

AFTER POSTMODERNISM

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Abstract

For the past 30 years, Christians have written about and discussed postmodernism. The topic is a favorite among scholars and students, who have enjoyed endless debates on the impact of postmodernism and who have speculated what the Church's proper response should be to the West's dominant worldview. This article urges the reader to recognize postmodernism's demise, and to start thinking about the Church's response to the next dominant worldview: Neo-realism. Could it be that God has brought the greater culture through the emptiness of postmodernism so that they will be ready to hear the truth of the Gospel as they turn back to realism?

In his book, *The Universe Next Door*, James Sire examines the past two centuries of western worldviews. He begins with Christian theism, progresses through deism, naturalism, nihilism, existentialism, and then ends on postmodernism. Sire traces the logical progression of thought in the west from one worldview to next. For example, naturalism saw the glorification of the mechanical nature of life, which led to the loss of free will in nihilism.¹ Sire's study leads the reader all the way to the current predominant worldview in western thought (postmodernism), but many scholars are already feeling that the era of postmodern thought is drawing to close.² If this is true, then

¹ James Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 94.

² Josh Toth and Neil Brooks, "Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?" in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 1.

a question arises, What comes after postmodernism? James Sire recognizes that every worldview that arose in the last two centuries was based on the thoughts and concepts of the previous worldview; therefore, in order to determine what comes after postmodernism, it will be necessary to examine what tenets within postmodernism have left lasting impressions on the culture. The first half of this article will analyze the defining characteristics of postmodernity in order to determine what tenets of postmodernism are already losing influence in western culture and what tenets are going to live on in the next western worldview. The second half of this article will prove that a neo-realism is starting to rise in the place of postmodern thought. The goal of this article is to be able to draw conclusions about the implications for Christian theism and Christian missions in a cultural landscape that has evolved beyond postmodernism.

POSTMODERNISM AND ITS TIMELY DEMISE

Postmodernism is an elusive prey. It laughs at attempts to define it and pin it down to one phrase or thought. Postmodern thought prides itself on being an indefinable and all-inclusive philosophy, so this article's brief attempt to explain it will rely heavily on the following three philosophical founders of the postmodern movement: Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Michel Foucault.³ No matter what area of postmodern thought and philosophy one is researching, the principles of these thinkers, who are called the "unholy trinity of postmodern-thought," are constantly referenced and quoted.⁴ In an attempt to survey the basic tenets of postmodern thought, this article will examine the main contribution of each philosopher to postmodernity.

Jacques Derrida's central claim is that "There is nothing outside the text."⁵ At first glance, this claim might be seen as a tribute to the truth and beauty of written language, but Derrida actually seeks to divorce the modern man from his logocentric attitudes and awaken him to the reality that it is impossible to connect linguistic representations to reality.⁶ For Derrida, deconstruction is the vehicle by which he seeks to separate man from the text. Derrida theorizes that man has too long assumed the ability to immediately ferret out the true meaning of any given text, and this false arrogance in interpretation is a great disservice to any particular text, which can inherently contain a vast variety of meanings.⁷ The purpose of philosophy, there-

³ James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 21.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 148.

⁷ Ibid.

fore, must not be to defend the external systems set up by man through which they interpret text, but rather to deconstruct those same systems until only the text remains.⁸ Postmodernity owes its rejection of formulated interpretation and a renewed interest in the text to Derrida.

Jean-Francois Lyotard is credited with the most famous claim concerning postmodern thought, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives."⁹ A metanarrative, according to Lyotard, is any encompassing narrative that intends to fully explain reality and pacify its adherents.¹⁰ Lyotard, however, is less concerned with the narratives themselves but rather the nature of the claims they make. Chief among the metanarratives of modernity is that of science and its appeal to reason. Lyotard accuses modernity of grounding itself in the narrative of faith in human reason and progress, which is no different than any other metanarrative.¹¹ Lyotard's idea has been taken and championed by many budding philosophers who seek to defame any metanarrative they find particularly offensive, whether it be Christianity or capitalism.

Michel Foucault's major contribution to postmodern thought is derived from his claim that "knowledge is power."¹² Foucault is alluding to his concept that what man defines as knowledge is always found within networks of power, whether they be social or economic or political.¹³ Foucault rejects the Enlightenment era presupposition that an objective pool of knowledge exists and can be discovered, and therefore denies "that truth is a claim to knowledge that can be validated by procedures devised by the appropriate scholarly community."¹⁴ Knowledge, according to Foucault, is inherently embedded into the power struggles of this world, and thus knowledge or "truth" cannot be trusted because it is a fabrication of those with power.¹⁵ Foucault's idea married neatly with Derrida's and Lyotard's, and the result was a postmodern skepticism that dominated western thought for the last three decades of the twentieth century.

However, today we are halfway through the second decade of the twenty-first century, and it is time to wake up to the reality that the postmodern moment has passed. One of the surest signs of the demise of all great movements of thought is its welcome into the mainstream, and postmodernism was fully welcomed into the mainstream during the nineties when its themes

⁸ Ibid., 150.

⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: The University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), xxiv.

¹⁰ Smith, 64.

¹¹ Ibid., 69.

¹² Smith, 21.

¹³ Ibid., 85.

¹⁴ Grenz, 131.

¹⁵ Ibid., 132–33.

and ideas were played out on big screens across America.¹⁶ Additionally, one of the biggest arguments against postmodern thought is its inability to deal with the problem of evil. Postmodernism has “too few resources with which to respond to the occurrence of evil, few resources which might guide one in making moral judgments. ... Faced with the necessity of responding to the injustices and suffering caused by evil events and actions, we need to be able to identify evil and judge it, and postmodern thought is powerless to do so.”¹⁷ Evil is part of reality, and that reality must be faced. Postmodernism gave culture a renewed focus on authenticity and brought the question, “What is truth?” to the foreground of cultural thought. However, its answer that truth is ultimately unknowable and corrupt is unsustainable and illogical. TLP Watts responded to postmodern thought as a whole, which he thought of as a “condition of despair” caused by a lack of faith in any truth and a lack of faith in any moral absolutes.¹⁸ He writes,

Although I believe there are moments of truth in both positivism and postmodernism, neither is a satisfactory basis for understanding reality. Neither will account for what I think Sarte once called the fundamental philosophical problem—namely, that there is something rather than nothing.

Watts is not alone in feeling uneasy about the inability of postmodernism to address reality, which is why many scholars now feel that a new form of realism will take over as the dominant cultural worldview in the west.

“WELCOME TO THE DESERT OF THE REAL”

Morpheus, in the iconic 1999 film *The Matrix*, welcomes Neo to the alarming reality that his entire existence up to that point has been fabricated by computer programs with the words, “Welcome to the desert of the real.”¹⁹ Similarly, only two years later, America was welcomed to its own desert reality as the dust from the fallen World Trade Centers settled, and a new culture of fear was born, as well as a unified sense of moral outrage.²⁰ Suddenly, no incredulity was directed towards the United States government as the nation mourned and longed for vengeance, but this acceptance of reality by the American people was reflective of a cultural phenomenon that was already underway—the rise of neo-realism.

¹⁶ Andrew Hoberek, “Introduction: After Postmodernism,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.3 (2007), 233.

¹⁷ Jennifer L. Geddes, *Evil After Postmodernism: Histories, Narratives, and Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.

¹⁸ TLP Watts, “After Postmodernism,” *The Lancet* 355 (2000), 149.

¹⁹ *The Matrix*, DVD, Directed by Andy and Lana Wachowski (1999; Los Angeles, CA: Warner Bros, 2001).

²⁰ Toth and Brooks, 3.

The world of academia surrounding literature was the first to identify the new realistic trend among American authors. Bill Buford wrote an article called “Dirty Realism” in the 1983 issue of *Grantra*, in which he argued that a new form of realism was emerging as a response to the fallibility of postmodernism, but the sense of Buford’s writing suggests that this new realism will be one heavily informed by the lessons of postmodernism.²¹ Another major proponent for the neo-realism movement, or, as he labels the movement, critical realism, is Ihab Hassan. Ihab has no qualms about breaking down the thin veneer of authenticity in which the postmodern movement has shrouded itself. He rightly observes, “If truth is dead, then everything is permitted—because its alternatives, now more than ever, are rank power and rampant desire.”²² Hassan acknowledges that an “absolute, transcendental, and foundational truth” that unites and reassures is beyond possibility after postmodernism, but he points out that all men deal in truths, whether big or small, every day.²³ Identifying truths and falsehoods is part of the human experience, and it is foolish to try to deny it. In order to welcome this new realism, Hassan claims that the culture must embrace truth in defiance to the postmodern ideals it previously spouted.²⁴ However, truth rests on trust for Hassan, and without trust, there can be no embracement of truth. Hassan says,

Truth, I have said, rests on trust, personal, social, cognitive trust. But what is trust? Roundly, I answer: more than consensus, truth depends on self-abnegation, self-emptying, something akin to *kenosis*. It requires dispassion, empathy, attention to others and to the created world, to something not in ourselves. But, ultimately, it demands self-dispossession. That is why truth and trust remain spiritual qualities—not merely psychological, not merely political, but, above all, spiritual values.²⁵

Hassan’s article suggests that it is not truth that realism must depend on, but rather trust. He remarks that realism, in both the humanities and the sciences, can only be built on an “answerable faith.”²⁶ This is a fascinating remark, especially after suggesting that truth and trust are primarily spiritual values. Hassan’s study of postmodernism and realism led him to the conclusion that there must be something more, something other, something that has been missing in the culture recently, and he seems to suggest the answer might be found when the real is wed to the spiritual.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² Ihab Hassan, “Beyond Postmodernism: Towards an Aesthetic of Trust,” *Modern Greek Studies* 11 (2003), 307.

²³ *Ibid.*, 308.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 309.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 310.

Not all scholars are as optimistic as Hassan, however. This neo-realism is not the realism of times past, because most people are not satisfied with an “innocent and confident realism.”²⁷ Even Hassan remarks, “Realism is no light matter: it touches the inviolable mystery of minds relation to the world. It refers us to the enigma of representation, the conundrum of signs, the riddle of language, the chimera of consciousness itself.”²⁸ Former excursions into realism were always taken under the banner of modernism, which stated that humanity was in a constant state of improvement. That lie gave birth to postmodernism, but due to its deficiencies, postmodernism has given way to neo-realism. Neo-realism rejects the complexity and ambiguity that was characteristic of much of postmodern prose. Neo-realism “struggles for clarity and simplicity,” and though it might not always meet those goals, it changes the tone literature to virtually the opposite of postmodernism.²⁹

Ernest Gellner was an early proponent of the neo-realist movement, although he would not have thought himself to be so in the early nineties. Gellner saw that there was battle going on between adherents of religious fundamentalism and postmoderns and relativists over the nature of truth and reality, and he stepped in with a third option, Enlightenment Rationalist Fundamentalism.³⁰ Gellner states that absolutism and deference to scientific results are clear markers of rationalist fundamentalism, which are also both marks of neo-realism.³¹ In Gellner’s eyes, postmodernism is only good for the possibility of the encouragement of political compromises, but he finds their view of reality and their system of making moral decisions “laughable.”³² Gellner’s opinion towards postmodernism in 1991 has become increasingly normal in academia, and it is only a matter of time before neo-realism is welcomed by mainstream western culture.

CONCLUSION: REAL RELIGION

Neo-realism might worry evangelicals who have just gotten used to the idea of ministering and witnessing to postmoderns, but their fears would be unfounded because neo-realism holds much more promise for ministry than postmodernism does. Postmodernism, as a movement, has always cleverly avoided discussing anything religious in depth, all the while claiming to

²⁷ Windy Counsell Petrie, “A Self-Reflexive Renewal of Realism,” *Postmodernism and After: Visions and Revisions* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 104.

²⁸ Hassan, 310.

²⁹ Garry Potter and Jose Lopez, *After Postmodernism: An Introduction into Critical Realism* (New York: The Athlone Press, 2001), 5.

³⁰ Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

³² *Ibid.*, 96.

be deeply religious.³³ Neo-realists, however, will not avoid religious topics or skirt around the issues of religion; the mantra of neo-realism demands that they meet those issues head on, which is good news for ministers of the Gospel. While postmoderns might want to discuss the abstract nature of the divine or the unknowable qualities of spirituality, neo-realists will want to strip away the obscure doctrines of Christianity and discuss the clear and simple message of Christ. Gospel-centered discussion with neo-realists will focus much more on Christ's atoning death and resurrection rather than the minor theological quibbles that postmoderns use to avoid the big issues, which is a positive thought for ministers. Carl Raschke theorizes that with the return of realism in mainstream thought, religion will naturally return alongside it. He sees the two as intricately connected and states, "Religion is the loud noise that shatters our secularist sleep."³⁴ When neo-realism is picked up by the mainstream culture, and this shattering happens, ministers of the Gospel will be there to lead people to Christ. However, the temptation will be to modify the message of the Gospel in order to try to contextualize or makeover the Gospel to fit within the neo-realist's worldview. The Gospel will never be completely compatible with the larger culture, so ministers who find themselves with people more willing to listen, discuss, and engage must remain faithful to the purity of the Gospel. Jacob Sherman comments on the tendency of ministers to try to reinvent the Gospel whenever they encounter a new worldview. He says, "It may be that what we need is not to reinvent religion in light of postmodernism, but rather to recognize that after the exhaustion of the postmodern we are returned, as we have always been and ever will be, to the abiding questions of religion."³⁵ As the west returns to the "abiding questions of religion," it is up to the church to be there and to give the answers.

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³³ Carl Raschke, *Postmodernism and the Revolution in Religious Theory: Towards a Semiotics of the Event* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 13.

³⁴ Raschke, 69.

³⁵ Jacob Holsinger Sherman, "Religion After Postmodernism: Retheorizing Myth and Literature," *Theology, Ethics, and Philosophy* (2010), 614.

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Thomas Sieberhagen was born in Grahamstown, South Africa, and he grew up in Central Asia. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre from North Greenville University, and he is currently completing a Master of Divinity in International Church Planting at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Holley, have been appointed as missionaries with the International Mission Board, and they will be serving in Namur, Belgium. They seek to plant churches and make disciples among the French-speaking Belgians.