all reality is someone's willful, powerful construction, then for Foucault, language is the fundamental tool in that construction.

- + Other contemporary academicians, such as French philosopher Jacques Derrida watered Nietzsche's ideas and devised a method of sorts – deconstruction, to show how all truth is like Play-Doh, you can make anything you want with it.
- + One purpose of deconstruction is to show there are multiple meanings there is no one right interpretation of any text.

There is a grave distrust of any overarching schemes of meaning famously called “metanarratives” by Jean François Lyotard.

- + We devise our own metanarratives motivated by the will to power, in order to promote the interest and cause of certain interest group.
- + Example: the meta-narrative of the Judeo-Christian sexual ethic has largely been disowned or delegitimized
- + To Nietzsche what you see as your world is only a construction of your own perspective. No one may know the truth about reality but only our own constructions of it.
- + The assertion is made that there is no need to have to see things as a whole. We need to learn to be content with looking at things in fractured unrelated terms.
- + Postmodernism is marked by a rigid scepticism of reason. There is no truth in any absolute form. No one should impose his metanarrative on any other people.

### **Characteristics of Postmodernism**

In his excellent article, *Towards a Theological Understanding of Postmodernism*, Daniel J. Adams identifies some characteristics of postmodernism.

Here are some reflections from his article.

#### **1. Plurality of Values**

When power of metanarratives is taken away, what is promoted in its place is a plurality of values.

- + With the dismissal of any one single universally-legitimized value-system we see the fragmentation of society into special interest groups.
- + This in turn has led to the paralysis of the political process; the destruction of the idea of the common good; and an intense competition for increasingly smaller pieces of the political and economic pie.

## 2) Intellectual Marketplace

No longer is knowledge confined and controlled by the intellectual and political elite.

- + It used to be that “parents controlled their children, teachers controlled their students, clergy controlled their parishioners, politicians controlled the citizens, and so on. Knowledge was power, and therefore the diffusion of knowledge was strictly controlled.”
- + You needed years of specialized education and training before you could qualify as practitioners of your area of speciality.
- + The spirit of postmodernism, coupled with the advent of the internet has flung the door wide open for knowledge of virtually all areas to be held by all.

## 3. Upsurge of Religiosity

Strangely postmodernism has also led to what one social scientist has called the “unsecularization of the world”. Not only are new religious movements coming into being traditional religions are experiencing revival and renewal

- + The decline of modernism in turn has witness the rise of the religious spirit.
- + In a sense postmodernity restores to the world what modernity had taken away.
- + Consequently, we see “a re-enchantment of the world that modernity tried to disenchant”

(Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* ,London: Routledge, 1992, x; cited by Daniel J. Adams in *Towards a Theological Understanding of Postmodernism*)

If modernity brought with it the secular, postmodernity is seen by some as restoring the sacred.

## 4) The process of deconstruction

Deconstruction is the intentional process of taking apart of texts and documents and delegitimizing the standard accepted meaning of texts.

- + As Daniel Adams affirms “Deconstruction seeks to examine a text from all possible perspectives so that individual bits of information are extracted and separated from each other, and that “every text at any given period of time is conditioned by a network or web of relations that in turn affects the meaning of that text” so that you could not affirm that a text has a “once and for all time” meaning.

- + Postmoderns categorically assert the absolute impossibility of attributing any one single ultimate meaning to any particular text.
- + Additionally, since “objective truth is to be replaced by hermeneutic truth”, the sacred texts, such as the Bible, do not have a single ultimate meaning nor are such texts necessarily authoritative.
- + The entire network of relations outside the text may determine both the meaning of the text and the nature of its authority.
- + The homosexual debate within the church has revealed a large following with some sectors of the church of Foucault’s philosophy of deconstruction

## **CRITIQUE OF POSTMODERNISM**

### 1. Postmodernism self-stultifies.

- + Postmodernists attempt to deny the validity of reason but in so doing must use reason and thus self-defeating for them. They claim that no one can know objective truth but the statement itself is a statement of objective truth.
  - + Postmodernist preachers declare that if we find anyone claiming to know truth that person we should ignore. By their own test they should be ignored!
  - + This isn't a small issue. One important test of any world view's validity is inner consistency.
  - + Postmodernism is not consistent and therefore flunks a major test used to analyze world views.

### 2. Postmodernism renders speech superfluous.

If it is true that our thoughts and speech do not configure and correspond with what is true out there objectively, then it seems to me that the logical response is one of total silence.

For what is speech but an attempt to make sense of what is out there and if we cannot ever hope to understand intelligently what really truly is out there, then speech is ultimately a meaningless babble.

This is why the more sincere of the Buddhist school of thought have opted for a discipline of total silence for the rest of their human existence on earth.

But this is obviously not the position of the postmodernism. They continue to write volumes and hold conferences on postmodernism - all the while unwittingly trying to grapple with the problem of how to make sense of human existence.

### 3. Postmodernism indulges in value-judgment.

The belief that absolutes are oppressive is a value-judgement and not a well-reasoned argument. Postmodernists teach that those who believe in absolutes are oppressive, exclusive, and violent. But postmodernism ends up with a spirit of oppression itself.

In the end, postmodern rhetoric such as "tolerance" "openness," and "inclusion" are power-charged terms. Unwittingly, they serve as a disguise for a more destructive objective; i.e. the end of all absolutes.

And postmodern thinking has already produced some of the most oppressive speech and behavior ever seen. The politically correct movement and campus speech codes are just a few examples of the effect of postmodern thinking.

### 4. Postmodernism is basically a dishonest position.

Packer makes the point that "the heart of postmodernism is parasitic; it has no life of its own; [it has a life] only by a denial of what other people believe".

The postmodernist position is parasitic in the sense that it lives off the capital of modernity.

Example" For all their meddling with shapes and construction in modern postmodern architecture, when it comes to laying the basic foundation of those buildings, the modernistic concept of mathematics and physics are rigidly followed.

This is parasitic nature of postmodernism is another example of its living on "borrowed capital".

Example: John Cage in his postmodern approach to music is inconsistent with his approach to mushroom picking.

### 5. Postmodernism is an unliveable position.

If everything must be deconstructed, then no special pleading may be indulged when it comes to evil. Evil too must be deconstructed. And as Groothius says "if evil is deconstructed into incommensurate language games, perspectives and final vocabularies, no evil remains - but

the evil of its attempted banishment and the haunting impression that something is deeply amiss.”

(Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2000)

As C. S. Lewis put it in 1944, when one sees through everything, there is nothing left to see.

You cannot go on "explaining away" forever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on "seeing through" things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the tree or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to "see through" first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To "see through" all things is the same as not to see.

(C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 86-87.

6. Postmodernism frowns upon metanarratives but it is itself a form of metanarrative.

By getting us to think in a certain way, postmodernism serves as a grand narrative

In defending the story of the Bible as our narrative, we may be charged of embracing the old modernist agenda, but in not defending it we lose out by default to the postmodernist's hidden metanarrative.

7. The view that no one can ever be wrong about what they believe is itself a subtle form dogmatism

This is ironical, since the postmodernist goes to no end castigating all forms of dogma.

The postmodernist would not have you be critical of other cultures and beliefs. But if rational critique cannot be offered, then nothing separates truth from fallacy or mere delusion.

Truth has been replaced especially among many academics for politically empowering narrative. But the result of this is the spawning of all kinds of revisionism; viz, revisionist history, feminist critical method, and different perspectives on multiculturalism.

8. Postmodernism and the fallacious claim of the non-existence of objective truth.

Postmodernism rests on the shaky foundation of relativism. It rejects the notion of absolute truth arguing that there is no truth except the personal "truth" that each person finds for

himself. If the postmodernist so highly value his perspective on truth why is he so impatient with the Christian's perspective on truth.

Christians should never minimize the importance the Bible places on Truth

The Bible's emphasis on historical revelation (1 Cor 15:13-15), doctrinal propositions (Rom 10:9), and natural revelation (Rom 1:18-20) presume that objective truth exists.

(Jim Leffel and Dennis McCallum, *The Postmodern Challenge: Facing the Spirit of the Age*, Christian Research Journal, Fall 1996)

As Carson asserts "true knowledge" is possible, "even to finite, culture-bound creatures".

(Carson, D.A. *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996. p. 102)

Carson says our misunderstanding of God's communication due to our finiteness does not change the content. The content may still be objectively true--not exhaustively true, but true nonetheless-- "a subset of what Omniscience knows, and cast in culture-laden forms"

(Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p.130).

Carson alludes to the fact that while we affirm such a thing as "true knowledge", we confess openly that all grasping of that truth is "necessarily interpretive"

(Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p. 133).

But this is not to affirm that the postmodernist argument for the intrinsic unreliability of the metanarrative is convincing. The point that needs to be emphasise that that although it may be true that objective truth is difficult to perceive and interpret, as "objective" truth, it is true whether we perceive it or interpret it correctly.

Alister McGrath, in attempting to highlight postmodernity's skewed approach to truth, writes:

To the postmodern suggestion that something can be "true for me" but not "true" the following reply might be made. Is fascism as equally true as democratic libertarianism? Consider the person who believes, passionately and sincerely, that it is an excellent thing to place millions of Jews in gas chambers. That is certainly "true for him". But can it be allowed to pass unchallenged? Is it as equally true as the belief that one ought to live in peace and tolerance with one's neighbours, including Jews?

(*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35, 1992).

It may be true that modernists were overly confident with regards to knowing the truth. But it is equally overconfident for the postmodernist to say that objective truth doesn't exist. For that would be self-stultifying.

## Closing word

When the Christian worldview is challenged by the postmodern deconstructionists, it is easy to make the mistake of return once again to support modernity because it looks safer to be on the side of rationality.

We should neither do this nor adopt what Middleton and Walsh call a "myopic conservative retrenchment"

(Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*  
Publisher: InterVarsity Press 1995 p. 173).

This may seem strange, but Middleton and Walsh argues that "without a renewed rooting in the Scriptures Christians will have nothing to say to postmodernity". If indeed, we err on the side of misinterpreting our Christian metanarrative, then Christians need to humbly immerse themselves in the Scriptures and then to lovingly but authoritatively affirm the truthfulness of the Christian narrative.

In this light, David Goetz observes with deep insight that postmodernism will only elevate the importance of Christian preaching and the church may be the only venue left where truth is proclaimed confidently. And that "it is certainly the only place where those seeking something more than the cold, rational world of modernism can explore the deep mysteries of God.

Goetz makes a pivotal point when he writes: "Postmodernism, for all its confusion, seems just one more opportunity for the church to do what it does best - be the church."

(David L. Goetz, *The Riddle of Our Postmodern Culture, What is postmodernism? Should we even care?* Leadership Journal, Winter 1997)