



# Whitefield BRIEFING

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## *Post Modernism: Friend or Foe*

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Attempting to define "postmodernism" is, in the eyes of many who are in favour of it, the occasion of a wry smile; for them, such an attempt is the silliness of trying to give wisdom a name. The very word, "postmodernism", unlike so many "isms" defines itself by what it is not; one might venture to say that postmodernism is beyond "-ism". It is also beyond 'the modern', that is the accelerating world of progress and technique, described in *Future Shock* as a wave to be surfed or sub-merged in.<sup>1</sup> So postmodernism equals opting out of that world, to observe from a perspective of this moment which, not being part of time's ever-rolling stream, is 'timeless' and has little wish to plunge back in. It is gallows humour, affected yet aloof from the hastening breakdown of society and the end of the world or at least of some of the little worlds (the family, the community, the nation, the belief system, the macro economy) which make up our own 'cosmos'. Postmodernism is such a slippery term that it often gets defined in terms more appropriate to some-thing else. For example, pluralism and postmodernism are used almost inter-changeably since they share certain features. Why use one word when two will do?<sup>2</sup>

By word associations, lateral thinking and solecism, one may mock the linear and therefore driven life of a thin, modern identity. We might hear, with distaste for his tone, *Trainspotting's* antihero, Renton mimicking society: "Choose us. Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting on a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows ... Choose rotting away ... in a home ... Choose life."<sup>3</sup> At the point in the book when the addict admits to unbelief in society, there is a chilling echo of Thatcher's axiom: no society, only individuals. More urbanely, Frederic Jameson maintains that postmodernism is self-deceived, since like some duped double agent it plays into the hands of capitalism and all it really wants to oppose.

In Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*<sup>4</sup>, for example, the three main characters seem to have lost interest in sex (no longer taboo nor the preserve of a former generation vainly thinking that relationships are about two people meeting each other's needs). They have no interest in material things - an asceticism born from a world-weariness. Coupland's follow-up is appropriately entitled *Life After God*. Within this later book there is a self-pitying road journey: the driver linked by invisible bonds (the virtual reality of radio) to relationships, not people; the nostalgic re-counting of the failed one true love; not so much the suspicion of intimacy but doubt as to whether it actually exists; the looking towards animals and children for wisdom. "I have never lost the sensation of always being on the brink of some magic revelation - that *if only I* would look closely enough at the world, then that magic revelation would be mine - *if only I* could wake up just that little bit more." (p73f). Throughout the book, there is a horribly grating confusion between human nature and personality. That which is intense and disappointing in human experience may be overemphasized, but it does tug at what most of us can recognise as beautiful and valuable, a welcome "Romantic" riposte to the "Classical" pragmatism of today. Of course we would not want to stay in this mood.

One could run a long way with casual refer-ences to the soup of modern culture in which low brow and high brow are not really distin-guished, but are mixed in. Tony Parsons noses his way from trash, which some people take seriously, to high art, of which other people are patrons. He draws

comparisons between them, reappropriating the mysterious by the familiar (Euripides' character Medea is thus "like Ma-donna on a bad-hair day").<sup>5</sup> Culture is increasingly less 'out there' and more accessible through the media. In the description of any modern problem, the 'value-free' approach does not help solve it. Bono of U2 duets<sup>6</sup> with Pavarotti in a song ("Miss Sarajevo") which is strikingly neutral about the Balkan situation (for want of information or because all information is someone's propaganda?). Money goes to charities which increasingly have become either a first world service or a tertiary industry in the third world. Yet to list such epiphenomena of postmodernism is a bit like a documentary on a gangland leader which is won over by his charm as it tries to record a 'day in the life'. It plays to the phenomenological theory of understanding ("all you see is all you [ought to] get"). Something more probingly analytical is called for. The current suspicion of analysis should not stop us from trying to find a system of inter-relations and parts of wholes in postmodernism.

Yet why analyse a word or concept that is clichéd? - simply because it is postmodern to think that one should always be seeking the latest synthesis. Postmodernism is more than mere eclecticism; despite its avowed eschewing of systems, its collage of ideas and expressions eventually builds into some discernible pattern of relationships. By rendering itself passé, it celebrates its entry into institutional thinking as silently subversive of structures. Of course much in these structures needs to be deconstructed - and that means being analysed in their component parts. As Derrida himself insisted, deconstruction is not destruction (even if it sounds related).

So, as already mentioned, the act of description may be part of the problem, in the way that crime reconstructions on TV may give people ideas of how to be a criminal. If postmodern criticism feeds off that which infects it and is simply negative as well as parasitic then should it not be vehemently opposed, even if it does sometimes reflect to us how society is? The virtue of honesty may be an overrated one; perhaps people would be happier, as in a war, with information rationed and the enemy accused.

## POST-EVANGELICALISM

Some UK evangelicals have spotted a postmodernism-related problem in the pages of Dave Tomlinson's book *The Post-Evangelical*. On the one hand, evangelicalism has often tended to be negative and corrective, particularly of attitudes in the wider Church, but on the other hand, its action has been affirmative and active towards those outside. One might view this as tough love for the family and indulgence towards outsiders. Thus 'isms' are not perceived as a threat until they are within the camp in the form of syncretism or accommodation. In this case, post-evangelicals are accused of carrying the virus into the camp. I do not intend to review Tomlinson's book (a defence of the post-evangelical), but merely to make a few points.

How do these 'post-evangelicals' differ from 'liberals'? Tomlinson points to post-evangelicals allowing the 'irrational' a place in our account of the world and of faith. He contrasts the postmodern recovery of the imagination and the overcoming of the subject-object distinction with modernism and liberalism's obsession with making science and faith agree 'reasonably'. However, Tomlinson seems to rejoice in a crass "two cultures" mentality (arts/ humanities - good; science - bad) transported into the field of faith. Naively and optimistically, he asserts that the new arty breed have "no real difficulty with the supernatural nature of the gospel and the possibility of miracles."

However he shows a more sceptical hue when he claims that "the idea of objectivism - the belief that there is such a thing as entirely objective knowledge which is accessible to us - seems to be disappearing." Such epistemology is indeed popular in certain circles, but can we not, as Christians, believe that there is an objective knowledge which is not entirely accessible to us? This mistake is at least as old as Eunomius, that old enemy of the Trinitarian doctrine, if not Aristotle.

Postmodernism is not so far from modernism: in fact Lyotard has famously described it as modernism still at the (self-)questioning stage, before it turns assertive and fascist. It proceeds by rationality of argument and yet Tomlinson wants to say that while modernism is crumbling, postmodernism builds on top of it (surely an un-

happy choice of meta-phor). However, for many specialists, whether in particle physics or literary criticism, metanarratives and modernism still matter. In particle physics, the questions are "what does it mean?" or "how to describe 'randomness' in subatomic terms?" Literary criticism asks "what is the canon of literature?" or rather "what are the canons (criteria) by which a work is judged?" The fact that there are not always easy answers does not mean the question is illegitimate, especially if the alternative is to refuse to share our insights. One of the worst things about the culture of evangelicalism is that it is a tiny subculture apeing its larger macrocosms in the secular world. Like Scottish football, it lurches from inferiority to hyper-confidence - but post-evangelicals rejoicing in the non communicability of their spiritual discoveries is hardly going to help that insecurity.

The post-evangelical's Bible, which offers models for interpreting reality, is less 'Barthian' and more the product of biblical scholarship and linguistic approaches to the Bible - and is sound (in theory). Yet Tomlinson fails to provide even one example of how this might work. He triumphantly reports that Derrida charitably allows for the possibility of the existence of God. The evidence rather is that Derrida sees the possibility of God as part of the "excess of the world's meaning", but he is not (yet) arguing for the actuality of a Judeo-Christian Creator, much less the mysterious but positive theology of the Trinitarian Faith. Tomlinson makes the dubious assertion that theology starts with stating what God is not ("negative theology"), which evangelicals have forgotten. This may be true, but why should we and, indeed, how can we start with what God is not if we have not yet some inkling of what he is? And if our positive statements about God are to be regarded as metaphor (since the Bible speaks in poetic language) then does this apply even to Jn 1:14 or Jn 3:16? Surely this can not be done without a significant loss of meaning. For the Son of God to come into the world might not mean that he came down from the sky as such - John the Evangelist likely thought this no more than Don Cupitt does - but he has to have made his entry somehow from a realm not accessible to humans.

## COUNTER-CULTURE

My second window on postmodernism comes from outside the Church in the form of Richard Linklater's films. In some ways European cinema

sees itself too much as art while the US cinema has always been about application of views to real-life situations. *Dazed and Confused* (1993) portrays the last day of school for the class of 1976 (the American bicentennial year). It is all about the preparation for an adult world of loyalty and conformity, the humiliation of initiation ceremonies and life as a preparation for death. "You don't want to go to law school, what do you want to do?" "I want to dance." While at school, American football or druggy counter-culture is all the choice offered. Yet the 1994 version of American youth found in the film *Before Sunrise* holds his own with a better read, better-looking, linguistically competent and politically informed Parisienne. Unlike the earlier film the dialogue sparkles and is far from small-talk; romantic love is not foolishly redemptive but 'this-life-affirming' as a couple talk their way through a one-night walk around Prague. The young American takes Euro-culture and her beating heart and charms it into respect, even adoration for the Judeo-Christian, non-Hollywood ethos portrayed. Between these two films, we can see a shift from postmodernism at its most resigned to postmodernism at its most positive.

## BACKFIRING CANONS

The third observation relates to the connection between the arts/culture and colonialism as observed by Edward Said. He writes that we should understand Jane Austen in the context of this imperialism. The old *Mansfield Park* was bought with slave-cotton money, which is a bitter twist too easily missed when sweetened with the likes of "Kate 'n' Em" or Colin Firth. In Conrad's exotically located *Nostromo* all the significant action still takes place in the West. Western literature reflects an 'us and them' attitude which goes back to Greeks and barbarians. Exported into politics, this attitude is used to justify even aggression on other nations; whether in the work of John Updike or T.S. Eliot<sup>8</sup>, this is seen as owing to the need to unify the diverse immigrant culture that is the USA. The last decade has seen, by way of reaction, a celebration of the fringes: there has been a cultural tourism ready to lap up Rushdie, Ben Okri, Kelman, Welsh, Ishiguro, Ondaatje...and this is English literature. Analogously amongst women writers, the dark side of the psyche as new territory is celebrated in Winterson, Gallop and Carter. The canon of English literature is no longer a Leavis minimalist one (Austen, Eliot,

Conrad, James) or even H. Bloom's regurgitating of the definition of 'the classic'. Instead the canon is up for grabs, and it is even questioned whether its existence is useful.

To the objection "so what? - these are not ultimate issues", I can only demur. Exactly - Christianity concerns itself with the private gospel or the socio-political gospel and the large space in between is left, full of rubble and uncared for, a place for children to play at their peril.

Lastly, postmodernism is opposed to pluralism in as much as the latter stands for the 'modern-ist' dream of, for example, world religions co-existing together and affirming this like a rainbow (with or without synthesis and syncretism). "Leave us alone to be private!" postmodernism cries, "We can share common humanity together. That is enough, even if it gets easily reduced to TV programmes we commonly watch [no problem if we all get 500 channels!] and 'my career'." For we are forced to invent things of value and package them as attractive, even though the postmodern tendency is to deny that our lives have any milestones on the way to anything.

Postmodernism then is the articulation of inner confusion, in that it describes growth towards a maturity which is the lowering of expectations. This articulation of confusion is made from past-induced reactions, which bubble up like geysers into the frozen consciousness. Like pain, it is a friend - to those who listen.

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## REFERENCES

1. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam, 1971).
2. A feature of D.A. Carson's remarkable study of pluralism, *The Gagging of God* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996).
3. I. Welsh, *Trains potting*. (London: Minerva, 1993) p187. 'London: Abacus, 1992
4. Tony Parsons on BBC2's *The Late Review*. Compare D. Coupland, *Life After God* (London, 1994) p167: "...counting the Rothkos of skid marks of long-dead car collisions on Interstate 15's white cement lanes."
5. A listening experience akin to drinking Bordeaux after Vimto. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, 1993).
6. A much more *American* poet/writer than is usually recognised; whence his "anti-Semitism" (See A. Julius' recent book and Tom Paulin's review in *The London Review of Books*, May 8th, 1996.)

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