

# Understanding Postmodernism and Christianity

A letter to Jarys

PH504: Christian Worldview/World View Challenges

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Dear Jarys,

I have really enjoyed our many discussions over the past year about politics, the environment, world religions. I have appreciated your willingness to take the time to join me reading stories about Jesus and reflecting on their significance to our lives. I have often appreciated the fresh perspective you have brought to our discussions about texts that have grown very familiar to me.

Recently I had the opportunity to think more about my way of viewing the world through what I understand to be a Christian worldview and to compare it to the way you seem to view reality which has been described as a postmodern worldview. I hope that the time I take to describe how I understand what you believe will help continue to build trust and facilitate further discussion. Please feel free to disagree and correct me where I may describe your worldview in a way that is different than your own self understanding.

In comparing Christianity and Postmodernism I will compare the way they answer four basic questions which many have concluded are the components of all worldviews, namely: 1) What is the nature of reality? 2) What is the nature of the human person? 3) What is the human predicament? 4) What is the solution? <sup>1</sup>

Postmodernism, as its names implies, is what happened after modernism. Therefore, before I described postmodernism I think it might be helpful to briefly describe how I understand modernism. Modernism might be described as the belief that the universe and everything in it (including humanity) can be described as basic primitive particles and energy through a natural process evolving to greater complexity and

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<sup>1</sup> Walsh, Brian. "Worldviews, Modernity and the Task of Christian College Education." *Faculty Dialogue: Journal of the Institute for Christian Leadership*. No 18 (Fall 1992), 19.

sophistication. It views humanity and all its representative cultures as having started in primitive states and gradually evolving over time. Modernism assumes that through enlightened human reason, humanity will continue to develop and progress closer and closer to perfection. To clarify modernism does not explicitly deny the existence of God or the supernatural but it often finds that they are unnecessary to understand and describe the world as it is observed.

Postmodernism questions the many assumptions made by modernism. First of all it questions the assumptions of scientific rationalism (which is closely linked with modernism) and its trust in human observation and rationality. It also challenges the value assumptions that define the direction of history as progress. History cannot be described as progressing because it has no goal towards which it might make progress. Postmodernism dismissed modernism's faulty assumptions and presuppositions and attempts to provide a more honest worldview.

Postmodernism answers the first question (what is the nature of reality?) less by making a positive affirmation as to its nature and more by clarifying what reality is not. Specifically, postmodernism asserts that in reality there are no metanarratives.<sup>2</sup> Metanarratives are stories (narratives) that are overarching and objectively true and describe all of reality. According to postmodernism reality can only be defined by micronarratives, stories we, and those we identify with, embrace to be true. Reality, therefore, is not objective but subjective and defined by each individual observer or community of observers. This perspective is in stark contrast with the assumptions of modernism which

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<sup>2</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 94-5.

believed that there is an objective reality that can be discerned through observation and the application of reason.

Christianity, like modernism, believes in an objective reality and an objective truth that is independent from any human subjective experience. From the Christian perspective this reality may be described as being made up of the community of the Christian God and everything God has created. Christians understand God as a community, one being in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, (what Christians call the Trinity). On the other hand Christianity can acknowledge the postmodern understanding that all humans experience reality subjectively and lack access to the objective truth through our own observation and reason. Christianity, at its best, acknowledges that all human observation of reality and application of reason are biased and prone to flaw, as Paul of Tarsus wrote, “...for now we see in a mirror dimly.”<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Christians believe that an objective reality does exist. While Christianity at this point disagrees with postmodernism it does so with humility. The Christian believes that there is one ultimate story with God as the author, there is one overarching metanarrative. The Christian believes that God, and not any human, institution or tradition is the author of this metanarrative and therefore God is the only one able to speak *authoritatively* as to the nature of the revelation. The reason for this will become clearer as we speak to the nature of the human person as understood by the Christian tradition.

It is difficult to state succinctly the postmodern view of the human person and the human predicament since one of the characteristics of postmodernism is the lack of any one overriding metanarrative that would define reality and the role of humanity in it.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12.

However, in the development of postmodern thought there have been some common ideas that are often shared, many of which have been articulated by Marx and Nietzsche. Andrew Murray in writing on postmodernism describes, “Marx as its philosopher and Nietzsche as its prophet.”<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche observed that as modernism and its reliance on reason and affection fail to provide means to describe what is right and good that they will be replaced by pure will. This becomes the essential identity of the human person for postmodernism – a being who wills. Humanity creates their own reality, their own tradition, their own truth and identity through sheer will.

I found that one of the final scenes of the recent movie *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003) exquisitely illustrates the postmodern view of the human person and their predicament. In that scene from *The Matrix Revolutions* Neo is battling Agent Smith, a program in the computer world who originally functioned as a mechanism for control. Agent Smith and Neo are battling within the Matrix, the computer generated reality which most of humanity experienced as their day to day life. Since the second movie Smith has mass produced himself by taking over the bodies and the individuality of all of the humans and humanoid programs within the Matrix. In this final battle Smith, and all of humanity made in his image, faces off against Neo.

Smith represents the logical conclusion of modernity. As a program he epitomizes logical thinking and reason. He is a technology that has mass produced itself filling the earth. This image is reminiscent of Warhol’s portrayals of modernity as represented in his pictures of Coke bottles or Campbell’s soup cans filling a canvas. Smith is like the Coke bottle has filled the earth. Neo on the other hand is the postmodern alternative. He is

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<sup>4</sup> John Courtney Murray, S.J., *The Problem of God* (London: Yale University Press, 1964), 86.

known as “The One,” a human who fights as the champion of both humanity and the machine world as their last hope against Smith and his totalizing control of the Matrix. On the way to this battle Trinity, Neo’s love interest has died. As Neo arises after a severe beating by Smith, Smith pauses to ask him why he fights. In his taunting Smith recites all the usual answers – love, truth etc. He reminds Neo that this array of reasons are merely socially constructed and have no objective reality. Smith, the audience of the movie, and all who long to see modernism and its totalizing influence defeated await Neo’s response. Neo’s answer is Nietzsche’s answer and the postmodern answer. The answer is choice, “I choose to” are Neo’s words as he goes on to fight and ultimately destroy Smith from the inside out. Postmodernity views the human person, the crisis he faces and the solution in the same way. Modernity has produced a bland and horrific reality (like Agent Smith). All sense of God (Trinity) is gone, “God is dead” proclaims the prophet Nietzsche. Truth and love are merely social constructed. Humans are beings who by will alone may confront this reality.

Similarly, Christianity views humans as beings with the power to choose. However this power to choose does not follow from the absence of a God, rather in the Christian view the power to choose is one of the ways humanity reflects the image of God – humanity’s creator. Christians like postmoderns view human choice as one of humanity’s greatest qualities but Christianity views choice as simultaneously the cause of humanity’s greatest failing. Christianity understands that all humanity has chosen to seek its way independently from God and that the father and mother of humanity, Adam and Eve, represented us in this rebellion at humanity’s beginning (as described in Genesis 3).

As a result humanity fails to live up to its full potential and glory and are now unable to see the world clearly. Humanity is no longer able to discern the world correctly and is, as postmodernism has correctly discerned, hopelessly bound to biased perception of reality when left to ourselves. The predicament for postmodernism is that there is no metanarratives and no pervasive sense of God or objective truth in the universe. Humanity is left to forge a path for itself. Christianity describes reality similarly, but does not attribute the cause to modernism and its dehumanizing application of reason rather it attributes this reality to the effects of human rebellion and sin and the resulting brokenness in our relationship with God, ourselves, one another, the earth, and the entire created order. Christianity explains the sense of evil in the world and the perceived absence of God as a result of sin. For postmodernism this sense of evil and absence of God points to a fault with God or at least the Christian conception of an all powerful and all good God. From the Christian this same experiences point to humanity's failing and sin.

The difference in the solutions proposed by postmodernism and Christianity flow from their varying answers to the first 3 questions. For postmodernism humanity is left with choice. As we see Neo overcome Smith and the perceived absence of God (represented in the person of Trinity) by sheer will - "I choose to" - so the postmodern person creates his own sense of reality and truth through will. Although some audiences were disappointed with this answer by Neo, it accurately represents postmodern humanity's appraisal of the solution. Postmodern humanity does not look to something outside of themselves as an answer to their predicament, not truth, love, justice, honor, etc. Instead

the postmodern person boldly faces the world as it is experienced and through will seeks to shape reality into the shape which each person desires.

In contrast the Christian believes, left to ourselves, the human predicament is hopeless. Left alone humanity can only live in despair or denial. The Christian however believes that humanity is not left to alone. Instead God has come to represent humanity in repentance and obedience and to rescue humanity from the ultimate consequence of our rebellion. This coming by God in the person of Jesus is anticipated in the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament), described in the New Testament in the Gospels and interpreted by Paul and other apostolic writers in the rest of the New Testament. Christians believe that people should respond by aligning our will with that of God, looking to his leadership (often called lordship) once again and accepting God's merciful offer to represent us in the person of Jesus who lived and died in our place.

I hope you have found that I have represented your worldview with clarity and insight. I also hope that you find my description of the Christian worldview helpful. As you can tell I find many aspects of the postmodern worldview insightful and helpful as correctives to ways I have previously thought. I hope my description of the Christian worldview might serve you similarly.

Sincerely,

Jon Paris