

# Postmodernism, Art and the Church

by

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*Ministry in a postmodern, pluralistic world must bring together the opposites; it must embrace and bridge a world that is homeless and well-housed, a world that is both dying and healthy, a world that is obese and anorexic at the same time.*

(Leonard Sweet in Aqua Church)

Life in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century is anything but static. We live in an era of technological and communication advances which would have boggled the mind just one century ago. People around the world are breathless with the attempts to just stay reasonably aware of what is current, with the fearful knowledge that by tomorrow they may be left behind. Nothing speaks of stability. Life is fast-paced and confusing. According to Francesco Clemente as he observed today's world, "The only intelligence that matters is. . . not to cling to the previous state, and to accept a new state--just to be able to be there for every new challenge" (Sandler, p. 1). While at first glance this situation seems to be the frenetic outcome of a world that has pursued progress at any cost, in actuality it is much, much deeper.

One need only to peruse the shelves of any bookstore, visit an art gallery, attend a movie theater or watch an evening of television to realize that there is more to the dynamic changes in our Western world (and, due to instant communication, reaching the rest of the world) than in the tools we use and the games we play. There is a fundamental shift in the foundation of how we view the world. The rules have changed. The definitions we've used for at least the past three hundred years aren't working anymore. The meaning of life, how it is to be lived and what we value have all been blurred at best, and perhaps, eradicated. Christian futurist, Leith Anderson, affirms the significance of this change, writing, "We are experiencing enormous structural change in our country and in our world, change that promises to be greater than the invention of the printing press, greater than the Industrial Revolution" (Veith, 1994 p. 18).

This paradigm shift in worldview of Western cultures is commonly referred to as Post-Modernism. Princeton professor, Diogenes Allen, claims, "A massive intellectual revolution is taking place, that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the Middle Ages" (Veith, 1994 p. 27). Because this revolution is a fundamental divergence in worldview, the ripples (or perhaps, tidal waves) are felt in every area of life—philosophy, academia, media, relationships, finance, the arts and

religion. Or—perhaps we could say, especially in the realm of the spiritual. As a Christian, seeking to communicate the hope of the Gospel to a lost and dying world, this change in both the rules and playing field of the “game” of next generation has drastic implications to life and ministry.

It is my observation that Church too often plays catch-up to the re-direction of our culture. In fact, we demonstrate either an abhorrence or fear of such change. We too often find ourselves unable to understand the culture in which we are ministering, or merely condemn that culture and sequester ourselves in our fortress-churches. It is my assessment that this cultural change will be ignored to our peril—it is too all encompassing and significant to assume that it will be a passing fad and then we will return to “normal.”

There are many means to study and assess a cultural transition. The study of the art of such a culture is merely one means, but it proves a valuable resource in the study of this particular paradigm shift. The artist both reflects the cultural milieu, as well as becoming an instrument of change. The “meta-narrative” of a culture over time can be “read” in the visual art and literature. In addition, because visual art serves as a catalyst for change, it can be used effectively to speak to the people of such a culture, with both positive and negative implications possible. Therefore, the visual arts have a significant role to play in the work of the Church to be salt and light in a needy world.

It is not the intention of this paper to offer a detailed assessment of the history or philosophical ramifications of Postmodernism, nor what may be emerging beyond it. It is also not in the scope of this paper to present an analysis of the art or artists in the Postmodernist stream. The purpose of this paper is to consider the *significance* of art in today’s world, which has implications for ministry to present and future generations. In facilitation of this goal, a brief history of Postmodern thought will be offered. Then, an attempt at a definition of the nebulous term “Postmodernism,” as well as its evidences in the visual arts will be considered. Of crucial importance is the meaning and role of spirituality in a Postmodern world. Finally, some ministry applications will be submitted in the form of a concluding challenge.

**And the Context is . . .**

*The generation which calls itself  
“post” something,  
probably doesn’t yet know what it is.  
(Graham Cray quoted in Brand p. 15)*

In any research it seems wise to set the context or background to the subject under consideration. This becomes a necessity when discussing a subject that has as its very terminology and essence “post”—meaning it has following something that has gone on previously, in this case, “modernism.” But before comparing these two entities, it seems to set them both in an historical context.

The goal of defining historical periods is not as easily accomplished as it sounds. Philosophy, world views and values systems are not set in precise periods of time. Carter Ratcliff describes this difficulty, writing,

Because innovation is continuous, it is difficult to establish precise boundaries between historical periods. Which painting or building signals the beginning of the Renaissance? Which work of the imagination of scientific discovery signals its end? Answers to such questions are bound to seem arbitrary. Surely a historical period is not just the temporal site of certain artifacts and discrete intellectual events. We give names like “medieval” and “Renaissance” and “Modern” to stretches of time that appear to be unified by characteristic beliefs and procedures—or what is more to the point, periods disrupted by characteristic conflicts (Lovejoy, p. xviii).

Not only are the historical boundaries difficult to ascertain with certainty, the shift is not usually total, according to Gene Edward Veith, Jr. He posits, “World views do not go away. Belief systems that emerged from a specific historical context tend to stay in a culture, even when the forces that brought them into existence have faded . . . Ours is an age of pluralism when many world views exist side by side. Sometimes they compete with each other, . . . people slide back and forth without awareness of consistency” (Veith 1990, p. 191). These competing philosophies or “ragged edges” (Brand p. 5) may even be experienced within an individual, as well as the whole culture.

As a basic overview, there are minimally two previous historical epochs in Western culture, Pre-Modern and Modern. While it may be difficult to ascertain precisely when the transition between these two occurred, it is clear what the distinctive were. “For 1700 years, Western society looked to revelation, mediated through Scripture and/or the church as the basis of truth” (Calver, p. 430). This was the motivating foundation of the Pre-Modern world. Flowing from this basis came a belief in the rationality of the universe, a strong belief in the supernatural, a belief that there was a pattern and purpose in history, an understanding that Truth existed and an acceptance of a dualistic universe (derived from Erickson, p. 15).

The turning point from this worldview to what is now called the “Modern Age” is dated in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, during the time commonly called “The Enlightenment.” Some historians pinpoint the key transition point to the Fall of the Bastille in France. This era is termed the “Age of Reason” which gives evidence to its philosophical underpinnings. It was defined by “man’s faith in his own capacity to understand and control the world and the inevitability of progress” (Brand, p. 5). The theme was *optimism*. Scientific progress was the answer to the world’s problems.

The three hundred years of modernism produced many paradoxes, one being the emphasis on the unfettered ability of humanity, while simultaneously reducing mankind to the level of merely one of the animal species, or even to the mechanistic machine. The supernatural was denied—determinism taught that everything was driven by scientifically knowable and provable “fixed causes.” Utilitarianism was the highest goal. Flowing from the utopian belief of Romanticism (that the world is getting better and better), Darwinism introduced the “law of the jungle” which he termed “natural selection” which culminated in “free market economic policies and untrammelled competition. . . (all) becoming the keystone of a new materialistic worldview” (Veith, p. 193). In a

strange juxtaposition of philosophies, Modernism produced capitalism, Marxism and Fascism, all stemming from this materialistic foundation.

While Modernism spawned an untold number of “isms,” one key product that contributed to our current cultural transition is Existentialism. This is expressed in an absence of meaning for life, apart from that which is self-created. There is no order, nor are there absolutes—therefore, one must “create their own order by choices, . . . (and) what validates commitment is the *choice*” (Veith 1990 p. 199). This is clearly evidenced in the so-called “Pro-Choice” position related to abortion. Growing from this philosophical underpinning is the assertion that all belief or truth is privately determined and interpreted and therefore subjective. It is a world where “moral laws have no bearing” (Ibid.).

Modernism did not—or rather, could not—fulfill the optimistic promise with which it began. During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, two terrible World Wars and the genocide of millions of people, a worldwide Depression, the nihilism of Nietzsche, the despair of Sartre’s existentialism, the “God is Dead” movement and countless other philosophies were the soil which gave birth to Postmodernism.

### **In Search of a Definition**

*The locks are changed  
new borders everywhere  
maps fall apart  
the center is missing  
all surface, all edge  
no fixed exchange rates  
things become what they seem  
languages no longer translate  
structures built only of confidences  
life and t.v. blur  
new hybrids everywhere  
joyful mass amnesia  
brilliant uncertainty  
self forgetting and self reinventing  
opposites merge  
slang evolves and mutates  
languages no longer translate  
conquest gives way to surrender  
the locks are changed  
throw away the key  
(Brian Eno from Brand, p. 8)*

A concise definition or description of Postmodernism is extremely elusive, perhaps slippery, but the above quote by Brian Eno does well in offering the experiential confusion, even chaos, that many people are expressing as we are in the pivotal time of worldview change.

In simplistic terms, “postmodern” refers to a *period of time* that followed the era commonly known as modern. It is not in conflict with the term “contemporary.” Postmodernism is the characteristic philosophy of those living in a postmodern age. Glenn Ward brings another suggestion to the definition, writing that postmodernism “refers to cultural and artistic developments,” while postmodernity “has to do with social conditions and the ‘mood’ that these conditions give rise to” (Ward p. 12). As time passes, the term Postmodernism seems to be encompassing the totality of the perceived present condition in Western cultures, at least in popular usage.

Frederic Jameson writes that Postmodernism “has most often been characterized as the end of something” (Jameson p. 93). Nikos Stangos counters that, at least in the art world, “there has always been a Postmodernist sub current within modernism” (Stangos p. 269). Alex Seago queries whether Postmodernism produces “genuinely new aesthetic forms or the recycling of techniques and strategies of modernism” (Seago p. 2). Continuing with an attempt to define Postmodernism, Stuart Sim regulates it to anything oppositional, in other words, any protest movement of the current age. He continues, “Indeed it is often easier to say what they are against in terms of cultural paradigms than what they are actually for” (Sim p. 6). Christian author, Stanley Grenz, believes, “At its heart, postmodernism is negative. That is, it is the critique of, and the quest to move beyond modernism. Specifically, it is a rejection of the modern mindset” (Bos p. 2).

According to respected historian, Arnold Toynbee, who is credited with coining the word “postmodern,” this is the “last or decadent stage of dying civilization. . . cultural suicide. . . (and the) last, decadent stage of Modernism” (Petty p. 2). Current analysts would take issue with Toynbee’s gloomy assessment. In contrast, many secular observers clearly believe that we *must* move beyond modernity if the world is to survive from the abuses and destruction such modernity produced. David Ray Griffin pleads, “The growing use of the term Postmodern (indicates a) growing dissatisfaction with modernity to an increasing sense that the modern age not only had a beginning but can have an end as well.” He continues, “Since we must leave modernity behind if we want to avoid destroying ourselves and most of the life on our planet” (Griffin p. ix).

While the definition is elusive, few people today can deny that something has taken place. What produced this movement? One answer is:  
(This) age began when technological change speeded (sic) up to the point where succeeding generations could no longer feel certain that they lived in the same world. . . modern technology disrupts the history of experience, it changes not only the landscape but the way that landscape is seen. It shapes perception and induces a new kind of uneasiness, the distrust we feel toward tools and convenience that we would be reluctant to do without—devices that have, after all, done much to define what we are (Lovejoy p. xviii).

We are in the midst of a foundational, structural change. Historians of future generations may look back to this time and declare Postmodernism to be merely a transitional stage leading to something entirely new. This author ascribes to this definition as in a mere ten years, the term “postmodernism” has lost its adherents. Glenn Ward believes that “in some quarters (the art world for instance) the word (Postmodern), if not the issues to which it refers, seems to be in the process of being willfully forgotten” (Ward p. 2). However, assuming we are moving towards something else, and that it is impossible to accurately predict what will occur in the future, it behooves us to understand what currently *is*. Certainly we are facing more than “the collective chagrin and morbid projections of generation of baby boomers confronting disillusioned middle age” as claimed by Dick Hebdige (Seago p. 1). In contrast, German historian, Andreas Huyssen writes, “Postmodernism appears on one level as the latest fad, advertising pitch or hollow spectacle (actually there) is a noticeable shift in practices and discourse which distinguish postmodern assumptions, experiences, and propositions from that of the preceding period” (Seago p. 2).

### **So what is it?**

*Postmodernism is neither a homogeneous entity  
nor a consciously directed movement. . . .  
It is instead a space, a ‘condition,’  
a ‘predicament,’  
an ‘unpassable path’—  
where competing intentions,  
definitions, and effects, diverse social and  
intellectual tendencies and lines of force  
converge and clash.  
(Hebdige in Seago p. 1)*

While a precise definition escapes us, the symbolical birth of Postmodernism is quite precise. While some see the early birth pangs being the protest movement of the 1960’s, and the “coming of age” as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the triumph of the paradigm shift occurred at 3:32 p.m. on 15 July 1972 in St. Louis, Missouri at the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing development, “a prize-winning apartment block in the ‘machine for living in’ style,” solely because its “occupants having declared it uninhabitable” (Brand p. 5). At that moment, the “death of international style of Modernist architecture/functionals occurred, simultaneous with the birth of Postmodernism” (Appigmanesi p. 115). Note that protest and demolition characterize this “birth.”

Rising out of the inevitable destruction of Modernity’s unfulfilled promises, Postmodernism appears as a multi-headed Hydra of fragmentation and confusion (at least to one with a modernist worldview). The “gurus” of this transition contributed to this observation. French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, attacked any referential or fixed

meanings to language. He “waged a one-man ‘deconstructionist’ war against the entire Western tradition of rationalist thought. . . . targeting Western philosophy’s central assumption of reason which he sees as dominated by a metaphysics of presence” (Appigmanesi p. 77).

Another contributor, Roland Barthes, declared in 1967 the “death of the author” and asserted that readers created their own meanings, which rendered any text or idea as shifting and unstable (adapted from Brand p. 7). Hegel had previously predicted that we would see the “end of history” as well as the “end of art” (Jameson p. 79). Werner Heisenberg contributed to the unstable mix with his “Uncertainty Principle” inherent in Quantum Physics (Appigmanesi p. 16).

In an extreme manner, Michel Foucault, an influential French philosopher, was suspicious of all universal truths and preached escaping the “limiting standards of the Enlightenment rationality” as he proclaimed there was no absolute truth, providence or final cause. Individual experience was the measure of reality. He claimed that there was “no history, no theory, no universal or general truths” and sought a reversal of the “foundation of all Western thought” and external standards. His “locus of non-limitation was sexuality” and he lives his life accordingly (above adapted from Petty p. 3). In addition, he attacked knowledge as being a source of power and control, not goodness and progress as Modernism had ascribed (Appigmanesi p. 83).

Another recognized Postmodernist, Richard Rorty, “rejects objective foundation in philosophy, repudiates any universal truth” and approves of each “individual style, which may be moral” (Petty p. 9). The rejection of Truth and absolutes is an obvious extension of foundation in Modernism, starting with Voltaire’s “exodus from belief in God of absolutes” in 1755 (Calver p. 430). Total relativism was the result by turn of the millennium.

Art critic, Jean-Francois Lyotard, ascribed to the lack of standards, saying “I judge but if I am asked by what criteria do I judge, I will have no answer to give” (Sim p. 1). He also expressed another premise of Postmodernism, saying “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity towards meta-narratives” (Brand p. 7). He also described this time as “when worlds collide” (Ward p. 133). Denouncing any universal guiding principles, Lyotard proclaimed that Postmodernism turned “hierarchy into heterarchy and posited a centreless universe” (Sandler p. 9).

The list seems endless. The theories of Baudrillard, Jacques Lacan’s “deconstructive self,” plus countless philosophers, writers, architects and artists have contributed to the disjointed quagmire of values and beliefs included in the term “postmodernism.”

Christian writers and thinkers were not blind to these changes. C.S. Lewis warned of the “close connection between aesthetic relativism and moral relativism” (Goothuis p. 241) that he saw developing in the 1930’s and 1940’s. Frances Schaeffer declared the absence of “true truth” in our culture during the decade of the 1960s (Calver p. 430). But these men fought either a battle which could not be won, or were seeking to fight with medieval weapons in an age of nuclear war, for Christians have contributed very little to this revolution against Modernity.

Without undue explanation, it may help to list the recognized characteristics of Postmodernist philosophy, as we know it today:

- New historicism: history is not merely objective discovery of the past, but actually can be created;
- Objectivity of knowledge is denied and knowledge is either considered unknowable, or as a source of manipulation and power—definitely not considered to be good;
- The value or possibility of progress is rejected;
- The scientific method is challenged as reality is not discoverable through reason, but through other channels, such as intuition;
- Community-based knowledge replaces individualism (above derived from Erickson p.18-19).
- Rejection of Cartesian dualism, but an renewed acceptance of possibility of supernatural (or something beyond human);
- Rejection of “meta-narratives” of any kind (Sandler p. 9);
- A distrust of authority;
- Pluralism and an “anything goes” attitude, as well as an obsession with the past (Ward p. 35).

While this is only a partial listing of Postmodernism’s characteristics, it is sufficient to underscore the revolution of thinking from Modernism. Truly it is a new grid for life.

It would be naïve to assume that Postmodernism is monolithic or homogenous. In fact, while there are many trends (after all, they purport no absolutes), there are distinctly two opposite directions that Postmodernism may be headed. One is the deconstructionist or “hard” Postmodernism (Erickson p.19). This extreme rejects any objectivity, truth, facts or referential meaning in any subject. Personal experience reigns supreme.

In contrast, the Reconstructionist or “soft” Postmodernism seems to merely be in contradistinction to the abuses of Modernism—such as anti-supernaturalism, a reductionistic view of reason, logical positivism, behaviorism and all other “artificial” (according to Postmodernism) scientific approaches to reality. The Reconstructionist rejects that the human personality is limited to a set of stimulus-response reactions. (Above derived from Erickson p. 19) and calls for “re-enchantment with the world” (Griffin p. 184).

### **What does ART have to do with it?**

*The art world undertakes the fateful  
closure of modernism and  
its failed utopian ambitions.  
(Gablik in Griffin p. 178)*

As stated in the introduction to this paper, artists may either mirror culture, or contribute to the defining of it. Veith writes, “Because the thought forms of an age are uniquely reflected in its art, as the culture changes, art too must change. To walk through an art museum is therefore to walk through the history of Western culture, with



both its high points and its low points” (Veith 1991 p. 53). Never is this more clearly evidenced than in the current situation. While postmodern ideas were found in every discipline (albeit with inconsistent meanings) (derived from Ward p. 3), it is an undisputed fact that architecture and the arts led the charge. Stanley Grenz explains, “Initially the term denoted a new style of architecture. Then it invaded academic circles, originally as the label for theories expounded in university English departments, before invading philosophical faculties as well. Eventually it surfaced as the description for a broader cultural phenomenon” (Bos p. 2).

David Ray Griffin gives four purposes for art in his 1990 publication. He states art is (both/and):

1. a mirror (reflecting the times)
2. a hammer (social protest)
3. furniture (to hang on the walls)
4. a search for the self.

(Griffin p. 192).

Postmodern art seems to have accomplished all these goals at one time or another. But Griffin claims even loftier goals for today’s art. He believes it can “exercise power to administer the social dreaming, through images which empower the collective unconscious” (Griffin p. 192). Whether or not you ascribe to Griffin’s cosmology, it is interesting to reflect on his meaning and significance given to art in today’s world.

In the Postmodern world, the “artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher” (Baker p 41) according to Lyotard. Veith declares that postmodern artists are “cultural guerrillas” (Veith 1994 p. 103). Douglas Groothuis warns that, “Art can profoundly shape our world views and sensibilities without our knowing its persuasive power. . . (with) the Postmodernist rejection of objective aesthetic standards and values takes root, it easily washes over into moral standards and values as well” (Groothuis p. 246). Art is not marginal or a nice “sidelight” to life—it is a driving force. Of course, the influence of art isn’t always negative. Since it has such a strong influence on a culture, we can use art to “teach, praise, prophesy, decorate and help social relationships, (as well as) in evangelism” (Rookmaaker p. 230).

Christian writer, Leland Ryken, underscores the value of the art, calling it an “invaluable index to the thinking and feeling of non-Christians who live around us” (Ryken p. 130) and “the most accurate index we have to basic human values—to human convictions about what is worth having, what is not important and what matters most in life. . . (the arts) tell us the truth about foundational human experience” (Ryken p. 131). He asserts that in addition to the revelatory usage, the arts are therapeutic and corrective, a great organizing force in human life and will awaken us to the central realities of living (adapted from Ryken p. 132).

But before considering the nexus of postmodern spirituality and art, a further explanation of the architectural and visual art considered to be postmodernist may be helpful.

It is easiest to define postmodernism in architecture. It includes,

- an eclectic mixture of styles from the past; “In a world where faith in the future is a thing of the past, nostalgia is a growth industry” (Brand p. 13),

- a mixture of styles from different places,
- ornamental, decorative or pictorial features;
- different surfaces, materials and colors;
- high degree of referencing to surrounding area, and other local styles (adapted from Ward, p. 15-16).

For example, “today we have shopping malls that rival the Hanging Gardens of Babylon in their luxurious ostentation. We have church buildings, oddly enough, that resemble shopping malls, with atriums and fountains and vast parking lots. . . . Churches designed like commercial buildings cater to ‘church shopping.’” (Veith 1991 pp. 36-37). The sterile, dehumanizing construction of the past age gives way to “multivalent symbolic dimensions into architecture, mixing cues, local vernacular styles and regional traditions” (Seago quoting Huyssen p 2).

While architecture is unquestionably indicative of Postmodernism, the world of visual art is replete with such evidence also. While not in the purview of this paper, the development of this cultural shift can be documented through an historical survey of the art of the past century. A cursory overview of art history indicates that during the Middle Ages, the artist sought to integrate faith and artistry, “attempting to portray eternity” (Veith 1991 p. 54) with art rich in symbols and narrative. The Reformation brought the secularization of art, and the portrayal of portraiture, family life and the ordinary, natural world (derived from Veith 1991 p. 59-62). The rediscovery of the classical tradition during the Renaissance produced art that glorified humanism. Reality was “interpreted according to ‘what I see’ and ‘how I see it’ rather than what I know is true by reason or by faith. Self was the center of universe” (Veith 1991 p. 65). It is clearly a precursor to the extremes of this view in postmodern art that we see today.

The failure of humanistic optimism produced the Mannerism school of art, projecting an “inwardness that is sometimes questioning and sometimes deeply religious” (Veith 1991 p. 66). But the Counter-Reformation produced the Baroque style of art, illustrating the Catholic emphasis upon “both the very spiritual and the very material” (Veith 1991 p. 67).

The birth of Modernism during the Enlightenment period resulted in the art of Romanticism, which gave expression to the unbound optimism of the period. The reaction to this was stark realism that coincided with scientific naturalism and materialism later in the period.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, an emphasis on perception, appearance and the subjective view of nature was clearly demonstrated in Impressionism. This naturally lead to Expressionism which sought to express the inner feelings of the artist, rather than what was perceived externally. The march towards the rejection of *external* standards continued.

The cultural denial of Truth or any absolute standard was further evidenced in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Modern Art. Cubism broke down the human and natural form into a grid of cubes or geometrical designs, reflecting the mechanistic view of existence and the dehumanizing of the body. Dadaists (meaning “babble”) and Surrealists evidenced the nihilism and anarchy of Existentialism. “Op art” which is said to have psychedelic origins (Veith 1991 p. 84), completes the breaking down of the boundaries between art and ordinary life. This Postmodern value is called *simulacrum*, defined as the break

down between representation and reality (derived from Appigmanesi p. 54). This became a keystone in Postmodernist art.

In place of modern art, some declare that the postmodern artist accomplished the “utter annihilation of art” (Veith 1991 p. 93). There is definitely no foundation to determine what is art and what isn’t, much less standards to judge the validity of such art. Without objective standards of beauty or aesthetics, ordinary “kitsch” and Fine Art are interchangeable. The meaning of a piece of art is placed solely in the determination of the individual viewer, “the meaning of an artwork need not be fixed or even discernible” (Groothuis p. 246). The intention or purpose of the artist has very little influence in the interpretation of the piece. According to Clive Calver, “the reader, spectator, or viewer—not the author, painter, or director—has been placed in control. Fact and fiction become blurred, style becomes an important substance, and the material can be interpreted according to the recipient’s wishes” (Calver p. 430). Again, this is evidence that the ground rules of life have changed.

By definition, Postmodernist art is a statement of “anything goes.” In fact, most analysts concur that it defies definition as a style, rather that it is defined by “paradox, fragmentation, and juxtaposition of styles, techniques and imagery. . . . Art can be anything you say it is. . . . with irony as the gloss over it all” (adapted from Brand p. 13, 15).

Postmodern art is frequently a battleground of philosophies. Such art has been described in various ways. According to Groothuis, Postmodernist art “resorts to bludgeoning and bullying its audience for purely political purposes” (Groothuis p. 247). Because of this, Appigmanesi and Garratt declare, “Art can only progress towards its own self-annihilation” (p. 45). By the 1980’s art became “a polemical battleground between competing claims” (Sandler p. 18).

One cannot study Postmodern art without being aware of the strong political statements that are being made. According to Groothuis, in Postmodernism, “beauty is only in the eyes of the beholder (therefore) any artistic creation or evaluation can be deconstructed into various contingent social elements such as class, gender, race and historical epoch” (Groothuis p. 239). The key issue is a search for identity and the divisions within Postmodernist art reflect this. Identity is considered to be the “defining characteristic of the postmodern age” with the “Art world developments reflecting broader social critiques of hierarchies based on race, class, nationality, gender, sexuality and other forms of identity” (Stangos p. 274). This search of identity in today’s culture is best seen in the rise of “gay” and “feminist” art, as well as “racial art.” According to Stangos, “Identities rooted in gender and sexuality became central forces in the development of Postmodernism” (Stangos p. 275).

When the “meta-narrative” of life is rejected, then the focus is on the particulars. Meta-narrative is defined as an “overarching story which can supposedly account for, explain, or comment upon the validity of all other stories, a universal or absolute set of truths which is supposed to transcend social, institutional or human limitations” (Ward p. 157). The “particulars” of art reflect the divisions found in the ethnic, gender, religious and philosophic arenas today. One author, David Salle, calls it a “non-narrative play of detached signifiers” (Stangos p. 273). Paradoxically, while the “meta-narrative” of a universal or absolute standard is rejected, narrative of the particulars became highly

important. Cultural history “can only be recreated by analyzing its ‘little narratives’” (Seago p 208), according to David Mellor. Individual or “identity group” narratives reign supreme. This is true of narrative art, as well. “Narrative art overflows with speech-like activities such as telling, indicating, suggesting” (Taylor p. 143). Taylor believes that the role of art is to “narrate identity” (Ibid.) and that it does so by “its embrace of imagery that originates in mass culture, takes its connotations to the fields of bodily experience, personal and racial and identity, and by importing ‘meaning’ . . .” (Ibid.)

The search of identity by the Postmodernist, and visualized in its art, is given expression through the emphasis of *community*. Interactive and communicative art demands involvement and not individuality. For instance, the Postmodernist defines the success of a leader, not in his achievement of goals, but in the ability to “perform this integrative role through the creation and sustenance of community and through acting the role of servant to those with whom they work” (Lakeland p. 154), according to William Berquis of The Postmodern Organization. “Interconnectedness” is the prized goal (derived from Griffin p 3). Relationships are key. Glenn Ward asserts, “There are many sides to the unfolding story of Postmodern identity, but if there is one central theme, it is that the self is fundamentally social” (Ward p. 105). One example of the role of art in this context is “Installation sculpture.” This art form is used for the “narrating of social and private identities” (Taylor p.151). Sometimes the only cohesion in this search of relationship is in “interpretive communities” which are “groups who view the arts from a common set of interests and assumptions and values” (Ryken p. 177). But, they are communities, never-the-less.

Postmodern art is a major contributor to another key Postmodern value, *image*. The importance of image cannot be over-stated. According to one author, “Image is all that matters. . . self is still without substance, but fashion statements, shopping and lifestyle choices have pushed authenticity out of the equation. Identity is related to what we buy; we use goods as signals of both individuality and solidarity (Ward p. 108). Image is often the Postmodernist’s answer to the question of identity. “The question shifts from ‘Who am I?’ to ‘What image shall I adopt today?’” (Brand p. 11). The breakdown of division between what is art and what is reality contributes to the ever-changing image possibilities of identity.

It is evident that postmodern art is intricately intertwined with the essence of the Postmodern thought and practice. Also to be “read” in the art of our times is the new definition and interest in things spiritual. As the anti-supernatural bent of Modernism is replaced, a renewal of expressed spirituality is evidenced in the art and literature of today.

### **The “God Shaped Vacuum”**

*At heart, man is a religious being  
whose religious structure demands that he  
must commit himself to something or someone.*

*Man cannot find meaning within himself  
but must worship something other than himself.*  
(John Wilson in Brand p. 50)

A reminder is in order as we approach the subject of postmodern spirituality, as it will seem to be espousing contradictory values. But, that is the nature of Postmodernism. . . there are no standards, absolutes, or “Truth,” therefore what, to a Modernist, may seem illogical is merely an evidence of the “reality” of Postmodern thought. For example, Postmodernism values social relationships and community, but it would seem that their rejection of all “capital ‘T’ Truth” (Don Cupitt in Brand, p. 7) as manipulation would lead to a distrust of commitment and intellectual skepticism which ultimately destroys human relationships! (derived from Brand p. 7). But, the value remains, just as a search for the supernatural (in some form) continues within a belief system that rejects any external meaning or reference.

This search is in greatest evidence in art. Brand and Chaplin express this conundrum, “it is a curious twist that, in an era when God was deemed to have died the search for the spiritual in art should take on an even greater intensity” (Brand p. 20).

We must not assume that the search for spirituality is being conducted in a Christian or Biblical framework. In fact, “the claims of Christianity are not denied; they are rejected BECAUSE they purport to be true” (Veith 1994 p. 19). Likewise, the search is not centering on the institutional Church. It is evident that “new spiritual seekers are reacting against the modern forms of religion, the human-made systems for understanding God. Postmodernists are anti-religious and anti-institutional spiritual seekers. They are crying out to experience the sacred and the spiritual” (Campbell p. 434).

This search for spirituality is partially due to a felt need to find meaning in place of the disillusionment that Modernity produced. According to Howard Risatti, “Construction of meaning is THE major issue of today’s art, culture, and society because it is an issue directly related to the individual’s development of consciousness and perceptions of reality” (Risatti p. 10). Turner claims “the worldview and resulting materialistic religion and ethic of modernism have starved people of the pleasures of the mind and spirit and soul” (Griffin p. 4).

The Postmodernist believes that Modernity merely exacerbated “the presence of a transcultural proclivity to evil deep within the human heart, which no paradigm. . . will eliminate” (Griffin p. xii). It is interesting that a belief system dedicated to rejecting absolutes, authority and truth would be so aware of evil! The search for the spiritual today often culminates in a strange mixture of Eastern religion (especially Hinduism), New Age philosophies and a form of pantheism or shamanism. But we must not overlook the fact that the *search* is occurring. What are the elements the postmodern person is seeking? Some diverse quotes taken from David Ray Griffin’s book *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art* may shed some light on the answer:

“No feature of postmodern spirituality emphasized more than the reality of internal relations” (p. 1).

“Postmodern religion is richly relational” (quoting Richard Falk, p. 2).

“God as interconnected with the whole interconnected creation” (quoting John Cobb p. 2).

“God is in all things and all things are in God; relations between things are regarded as internal to them, and as their participation in the universal web of interconnections, which is itself holy or sacred, being the source of all value and power. The receipt of this valuable empowerment is grace” (p. 2)

“Modernism was the death knell of mysticism” (quoting Fox, p. 6).

The Postmodernist’s search for spirituality is the desire for an experience with the supernatural—an experiential connection with an immanent, as well as, transcendent being. At the heart of the search is the “centrality of the mystical experience” (Griffin p. 7). According to Matthew Fox, true (interesting use of the term) spirituality will release the “power of creativity, justice and compassion in all persons” (Griffin p. 17). It is the antithesis of Modernity in which, according to the Postmodernist assessment,

...sucked all power out of morality and rendered it passive. . . emasculated and feminized spirituality,. . . allowed patriarchy to run wild with its militarism and war games; with its bloated left-brain definitions of schooling; with its rape of mother earth; with its disregard for youth; with its replacement of a mystical sexuality with its own industry of pornography; with its replacement of authentic worship—which is always a matter of relating microcosm to macrocosm—with words.

(Matthew Fox quoted in Griffin, p. 17).

The search for spirituality reflects the “Reconstructionist” or “soft” stream of Postmodernism. Writers such as David Ray Griffin, Suzi Gablick, Frederick Turner and Matthew Fox are convinced that the direction of Postmodernism is toward wholeness, not fragmentation; re-engagement with the world instead of destruction; fulfillment rather than disillusionment. They recognize the barrenness of the deconstructionist approach. Sylvere Lotringer acknowledges, “There is a high price to pay in terms of emptiness and disenchantment. There you have all the seduction, and the sadness, of nihilism” (Griffin p. 183).

One means of turning the tide in Postmodernism from the despair of deconstructionism to the hope of the Reconstructionist is the use of art, according to the above mentioned writers. The positive direction is not assumed, however. “The question for the art world of the coming generation is which of these paths it will take. . . in any case, the nature of the postmodern world will be significantly shaped by the emerging generation of artists” (Griffin p. 12). Christian writer, Gene Edward Veith, writes that in the postmodern world, “Art gives a sense of meaning, an experience of transcendence, and guidance” (Veith 1990 p. 204).

According to Christian authors, Brand and Chaplin, “spirituality is in fashion again. . .but the question is no longer ‘Is it true?’ but “Does it work?’ and the one thing that seems to work is art” (Brand p. 16). They believe that “Christian artists have an unparalleled opportunity to help set the agenda” (Brand p. 15).

As a Christian, I should be encouraged by the search for spirituality exhibited by Postmodernists. There are a limited number of Christian leaders beginning to sense the same response. Clive Campbell writes, “I have seen the spiritual hunger (Postmodernists) confess. I have watched the rejection of the human self-aggrandizement of modernism, and I have listened to the desire to see a faith that works” (Calver p. 431). Jimmy Long reflects, “Worship and prayer are making a comeback in the postmodern world since Postmodernism has brought an openness to the supernatural. It is recognized today that there is something more to life than the human misery we observe all around us” (Long p. 150). Respected author, Millard Erickson, sees “soft Postmodernism” as an “open door for believers to contend for the truth of the Christian faith in contrast to the secular world” (Erickson p. 20). While it is pointless to be naive about the barriers between Christian thought and Postmodernism, “if we believe God is at work in his world in every generation, then his fingerprints will be as evident in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as in the 1<sup>st</sup> Chapter of Genesis” (Brand p. 180). There is a reason for hope.

### **So what?**

*Postmodernism opens a door of hope.  
It confesses that a spiritual dimension exists beyond the physical.  
We claim to have the answers to this hunger in Jesus.  
We only have to live in a way that will  
confirm that our truth is true for all.  
(Calver p 431)*

Simply understanding of the postmodern culture was not the goal of this research, albeit it was necessary. My purpose in understanding is to effectively present the hope of Jesus Christ to the world in which we live. Too frequently Christians view or experience the negative (anti-Christian) aspects of Postmodernism and either run in fear, or denounce it with a harsh vengeance. Presented in another way, Stanley Grenz believes Christians either “baptize every new development” or “demonize what they see happening around them” (Bos p. 4). Many people fear that our theology and Christian expression has been so fused with Modernism that we cannot conceive of God working in any other construct. Could it be that “Christianity has adapted well to the grand vision of the Enlightenment, arguing a reasoned defense against other meta-narratives” (Tebbe p. 426), that it is meaningless when confronting with a new grid? Jonathan Campbell believes that Christians have bought into the “assumption that modernity is somehow more biblically sound than its counterpart in Postmodernism” (Campbell. 432).

At its essence, Postmodernism is in opposition to *modernity*, not *God*. While institutional religion (as demonstrated in the past 300 years) is rejected because “the church has yielded to the modern intellectual and social agendas of rationalism, pragmatism, institutionalism professionalism and enlightened centralized control” (Campbell p. 433), the postmodern person is open to fresh expressions of the Gospel of Christ. “They acknowledge the spiritual dimension, but they do not know how to experience God” (Campbell p. 433). What are we doing to demonstrate this relationship in manner and language they can understand?

For some Christians seeking to engage the Postmodernist, the answer lies in returning to “pre-modern” Christian expressions. This does have some merit. This is the essence of the growing movement called *Ancient-Future Faith*, as expounded by the late Robert Webber. The Christian mystics of the Middle Ages are certainly speaking to many spiritual seekers today. Postmodern writer, Matthew Fox, believes, “Westerners cannot recover our spiritual roots without the gift of these great cosmological mystics of our past and the tradition they represent, a tradition that is thoroughly grounded in Scripture as well in practice of a personal and social justice” (Griffin p. 21). This longing for the mystical and “pre-modern” expressions may be the thrust behind the resurgence of Eastern Orthodoxy among American believers as well.

Thomas Oden is a proponent of this return of the past. He believes that, “Postmodernism is an opportunity for orthodox, classical Christianity to make a comeback” (Veith 1994 p. 28). While the eclecticism of Postmodernism may reflect a renewal of the forms from the past, and the search of meaning in mystical experiences may recall the pre-modern age, it is dangerous to assume this trend is the only answer. Essentially, “Christianity should not be identified exclusively with pre-modern civilization, anymore than it should be identified with any other humanly devised institution” (Veith 1993 p. 32). God is “setting the stage to do a new thing” (Campbell p.435) and we need not be content with a retroactive approach albeit the value of rooting our belief and practice in the Ancient Fathers of the Church. Clearly the way to an orthodox future is through the path of the Ancients, but the expressions and symbols may embrace a yet unknown style.

It remains to be seen actually what the emerging church will be in Postmodern or still-to-be-determined era to come. A limited offering of the approaches and elements that may be needed is offered in this conclusion.

First, in order to earn the right to share the “meta-narrative” of God’s plan, personal evangelism needs to focus on the sharing of personal experiences with the living God. Brand and Chaplin believe, “At the end of the day, people can’t live without a grand story. In telling personal stories, we are breaking through barriers that have been raised against the Christian meta-narrative” (Brand p. 180). The telling of these stories may be through personal interaction, but they are more readily accepted when illustrated through the visual arts.

Although Postmodernism is characterized by fragmentation, the Christian message must not be presented in a fragmented form (Tebbe p. 429). A “rationalist 1,2,3” approach, lectures in Systematic Theology or even apologetic arguments will not communicate the reality of the message. Even more importantly, the message must be validated, according to Roxburgh, by Christians “living as an alternative community, living unfragmented lives and allowing the Spirit of God to permeate every aspect of our



lives. . . not to champion an individualistic message” (Tebbe p. 429). The *whole narrative* of God must be presented.

The quest for spirituality is a longing for meaning in order to define identity and experience community is the goal of the Postmodernist. God is the answer to this quest, but “the Postmodernist’s spiritual thirst cannot be satisfied with doctrine, strategy, or institution. Only the person of Jesus and his body, the community of believers, can quench such a thirst. The church can fulfill its mission in a Postmodern world through the reproduction of authentic communities of Jesus-followers” (Campbell p. 435). Stanley Grenz declares the “ultimate key is community” (Bos p. 7) in reaching the Postmodernist for Christ.

Christians need to re-engage in a forceful manner in the arts, entertainment industry and other facets of modern culture. This is crucial because “in many respects the entertainment industry has become the vehicle through which postmoderns express their spiritual quest. . . . this enterprise, as well as a return of evangelical Christians into the realm of pop culture, (is) standing on the cutting edge in the immediate future” (Grenz quoted in Box p. 7).

What we do not need to do as evangelicals is “assume that (we) must convert the postmodernist to modernism before they can bring them to Christ” (Bos p. 5). We also do not need to confront the errors in their philosophy before sharing the reality and hope of Jesus Christ, and demonstrating it in our lives. It would be easy to fall into despair as we witness the out-workings of the deconstructionist Postmodernism in daily life and art, but that would be a false conclusion as well. We need a daily reminder of the need to “recapture a profound confidence the power of the Spirit who remains active in the world today and is active in ways that we might not immediately recognize” (Grenz quoted in Bos p. 8).

Do we *really* believe that we serve a God who is greater than any spirit or philosophy of this world, including Postmodernism and what may follow it? It remains to be seen.

*Our world has changed for better or for worse.  
It is for us to find truth and beauty for today,  
constantly re-applying the truth of God’s word  
to our own time and our contemporary situation.  
(Rookmaaker in Brand, p. 151).*

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