

**What is postmodernism? How has this movement of thought affected understandings of the religious?** Aaron Kennedy

'Now - here is my secret:

I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God - that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need to God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.'

(Excerpt from 'Life After God', by Douglas Coupland, novelist to the emerging 'postmodern' generations. These words did not contribute to the overall count.)

It is partly by virtue of his place in history and society that this author considers himself, in some sense, to be a 'postmodern' individual. It is also the case that, largely, but not solely by virtue of this place in society and history, that he is also a 'Christian.' 'That's a tight spot', he hears you say. He would agree with you up to a point - he experiences an element of personal stress regarding the *present* conflict between said modes of being/thinking. On the other hand, being (somewhat) postmodern, he is "...for heterogeneity, plurality, constant innovation...", (Best and Kellner, 2002) well, at least to some indefinable extent, and is therefore at ease with the disjunction. It is with an awareness of the personal embodiment of the effect of postmodernism's critique, and these obvious biases that this author

attempts to describe it, and illustrate how it has affected understandings of the religious.

A subtle example of the affects of this movement of thought is perhaps already borne out, in part, in the very title of this essay. The presumption of the plurality of religious interpretations is indicative of the influence of the postmodern critique of truth. It is with specific reference to this facet of religion, truth claims and epistemology, that this essay will be conducted.

It is helpful to consider, when trying to say what postmodernism is, that it is mostly defined by what it is *not*. That ultimately makes it fairly difficult to talk about, especially when its main exponents do not all reach the same conclusions. Smart also testifies to this. 'The difficulty of writing about postmodernism and postmodernity is that these terms do not clearly designate unambiguous realities.' And later he cautions, 'Sometimes criticisms are based on a parody of the thinkers at issue.' (Smart, B., 2005: 258) It must be conceded therefore that any such report on the nature of postmodernity or postmodernism will necessarily be incomplete. As Grenz points out when talking of Rorty, Foucault and Derrida, "They constitute a trio of postmodern prophets who sometimes sing in unison but more often produce the more discordant music you would expect of postmodernism." Thus, frustratingly many would say, it is an important and defining feature of postmodernism that it does not constitute a unified edifice of knowledge. Indeed in doing so it would do violence to one of its most commonly accepted core values, that of plurality. Arguably the greatest champion of plurality and difference in postmodern thought was the Frenchman, Jean-Francois Lyotard.

Lyotard (1924 - 1998) uses the term *modern* to "designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse ...making explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth." (Lyotard, J-F., 1979: xxiii) He goes on to describe postmodernism in its very crudest sense, as '...incredulity towards metanarratives.' (Lyotard, J-F., 1979: xxiv) He cites the changes in the transfer, ownership, and codification of information in post II World War Western society as one the main reasons for the destabilisation of scientific knowledge. (Lyotard, J-F., 1979: 3) His line of thought is that knowledge is codified as information and translated into computer languages. It is then commodified and therefore loses its truth-value, instead acquiring a financial value, as in the value of a product to its consumer or producer. He maintains this is also a prime, and false, means of legitimation for scientific knowledge. (Lyotard, 1979: 4) Its ultimate means to legitimation is, he claims, by a kind of knowledge he calls 'narrative'. Since scientific knowledge ultimately shares the same basis of legitimation as non-scientific knowledge, it cannot claim any superiority over it. It is largely for these reasons that he is incredulous towards metanarratives. (Lyotard, 1979: 27 - 28) These theories, among others, have filtered down into popular and academic culture and have contributed to (or, initiated or reacted to...?) a popular rejection of any system of thought that sets itself up as objectively and ultimately true, to the exclusion of other 'narratives' of truth. Christianity is an (almost omnipresent) example of such a metanarrative, in that it provides a framework for understanding the earth (i.e. Created by God, given to humans to dominate, etc) and

humankind (i.e. Essentially sinful, but not beyond help, redemption, etc) and their future (i.e. Salvation, life after death, heaven/hell, etc).

In further discussing the nature of postmodernism, Lyotard insists that it constitutes an attitude of unremitting suspicion of 'the received'. Thus he says: 'A work can only become modern if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.' ('Answering the question: What is Postmodernism?', 1982: 79) Anything created or conceived in a postmodern context immediately assumes the label 'modern', and must be challenged and reappraised.

During his young adulthood, Lyotard, previously an introverted and quiet man, experienced the II World War. 'The war disrupted both his way of life and his thought; he acted as a first-aid volunteer in the fight for liberation in the Paris streets in August 1944, and gave up the idea of indifference for a commitment to the investigation of reality in terms of social interactions.' (Woodward, 2005) It is clear that such experiences prompted the young Lyotard to consider precisely what sort of system of thought could lead to such catastrophic pain and suffering, such as the II World War. Middleton and Walsh express the mood of the times, post-World War II. '...the crisis of modernity is perhaps best seen in the post-war existentialist movement in Europe ...[who] articulated a profound loss of hope and sense of angst about the meaning and purpose of life in modern times.' (Middleton and Walsh, 1995: 23)

The Encarta World English Dictionary (1999) defines Christendom as "all the areas of the world where Christianity is accepted as the main

religion.” Its main period of influence arguably stretched from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century C.E. until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century C.E. It acted as an over-arching paradigm of truth and reality for the governments, and most people, in the countries concerned. This included a large portion of the known world. It was however, effectively ended by a combination of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment movement of emancipation. Western Christianity then resurrected itself in forms more conducive to modern times, and subsequently regained significant influence in society. This influence persisted until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when postmoderns began offering their critique. The movement within Christianity that most clearly embodies enlightenment thought became known as ‘evangelicalism’. As Grenz testifies, “evangelicals have always used the tools of modernity, such as the scientific method, the empirical approach to reality and commonsense realism.” (Grenz, 1996: 161) One of the first to offer a serious critique of Christianity was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900), who, significantly, was a source of much inspiration for postmodern theorists such as Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault. (Brians, 1998) He also influenced many recent theologians, such as Paul Tillich (1886 - 1985) who developed a human-centred, existentialist theology, highly reliant on Nietzsche’s rationalism, and Martin Buber (1878 - 1965), the Jewish theologian, who like Nietzsche, emphasised process as important in theology. (Brians, 1998) More reference to Nietzsche will be made in following paragraphs

Implicit within the eschewing of the idea of objective scientific knowledge, was the ‘dethroning’ of rationality. ‘Lyotard sees reason not as a universal and immutable human faculty or principle but as a specific and variable human production.’ (Woodward, 2005) Smart

describes the situation: "Postmodernity in this sense is a *mood of radical doubt* [Italics mine], following from an undermining of the idea that our narratives and world-views can be rationally grounded and secured." (Smart, B., 2005: 256) This sense of doubt or scepticism has significantly infiltrated the Western consciousness. It has impacted many different areas of society because it sets itself up against any 'totalising theory' of reality. (Woodward, 2005) With reference to the arena of research, Lyotard talks of the 'demoralisation' of scientific researchers as an affect of the loss of confidence in science. (Lyotard, 2005: 7) As regards religion in society in general, many now talk of living in a 'post-christian' (Miles and Iannaccone, 2003) society, due the popular loss of confidence in Christianity as a 'totalising theory'. Statistical research does support this, making clear that the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries have seen substantial decline in Church membership in Europe, and an increase in association of ethnoreligious groups, atheism and a multiplicity of other religious groups. This can be seen as an increased interest in non-christian groups which embody a more pluralistic outlook on reality, or at least, which do not demand of their adherents, the endorsement of 'modern-style' metanarrative.

Jacques Derrida, another key postmodern theorist, is responsible for the development of 'deconstructionism', also known as 'poststructuralism'. This discipline owes a great deal to the work and teachings of structuralist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), who was the '...proponent of the thesis that is commonly referred to as "the arbitrariness of the sign."' (Reynolds, 2005) 'Poststructuralism's finest achievement is to rediscover and extend the radical analytical possibilities inherent in Saussure's theory of language as signifiatory rather than a representational phenomenon'. (Scott and Marshall,

510: 2005) Vanhoozer describes the modern understanding of language as 'a transparent medium that enabled consciousness to grasp reality. Postmoderns find this picture of mind-world relation incredible.' Thiselton (2005: 15) expresses this incredulity so: 'The 'objectivity' of the sign as an innocent truth-claim about a single state of affairs proves to be illusory.' (Vanhoozer, 12: 2003) Don Cupitt (as cited by Thiselton, 1996: 88), a fine example of a church leader who has accepted the poststructuralist critique describes this understanding of the nature of language: '...language *is* transience. It slips by at such a rate that the object of our desire never fully arrives, and before it has come it is already disappearing.' This is part of a larger critique offered, most notably by Derrida, who saw that Western philosophical tradition has long discriminated against the written word ('phonocentrism', Scott and Marshall, 2005: 511), in favour of the spoken. Derrida detected a residual humanism (or metaphysics of human presence) within this bias, which assumed the inherent stability of meanings and 'the possibility of knowable truth for no convincing reason'. (Scott and Marshall, 2005: 511) Vanhoozer explains this view: 'Logocentrism is the belief that the meaning and truth of what we say can be guaranteed by some centre outside language (for example, Reason) by which we gain direct access to things themselves.' He goes on to describe the postmodern take on language, saying, 'Language is a sign-system made up of signifiers whose meaning is a function of their difference from other signs. This differential network of signs perpetuates a system of differences that never settle on a stable extralinguistic entity.' He goes on, 'Hence there is no such thing as an identical repetition, for though the signifier may be the same, the occasion of its utterance, its context, is not.' (156: 2003) This has specific relevance to the Christian idea of

revelation, and further to that, hermeneutics. Meanings are socially and historically constructed and are not transferable between contexts, or repeatable. Therefore, from a postmodern point of view, the Christian idea of revelation, specifically textual biblical revelation, falls to pieces, or, is deconstructed. "Grammatology" is Derrida's name for a science of writing no longer determined by the assumption that language communicates stable meanings or referents.' (Vanhoozer, 2003: 157) Another key postmodern theorist and pragmatist, American Richard Rorty (born 1931) is read by Grenz thus, 'Truth is established neither by the correspondence of an assertion with objective reality nor by the internal coherence of the assertions themselves.' (Grenz, 1996: 6) 'As a result, truth is not primarily a metaphysical concept, but a matter of human convention.' (Grenz, 1996: 152) As read by Grenz, Rorty resists developing a new theory of truth, instead places value on the coherence of a given statement. For something to be true for someone (that is subjectively true) it must correlate directly with the system of beliefs it seeks to inhabit - there must internal integrity in the belief system.

Let us take the example of Don Cupitt, in order to further consider some likely implications of the postmodern critique for understanding the religious. As cited by Thompson, Cupitt arrives at the conclusion that "nothing is hidden. Everything is what it appears to be and there is no occult reality... There is only the manifest, the world of appearances which is best analysed philosophically as a world of signs." (As cited in Thompson, 2003: 86) It would appear that this would render Cupitt as a non-believer, he does however to best of this authors' knowledge, retain his position as an Anglican priest. Indeed, as Thompson says, '...the general approach of postmodernism is one

that denies the reality of anything that lies 'beyond' the actual words or images we create.' (Thompson, M., 2003: 88) Cupitt goes on to describe the kind of spirituality he considers consistent with this kind of postmodern critique: "I am advocating a religion of life in the sense of spiritual discipline that enables us to accept and to say yes to our life as it is, baseless, brief, pointless and utterly contingent, and yet in its very nihilism beautiful, ethically demanding, solemn and final. (As cited in Thompson, 2003: 87) And further to that: "The gods are just what people can be seen to be worshipping; they are our faith in them and the things we say and feel about them and do for them. There is nothing extra. Gods have no existence outside our faith and practice. (Cupitt, D., as cited in Thompson, 2003: 88) In sum, if followed through with, the postmodern philosophy, according to Cupitt, strips religious practice of any serious potential of mediating the spiritual or divine. It is ultimately an atheistic philosophy.

Having considered possible implications of this line of thought for religious belief, it may be observed, that contrary to popular opinion (Thompson, 2003: 87), Cupitt betrays a modernistic philosophy, alongside postmodern influences. He stresses the importance of logic, and asserts his position in terms of objective concepts of truth. Thompson (1997: 34) makes clear in the following quote, we need a wider concept of the nature of the postmodern and that perhaps, there may be room for the religious within its boundaries (Or lack of them). 'Both ancient philosophy and a 'post modern' approach enlarge the concept of reason to include mysticism and the imagination. Where as sceptical rationalism seeks an *isolated, self-possessed certainty* [Italics mine] based on our own resources – and so is liable to end in nothingness and despair – the reasoning of contemplative imagination

accepts that no objective, self-possessed grasp of reality is obtainable, and instead is open to seeking truth through being possessed by reality by way of the imagination, poetry, contemplation, and prayer. Whereas sceptical rationalism strives vainly after objective, graspable proofs, faith by definition accepts that truth ultimately lies in reaching out through darkness and uncertainty to that which lies beyond.'

One of the most important aspects of the aforementioned poststructuralist critique is the insistence that a claim to truth is a claim on power. Thiselton informs us that 'Nietzsche and Foucault, among others, argue that claims to truth often represent disguised attempts to legitimate uses of power.' He thus articulates what he considers to be the defining characteristic of postmodernism: 'Postmodernity means, above all, loss of innocence, especially any innocence which perceives the contrived as 'natural'.' (Thiselton, 1996: 15) There is therefore within postmodernism an inherent suspicion of the nature of the motivation behind all truth-claims. As regards religion, 'Nietzsche attacks the motivations that underlie the truth claims of Christian theology. ...He writes, 'The "Salvation of the soul" - in plain English "the world revolves around me"'.' (As cited in Thiselton, 1996: 6) This kind of statement is perhaps indicative of a general rejection of the modern emphasis upon the centrality of the self. His judgement of the motivation of clergy is even more grave: 'A theologian, a Priest, or a Pope, not only errs but actually lies with every word that he utters.' (As cited in Thiselton, 1996: 6) Drawing from and yet critiquing Francis Bacon (1561 - 1626), he also said, 'Knowledge works as an instrument of power.' (As cited in Thiselton, 1996: 6) This stance is further supported by an observation by Lyotard in the contrasting role of knowledge industry: 'Knowledge in

the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major - perhaps the major - stake in the worldwide competition for power.' (Lyotard, 1979: 5)

It is commonly known that incidences of abuse within the Christian church have plagued its recent history, but these are probably not the type that Foucault and his postmodern cohorts are most concerned about. It is with the everyday kind of power exerted by individuals who claim to possess knowledge, and even access to its source, that represses the individual. Foucault further claims that, due to the essential link between truth claims and power relationships, that truth is produced and moulded in a way that is suitably advantageous to those in power. (Grenz, 1996: 132) It may be argued therefore, from Foucaults' point of view, that the very nature and form of Church doctrines are so designed, not simply to express perceived truth, but to maintain the upper hand in a power relationship.

Postmodernism, thus far, seems to offer no constructive critique for understanding religion, and in fact, would appear to sound its death knell. Does postmodernism have anything positive to offer to the understanding of religion? Or is it the case, that if participants and leaders of religions want to maintain their traditions, they must ignore and eschew the postmodern critique? Should the church strike the defensive pose, and ironically become the last bastion of modern thought in the Western world? There are many Christians throughout the world who seek to embrace the critique of postmodernism, in so far as they feel is appropriate, and in so doing regain a place of relevance and assistance in relation to the rest of the world. 'The Post-evangelical', by Dave Tomlinson, was written to express a move

within evangelicalism away from some of its defining characteristics, and as such reflects the influence of the postmodern critique in the Western Church. As he says, 'the shift from evangelical to post-evangelical is not primarily about surface culture... it is first and foremost about a difference in perception of truth.' (Tomlinson, 1995: 90) Although Tomlinson would not fully agree with the deconstructionist belief that nothing actually exists outside language, he would hold that much religious language is vacuous. (1995: 91) He also references the writings of Don Cupitt, and asserts that his conclusions are not the only possible interpretation of the critique of deconstructionism. He further quotes Derrida himself: 'I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is in fact saying the exact opposite.' (1995:92) Tomlinson and many like him, are a living embodiment of the effect of the postmodern critique of religion, and actually view it as helpful in renewing understandings of Christianity considered core to its historical identity. 'The advent of postmodernity, ironically, creates a set of conditions under which the magicians, shamans, and prophets can thrive. The absence of certainty ...progress questioned and a return to pre-critical classicism or romanticism, puts competing powers and alternative world-views back into the centre of public space.' (Percy, 2001: 12)

In conclusion, postmodernism and its variant sub-disciplines, have offered a very persuasive and powerful critique of modern concepts of truth, epistemology, language, and the use of power. Being very much a child of modernism, Western Christianity, in the form of Evangelicalism, suffered a very heavy blow at its hands. Popularly this has resulted in disenchantment with mainstream, institutionalised

religions. For many, postmodernism has sounded the death knell of religion, proclaiming that God has died; however for others, it presents a singular opportunity from which to restore religion to something of its pre-modern, historical identity.

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