

WORSHIP AND SPIRITUALITY AS A PRACTIS-ORIENTATED APOLOGETIC IN A POST-MODERN WORLD (THE NEW AGE) — AN INCARNATIONAL ENGAGED APPROACH¹

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights certain tenets of postmodernism and then attempts to provide an evangelical Christian response. Postmodern ideology and its religious face as reflected in the New Age movement need not cause disquietude or be derided. Rather, postmodern thought should be allowed to challenge any premodern fundamentalism and modern rationalism that the evangelical Church has uncritically internalised or embraced. Postmodernism provides an incredible opportunity to develop new methods to demonstrate the Gospel message of love and hope. In this article it is argued that this is best done through the supernatural power of an incarnational, engaged worship and spirituality (of adoration and action). Then, unconditional and sacrificial love is demonstrated as a praxis-orientated apologetic through the Christian's life-story. Christian truth claims need to be authenticated, convictions must be acted out, to provide plausibility, persuasion, incentive and inducement in a pluralistic and relativistic postmodern world that is aware and hungers after spirituality.

The postmodern intellectual situation is profoundly complex and ambiguous.² There is a diversity of cultural and intellectual cross currents shaping the postmodern intellectual climate. Pragmatism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, deconstructionism, and postempiricist philosophy of science are some of the most prominent shapers of postmodernism. The open-ended, indeterminate postmodern mind has developed from this maelstrom of divergent impulses and tendencies. McGrath (1996:184) defines postmodernism as follows:

Postmodernism is generally taken to be something of a cultural sensibility without absolutes, fixed certainties or foundations,

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which takes delight in pluralism and divergence, and which aims to think through the radical 'situatedness' of all human thought.

1. THE POSTMODERN IDEOLOGY

There are a few working principles that emerge when one studies these diverse and divergent strands that combine to form postmodernism. Tarnas (1991:395) notes an appreciation of the plasticity and constant change of reality and knowledge, a stress on the priority of concrete experience over fixed abstract principles, and a conviction that no single a priori thought system should govern belief or investigation, as key principles.

This naturally calls into question traditional notions of truth, structure, and reality. The center of discourse is dislocated to the edges of human preference and subjectivity. People are increasingly attributing thinking and actions to their cultural background. Truth and responsibility are discredited notions because postmodernism is not a set of doctrines or truth claims.

Postmodernists deconstruct metanarratives so that no one particular belief is more true or believable than another. Deconstruction declares that the identity and intention of the author of a text are irrelevant to the interpretation of the text. Two general principles of this approach to the reading of texts are: anything that is written will convey meanings that its author did not intend and could not have intended, and the author cannot adequately put into words what he or she means in the first place (McGrath 1996:186).

Metanarratives are large-scale theoretical interpretations purportedly of universal application. They often have a terroristic or militaristic function to sanction the illusion of a universal human history. Often Scripture as a metanarrative has been used to legitimise prejudices (e.g. apartheid) and perpetuate violence against people. Thus, it is not difficult to understand the postmodern attitude to metanarratives.

Reality eludes all attempts at conformity so there can never be any absolute foundation. All truth is a social construct, pragmatically justified. Reality is constructed by the mind and not simply perceived by it. If reality is a fluid, unfolding process then the quest

for knowledge is endlessly self-revising, continually affected and moulded by one's actions and beliefs.

All human understanding is interpretation and no interpretation is final. Continuing advances in anthropology, sociology, history, and linguistics have underscored the relativity of human knowledge, bringing increased awareness of the Eurocentric character of Western thought, and of the cognitive bias produced by factors such as class, race and ethnicity.

The postmodernist thesis is that idiosyncratic cultural-linguistic forms of life ultimately generate all human thought. Knowledge is nothing more than the historically contingent product of linguistic and social practices of particular local communities of interpreters, with no assured "ever-closer" relation to an independent ahistorical reality (Tarnas 1991:395-402). Any interpretation of a text cannot claim ultimate authority because of the hidden incongruity and contradictions that undermine and impair its unity and coherence. The result of this is that all meaning is ultimately 'up in the air' and indeterminable. There is no such thing as true meaning.

How can Christianity's truth claims (the metanarrative of redemption history in Jesus Christ) be considered when there are so many rival alternatives, and truth is a devalued notion? In postmodern ideology all claims to truth are equally valid and plausible. Thus Christianity is acceptable because it is believed to be true by some, not because it is true.

2. A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO POSTMODERNISM

A pragmatic test applied to the Christian truth claim will demonstrate whether a truth delivers what it promises. According to John 13 & 17, Christianity is to be a community of believers that is characterised chiefly by worship of God, love for each other, and unity. The Church is challenged to demonstrate a Christianity that transforms lives, and integrates them into a community of love.

Christianity can only overcome the plausibility problem the postmodernist ideology of relativism and pluralism presents through a demonstration of the truths it claims. This will be best be done

through an incarnational engaged approach to worship, and spirituality as a praxis-orientated apologetic. The theological and philosophical apologetics will only be listened to in a context where they have been demonstrated. Then they will prove to be incipiently plausible. (In the postmodern world, religious relativism is incompatible with the objective truth claims of Christianity.)

For the Christian, the issue becomes one of whether it is necessary to become a relativist to be open to truth in other religions. This issue is eliminated when one adopts the attitude that the only truths that are false in other religions, are those that are incompatible with Scripture. It is also important to realise that because multiple, incompatible truth claims exist, it does not mean that one of them is not objectively true.

The postmodern relativistic position does not allow for a definitive answer to the four inescapable questions dealing with origin, morality, meaning and destiny. Jesus said that He is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). For the Christian, truth is thus knowable and absolute.

It could be argued that the philosophy of postmodernism is seeking unity in diversity through relativism. The Christian could respond with the model of the Trinity that provides a community of love, respect and dignity that does not mitigate individuality, personality or diversity. The recognition of all religions by postmodernists unknowingly acknowledges the longing of the human heart to worship.

An examination of history reveals an intense pursuit of things spiritual. (This is not surprising as humanity is made in the image of God.) But worship needs the constraints of truth or it can go in any direction at the whim of those worshipping. The Christian is told by Jesus to worship in spirit and in truth.

Postmodernism cannot critique an individual or a society's ethics or belief system (unless it is an absolute claim). Thus Auschwitz, Birkenau, Treblinka and apartheid must be accepted or at best, can only be ineffectively critiqued.

Victor Frankl (1982:xxi) believes that the gas chambers of the Nazis were the ultimate consequences of the theory that man is

nothing but the product of heredity and environment. He believes the decimation of the Jews was ultimately prepared in lecture hall of nihilistic scientists and philosophers. Where and how will postmodernism draw the line on morals and ethics and worldviews?

"If Christianity is true, then we know some things about people that they do not know themselves" writes Sire (1995:111). This gives Christianity the confidence to challenge postmodernism assumptions. Sire (1995:113) argues that once the possibility that God exists is accomplished, traditional apologetics can be used. The postmodern thinker has to admit that he believes relativism is true. This means truth is necessary and important.

The Christian should accept the postmodern critique of modernity in relation to the belief that humans can through their mental faculties grasp truth with certainty. The best reason to believe something is usually because you are convinced that it is true. But which conjectures, which worldviews best explain the questions people are asking? Will a postmodern or a Christian worldview deal adequately, be coherent and self-consistent with the existence of humanity?

The starting point in meeting postmodernism is in a praxis-orientated apologetic: a willingness to offer one's life in adoration and action, in true worship and spirituality. The Christian is to live under the ethos of the cross, willing to suffer with and for others. What it means to be a Christian is inseparable from what it means to be the Church of God. The Church has a word to speak to the world because it embodies an alternative way of ordering human life made possible by Jesus Christ.

Kenneson sees beliefs and convictions as habits of acting. Thus, his model of plausibility and persuasion is one in which the facts or truth one cites are available only because certain convictions have been acted out. He writes:

The paradigm I am advocating frankly admits that all truth claims require for their widespread acceptance the testimony of trusted and thereby authorized witnesses (1995:163).

The belief that Christianity has a relevancy and a truth to convey is one thing, a reason to be heard is another.

Christians are told in 1 Peter to always be ready to give an answer to those who ask questions about the Christian faith but in the postmodern world few are asking. Any effort to argue people into the Kingdom of God by insisting that what Christianity teaches is objectively true reduces the Christian faith to a form of gnosticism (secret knowledge) in a postmodern world.

The life of the Church, the worship and spirituality of Christians is what will give Christian truth claims integrity, credibility, veraciousness and intelligibility. Jesus is revealed to society and culture as He is mediated through the Christian, through communities of human beings energised, inspired and moved by the Holy Spirit. For the statement 'Jesus is Lord' to be objectively true, His lordship must be visible in the worship and spirituality of the Christian. It must be demonstrated.

When the Church lives its proclamation, when it lives in the community in such a way that its life is incomprehensible apart from the God of Scripture, the Jesus of the Gospel; then and only then, will the postmodern world ask it about the hope it has - and only then will it have something to say.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980:35) warns that

The truth can be spoken only by someone who is already at home in it; not by someone who still lives in falsehood and reaches out from falsehood towards truth on just one occasion.

Walter Brueggemann (1978) argues in chapters 5 and 6 of his book that Jesus Christ embodied the counter ideological dynamic of sensitivity to suffering. Jesus enters the religious and political world of Israel and offers a scathing critique of the ritual system imposed by the religious leaders of Israel. This system marginalised many and caused much pain and suffering.

The Christian is to be a living epistle (2 Cor 3: 1-3), bringing the world a personal narrative based on adoration and action. This is worship and spirituality as a lifestyle, a praxis-orientated apologetic, an incarnational, engaged approach, in a postmodern age.

3. POSITIVE INFLUENCE OF POSTMODERNISM

In the postmodern era religion is recognised as a fundamental human activity in which every society and individual symbolically interprets and engages the nature of being.

In a postmodern world, Christianity is intellectually pertinent. The market place of ideas is wide open as the result of the demise of the absoluteness of human reason and science, and the supernatural is once again open to consideration. Veith (1994:68) observes

Without a belief in God... it would be difficult to avoid postmodernist conclusions. If there is no transcendent logos, then there can be no absolutes, no meaning apart from human culture, no way out of the prison house of language.... Postmodernism may represent the dead-end - the implosion, the deconstruction - of attempts to do without God.

So, what does postmodernism do for Christianity?

- Postmodernism reminds the Christian theologian that theology is not complete, but a developing and maturing science. There are many approaches to theology, none of which can claim to be complete. It is the obligation of the theologian to explore all propositions in accordance with God's Word, to better understand the divine disclosure that God has given.
- Postmodernism reveals the futility of self-dependence and forces the Christian to depend on Christ for everything. Only in Christ we find design, significance, and purpose.
- Postmodernism points out to the Christian Church and individuals that we all have presuppositions, and that no one is impartial and unprejudiced. We all bring our tentative assumptions and conjectures to our experience; each fact about the world is theory-laden.

Allen (1989:6) argues that Christian theology has yet to become postmodern. By this one assumes he is talking about theology still being influenced by premodern fundamentalism and modern rationalists. The modernist theologian still refutes doctrines that he or she deems unscientific or irrational, and the premodern fundamentalist will not allow his or her doctrine to engage the world.

Postmodern Christian theology must analyse, explicate, and critique rationalism by substantiating the impossibility of reason apart from presupposing God; it rejects fideism and seclusion because it demonstrates that God is the basis for rationality.

Are the theologian, the Church, and the Christian ready to meet the challenge? Allen (1989:8) says,

They have within their heritage immensely powerful ideas, not to mention a Living Lord.

It is to be believed that demonstrating our Living Lord in an incarnational, engaged approach to worship and spirituality, reflected as a praxis-orientated apologetic, will prepare the Christian to win the day for Christ.

Many of the new generation are coming of age with little or no religion as a point of cultural and personal reference. This is a real opportunity, as one who knows nothing of religion tends to have no prejudices against it. Postmodernism has opened up a new era of spirituality and the Church of true believers must rise to the challenge or miss one of the greatest opportunities for spreading the Gospel.

Why in an age of almost unparalleled interest in spirituality, is the Church still so incredibly unpopular? Is it not because the modern evangelical Gospel tends to be too refined, defined, and regulated? By this I mean that the Gospel is a systematic A-Z of everything you need to know about life, death and eternity. Whilst this 'package' is generally assumed to represent New Testament Christianity, it was never presented in this way, either by Jesus or the apostles. This pre-packaged Gospel is really a systematised stringing together of lots of little pieces which, in their original context, were presented as they stood, without being fitted into a coherent scheme. A recent survey that shows that 69 per cent of people cannot put a date on their conversion: it was a gradual process - a journey. Compare this with a survey done 25 years ago during which 69 per cent of the respondents said it was datable. This is part of the cultural shift that is taking place (Tomlinson 1995:141-143). The implications for the Church's evangelisation program is not to seek fast results, but to develop models of evangelisation which will help

people along the gradual pathway that seems to be the prevalent means of conversion today.

In a postmodern world people merely see in the Church more of what they see and reject in the outside world; hierarchies, bureaucracies, and power struggles. (It is essential that Christians live and practise transparent, non-hypocritical, non-legalistic lifestyles, without compromising the convictions they hold dear, conscious of the fact that one's opinions sometimes change.) Non-Christians obviously want nothing to do with the Church because they believe that it will not bring them personal spiritual fulfilment. If one bears this in mind, it only serves to emphasise the value of worship and spirituality as defined and developed in this study.

If the community of believers were to practice the type of spirituality reflected in Romans 12:1 and Hebrews 13:15-16 they would draw people to Christ. The most effective method of evangelisation is the very life they live. The practical love for one's neighbour is an irresistible means for winning over one's fellowmen to Christ. In practising love, Christians do not seek immediate results, in fact they are to love regardless of the results. In a world of changing values, morals and ideals, the love that Christ has given Christians and that they, in turn, give to the world, can become a beacon of light drawing people to Jesus Christ.

As the Church faces these new challenges, she must redefine not her mission, but her methods. In order to be relevant yesterday, today and tomorrow, the focus of the Church should always reflect the application of Romans 12:1-2 and Hebrews 13:15-16. Worship and spirituality constitute a lifestyle of action and the most effective witness.

Is there any future for the Church in a postmodern world? The answer is an emphatic yes. Wells (1988:304) writes:

Will modern people therefore heed the Biblical, eschatological message? At a rational level they may not, but powerful psychological forces flow in the opposite direction. The modern experience, shaped by a secularity that powerfully shifts our attention to the future, to a vision of humanity poised on the brink of a terrifying abyss, means that few of our contemporaries can ignore the future. And Biblical faith, above all else, wants to consider it.

In an article Amaladoss (1995:317) discusses mission as action. He writes:

As Christians we visualize a world where there will be a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Rev 21:1), because we believe that God is active in the process of transforming this world. That is the hope that sustains us and makes us ever more creative to bring out what is best in human beings.

Thus, he defines the mission of Christians as living the faith experience in Jesus Christ, so that the Christian may be credible, and this credibility can amount to evangelisation.

4. CONCLUSION

In this new era there is no place for escapist theology. The environment outside the Church is hostile and apathetic, yet that is where we practice and live our Christian life. The message of hope is more than ever relevant for a world staring into the depths of non-existence. But we must allow people to find God where they are. The emergence of narrative theology in recent years will play a pivotal role in overcoming Christians' bias towards a rational presentation of Christianity. The intellect is engaged when systematic theology is practised but the heart is engaged through storytelling. It is very difficult to engage the postmodernist with propositional truths when relativism rules his/her thinking. But, the presentation of an incarnational and engaged life is a 'story' that will be seen and heard. There are four significant propositions to allow this to happen to a person.

4.1 Master the story.

This means that one must learn the incredible story of God's love for His creation as revealed in Scripture (God's love story). Also, learn the smaller story of experiencing God in one's own life (your story).

4.2 Own and meditate your story.

To own your story you must accept it. Accept yourself, make friends with your dark side, your brokenness, so that you understand and experience the redemptive love of Jesus (He overcame the darkness in His own life.) Spend time looking at the stories of your life (the way

God has worked in your life). Learn to recognise your own humanness (sinfulness and weakness) and experience daily the grace of God (that saved you and is still functioning in all of your life through the ministry of the Spirit). This will help you become transparent, non-hypocritical, and less legalistic, and more accepting of those living according to a relativistic ideology.

4.3 Pray the story.

Prayer bonds our story and God's. Talk to God about all your experiences, brokenness, and concerns. Then listen to God and experience His awesome love, grace and mercy.

4.4 Share the story.

Open the shadows and joys of your story to a soul-mate (a trusted friend). Then apportion your story that is bonded with God's story with broken people that need the holistic liberation that is found only in salvation through Jesus Christ. This is best done through an incarnational, engaged lifestyle.

Helmut Thielicke (1970:18-19) wrote about how the figure of Jesus had been 'amputated' over the ages, how Jesus had been repeatedly crucified by the Church throughout its history.

He has been scourged and bruised and locked in the prison of countless systems and philosophies. Treated as a body of thought, he has literally been lowered into conceptual graves and covered with stone slabs so that he might not arise and trouble us any more.... But this is the miracle, that from this succession of graves Jesus Christ has risen again and again.

In a postmodern world Christian worship and spirituality must produce the actions that give voice to the nature and will of God. Christians will demonstrate the Christian truth claims when worship and spirituality are expressed as praxis-orientated apologetics. Then Jesus Christ will 'rise again' in the postmodern world in an incarnational and engaged Christian faith.

The religiosity and secularisation of the Church must be replaced with a message of love and hope ministered through the supernatural power of an incarnational and engaged worship and spirituality. This

is not an abstract, sweeping, pious, or poetical love of sentiment, utterance, or conscience. This love is an abandonment of selfishness, and the will to practise self-sacrifice; it is practical, specific, involving courageous deeds to anyone who needs you in this world and at this moment.

This is the incarnational, engaged approach to worship and spirituality as a praxis-orientated apologetic in a postmodern world that this study argues for. The Christian's lifestyle and witness of adoration and action, practised, experienced, and demonstrated through worship and spirituality functioning as a praxis-orientated apologetic, can be labelled 'an incarnational, engaged approach to effective proclamation of the Gospel in a postmodern world.'

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