

Living in Postmodern Times

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A Paradigm Shift

Humanity is witnessing the demise of modernity. Modern epistemology--that privileges rationalism, objectivity, positivism, individualism and abstract discourse--is being superseded by a new way of understanding the world: Postmodernity.

A Working Definition

In these papers we are following the definition advanced by Jean-François Lyotard's: "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives." Postmodernism questions the foundational myths that legitimize the dominant society and affirms the "stories" of the different social and ethnic groups that form humanity. In this sense, postmodernity values fragmentation and wages "war on totality."

Genesis

- According to Lyotard, World War II marked the end of modernity and the genesis of postmodernity.
- The irrational death of millions of innocent people at the hands of the most sophisticated nation in the world.
- In brief, WWII demonstrated that the modern ideal of progress was a lie.

Christendom is Dead

- Christendom, as a globalized metanarrative, is dead. Postmodern people tend to reject totalizing master narratives anymore.
- However, the Christian faith as such can thrive in postmodernity, as a micro-narrative that affirms individuals and communities in their quest for meaning.

Seven Trends in Postmodern Culture

In this lecture we will describe seven important trends in contemporary post-modern culture. These trends do not form a coherent system and do not respond to a single ideology. On the contrary, they are fueled by several and often differing ideologies, contradicting and opposing each other.

1. A Centralized Global Market

The first one is the trend toward a *centralized global economy* that pursues the ideal of a free world market. This brand of capitalism calls for the end of such governmental intervention and summons individuals to take personal responsibility of their own welfare. This means that NGO's—such as the Church—will have to take responsibility for the care of the unemployed, the sick and the poor.

2. Globalization

Globalization goes above and beyond “internationalization.” In the global market, international treaties such as NAFTA and GATT are facing out those barriers to free trade. This means that the distinction between foreign and national goods is also disappearing. People now buy “German” cars assembled in Alabama; “Japanese” cars assembled in Tennessee; and “American” cars assembled in Mexico.

3. Deconstruction

- *Deconstruction* is a tactic of decentering, a way of reading, which makes us aware of the *centrality* of a central term. Then it attempts to *subvert* the central term so that the marginalized term can become central. The marginalized term temporarily overthrows the hierarchy.
- In theological terms, this implies that the Church has lost its place as the sole authoritative voice of God. Now the voice of the Church is another one in a “free market” of ideas.

4. Multiculturalism

- *Multiculturalism* not only celebrates diversity but also protects the cultural practices of minority groups, such as popular religious practices and vernacular languages.
- As a part of its “war on totality”, multiculturalism tries to unmask the history of oppression suffered by specific minority groups. It also tries to expose the unequal relationship between minorities and mainstream cultures. Minority groups need to recover their “hidden stories” in order to understand their present situation.

5. Culture of Celebrity

The global market needs people to create, produce, perform in, and sell their cultural products. In a word, the market needs celebrities. Such celebrities are the famous people who are seen, heard or read by the “public.” The famous are not only related to the production of cultural products but also sell commercial goods and services. In a certain way, celebrities are the face and the voice of the capitalist market.

6. Simulacra and Simulation

In a world where entertainment is everything, reality is nothing. Jean Baudrillard's analysis of contemporary popular culture focuses on the difference between reality and simulation. His point is that *simulation* no longer refers to a thing, a being, or a substance. Simulation is the “generation of models without origin or reality: a hyper-reality.” In other words, simulation tends to kill its referent and to substitute it. That means that the dividing line between reality and fantasy is so blurred that it is almost impossible to distinguish between them.

7. Non-Places

Marc Augé, another contemporary French scholar, describes the emergence of “*non-places*” in our cultures. The “non-places” are spaces of anonymity where individuals are considered customers rather than people. An individual is always alone in a non-place, even when in the midst of a crowd. Non-places are therefore those facilities needed for the rapid exchange of people, goods, information and services: a highway, a taxi, an airport, a plane, a hotel, an ATM, a cinema, a fast food restaurant, and cyberspace.

Tensions

In brief, we find the following in postmodern to society.

- Globalization vs. nationalism
- The culture of celebrity vs. affirmation of personal identity
- Reality vs. simulation
- Christendom vs. spirituality

An Example

The issue of sexual orientation provides an example:

- In the USA, there is a pseudo-scientific view on sexual orientation: People are “born” with a “natural” inclination to be gay or straight. GLBT see themselves as a minority group, demanding their “natural” civil rights.
- In Europe, the trend is to reject gender and sexual orientation as another master narrative inherited from modernity. In brief, there is no such thing as sexual orientation. An individual therefore has the right to engage in sexual relations and even marry any other human being.

Strategies

Now we will suggest some strategies for addressing the issues raised by the seven cultural trends enumerated above. Our remarks must be understood as an agenda for further discussion, rather than as panaceas for intimidating cultural shifts.

1. Guilty as charged

- The first step is to accept our guilt, as heirs of the Christian tradition. Christendom legitimized atrocities such as the the genocide of native American peoples, the enslavement of African peoples, the Jewish holocaust, racist social stratification and the armament race.
- In many ways, Church is still legitimizing the hegemony of western Anglo-European nations over the rest of the world.

2. It's the Economy

The Church must pay attention to economic issues in four different contexts.

- In biblical exegesis: We may preach differently if we could picture the social and economic situation of the Bible.
- In the church's history: On the one hand, the church has had lots to say about economic issues throughout its history. On the other hand, theological systems are not ideologically neutral.
- In our congregations: We must have a clear picture of our parishioners' financial situation and concerns.
- In society at-large: Particularly, we must beware of the idolatric tendencies of free-market capitalism.

3. Subversive Texts

- Scripture is a rather subversive collection of religious texts. Yet, most of our first world readings have taught us to interpret the Bible in ways that disregard its prophetic voice.
- Alternative theological voices confront us with the prophetic edge of Scripture. Therefore, it is crucial to study the theological reflection born in context of suffering and developed by scholars who belong to minority groups.

4. Community and Truth

In his book *Out of Every Tribe and Nation*, Justo L. González reminds us of the meaning of the word “Catholic.” It comes from two Greek words: “kata”, which literary means “under” and figuratively “according”; and “holos” which means “whole.” Therefore, the correct meaning of “catholic” is “according to the whole.” In this sense, Catholicity implies the inclusion of diverse cultures, practices, and theological positions. Only an inclusive church can be truly “catholic.”

5. Nothing Means Anything Anymore

Maybe the most important principle is that Postmodern thought calls into question our traditional views of authority, truth and knowledge. We may say that the trend toward deconstruction leads us invariably to questioning ideologies, thought processes, and language itself. *Hence, in postmodernity nothing means anything anymore.* All concepts are devoid of meaning until explained or defined anew. The practical consequence of this reality for the pulpit is that preachers cannot assume that parishioners share a common language of faith.

6. Tear Down to Build Up

While deconstruction presents some problems for the Church, it may be also provide strategies for renewal. Deconstruction may be a useful tactic needed to debunk oppressive ideologies and practices. In the same way in which we tear down old structures to build new ones, we may need to tear down old concepts in order to build up new ones. Contextual theologians find deconstruction to be a particularly useful tool.

7. Integrity and Truth

Congregations discern when we are truthful and when we are less than candid. They are tired of preachers who never hesitate, who never doubt and who seem to know everything. Postmodern preaching invites us to be fellow Christians who are trying to understand why and how to live in faith. The church needs real people in the pulpit, not simulacra. In postmodernity, a preacher that confesses uneasiness with a topic or difficulty in understanding the “big picture”, may be more believable than a “resident expert” who hides his or her fears behind a pious façade.

Living our Baptismal Covenant

My emphasis on the counter-cultural and prophetic nature of the church may be summarized using a rather old biblical and theological image: we need to live according to our baptismal covenant. From the beginning, God has called the faithful community to live out the practical consequences of discipleship. Postmodernity just “ups the anti”, forcing us to make clear just where our allegiance stands.

An Untimely Word

We conclude affirming that the church has to accept its minority status in postmodern culture. The church has to accept its mission of preaching the gospel of life in a world controlled by the powers of death. The church has now to preach the gospel to a world that may not want to hear it. That means that Christian preaching is now free to become what it was in the beginning: A surprising, intrusive, and untimely prophetic word.

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