

All That is Solid Melts Into Air. Some Reflections on Postmodernism, the Church and Theology¹

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The Emergence of a *Zeitgeist*

The age that we inhabit is one so overwhelmed by vacillations and dubieties that in the summer of 1989, some forty-eight globe trotting intellectuals congregated at Boston University to debate what is deemed to be a most profound issue in our time: what period do we inhabit? This question presses in different directions, conjuring yet deeper and more primal anxieties: who are we? What constitutes our identities? Is it our nationalities? Or is it our cultures? Or are we soon to be categorized more generally, simply as *homo sapiens*? And as to the period which we inhabit, how should that be classified? By a general pathos perhaps, like the Age of Anxiety, or the Quantum Age of Uncertainty? Or perhaps by global catastrophes — famine, species extinction, Aids, pollution. Or perhaps by the rapid changes in the political and economic landscapes — the End of Colonialism, the Collapse of Communism, and Late Capitalism. Those who seek categories which aim to avoid the anthropocentric concerns of the above would turn to the eco-spiritual, with banners like the Age of Gaia or Cosmic Consciousness.²

Over the last two decades or so, the term 'postmodernism' has been used to designate as well as describe the new era that has emerged, one which attempts to supercede modernity, bringing to pass

that which the latter failed to achieve. Postmodernism therefore is more than just a matter of periodization, the signal of the dawn of a new cultural era. It is also an ideology, a system of ideas about the way things are, an opulent tapestry of concepts, notions and proposals which are subtly shaping the Western cultural Identikit in these last years of the second millenium. As a cultural phenomenon as well as an ideology, the term signifies not a monolithic experience but a multi-valent and sometimes incoherent articulation of a *Zeitgeist*. Be that as it may, postmodernism can be generally characterised as the categorical rejection of the modern, the vanquishing of a culture that has now run out of steam, and the emancipation of man into a new era in which the strictures of the modern are totally removed. Postmodern therefore means in many circles, anti-modern.³ Thus postmodern culture and philosophy, in reaction to modernity, swings the pendulum to the other side, so that, to simplify to the extreme, if modernity celebrates purpose, presence, centering and transcendence, postmodernism dwells upon play, absence, dispersal and immanence.⁴ What this means for the Church and her theology is the subject to be dealt with briefly in this paper. It seems to me that the postmodern turn has made several issues especially acute for theology.

Being, Knowledge and Language

Postmodernism presents, in a radically new way, the problem with which both theology and philosophy have been concerned all along, namely, the relation between knowing and being and between language and being. As we deal first with the problem of knowing, we must bear in mind that this question cannot be reflected upon satisfactorily without also taking into consideration the problem of language and being. Postmodernism presents the problem of epistemology by rejecting offhand all realist and representationalist epistemologies, which presuppose some correspondence between the perception of an object and the object itself, and arguing in favour of the other extreme, namely, relativism. Such a rejection could only result in the corresponding rejection of absolute truth, sliding from an objectivist

first to a perspectivalist and finally to a constructionist outlook, where knowledge about the real world is unattainable and all 'worldviews' must be rejected. This has also transformed the role of language in human culture so that now its role is no longer perceived as the signifier of reality, but as social constructs which constitute what is believed to be real. Postmodern epistemology assumes therefore that all explanation of reality are actually just constructions which are not objectively true, but which are determined by the social matrix from which the rules of the various language games are set. At the same time, postmodern epistemology also assumes that it is impossible for one to step out of these constructions; the 'reality' which we create through our language games imprisons us. To say that postmodern epistemology plunges into the sea of relativism means that the postmodern mindset accords man with unrivalled power, from which even their predecessors shunned. Man has now become a gnostic and language animal capable of creating his own world and determining his own reality. Through the agencies of consciousness and language, man, in true constructionist fashion, can form ideas of the real, even though these ideas are never universal but are specific to the communities which proposed them. Nonetheless, his self imposed imprisonment to the structures of his own language game has ironically given him this strange power: to deconstruct the received notions of the way things are and to re-create 'new' realities. But this has, again ironically, a heavy price. Ihab Hassan, among others, has described postmodern literature, for instance, as a literature of silence where words have severed themselves from things and where language can only refer to language.⁵ Postmodern *epistemology* has therefore nullified man's noetic capability, and as a result his language has become vacuous, yielding no meaning because it points to no reality, but only to itself in an irreversible process of introversion, or, as Derrida would describe it, in an unending chain of signifiers.

As the problems of knowing and being are so profoundly and fundamentally related to one another, the one cannot but affect the other. Postmodern epistemology has also introduced a radical philosophy of being, a meta-critique, if you will, of Western

metaphysics, which results in the ultimate rejection of the latter. Since it is impossible to know the truth, that is to say, to have cognition of the way things really are in their own interrelation as objects, and since all that is to be found in the postmodern world are paralogies, parallel language games which may not converge, there can be no place for what some postmodernists call 'meta-narratives' — that overarching account of the way the world coheres, whether this meta-narrative is Marxist, Capitalist, Hegelian or Christian. This rejection of the universal in favour of the particular of course means invariably the misconstrual of the particular and the crisis of meaning.

It was the French philosopher Jean François Lyotard who articulated this characteristic of postmodern ideology most eloquently.⁶ Lyotard argues that the decline of the modern is caused by the fact that the meta-narrative which evolved from the Enlightenment, which is the narrative of progress and optimism, fanned by the phenomenal rise and omniscience of science and technology, has lost its force since the Second World War. The postmodern condition stipulates not only the abandonment of the myths of the modern, but also the rejection of any central meta-narrative which seeks to legitimise a culture or society.⁷ Instead there has come into existence local narratives which allow for diversity and which do not work towards consensus but instead celebrate plurality and tolerate incommensurability. Thus a plethora of innovative paradigms are allowed to flourish side by side. There is no universal arbiter, no controlling 'worldview' or metaphysic. Michel Foucault, a postmodern philosopher, calls this 'heterotopia', in direct contrast to the utopianism of modernity⁸. The 'universe' has now been replaced by a 'multiverse'. This means that the meta-narrative of the Christian faith which is informed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ must be rejected. The Christian metaphysic which postulates a certain ontological framework, like any other such grand narrative can no longer be considered to be determinative. It can at best exist alongside other accounts. This postmodern move has of course given great currency to the pluralist worldview, one which is exploited by certain theologians and philosophers of religion. This line of argument is of course inherently inconsistent, for do we not see here a grand-narrative

about the demise of grand narratives? And do we not see here also a dogmatic insistence on the end of dogma? Furthermore, do we not see in this rigorous crusade for pluralism an underlying and profound process of homogenization at work, one which simply says "This is the way things are." For underneath the clever rhetoric against 'worldviews' we see a subtle and insidious postmodern *Weltanschauung* emerging.

Theology must therefore restate its understanding of the ways of knowing, not based on current developments of philosophy, but rather on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. For it is in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the coming of the enfleshed Word into the world, the making visible of the invisible God through the appearance of the Image of God, the eternal Son, that we come to understand the ways of knowing and can therefore formulate a theological epistemology. Furthermore, in the Incarnation, we are given to understand the ontological basis of our epistemology, the fundamental relationship between God and the world. For in the event of the revelation, in that miraculous event in which the God who is Spirit objectifies himself by becoming object and thus becoming world, we come to understand the relationship between being and knowing, between object and subject, and between the revealer and the recipients of the revelation.

The Displacement of God

The postmodern condition portrays a world in anarchy. Man has lost touch with himself and with his world. The order of things has disintegrated into chaos. Optimism has given way to pessimism, realism to nihilism. The culture of the postmodern is the culture of dissolution. In the postmodern condition we see the force of Karl Marx's laconic statement which was originally directed against bourgeois modernism: 'All that is solid melts into air. All that is holy is profaned'. It is this statement, ironically from the pen of Karl Marx, that brings us to the root cause of the ills of modernity and late modernity: the displacement

of God. This state of affairs is also captured by the poet W. B. Yeats when he wrote

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

It is in this sense that the postmodern condition stands in continuity with the Enlightenment and with modernity. In the context of the modern and postmodern world, God is no longer needed to provide coherence to reality.⁹ This means that God has ceased to become the meaning of the world. The coherence and the meaning of the world are therefore to be sought elsewhere. Modernity, following the footsteps of the Enlightenment, has located this in human rationality and will. So for both Enlightenment thinkers and moderns alike, the focus of the unity of things is the unifying rational mind. While postmodern thinkers distance themselves from the rationalism and individualism of their predecessors, they too have made the unifying will of God redundant. They reject modernism's search for the universal and sought to locate truth(s) within the communities in which the individual participates. They postulate that there are many different truths, all of which are the social constructs of different communities. Both modernism and postmodernism therefore endorse pluralism and relativism. But whereas the relativistic pluralism of modernity is radically individualistic, the postmodern consciousness focusses on the group or community. And while modernity still looks to human reason as the unifying force, postmodernity rejects the possibility of any consensus, allowing pluralism and relativism to reign supreme. But the root cause of the confusion is to be found in the rejection and therefore displacement of God. And with the displacement of this centre, only anarchy reigns.

Church, Theology and the Culture of the Postmodern

The question that must now be addressed is, What then should be the response of the Church and theology to the culture of postmodernism? The Church must in these times of rapid change continue to faithfully

listen to the Word of God. On the surface, this statement is so plain and obvious that one wonders if it deserves mention. But history has taught us that sometimes the plain and the obvious escape us mortals — and the Church, in so far as she is a community of sinners justified by grace, must be constantly on the alert so that this does not happen. This attitude of attentive listening to the divine Word goes back to the Reformation dictum of *sola scriptura* and also to the corresponding emphasis *fides ex auditu* — faith by listening. Luther understood his whole responsibility as a theologian and as a doctor of the church in terms of the attentive listening to the Word of the Lord. This emphasis is again made by Karl Barth in a series of addresses delivered at the Free Protestant Theological Faculty in Paris in the April of 1934. The Church, Barth asserts,

... is in existence where man hears God. Not gods, not something divine, but God. God is not a power or a truth, or even a being which man can discover by himself in order to clothe it with the title deity. On the contrary, God is He who became known to man as his real Lord by meeting him by His initiative in judgement, forgiveness, sanctification, and promise: by revealing himself ... Where the Scriptures speak — and through the Scriptures God Himself in the language of His mighty deeds — and where man hears — hears God Himself in the word of his witnesses — there the Church comes into existence and exists. We deny the existence of the Church apart from this relationship.¹⁰

To be sure, this approach will mean that the Church and her theology must resist the temptation of 'inculturation', of allowing itself to be subservient to the present *Zeitgeist*. One need only to turn to the theologies of Thomas Altizer, Mark Taylor and Don Cupitt to see just how seductive the postmodern turn is.¹¹ The Church must therefore continue to state and re-state a theology of culture, but never in this process of continual reflection on culture must that theology become a cultural theology in which the cultural context determines and shapes

the Church's thinking. The Church's theology must always be an ecclesiastical theology, done within the context of the community of the Holy Spirit which is also the *communio coporis et sanguinis Christi*, the communion of the body and blood of Christ. This community, it is true, exists in an historical and cultural context, but in so far as it is the *communio sanctorum*, the communion of saints, it is always in the world but not of it.

But this approach does not mean that the Church and her theology recoil into some kind of defensive faith, what Moltmann calls a 'pusillanimous faith' which feels threatened by the intellectual challenges presented to it by culture. "Such faith", Moltmann rightly argues, "tries to protect its 'most sacred things', God, Christ, doctrine and morality, because it clearly no longer believes that these are sufficiently powerful to maintain themselves".¹² Such 'faith' is no different from unbelief. Neither does the above approach mean that the Church should be detached from the world and ignore developments in culture. In so far as the Church is a community which exists in a historical and cultural context, she and her theology must dialogue with culture and grapple with the issues that emerge in history. But in this dialogue, the Church must always bear in mind that she is first and foremost the "creature of the Word" (*creatura verbi*).¹³ It is by allowing herself to be reminded of this that the church will not be concerned about cultural respectability and popularity; she will be more worried about losing her soul than gaining the whole world.

It is only when the Church truly hears, proclaims and obeys the Word of God that she is able to overcome the crisis of relevance. It is only when the Church hears, proclaims and obeys the Word of God that she is profoundly loyal to the world. Similarly, it is only when the Church differs most sharply from the world that her 'solidarity with the world is most complete'. For only when the Church proclaims the full Gospel is she truly relevant to the world and can therefore serve her Lord in the world, even though the 'world was not always grateful to the Church for ignoring its idols'.¹⁴

NOTES

1. Presented at a forum on "Doing Theology and Ministry in the Postmodern Context" at the Trinity Theological College on 28 February 1997.
2. Charles Jencks, *What is Postmodernism?* (Maryland, 1996).
3. This is the position of postmodern philosophers like Jean François Lyotard as well as their critics like Jürgen Habermas. But this viewpoint is not shared by all postmodernists, Charles Jencks, in particular. In his recent *What is Postmodernism?*, Jencks argues emphatically that "Post-Modernism is not Anti-Modernism; it is neither traditionalism nor the reactionary rejection of its parent. It does not, as philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard contend, reject the Enlightenment project; that is, the social emancipation of humanity, increasing freedom and universal rights. Rather, it rejects the totalising arguments with which universal rights are often imposed by an elite on a subservient minority (along with so much else)" (p. 15).
4. See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, 1990), p. 43 for a table of the schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism.
5. *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (Urbana, 1975), p. 90. Quoted in Hans Bretens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, (London, 1995), p. 44.
6. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1984).
7. This is true also in the area of global politics in the post Cold War era which is now radically reconfigured along cultural (rather than ideological and economic) lines, in which questions pertaining to ancestry, religion, language, customs etc. became determinative. Also, with the economic ascendancy of East Asia, universal Western ideals are constantly challenged and rejected so that interciviliation conflicts on issues such as immigration, human rights and democracy are intensified. In short global politics in the post Cold War period has become, what some political scientists call 'multipolar' and 'multicivilizational', no longer dominated by the West. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of*

Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York, 1996).

8. Foucault describes the significance of the difference between utopia and heterotopia, but from the perspective of language thus : “*Utopia* afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted garden, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together’. That is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*; heterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentence” [Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1994), p. xviii].
9. Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many. God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 28f.
10. Karl Barth, *God in Action* (New York, 1936). p. 29.
11. See Thomas Altizer, *The Gospel and Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia, 1966); Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago, 1984); Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (New York, 1980).
12. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London, 1974), p. 19.
13. Christoph Schwöebel, “The Creature of the Word: Recovering the Ecclesiology of the Reformers”, in *On Being the Church*, edited by Colin Gunton and Daniel Hardy (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 110-155.
14. Barth, *God in Action*, p. 27.