

THE GOSPEL AND OUR CULTURE

*A Network for Encouraging the Encounter
in North America*

POSTMODERNISM AS AN EMERGING WORLD VIEW

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During the past few decades the term "postmodern" has come into vogue to explain the shift which appears to be taking place in modern western culture. While there is no one definition of the term at present, there are a variety of shared ideas which circulate around its use. These ideas have taken on a sharper focus in recent years, leading those of us who work in the fields of theology and missiology to interact more actively with some of the concepts and theories associated with what is being called postmodern.

The actual word "postmodern" was first used by Federico de Onis in the 1930s within the arts to indicate a minor reaction to modernism. The term became popular expression, however, in the 1960s, among the young artists in New York who used it to refer to the movement beyond the artistic expressions of high modernism. The basic criticism made by these artists was that the avant-garde art created to critique society had become domesticated as either the object of study in the academy or of display in the museum. They called for a postmodern art which focused on the everyday or common culture. A wider usage was given to the term in the 1970s within the field of architecture where it came to signify an eclectic style of design. The modern architect's search for the essential principles of functional designs were replaced by buildings expressing

diversity, mixed styles, and multiple textures.

The concept of postmodern during the 1970s soon spilled over into other fields such as music and the visual and performing arts. It came to characterize a movement away from meta-narratives (or broad schemes of interpretation). It called for a deconstruction of any perspective which claimed absolute authority of a particular viewpoint. It preferred stylistic expressions which favored eclecticism, parody, playfulness, and depthlessness. Expressions of these themes were rapidly transmitted back and forth between Europe and North America. By the end of the decade a series of theoretical explanations and justifications of this phenomenon began to be written. The works of the following authors became points for discussion and debate within the growing postmodern movement: Bell, Kristeva, Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Habermas, Baudrillard, and Jameson.

The basic thesis of postmodernism is expressed in different ways by these various theorists, but they share in common the realization that there has been a fundamental shift within modern western culture. We have moved beyond and/or away from the culture identified with modernism. Modernist culture first gained expression in the Renaissance with its emphasis on human life as the focal point of reality. In the 1700s this was built on by Enlightenment thought which stressed the autonomous nature of the individual and his/her ability to construct a coherent whole to life through the use of the scientific method and rational thinking. The period of time known as the Industrial Revolution during the

19th century carried this orientation further by providing the tools and structures to shape the development of modernism -- market capitalism, bureaucratic organization, the modern nation state, and science-based technology.

By the beginning of the 20th century, modernism or the process of modernity came to be characterized as a movement which had the potential of bringing rational management to life along with improving the quality of life through technological developments. Its core assumptions included the expectation of human progress, the social management of life, and the capacity of reason to discover and develop the essential principles and perspective to solve life's problems. Associated with modernism was an avant-garde who served as the artistic and intellectual creators of the modernist perspective on behalf of the bourgeois.

The postmodern perspective has challenged most of the core assumptions of modernism. Key theorists have made it clear that something has shifted in the world view and social order which was developed within modernism. While the movement has not coalesced into one common thesis, there are some discernible points of convergence among many of the theorists. It is recognized that both the speed and scope of change have accelerated in recent decades. These dynamics coupled with new technologies which increase our capacity to process information and multiply images have focused attention on the "now" and

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the "surface" of life. These new technologies also interact with the economic order to multiply forms of production and choices of consumption. The value of products has shifted even further from use-values or exchange-value to what has now become sign-value.

Life is lived more and more in the present tense, with the contingencies of the past and possibilities of the future diminishing in importance. The search to find and/or state the central thesis, grand narrative, or essential principles of life has given way to an acceptance of pluralistic alternatives and competing viewpoints. Claims to an authoritative perspective or conclusive finding have given way to paradox, diversity, and juxtaposition as new ways of seeing reality, ways which are often celebrated in a sort of playfulness. The avant-garde of high modernism has given way to the recognition that all culture and any culture is an expression of creativity. This has resulted in the aestheticization of everyday life.

One word often associated with this shift is "deconstruction," which refers to the uncentering of modern life. The paradigm of modernism with its search for the center has shifted to a postmodern one characterized by helping persons understand that there is no center, only plural possibilities of perspectives. This shift is a significant departure from the nihilism often associated with modernism as expressed in the writing of Nietzsche. Nietzsche wrote from the perspective of the despair modern persons experienced in the face of the pervasiveness of relativism. Absolute relativism was seen as a loss of something once owned by humankind, a sense of wholeness and unity.

In the postmodern perspective, there is celebration of relativism (or pluralism) rather than despair. The postmodern perspective is developed from the outside in, rather than the inside out. Relativism is accepted as the nature of the human condition, and the assumption is made that there is no center, therefore there is nothing which

has been lost or given up. Pluralism from this perspective represents alternative possibilities of experience and expression. Life is lived in the local context as the only reality which matters for the moment, and the technologies available allow for a seemingly endless array of such local contexts to be experienced in other moments.

Reflections and Evaluation

A number of reflections and/or evaluation comments can be made about this movement which is being labeled as postmodern. Some of these observations are being made by secular authors, and others come from within the uniqueness of the Christian perspective.

1. There appears to be an unusual pervasive consensus regarding the nature of postmodernism emerging among its theorists about a viewpoint which holds that it is no longer possible to develop or have consensus of viewpoints. Perhaps the postmodern perspective has not yet dealt adequately with the difference between pluralistic perspectives where it is assumed that there is no center, and pluralistic perspectives on a common center which no one perspective sees fully or clearly.

2. There is a tendency among some of the theorists to use periodization of history as the basis of establishing the postmodern paradigm, but this approach flies in the face of the underlying assumption that all periodizations are subject to deconstruction. In similar manner, others tend to posit a kind of master narrative approach to describing the postmodern condition, which is also contradictory of the core assumptions of the movement.

3. One has to use coherent language and analysis to study and describe the pluralistic, diffuse, and decentered conditions of the postmodern. Many books describing it still utilize the standard and accepted disciplines associated with social science research. This raises the nagging question of whether there is something intrinsic to

life that requires us to think and function within rational wholes and interrelated logic. Although there is surely something "post" about the present modern, it may be that the intrinsic, natural, and essence issues have been dismissed or ignored prematurely. Perhaps we are only in a transition period that is forcing all of us to become comfortable with pluralism prior to returning to a discussion of such issues.

4. From a Christian perspective there are two major challenges which face the church with the emergence of a postmodern world view. First, the church will have to develop a much more flexible approach to mission and enfolded if it is serious about reaching postmodern persons whose lives are fragmented and under constant reformulation by "now" and "images." Second, the church will have to face up to the fact that the world views of many of its members are also being impacted by postmodern perspectives. Diversity and pluralism have become a way of life within many churches, as well as within the communities being served by the churches. Both challenges will require the development of new forms of Christian community which have a capacity for expressing creative diversity, while seeking to hear and understand afresh the living truths of God's word to them.

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AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH IN CANADA

*Alan Reynolds
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The University of British Columbia is beautifully situated on Point Grey,

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sheltered from the city of Vancouver by Pacific Spirit Park, a clear view of the Coastal Mountains to the north, the Strait of Georgia and Vancouver Island to the west, and the flats of the Fraser River Delta to the south. From our beautiful university, we extend greetings to all who are becoming part of *The Gospel and Our Culture Movement*.

There were never more than five or six of us, but the conversations were often intense and the sessions always helpful. The group consisted of members of faculty of the University of British Columbia drawn together by a common Christian commitment and by my own excitement about the ideas emanating from *The Gospel and Our Culture Movement*.

I first read Lesslie Newbigin's *Foolishness to the Greeks* in May of 1990 and found it one of the most helpful, exhilarating -- and liberating -- books I had read in years. I had already been receiving the newsletter for several months.

But were the thoughts and themes presented as relevant to other disciplines and generally to Christian faith and theology as they appeared to me? Over the summer I contacted several friends who taught at the University-- a couple in the geography faculty, one in chemistry, another in forestry, etc.

We met over lunch, once a month, through the fall, winter and spring. Attendance was surprisingly consistent as others saw the relevance of Dr. Newbigin's thought. No sophisticated educational techniques, we simply took the book chapter by chapter each month, and each took a turn in responding to and commenting on the chapter, leading into a period of question and discussion.

The differing professional perspectives were helpful in appreciating the implications to the book and confirmed for each of us its importance and significance.

As a result, through the Faculty and Graduate Christian Forum at U.B.C., we have contacted Dr. Newbigin to ask him to spend a week with us during the fall of 1992. While it looks like it will not be

possible for him to accept our invitation because of Mrs. Newbigin's health, it has been clear that he declined with real regret.

For myself, I hope to attend the consultation in Chicago in February of 1992, and perhaps the conference in the United Kingdom in July of 1992.

The kind of response we have made has been quite simple, easy to organize and carry out. Each of us feels that our study and discussion has made a significant impact on our thought and our understanding of our own disciplines. Perhaps others can find a similar inter-disciplinary approach equally helpful.

FROM THE MAILBAG

*Stanley Hauervas
Duke Divinity School
Durham, North Carolina*

I have some ideas about some of the conflicts that may be present in our [GOCN] group between the more Calvinist types and people like me who tend toward the so-called 'sectarian' groups. For example, in the very way that the [February working] consultation is put together I'm not sure I'd want to distinguish between the task of theology and the task of the church. Or, put differently, I would certainly want to do the task of the church before I do the task of theology since you can't have theology without the church. I'm sure you agree with that, but finally it's about how you understand differences between someone like Newbigin and someone like [John Howard] Yoder. It would be fascinating to explore that. However, given the confrontation we face, those issues may not be all that important, but as Christians we owe it to one another to try to work them out.

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*Rodney Clapp
InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois*

I am excited about the sorts of things your Network is grappling with. InterVarsity Press has long devoted itself to cultural engagement and books that will help contemporary Christians to better understand the world they live in. It's heartening to see your Network grappling with the profound flux our society is now undergoing. I especially appreciated the bibliographies provided by Craig Van Gelder, and concentrating on the shift from a modern to a postmodern world. A few specific ideas and thoughts come to mind.

You may be interested to know that we will be publishing a book by Thomas Oden this winter, which focuses on the shift from modernity to postmodernity in the United States and the Soviet Union. Written after his own recent visit to the Soviet Union, the book will be called *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in the United States and the Soviet Union*. I'd be happy to provide more information for you or any members of the Network, or to send advance copies if you would like.

There are at least three or four other upcoming IVP titles that might be of interest to the Network. I'd be happy to provide more information about these and various other books as I better understand what the aims and interests of the Network are.

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*Charles H. Long
Forward Movement Publications
Cincinnati, Ohio*

I finally had a chance to work through the back issues of the newsletter which you kindly sent this summer and have an even greater appreciation for the fine job you are doing. I think it is the most important ecumenical action/research project that has taken place in the last

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thirty years. The fact that it is an undertaking of concerned individuals and not linked to the structures of churches and mission societies gives it all the more strength. I look forward to more personal participation on my part.

Someone might find it useful to review and reclaim "The Missionary Structure of the Congregation," studies undertaken by the WCC in the early sixties, mainly under the leadership of Hans-Ruedi Weber and Tom Weiser. There was lots of good stuff but it disappeared in the controversy surrounding the Bangkok conference and the development of the Lausanne alternative program.

I'd like also to call to your attention the final issue of *The Ecumenist*, Spring 1991, with a fine article by Gregory Baum on "Theories of Post-Modernity."

You can order a copy from the Paulist Press, 997 MacArthur Blvd., Mahwah, NJ 07430. A few years ago there was much debate about the difference between secular humanism and Christian humanism. An excellent book has just been published by Eerdmans on this issue, *The Case for Christian Humanism*, by William Franklin and Joseph Shaw.

An important piece of the agenda I have not seen mentioned yet is the relationship between service and proclamation in America-as-a-mission field. In overseas mission experience, as you know, service, particularly through educational and medical institutions, was an important component in the communication of the gospel. It also created its own problems of cultural imperialism, particularly when institutional work was detached from the evangelistic work of mission societies. What, in an American context, would be an appropriate service that Christians and only Christians could render to the human needs of this culture?

I would very much like to get a copy of "Another Way of Looking" study guide if they are still available. Is there a North American version yet? If not, I would be interested in publishing something like it when the time is ripe.

Are there any other Episcopalians you know who are involved in the project so far? [Ed. note: yes!] Are there any of any denomination in the Cincinnati-Dayton area with whom I could establish relations?

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Robbie F. Castleman
InterVarsity Christian Fellowship
Tallahassee, Florida

My burden (grown from studies, thesis, etc.) is for folks to see beyond the safety of creedal formulations, and forsake the false-faith of theological correctness. To encounter Jesus is to be ontologically shifted, not just cognitively enlightened. Rahner (sorry, thesis again) said that Christians of the 21st century will be "mystics" or they "will not exist." This reflects a concern for a spirituality that has a marked degree of the ineffable, a deepest encounter of the soul, a sight of God that renders one "undone." And yet, remade.

It is a concern of mine that theologians such as you have in the network address this mysticism, this spirituality, in such a way that it remains within the Biblical revelation and proves to be a non-elitist and unifying agent for the health of the church. Mystics often become monastics. This contributes to the spiritual anemia of the church and the further alienation of the culture from the Gospel. Jesus is not seen in worship, and certainly not in the workplace.

A MEDITATION ON MERCY

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From the reformation until now, the central word which the church has relied upon to articulate the heart and essence of God's salvation is the word "grace." Grace connotes unmerited favor, kindness and generosity. The word has

well captured the surprising and overwhelming encounter with goodness which is at the center of the Bible's depiction of the divine-human encounter.

The word "grace" has also had another important dimension of meaning, that of civilization, elegance, and aesthetic pleasure. It is interesting to consider that the protestant reformation emerged in tandem with Europe's cultural renaissance. As the reformation placarded grace as the central religious reality, the renaissance strove to embody graciousness in all its forms. In this way, the very word "grace" wrapped up within itself a comprehensive vision for society, a society marked by kindness, generosity, beauty and civility. It comes as no surprise then that many of the monarchs of Europe threw their material and political power behind the slogan *sola gratia*. Here was a word which projected a grand synthesis of religion and culture, a word which projected the hope of a kinder and more humane world.

Although the explicitly religious dimensions of the word "grace" have for the most part disappeared from western culture, the ideal of a gracious society still has significant power over our minds and imaginations. Its secularized form has been preserved most clearly in classic political liberalism, with its emphasis on freedom and its exercise of philanthropy toward both the arts and humanitarian causes. But the secularized vision of a gracious society is not limited to the political left. Even George Bush attempted to draw on this heritage in his call for a "kinder, gentler nation."

At this point in the history of western culture, however, Christians may have reason to ponder whether or not the word "grace" should still occupy the cardinal position in the church's vocabulary of salvation. Let

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me suggest some reasons why a reconsideration might be in order. First, it is becoming increasingly evident (even to western Christians) that Christianity is no longer primarily a phenomenon of western culture. The church in the west is clearly in decline, and the majority of the Christian population in the world today resides in non-western countries, countries where notions of civility and graciousness may differ significantly from western assumptions. This raises the question of whether, by speaking primarily of grace, we run the risk of confusing western cultural ideals with the gospel in such a way that we render the gospel meaningless in other cultural contexts.

Consider for example the proclamation of the gospel among the poor in third world countries. While it is still imperative to speak of God's generosity and favor, the connotations of civility and elegance which are part of the word "grace" in the cultural heritage of the west have little place in the barrios and slums. Here other Christian words like hope, liberation, mercy and empowerment speak more directly and more powerfully.

This problem in non-western contexts is related to a problem that emerges within the west itself. As the cardinal word for salvation, "grace" denotes both the character of our relationship to God and our relationships with each other. As we have received grace, so are we to be gracious. This sounds fine, as far as it goes, but I cannot help but wonder whether the particular associations of elegance and sophistication which the word "gracious" carries with it are the most helpful in our present context. There are many voices being raised today which suggest that the gospel's role in our society is not so much to be a civilizing influence, but rather a cry of the conscience which speaks out to and for the poor, the broken, the ignored and the despised. These voices are calling the church, not to a recovery of high culture, but to a recovery of compassion.

I am not in the least suggesting that we lose sight of the unmerited favor and

goodness of God. We must not lose what the word "grace" connotes about God. But I believe that the challenges we face today may be calling us to reshuffle our vocabulary of salvation. In particular, I suggest that we take out another word from our theological treasure chest, dust it off a bit, and consider whether it should not assume primacy, at least for us at this point and in this situation. The word is "mercy."

The word "mercy" retains all the nuances of unmerited favor and kindness, but the call to "be merciful" has a different ring to it than the summons to "be gracious." Exercising mercy means the willingness to abandon something to which a person has a perfect right. Mercy implies the restraint of vindictiveness, the end to cycles of revenge, the supplanting of competitiveness with compassion. Mercy directs our attention very concretely to those who are less fortunate than ourselves, and calls us to treat them as we would ourselves like to be treated.

I wonder what kind of reformation would take place in the churches of the west if we were to adopt the slogan "mercy alone," if the sole criterion for participation in the people of God was the willingness to receive and exercise mercy. I wonder what changes might take place in church budgets, in programs, perhaps even in the demography of our congregations. I wonder if "mercy" is a word whose time has come.

THE GOSPEL AS PUBLIC TRUTH

*The Gospel and Our Culture
Birmingham, England*

[Ed. note: The Gospel and Our Culture Programme in the United Kingdom has issued the following announcement of a major consultation. Members of the North American GOC Network have been invited to attend. Space is limited

and is filling fast, therefore, immediate response is necessary.]

"Christianity continues to hold the allegiance of one third of the world's exploding population. But while churches in the Third World grow rapidly, churches in Europe continue to decline or are static. Some have labelled Europe the new dark continent.

"In response to this situation many of our churches have asked that we set aside the last ten years of this century as a 'Decade of Evangelism'. But what will this mean? Is it a revival of the old-time religion? Is it an attempt to re-establish the churches' authority and control in society, to re-found christendom? Or will it involve a willingness to examine and question many of the assumptions and beliefs of Western culture in the light of the Christian gospel? In other words are we prepared to look at our own culture through the eyes of an overseas missionary?

"In response to this challenge a national Consultation will take place at the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, Derbyshire from Saturday 11th July to Friday 17th July 1992.

"This Consultation will bring to a focus the work done during the past eight years in the programme on 'The Gospel and Our Culture' initiated by the British Council of Churches. The aim of the Consultation is 'to test the thesis that the Christian Gospel can provide a positive critique of contemporary Western culture, the basis of unity and coherence, and the possibility of a hopeful future for the public life of our society'.

"A volume entitled *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture*, edited by Bishop Hugh Montefiore, has been published by Mowbrays and will be sent to all participants. The Consultation will be addressed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Professor Jurgen Moltmann, Professor Lamin Sanneh of Yale, Dr. Carver Yu

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of Hong Kong, Bishop Hugh Montefiore, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin and other leading figures from public life. The conference fee is L160 inclusive of Value Added Tax. A registration fee of L20 is payable with the booking form." (The form may be obtained by contacting Holli Rook, 86 E. 12th St., Holland, MI 49423, 616/392-8555.)

ANNOUNCING
PUBLICATION OF
THE GOSPEL AND
CONTEMPORARY
CULTURE

Monbray
London, England

This volume, edited and introduced by Hugh Montefiore, provides the critical stimulation for the discussions

to be held at Swanwick in July 1992 under the sponsorship of the Gospel and Our Culture movement in the United Kingdom. Here, eight experts in different fields take up the challenge of inculturation. History, science, the arts, and epistemology, and their applications in economics, education, health and healing, and the media, are all examined in the light of the Gospel, and the Gospel's relevance for each is brought out. The essays by Eric Ives, Mary Midgley, Jeremy Begbie, Colin Gunton, Jane Collier, Brenda Watson, John Young and Jim McDonnell comprise what Lesslie Newbigin calls "the most serious attempt for many decades to explore in depth the bearing of the Christian faith upon the key areas of public life in the modern secular society."

The book is available in the USA

through Cassell plc, Publishers Distribution Centre, P.O. Box C831, Rutherford, NJ 07070 (phone 201/939-6064). Each copy sells for \$19.95 plus shipping and handling. The ISBN number is 0-264-67259-3.

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