

POSTMODERNISM

Key Verse: “*He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the One who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.*” (John 7:18)

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Introduction

So what comes after modernism? The prefix “post” means “after,” so “Post-modernism” is one way people describe the worldview of the present era where we are now. Some suggest postmodernism is really a continuation of modernism, a return to and intensifying of some of modernism’s basic tenets, particularly the individualism and artistic abstractions of the 20th century. Other terms for our present age based on this later view are liquid modernity, fluid modernism and hypermodernity or supermodernity. For this study, we will focus on postmodernism as a worldview.

Reactions and over reactions are frequent in history and in the development of thought, including religious history and thought. The Age of Reason, as we have seen, was in part a reaction to what rationalist thinkers perceived as the rigid narrowness of tradition and the miraculous in Scripture. Similarly, the rise of emotionalism and subjectivism in culture and evangelical religion was a reaction or over reaction to the apparent coldness and analytical nature of reason. Many aspects of postmodernism are a reaction to the limitations of modernism.

We noticed how modernism took about 500 years to develop and some historians see ca. 1990 as the end of the late modern period. Modernism overlapped with other eras during its development. Similarly, postmodernism overlaps with and grows out of the modern era. Postmodernism as a worldview exhibits much of late modernism’s fascination with abstraction, particularly in the visual and literary arts, individualism and alienation, rejection of traditional authority structures, generational isolation and separation of facts from values. Postmodernism goes further in questioning the very nature of fact, reality and truth. Postmodern thought began to flourish in the twentieth century primarily in the United States and France. Because of its limited and subjective perception of reality’s diversity and problems, some think postmodernism will come to an early end.

Some believe that each major historical era or paradigm has a leading source of meaning. In the Middle Ages it was theology, in the Enlightenment, philosophy, and in modernism, science. The leading source of meaning in postmodernism is literature. Interestingly, God chose the written word to give us His most meaningful messages.

Some Relevant Definitions

Construct (as a noun): Something constructed by the mind in the mind. It could be a theory, working hypothesis, concept or product of ideology, history or social circumstances. In postmodern thought, personal identity and meaning are internal constructs rather than objective realities in commonly held fact.

Deconstruction: A philosophical method asserting that meanings and metaphysical constructs (non-material or spiritual realities) are always made unstable by their dependence on signifiers* that are arbitrary. The analytic examination of something to reveal its inadequacy (i.e. to take it apart, to de-construct it). (A signifier is “a symbol, sound, or image [as a word] that represents an underlying concept or meaning.”)

Epistemology: The study of knowledge and meaning. “The study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity.” From Greek *epistēmē* knowledge, from *epistanai* to understand, know, from *epi-* + *histanai* to cause to stand.

Etymology: The history of a word. From Greek, *etymon* + *-logia* –*logy*, true, word, i.e. the true sense of a word.

Linguistics: The study of language and how it works. Includes examining the smallest units, nature, structure, modification and development of language. Can include non-verbal language like American Sign Language.

Narrative: Story that is told verbally or in writing. Something narrated as in the explanations in a documentary or the voice-over story in a movie. The representation in art of an event or story. In postmodern thought the ongoing personal story of one’s life is a narrative in action, constantly in the making.

Metanarrative (Meta-Narrative): One grand narrative common to everyone. A big picture story that applies to all. Postmodernism rejects the overarching explanation of common meaning, knowledge, experience and destiny that a

metanarrative would provide for society. Like nominalism, postmodernism rejects even the idea of universal absolute truth. The root meaning of *meta* in Greek is “with” or “after.”

What Is Postmodernism as a Worldview?

Some define postmodernism as a movement rather than a worldview. The movement re-examines modern assumptions about culture, identity, history and language. These re-evaluations, however, have come from people in positions of power to influence the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of culture through education and mass media. These influences have been significantly different enough from modernism’s core tenets to constitute a distinct worldview, a way in which people look at the world that influences every aspect of their lives.

As we saw in Study 1, there are twelve important dimensions of a worldview. These are questions we can ask to identify the fundamental characteristics and tenets of any worldview, including our Christian worldview:

1. Who is God, what is prime reality - the really real - the “ground” on which reality exists? (ontology)
2. 2.1 What is the nature of external reality, the world around us? (i.e. concrete and real or an illusion)
2.2 What is the nature of our “internal thought world.” To what extent is the “virtual” world “real”?
3. What is a human being?
4. Where do we come from? (etiology, our cause and origin)
5. What happens to a person at death?
6. Why is it possible to know anything at all? (epistemology; study of meaning and knowledge)
7. How do we know what is right and wrong?
8. What is the meaning of human history?
9. How do we perceive time: as linear and uni-directional or as circular and multi-directional? What matters more to us, being on time or events? Do we see the future or the past as most important?
10. Is this worldview/culture open or closed, monolithic/homogenous or heterogeneous?
11. Is the centre of this worldview/culture its groups or individuals? (i.e. group or individual culture)
12. Where are we going, how does the world end? (futurology or eschatology)

The highlights of the postmodern worldview in terms of the characteristics answering these questions above are:

1. Postmodernism is not concerned with reality as much as how language functions to construct meaning itself. The shift of emphasis in the postmodern worldview is from being >>>knowing>>> meaning.
2. The truth of reality is hidden from us. All we can do is tell stories.
3. Human beings make themselves who they are by the languages they construct about themselves. The I is not a self but a floating construct.
4. There is no single viable explanation of where we come from. Everyone has their own story about it.
5. Similarly, everyone can have their own view of an afterlife or no afterlife. Either way it can’t be proven.
6. All narratives mask a play for power. Any one narrative used as a metanarrative is oppressive (i.e. a metanarrative is an overarching story that would try to tie all the others together). “I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives” (Jean-François Lyotard, French philosopher and sociologist, author of *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*). Knowing is relative to the individual since there is no objective reality commonly understood the same way by everyone.
7. Ethics, like knowledge, is a linguistic construct. Social good is whatever society takes it to be.
8. The cutting edge of culture is literary theory. History is largely dependent on who is writing it. Therefore, it is difficult to know and is constantly being redefined. What happened in the past is always less important than what is happening now. This kind of thinking disconnects people from their heritage. Even though though images and words from the past are reused their original intents and meanings tend to be forgotten. The speed of change tends to make people think there is essentially no value in the past applicable.
- 9, 12. Time and destiny may be constructs of one’s own story rather than objectives of overarching universal truth (metanarrative).
- 10, 11 Postmodern culture tends to be open-ended and centred on the individual.

The following quote sums up the cultural environment generated by widespread individualism and relativism in the west in postmodern and liquid modern times: “Interruption, incoherence, surprise are the ordinary conditions of our life. They have even become real needs for many people, whose minds are no longer fed by anything but sudden changes and constantly renewed stimuli. We can no longer bear anything that lasts. We no longer know how to make boredom bear fruit. So the whole question comes down to this: can the human mind master what the human mind has made?” (Paul Valéry in Zygmunt Bauman’s book *Liquid Modernity*).

In *The Death of Truth: What's Wrong With Multiculturalism, the Rejection of Reason and the New Postmodern Diversity*, Dennis McCallum argues that postmodernism impacts society’s view of truth in every significant sphere of life: law, science, religion, health care, psychotherapy, literature, education and history.

Are there Relevant Points of Contact Between Postmodernism and Scripture?

On the positive side, there are many potential points of contact between postmodernism and Scripture to help us build honest relationships and make the most of opportunities to reach out to postmoderns with the good news:

1. In the Bible there are many stories (factual accounts) of people who wrestled with God's existence or justice or even the point of their own being in a profoundly literary narrative and/or poetic way: Jacob in Genesis 32, Job, Solomon in Ecclesiastes, Psalm 22, Isaiah 1:18, Habakkuk 1, the wisdom literature, ("Writings"/Kativim of the Jewish Canon), etc.
2. God refers to Himself with many artistic metaphors: potter, author, creator. (Franky Schaeffer's book *Addicted to Mediocrity* talks about how we have lost touch with this artistic and excellence side of God's great character; cf. Romans 1:18-20.)
3. The profound meanings that John brings from the very straightforward language in His Gospel and letters (e.g. John gives deep meanings to such simple words as: door, bread, light, word, etc.)
4. Truth is not hidden but revealed in Scripture and personified in the being of Jesus (John 14:6).
5. God's Word shows how an overarching metanarrative still allows for creativity and many personal narratives within it. We find meaning when the stories of our lives become part of His story, the real history of salvation.
6. God not only provides prescriptions for right and wrong, He shows through narratives how the consequences of ethical and/or immoral behaviour play out in people's lives. The Bible is full of objective object lessons in narrative form!
7. God's story is a story of hope. His future is as real as His past.

Challenges

1. Postmodernism's free floating relativity.
2. Helping people make the transition back from relativity to reality in all its beauty and truth.
3. The pervasiveness of this worldview, plus the fact that many don't even know they're living in it or accept it as a worldview (cf. our earlier example in Study 23 of the fish as the last one to know that he lives in water).

Opportunities in Evangelism

1. All of the points of contact above.
2. There are lots of people around us to work with.
3. The moral fruit of the truth becomes more attractive as the world rediscovers the existence of the evil and oppression that the moral poverty of relativity has lead to.
4. Scripture is literary. We can help people discover a sense of wonder, mystery and enchantment in God's amazing Word.
5. Scripture is not only literary but historic, theological, and prophetic (cf. John Clayton read it to disprove it and discovered, once inside, that it's true.) God weaves His lessons about meaning and morality through and into the fabric of human lives. He reveals Himself as creative, artistic and caring.

As strange and vague as a lot of this must seem we have no choice but to try and come to grips with it and see how we can build bridges and communicate the wonder of God's message to postmodern people. They may well be surprised and delighted to find out how amazing God and the world of His Word really are if they would give them a chance and enter in to Him.

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