

POSTMODERNISM: A NEW PARADIGM

I. Introduction

Over the last several years you may have heard someone use the term *postmodern*, or *postmodernism*. You also may have heard someone say something about a *paradigm shift* (see below). Postmodernism is a new way of looking at reality that is strongly entrenched in all areas of our culture. A previous briefing paper (#52) on Deconstructionism was a more in-depth critique of a specific postmodernist movement as it affects a particular area. (See also briefing papers #50, and #54 on Existentialism and Fascism for related insight).

In light of this apparent paradigm shift, Alasdair MacIntyre, philosopher and author of *AFTER VIRTUE*, believes we may be entering a New Dark Ages as dramatic as the one that plunged the Roman Empire into intellectual and spiritual darkness. He is only one of many who are saying this. Kevin J. VanHoozer says: *This crisis---which at its root is a crisis of epistemology and theology---may well be the dusk before the 'night of nihilism' and a new Dark Ages. GOD AND CULTURE, P.2.*

II. Defining the Terms

A. Premodernism: In the West, this was the Christian era, beginning shortly after the New Testament was written. It was a period characterized by orthodoxy, creeds, dogmatism and tradition with no clear line of demarcation between the material and spiritual worlds.

Modernism: Modernism is synonymous with the humanist philosophy of the Enlightenment which began in the 17th Century, and according to some, ended with the fall of communism. In its very basic summation it was a movement that was optimistic about discovering universal truth that would explain all of life. Some of the major tenets of modernism:

1. Rationalism: Because of the belief that there is a correspondence between our minds and the world it was believed that truth or principles existed that could be used to explain all of life. Knowledge was objective and good, its increase certain. It was believed that laws of logic had independent existence like the laws of the universe.
2. Freedom: Only a truly autonomous man was free to discover truth. Being

in bondage to superstition, religion or political tyranny prohibited man from acquiring and experiencing the truth.

3. Progress and optimism: With the Enlightenment and its ensuing movements there existed an unbridled optimism about the human capacity (*Onward and upward*. Note: Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was a hymn to the glory of man) to discover truth leading to governmental and social advancement. In other words, there was absolute faith in human rationality.
 4. Immanence: The emphasis of the enlightenment was away from the spiritual and the transcendent. This led to the secularization of society (secular humanism) that we have witnessed in the Twentieth Century. A good indicator of this shift from the transcendent was the subjects of the great paintings. In the Modern period the subject became predominantly nature scenes. There was no intrusion from the spiritual world, i.e., no people with halos, angels or demons.
- C. Paradigm Shift: A paradigm is one's model for interpreting reality. It is similar to worldview. A paradigm shift is a transitional period where a culture jettisons one worldview for another. Postmoderns frequently use the term "metanarrative;" it too, is synonymous with paradigm.

III. The Reaction against Modernism

It is always difficult to pinpoint the beginning of the reaction against Modernism but the giant that kindled the conflagration and whose shadow we predict will be cast even into the next century is Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). When he declared *God is dead* he was making a statement of such significance that it escaped most of his contemporaries. It was not until the middle of the Twentieth Century that the existentialist philosophers saw the full ramifications of the death of the Judeo-Christian deity. If this kind of eternal, transcendent god does not exist then neither does the possibility exist for *the* meaning to existence. In other words, if there are no universals there is no meaning for the particulars of life. Or, as Francis Schaeffer used to say *true truth does not exist*. By the late 60's and 70's the reaction against Modernism became quite strong and at times violent.

IV. The Major Elements of Postmodernism

Postmodernism refers to what comes after Modern. It suggests an era or, maybe even more accurately a mood, that succeeds Modernism or the Enlightenment. After two

world wars and two holocausts, postmoderns no longer shared in the optimism of the past that reason would provide a foundation for human progress.

- A. There is no metanarrative, no objective base for critique. There is no one (true) worldview that explains all of life. There are only *stories*, or *narratives* that are valid only within a community. Knowledge is wholly subjective and is the result of culture and language. You can never be wrong about what you believe. (*Don't think, just let it happen.*) There is no universe, only multiverses.
- B. The repression of the past must be righted. All speech is a political power play; it must therefore be monitored and regulated. Since speech is oppressive you should communicate in other ways such as via physical instincts and bodily manifestations (have you seen any rock music videos lately?) Words are replaced by images. (Books to TV, DOS to Windows!).
- C. We should become a society of inclusion, tolerance, and multi-culturalism. As a result there is emphasis on differences. This has led to what some are calling the *new tribalism*.
- D. Man is an extension of culture, i.e., a denial of the individual self. Humans are social constructs; they are socially determined. Hence a modernist sees the group as more important than the individual.
- E. One of the prime virtues of human beings is their ability to interpret. For a PM everything is a text, and only subjective interpretation is possible. One can never know the intent of the author. We never arrive at universal or objective knowledge. But while we can never know the author's true meaning, you can be sure that the author's words are meant to have repressive effect. This explains the trashing of the western canon of literature.
- F. For the most part the PM denies transcendence. While there is some talk of gods they are generally referring to the gods within (immanence). The PM mentality makes for a fertile ground for new age religious movements.
- G. Because of the above belief in immanence PM are ardent activists for the environmental movement. Rather than conquer nature they believe humans (their term) should cooperate with nature. And because of their opposition to rationalism and modern science there is an increasing wackiness to this movement (all creatures of the evolutionary ladder have equal rights!).

V. What to Expect from the Postmodern Era

- A. **Hostility and Intolerance:** While tolerance is proclaimed as one of PM highest values they are often incredibly intolerant, particularly of those holding Christian beliefs. They refer to such believers as *totalizers*, or *absolutists*. Another example of PM intolerance: on many state university campuses a student can be severely disciplined for something as simple as inappropriate laughter. Speech and behavior codes are strictly enforced. Political correctness on most college campuses often takes precedence over academic integrity.
- B. **Irrationality and Irony:** Since a PM is likely to think unsystematically we should not be surprised to find that they often hold to ideas that are mutually contradictory. For example, Veith, in his book (see below), gives the example of a person who declared that he held to the doctrines of the reformed faith but also believed in reincarnation. Often PM make their case when the facts are either totally absent or in contradiction to their conclusions. To a traditionalist they will appear bizarre and even humorous. Critics like Rush Limbaugh make a good living pointing out these inconsistencies with his own brand of humor and satire. (Christians must remember, however, that PM are very serious and inappropriate laughter in their presence will not advance the Gospel.)
- C. **Hostility to Modern Science:** Since for a PM beliefs are a function of the will, they deeply resent the imposition and intrusion of modern science which represents the epitome of modernism. The modern scientific establishment is of course utterly appalled by the rise of superstition and new age beliefs. A good current example is the increase of interest in folk medicine.
- D. **Inconsistent Relativism:** PM often call for justice to groups that have been victimized, but to call for justice assumes some standard of right and wrong. PM rail against traditional standards (mainly Judeo-Christian ethics) that claim to be universally true, but in their place are new absolutes that they actively try to apply to all. Bill Watkins in his book, *THE NEW ABSOLUTES* eloquently demonstrates the impossibility of relativism.
- E. **Increase in Violence:** Lawlessness and violence are the obvious result of ethical relativism. A few years ago Harvard U. had a huge problem with books being stolen from the library. In the discussion, faculty were hesitant to do anything to stop the theft less they be guilty of imposing their values on the student. Question: Was that attitude itself not communicating a value?

- F. Victimization: Everyone (with the exception of white males) is a victim of these 5 great evils:
1. Sexism: PM do not limit the genders to just male and female. At a recent world seminar they suggested several genders!
 2. Racism.
 3. Specieism: discrimination of one species over another. There are journal articles published on the rights of bacteria!
 4. Nationalism: one nation lording over another.
 5. Religious bigotry: This evil probably evokes in the PM the greatest reaction. This is especially true if that religion claims to be true in the sense that it is true for all mankind ("humans" to use the politically correct term.), i.e. Christianity. This last evil is what prompted Hitler's great hatred for the Jews--the fact that they claimed their god was the one true god.

V. The Danger of Postmodern Influence on the Church

- A. The danger of deconstructing the Gospel. Various groups, perceiving themselves as victims have deconstructed the Gospel to fit their own perception of need. For example, we now have *Black Theology*, *Feminist Theology*, and others.
- B. The threat to the church is that it will reduce the gospel to emotionalism and fanaticism. Experience and feeling are important but the postmodern emphasis is to abandon truth and doctrine. We must never be satisfied with spirituality without truth. Leith Anderson says:

We have a generation that is less interested in cerebral arguments, linear thinking, theological systems, and more interested in encountering the supernatural. Consequently, churchgoers operate with a different paradigm of spirituality. The old paradigm taught that if you have the right teaching, you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching. (A CHURCH FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, p. 20,21.)

VI. Defending the Christian Faith and Preaching the Gospel in a Postmodern Era.

Some Principles:

- A. For a PM the claims of Christianity are rejected *because* they claim to be true. Therefore, before Christians discuss the historicity and truth claims of Christianity, it must be preceded by a discussion of the nature of truth. We cannot make Christianity's truth of no importance because we are afraid it will divide. We must follow the command of the Apostle (I Pet. 3:15) where believers are exhorted to present the Gospel with gentleness and respect and with a clear conscience. The Gospel must be presented in deed and truth.
- B. The Preaching of the Gospel must be inclusive. *God so loved the world...*(Jn. 3:16) means the message should be preached to all tribes, tongues, genders, etc.
- C. Be aware that although PM can easily be refuted with logic it will not impress the PM. Remember, words and rhetoric to the PM are a weapon of tyranny. It will probably not be helpful to point out that PM write books with words and logic! They will criticize you for being oppressive but they have produced some extremely oppressive codes of conduct.
- D. Where there are true victims Christians should be among the first seeking to right injustices.

For Further Study:

Allen, Diogenes. ***CHRISTIAN BELIEF IN A POSTMODERN WORLD.***

Dockery, David S.ed. ***THE CHALLENGE OF POSTMODERNISM: AN EVANGELICAL ENGAGEMENT.***

Erickson, Millard J. ***POSTMODERNIZING THE FAITH.***

Erickson, Millard J. ***TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES.***

Gaede, Stan. ***WHEN TOLERANCE IS NO VIRTUE: POLITICAL CORRECTNESS, MULTICULTURALISM, AND THE FUTURE OF TRUTH AND JUSTICE.***

Grenz, Stanley J. ***A PRIMER ON POSTMODERNISM.***

Groothuis, Douglas. ***TRUTH DECAY,***

Hunt III, Arthur W. ***THE VANISHING WORD.***

Lundin, Roger. ***THE CULTURE OF INTERPRETATION: CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE POSTMODERN WORLD.***

McCallum, Dennis. ed. ***THE DEATH OF TRUTH.***

Middleton, J. Richard, and Walsh, Brian. ***TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN IT USED TO BE: BIBLICAL FAITH IN A POSTMODERN AGE.*** (Note: this purported evangelical book shows an alarming attraction to postmodernism.)

Oden, Thomas C. ***AFTER MODERNITY...WHAT?***

Oden, Thomas C. ***TWO WORLDS: NOTES ON THE DEATH OF MODERNITY IN***

AMERICA AND RUSSIA.

Phillips, Timothy R. and Okholm, Dennis. eds. ***CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD.***

Thiselton, Anthony C. ***INTERPRETING GOD AND THE POSTMODERN SELF: ON MEANING, MANIPULATION AND PROMISE.***

Veith, Gene Edward. ***POSTMODERN TIMES: A CHRISTIAN GUIDE TO CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT AND CULTURE.***

Watkins, William D. ***THE NEW ABSOLUTES.***