Postmodernism and the Church

Since the Second Vatican Council we have taken for granted the necessity of “reading the signs of the times.” We understand this to be an on-going task, one that is never done once and for all. I understand postmodernism as a way of doing just that—reading the signs of the times from the late 1960s or early 1970s to the present, pointing to a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies. The term itself is ambiguous and amorphous and has meant different things at different times, in different disciplines, and in different geographical contexts. It describes shifts in sensibilities, in literary theory, philosophy, architecture, politics, economics, the media, science, religion, and in general worldview. Postmodernism has “touched every field, it permeated cultural analysis as a whole, it had emerged as a ‘condition’ to be celebrated or suffered, a world view and set of paradigms, and like anything so all-encompassing it had positive, negative, and ambiguous aspects—all three” (Jencks, 1992: 31).

In this article I will first summarize the main characteristics of postmodernism insofar as some convergence and consensus from these various disciplines can be discerned; second, summarize the main critiques of it; and third, indicate some implications for the Church and Christian spirituality in a postmodern world.

POSTMODERNISM

Charles Jencks summarizes the postmodern project as: “the attempt to go beyond the materialist paradigm which characterizes modernism; an intense concern for pluralism and a desire to cut across the different taste cultures that now fracture society; an obligation to bring back selected traditional values, but in a new key that fully recognizes the ruptures caused by modernity; an acknowledgment of difference and otherness, the keynote of the feminist movement; indeed the re-emergence of the feminine into all discourse; the re-enchantment of nature, which stems from new developments in science and A. N. Whitehead’s philosophy of organicism; and the commitment to an ecological and ecumenical world view that now characterizes post-modern theology” (Jencks, 1992: 7). Permit me to elaborate on some of these points.

1) Pluralism. If there is one characteristic of the various versions of postmodernism on which there is consensus it is pluralism. Jean-Francois
Lyotard expresses it as an “incredulity toward metanarratives,” meaning that there is no one worldview, no single explanation. There is a suspicion of totalizing institutions and of their legitimization by an overarching story, whether in the realm of politics (communism or capitalism), or of culture (worldwide westernization and the dominance of science and technology), or of style or taste in art or architecture (modernism). There is a great fear of anything leading to totalitarianism or universalizing control.

2) **Radical eclecticism.** Consonant with this radical pluralism is a willingness to assemble and combine elements from various traditions, including modernity, in a pastiche or *bricolage* (a favorite term), without seeking a synthesis or harmony, as manifested especially in architecture. Thus, there is the rediscovery and reincorporation of elements of tradition that have led some critics to see it as neoconservative. But postmodernism respects (and criticizes) tradition as well as looks to the future. Charles Jencks refers to this as “double voiced discourse.” Neither is it anti-modern; rather it sublates the modern. Lyotard says that postmodernism does not indicate the end of modernism but a new relationship to it. Postmodernism means the continuation of modernism and its transcendence. It can be understood as an intensification of the critical self-consciousness of early modernity—“Both the postmodern and the modern share a common cause in reaction to the grip of an uncritical premodern tradition” (*The Postmodern Bible*, 1995: 13).

3) **Difference and otherness.** This is another consequence as well as cause of radical pluralism. An acknowledgment of difference and otherness, of other voices, other styles, other experiences, other cultures is characteristic of postmodernism. We are now much more conscious of the fact that the experience of others is truly different from our own. Women’s experience is different from men’s (e.g., Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*), African-American and Latino from Anglo, northern European from Latin American. Anthropologists, for example, are acutely aware of how much their representations of other cultures are seen through their own cultural experiences and of the need to allow the other culture to speak in its own voice. Modernity was inclined to see itself as normative for all other premodern or less modern cultures and judge them accordingly. Postmodernism is willing to accept the other as other and recognize the value of different traditions. With postmodernism, the different ways of life can be confronted, enjoyed, juxtaposed, represented, and dramatized, so that different cultures acknowledge each other’s legitimacy.

4) **Particular, regional, local.** In its recognition of otherness and its resistance to totalizing metanarratives, postmodernism emphasizes the
particular, the local, and the regional. There are only “local determinisms,” particular language games, particular “interpretative communities’ made up of both producers and consumers of particular kinds of knowledge, of texts, often operating within a particular institutional context (such as the university, the legal system, religious groupings), within particular divisions of cultural labor . . . or within particular places . . .” (Harvey, 1992: 306). Thus, there are multiple institutions, multiple social groupings (“clouds of sociality” as Lyotard calls them), multiple sources of oppression and multiple resistances; not just one oppressive structure or system, such as communism or capitalism.

5) Indeterminacy, Ambiguity, and Chaos. Postmodernism accepts that there is a certain indeterminacy, randomness, even chaos at the heart of reality. The more we know on both the micro- and the macro-levels, the clearer it becomes that even the material world cannot be fully pinned down, fully described, much less fully comprehended. As J.B.S. Haldane once said, “Not only is the universe mysterious, it is more mysterious than we could possibly imagine.” The idea that modern science will, sooner or later, with ever improving technology, be able to give a full explanation of everything is no longer acceptable. In literary theory, indeterminacy as applied to texts leaves us without the signified or determined referents, but only “signs referring to other signs in an endless play of signifiers” which are ultimately only self-referential.

6) Democratizing movements. Another key movement associated with a postmodern worldview has been the progressive democratization of countries and empires since the mid 1970s. Again Jencks: “One might say, without exaggerating, that the most significant post-modern movement of all is electronic democracy, information-age pluralism, and the emergent self-organizational movements of the last fifteen years, whether these are national, ethnic, regional or transnational” (Jencks, 1992: 15). This can be understood as a manifestation in the political realm of the postmodern resistance to totalizing institutions and the urge for wider participation versus domination and control by an elite. The implosion of the Soviet Empire and the collapse of authoritarian regimes within it are the most obvious examples, but one could also mention the, at least formal, democracies which have replaced a variety of authoritarian governments in Latin America.

7) Participation and dialogue. Characteristic of the postmodern is the awareness of and desire for participation by all, not just an elite, in realms other than the political, such as including aspects of popular culture in art, architecture (e.g., Robert Venturi, Learning from Las Vegas) and literature. The ability of all to participate in the free flow of
information through computers, the Internet, etc., has made this possible and realistic. Again, it is a form of resistance to elitism.

Before turning to the major critiques of postmodernism, I should point out that, despite the convergences just listed, two distinct but overlapping strands of postmodernism can be distinguished. The strand, perhaps familiar to most readers, is that associated with such French intellectuals as Lyotard, Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault (though there are significant differences among them), and others that is sometimes referred to as deconstructive or eliminative postmodernism which tends toward relativism and nihilism. It has a generally gloomy view of the postmodern condition, leading to resignation or cynicism. The other strand, called by contrast constructive or revisionary, is associated with American thinkers such as David Ray Griffin, John Cobb, Joe Holland, Matthew Fox, William A. Beardslee and others, in a series of publications from SUNY Press in New York. This is much more optimistic and suggests a new vision for the world which would incorporate the characteristics above. It is already being realized to some extent in the feminist and ecological movements, and in some theological and ecumenical thinkers such as Harvey Cox and Hans Küng. It is heavily influenced by the process philosophy of A. N. Whitehead.

CRITIQUES

With these two strands in mind, let me repeat that postmodernism is ambiguous, frustrating to try to comprehend, and deliberately eclectic. Some criticisms, therefore, apply to some versions and not to others. Most have been directed at the French strand.

Some critics have said that postmodernism is just a fad or an ideology of the Right, or of Neo-conservatives. But it does seem to pick up some cultural currents, and it has evoked resonances in a wide variety of areas for the last twenty to thirty years. While it may turn out to be a fad in one discipline or another, there do seem to be enough common characteristics to suggest that the culture of modernity, if it is not ending, is at least in the process of a major transformation.

Still others, Gregory Baum for example, have said that “postmodern theory may simply be the language game for a network of intellectuals and artists who, deeply disappointed by the failure of the left, create for themselves a non-political world of plural meaning where there is room for their wishes, thoughts and inspirations” (Baum, 1994: 91). Baum’s main concern is that postmodernism is socially irresponsible, even though he acknowledges that Lyotard and Baudrillard are against totalitarianism and defend personal freedom and collective self-determination. Similarly, David Harvey suggests that postmodernism lacks “revolutionary impulse” and can lead to a simple and direct surrender to commodification, commercialization, and the market.
Critics also reject the postmodern theory of language and communication, suggesting that it reduces cultural life to "a series of texts intersecting with other texts, producing more texts" (Harvey, 1992: 312). Baum is even harsher, saying that the notion that the discourse of particular communities is only self-referential may be valid for some discourses such as poetry, literature, art, and music, but "becomes absurd when we apply it to the many dangers which threaten human-kind at this time. Here our speech is tested and judged by that to which it refers. Hunger, we note, is a discourse-transcending reality, so is AIDS, so is torture and assassination by death squads" (Baum, 1994: 89).

This leads directly to what Harvey calls "the most problematic facet of postmodernism, its psychological pre-suppositions with respect to personality, motivation, and behavior. Preoccupation with the fragmentation and instability of language and discourses carries over directly, for example, into a certain conception of personality" (Harvey, 1992: 309). The series of discreet signifiers becomes a "series of pure and unrelated presents in time," making it impossible to unify the past, present, and future over time and thereby forging a personal identity. Rather than alienation or paranoia, we have schizophrenia, broadly understood. This is another way of postmodernism talking about the loss of the subject.

Finally, as Harvey also points out, postmodernism as a cultural movement has not occurred in a social, economic, or political vacuum. Preoccupied as they are with the relationship of knowledge and power, one has to ask whose interest does postmodernism itself serve? What are its social, political, and economic bases?

The American strand has met with less response. Some have also regarded certain manifestations of it as a fad, for example, creation spirituality or the marriage of theology and ecology. Since some of the main authors are rooted in process philosophy and theology, it has been subject to the same criticisms as those systems are. On the whole, however, the American strand preserves some of the most important concerns of the Enlightenment, such as emancipation, social transformation, and solidarity. It also fosters ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and therefore demonstrates a quite different view of language and discourse than the French version.

With these general criticisms in mind, let us turn to the implications of postmodernism for the Church and Christian life.

IMPLICATIONS

The characteristics of postmodernism listed above have definite implications for us as Christians and for how we organize the community we call Church, some of which are positive and some negative.
The characteristic postmodern emphasis on pluralism, difference and otherness, and the particular, regional and local could and should lead to a postmodern Church that is more pluralistic, less uniform, less centralized, giving greater place to the views and experiences of others—of women, minorities, non-western cultures—a Church that allows and encourages greater autonomy and authority in the particular, regional, and local churches.

In recent years, we have seen the growth of the base ecclesial community movement, the growing importance of national and regional episcopal conferences, the beginnings of contextualized indigenous theologies, all of which can be interpreted as expressions of the postmodern within the Church. These tendencies were initiated and encouraged by Vatican II when it recognized diversity in liturgical and theological traditions, pluralism in theological formulations, and cultural pluralism. Such plural traditions were seen by the council as complementary and enriching, rather than as contradictory and divisive (cf. Lumen gentium, Gaudium et spes, Ad gentes, and Unitatis redintegratio, passim).

Vatican II also encouraged dialogue among the different traditions within Christianity and with the other great non-Christian religions—Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. This new openness to “the other” was, as many have noted, in stark contrast to the monocultural, closed, uniform, and centralized character of post-Tridentine Catholicism. Yet that tendency to uniformity and centralized control still exists within the Church, as exemplified in such things as the 1983 Code of Canon Law and the “universal” Catechism of the Catholic Church (English version, 1994). The dialogue within the Church is only just beginning to include the voices of women. The feminist critique of the patriarchal power structures will have to be listened to; it is not just an issue of the ordination of women, but of including all voices in the dialogue.

Something similar can be said of the progressive democratizing movement associated with postmodernism. While not exactly “democratizing,” the greater importance assigned to the local and regional churches initiated at Vatican II, the regular meetings of the Synod of Bishops representing episcopal conferences from around the world, and local diocesan and parish councils are movements encouraging the greater participation of the whole People of God. The ecclesiology of communio, which provides the theological underpinning for the equal participation of all local and regional churches, is interpreted by some to stress communion with the center, the Vatican, rather than the communion of particular but equal churches. The hierarchical nature of the Church has been stressed repeatedly in recent statements coming from Rome. While Western forms of democratic governance should not be absolutized, it does seem that peoples around the world...
do seek freedom, equality, and the recognition of basic human rights—the positive legacy of modernity. If the Church is to be credible in a postmodern world, it will have to model in its own institutional structures the demands for freedom, equality, and justice it advocates in the social, political, and economic realms.

The postmodern themes of **radical eclecticism, indeterminacy, ambiguity, and chaos** do not seem, *prima facie*, to be very compatible with Christianity’s (especially Roman Catholicism’s) belief in God’s providence, God’s overarching care and plan for all creation, and that all will ultimately be united in and with God. For Christianity is itself a metanarrative interpreting all history, proto-history, and eschatology through the hermeneutic key of the Christ event. Christianity believes that God’s plan, hidden until now, is revealed in Jesus as the Christ. Things, events, and persons may be indeterminate, ambiguous, and even chaotic from our intrahistorical perspective, but ultimately all will be clarified and reconciled in the “kingdom of God.”

But Christians may have something to learn from these themes of postmodernity. Perhaps because of the Christian belief that though sin abounds, grace abounds even more, we sometimes gloss over too easily the radical disruptions and discontinuities in history. As the horrors of our century make plain, there is more indeterminacy, ambiguity, and chaos than we like to admit. It is perhaps too glib to say that “grace abounds even more” in the face of two world wars, the Holocaust, the Gulag, ethnic cleansing, the AIDS epidemic, massive poverty and hunger, and the other “forces of diminishment” experienced in the twentieth century.

The postmodern awareness of the collapse of the secular metanarratives of Marxism and consumer capitalism allows for, as Jencks said, “an attempt to go beyond the materialist paradigm” which both of them presupposed. In turn, we have seen a remarkable resurgence of all spiritual traditions and a quest for new forms of spirituality. The American strand of postmodernism incorporates this in a way that the French version does not. The republication of major spiritual texts of the Western tradition has made the creative retrieval of these great traditions possible for a broad variety of people. There is a new openness to the very notion of “tradition” that the Enlightenment and modernity had repudiated. In postmodernism this is coupled with the recognition and respect for many spiritual traditions, especially those of the East, and to this extent postmodern spirituality is eclectic. At least since the time of Thomas Merton, some Christians have attempted to draw upon the spiritual traditions of Zen Buddhism and others. Holistic and creation spiritualities also appeal to several traditions.

How can we live as Christians in this postmodern condition? What Christian virtues do we need to cultivate in the postmodern world?
First, it seems to me that we need to live with a lot more humility, more modesty, about our take on reality. The Christian metanarrative is truly that, but it is not the only one. We may have to learn to live with a “relative relativism,” to seek to relate our story to other stories without co-opting them, but respecting them precisely as other.

Second, modesty and humility entail listening more than talking. The postmodern condition of our culture poses not only threats but also new possibilities. Listening to other voices, voices previously ignored or excluded from Christian discourse—those of women, indigenous peoples, the poor and oppressed, can only enable us to deepen our understanding of the gospel, enable us to see aspects to which we have previously been blind, as the various liberation theologies are currently doing.

Third, the appropriate Christian virtues for the postmodern condition, I think, are hope and courage. In the face of the collapse of secular metanarratives, Christians will respond not with cynicism or nihilism, but with a return to our spiritual traditions, rich as they are, to retrieve creatively the best elements. David Tracy has argued that two of the most basic biblical forms for Christian spirituality and theology—the prophetic and the meditative or wisdom form—are the most appropriate for the postmodern condition. The prophetic tradition spoke not only to the other, but for the other, especially the poor, marginalized, and the oppressed. Tracy says, “One or another version of this prophetic move determines the new kind of Christian theological ethics in many postmodern political, feminist, womanist, and liberation theologies across the Christian world” (Tracy, 1994: 112). Christianity in this form is certainly at home in the postmodern world. In its meditative or wisdom form, Tracy says, Job and Lamentations, and the Gospel of John “will always speak their meditative, penetrating truth to anyone capable of facing the tragedy that is human existence.” These two biblical traditions—prophecy and wisdom—are, I think, expressions of the Christian virtues of courage and hope.

Can the Church be and can Christians live in a postmodern world? Clearly, the answer is yes. But we will need to cultivate modesty, humility, openness to the voices of others, as well as courage, and hope. As a reading of the signs of the times, it may also be that the postmodern condition is revealing the movement of the Spirit among us.

REFERENCES


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http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/christian-history.html

If church history is your interest then this site will be useful. A “Guide to Early Church Documents” is a church history buff’s dream tool. You can read through the *Didache* or search Augustine’s *Confessions*. There is a great amount of primary sources for study of the early centuries of church life.

http://www.digiserve.com/mystic/Christian/

This page simply titled “Christian Mystics” is a gold mine. Look up and read the works of Thomas à Kempis (*Imitation of Christ*) or search the writings of John of the Cross. There are many figures whose work is available. Upon entering the site you can search the authors by topic or by comparison to other faith traditions.

http://www.ovnet.com/~mandrson/xcreeds.htm

If ecumenism is an interest then this site is for you. Called the “Creeds of Christendom” this site will guide you through the credal confessions of many Christian communities. Read what the Reformed and Union churches teach or the Free and evangelical churches as well as the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. You may even find a creed for those denominations that do not believe in having a creed.