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The Evangelistic Conversation in an Increasingly Postmodern America

Will McRaney

Introduction

The church of America is in a time of crisis as it relates to the expansion of God's kingdom through evangelism. The numbers vary slightly depending upon the particular study, but the following presents a picture of the state of the church and evangelism in America.

- 81% of our churches are either plateaued or declining in attendance
- 18% of our churches are growing primarily by transfer growth
- 1% of our churches are growing by conversion growth¹

In spite of the fact that 44% of all men and 40% of all women are still searching for the meaning and purpose of life,² the church in America is not successfully leading people to a saving and dynamic relationship with Christ and failing to expand.

Americans are influenced by many worldviews, including but not limited to a mixture of modern and postmodern views. The question becomes how does the church and its family members respond to the challenges and opportunities afforded to it by the increasing influence of postmodernism in its various forms. The goal of this paper is to propose some significant keys to evangelizing a postmodern America. To accomplish this, I will provide an overview of the changing context of ministry on which the conversation is to be built by examining the shifting

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foundation from modernism to postmodernism in America.

Understanding Our Ministry Context

My former preaching professor, Harold Bryson, often reminded us that words do not have meanings; they have usages. This statement could easily be made about the terms modernity and postmodernity.

Modernity

Modernity has its roots in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries out of a desire to promote individual freedom and identity above that of the community. The individual could decide what was truth by using the scientific method and reason. Individuals would work together through governments and facts to build a progressive society.

Among the many authors who have summarized the dominant influences of modernism, James Emory White described four marks of modernity.

1. Moral Relativism - what is morally right is dictated by the situation
2. Autonomous Individualism - everyone is personally responsible for their own destiny and accountability without higher moral authority
3. Narcissistic Hedonism - what is best for me is what I'll do
4. Reductive Naturalism - truth is only that which can be scientifically verified

For many, modernity did not deliver on its unstated promise. White said, "Rather than enhancing personal satisfaction and fulfillment, it has proven to be a barren wasteland. Moral relativism has led to a crisis in values; autonomous individualism has led to a lack of vision; narcissistic hedonism has created empty souls; and reductive naturalism has proven inadequate for human experience."³ The conversion growth numbers of the churches in America indicates that Christians have not effectively presented through word or lifestyle an alternative worthy of the attention of those who were left searching from modernity.

Postmodernity

A new thinking pattern is emerging, postmodernity, yet a clear understanding of this term is still lacking. J. I. Packer, theologian at Regent College was quoted as saying, "Postmodernism

is a throw-away word that means everything and nothing."⁴ My objective is not to assist the writers at Webster's Dictionary, but to acknowledge that people use the term in different ways and highlight a few common usages of this term.

Postmodernity arises out of the recognition that something was terribly wrong with the living out of modernity.⁵ Often the term is described as not being modern or what follows modernism or even the exhaustion of modernity. Postmodernism is a moving and multi-faceted target, not rigidly designed as a package of thought. Some describe it as an attitude. Others such as Thomas C. Oden discussed postmodernity in terms of a time span, ideological spell and a moral spinout.⁶

Several authors have attempted to summarize the dominant distinctives of postmodernism. David L. Goetz noted that postmodernism has at least two distinctives, "First, postmodernism doesn't put much stock in the progress of humankind, that things will be getting better anytime soon. Modernity believed science would save the world. Today, science by no means is dead; it still rules in the universities. But the postmodern outlook has nicked it."⁷ Goetz noted, "Another distinctive that gets a lot of press is the postmodern notion that all truth, even to some extent scientific knowledge, is biased and socially constructed. That is, truths are relative and depend on what one's culture regards as truth."⁸

From Modern to Postmodern

A shift from modernity to postmodernity has been taking place throughout America. A danger exists when one tries to generalize, but in an effort to give his readers some useful handles, Jimmy Long summarized the changes from modernism to postmodernism.

| <u>Modernism</u> | <u>Postmodernism</u> |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| From Truth | to Preference |
| From Autonomous Self | to Community |
| From Scientific Discovery | to Virtual Reality |
| From Human Progress | to Human Misery ⁹ |

A rigid line cannot be drawn between modernity and postmodernity, because various aspects of both systems to varying degree influence everyone. However most people who were born prior to 1960 were more influenced by modernity, while

those born after 1970 were dramatically more influenced by postmodern thought. A mix of each, with their dominant perspective and presuppositions being influenced by factors such as where they were reared, their educational background and even the types of television programming they watched, influenced those born between 1960 and 1970.

The differences between modernism, postmodernism and the area between the two ends can be seen through an illustration told by Walter Anderson.

Three umpires were sitting around before a game talking about their job. The first umpire said, "There are balls and there are strikes and I call them." The second umpire said, "There are balls and there are strikes and I call them as I see them." The last umpire said, "There are balls and there are strikes, and they aren't anything till I call them."¹⁰

In this analogy, the first umpire represents modernity, the second umpire represents a combination, and the third umpire represents postmodernity.

Street-level Postmodernism

I agree with David L. Goetz when he said, "Much of postmodernism and the culture it is creating should be mocked for the silliness it represents."¹¹ But, I also believe there are things we can learn from postmodernism. Therefore, the focus of this paper will not be the academic elite or the more pure forms of postmodernism, but on the population at large who are increasingly affected by various filtered forms of postmodernism.

Brad Sargent from Golden Gate Seminary made an observation that is reflective of the concerns of many of those carrying out front-line ministry to postmodern people. Sargent said, "Most 'postmodernists don't care about academic postmodernism, even if they've been influenced by those trendy European philosophers. What postmodernists do care about is a particular set of values, a non-traditional way of processing information, and interacting within the multicultural mosaic of a world."¹²

Postmodernism does affect Americans individually and the church corporately in many ways. David S. Dockery said, "Postmodernism is a new set of assumptions about reality, which goes far beyond mere relativism. It impacts our literature, our

dress, our art, our architecture, our music, our sense of right and wrong, our self-identity, and our theology. Postmodernism tends to view human experience as incoherent, lacking absolutes in the area of truth and meaning."¹³ Goetz also noted that pastors are concerned at postmodernism's cavalier dismissal of absolute truth, given that Christianity rises or falls on the historicity of Jesus Christ. There's not much to cheer about in the claim that everything is relative, that nothing is secure....And it certainly doesn't seem like much an improvement on modernity."¹⁴ However, in spite of the new challenges postmodernism brings, it also brings rich opportunities for evangelistic witness.

The Generation X as a group is the first generation which has most been affected by this philosophy. Student ministry specialist James K. Hampton described several ways in which postmodernism displayed itself in the lives of students: moral relativism, spiritual hunger, mix-and-match theology, respect and tolerance, little respect for authority, pain and dysfunction and belonging.¹⁵ These do provide the church with many opportunities to communicate the message of Christ.

Responding to the Context and Commission

Power and Heart of God

God is not limited in his ability to communicate his message of reconciliation to mankind. History reveals the fact that continually in all types of environments God has communicated his desire to give people the opportunity to respond to his extension of love and his desire for restored relationships. Regardless of the dominant philosophy, the heart and passion of God remains the same: people. We peer into the window of the heart of God when we read Jesus' life statement, "For the Son of Man came to seek and save that which was lost."¹⁶

Potential Opportunities with Postmodern Audience

Powerful opportunities have come with postmodernism. William Willimon, professor of Christian ministry at Duke University said, "The good news is, we are entering a period in which the old, modern world view is losing its grip. People are wandering and exploring. We ought to be there to say to them, 'The world too flat for you? Okay, we can help you with that. Your life an impenetrable mystery to you? We love to talk about

that."¹⁷ People are searching for meaningful relationships, for truth, for community, and something larger than itself. Christians know the one who holds the key to these issues.

Changing Context

America and the world is becoming more secular, urban, pluralistic, and postmodern. Christians cannot choose the context in which we carry out the great commission to make disciples of all nations and we cannot choose the worldviews of the people we are seeking to reach. However, Christians can choose how we respond in communicating God's message.

Responses to Postmodernism

Some may think that the future of Christianity is tied to the continuation of modernity. Harry L. Poe noted, "The success of the gospel does not depend upon the continuation of Modernity any more than the success of God depended on the continuation of first century Israel. In each age and place, however, God opens a door through which the gospel can pass. It keeps the church from growing lazy. And it reminds us that 'we have this treasure in earthen vessels.'"¹⁸

The church of America has several ways in which it can choose to respond. At least four options exist: ignore, attack, adopt, or adapt the conversation and win. I believe the influence of postmodernism is too strong to ignore. Christians are often known by what they are against rather than what they are for. This need not be the case in dealing with postmodernism. Christianity is based on the person and fact of truth and therefore cannot be adopted. If today's ministry context is examined through the eyes of the first century, we should see that the church can adapt and thrive in this context.

With the power of God and the history of God with his people, Christians need not fear the new set of rules that comes with new paradigms. I believe the time is right for the church to rise to the challenges and unique opportunities to communicate the love of Christ to a people that are marked by a desperate search.

Great Commission Task: Christians and the Church

With the emergence of postmodernism, the gospel conversation is rapidly changing. Thom Wolf described the mission of church and the pastoral task as "the equipping of believers for

the emerging global conversation."¹⁹ The challenge before the church and the individual Christians is to exegete not only our message, but also our culture to insure that our traditions do not hinder our understanding and communication of our message.²⁰

Often the Great Commission is mistakenly read as a command to grow individual churches. The actual command involves the conversion of lost people, not the exchanging of members. The Great Commission and task is to disciple the nations, not just individuals. These two facets of the Great Commission certainly would include those whose orientation is more postmodern. One re-emerging facet of the Great Commission that is partially brought to light through the postmodern influences is the facet to win people to a community who share a faith in Christ, not win them to an highly isolated and extremely individualized faith journey.

Modern or Postmodern?

It is the Christian's great privilege to communicate how one can discover and establish a saving, developing and meaningful relationship with the Creator of the universe. The task before the church is not to help people develop who have a modern or postmodern worldview, but that of a biblical worldview. Christians may just find that postmodernity actually presents fewer barriers to evangelism, though different, than modernity.

God's Methods of Communication

God has used a variety of methods to communicate with his people throughout history and is quite capable of doing so in a postmodern world. Some of these methods would be suspect at best to the modern mind, but present fewer obstacles to the postmodern thinker who more readily embraces the supernatural. God has used at least the following methods of communicating to his people: nature, angels, animals, written word, miracles, visions/dreams, spokespersons such as prophets, priests and ordinary citizens, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and direct supernatural communication.

God is not limited to the use of rational, propositional communication from Christians to those who are postmodern and searching. Because the postmodern person has little trouble acknowledging the supernatural and the mystery of God, Christianity may pose fewer obstacles in this arena than in a more

modern world. Those Christians who have been more influenced by modern thinking, especially those with theological training, can more easily slip into thinking that they can understand the entire nature of God through their rational thinking and study of detailed Biblical information. Therefore, it is easier for the modern Christian to lose the mystery and awe of God.

Can Christianity Compete?

Prior to this time period, the dominant religious options were Christianity or atheism. This has changed. A pressing question for the church in America is: can churches which were started by and for people who were more modern in their thinking now compete without having a favored status in a pluralistic environment and among postmodern people who are growing up without a Judeo-Christian environment and doctrines. Is it possible that this nonpreferred status will actually help the expansion and quality of Christianity over time? The apostle Paul gave a challenge to his readers that is applicable to the church today, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize."²¹ Goetz said, "Postmodernism, for all its confusion, seems just one more opportunity for the church to do what it does best-be the church."²²

Evangelism

There is no one method of communicating the gospel. Through God's creative design, he created people with unique characteristics. Because of the great diversity of people, most methods of evangelism will still have some usefulness in evangelism, but some approaches will be more effective than others. Francis Schaeffer asked the question "How Should We Then Live?". The question for the church is 'How Should We Then Evangelize?'

Dominant Evangelism Methods in a Modern America

Evangelism does not happen in a vacuum, but in a living context. The objective is to communicate in such a way that the listener has the best opportunity to understand and respond to the person and message of Christ. James Engel in *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest* highlighted the fact that evangelism is both a process and an event. Because a process is involved, it

must be acknowledged that people are at different levels or points along the journey. Engel and White among others have developed scales to represent how far a person potentially is from conversion.

In an America dominated by Judeo-Christian values, teaching and churches White noted that most Americans in the middle part of the twentieth century were about 8 on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being conversion. The primary evangelistic methods to the modern mind in America have been door-to-door, revivals, Sunday School and busing. He noted these approaches of the 1950s worked in the 1950s for several factors, but most notably because these harvest type approaches found spiritual seeds already planted in the majority of non-Christians.

As the American church moves into the twenty-first century, Christians find their non-Christians friends around a 3 on the 1 to 10 scale. This along with other changes in the American culture necessitates the addition of different kinds of evangelistic approaches. Additionally, the postmoderner often finds the propositional, rational and more direct approaches designed for the modern person either offensive or irrelevant.²³

The church has not been effective in the last several decades in evangelizing an America that was dominated by modern thinking. Now that America is becoming more postmodern, how can the church thrive in this new context.

If the church is to thrive, Christians individually and the Church corporately must adapt and learn to effectively communicate God's message to His creation. I will seek to address selected aspects evangelism in an increasing postmodern world.

Evangelism Directions in a Postmodern America

No one method will be the silver bullet for evangelism in the growing postmodern context. So, how will evangelism take place in an increasingly postmodern world? White summarized his thoughts and the thoughts others in providing seven highly significant directions for evangelism.

1. Our approach, method, and style should be culturally relevant
2. Relationships must be built with nonbelievers
3. Evangelism should be understood as process and event
4. Maintain a Biblically functioning community
5. Apologetics must be used - but updated

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6. Christianity should be portrayed as practical
7. A vision of the church's mission must be recaptured²⁴

Conversation Characteristics of Evangelism to a Postmodern Person

Examining the characteristics of the spiritual and evangelistic conversations will provide some insights into evangelizing people increasingly influenced by postmodern thought. The following is designed to give some insights into the types of evangelistic encounters we will have.

| | | |
|-----------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|
| Multiple encounters | not | Single encounters |
| Listener centered | not | Witness centered |
| Dialogical | not | Monological |
| Story then proposition | not | Proposition then story |
| Asking good questions | not | Giving lots of information |
| Community integration | not | Individual isolation |
| Soft | not | Loud |
| Consideration ²⁵ | not | Argumentation |
| Guided tours | not | Ticket sales |
| Gospel story | not | Gospel presentation |
| More supernatural | | Less supersales (natural) |
| More time seed planting | | Less time harvesting |
| More earthly benefits | | Less eternal benefits |
| More relational validation | | Less evidentiary validation |

Person and Uniqueness of Jesus

The central issue or focus in the communicating the message of Christ will be on the person of Christ and uniqueness of the resurrection.²⁶ Other doctrines and aspects of the nature of God will continue to be important, but to a lesser extent in the evangelistic conversation. One single event separates Christianity from all other religious claims: the resurrection. Apart from the resurrection, Christians have no message. However, postmoderns should be attracted to Jesus because of the manner in which he lived his life. It is the responsibility of the Christian to give a persuasive verbal and lifestyle witness as the Holy Spirit role to pleads his case on the heart and conscience of the non-Christian.

Conclusions

Opportunities and challenges are before the church of America. I face the opportunities before us with anticipation. Hampton

said, "Postmoderns want something bigger than themselves in their lives. They're starving for encounters with the living Christ—and to try Buddha, the New Age movement, and countless other belief systems. It's an all-out, unashamed effort to fill the spiritual voids they know exist inside themselves."²⁷ And, we have what they are looking for.

I think the church of America can benefit from the jolt postmodernism will surely continue to bring. The potential freshness and the finding of some lost Biblical emphases will probably occur with the arrival of converted postmoderns to our churches.

Postmodern people generally start farther away from Christ than their predecessors, and therefore will usually take longer in surrendering their life to Christ.²⁸ So, Christians will have to be intentional about developing relationships and planting seeds through servant and ministry evangelism projects. I am hopeful that their slower process will lead to more contemplative decisions and stronger commitments when they do trust Christ and become disciples. I am also hopeful that networks of people will surrender their lives to Christ, not just individuals.

The gospel message will center around the person and uniqueness of Christ. The three primary delivery systems will be (1) narratives, parables, and testimonies, (2) creative worship appealing to all the senses, and (3) authentic community in the forms of meaningful, safe small group experiences for discovery and development of relationships with each other and God and conducting acts of community service.²⁹

What a challenge. What an opportunity! In a postmodern world, Christianity has a seat at the table. It is up to the church to determine what it does with this offer from the spiritually searching.

Writer

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NOTES

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1. George Hunter, "Doing Church to Reach Secular Urban Prechristian People," Oral presentation at the American Society for Church Growth Annual Conference, Orlando, FL, November 1997.
2. As reported in the USA Today on October 23, 1997.
3. James Emory White, "Evangelism in a Postmodern World" in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1995), p. 363.
4. David L. Goetz, "The Riddle of Our Postmodern Culture: What is Postmodernism? Should we even care?" *Leadership* (Winter 1997): 53.
5. In contrast to modernity, Thom Wolf gave five marks of Postmodernity: (1) rediscovery of the supernatural, (2) embracing of alternative authorities, (3) disillusionment with historical progress, (4) multi-dimensional methodologies and (5) reconfiguring through the information revolution. "Postmodernity and the Urban Church Agenda," Oral presentation at the American Society for Church Growth Annual Conference, Orlando, FL, November 1997.
6. Thomas C. Oden, "The Death of Modernity and Postmodern Evangelical Spirituality" in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, David S. Dockery ed. (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1995), pp. 23-25. Oden uses the beginning date of 1789 with the French Revolution and 1989 with the collapse of Communism. Dockery in this same work on page 13 also describes postmodernism in terms of a time period.
7. David L. Goetz, "The Riddle of Our Postmodern Culture: What is Postmodernism? Should we even care?" *Leadership* (Winter 1997): 53-54.
8. David L. Goetz, "The Riddle of Our Postmodern Culture: What is Postmodernism? Should we even care?" *Leadership* (Winter 1997): 54.
9. Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 69.
10. Walter Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 75.
11. David L. Goetz, "The Riddle of Our Postmodern Culture: What is Postmodernism? Should we even care?" *Leadership* (Winter 1997): 56.
12. Brad Sargent, "The Barometer Subcultures for Studying Three Street-Level Postmodernist Edges", *ChurchChampions Fax*, Volume 4, Number 5) March 8, 1999.

For some assistance in communicating with the academic postmodernist, see "Reaching the Happy Thinking Pagan" an interview with apologist Ravi Zacharias in the Spring 1995 issue of *Leadership*.

Sargent identified what he calls three layers of postmodernist (1) "mild postmodernism (2) far edge postmodernism" and (3) (he has yet to identify). He said, "Just as the punks developed in reaction to hippies, New Edge postmodernist Christians tend to exist in reaction to the

modernist church. Community is a high value, and New Edgers seem to have recaptured the strong biblical sense of relationship and fellowship. But I frequently see New Edgers trying to “tweak” traditional church structures. This may end up as a seeker-sensitive church with “alternative” music, or what is basically a takeoff on a church growth model. Thus, ironically, their identity is still tied to modernism, though they may think they’ve broken away significantly from tradition.

13. David S. Dockery, “The Challenge of Postmodernism” *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1995), pp. 13-14.

14. David S. Dockery, “The Challenge of Postmodernism” *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1995), pp. 13-14. Also see an excellent article, Harry L. Poe, “Making the Most of Postmodernity,” *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism* (vol. 13, 1997-1998): 67-72.

15. James K. Hampton, “The Challenge of Postmodernism,” *Youthworker* (January/February 1999): 19-20.

16. NIV version of Luke 19:10.

17. David L. Goetz, “The Riddle of Our Postmodern Culture: What is Postmodernism? Should we even care?” *Leadership* (Winter 1997): 56.

18. Harry L. Poe, “Making the Most of Postmodernity,” *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism* (vol. 13, 1997-1998): 72.

Earlier in the same article Poe said, “Modernity posed one of the greatest threats to Christianity that any culture has mounted....Always a hated enemy of Christian faith, Modernity became the world view in the West. Oddly enough, with the passing of Modernity, many Christians grieve as though the Faith itself were passing away. To an incredible extent, the western church appropriated the modern worldview to such an extent that it cannot distinguish between Modern thinking and Christian thinking. Instead of lamenting the passing of Modernity and calling the troops to defend what remains of that godless ideology, Christians need to see what a gift God has given the church in the collapse of Modernity. Postmodernity presents fewer barriers than Modernity for evangelism, but they are different barriers. Postmodernity threatens many evangelical scholars because it is new. Evangelicals have spent several centuries developing an arsenal of weapons to use against Modernity. To change the playing field now seems unfair.” p. 67.

19. Thom Wolf, “Postmodernity and the Urban Church Agenda,” oral presentation at American Society for Church Growth Annual Conference, November, 1997, Orlando, FL.

20. Nick Pollard in *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult: How to Interest People Who Aren't Interested* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP). p. 102. said “Essentially I try to start from two points: a clear understanding of the gospel and a clear understanding of the person I am trying to help. If I

can bring those two together, I will have succeeded in helping that person to understand the gospel." John Maxwell says "seek first to understand, then to be understood."

21. NIV version of 1 Corinthians 9:24.

22. David L. Goetz, "The Riddle of Our Postmodern Culture: What is Postmodernism? Should we even care?" *Leadership* (Winter 1997): 56.

An excellent article which outlined the opportunities created by the deficiencies of postmodernism is "Making the Most of Postmodernity" by Harry L. Poe in vol. 13 of the *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism*. He dealt with the topics of searching for truth, death of rationalism, death of ideology, rejection of authority, pluralism, relationship, spirituality, and integration.

23. For a more complete understanding of these issues see James Emery White, "Evangelism in a Postmodern World" in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, David S. Dockery ed. (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1995), pp. 364-366.

24. James Emory White, "Evangelism in a Postmodern World", *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, David S. Dockery ed. (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1995), pp. 366-371.

25. Thom Wolf in his oral presentation "Postmodernity and the Urban Church Agenda," at the American Society for Church Growth Annual Conference, Orlando, FL, November 1997 made the case for asking the lost person to consider the possibility of the resurrection and then the implications of this.

C. Norman Kraus in *An Intrusive Gospel? Christian Mission in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP), p. 19 asserted, "By implication, postmodern presuppositions challenge traditional evangelism as cultural arrogance. They throw suspicion on a service motivation as disguised self-serving....Thus whether we agree with these postmodern implications or not, they demand a change in attitudes, modes of communication and definitions of witness and service."

I do believe we can and should communicate directly with postmodern people about the implications of a decision, but initially the emphasis will be consideration and allow the Holy Spirit to work.

26 Thom Wolf made a strong case for this growing trend in his oral presentation "Postmodernity and the Urban Church Agenda," at the American Society for Church Growth Annual Conference, Orlando, FL, November 1997.

J. I. Packer noted that preachers should focus on "Who and what is Jesus Christ? Is he a reality with a saving status?"

27 James K. Hampton, "The Challenge of Postmodernism," *Youthworker* (January/February 1999): 19.

28 George Barna, Thom Wolf, George Hunter, James Engel and Nick Pollard in *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult* all agree that con-

version will generally take longer for the Postmodern person who has experienced less influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

29 James K. Hampton, "The Challenge of Postmodernism," *Youthworker* (January/February 1999): 20-21 and 24.