

‘The response of a Christian witness to a person enmeshed in post-modern categories must be that of a fellow-traveller’ (Gibbs and Coffe, 2001). Is this the best way for Christians to live their theology today?

1500 word assignment

Introduction

Gibbs and Coffe in proposing this methodology are addressing the decline in church attendance within the mainline denominations of the West and within the wider population as a whole in contrast to ‘new [paradigm] churches’¹ that have increased dramatic growth:

‘...These denominations have become increasingly sidelined...within culture...within the Church population as a whole...others have experienced phenomenal growth.’²

This new ‘postmodern’ paradigm reflects not just the lack of participation within the Church population but a response to the lack of relevance of the Churches in a wider cultural context where ‘spirituality’ is once more on the agenda:

‘...increasing numbers of Westerners [are] attracted to Islam and New Age adaptations of Hinduism, Buddhism, pre-Christian...paganism, so decline in Church attendance can not be attributed entirely to the influence of secularisation...the transition from modernity to post-modernity represents a seismic shift..’³

¹ Gibbs, E., Coffey, I., *Church Next – Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry*, p81, Leicester:2001.

²Ibid, p22.

³ Ibid, pp23-4.

The main body of this essay will be concerned with examining this “postmodernism” and the Christian response to it. Finally, it will offer a critique of this relationship.

Postmodernism and Christianity

Modernity has been defined as an ‘understanding of the world through autonomous human rationality’⁴ and its consequent ‘...self-assertive secular presuppositions that allow no place for the transcendent ...a separation of the secular and the spiritual’⁵. Post-modernism, on the other hand, ‘...has subtly and unobtrusively dissolved the clear cut distinction between secular and religious thinking’⁶ allowing a gradual rehabilitation of the ‘Other’ (implying God and spirituality) into theology, philosophy and subsequently the rest of human life.

At this level of understanding, such a concept is not entirely absent from the history of the Church. Renewal and revival movements frequently adopted musical styles and media from the non-Christian arena and the Early Church clearly operated within a Hebrew and then Hellenistic context.

However, the term ‘fellow-traveller’ suggests one that is not just alongside the one enmeshed in post-modernism but has given intellectual assent to a

⁴ Ibid, p27.

⁵ Ibid, p25.

⁶ Berry, P., ‘Introduction’, *Shadow of Spirit – Postmodernism and Religion*, p4, London:1992.

greater or less degree the philosophical assumptions, ideas and methods of post-modernism:

“...the emphasis shifts from a concern with the proclamation of an objective and universal truth to a concern with the subjective applicability of truth...”⁷

This is a necessary corollary as ‘...neo-orthodoxy has no helpful response to those who are attracted to other religions, which it is obliged to dismiss as distortions and perversions...’⁸. McGrath summarises the conceptual features of post-modernism in the following terms:

“...Post modernism is generally taken to be something of a cultural sensibility without absolutes, fixed certainties or foundations, which takes delight in pluralism and divergence, and which aims to think through the radical ‘situatedness’ of all human thought.”⁹

The notion of “situatedness” has been particularly incorporated by some practitioners of Practical/Pastoral theology using the phrase ‘context’¹⁰. It has gained a widespread acceptance within both Catholic and Protestant thinking.

However, philosophical postmodernism takes us far beyond this point.

Ferdinand de Saussure, the pioneer of postmodernism and practitioner in the field of linguistics, asserted ‘the end of the possibility of fixed, absolute meanings’. His primary method is known as ‘deconstruction’:

⁷ Gibbs and Coffey, p28.

⁸ McGrath, A., *Christian Theology – An Introduction*, p108, Oxford:2004.

⁹ Ibid., p112.

¹⁰ West, M., Noble, G., Todd, A., *Living Theology*, pp21-31, London:1999.

“...the critical method which virtually declares that the identity and intentions of the author of a text are an irrelevance to the interpretation of it...no fixed meaning can be found in it...”¹¹

The use of ‘centralising narratives’ or ‘metanarratives’ that claim to have a universal application outside context are thus emphatically rejected. Thus, the notion that the biblical text can have a “meaning” is ‘regarded with intense suspicion by post-modernism’. There is ‘...an elimination of the concepts of self, truth and meaning’, instead there are ‘polyvalent approaches [to scriptural interpretation]’¹². In other words, its ‘meaning’ is private to the individual.

The consequence of this for doctrine and systematic theology is of course catastrophic. Indeed, post-modernists prefer to think in terms of ‘a/theology’ or ‘anti-systematic’ theology. All religions and all experiences are as equally valid. Any attempt to assert the primacy of one narrative over the other is considered authoritarian and fascist or, in the language of Western Europe, ‘politically incorrect’. This is the philosophical basis to the echo in contemporary culture:

‘...[they have] abandoned the illusive search for truth...they have redefined truth in terms of consensus and ‘whatever works for you’...each individual has to create his or her own meaning and associate with others to increase his or her power base in a fragmented society...no meaning or purpose to life awaiting discernment at either the cosmic or the personal level...’¹³

¹¹ McGrath, op. cit., p113.

¹² McGrath, op.cit, pp112-115.

¹³ Gibbs and Coffey, p29.

However, all this is not necessarily a problem to the Christian witness. Gibbs and Coffey, in many ways representative of a post-modernist movement within Christianity, are enthusiastic at the opportunities this new 'openness to explore alternative explanations of the world of experience' presents for Christians. Even 'deconstruction' is seen as a potential ally:

"Deconstruction...questions the claims to truth made by unaided reason...in common with Christian convictions about...sin...it echoes the voice of prophetic judgement...breaking with rigid forms of scientific discourse...a potent ally for the Christian who wishes to reintroduce mystery into the human experience."¹⁴

The mode of postmodern evangelism then becomes one of 'infiltration' and 'sympathetic'¹⁵ engagement:

"The witness walks with his or her companion to the rim of the abyss..with vulnerability and humility from the margins of society...post-modernists and Christians..side by side in recognising that neither has the power to determine the future, nor to see it with complete clarity or unrestricted vision...post-modernists look for honesty and authenticity...Post modern people will not tolerate any separation of the body, mind and will...a healthy corrective to the evangelical world view."¹⁶

People are then edged gently towards a conversion, '[God], who is nudging them and beckoning them to kneel before the Cross of Christ as their means of access to the throne of God'¹⁷. The phrase 'corrective to the evangelical world view' is a crucial one. Evangelicalism is seen as a rational response to a rational critique:

¹⁴ Lundin, R., *The Culture of Interpretation*, p.15., Grand Rapids:1993.

¹⁵ Gibbs and Coffey, pp32.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp35-36, 165.

¹⁷ Ibid., p165.

“Post modern people are more likely to come to faith through experience...than through intellectual assent...But... the Church is now so secularised in their disbelief in the supernatural that they have nothing to say to a culture which...[is] spiritual.”¹⁸

It is thus desperately in need of an overhaul for the new post-modern era. A new apologetics is required. The latter is the driver amongst the movement that may be called “post-evangelical” and is popularly associated as beginning with the publication of Tomlinson’s, ‘The Post-Evangelical’.

In some respects, as Tomlinson himself saw, this may be seen as a corrective to ‘classical’ evangelicalism in response to cultural post-modernism. There is a new readiness to engage in bars, clubs, nightclubs and poetry-reading groups presenting Jesus to the spiritual ‘mix and match’¹⁹ generation. There has been a reassessment of what constitutes the ‘Word of God’ with a Barthian “threefold” model used by Tomlinson²⁰ to reposition the importance of scripture. Consequently, post-evangelicals are much more willing to engage in sharing the experience rather than reasoned arguments from the scriptures:

“...[post modernists] are searching for a spirituality that works. These trends give us wonderful new opportunities for presenting the Christian message.”²¹

¹⁸ Richards, Y., ‘A Spiritual Snapshot’, *Evangelism in a spiritual age*, p14, London:2005.

¹⁹ Gibbs and Coffey, p157.

²⁰ Tomlinson, D., *The Post Evangelical*, pp104-122, London:2002.

²¹ Frost, R., ‘Evangelism beyond the fringes’, *Evangelism in a spiritual age*, p14, London:2005.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt following the arguments presented in the essay that post-modernism is seen as an opportunity for the Church to once again re-engage on a more equal footing in the public realm. The obvious opportunities and the excellent dynamic and freedom provoked by the willingness of Christians to break out of the evangelical straight-jacket and to engage on a “spiritual and experiential” level are certainly welcome and positive ways of “living theology”. Post-modernism has made Christians aware of their intellectual prejudices and highlighted the importance of “context” for witness.

However, the author would strongly disagree with the “fellow traveller” part of the proposition. Sampson rightly describes postmodernism as ‘nihilism with a smile’²². Nihilism on the level of theology and the rationality of Man is most dangerous. Postmodernism rejoices in that it has broken free of the restraints of rational, reasoned debate. Indeed, there is a denial that such a debate can take place, there can be no claim to have arrived at ‘truth’²³. In contrast, Christianity has a Jesus asserting He was ‘the Truth’ and to ensure no one could possibly misinterpret what He meant, qualified it with the statement, ‘no one comes to the Father except by me.’ To deny, truth, is, the author would propose, an anti-Christ a/theology.

²² Sampson, P., ‘The Rise of Post-Modernity’, *Faith and Modernity*, p30, Oxford:1994.

²³ Woods, T, *Beginning Postmodernism*, p29, Manchester:1999.

Critically, 'Modernity' as described by so many Christian commentators is a misinterpretation²⁴. 'Modernity' was not about secular humanism but the belief that the intellect of Man, as a gift of God, was able to bring order as an expression of the *imago Dei*. Modernity in the shape of Erasmus' Greek text unveiled God's Word and changed the world. To abandon Man's reason does not produce 'pluralism and divergence...[a] glorious and playful diversity'²⁵ but a harsh and cruel chaos.

A striking feature of our post-modern age is the inability of people, in particular Christians, to think deeply and rigorously. The Christians need to witness as those whom have thought and understand the nature of the supernatural power they experience rather than just "live in the moment". They are the ones where truly there is no discontinuity between body, mind (soul) and spirit.

1505 words.

²⁴ McGrath, p105.

²⁵ Ibid, pp112-113.

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