

# POSTMODERN LIVING

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**"FALLEN! FALLEN IS BABYLON THE GREAT! SHE HAS BECOME THE HAUNT OF DEMONS!"** Or, to put it more prosaically, we live in a time of significant cultural change. The old city we used to live in, the city we – or at least our parents – assumed was eternal, has indeed fallen. Modernity is no more. And, in the ruins of that “eternal” city, gone the way of every previous eternal city, a new thing has come to pass. We have learnt to speak the name, but not perhaps know the nature, of this new thing. We are all used by now to the fact that we have become “postmodern”. We have heard it announced often enough, often in celebratory tones and sometimes as a dire warning of coming doom. Perhaps this is a work of God’s Christ, the one who says “See, I make all things new!”; perhaps it is a beast risen from the sea, multiply horned and headed, and worse than anything that has gone before. However, just like those images from St John’s great vision, it is not clear what “postmodernity” represents. I want here to indicate two distinct current ways in which the word is used, to offer as St Augustine once did, a “Tale of Two Cities”, and to draw out some implications of the one that I favour.

What is postmodernity? A few academic writers appear to believe that it is something concrete, a new cultural situation that is possibly as robust and lasting, as the renaissance, romanticism, or even the modernity it has supposedly replaced. It is a “worldview”, a way of understanding “life, the universe and everything” that makes positive proposals about what the world is (or, more pertinently here, is not) at the most fundamental level. So, Jacques Derrida seems to regard the endless play of *différance* and the concomitant endless deferral of meaning as statements about the world as it is, insofar as any such statement can be made. Again, although with much less philosophical sophistication, American anti-realist philosophers, such as Richard Rorty or Stanley Fish, appear to be quite serious in their denial that there is any underlying reality to the world, any metaphysical absolute against which we can judge concepts like “truth” or “fact”.

This view of postmodernism is without doubt a minority position, explored within certain universities, but not really lived out by any significant group of people. Clearly, it is incompatible with any form of orthodox Christianity, which necessarily makes claims about ultimate reality (God, who “created all things, visible and invisible”), truth and meaning (Christ, who said “I am the truth”), and the accessibility of these things to human beings (through the work of the Spirit who is promised to “lead us into all truth”). Putting it

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bluntly, this form of postmodernism seems rather silly to me. It is an ideology that churches can largely ignore, or occasionally rebut, out of politeness more than anything else.

However, we clearly cannot ignore postmodernity. It is endemic in the artistic life and media of our nation, and all other “Western” nations. Serious journals or artists do not ignore it, but (respectively) endlessly discuss it; popular media (all the national newspapers) and art (almost all television and cinema) simply assume and repeat the positions without apparent awareness that they are (relatively) new and controversial.

How can we make sense of this mass-market postmodernity? Might I suggest, by the rather unfashionable method of etymological analysis? “Postmodernity” is a space that exists after modernity, but it has no positive identity of its own. This is why postmodernism that has so infected our society. It is a lacuna, a moment when one thing has come to an end and its replacement is not yet in sight. The attitudes, practices and assumptions that characterised modernity are no longer credible, so we are necessarily and literally “post-modern”, but there is as yet no new common culture that we have moved into.

Such a lacuna may prove to be lasting, perhaps more so than the modernity that came before.<sup>1</sup> A lasting absence is still, however, an absence; it must not be mistaken for a presence, even an endlessly deferred one. On the first description, postmodernism is represented as a dominant ideology that demands to be believed and lived. On the second, the essence of postmodernism is the lack of a dominant ideology, consequently there is an endless plurality of ways to believe and live. The famous definition of postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” is open to either interpretation: on the one hand, this is a prescriptive incredulity, a belief system which insists in advance that no metanarrative is worthy of belief; on the other, it is merely descriptive, the acknowledgement that we live in a culture where no one way of narrating the world commands universal assent. All of this is obvious enough; more interesting are the forms of cultural change we should expect to see under these two accounts of the postmodern condition.

If Derrida, Rorty and Fish are right and postmodernity is a positive cultural phenomenon, a substantial presence, then we should look for the postmodern Church, postmodern politics, and so on. Just as the culture of modernity, or indeed that of the medieval

period, gave rise to certain social shapes, so too will postmodernity. A new city is being built. Over time, such barbarisms as “early postmodernity” and “late postmodernity” will no doubt become necessary to differentiate the development of forms. Some of these might prove to be hospitable to certain aspects of Christianity (or, for that matter, any other pre-existing worldview); to others they will be hostile or uncomprehending. The Church will, by the grace of God, give birth to great theologians who will re-narrate the gospel story in postmodern terms, no doubt both obscuring some facets and rediscovering others. And so the story will go on. As I have already indicated, this account of what postmodernity is seems implausible to me – and so, necessarily, does the ensuing account of what postmodernity will look like. What of the alternative?

If postmodernity is no more than the presence of an absence, an endlessly deferred trace that points only to the emptiness at the heart of a deconstructed worldview, then there will be no distinctively postmodern culture. Instead, there will be a rich and/or bewildering variety of emerging social constructions, each an attempt to construct a new world, growing out of the ruins of the eternal city of modernity, which has gone the way of every eternal city since Babel. Fragments of old stories will be weaved together with wholly new stories; stories which were forgotten because they seemed incredible will be retold and found to be believable once more; new tales will be invented and told, and will grow in the telling through of all this, numerous competing ways of understanding and describing the world will jostle and compete in the marketplace of ideas. Just like that of Athens of old, which was full of people who “do nothing with their time but talk about, or listen to, something new” (Acts 17.21), the forum of the old city will find a new vitality, even when all around tends to ruin.

One alone can open the scroll that declares God’s purposes: the Lamb, fresh from the slaughter, seated on the throne of heaven. Just so, futurology is an idle pursuit: if God is pleased to give us prophets we will know what needs to be known about the future; if he is not, we will never guess it. Only one question is worth asking: how, in all of this, do we live faithfully before God, as the Church of Christ, in the power of the Spirit?

Two options suggest themselves. In a world of many tribes, the people of God might form a distinct tribe of their own and become one more voice clamouring to be

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> What truth there is in the description of the early medieval period as the “Dark Ages” reflects the existence of just such a period of conflict and uncertainty, which lasted for some centuries (brought about, incidentally, by the fall of the original Eternal City – and foreseen and interpreted by Augustine’s account of the City of God and the City of Man).

► heard amongst the others. Dressed in white robes, numbered (“144,000 from all the tribes of Israel”) and separate, and sealed with the baptism of God, the Church might become a subculture in a world of subcultures, calling people out of every other tribe and into its own. This is one possibility.

There is another: more adventurous, perhaps, more creative, certainly. When we look at the Church we might see, not the ordered ranks of the tribes of Israel, but a “huge, innumerable crowd, from every nation, and tribe, people and language, gathered before the throne, in front of the Lamb.” The Church might be found not as a tribe amongst other tribes, but within every tribe; not one voice in a plurality of conversations, but a distinctive accent in which every other voice can be spoken, through which every conversation will sound different. Thus understood, the cultural markers which divide the tribes – fashion to economics; eating to ethics – will not be issues on which there is any distinctive Christian position; rather, there will be ways of thinking about such issues that are distinctively Christian, but which permit modified versions of most, if not all, of the common answers to be adhered to. Of course, there will be boundaries – forms of belief and behaviour that are unacceptable within the Church. Most lifestyle choices, however, will not transgress those limits; faithful Christian living will be possible in every tribe.

The City of God will not arrive on earth until, at the last, it comes down from heaven. Just so, for the Church to attempt to “come out and be separate”, to create a distinctive Christian community, delineated by modes of dress, musical preference, or other cultural markers, is to attempt something improper – the bringing of the Kingdom by our own means. Instead, waiting patiently, hopefully and cheerfully for the coming of Christ, we will be aliens on the earth, equally at home in any and every city, and praying always for the prosperity of each place of exile we find ourselves in whilst we live there (Jer. 29.7). If there are many cities, then why should we not serve the Lord in the one in which he has been pleased to place us? Only, we must still serve the Lord, not the city of exile. Increasingly, conflict between the different tribes, growing from hostility sometimes; from simple incomprehension more often, will be the norm. The myriad tribes who are searching for something lasting after the fall of Babylon may argue about much. On (almost) every side of (almost) every argument there will, or should, be those who argue differently, and who, after the

argument, confess their deeper unity by sharing bread and wine.

This is a more challenging way of picturing Christian living within the present moment than the vision of a single Christian tribe amongst the other tribes. I suggest, however, that it is also a more faithful one. It will not be easy; but as those who know the limitless nature of God’s love and forgiveness, the fear of failure will not debilitate us. It may not be “successful”, whatever we take that dangerous word to mean; but as those who confess that God achieved his greatest purpose in weakness, pain, loneliness and death, worldly notions of “success” will not attract us.

In an age of increasing tribalism, nothing will kill churches faster than the old “homogeneous unit principle” of church growth theory. We hear of Kosovan churches struggling to bring together ethnic Albanians and ethnic Serbs in the body of Christ. If you want a prophecy for the future of all of our church life in the West, at least, it is there, acted out in the best Old Testament tradition. The struggle is, and will be for some while yet, to overcome hatred or incomprehension; to make real the peace by which Christ has destroyed every barrier and put to death all hostilities by dying on the cross. Let the tribes and their languages multiply; let Babylon fall only to give rise to Babel, if they will: human history is in God’s hands, not ours. But let the gospel be heard by every tribe, in every language. This is a call to the churches, for the gospel, this ministry of reconciliation, is the only thing that God has put in our hands.