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SS 332: World Civilization II

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Response Paper

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I was raised in an environment that was relatively free from postmodern influence and distanced by time from that of the moderns. As a result, I am neither postmodern nor modern in my thinking. Like Millard Erickson with his book, "Truth or Consequences," I was therefore able to write this paper somewhat objectively, excusing such a throwback to modernism. My conservative upbringing, however, was the cause of many mental wrestling matches. I struggled to appreciate "po-mo" thinking because it seemed akin to liberalism (Tiplady 23, 25)—especially in emphasizing community over the individual—which I was taught to disfavor. If nothing else, the research I did for this report enabled me to see postmodernism in a positive light.

"The more I study postmodernism," my dad told me once, "the more I come to the conclusion that nobody really knows what they're talking about." Perhaps he did not realize how close this statement described the whole of the postmodern era itself: a time of flux and uncertainty; a time of transition. This paper highlights three authors' positions on postmodernism and concludes with my response.

Since the sixth day of creation, human kind has asked some form of the question, "What does it mean to be human?" This question was passed down through the ages as generation after generation desperately tried and failed to provide a working answer. Today the question lies in postmodern hands. Yet to understand the postmodern answer(s), one must understand the answer of those who went before them, the moderns.

The shadows of the dark ages fled as knowledge lit the way to modernity. The great minds of the eighteenth century (Diderot, Descartes, Jefferson, Voltaire, and Newton) gleaned knowledge from and applied knowledge to the once cold and arbitrary world. This century-long Enlightenment Project brought about more than the discovery of a rational universe, however: It actualized a machine-like reality made only of mind and matter. The voice of the Enlightenment—"Dare to know!"—fell upon the ears of the moderns who, with the scalpel of science in hand, began to dissect the universe... and its Creator.

The creation of the steam engine, the harnessing of electricity, the formation of Darwinian evolution—the world was a machine, a self-controlled system operating on universal laws. Truths (capital "T") governed the forces of nature and, once discovered, would lead to unlimited progress (Erickson 74). As long as human intellect could

supply Truth from matter, God could be marginalized. Humans' ability was certain. Knowledge was certain. Perfection was certain. Optimism filled the air as man began to recreate the world that God got wrong.

1914: World War I. More than 10 million bodies later, science had developed the flame thrower, the grenade, the tank, and the machine gun... all in the name of progress. 1939: World War II. Humanity's ability to progress was eclipsed by the most destructive war in history, leaving 55 million dead. The call for knowledge fell silent as the world soaked in the bloody wake of its World Wars. Was this the result of knowledge or the outcome of progress (Tiplady 58)? Betrayed by science, the advocate of Truth, Western civilization abandoned social mores, objectivity, and meaningful lives. God was a casualty of war.

Words like "Auschwitz," "genocide," "industrial killing," and "ethnic cleansing" rung in the ears of the next generation. Indeed, if any knowledge could be certain, it was that modernity and its tenants could not solve all problems (Erickson 165-166): Though God may have been left in the trenches of 1945, evil still remained. The reactionary postmoderns demolished the constructs of their fathers (Erickson 114-116, 132) and began building a new foundation for meaning: the community (Erickson 201-202, Tiplady 12).

Descartes, Locke, Kant, Kierkegaard, Foucault, and Nietzsche each added elements to the developing thinking of community in Postmodernism (Erickson 53-92). However, to define postmodernism, say the "Generation Xers," is counterproductive (Erickson 4, 13; Tiplady 78), for it is not what postmodernism means that is of importance, but rather what it does (i.e., how it functions) (Tiplady 64). Yet, for the purpose of establishing common terms with the reader, it can be said that postmodernism is the broad thinking fashioned around postmodernity, social and cultural changes (mostly reactions) of the day (Tiplady 74-75).

Postmoderns welcomed the ideas that stemmed from their "function-over-form" thinking, the first of which was the challenging of modernism's metanarratives. A metanarrative is a framework or system of thought (Erickson 76) that controls the reality it contains. For example, inspired by the philosophical ideas of Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), postmoderns realized that both the historical and the scientific narratives used labeling (discussed later) to manipulate or marginalize Reality in order to maintain power (Erickson 136-148, Tiplady 60, 80). Discovering that the domination of other views of truth could be undermined by asking questions (Tiplady 57, 59, 65), postmoderns opened the universal Reality to many different interpretations. They dismantled the certainty of Reality and rejected whole paradigms based upon it (Erickson 30). After all, a metanarrative cannot be universal if there exist so many individual realities.

Postmodern thinking also led to the weakening of labels. Assigning an entity a specific characteristic (labeling it) is not possible, the generation argued, because each person sees both the entity and the characteristic from a different angle. Rooted in diverse reality, postmoderns cringe at the word “normal” and go the extra mile to embrace difference and diversity.

Generation X puts into practice their holistic understanding of what it means to be human: They live in “organic society” (Erickson 18). In an ideal postmodern community, everyone is accepted because there is no “norm” by which people are judged (Tiplady 62). Following the teaching of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), each member even defines his own morality according to his own experience. “Unity in diversity” is the motto inside the group, as its members are generally flexible, adaptable, and, in a sense, “all things to all people.” In addition to cooperating with each other, they cooperate with the earth, too, so that a suitable habitat might be maintained. Life is a fragile gift and community is its protector.

Called by moderns (labeled) a destroyer of tradition and a catalyst for nihilism, what good can be seen in postmodernity? In my opinion, there are certain aspects of postmodernism that directly reflect what the Church should be (Tiplady 23, 26, 125). Paul had to continually remind the New Testament believers that they were one under Christ and that the labels of “Jew” and “Gentile” should not divide this unity. As seen above, postmodernism champions unity in diversity, yet I cannot help but wonder how much greater their unity might be if they knew that they were to be an example of kingdom community (Erickson 249).

Additionally, labels do not stick on postmodern skin, giving them the freedom to be all things to all people—a chief asset on the mission field. Closer to home, postmoderns exemplify Christ-like acceptance of the marginalized (“un-normal”) in today’s society (Tiplady 72-74, Erickson disagrees 220-221).

While “diverse” describes postmoderns’ social acceptance, it also (and perhaps more importantly) applies to their views on the Bible. Many postmoderns view the Scriptures as an interpretation of human reality and not as the authoritative word of God. “Words,” they remind us, “can hold neither ideas nor truth” (Erickson 28, Tiplady 64) such that authorial intention cannot be known, just interpreted. On the conservative side of the scale, postmoderns either adopt a view of “provisional certainty” (Tiplady 28), saying that the Bible is likely true but leaving room to be wrong “just in case,” or agree that the Bible does contain absolute Truth... humans just cannot grasp it (Tiplady 27).

I have struggled with both of these “conservative” views and, at the start of this paper, I considered myself too uninformed to give decided thoughts on the matter. I knew that I opposed provisional certainty because God says His word is true. I was uncomfortable with the latter idea partly out of an argument of silence: No author I have read has excluded the gospel from our inability to grasp absolute truth, nor have they even mentioned the role of the Holy Spirit in such justification matters. To say that I cannot grasp the fundamentals of the gospel—a fraction of absolute truth is still absolute truth—is to say that I am not saved.

Much later, I realized that postmoderns had made a box for me to live in, yet I did not fit inside their box. They called their box “Absolute Truth,” or sometimes “Absolute Assurance,” and said that it was such because logic and science could duplicate it again and again. My religion, they claimed, was faulty because it could not be proven or duplicated. I do not need their absolute, provable truth to believe what I do, however; I need reasonable assurance. The Holy Spirit gives me this reasonable assurance and much more. The world will never understand the illogical, insensible, and personal *absolute truth* that I have through the Spirit because it is beyond logic. It is beyond the box.

Aside from these personal issues, I believe that postmoderns have unprecedented potential to positively change the face of the world. Their acceptance of plurality and their broadening of grey areas allow them to excel in the diversity of multi-cultural situations; they make good missionaries. Their desire for community attaches them to a broad but connected network of people needing the gospel. Their desire for openness, honesty, and experiential truth leads them to a fresh look at a gospel not veiled by Western tradition.

At a fundamental level, postmodern missionaries need to help other postmoderns see that Christianity is not just another metanarrative, but that a correct interpretation of the Bible does meet real human needs. Unlike moderns’ attempts to answer the question of being, the story of Christianity will actually resolve the problem of evil and end in the happiness it poses. While postmodernity, contrary to popular thought, is not an end in itself, it can be a means to the end: True whole-ism points to the gospel and the gospel points to the Reality for which we all long.

Works Cited

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