My Thoughts on Christian Postmodernism

By Rick Bowers

> ***"… theology has always been aware that the knowledge it produces facilitates an understanding of the human condition and the world we live in more than a knowledge of God-in-Godself."***
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> ***—Graham Ward*** [1]

There are many different definitions—perhaps drastically differing definitions—of the words *postmodern* and/or *postmodernity*—and what that implies for today's world. As Kevin J. Vanhoozer says, "Those who attempt to define or to analyze the concept of postmodernity do so at their own peril."[2] Yet if we're using the same word for multiple concepts we're in worse trouble. The problem is shown in a somewhat circular fashion with the postmodern understanding that "Definitions may appear to bask in the glow of impartiality, but they invariably exclude something and hence are complicit, wittingly or not, in politics. A definition of postmodernity is as likely to say more about the person offering the definition than it is of 'the postmodern'."[3] Thus postmodernists push back against the "assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality" and further "[postmodernism] denies the existence of any ultimate principles."[4]

To me postmodern points to two different but interrelated concepts. The first involves the overall evolution of humankind's consciousness[5]—eras denoted with the standard timeline periods of premodern (traditional), modern (rational), and postmodern (transrational). This concept is often conflated or confused with the second, an individual's development throughout his or her lifetime. Perhaps counter intuitively, I'll begin with my definitional summary of an individual's development and then step back to a macro level to discuss evolutionary eras.

Postmodern as an individual's stage of development

There is an easily dismissed concept in biology stated as "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny"; however, the theory is still useful in psychology. Ontogeny, (the development of an individual), when considered in the sense of the psychological development of an individual "follows the same path—stages of" (recapitulates) the overall development of humankind's consciousness throughout history (phylogeny). Even if we are able to assume the current era of humankind's consciousness is postmodern, put simply, a baby is not born at a postmodern level of consciousness. A baby born today is born into a world where his or her upper limit of consciousness is in a very real sense defined by the postmodern era but a baby born today or a thousand years ago is still an infant driven by instincts. A middle-school student is not at

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a postmodern level of consciousness but may be growing up in a postmodern milieu. Briefly and overly simplistically using Robert Kegan's framework of the psychological development of individuals, staged constructive-developmentalism[6] we have:

- **Premodern** is associated with Kegan's *affiliative* and earlier stages. The affiliative stage is normally attained in teenage, young-adult years where the way of making-meaning is driven by relationships. For example, "I believe in the tenets of the Nicene Creed because Pastor George says it's true." About 50-60% of adults are at the premodern stage of an individual's development (with perhaps a third of these in transition to the next stage, modern).[7]
- **Modern** is associated with Kegan's *self-authoring* stage. Meaning-making is driven by reason. "I believe in the tenets of the Nicene Creed because I have studied history as it relates to the Bible and I believe it, the Creed, to be the truth." Not all adults reach this stage of development. Approximately 42% are at this stage (with some of these, perhaps 7%, in transition to postmodern).
- **Postmodern** is associated with Kegan's *interindividuality* or *postmodern* stage. Meaning-making is pluralistic, contradictory, paradoxical, and relative. "I believe in the value of the Nicene Creed not as a statement of absolute truth but as an affirmation to expand my relationship with God." Not all adults reach this stage of development. A very small percentage of the population is fully at the postmodern stage.

My overall point is we as humankind may be entering a new era of consciousness, but that does not mean all individuals are currently—or will ever be (because we have to develop as individuals through all stages)—at this new level. A teenager may adopt postmodern values because his influential adult (e.g. pastor) may be at the postmodern level of consciousness. But the teenager takes on these values due to his relationship. If his relationship changes (perhaps he goes to college and associates with a different crowd), his values can dramatically change based on new relationships.[8] So if some adults are transitioning, or have transitioned to postmodern consciousness, how does that relate to humankind's evolution as a whole?

Postmodern as humankind's stage of development

As stated earlier, the three (somewhat recent) eras of humankind's evolution of consciousness are denoted with the standard timeline periods of premodern (traditional), modern (rational), and postmodern (transrational). In my estimation, humanity is at best well entrenched in modernity and has only early whispers of postmodernity. While the Christian church has played a significant role in ushering in the modern age, the churches themselves have remained stuck in pre-postmodern structures and creeds. For example, pluralism (e.g. multiculturalism) is frequently associated with postmodern.[9] I see a lot of lip service given to pluralism but I see very little recognition of the value of multiple perspectives (e.g. I'm way too often exposed to disparaging comments about Islam). Some see postmodernism starting in the early, mid or late 20th century. I suspect some part of our differing perspectives hinges on the word "starting." I see *starting* as the early wave that is just beginning to usher in postmodernity. Others may see *starting* as a sharp demarcation on a timeline that ends modernity and starts postmodernity, which is seldom the case in human evolution.

I personally see significant aspects of modernity alive and well in today's world. For example, to me rationalism is one of the hallmarks of modernity that has brought with it the supremacy of science—including the rational reliance on bureaucracy as a "scientific" approach to running governmental (and church) functions. As one of many examples, Portland, which is considered to be progressive, in a recent Oregon state audit has been faulted for its ongoing failure to address longstanding racial inequities within the Portland Public School (PPS) system. Year-after-year reliance on a rational bureaucracy to solve these problems has only led to ongoing—from the late 1800s to today—discrimination of people of color.[10] A postmodern perspective recognizes the folly of this continued leadership. PPS—within and without—continues to rely heavily on insider educational experts to solve the various problems. A postmodern perspective would recognize entrenched educational insiders have a vested interest in perpetuating the existing system that concretizes the status quo—including the inequities (e.g. existing systems such as white privilege and class privilege). My intention is not to shift the discussion from Christianity to education; my intention is to show the lack of a postmodern perspective in a "safe" area—education—where we have some "distance" before discussing this same lack of complexity of thinking (a pre-postmodern consciousness) within Christian leadership.

In postmodernism all structures and systems are suspect. Here are simplified examples of the evolution of the complexity of thought from premodern (traditional) to modern (rational) to postmodern (transrational) in various areas:

Complexity of Thinking. Premodern: beliefs are largely unexamined. Modern: reliance on rational thought, reason, in coming to conclusions about beliefs. Rational people may reach different conclusions therefore the important driver at this level is *how* people reach conclusions or create meaning—the reliance on reason—not what conclusion is reached. Postmodern: as stated above, a postmodernist suspects structures and systems (including beliefs). In the transition from modern to postmodern there may be a sense of unease with "nothing solid to stand on." Postmodernists are comfortable holding beliefs lightly knowing they are simply stories, perhaps metaphors, to achieve a goal.[11] Contradictions and paradoxes are to be expected.

> ***"Much postmodernism has drawn the conclusion that science, generally taken to be the paradigm of rationality, is itself rationally groundless."***
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> ***—David Ray Griffin[12]***

Culture. Premodern: largely unexamined (which may have been a factor in colonialism—"Our Western culture is naturally the best simply because it's ours"). Modern: sees the value of multiculturalism as a source of research material so we can evolve to the best culture through scientific analysis (which may have supported continued colonialism and the insistence of spreading democracy everywhere—now!). Postmodern: there is no such thing as the best culture for all.

Nicene Creed. Premodern: largely unexamined. Modern: "This is silly, how can one equal three? I'm outta here!"[13] Postmodern: "Who cares if one doesn't equal three! God is beyond words and when we try to use words to describe God of course there are going to appear to be contradictions and

paradoxes. The point is can this 'story' (metaphor) lead me to a more loving relationship with God? If not, I'll find another story/metaphor."

Authority. Premodern: largely unexamined. Modern: provides for an orderly state of affairs—without people in charge we would have chaos. Postmodern: provides for an orderly state of affairs (which, if we're not careful, will position us as followers and not leaders)—but because of inherent biases and limited perspective will always be suspect.

Where are we in Christianity?

Obviously, there isn't one "Christian church"—so the following comments are general and may not be relevant for all churches. Richard Rohr in his book *What Do We Do With the Bible* suggests "After 313 AD, the message of Jesus was increasing aligned with Empire in both the East and the West. In many ways, he and his message were rather fully co-opted to establish an agreed-upon state religion and to enforce compliance."[14] Further, "until the last few decades, the typical interpreters of the Bible were overwhelmingly educated males, often formally celibate, raised into a higher social class, and trained to broker and maintain an organized form of Christianity upon which their jobs depended."[15] Rohr rightly says these folks could see through no other lens. My point is these folks did not and do not represent a postmodern perspective—a perspective that in my view is in the very early stage of development within Christianity. I repeat my statement regarding reforming discriminatory outcomes in education—instead addressing the church as a pre-postmodern institution—"a postmodern perspective would recognize entrenched ~~educational~~ church insiders have a vested interest in perpetuating the existing system that instantiates the status quo—including the inequities (e.g. existing systems such as ~~white privilege and class privilege~~ insuring uniformity of thought through creeds[16])." In other words, from my perspective Christian institutions need to re-imagine who they are and what they are there for from a postmodern perspective. This re-imagining may include being open to perspectives that may be at odds with the "truths" that were established by early Church councils. Fundamental changes in both structure and creeds are required in order to shift into the postmodern age.

Conclusion

We either need to seriously reflect on the message of Jesus and turn our churches upside-down (reflect on the relationship between Jesus and the rich/Pharisees versus the relationship between Jesus and the poor/common people)—or allow our religious institutions to collapse to make room for truly postmodern expressions of spiritual community. Stated differently, a postmodern Christian theology is to me an oxymoron. Postmodernists are suspect of systems & structures—including Christian theology—that modernity attempted to concretize. Some postmodernists see this as a fool's errand. So for me, evolving to a new postmodern Christian theology—perhaps a more enlightened theology or a theology that cannot be abused—is looking in the wrong direction. For me the goal is to support the spiritual development of individuals who are attracted to Christianity. Postmodern Christianity is not a collection of dogma. Christianity is a process of human evolution—for both individuals and humankind.

Notes

[1] (Ward, 2003, p. 82).
[2] (Vanhoozer, 2003, p. 3)
[3] (Vanhoozer, 2003, p. 3).
[4] (Public Broadcasting Service, 2019).
[5] I and others may substitute the word *consciousness* with *mindset*, *meaning-making* or the phrase *complexity of thinking*.
[6] (Kegan, 1982, 1994).
[7] This research comes from the second half of the 20th century so the distribution information is becoming dated. However, I still consider the overall insight to be useful.
[8] (Kegan, 1994).
[9] (Wilber, 2007).
[10] See for example: https://www.opb.org/news/article/state-audit-problems-portland-public-schools-oregon-department-of-education/, https://sos.oregon.gov/audits/Documents/2019-01.pdf, https://www.ohs.org/research-and-library/oregon-historical-quarterly/upload/OHQ_111_1-Johnson-and-Williams_PPS.pdf, and http://static1.squarespace.com/static/5501f6d4e4b0ee23fb3097ff/t/556d3996e4b09da5e9a521df/1433221526152/African-American-report-FINAL-January-2014.pdf.
[11] For example, a postmodernist (and potentially a rationalist) is not concerned that Newtonian physics is not the (upper case T) Truth (the theory assumes time is a constant which seems not to be the case). In other words, a postmodernist is not concerned that a plane might randomly drop out of the sky even though the underlying physics are known to be wrong.
[12] (Griffin, 2003, p. 98).
[13] Or through reason may decide that the early church councils had a window into the truth and hundreds of years of theologians cannot be reasonably dismissed. Again, a modern thinker is defined not by the belief itself but instead defined by how the belief is constructed—through reason.
[14] (Rohr, 2018, p. 36).
[15] (Rohr, 2018, pp. 38-39).
[16] "Presbyterians confess their beliefs through statements that have been adopted over the years and are contained in The Book of Confessions"—a 395 page document. See https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/theology/.

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