

Postmodernity: Understanding Our Generation's Thought-Life

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“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign Lord, “when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it. In that day the lovely young women and strong young men will faint because of thirst.” AMOS 8:11-13

What is Postmodernism? We can think of it as the way the younger generation, “Generation X,” thinks. It cuts across cultural and social barriers, from the brightest young college students to drug users on the streets.

A friend of mine in St. Louis sat down with a group of non-Christian students at a prestigious university one day. The next day, he spoke with a group of African-American youth with no money. Although the groups were very different, they thought about life in exactly the same way. Both lacked idealism, were reluctant to commit themselves to anything and were irreverent toward everything sacred and all authority. They were apathetic, skeptical and bored. What produces young people with these attitudes?

The word Postmodernism is commonly used in three different ways. People use the word “Postmodernism” to talk about style, literary criticism and philosophy. We will look at all three sides of this crude triad—distinct, yet the same.

Postmodernism and Style

When the word “Postmodernism” is used in reference to style, it means a mixing of styles. Postmodern architects use every style of architecture throughout the history of building design. In art, Postmodernism brings us a mixture of Mickey Mouse and Picasso next to each other. In Postmodernism there is no high culture or low culture. Anything or everything can be art. The American artist Andy Warhol would sell Campbell’s Soup cans as great works of art. We look at some of this and smile, but when we look deeper, we see what Postmodernism is actually saying, “There are no standards. Nothing is better than anything else.” We cannot look at architecture, or art, or music, or anything else and say, “Here is something which gives us a standard and authority with which to judge other things.”

Postmodernism and Literary Criticism

The second level to consider is Postmodernism and literary criticism. Often, literary criticism is one of the most influential disciplines in our universities. The question is, “How do we read a text?” or “How do we read a play by Shakespeare or a passage from the Bible?”

The traditional approach to answering this question would be, “What was the intent of the author? What did Shakespeare have in mind when he wrote this play?” But, as we look at the development of literary criticism in this century, we find a series of shifts away from this question.

The first shift denies meaning in the author’s intention and establishes meaning in the text itself. This position is known as New Criticism or Structuralism. This theory states that every writer, as they write, is bound by conventions in their culture. If we understand the conventions in the particular culture in which the author wrote, then we can understand the text.

Let’s take an example from Shakespeare’s play *Much Ado About Nothing*. If you read this play using New Criticism, you might ask, “What was the society in which Shakespeare lived when he wrote this play?” “What were the conventions which controlled the relationships between men and women?” You might end up with a radical Feminist reading or a Marxist reading depending upon which questions you choose to ask about Shakespeare’s society. Shakespeare’s intent would be considered completely irrelevant.

The next shift follows necessarily from the last. It acknowledges what is called “Reader Response Theory,” which states that the meaning of the text rests completely within the person reading. If we had a room of 100 students, all reading Hamlet, each student could come up with a completely different reading of this play each time he or she reads it, and Reader Response Theory would say every reading is just as good as every other. Imagine trying to teach literature to children allowing them to read any text exactly as they wanted.

These shifts have brought us to the Postmodern stage of literary criticism which tells us that the text can have no meaning. It says we can never know the author’s intentions or the conventions of the age in which the author wrote. If we examine the parable of the good Samaritan, Postmodernism would say it is impossible to understand Luke’s intentions. Obviously this completely destroys literature, and because literary criticism is often one of the most influential disciplines at any contemporary university, especially affecting the History Department, it destroys the possibility of what we once called a Liberal Arts education.

Postmodernism and Philosophy

We come now to Postmodernism and Philosophy, particularly the Philosophy of Knowledge, or Epistemology. Epistemology asks the question, “How do we know anything about a particular something?”

Take my eyeglasses for example. How can we know anything about these glasses? A pre-modern person looking at my glasses would have said, “Things have an objective existence; they really exist. Their objective existence is upheld by some transcendent reality.” Thus in the pre-modern view, things have an objective existence, but they are upheld by something above.

In the modern understanding of knowledge, the time from the Enlightenment until the recent past, things have been acknowledged to have objective existence, but the truth about them is discovered by observation. The Modern view has complete confidence in the power of reason and science. Reason and science are completely adequate to help us understand the world and come to a true knowledge of it.

Postmodernism sets itself completely against confidence in reason. The Postmodernist believes that things have no objective existence. Things are simply a construction of the community in which we live. This means that true knowledge is always beyond us. This is the very heart of Postmodernism—there is no objective reality. This may sound very abstract, but the consequences are very real.

RESULTS OF POSTMODERNISM IN SOCIETY TODAY

Rejection of Truth

Postmodernism says that nothing can be known by reason. There is no objective truth. This is the common view of people in America today—67 percent of all Americans believe there is no such thing as absolute truth. Over 80 percent of Generation X says there is no absolute truth; instead they say there is only personal truth. “You have your truth, and I have mine.” Living in a pluralistic society reinforces this. It’s very easy to think that Christianity is the truth if everybody around me is a Christian, but if I live on a street where one of my neighbors is a Hindu and another is a Muslim, it is much harder to think that Christianity is the truth.

The problem is, if we say there is only personal truth, we are saying there is no ultimate meaning. I have three sons, all in university, and most of their friends believe there is no truth. In fact, they feel it is not worth looking for; it does not even enter their minds that there might be meaning in the world. As an example, the music they listen to, “alternative rock,” is deeply pessimistic. Five years ago in America, “alternative rock” was listened to mostly by college students, but today alternative rock is popular for high school students as well. Musicians like The Beautiful South, Morrissey, The Cure, and James write some of the most interesting music today. Yet, while interesting, their lyrics are often tragic.

Rejection of Authority

The second consequence of Postmodernism is the rejection of authority. Postmodernism believes there is no book, no idea, no person and no social structure which could command/deserve respect. This leads to a profound irreverence. We find attacks on everything once held to be sacred. Madonna attacks the family, traditional views of sex, religion, the Pope and whatever else, yet she has sold more records than any woman recording artist in history. You might say she delights to shock, and that is the essence of Generation X.

This brings us back to the point I made earlier about style. If there is no authority that commands respect, then all styles are equally valid. There is no “high” culture. Mickey Mouse is considered the same quality as the art of Picasso, because there is no measure against which I can judge these things.

Moral Relativism

The third consequence is moral relativism. For Generation X and the Postmodernist, there can be no transcendent or binding commandments. Nobody has the right to tell anybody else what to do. Democracy was once understood as the people electing their representatives. It is now the people voting on what their morality should be. So we have referendums every year on abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, etc. It is the fulfillment of novelist William Golding’s words, “If God is dead; if man is the highest; good and evil are decided by majority vote.” There is no moral objective standard by which we can judge any thing.

This has resulted in a loss of respect and rational discussion in the public square. In America we have culture wars between different groups in the community who no longer understand each other and can no longer communicate with each other. Because we have lost a shared understanding of what is right and wrong, we can no longer talk to each other.

Practical Idolatry

The fourth consequence is practical idolatry. People have to live for something, and that thing will completely control their lives no matter how irrational it may be. In fact, they don’t even ask the question, “Is it reasonable?” With no passion to fill them, and no commandments to guide them, they try to find meaning and direction in anything—sex, money, pleasure, ambition or whatever. America is an idolatrous society;

people are consumed by the pursuit of things and pleasure. If there is nothing in heaven to worship, they have to worship something on earth.

Paganism

Last is the return of paganism. People may give up pursuing a reasonable religion, but they are still religious. God has set eternity in their hearts, and so they become open to any religion that will help them feel spiritual. In America, people pursue every kind of neo-paganism and every sort of New Age Religion, but they don't ask the question, "Is it true?" Instead, they ask, "Does it make me feel spiritual?" "Does it fill the vacuum in my heart?"

These are the practical consequences of Postmodernism and the challenges we face as we seek to communicate Christianity in this present time. As stated by the prophet Amos in the passage quoted at this article's beginning, there is a famine of hearing the Word of the Lord, and the younger generation of men and women faints for thirst without it.

This article originally appeared in Covenant magazine, the quarterly magazine of Covenant Theological Seminary. Reprint permission is available upon request by e-mailing covenant@covenantseminary.edu. Begin a free subscription to Covenant magazine at www.covenantseminary.edu/contactus/subscription.asp.

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