

**G**od is dead! Behold I show you the superman. Thus said Nietzsche, the 19th century German philosopher, as he set out his charter to postmodernism.

What is postmodernism? Even before we can define the term, we need to understand modernism. Briefly, modernism is that movement that emphasized reason and expressed itself most fully through science. Beginning with philosophers like Locke, Kant, and Hegel, modernism sought to understand the world through reason. Scientists like Bacon and Newton regarded physical reality as operating on the basis of natural laws. They shaped a modern science that is empirical in methodology and rational in interpretation. The 18th-century Enlightenment sought to apply reason and science to all of reality, an attempt postmodernists pejoratively refer to as the "Enlightenment Project." The 19th century witnessed the efforts of Henry Buckle, August Comte, and Karl Marx to turn the study of human society, both past and present, into disciplines that would discover laws similar to those found in the natural world. The 20th century emphasized the application of scientific methodology to academic disciplines. In the process, modernism has brought environmental degradation, totalitarianism in the name of science, global wars using the most advanced technology, and atomic destruction.

Thus, reason and science did not lead to an utopia. No wonder reactions arose against modernism. One of these reactions is postmodernism.

#### **Postmodernism: the background<sup>1</sup>**

**Nietzsche: reality is what you create.** Nietzsche is often regarded as the father or forerunner of postmodernism. Announcing that God is dead, Nietzsche stressed that there was no longer any fundamental basis to things, no foundation on which to rest one's beliefs. Therefore, human beings have both the opportunity and responsibility to create their own world.

But there's a problem. Nietzsche said that knowledge of things as they actually exist is impossible. What we think of as knowledge is a human creation, an illusion, or artistic construct. The language through which we express our knowledge is a self-contained world,

entirely separate from external reality and purely arbitrary in its formation. What we call truth, therefore, is a human invention.

**Heidegger: reality is being.** A second major figure influencing postmodernism was Martin Heidegger, the 20th-century German philosopher. Agreeing essentially with Nietzsche's view that language creates reality, Heidegger built much of his understanding of language from artistic examples

# The challenge of post-modernism

*Postmodernism has its pitfalls and its challenges. How should a Christian respond?*

and held a mystical, perhaps even religious, stance toward language. Rather than analyzing language, he ultimately wanted to experience it and through that experience come into contact with "being."

**Foucault: reality is a continual liberation.** In the post-World War II period, a number of French thinkers were attracted to the ideas of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Of these, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida are the most significant for the development of postmodernism. Because knowledge is the attempt to control and subject, Foucault argued, it cannot be objective. Therefore, Foucault argued, the intellectual must challenge this order in a continual program of liberation. The language through which knowledge is expressed is only discourse—words and ideas interacting with other words and ideas, rather than with things in them.

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selves; thus, it allows an existing discourse to challenge an opposing discourse. Therefore, Foucault sided with excluded or marginal groups, particularly homosexuals, to subvert the existing order. But if one of these marginal groups were to become dominant, he was ready to ally himself with another marginal group to oppose the newly created oppressive order.

**Derrida: no self-evident meaning.** Jacques Derrida is also preoccupied with language. Because we have no immediate vision of reality, we are dependent upon speaking and writing. But speaking and writing are ambiguous and do not necessarily convey what we wish them to. Therefore, Derrida proposed "deconstructing" texts, which includes analyzing word etymologies, unintended puns, and Freudian slips in an effort to show that they do not contain any self-evident meaning.

Despite the important differences among these four thinkers, they laid the philosophical foundations for postmodernism through three primary contributions. First, human beings have no access to reality and, therefore, no means of perceiving truth. Second, reality is inaccessible because we are caught up in a prison-house of language that shapes our thought before we think and because we cannot express what we think. Third, through language we create reality, and thus the nature of reality is determined by whoever has the power to shape language.

### Postmodernism and the humanities

As a recognized intellectual movement, postmodernism began in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>2</sup> An examination of the writings both of and about postmodernism strikingly reveals the emphasis on the changing and fragmentary nature of the movement. Some of the effects of these emphases on the humanities may be summarized as follows.

**Anti-foundationalism.** Postmodernism is in fact often referred to as anti-foundationalism. It arises out of an understanding of language as a self-containing reality. Thus Jean Baudrillard can say that we must allow "for all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory—all are true, in the sense that their truth is exchangeable."<sup>3</sup> Reflecting Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman says,

"Truth is ... a *social relation* (like *power, ownership, or freedom*): an aspect of a hierarchy built of superiority-inferiority units; more precisely, an aspect of the hegemonic form of domination or of a bid for domination-through-hegemony."<sup>4</sup> Hence, postmodernists frequently speak of "privileged" texts, ideas, and languages, whose importance, they believe, arises not out of inherent qualities but from hierarchical power relationships.

**Emphasis on the "other."** Because it sees truth as a symbol or expression of power, postmodernism emphasizes what it often calls the "other," marginal groups such as people of color, women, homosexuals, and third-world peoples who can challenge the "center" or locus of power. In one typical statement, Henry Giroux asserts, "In challenging the notions of universal reason, the construction of a white, humanist subject, and the selective legitimization of high culture as the standard for cultural practice, postmodern criticism has illuminated how Eurocentric-American discourses of identity suppress difference, heterogeneity, and multiplicity in its efforts to maintain hegemonic relations of power."<sup>5</sup>

**Expression in literary criticism.** With its emphasis on language, it is not surprising that postmodernism has probably experienced its greatest expression in literary criticism. Stanley Fish is one example. He has been a leader in the approach to literature known as "reader-response" theory. In his book *Is There a Text in This Class?*, he takes up the modernist assumption that a literary text has a fixed identity that the critic must uncover. In his intellectual development, Fish first argued that the text has a structure that is the same for all readers but that the work's meaning lies in the reader's experience. However, after further examination, he determined that it is the reader who decides what formal patterns are important. Later, he found that the reader supplies the formal patterns. Finally, he concluded that the reader does not act independently but is a member of an interpretive community that shapes the way the reader understands the text.<sup>6</sup>

Other critical schools, including formalism, semiotics, deconstruction, feminism, and neo-Marxism, have also in various ways decentered the author and the text. The critic pursues criticism as another art form—as one text interacting with other texts—because it is no longer

possible to identify the "meaning of the text in reference to any generally valid criterion of value, knowledge, and truth."<sup>7</sup>

Such a theoretical approach underlies the attacks on the so-called "canon" of Western literature. While some simply want to expand the canon to include "other voices," namely women and ethnic minorities, others have attacked the very notion that the classics are in any way superior works. Rather, in their view, such writings have been considered classics because a white, male, heterosexual power structure has posited them as such.

### Postmodernism and history

History was slower to respond to the postmodernist impulse, partly because historians have been largely uninterested in the discipline's theoretical underpinning.<sup>8</sup> Hayden White, however, argued in the early 1970s that considerable similarity existed between literature and history in both form and purpose. Furthermore, he observed, there appears "to be an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality."<sup>9</sup>

Other historians, particularly those working in cultural and intellectual history, picked up this theme. Dominick LaCapra described the historian as one in dialogue with the past, deciding "what deserves to be preserved, rehabilitated or critically transformed in tradition."<sup>10</sup> Along with the influential philosopher Jean-Francoise Lyotard, who challenged the possibility of all-inclusive interpretations of history, historians increasingly rejected the notion of objectivity. "History—like myth, powerful, suggestive, and inevitably fragmentary—," Henry Glassie writes, "exists to be altered, to be transformed without end, chartering social orders as yet unimagined."<sup>11</sup>

As in literary study, historians increasingly have sought to bring new voices and perspectives—African-Americans, Native Americans, women, homosexuals, non-elite classes such as workers, storekeepers, peasants, and colonized peoples—into their accounts. They have frequently pursued the theme of oppression, particularly in connection with the spread of Christianity and Western colonialism. Beyond simply bringing in new voices, however, historians also now seek to decode language to reveal the relationships of power and gender or the psychological realities that lie behind events. And similar to some

literary critics, they seek to topple historical hierarchies.

Commenting on the debate raging over these new thrusts in historical scholarship, feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott describes the postmodernist approach to history and applies its methodology: "The knowledge we produce is contextual, relative, open to revision and debate, and never absolute." She continues: "There is no denying the partiality and the particularity of the stories, and, by extension, of all stories historians tell. It is finally the plurality of stories and of the subjects of those stories, as well as the lack of any single narrative that conservatives find intolerable because it undermines the legitimization of their quest for dominance."<sup>12</sup>

We must recognize that postmodernism is not all of one piece. While on the one hand some argue that scholarship is fiction, others suggest that there is a connection between knowledge and the real world. In other words, there are both more conservative and more radical versions of postmodernism. But this very pluralism in the postmodernist mindset suggests its fundamental nature. "Properly speaking, therefore, there is no 'postmodern world view,' nor the possibility of one," writes Richard Tarnas. "The postmodernist paradigm is by its nature fundamentally subversive of all paradigms, for at its core is the awareness of reality as being at once multiple, local and temporal, and without demonstrable foundation."<sup>13</sup>

### **Responding to postmodernism**

How shall we respond to postmodernism? Clearly it challenges

nearly all the concepts that have guided Western civilization for 400 years or more. Its spread throughout academia and the general culture demands that we take postmodernism seriously.

**Self-contradictions.** First of all, postmodernism has a number of self-contradictions. Although many postmodernists assert that we have no contact with reality and therefore cannot establish truth, this argument itself puts forward a truth statement about reality.

Also, in its belief in crisis, its historical account of the passage from modern to postmodern, and its critique of the "Enlightenment Project," postmodernism writes its own meta-narrative of Western culture that appears not to take into account the very pluralism it believes lies at the heart of the historical process. Romanticism, traditionalism, and religion have all both challenged the supremacy of reason and played important roles in shaping our culture, yet they seem to disappear amid the "Enlightenment Project" paradigm postulated by postmodernists.

Despite its denial of absolutes, postmodernism's concern with dominance and oppression reveals its own set of moral absolutes. Terms such as tolerance, justice, and democracy appear frequently in postmodernist writing as moral values by which to judge existing society. But if we cannot know any absolutes, there seems to be little reason other than preference to choose these particular values and, if preference determines our values, then those values would seem to lose their moral force.

These internal contradictions of postmodernism support the view held by many scholars that rather than being a

new worldview—or anti-worldview—postmodernism is actually the logical conclusion of modernism. If this is so, it is not surprising that postmodernism still holds dear some of modernism's values, even if it has undercut the bases of those values.

**Practical problems.** Postmodernism also poses some practical problems. Although most postmodernists believe that language separates us from reality, this does not adequately account for the totality of human experience. Allan Megill, a sympathetic historian of postmodernism, writes: "One can call everything 'illusion' if one wishes, just as one can call everything 'discourse' or 'text.' But this does not abolish the distinction between, say, an interpretation of the experience of being run over by a truck and the experience itself—a distinction which every language, if it is to function on something other than a purely fantastic level, must somehow accommodate."<sup>14</sup>

In other words, there is some connection between language and external reality that postmodernism does not seem to acknowledge sufficiently. For example, feminist historian of science Evelyn Fox Keller argues that modern science must be understood as the product of a privileged male hierarchy. Nonetheless, she puzzles over the fact that this gendered knowledge has worked so well. "Whatever philosophical accounts we might accept," she writes, "the fact remains that the particular vision of science that men like Bacon helped articulate has, over the course of time, more than fulfilled Bacon's prophecies, yielding a kind and degree of power that surpasses his wildest dreams. Science, as we know it, works exceed-

### **Campus Graffiti**



Nery Cruz, Puerto Rico

ingly well." Although Keller acknowledges that there is a "loose" connection between science and physical reality, she regards this as very limited and argues that we need "a better understanding of what it means to say that science 'works,' above all, of what it is that science 'works' at. What is needed is a reexamination of the meaning of success."<sup>15</sup>

Another, and possibly the most important, practical problem posed by postmodernism is whether a functioning society or civilization can be built without a foundation or absolutes. One of the foremost U.S. postmodernist philosophers, Richard Rorty, argues that in a world where truths do not and cannot exist, all we need is mutual tolerance.<sup>16</sup> But is mutual tolerance of sufficient moral force to preserve a society challenged either within or without by dissenting voices that put forward a different vision, perhaps one based on absolutes? Is mutual tolerance sufficient to motivate future generations to maintain a civilization with no surer foundation than preference?

**The Christian concerns.** Some Christians have seen postmodernism with its interest in the "other," its concern for a plurality of choices, and its rejection of the domination of reason and science as presenting a more favorable situation for Christianity than did modernism. Arthur J. DeJong, for instance, states that postmodernism "emphasizes openness and diversity, it reintroduces awe and mystery. While it does not demand transcendence, it allows, perhaps even suggests, transcendence."<sup>17</sup>

While this argument is correct to some extent, it also appears to be naive. The reason postmodernism allows awe, mystery, and transcendence is because it accepts no account as truthful or, to put it in other terms, it considers all accounts as equally truthful. Christianity can be allowed into the discussion or discourse only if it drops any claim to absolute truth.

As Christians we can agree with and learn much from postmodernism in its assertions that our knowledge is limited, that reason is an inadequate path to the absolute, and that language both shapes and confines thought. After all, Paul stated that "we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). The issue

is that as Christians we believe in revealed absolutes, while postmodernists do not. Gene Edward Veith observes, "Modernists would argue in various ways that Christianity is not true. One hardly hears this objection any more. Today the most common critique is that 'Christians think they have the only truth.'"<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to postmodernism's denial of meta-narrative, Christians believe that the "*petit-histoire*," to use Lyotard's terminology, of Jesus's birth, crucifixion, and resurrection not only actually occurred but is itself the key element in the meta-narrative of cosmic history—what Adventists call "the Great Controversy." Furthermore, Christians assert that our personal relationship to this totalizing story determines our individual eternal destiny.

The problems listed above should not be interpreted to mean that we should reject postmodernism out of hand. We are undoubtedly and inescapably influenced by the culture in which we live. But we also must strive to be counter-cultural, to stand outside both modernism and postmodernism, evaluating them critically and identifying points of agreement where dialogue can begin. With postmodernism such elements as the limitations of reason, acceptance of non-rational paths to knowledge, and concern for justice, among other features, can provide common ground for conversation. But we enter this dialogue with our postmodernist friends knowing that our discourse is not just intertextual—to use postmodernist terminology—but is built upon faith in the God who revealed Himself to us both through the written Word and the "Word...made flesh" (John 1:14).

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## Notes and references

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