

EV509 Spirituality and Creativity
for Evangelism & Worship

Essay

*Post-Modernism: How to
reclaim the Christian
message lost to the
Enlightenment.*

by

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1. Introduction

The Enlightenment has severely impacted Christianity. The measuring stick of the Enlightenment was that everything must be reasonable and so Christianity was made reasonable according to the way reasoning was seen to be proper in each time period. Reason has fragmented and compartmentalized the understanding of faith so that faith became largely a dogmatic and intellectual issue. The following essay tries to give a more holistic perspective on Christianity. Christianity must be a way of life and not just a way of thinking. Christianity is not a dogmatic intellectual issue and therefore irrelevant to our time, but it is a complete way of life, the only lifestyle that allows humans to live up to their full potential (John 1:14).

Postmodernism has shown us the limits of reasoning and the subjectivity connected by necessity with all abstract rational thought. The real world cannot be grasped by dogmas or even by scientific laws. Postmodernism has finally brought the era of the Enlightenment with its optimism concerning reason to an end. We now have the chance to rearticulate our Christian faith and provide a viable alternative to materialism that reason has brought about.

2. What is Postmodernism?

The term Postmodernism is highly disputed and claimed by a large number of people. It is supposed to be something that does away with modernism in one way or the other. The expression generally means a turning away from the “presupposition” of the modern period and the striving for an alternative to modernism. Nancy Murphy sees Postmodernism as a turning away from individualism to community and from foundationalism to a web-like form of reasoning¹ whereas Dyrness sees it more as an acceptance of the validity of pluralism. Different systems of explaining the world - which are mutually contradictory - are accepted as valid expressions of reality. There is a distinctive move to the acceptance of the paradox for the explanation of reality.

Difference Between Modernism and Postmodernism²:

Modern	Postmodern
Universalistic Understanding	Recognition of Pluralism in the “modern” World
Foundational thinking	No universally accepted axioms.
Very systematic rational thinking	Thinking is much more adhoc, more in the form of a web and connects to other beliefs.
Knowing is independent of social context	Knowing is only possible in a social context. Pragmatic reasoning
Reality can be found by finding the laws of nature.	The validation of what we are doing becomes our accepted form of reality.

¹ Murphy p. 202

² Lecture Notes PH508 Dr. Dyrness, Spring 94

After reading the *Postmodernism Across the Ages* I had more the impression that “Postmodernism” in the secular sense refers to an intensified pessimism flowing out of the condition of the arts into a denial of any beauty at all. All one usually finds - apart from a love for the paradox - in this book is a combination of evils (that contradict each other) happening at different times combined into a horrible outcry, an outcry for sense and value in life. The biggest problem seems to be that meaning is wanted without any commitment based on human reasoning alone. In that sense the book is not “postmodern” at all but still “modern” in its expectation of reaching the goal with human capabilities. It reiterates the end of the modern era which is that our reason has limits.

Postmodernism is ultimately the doing away with the modern, the challenge of its underlying presuppositions. It is the reaction against the horror unleashed by a rational humanistic worldview.

3. The Mystical

One of the most important issues brought up through postmodernist thought is the readiness of acceptance of something beyond reason to give our life sense. Humans clearly see that the message of pure rationalism makes life senseless. Modern accepted theories when taken to the far end lead to a worldview that must lead to despair. For example evolution is based on the survival of the fittest and the killing of the weak. If we have the same approach in the way we handle our fellow human beings (many act like that already!) then life will be hell for us for we are all weak in some aspects of life. Are we still “fit” for life? We will find ways to get rid of the weak in our social context. But we are getting to be weaker the older we get. When will we be the ones that have to yield to the stronger and to the younger?

Validity of our lives is therefore sought beyond the world that we know, beyond the world that the media prepares for us. That is why there is such a strong search for spirituality in the world today and classes on mysticism are very popular. But this movement is very fragmented. People are very skeptical concerning these methods. Generally they do not “believe” in it, but they accept it since it works for them. Here we have an expression of the pragmatic element in Postmodernism. People want to see results before any high theories are discussed. It does not have to be logical it just has to work for them. Like for example stress reduction through some kind of meditation on an ancient Indian name of a God or some magic balls that will do the job. Mystical experiences are sought after to verify that there is something beyond, something outside of our rational grasp that gives meaning to our life.

The biggest problem with mainstream Christianity is that we already have let go of our rich heritage of mystical techniques and spirituality that was available especially in the Middle Ages. We have given it up in favor of rational dogmatic and systematic ethical thought, in favor of a “more pure” form of Christianity. Christian spirituality was popular in a wide array of methods and expressions from its start. Scripture is full of these items. For example Psalm 1 mentions the meditation day and night about God’s Word and the New Testament frequently mentions the custom of all night prayers of Jesus himself.

Mainstream Christianity is customarily identified with Christianity in itself but is in reality a rationally justified- and thereby censored and warped - version of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What we therefore have to do is to renew our commitment to our tradition and to rediscover the spirituality that we lost to the “Enlightenment”. Like the popular techniques offered in our schools today we should be able to tap into our rich heritage and offer classes also in Christian spirituality. Contrary to other religions Christianity is not rigid in its approach to spirituality. We should be able to do far more than others will be able to. Furthermore what we teach integrates well with our history and we would be much more easily able to communicate with regular people damaged by the enlightenment than the eastern or other strange popular religions.

4. The Supernatural

The enlightenment put a heavy emphasis on the “natural laws” of nature. Everything was thought to be governed by these laws which are supposed to be unbreakable. Essentially “natural laws” were valid forever and even God would not break them. This led to a belief in a God that could not intervene in the world that he had created and ultimately to atheism. Yet there was and is still a deep hunger for the intervention of God on behalf of injustice and on a personal level to give meaning to life. Who can believe in God’s purpose for one’s life without having a God that intervenes for us and shapes our lives?

For these reasons the hunger for supernatural intervention is still there. In modern science (or better postmodern?) with Einstein and the discoveries of elementary physics we have now severe blows to our systems of causality in place. We now know that the behavior of elementary particles is governed by chance rather than any laws that we know. The behavior of light as a particle or as a wave is determined by our observation of light. We as observers interfere with the observation. Causality that was the basics of our “natural laws” is seriously challenged with the result that the “natural laws” are more an empirical prediction of future behavior of matter based on the past behavior that we have studied. The behavior in a single instance that is before us is in effect unpredictable.³

From this turn of events we are much more open to supernatural intervention today than in the past. Intervention by God in reality is not against inviolable “laws of nature” anymore. Our research has basically shown us the limits of reasoning that we cannot predict natural behavior. The argument for ultimate control of nature through our knowledge cannot be made anymore. The control is and must be effectively limited.

Supernatural interventions by God are at the heart of the Christian message as seen from Scripture and from the history of the Church. The New Testament is very explicit about healing people through laying on of hands, confessing sins etc. There is a deep need in our society for healing and divine guidance and intervention. We need to offer this explicitly in

³ See John Gribbin [In Search of the Big Bang: Quantum Physics and Cosmology](#), Bantam New Age Books, 1986 for a Postmodern New Age perspective on this. That book gave me valuable information which I could not find from a Christian side.

our churches to make faith workable for people and show it to be a reality in the life of the members. Healing services and personal counseling and healing ministries are essential for any effective ministry in the postmodern period. Again we are thrown back on our long tradition before the enlightenment, before God's divine intervention was denied.

5. God's creation

The Enlightenment came with the classic Greek claim that the "natural laws" were eternal and so was the universe. The Christian message of a creation was ignored and seen as outdated. Presupposing that the universe had a beginning would mean that there was a higher superior being. If that was conceded then at least the inability of that being to intervene was assumed in deistic forms of religion.

Einstein's Theory of Relativity was first formulated in a way that would conform to the prevalent view of the eternal universe. His equations included a constant that he could not explain. But omitting the constant would mean that we have an expanding universe. An if it expands then it must have started at some point. Einstein had to omit his "cosmological constant" after Edwin Hubble made his observations of red shifts here at the Wilson Observatory. Still many scientists doubted such a strange concept as an expanding universe. The Hubble telescope - since it was not able to be used for visible exploration due to the defective lenses - has very effectively collected a host of data on the background radiation of the universe. This data shows a pattern predicted by the Theories of an expanding universe. The concept of an expanding universe is almost universally accepted now.

What we have here is again a development towards the affirmation of the Christian faith. We can now speak about creation. Furthermore this whole issue leads to so many basic questions in science - to the basic modern paradigm - that a plurality of opinions concerning the creation and making of the world is possible. An expanding universe means also that another set of heavy doubts need to be cast on the assumption of the "eternal" validity of natural laws even throughout the time the universe existed.

An openness for alternative views on creation or the basic framework of the universe has therefore come up. The evolutionary understanding of the survival of the fittest needs to be challenged since it leads to a world without beauty that is just bend on the fight for survival. We need to have a new worldview that can appreciate beauty and express joy about creation similar to what is witnessed in Scripture and in our tradition.

It is interesting how the arts react to public ideologies like for example evolution and classical science. What we have gotten since the 1900s from the arts was increasingly an expression of despair, loneliness and all sorts of other negative critical images. We need a new framework for the world that allows us to express hope, purpose, love. We need to learn anew to rejoice with our creator, enjoy worship and enjoy the harmony and beauty of his creation. This is all bound to our acceptance of creation as a fact, as a divine act of God and our thankfulness and worship for what he did. So that we can sing with the elders in Revelation 4:11:

Our Lord and God! You are worthy to receive glory, honor, and power. For you created all things, and by your will they were given existence and life.

6. Conclusion

The issue that comes up in all fields that I have surveyed is always the same. Our traditional understanding of Christianity was abandoned in the name of reason during the enlightenment. We have to recognize that we cannot put reason in such a high place as we have done it in the past and we should acknowledge that there are limits to reason and that actually faith goes beyond reason. Calvin once said “*Faith goes beyond the capabilities of our minds.*”

The denial of our tradition in the name of reason has to be acknowledged as a heresy. We cannot tolerate people in the 21st century still compromising the Christian faith in the name of their ideas. The basic message of Christianity as revealed in Scripture has to be accepted without any censorship. Judgment of passages of Scripture as “primitive” or contradictory should be made - if at all - only with the acknowledgment that our reason is fallen and that God is ultimately beyond the capabilities of the mind.

The enlightenment has led to another bizarre development of mainstream Christianity like the development of the papacy in the middle ages. Mainstream Christianity usually denies the authority of Scripture as normative in some aspect of faith, be it creation, supernatural intervention or gender roles. They are not a viable alternative to modernism as required for our postmodern period. Mostly mainstream Christianity is more a representative of modernity with some kind of ethical framework extracted from Scripture.

Postmodern Christianity will have a decisively countercultural approach to modernity putting an emphasis on the acceptance of Scripture and tradition, ministering with healing and experiencing divine messages in their midst. The approach will be based on experience but on the basis of our rich tradition and Scripture. There must be an emphasis on God’s creation otherwise the Biblical message is undermined. There must be an emphasis on the practical implications for family life as well, for the raising of children and for the relations within the family and outside of the family. These items ultimately show the reality of being a Christian to outsiders and are the major attraction to our faith.

Postmodern Christianity has to clearly distinguish itself from mainstream Christianity to be credible. Mainstream Christianity is rightfully associated with hypocrisy and ethical opportunism. Especially in Germany it has significantly contributed to two world wars. Mainstream “Modern” Christianity is a heresy. Usually members of “Modern Christianity” (at least the German state church version) do not qualify to be called a Christian under the Biblical notions since they usually deny creation and the bodily resurrection of Christ. Postmodern Christians need to carefully evaluate anyone wanting to join their ranks from this side.

Since the seventies a lot of Churches in this style have been growing all over the world. They are strongly against the theological establishment but they grow fast because their

message is practical and meaningful to the members of their churches. The church where I became a Christian is like that and the reason that I became a Christian is the practical approach and the integrity of the faith, which was never the case in the mainstream Christianity into which I was born and from which I only know hypocrisy and empty ceremonies.

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