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Part One: The Post Modern Explained

"Finally, it should be clear that it is not up to us to provide reality".

- Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post Modern Explained*

Post-modernism has become not only a buzzword in a variety of disciplines and social contexts, but also for some a type of movement. It is difficult to define what post-modernism is, although I think this quote from *What is Post-modernism* by Charles Jencks, who is known as one of the founders of post-modernism, captures some of its essential meaning:

Since 'modern' comes from the latin *modo* meaning 'just now', 'post-modern' obviously means 'after' just now - or sometimes beyond, contra, above, ultra, meta, outside-of-the-present.

[...]

Post-modern movements vary in each cultural form - economics, politics, dance, psychology, education, etc - and in some areas it has not been defined or perhaps does not exist. In architecture, art, literature and philosophy, different attitudes have developed at different rates, so once again it is the pluralism which should be stressed (incommensurable difference).

Most people understand post-modernism to mean a type of relativism - truth is relative to each person or each different cultural group. In post-modernism my truth does not have to agree with your truth - but both are valid. It makes me smile to see relativity misapplied in this way. Einstein's theory of relativity never proposed that everything is relative - but actually states that some things are relative when measured against

some things that are constant and absolute. The theory of relativity hinges on the constancy of the speed of light. Recently gravity was shown to contain a constant too. My point is that if we look for a universal principle of relativism, as post-moderns do, there isn't one to be found. Relativism only works when there is a constant which can be used as a yardstick.

In *The Post-Modern Explained*, Jean Francois Lyotard, one of post-modernism's foremost promoters, briefly summarises modernism - which he states began with the Enlightenment at the end of the 18th century, and continued on for the next two hundred years. Lyotard proposes that the ruling idea behind modernism is the emancipation of humanity, and that to this end reason and rationalism have combined with technology and resulted not in liberation, but in totalitarianism. He cites Stalinism and capitalism as examples of types of total dominance. In simple terms, Lyotard's view is that we see an end goal, we make a blueprint of a project to achieve that goal, and then we set about making others comply with the project. Yet none of the projects result in 'universal emancipation', but the result is an 'us and them', one group dominated by another, and inequity in terms of resources and freedoms. Lyotard is in effect criticising the modern world's march of progress through rational humanistic systems.

The title of Lyotard's *The Post-Modern Explained* is in itself a joke on the reader. He does not so much explain post-modernism as attempt to deconstruct modernism. In other words, he tries to take apart modern systems and values but doesn't offer any clear alternative. An example is his focus on metanarratives. Metanarratives can be simply described as the story behind the story, or the story about the story. We could say that the bible is a metanarrative for Christianity. It is the story behind our modern story of Christianity. It is the blueprint on which the project is based. Lyotard rejects metanarratives, including Christianity, because

he believes they end up in totalitarian and authoritarian systems, which result in favourable conditions for some and abuses for others.

One of Lyotard's objections to metanarratives (the story behind the story) is that they begin by stating what people *should be*. On this basis he sees Christianity as a modern and authoritarian system - because in his view it tells a person what they *should be* rather than letting them discover who they are and allowing them to be different. In Lyotard's analysis he rejects modernism and its systems - be they political, social or religious - yet he cannot avoid falling into the very thing he argues against. He creates his own story behind the story. In Lyotard's metanarrative difference is the key. In essence he begins with we *should be* different. He also prescribes a type of anarchy in which there are no absolute truths or laws. So he is saying there *should be* no absolute truths or laws. And fundamental to his view of post-modernism is his call for us to become childlike in our thinking (we *should be* childlike). He writes:

You cannot open up a question without leaving yourself open to it. You cannot scrutinize a "subject" (training for example) without being scrutinized by it. You cannot do any of these things without renewing ties with the season of childhood, the season of the mind's possibilities. You need to recommence.

In saying this Lyotard has said nothing new or post-modern, but has borrowed from an already existing story. Jesus said:

Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The difference between Jesus statement and Lyotard's concerning

becoming childlike, is that Jesus himself is the constant. Lyotard provides no means of undoing the rationalist humanism which has pervaded our thinking and motivated our actions. He vaguely pines for a return to metaphysics, and suggests that moderns have lost God. Yet he cannot substantiate a replacement or means to achieve "the season of childhood" necessary to begin again. Jesus provides the means, and the guidance.

In my view Lyotard would have us in a perpetual state of childhood - always questioning but never arriving at any conclusion. His post-modernism is a philosophy of scepticism and doubt. Jesus on the other hand provides us with a child-like renewal, but does not then expect us to remain there. As the apostle Paul wrote:

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

Here we see what Lyotard's post-modernism does not provide. We begin as children, but mature and become adults. Nevertheless we do not have the full picture - there is an element of mystery to the Christian faith. There will be a temporal finality in which we will know God fully - the absolute, and until then our faith is in what we understand and know of this absolute now. Thus we cannot be totalitarian, yet we can rely on and be guided by the absolute. Christianity outdoes post-modernism by providing both a new approach to life and the absolute by which to measure it. In contrast, Lyotard proposes a confused nursery in which the infants are expected to educate and train themselves. Lyotard's post-modernism is a deconstructive form of human rationalism which lacks spirit.

Part Two: Post-Modernism and the Jim Jones Potential

"If you're going to San Francisco
Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair
If you're going to San Francisco
You're gonna meet some gentle people there"
- Scott Mackenzie, 'San Francisco'

In my previous post, [The Post-Modern Explained](#), I looked mainly at the post-modernism of Jean-Francois Lyotard. Lyotard cites historical examples such as Auschwitz as indicators of the failure of modernism, and although he calls for a new type of thinking, he doesn't provide one. Lyotard is a deconstructionist, but not a constructionist of anything new.

Charles Jencks, another leading post-modernist, disagrees with Lyotard's negativity about modernism. Jenck's view of post-modernism is that it draws from modernism - that is, it takes aspects of the rationalist systems of the world and then develops them into something hybrid - derived from the modern, but new and post-modern. In 'What is Post-Modernism?', Jencks states, "The most visible shift in the post-modern world is towards pluralism and cultural eclecticism". In his view the post-modern is a mixture of different influences, artistic expressions and cultural practices. So a person or group may have a variety of ideas which they believe and act according to. In some ways this agrees with Jean Baudrillard's view of post-modernism. Baudrillard, who is more of a negative post-modernist, states that there are no originals in post-modernism, but only copies, which he calls *simulcra*. In other words, the post-modern is like a smorgasbord or piecemeal of ideas, which are copied from larger original ideas and then mixed together. Jencks

observed:

Bizarre, convulsive juxtaposition - sometimes beautiful and very unusual. In the late twentieth century a traditionally-garbed Bedouin can be found riding a camel across the desert while having, beneath his robes, a business suit, mobile phone and laptop computer. I have been on the tenth floor of a High-Tech tower in Tokyo and watched seven traditional Japanese weddings going on at once. Today incongruity is usual.

Jencks and some other post-modernists believe that post-modernism really began to emerge in the counter-culture of the 1960s. In the West it was a period of questioning and challenging rules and norms, and of embracing spiritual and artistic modes from other cultures that had previously been ignored. Certainly, if we look for a movement that seems to encapsulate post-modernism, the hippie movement fits the bill. The hippie movement was about creating a new culture, which rejected absolutes and rationalism. Hippies took on board various forms of spirituality, rejected materialism and capitalism, and departed from cultural norms for relationships and living arrangements. In hippiedom there was an "anything goes" type of mentality. It was a tribal movement without the restraints of the previous generation.

The hippie movement failed for various reasons. As well as the toll taken by the increasing use of hard drugs, there was the psychological and spiritual fallout that resulted from abuses of dignity and personal boundaries. Communes had flourished, only to see members leave in disillusionment with the shallow relationships, sexual promiscuity and general lack of any significant purpose. Of the many communes that sprang up, it was Charles Manson's Family that really helped nail down the lid on the post-modern hippie coffin. What began as a counter-culture tribe ended with Family members going on murder sprees. The universal love and peace that was the aim of the hippies failed because

there were no restraints, no tried and true norms, and no absolute truth which guided them. It was a project without a blueprint.

Another example of this was Jim Jones, the ex-Methodist minister who became a cult leader and instigated the mass suicide of over 900 followers (who were also captives) in the jungle of Guyana in 1978. It's an extreme example and it may surprise you that I would link it in any way with post-modernism. Yet Jones was also an eclectic post-modernist product. Jonestown survivor Deborah Layton has recorded his mixture of spiritual and political beliefs in her book 'Seductive Poison'. Jones combined socialism, revolutionary Marxism, New Age spirituality, faith healing and aspects of the civil rights movement into a shifting and increasingly delusional tapestry. It seems incredible that sane individuals would buy into Jones to the extent that they ended up virtual prisoners in a jungle, and committed mass suicide - some sincerely believing Jones was the kindest man on earth and unfairly persecuted. In a more recent example, there are those who still believe this about Waco's David Koresh.

The problem with creating our own tribe based on eclectic ideas which suit us is that we will naturally tend to dispense with norms we don't like. So Manson, Jones, Koresh, and others dispensed with honouring life. Post-modernism did not provide an answer to the selfish motivations of the human heart. Instead, it pandered to self-indulgence and selfish selectivity.

In 'Seductive Poison', Deborah Layton says:

We had embarked on a peaceful exodus into a "land of freedom", only to see our lives in the Promised Land turn into a dreary prison camp existence.

[...]

People do not knowingly join "cults" that will ultimately destroy and kill them. It is the most innocent and naive who find themselves entrapped. It is usually only gradually that a group turns into or reveals itself as a cult, becomes malignant, but by then it is often too late.

I see this as the potential in post-modernism - that in the haste to reject what is already in place and to dispense with the story behind the story (the metanarrative), people embrace a shallow melting pot of ideas. While there are post-modernists who say they are re-examining the meaning of leadership, human nature tells us, from ancient times to the present, that leaders always emerge. Even in consensus models there will be the dominant personalities who influence and lead the process. New tribes will have leaders who form new rules, and if absolute truth is rejected the new rules will be a mixture of authoritarianism, control, permissiveness, and exploitation. The post-modernism of Jencks leads to the same consequences as that of Lyotard - an anarchic worldview in which one picks and chooses ideas and cultural norms but rejects the metanarrative necessary to keep the story in a meaningful context.

Is it possible to live in this global village, with all the influences that we are exposed to, and remain constant without becoming either hermetic, xenophobic, or cultic? I believe it is possible, and that the solution lies not in attempts to re-create a lost tribalism, which is still going to be a product of human reasoning, but in following the way of Jesus, which is both ancient and modern, and in which there is both absolute truth and room for individual talents to be expressed. I will discuss Christianity and post-modernism more in part three.

Part Three: Post Modernism and Christianity

"That which has been is what will be
That which is done is what will be done
And there is nothing new under the sun"

- King Solomon, *Book of Ecclesiastes*

In [The Post-Modern Explained](#) I made the statement that Christianity outdoes post-modernism by providing both a new approach to life and the absolute by which to measure it. I am going to elaborate more on that here, and hope to outline how Christianity completes the picture post-modernism is still trying to guess at.

The different schools of thought that represent post-modernism have in common a dislike of metanarratives (the story behind the story), and see these as being the modern product of rationalism. Yet it is erroneous to dismiss Christianity as being only a rationalist system. The Bible, which we can call the metanarrative of Christianity, provides us with absolutes which remain constant throughout time. It is a metanarrative containing both reason and mystery. God is referred to as the *Logos*, meaning Reason, and also conveying the conceptual sense of a system of thought within the Reason. However the Bible also refers to God as a Spirit whose ways are above our understanding. Thus God, the author of the metanarrative, is infinite and absolute reason and truth, and yet is concurrently infinite and absolute spirit. These are not two separate aspects of God, but are both God together, combined in a way that I think is beyond adequate description in human terms.

When God is only viewed as Reason, the result is a purely logical system which does not allow for spirituality or the limits of human rationalism. If God is only a system of reason and logic, as Einstein believed (he referred to God as the logic behind the universe), then humans will eventually figure out the system, and so the logic called "God" will be explained. This one-sided view of God leads to human rationalism replacing faith. When God is viewed only as mystery the result is the false relativism of post-modernism. Without the reason of absolute truth there is just mystery - and so no yardstick by which to measure our

motives and behaviour. My perspective of the mystery will differ from yours - and there will be no absolute reason against which to measure our interpretations.

Trying to divorce reason and spirit is a schismatic and incomplete approach which denies not only both these aspects of God, but that both of these aspects are also part of mankind created in God's image. The post-modernist views of Lyotard and Jencks both attempt to divorce reason and mystery and fail. Lyotard still relies on reason to create propositions for a deconstructionist metanarrative. Jencks relies on reason but tries to chop it into a new pick'n'choose metanarrative. In each case the completeness of God is misrepresented. Christianity provides the way to completeness, as it is through Christ that one's spirit is renewed and one's mind is transformed. In this way Christianity outdoes post-modernism's one-sided emphasis against the reason it is ironically based upon.

While it seems to be universally acknowledged that post-modernism is not easily definable, if definable at all, certain practical components have been identified. One of these is cultural pluralism. Perhaps the most evident aspect of post-modernism when some attempt to apply it to Christianity is the emphasis on this cultural pluralism as the defining principle of faith in practice. Although post-modernists deny holding a metanarrative, claiming instead to incorporate several mini-narratives, they do in fact construct cultural pluralism as the story behind their story. In conjunction with an emphasis on mystery, the result is an eclectic diversity of Christian expression in which many aspects of Christian profession are made subservient to relative beliefs and interpretations through different cultural lenses. In some cases the bible itself is held in doubt as the emphasis on rediscovering mystery through one's own particular cultural context becomes the goal.

Christianity has from the time of the early church been a way of life which represents culturally diverse followers. Yet the absolute truths of the bible remain the same even when addressed to people of different beliefs and backgrounds. The apostle Paul, whose letters to the first churches make up the bulk of the New Testament, was acutely aware of the different cultures of his time. In his letter to the Romans we find that he addressed Roman concepts of justice and sanctity, giving them a completely new definition and meaning in a Christian light. In his letter to the church at Ephesus he understands their cultural emphasis on mystery, and reveals the truth of the greatest mystery of all. Yet while the concepts employed in his letters differ, the truths do not - both are centred on the death and resurrection of Jesus, and both set forth Jesus' forgiveness of sins, a believer's new life, and the pre-eminence of God in the Christian life and in the universe. The mystery is revealed in a logical way, so that the issue is not one of culturally acceptable subjective interpretation, but of faith in Jesus Christ himself. As Paul says, the message of the cross is foolish to some and to others something they stumble over - although conveyed in culturally understandable terms, the message is not subservient to the culture.

One of Paul's well known statements is, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some". Those who seek to introduce post-modernism into Christianity take this as a licence to make culture predominant even at the expense of biblical truths. Post-modernism makes absolute truth subservient to cultural norms. Paul made cultural norms subservient to the absolute truth which is centred on the gospel of Jesus Christ. The attempts to introduce cultural eclecticism at the expense of absolute truth are not new to our times. The post-modernist attempts of the 21st century parallel those of the 1st century, in which the early churches had to build on a blueprint which ran counter to the cultural diversity which surrounded them.

In *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michael Green writes of the Christian evangelists of the 1st century:

The charge of obscurantism which has sometimes been levelled at evangelists of a subsequent age could never have been sustained against them. Truth was a unity, and it derived from the ultimate reality made personal in him who was Way, Truth, and Life. It was this conviction which nerved them to proclaim the Absolute in a world which was dominated by the Relative in its morals, religions and concept of history; and for the most part they did it without fear and without censoriousness. Their gospel was big enough to embrace earth and heaven, this life and the next.

...There was no dichotomy between a social and a spiritual gospel to these men who held a unitive concept of truth."

Christianity outdoes post-modernism because it is centred in absolute reason and absolute mystery together. The message of Christianity is one of subservience to Christ, and all things, including cultural norms, novel expressions, and spiritual beliefs, must conform to his blueprint. We do not need to deconstruct Christianity, nor do we need to re-invent it in piecemeal fashion. As Paul aptly said, when commenting on the cultural diversity and divisions of his time:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Post-modernism would have us all in our separate relative ghettos thinking we are novel. Jesus Christ unites us in a new citizenship not of this world. He is the Spirit and Truth for every culture in every age, and his blueprint for the Christian church remains the same.