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Is Postmodernism Coherent?

by Tersur Aben

Introduction

Postmodernism is a dominant way of thinking in the Western world in the 21st century and it is threatening to become the same in Africa. In this paper, I argue that postmodernism is self-defeating and contradictory. Hence, I urge African Christians to reject postmodernism but to instead hold tenaciously to the Christian truth that Jesus revealed to us. Postmodernism is characterized by a total denial of objective truth or reality outside what each person can make of his or her own reality or truth. By truth or reality I mean “that which is accessible equally to all rational human beings apart from the accidents of history, through the exercise of reason and the experience of direct contact with the divine”.¹

Postmodernists reject all traditional ways of representing objective truth or reality – in religion, science, arts, and philosophy. Instead, postmodernists ask each person to self-consciously reflect on and to depict his or her own truth from all those small carefully shaped events in his or her life. This individualistic analysis and depiction of truth or reality simply relativizes truth or reality.

As contrast tends to throw things into better light, I shall contrast postmodernism with modernism to help us better see postmodernism. Such a contrast will also clearly show that postmodernists have unwisely deconstructed truth out of our epistemic system and have left us with a vacuum regarding what is beyond our material world.

Modernism versus Postmodernism

Modernism was born at the discovery of a new method of acquiring knowledge about objective truth or reality – the scientific method. Many intellectuals and reflective persons embraced the scientific method of knowledge because its truth-claims were verifiable through carefully controlled experiments. The carefully controlled experiments let scientists prove many hypotheses or conjectures, and the proved hypotheses drastically changed our perception of the world. So modernists readily embraced science and often jettisoned revelation.

They jettisoned revelation because the claims of revelation were unverifiable through carefully controlled experiments. Rather, revelation asked us to simply accept its claims as true on the authority of the revealer, such as God or a prophet. But modernists wanted proof for every belief they held as

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans, 1992.) p. 2.

true. So they rejected all claims to truth that they could not verify. Thus, Huston Smith says, "By the 19th century, Westerners were already more certain that atoms exist than they were confident of any of the distinctive things the Bible speaks of."²

Then, in the early 20th century, modern thinkers came to see that science can only explain limited aspects of the material world but it cannot give us a total worldview. A total worldview consists not only of information about the material world, but also of information about intrinsic values, existential and ultimate meanings, and immaterial beings that are *superior* to us. But about the latter categories of entities, modernists discovered that science has nothing substantive to say. In saying nothing substantive about them, science failed at the most critical stage of our epistemic enquiry.

The failure of science to give us a total worldview meant that modernists had to turn elsewhere to gain knowledge of objective reality or truth. But where could modernists turn to get that knowledge? The modernists had no idea. It seemed that the only viable option left for modernists to take was to deny that there is objective truth or reality. This is precisely what the latter day modern person did. The denial of objective truth and reality marks the shift from modernism to postmodernism.

Postmodernism can be subdivided into three categories. (1) *Descriptive postmodernism* denies that there is an objective worldview that we can accept as true or real. Perhaps there is a worldview that impresses a limited number of people as true, but it is not possible to find a worldview that everyone will accept as true or real.³ (2) *Doctrinal postmodernism* claims that never again will we have a worldview that we can be confident about. This is because the modern person is well aware that the human mind is greatly restricted in what it can know. Even if there is a deep structure about the world, the human mind cannot know it in that form. The best the human mind can do is to re-structure reality in a way that it can grasp, but such restructuring cannot yield an objective worldview.⁴ (3) *Polemical postmodernism* urges us to reject any and all worldviews because they are oppressive. Worldviews totalize and thus marginalize minority opinions.⁵ Terry Eagleton even goes so far as to accuse worldviews of performing a secret terroristic function.⁶

I will limit my discussion of postmodernism to doctrinal postmodernism especially its discourse with Christianity. Henceforth, I will use the term

² Huston Smith, "The Religious Significance of Postmodernism," in *Faith and Philosophy* (Vol. 12, Issue 3, July 1995), p. 410. [409-422]

³ The main champion of this view is Jacques Derrida.

⁴ Claude Levi-Strauss is the main defender of this view.

⁵ The champions of this view are Jean-Francois Lyotard and, in religion, John Hick.

⁶ Terry Eagleton, "Awakening from Modernity," *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February 1987, p. 194.

postmodernism as shorthand for *doctrinal postmodernism*. I grant that postmodernism has made a tremendous impact on Christianity – some of it good, but most of it bad. I will argue that essentially postmodernism is a self-defeating system that African Christians must reject. Rather than embrace postmodernism, I urge the church in Africa to hold firm and defend the truth that God revealed to us and that is recorded in the Bible.

The Impact Of Postmodernism

Before showing that postmodernism is a self-defeating system, let me state briefly what I see as the main positive impact of postmodernism on the Christian worldview before describing its negative impact. The positive impact of postmodernism on the Christian worldview stems from the very denial of objective truth. If there is no objective truth, then all truth-claims are relative. It follows that Christians do not need to embrace a single monolithic theology. If everyone is free to mold his or her own truth from his or her own experience of the divine, then nothing stops each Christian from molding his or her own version of Christian truth, of theology.

The denial of objective truth has, thus, licensed Christians to freely draw from their own experiences with God and to form their own Christian truth (theology) without needing approval from others. Indeed, in the absence of an absolute truth, any Christian can hold and preach whatever he or she deems true. This is precisely what is happening in modern Christendom, even in Africa. Many preachers are now preaching the gospel and establishing churches in cities and villages as they see fit. No one can stop them from preaching what they see as the gospel truth because no one actually has the total truth of Christianity. So they boldly preach the gospel and in assurance that no one can sanction them for preaching heresy.

Indeed, judging from the large numbers of people that attend these churches to hear these preachers, one can say that even the crowd cares little about any objective Christian truth. Postmodern Christians do not question the orthodoxy of the doctrines that preachers propagate from their pulpits. Rather, they simply want to enjoy a good sermon, by which they mean a sermon that entertains. Whether or not its claims are heretical, the postmodern Christian is not perturbed, but the sermon had better be fun, dynamic, and entertaining. This has led many postmodern pastors to preach salvation without talking about sin, to preach prosperity without requiring members to toil for it, and to administer healing without admitting that Christians, too, can fall sick.

In a way, then, the postmodern rejection of objective truth has allowed Christians to freely preach the gospel as they see it to the whole world. Preaching the gospel is positive. I agree with St. Paul that it does not matter what motives people have for preaching the gospel, what matters is that the gospel is being preached (Phil. 1:18).

Negative Impact of Postmodernism on Christianity

But essentially the main impact of postmodernism on Christianity is negative. Like its positive impact, its negativity also stems from the denial that there is any objective truth. The denial of objective truth implies that Christianity, too, does not have an objective truth. This renders Christianity a mere human religion designed to find God. If all religions are mere human attempts to find God then the best characterization of religions, with respect to truth, is that each has a bit of truth, but none has objective truth about God.

Each religion is contributing just a bit of the divine truth that it acquired. But no religion has been able to get the whole truth about God because there actually is no such truth about God. All religions - Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism and African Traditional Religions - are mere reports on human beings groping in the dark for God. In the postmodernist view, the best stance towards religions is *religious pluralism* - the view that all religions are equal.⁷

Now, the contention that all religions are equal contravenes the basic Christian teaching that Jesus is the only true way to God. Indeed, Christianity teaches that Jesus is the only way to God and by following Jesus we can surely find God (John 14:6). Most postmodernists regard the Christian claim as a 'scandal' of particularism and they instead advocate religious pluralism. But Christians insist that Christianity is essentially different from any other religions because Christianity depicts God as the one who is searching for humanity, not humanity searching for God. So Christianity is a unique religion.

Another negative impact of postmodernism on Christianity is its theoretical endorsement of every cultural practice, in other words, extreme *cultural pluralism*. Cultural pluralism is an attitude that welcomes the variety of cultures and life-styles within a society as enriching human life.⁸ Postmodernists regard all cultural practices as true depictions of the human spirit hence they frown at any discrediting of any culture as anti-human or ungodly. But, Christianity teaches that some cultural practices are sinful and antithetical to the human spirit or the will of God. So, while Postmodernists theoretically embrace all cultural practices, Christians denounce some cultural practices as inhumane and ungodly.

As a result, Postmodernists often accuse Christians of pushing their narrow cultural values down the throats of others. They condemn the imposition of one's cultural values or cultural practices on others as politically

⁷ Newbigin describes religious pluralism as the belief that the differences between religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood, but of different perceptions ... that to speak of religious belief as true or false is inadmissible. Religious belief is a private matter. Each of us is entitled to have, as we say, a faith of our own. See *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 14.

⁸ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p.14.

incorrect. To be politically correct, therefore, postmodernists refrain from subscribing to any cultural view about what is right and wrong. Instead, postmodernists theoretically accept all cultures as equally depicting the human spirit. But human beings are so constituted that we must judge human behaviors, judging some behaviors as acceptable and judging other behaviors as repulsive. Even postmodernists do this.

Postmodernism and Coherency

Now let me turn to the main question that this paper aims to answer, namely, "Is postmodernism coherent?" Since postmodernists deny that there is absolute truth, we cannot ask whether the claims of postmodernism are true, but we can ask whether or not postmodernism is coherent. Although most postmodernists simply project postmodernism as valid and universal, Christians must question its coherency because, if a school of thought attacks the core Christian claim to objective truth, we need to know if its tenets are coherent or not. If postmodernism is incoherent then we have good grounds for dismissing it and for regarding its attack on Christianity as unfounded.

The first thing to note is that in denying objective truth, postmodernists actually present us with a proposition that they want us to accept as true. Let us call the proposition (P).

(P): There is no objective truth. Now, either (P) is true or is false. If (P) is true then we must accept it. But if (P) is false then we must reject it. Notice that if (P) is true for me then perhaps (P) is true for other people as well. In that case (P) is universally true, i.e., everyone must accept it as true. But if (P) is universally true then there is one objective truth, (P). But (P) is saying that there is no objective truth. So, if (P) is true, then (P) is false and if (P) is false, then (P) is true. So, then, (P) is self-defeating or self-contradictory. Actually, the proposition 'there is no absolute truth' falsifies itself, the illocution falsifies the locution, as in 'I promise I'm lying'. If postmodernists affirm (P) then they must grant there is at least one universal truth. But granting that defeats postmodernism, leaving us free to accept a host of other universal truths.

Perhaps, postmodernists will retort that we misconstrue (P) as stating a universal principle when in fact (P) is merely stating a relative principle, i.e., the claim that truth is limited to some people. But this would not safeguard the coherency of postmodernism. We already know that not everyone acquiesces to what is true, so nothing special is affirmed if postmodernists simply claim that (P) is true for some people. The claim that there is no absolute truth is attractive precisely because it makes a bold assertion about objective truth. If it turns out that (P) is a tepid claim about what is relatively true then its appeal will fade quickly and we will not need to take postmodernism seriously.

We can clearly see now that the main claim of postmodernism is incoherent or self-defeating; hence, we have no need to subscribe to it. I urge the Church in Africa therefore to reject postmodernism and its entailment of

religious pluralism. Instead, I urge African Christians to reaffirm the biblical truth that Jesus revealed to us about God.

The Objective Christian Truth

The objective Christian truth that I urge the church in Africa to embrace can be described in three statements: (1) Jesus is the true revealer of God to us. (2) Salvation is in Jesus alone. (3) The Bible is God's word to us. Let me briefly explain these items.

1. Jesus is the true revealer of God to us.

This truth implies that outside of Jesus we cannot truly know God. The reason Jesus is the only true revealer of God to us is that Jesus is the Son of God who came into the world in the form of man to show us God. By seeing Jesus, we see God. Jesus says: "Whosoever has seen me has seen the Father" and "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (Jn 14:7, 9b, 10,11).

Jesus reveals God's true nature, will, and words to us in a manner that we can easily see, understand, and accept. In Jesus, we see that the true nature of God requires a sacrificial love for others. The Bible attests to God's love for the world in that God gave his only Son to die for the sins of the world (John 3:16). Clearly, to know God is to experience the divine love for humanity.

Jesus reveals God's will as consisting in God's distaste for sin and commitment to save us from sin. God wills to make us co-heirs with Jesus and to bring us into his rest in heaven. It was to fulfill this specific decree of God for us that Jesus came into the world. Jesus carried out the will God through his suffering and death on Calvary by which he redeemed us and brought us back to God. The entire work of Jesus Christ on earth was to fulfill God's will to redeem us from sin.

The miracles of Jesus corrected the aberrant conditions Satan imposed on the world as a result of Adam's sin. In performing those miracles, Jesus clearly showed us that God wills us to have good health, live freely (that is, not possessed by demons), and to prosper on earth. Thus Jesus healed all the sick, cast out demons, and fed the hungry wherever he went on earth. Since this is the eternal will of God for humanity, Jesus did not leave this world without first commissioning and empowering his disciples to preach the gospel, heal the sick, cast out demons, and feed the hungry in the world.

Jesus attests to his perfect fulfillment of the will of God for us by saying that what he hears from the Father that is what he tells us. Jesus spoke the word of God calmly but it affected us with much power. Clearly, Jesus was the personified eternal word of God to us. Although some theologians reject the personification of God's word in their denial of the incarnation, by regarding it as metaphor or myth,⁹ the full effect of Jesus' words on humanity in the past

⁹ John Hick, "The Logic of God Incarnate," *Religious Studies* (25, 1989), pp. 409-421.

2000 years can be explained only by granting that Jesus was God incarnate.

2. Only Jesus can save.

Salvation is mainly and strictly a Christian concept. Other religions do not teach that human beings are saved from sin in the way that Christianity does. Other religions may teach members to be good or how to achieve oneness with deity, but they do not teach that we are saved from sin through the death of another person. Christians cannot give up the concept of salvation from sin without thereby forfeiting their own unique identity.

From the Biblical teaching that only Jesus can save us from sin, we can infer that adherents to other religions are doomed. The Bible also teaches that our salvation is tied to our knowledge of the truth: 'You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.' Another way of stating this is, "You will know Jesus and Jesus will set you free". It is this concept of truth that postmodernists want to obliterate by denying objective truth and by advocating religious pluralism. We must affirm that our salvation comes only through Jesus. The Christian view of salvation goes against Hick's contention that salvation is the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness and that this transformation is taught in all the religions of the world.¹⁰ Evidently, what Hick means by salvation is directly opposed to what Christians mean by salvation. The ground for the difference is that while religious pluralists maintain universal salvation of adherents of all religions, Christianity maintains that we are saved only through Christ. If salvation is only through Christ then only Christians are saved and reach heaven. Our task is to help people find Jesus who is the way to heaven.

Postmodernism often causes Westerners to resist the gospel and to block evangelism or missions - logical actions if one assumes the superiority of a secular society. Although much of Africa is not actively resisting the gospel truth on secular grounds, even here some pockets of resistance are emerging as a consequence of postmodernist influence. The result is that there are some missionaries who advocate inter-religious dialogue over evangelism. I think the church in Africa should not hoard the eternal truth of God revealed to us through Jesus. We must proclaim the gospel truth to all people.

3. The Bible is God's word to us.

Christians believe that the Bible is truly God's words to us. The Bible tells us not only the truth about God and his relationship to the world but it also tells us the truth about the world and its relationship to God. No book has given us such a total worldview regarding cosmic realities, the divine, and the relationship that holds between them. The Bible's historical books, its poetic books, the gospels, and its moral codes attest to the objective truth that God created this world, and that he is sustaining it on a daily basis. Without the

¹⁰ John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," *Faith and Philosophy* (Vol. 5, Issue 44, 1988), p. 366.

creative and sustaining oversight of God for the world, it could not exist.

Christians cannot follow postmodernism into denying the truths revealed in the Bible; rather they must embrace and teach those truths. It is vital for us to note that religion *per se* is neither true nor false, just as art *per se* is neither true nor false. It is the message that is contained in the literature of a religion that is evaluated as true or false. Thus, when we say that the Bible is true, what we mean is that the message of the Bible is true. What the Bible says about God and the world or the world and God is absolutely true. The truth-claims of the Bible furthermore put Christianity above other religions.

Conclusion

Christians should ignore postmodernism. This recommendation may sound strange to some people, but there is really no sense in dialoguing with someone who denies objective truth. Such a person would deny that anything you say could amount to an objective truth. In his or her eyes, there is no truth of the matter because there is no objective, absolute truth. Your assertions would be relativized as your truth, but not theirs. In order to have a meaningful discussion with anyone both parties must subscribe to the idea that there is a truth to be found regarding the issue you are discussing. Only then could you hope to reach something approximating to "the truth" as result of your discussion. If one of you says that there is no objective truth to be found, then there is no sense talking. It is this that makes me urge Christians to ignore postmodernism and to simply go on preaching the truth of God as revealed in the Bible and in Creation. My recommendation also entails the rejection of religious pluralism. Christians should insist on the particularity of Christianity as the only true religion because it alone is the storehouse of God's truth. They must continue to evangelize the world because they know that other religions do not have a true concept of salvation.

Like St. Paul, we should point everyone to Yahweh as the unknown God for whom they are searching. We must proclaim the good news that God came to earth as Jesus Christ to seek and to save the lost. While holding tenaciously to the Christian truth about God, and to the church's mission to the world, African Christians can continue to engage others with the hope of bringing them into the kingdom of God. But, even if other people reject the gospel, we must respect them as fellow human beings.

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