

POSTMODERNISM AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANISM

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Visualize for a moment that you are living during the "Dark Ages." Do you think you would see them as dark? Do you think that if you lived in the Enlightenment you would see those years as enlightening years? It's very hard to see the overriding ideas or paradigms that define an age while one is living in it. What might our age be called one hundred or, say, five hundred years from now? I suggest that there is a good chance it will be called the Postmodern Age.

This is a term of which most people are probably only peripherally aware, and if that, only to relate it to the Postmodernist architectural style. Still, I feel it is incumbent on us to understand it better because it is the water we swim in. These are the assumptive, unchallenged premises of our culture that permeate everything in our lives. These premises mold all our thinking as individuals, dictate the nature of our society, and indeed mold our religious thinking as religious liberals. Most of our debates in society today are in essence debates over whether the Postmodernist view is true or whether alternative views are.

So what is Postmodernism? Simply put, it views all of our ideas of truth and our basic sense of reality as being constructed in our heads. It defines reality as

merely a social construction. There is no ultimate foundation for anything you believe, argues the postmodernist. What you believe is just a collage of ideas given by your culture and your own rationalizations for power and control. Some have declared the end of philosophy, the Enlightenment and reason itself. In fact, they have declared that any "ism," including Humanism, capitalism, democratism, and even Postmodernism, are not choices we make but are entirely determined. They have declared that there are no trans cultural, transhistorical or universal truths.

Now you may say these are the rantings of some intellectual determinists, but I ask you to consider your own beliefs and your own culture. Have you ever said something like "perception is reality," or "image is everything," or "truth is all relative"? I certainly have. Underlying these seemingly innocuous statements is a profound skepticism that ultimately has led to the postmodern malaise we live in.

Postmodernism has been a movement of ideas led by continental Marxist intellectuals. The premises and assumptions of Postmodernism are now accepted uncritically as the most modern of views. Intellectuals in all areas are reformulating their specific fields in the light of Postmodernist dogma.

Look, if you will, at the political scene where both Republicans and Democrats have essentially given up on any rational discourse. Spin doctors are the ultimate postmodernists whose whole *raison d'etre* is to create reality. This is done very deliberately and cynically.

In the field of law Robert Bork's confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court became a debate over interpretation versus the original intent of the law. This debate asks whether words and law in particular have any real meaning, or do we just interpret the words as we go through time, ignoring the original meaning?

Virtually every debate in our society today is in some way a debate over Postmodernist assumptions: the debate over political correctness, the debate in psychology over constructionist therapy, the debate over values clarification in schools, the debate over deconstruction analysis in English literature.

In art and advertising, the collage represents the ultimate postmodern art. The collage visually represents the postmodern fragmentation, disorientation and incoherence in our society. In the religious sphere, the New Age, neopaganism, and ecofeminism represent religions built on postmodernist assumptions. All these positions ultimately debate the same issue. Is there truth and is there any basis for it? Are we really thinking, or do we just mouth rationalizations?

In many ways Postmodernism is a rejection of Modernism. Modernism, as a child of the Enlightenment, regarded the world as having knowable, universal, objective, and in many cases absolute truths when reason was applied. Progress was an historical, rational, and scientific project. A better social order could be developed as we uncovered our common human nature and applied science to human problems. A technocratic kind of utopianism underlies this secular Modernist vision.

Postmodernist ideas come from many lines of thought. The Romantic movement was a reaction to the Enlightenment. It rejected the cold utopian reason that some of those in the Enlightenment thought would usher in a progressively better society. The Romantics, in contrast, saw their lives guided by the light of inner personal experience. Intuition played an important role in subsequent movements, such as existentialism, that also emphasized the subjective over the objective and the emotional over the rational. These Western ideas were enhanced by the awareness of older Eastern religious thought.

Other lines of thought were at work as well. Linguistic analysis in this century has found that language itself is not neutral but can actually create reality. The arguments are subtle and end with some saying that philosophy is reduced to language. Of course, sociologists argue that philosophy is reduced to sociology, and psychologists argue that philosophy is reduced to psychology. Eventually the whole Enlightenment project was rejected as an oppressive, hierarchical system only devised for rationalizing the gaining and maintaining of power. Reason, instead of being a liberator, became an oppressor.

Two basic forms of Postmodernism have developed, the European -dominated school of skeptical Postmodernists and the more American-dominated school of affirmative Postmodernists. The Continental skeptics argue that reality is pure illusion and conclude with a nihilistic, pessimistic view of individuals, the political process, and all "stories" we might make up about life. The American New Age affirmative version projects a more positive utopian vision of pluralism and tolerance.

Humanism is rejected on several grounds. First of all, there is a rejection of the self as a rational independent agent. Secondly, Humanism is rejected as being a philosophy oppressive to women and minorities primarily because it sets up a hierarchy of values. It is argued that any hierarchy is always a disguise for white male privilege. Thirdly, Humanists support the use of reason and science which Postmodernists say has no validity. Fourthly, they argue that Humanism has been used to justify Western superiority and cultural imperialism: humanism consists merely of the views of dead European white males. Lastly, they reject the inherent dignity and value of the individual.

Table 1 in the appendix presents a list modeled after one by Hassan that contrasts some of the paradigmatic differences between Modernism and Post-

modernism specific to the liberal religious movement. The Postmodern mind starts with the particular rather than the universal. It emphasizes the intuitive and mystical aspects rather than the evidential or cognitive aspects. It stresses communitarian, supportive behavior rather than individualistic, confrontational methods. Inner-directed human potential programs take precedence over outer-directed social action ones. An ethics of words and language is irrelevant because all symbols are mere metaphors.

What, you may ask, as a Unitarian Universalist and Humanist, am I to make of these views? I believe both the Modernist and the reactionary Postmodernist positions are ones of extremes. We should not be apologists for either position. I would describe myself as a repentant Modernist. I will explain as I go along.

The Postmodernist critiques are essential for a modern understanding of the prejudices that shape our thinking. Postmodernist awarenesses lead us to a sense of humility about our beliefs. They have opened new windows in my life of the mind and transformed my own Humanism. Let's look at one area where Postmodernism applies-that of liberal religion.

Epistemological insecurity, for example, is pervasive in both the laity and the ministry. The noncreedal organizational stance of Unitarian Universalism is curiously creedally reinterpreted to the effect that the denomination should have no focus, temperament or exclusivity. A phrase like "widening circles" of inclusiveness is canonized by some to discourage any theological critique or discrimination in a new "salad bowl" utopianism.

There is a renewed interest in mysticism. Mystery seems all that is worthy to be a God in the postmodern era. The metaphysically crippled of our age seem drawn to an awe and reverence of ephemerality. A "new spirituality" is the most talked about subject in liberal

churches as people search for some theological grounding in immanence rather than transcendence.

The functional, communitarian aspects of liberal religion now take priority over the ideological aspects of trying to explain the world and our role in it. Paradoxically, religion has historically been foundationally defined. Most definitions revolve around "ultimate" concerns, faith, moral codes, devotion, and so on. Humanists in this culture come across as Modernists since they are some of the few people who will defend the use of reason, science, and progressive knowledge. Moreover, they defend a definitive metaphysics, *Le.*, naturalism.

Fifty-five percent of Unitarian Universalists identify themselves as Humanists/existentialists, and another ten percent as agnostics/skeptics/atheists. Still, the ministry and the denominational hierarchy in general believe that in order to survive, they must accommodate a more relativized position. To be sure, there is a real dilemma for most ministers concerning the compromises they must make between pastoral support and theological leadership. Postmodernist culture and capitalist growth-oriented marketing bends most ministers to the acquiescent side of their profession. As one retired minister I interviewed put it, "They [the ministers] just lost their nerve."¹

A deeper ministerial problem, documented in several studies, is the quality, orientation and training of new ministers. They simply do not have the background in Humanism and philosophy in general. Approximately one-half of the Unitarian Universalist ministers are trained in nondenominational (usually Christian) schools. Even the denominational schools still place a large emphasis on Christian theology along with a variety of postmodernist dominated theologies

¹ Gene Kreves, retired minister of the Du Page Unitarian Church, Naperville, Illinois, in a 1992 sermon.

such as feminist theology, process theology, and neopagan theology. By promoting their theological openness (if not vulnerability), the Unitarian Universalist schools have attracted a disproportionately large contingent of nonrepresentative theologies such as neopaganism.

Traditional religious language such as God, holy, prayer, heaven, etc., has long been problematic. Emotionally evocative, these words carry deep metaphoric meaning but have generally been replaced by most religious humanists in the interest of clarity by nonsupernatural terms. The relativization of language has revitalized the "religious redefinition game." Many people in liberal churches use the word God in a strictly metaphoric sense, disregarding the historical supernatural definition. The Humanist is forced by this Tillichian scheme to use the word God for whatever he/she feels is ultimately important. This deliberate obfuscation serves the theist and implies that the idea of supernatural beings is inconsequential to religion. It teaches a form of language duplicity.

The Postmodernist sociological basis for knowledge has meant that ethics reduces itself to aesthetics and agreement. Since there are no universal norms, we are told, democratic agreement is all that is required. One Unitarian Universalist theological professor, for example, espouses a "democratic theology" as a complete theology.² Reason, it is argued, will automatically emerge in the process of democracy. Also, many feminist thinkers argue for a situational ethics based only on care and responsibility.

Postmodernism provides good new perspectives for Humanism. Humanism has always treated knowledge as fallible and tentative, preferring not to link itself with any foundational knowledge. The early Human-

² Professor Neil Shadle. Meadville/Lombard Theological School. personal communication.

ist skeptical intuitions are now supported so that it appears that there is no one foundation for truth and no real certainty concerning anything. We better understand today the limitations and insidious potential problems of rationality. We understand that the context of our knowledge tells, in some cases, more than the content. Our unconscious, power-driven motivations, our culturally laden subjectivity, the problems translating in our reality to others, the lack of a single a priori thought system to rely on, and our linguistic bondage all humble our pretenses to rightness.

As William James said, "A great many people think they are thinking when they are rearranging their prejudices."³ This is, I think, at the heart of the Postmodernist critique. We Humanists, many times, have laid too much emphasis on rational aspects of living while not developing an appreciation for the experiential-how we do our religion.

The last twenty years have shown mostly younger people in America how to use experiences rather than ideas to illuminate their religious lives. The human potential movement has awakened in many, keener intuitions about the world via nonrational approaches. Through direct experience from support groups, therapy, ritual, dream interpretation, meditation, hikes in the woods, or any of the thousands of other approaches, people have found a holistic, integrative awareness of their reality when they dropped all rational pretenses. Just as many people use superstition to deflect the harshness of reality, so, too, rationalists can screen themselves emotionally behind a web of rationalizations and comfortable intellectualizations.

Yet, there is an unmistakable romantic utopianism at work in postmodernism. As Jurgen Habermas says,

³ Quoted in George Seldes, *The Great Thoughts* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 205.

"The new value placed on the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism, discloses a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present."⁴ A pluralistic utopian, tolerant brother / sisterhood without any superiority of beliefs is supposed to emerge. We are told that this offers a new world humanist religion that will resolve old differences by acceptance and caring.

Others and I are troubled by Postmodernism. There is an insidious absolutism of the subjective. Even Richard Rorty, the most prominent American Postmodernist, cautions that "we should not become so open-minded that our brains fall out." Many are now calling for a new view of the Enlightenment. Others are discovering that reason and rationality are minimum propositions at the heart of any discourse. Somewhere along the line we thought we needed certainty rather than accepting all truth as fallible.

The Postmodern condition may, in fact, be unavoidable. David Harvey powerfully argues that a relativistic world is a necessary result of a world caught in a space-time cultural, economic, and geographical compression.⁵ The acceleration of world processes disorients, and alienates. The geographical compression of various cultures dislocates us culturally from any roots.

At the heart of this matter is a conflict of paradigms. These are not rationally paradoxical or even polar opposites. They do, generally, represent trade-offs in the practice of religion. Both the Modernist and Postmodernist positions are ones of extremes that need to be integrated and reformulated for any healthy Humanism. In fact I feel that Humanism is best positioned to do this.

⁴ Quoted in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Basil: Blackwell, 1989), 325.

⁵ Ibid.

The traditional way to handle extreme positions in the Western tradition, as formulated by Aristotle, is to seek the middle ground. Bravery, for example, is the moderate point between foolhardiness and cowardice. In contrast, the Eastern way of ying/yang might be a better approach. It seeks to hold both views in a dynamic tension, eschewing the moderate point as nonvital and compromising. Both Eastern and Western ways can help us derive a new Humanism. We don't have to have an either/or; we can have a both/and.

Looking at table 1, we see we must be centers of both principles and openness, social action and personal growth, the cognitive and the experiential, the ethical and the aesthetic. Our use of reason and intellect does not have to negate the intuitional, mystical aspects of our being. We only need to get these to work together in a healthy way. We must learn techniques of both the supportive community and the community that takes risks of skeptical confrontation. Our religious communities must open their doors to creative new ideas and people, but not self-destruct due to the centrifugal effects of divergent agendas. These are not easy tasks, but they are central to our purpose.

We should resist any reactionary tendencies that make us apologists for the Modernist position. As Samuel Butler said, "Life is the art of drawing sufficient conclusions from insufficient premises."⁶ We need to develop an experiential basis of education for religious humanism. That is why we need new stories to root our message. Nietzsche's warning about "metaphors which are worn out and lack sensuous power" should be heeded as Humanism enters the next century.

By the same token, we should not be deluded by the neo-romantic siren song of Postmodernism's world

⁶ Seldes, *op. cit.*, 62.

utopianism. Beneath that loving facade lies a nihilistic relativism. We can look at life relatively without resorting to looking at it arbitrarily. Intuitionism at its extreme is mere solipsism.

There is a crisis of intellectual nerve right now. There is a spiritual crisis. We are told that since we can't believe in anything for certain, we should only believe in our intuitions and emotions. As Robert Heller of the Federal Reserve said, "Never ignore a gut feeling, but never believe it's enough." Intuition and reason inform each other and integrate our knowledge into a whole story. But, critical reason with all its problems is all we have as a community to expose our errors. Truth is what's left when we get rid of all the lies, and that includes lies of both the emotions and the intellect. Is the concept of quality, without resorting to elitism, not applicable to religion?

Truth, hope, freedom, justice, reason, equality, responsibility, love, and devotion to progress still stand as virtues to which we should light the Enlightenment torch not because they are true but because they work.

Yet, this is not enough. Reason and science can explain, predict, and control aspects of the world, but they can never direct us to our goals and meanings, our religion, if you will. Humanism, if nothing else, is that ongoing critical search for an integrated world view of meanings and purposes using reason, science, experiences, and intuition. We cannot give up the powers of our minds to those who would tell us they have *the* truth or to those, just as absolute, who say there is none.

Appendix

Table 1:

COMPARISON OF MODERNISM AND
POSTMODERNISM IN LIBERAL RELIGIOUS
PRACTICE

<u>Modernism</u>	<u>Postmodernism</u>
Universal	Particular
Cognitive	Experiential
Individualistic	Communitarian
Progressive	No Progress
Becoming	Being
Elitism	Egalitarianism
Truth	Truths / No truth
Uniformity	Diversity
Outer-directed	Inner-directed
Transcendence	Immanence
Content	Context
Ethics of Words	Words as Metaphors
Principles	Openness
Skeptical Confrontation	Supportive Behavior
Evidence	Intuition
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Creation	Deconstruction
Utopian	Heterotopian
Phallic	Androgynous
Ethics	Aesthetics
Centralization	Decentralization
Design	Chance
Melting Pot	Salad Bowl
Selection	Combination
God the father	Goddess / Holy Ghost

by Michael Wemer; modeled after I. Hassan, "The Culture of Post-modernism," *Theory, Culture, and Society*. 2 (1985): 123.