

## ADVENTIST EDUCATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF POSTMODERNISM

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*I need to understand my purpose in life,  
to see what God wants me to do, and  
this means that I must find a truth that  
is true for me, that I must find the Idea  
for which I can live and die.*

Soren Kierkegaard<sup>1</sup>

Imagine that a college teacher falls asleep in the 1950s and miraculously wakes up fifty years later, in the early 21st century. What changes will he or she notice as they reenter the educational scene and begin to experience contemporary culture?

The most obvious surprise will be in response to the technological advances—lightweight portable computers, global internet communication, wireless telephones, digital media, exploration of the cosmos, 24/7 television infotainment. They will also be surprised by changes in the geopolitical scene—the powerful Soviet Union has fragmented into several independent nations with unusual names, China and India are emerging as competitive economic giants, the costly war on terrorism, and the changed demographics in the United States due to large-scale immigration.

At a deeper level, however, the teacher will be puzzled and even disoriented by the way many young people think, talk, write, and view the world and life. They will also be worried about the decline in educational standards, with students increasingly ignorant about art, geography, history, and the sciences. Ultimately, they will realize that the fairly stable world in which the teacher used to live has changed dramatically.

Since the 1980s Western culture has been in the midst of a significant shift affecting the humanities, social sciences, education, and religion. This development also poses a threat to the prestige and power of the sciences.

Allan Bloom sensed this cultural shift more than twenty years ago in his classic book, *The Closing of the American Mind*:

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.... Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue."<sup>2</sup>

In this essay we will situate postmodernism in the context of Western cultural periods, sketch the main ideas advanced by its leading proponents, review the impact of postmodernism on aspects of contemporary culture, and assess some of the challenges it poses for Adventist education.

### **Cultural periods in the Western world**

To begin with, let's acknowledge the difficulty of drawing a clear profile of postmodernism. This is, in the first place, because we are still in the midst of the cultural change from modernism to postmodernism. We're prevented from getting a clear image because the object is in motion. Second, no postmodernist has provided a clear definition of the movement itself. In addition, there are many shades of postmodernism, from the intelligible<sup>3</sup> to the obscure,<sup>4</sup> and even some of those who are seen as representatives of the movement refuse the label.

It will be useful, nonetheless, to approach the task by placing the postmodern turn in the flow of Western socio-cultural history.

*The premodern period* (5<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries) reflected a theocentric society and culture. Human beings were seen as created by God and living under His sovereignty. Truth was revealed by God through the Christian Church, which provided a unifying story. Authority was exerted vertically in all areas of life. In politics, feudalism, with its marked class distinctions, paralleled the hierarchical and powerful church. Education was available to a minority and literacy was limited. Scholasticism was the dominant theological and philosophical school of thought, which relied and elaborated on the church fathers' writings. Science was in its infancy, with Aristotle providing the main conceptual model. Tradition molded customs and controlled behavior. Each individual occupied a pre-assigned place in society. Wars, famines, and pandemic diseases decimated populations. Ethics were based on a mixture of divine law and human convention. In the field of knowledge, theology and tradition ruled.

*The modern period* (16<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) marked a shift from theocentrism to anthropocentrism. In politics, many social groups experienced a bumpy journey from feudalism to national identity and representative democracy. Humanism and the Protestant Reformation ushered in a new cultural era in Western Europe, which eventually reached around the entire globe. Truth was no longer accepted as revealed by God, but as discovered by humans. In religion, Christianity slowly relinquished its privileged position and the predominant culture moved from theism to deism to agnosticism. God and His revelation became marginalized in everyday life. Religious convictions were confined to the subjective, as human reason emerged as autonomous and dominant. Formal education reached a larger number of the world's population. Increased knowledge and emerging technology gave humans the power to harness and exploit nature, providing the means to make life more comfortable. Modern science gradually moved away from its Christian roots as it became more experimental, ambitious, and successful in its achievements. Darwinism eventually took over the philosophical foundations of science, postulating the spontaneous origin of life and a long organic evolution guided by chance and natural selection, which culminated in human beings. Bloody revolutions and devastating wars impacted millions. Ethics became anchored in autonomous human reason and social consensus. Philosophy, and later science, emerged as the dominant disciplines.

*The postmodern period* (21<sup>st</sup> century?). During the past 30 years, Western culture is undergoing a general shift toward postmodernism, which can be seen both as a reaction against and a radicalization of certain aspects of modernity. It reflects a relentless pursuit of absolute human autonomy and individual freedom.

Although the transition toward postmodernism is ongoing, certain foundational ideas can already be discerned:

- Human beings are incapable of arriving at absolute, reliable truth
- Knowledge is individually constructed rather than discovered
- We are prisoners of language, which limits our perspective on reality
- Any worldview or meta-narrative that attempts to be universal is oppressive and marginalizes certain people

- The personal narrative is a trustworthy method of understanding and communicating reality
- Ethics are relative to time and place—to what is acceptable within a community
- Nebulous “spirituality,” rather than doctrine, is at the core of religion
- Preferred attitudes are relativism, irony, ambiguity, skepticism

In this new cultural climate, literary theory, sociology, linguistics, and communication are the predominant disciplines. The various electronic media play a major role in spreading postmodern concepts and lifestyle around the world.

Although still evolving, three trends can be identified within postmodernism.

*Radical postmodernism* has provided the philosophical foundation and continues to be the engine of change creating this new cultural climate.

*Eco-libertarian postmodernism* places emphasis on environmental care and equal rights for all social groups.

*Eclectic postmodernism* attempts to preserve some rational and scientific features of modernism while accepting many characteristics of the new culture.

### **Antecedents and representative voices**

Several thinkers have provided the ideological foundation of postmodernism through their writings and teaching. Although the list could be expanded, these sketches will serve to depict the landscape.

**Thomas Kuhn** (1922-1996). This renowned U.S. historian of science authored *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962, 1970). The book’s main thesis is that science is not an empirically autonomous and objective enterprise, but instead a socially and historically constructed activity guided by dominant paradigms. Scientific progress is not incremental, but proceeds in stages. During periods of “normal science” scientists conduct research and practice their specialties in the context of a generally accepted set of assumptions and rules. Scientists are aware of some phenomena that cannot be understood within this model, but take for granted that in the future they will be explained. When these anomalies become too numerous to fit into the predominant model, a period of “revolutionary science” follows, as the old and the new frameworks

compete for acceptance. If the new model prevails, a “paradigm shift” occurs, which explains the exceptions and provides the platform for new approaches and research.<sup>5</sup>

**Jean-François Lyotard** (1924-1998) was a French philosopher and literary theorist who described postmodernism as “incredulity toward meta-narratives” (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1979). For him, there is no unifying, large-scale story or universal theory that can explain human history and behavior. He questioned the power of reason and stressed the importance of sensations and emotions in human decisions. Science, for example, has claimed for itself an undeserved position of prestige and authority. However, this hegemony must be contested and rejected. Humans are diverse and belong to different communities of meaning, with their own language codes, rules and micro-narratives. In his essay “Lessons in Paganism,” he proposed that as pagan religions believe in different gods rather than one God, justice must also accept a plurality of criteria, rules, and judgments—there are no universal ethics.

**Michel Foucault** (1926-1984), a French philosopher and historian, rejected traditional notions of truth, history, and morality. In books such as *Madness and Civilization* (French, 1961), *The Order of Things* (English, 1970), and *Discipline and Punish* (English, 1977), he argued that those who occupy positions of power in society use the medical establishment, the penal system, and even public education to control people. For him, truth is never absolute, but a product of power relations and oppressive ideologies. Reason, in his view, creates arbitrary standards of normality that must be abandoned. He demonstrated his ideas by a liberated lifestyle and experimentation with drugs. He died at 57 of AIDS.

**Jacques Derrida** (1930-2004) was an Algerian-born French philosopher and founder of deconstructionism. In his view, Western culture is built on certain presuppositions and biased dichotomies—sign/signifier, speech/writing, nature/culture, sacred/profane, mind/body—that should be questioned. All texts have implied hierarchies that impose a certain order on reality. Derrida called deconstruction the task of revealing and unsettling these dichotomies.<sup>6</sup> For him, language is an unreliable vehicle for communicating meaning and truth. In fact, there is no single meaning to a text, nor does it express any absolute truth. The reader is therefore free to interpret a text regardless of the author’s intention.

**Richard Rorty** (1931-2007) was an American philosopher who maintained in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) that there is no logical correspondence between language and the objective world. He also rejected the privileged position of science in modern culture. There is no need to understand the meaning of life or discover ultimate truth (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 1989). We are free to hold our beliefs lightly, avoiding religious and secular fanaticism. On fundamentalist Christianity, Rorty wrote, “When we American college teachers encounter religious fundamentalists, we do not consider the possibility of reformulating our own practices of justification so as to give more weight to the authority of the Christian scriptures. Instead, we do our best to convince these students of the benefits of secularization.... So we are going to go right on trying to discredit you [parents] in the eyes of your children, trying to strip your fundamentalist religious community of dignity, trying to make your views silly rather than discussable.”<sup>7</sup>

Other voices could be added to the discussion—Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Paul Feyerabend, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan—but for our current purpose these profiles provide an overview of core postmodern ideas.

In summary, postmodernism’s major themes center on language, truth, power, identity, interpretation/hermeneutics, equality/rights, the environment, and personal freedom.

## **Impact on culture**

A review of the contemporary landscape reveals the impact of postmodern premises on cultural emphases and scholarly practices. In language, for example, there has been a clear shift toward gender-inclusive speech and politically-correct expressions. In literature, the traditional canon is being expanded or has been replaced by a new list of authors from the margins of society, emphasizing the transgressive—the deliberate breaking of literary conventions and moral taboos. In history, documented events from the past have been reinterpreted and at times manipulated to fit the agenda of multiculturalism.

The effects of postmodernism on theology are significant, as the discipline moves away from propositional claims based on the Scriptures to culture-specific, socially-

constructed religious concepts. The Christian meta-narrative is questioned or abandoned altogether. Thus the core of Christianity is shifting from creed-based to general spirituality, triggering a disconnect between personal experience and fundamental beliefs.<sup>8</sup> Several liberation theologies—African, Asian, black, feminist, Latino—have emerged, in addition to process theology, which postulates an immanent God that is becoming Himself as He interacts with the universe and human beings. In parallel fashion, Christian worship and music have moved toward popular expressions that mirror media spectacles.

### **Science strikes back**

In 1996, Alan Sokal, a physics professor at New York, carried out a clever scholarly hoax. He wrote an essay titled, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” in which he quoted many statements about physics and mathematics from prominent French and U.S. authors. Sokal then submitted the extensive essay, with copious scholarly footnotes, to a well-known postmodern journal, *Social Text*.

The essay contained several absurd statements such as, “It has thus become increasingly apparent that physical ‘reality,’ no less than social ‘reality,’ is at bottom a social and linguistic construct.” “Scientific ‘knowledge,’ far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it.”

The text of the essay went through the usual editorial process and published by *Social Text* in 1996. Sokal then revealed his ingenious hoax in the journal *Lingua Franca* and later published with Jean Bricmont the book *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science* to expose the radical, anti-science posture of many prominent postmoderns.<sup>9</sup>

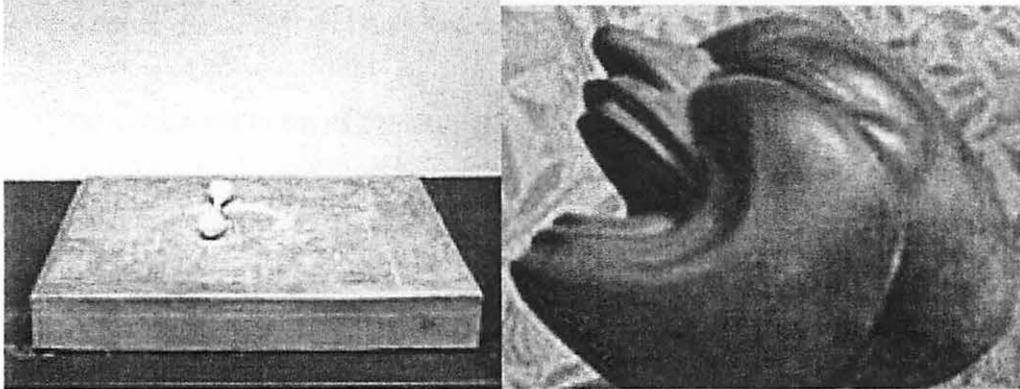
### **Confusion in the arts**

Historically, postmodernism started in the arts, architecture, and literature during the early 1900s as a movement that disdained the purity of form characteristic of modernism and favored experimentation and surface rather than depth.

Terry Eagleton, a British literary critic, defines postmodernism in the arts as follows:

There is, perhaps, a degree of consensus that the typical postmodern artifact is playful, self-ironizing and even schizoid; and that it reacts to the austere autonomy of high modernism by impudently embracing the language of commerce and the commodity. Its stance towards cultural tradition is one of irreverent pastiche, and its cultural depthlessness undermines all metaphysical solemnities, sometimes by the brutal aesthetics of squalor and shock.<sup>10</sup>

This aesthetic confusion fostered by postmodernism was amusingly evident in 2006, when London's Royal Academy of Arts invited artists to submit the best samples of their work for the Summer Exhibition. Some 9,000 applications for the world's largest open-submission exhibit of contemporary art were received. Sculptor David Hensel was among those selected by the jury to display a slab of stone and a small carved piece of wood, which he named "One Day Closer to Paradise." The jury labeled it "Exhibit 1201."



Hensel had also sent a finely wrought human head of jesmonite, which became separated from the base, and the selectors considered them as two submissions. The empty plinth, cut from a slate mortuary slab, and the tiny barbell-shaped wooden base were deemed of superior artistic worth and creativity than the main piece.

The Royal Academy of Arts explained their decision: “Given their separate submission, the two parts were judged independently. The head was rejected. The base was thought to have merit and accepted; it is currently on display. The head has been stored ready to be collected by the artist. It is accepted that works may not be displayed in that the artist might have intended.”

Hensel, a member of the Royal Society of British Sculptors, intended his work to illustrate an unknown man joyfully contemplating the journey to Paradise. The small wooden base for the sculpture took less than an hour to make, the base less than four hours, and the sculpture itself two months. The sculptor commented, “Anything, even if it is not intended to be art, can still have a presence. I like the look of the plinth and support. I can recognize it as a nice object. But I never thought the selectors would choose it as an exhibit.”

The plinth and the small wooden stand were offered for sale as a unit for 1,000 British pounds by *Times* online.



### **Toward a Christian evaluation of postmodernism**

How should we assess postmodernism and its socio-cultural impact? Evangelicals and Seventh-day Adventists are divided in their evaluation of this new trend. Some perceive it as a positive development that opens new vistas and opportunities for Christians in the intellectual arena, while many others note that postmodernism

undermines the validity of the biblical meta-narrative, rationality, and the propositional truths revealed by God.<sup>11</sup>

If we utilize the biblical-Christian worldview as our foundational template,<sup>12</sup> three major categories can be identified in postmodernism.

**Valuable insights.** Postmodern authors have provided us with perspectives compatible with the Christian worldview that help us to:

- Appreciate anew the intrinsic worth and dignity of all human beings and their inalienable rights, regardless of ethnicity or condition
- Acknowledge the significant role that the predominant culture plays in forming our personal identity and ideas, as well as prejudices
- Recognize both the limitations of human language to capture the whole truth and its power to manipulate, exclude, and control others
- Highlight and critique the blind optimism, arrogance, and deterministic assumptions of scientism,<sup>13</sup> along with its harmful effects on planet earth
- Understand that the Bible contains not only doctrines, but also narratives that reveal a living God mercifully interacting with His creatures in their struggles

**Problematic components.** Postmodernism has emphasized concepts that have positive dimensions, but that also lend themselves to negative outcomes. For example:

- Tolerance as a key virtue, but once power is achieved by a particular group, it often turns into hostility toward those who disagree with the new order
- Recognition that knowledge is both discovered and constructed, but denial that ultimate truth is revealed by God and personally embodied in Christ<sup>14</sup>
- Respect for other cultures, but reluctance or inability to judge immoral practices or to condemn evil
- Opposition to the corrosive individualism of modernity and emphasis on the role of the community, which, however, tends toward “group think”
- Concern for the marginalized in society, which many times fosters a sense of victimization and the emergence of distinct social groups competing for power
- Regard for the environment, which frequently evolves into the sacralization of nature and the devaluation of human beings

- Interest in spirituality and individual piety, but indifference or animosity toward organized religion and its teachings
- Fascination with electronic media, which leads many to prefer “virtual reality,” detached from real life and its responsibilities
- Allowing Christians a seat at the intellectual table, but considering their views only one voice among a multiplicity of equally valid perspectives on truth

**Destructive concepts.** There are also postmodern ideas that are incompatible with biblical Christianity:

- Both modernism and postmodernism reject God as a reality and enthrone autonomous (confused?) human beings in their search for unfettered freedom: Without trust in a Creator, Sustainer, and Lawgiver, humanity is left on its own to struggle for power and pleasure
- The postmodern rejection of a trustworthy worldview and metanarrative undermines the sense of purpose that men and women need to experience fulfillment: If we don’t know our origin or our destiny, how will we know the meaning of our existence?
- The relativism that characterizes much of postmodern thought deprives knowledge and values of a reliable foundation: What is the trustworthy point of reference in matters of truth? Is experimental science a dependable source of information? Are ethics relative to the individual and to time and place? Or are there actions that are wrong at all times in any culture? Who decides?

## **Challenges to Adventist education**

As postmodern ideas exert a wider influence on contemporary culture, the fundamental philosophy and principles of Adventist education are also at risk.<sup>15</sup> For example,

- God and his revelation, the Scriptures: Are they a reliable and a solid foundation for our beliefs, ethics, and hope?
- The Story of Salvation: If universal worldviews are no longer valid, how will we convey this foundational meta-narrative—Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation—to our students?

- Christian beliefs and values: If cultural relativism is embraced, are there any universally valid biblical teachings applicable to all believers?
- Standards of behavior: Who will establish the norms and who will be responsible for applying them in an educational institution?
- Bible history and prophecy: Do they have any meaning in a postmodern context?
- Adventist identity, distinctives, and mission: Can they be maintained and carried on, given the postmodern core concepts?
- Worship music: On what basis will we decide what type of music is appropriate for worshipping God, as different from the typical fare in popular concert venues?<sup>16</sup>

### **A thoughtful response**

These challenges demand a thoughtful response on the part of Adventist educators and leaders. Here are a few suggestions for consideration:

- Select carefully the textbooks and reading materials assigned to students, taking into account the worldview and values espoused by the authors, and being ready to discuss with the students whether some of the views presented are congruent with biblical-Christian principles.
- Foster the formation of small faith communities among Adventist students, using both the electronic media and personal interaction
- Involve students in worthwhile service projects designed to address real human needs, including service-learning as part of the school curriculum
- Recognize the role of emotion and nurture student creativity that expresses their ideals and concerns
- Guide students in developing personal and reliable standards for evaluating and critiquing art, cinema, drama, literature, and music, based on timeless principles and standards of goodness and beauty.
- Accept and affirm that the Adventist Church is a global community, with members that are united in biblical faith, doctrine, and mission, but belong to diverse cultural communities

- Create the conditions whereby a student and a mature Christian teacher/mentor may establish a relationship of mutual trust
- Balance the narrative and doctrinal dimensions of biblical preaching and interactive study, addressing the deep spiritual needs of students, leading to friendship with God, personal transformation, and positive action
- Help them comprehend and internalize the Great Controversy metanarrative as a frame of reference for understanding the meaning of their lives and making wise choices<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

This rapid review of a significant cultural trend of our time, with its philosophical assumptions, leaves some key questions unanswered:

Will postmodernism become the dominant global ideology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century or will it turn out to be a passing cultural phase which will self-destruct due to its internal contradictions?<sup>18</sup>

Will science and technology and even the administration of justice be able to operate based on radical postmodern principles and views?

Will postmodernism evolve as modernism did as it moved from the Enlightenment to the industrial revolution to 20<sup>th</sup> century science and technology?<sup>19</sup>

The 21<sup>st</sup> century world in which Christ's followers are to fulfill their mission resembles the mixture of ideologies and religions that 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians faced—materialistic, pagan, superstitious, hedonistic, apathetic, confused, and anxious. God will help us find our way between the extremes of modern rationalism and postmodern relativism. Above all, we need to be ready to be both committed and compassionate as we seek to communicate the Good News to our postmodern contemporaries. Jesus—"the true light that gives light to every man..., full of *grace* and *truth*"—has promised to be with us "always, to the end of the world" (John 1:6, 14; Matthew 28:20).

At a critical juncture of God's people in Old Testament times, all the armies of Israel assembled by tribal groups. Among the 340,000 warriors that gathered in

Hebron, there were 200 leaders of the tribe of Issachar “who understood the temper of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take” (1 Chronicles 12:32, LB).

We need this God-given discernment and courage today.

## References

<sup>1</sup> An entry from the journal of the young Kierkegaard, quoted by Douglas Groothuis in *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), pp. 25, 26.

<sup>3</sup> John R. Franke, a postmodern theologian, offers this profile: “Postmodern thinkers maintain that humans do not view the world from an objective vantage point but structure their world through the concepts they bring to it, such as language. Human languages function as social conventions that describe the world in a variety of ways depending on the context of the speaker. No simple, one-to-one relationship exists between language and the world, and thus no single linguistic description can serve to provide an objective conception of the ‘real’ world.... Postmodern thinkers assert that the all-encompassing narratives of scientific progress that shaped and legitimated modern society have lost their credibility and power. Further, they maintain that the very idea of the metanarrative is no longer credible. This is not to suggest that narratives no longer function in the postmodern context. Rather, the narratives that give shape to the postmodern ethos are local rather than universal” (“Christian Faith and Postmodern Theory: Theology and the Nonfoundationalist Turn,” in Myron B. Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2005], p. 108).

<sup>4</sup> What is postmodernism in philosophy? According to Jean-François Lyotard, “The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them, but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (“Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism,” in Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993], p. 46).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Kuhn gives as an example the geocentric view of the universe advanced by Ptolemy, with the earth at the center, circled by the sun, planets, and stars. This model was accepted in astronomy for 13 centuries until Copernicus demonstrated the principle of heliocentric planetary motion, which explained the apparently erratic movements of the planets and provided a new paradigm.

<sup>6</sup> In her book *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006), pp. 142, 143, Crystal L. Downing offers examples of “Christian deconstruction” in the New Testament. Jesus rejected the hierarchical binaries: priest over publican, Jewish over Samaritan, law over grace. Simon Peter had to receive a vision to renounce the binaries of his culture—clean/unclean, circumcised/uncircumcised, Jew/Gentile, inside/outside. Paul experienced a divine encounter on the road to Damascus that flattened his hierarchical dualisms:

the God of Abraham versus the Christ of Nazareth, Jewish versus Christian. So Paul concluded, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, NIV; see also Colossians 3:11).

<sup>7</sup> “Universality of Truth,” in Robert B. Brandom, editor, *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 21, 22.

<sup>8</sup> This reaction against a rationalistic and ritualistic religion has emerged at various times in the history of Christianity, such as in its pietistic and revival movements.

<sup>9</sup> Allan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador USA, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Gene Edward Veith, Jr., in *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994), pp. 94, 95.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the candid but illuminating exchanges among evangelicals assembled and published by Myron B. Penner in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> A worldview is a mental structure with which we comprehend and interpret the world and life, and on which we anchor our values in order to make choices and chart our destiny. A robust worldview provides an answer to four key questions:

Who am I? – The nature, meaning, and purpose of humans

Where am I? – The nature and extent of reality

What is wrong? – The cause of disorder, injustice, suffering, and evil

What is the solution? – Ways of overcoming the obstacles to human fulfillment

Worldviews are usually expressed through a story—a narrative that ties together concepts of origin, purpose, and destiny. In spite of the protests of some its promoters, postmodernism also offers a worldview—a way of interpreting the world and a meta-narrative with its own values.

For Seventh-day Adventists who accept God’s revelation in the Scriptures as foundational, the Great Controversy Theme provides the framework and point of reference for both epistemology and ethics.

See Humberto M. Rasi, “Worldview, Contemporary Culture, and Adventist Thought” in <http://fae.adventist.org>, click on “Symposium Essays,” and check “Symposium I.”

<sup>13</sup> Scientism maintains that all truth must be scientifically explained and proven.

<sup>14</sup> Bible-believing Christians fundamentally disagree with both modernism, which places the locus of truth on the human ability to discover it, and with postmodernism, with its emphasis on the human capacity to create and construct it. The Scriptures, in the Old Testament, use the word *emet* to speak of truth, conveying the concepts of faithfulness and conformity to fact, referring to what is authentic and reliable. David prays to the “God of truth” (Psalm 31:5). “The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful” (Proverbs 12:22). Through Isaiah, God states, “I, the Lord, speak the truth; I declare what is right” (Isaiah 45:19). The New Testament uses words such as *aletheia* and *pistos* to convey the concepts of faithful, reliable, accurate, and trustworthy, in opposition to error and lies. Jesus was “full of grace and truth,” “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:14, 17). He Himself stated, “I am the and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). When He prayed for the disciples, Jesus said, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). The Holy Spirit is called “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 15:26).

Before Pilate, Jesus affirmed, “For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (John 18:37). Paul speaks of “the truth of God” (Romans 1:25; see 3:7, 15:8) and connects it with “the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:5; see Ephesians 1:13). In summary, the Scriptures maintain that ultimate truth is revealed by God, that truth exists and is knowable, absolute, and universal. (See Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay* [Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000], chapter 3, “The Biblical View of Truth.”)

<sup>15</sup> A Statement on Seventh-day Adventist Educational Philosophy (2001) can be found through <http://education.gc.adventist.org> and clicking on “Publications.”

<sup>16</sup> Alain Coralie has written a significant paper on this subject, “Out of the Worship Maze: Revelation 14:6, 7 as an Integrative Framework for Conducting Public Worship on Adventist University Campuses.” It will be published by the Institute for Christian Teaching, a service of the General Conference Department of Education, in *Christ in the Classroom*, volume 37.

<sup>17</sup> After observing hundreds of evangelical college students, Steven Garber states that two factors that anchor them in their faith convictions are to establish “a relationship with a teacher whose life incarnates the worldview the student is learning to embrace” and to “develop a worldview that can make sense of life, facing the challenge of truth and coherence in an increasingly pluralistic world” (*The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior during the University Years* [Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996], p.171).

<sup>18</sup> Some observers of contemporary cultural trends believe that we are experiencing a reaction against the “anything-goes” stance of postmodernism that, for lack of a better term, has been labeled post-postmodernism. This trend is said to have emerged toward the turn of the century either at the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 or following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Books and movies such as the Harry Potter series and *The Da Vinci Code* would represent this mythical search for a mystical utopia.

<sup>19</sup> Looking at “the big picture,” Walter Truett Anderson identifies four worldviews competing in contemporary Western culture: (a) The postmodern-ironist, which sees truth as socially constructed; (b) The scientific-rational in which truth is “found” through methodical, disciplined inquiry; (c) the social-traditional in which truth is found in the heritage of American and Western civilization; and (d) The neo-romantic in which truth is found either through attaining harmony with nature and/or spiritual exploration of the inner self. Retrieved March 7, 2008 from *Wikipedia* article “Walter Truett Anderson.”

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