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POSTMODERNISM

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Introduction to Apologetics

by

Matthew McNutt

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Introduction

Postmodernism, the view that all truth is relative, is a widely accepted yet flawed belief system. Lyotard defined postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives.”¹ In other words, incredulity towards the idea of defined reality, history, truth, or beliefs. This paper will demonstrate both the internal and external contradictions with the postmodern belief system, as well as the contrasting ideals of the Christian worldview, ultimately demonstrating Christianity to be the superior worldview.

This will be accomplished by giving an overview of Postmodernism, with observations from some of its respected voices; Derrida, Kant, and Lyotard, as well as contrasting opinions from Christian apologists. Through this examination, it will become apparent that the foundations of Postmodernism, and the question of relativity, ultimately collapse and cannot support the fundamental claims of the worldview, ultimately demonstrating that Christianity is the only option for a functional worldview.

Summary of Postmodernism

James Sire describes postmodernism this way; “No longer is there a single story, a metanarrative (in our terms a worldview), that holds Western culture together.”² In generations past, typically each culture had its own metanarrative, but the postmodernism approach changes that to recognize that many people, groups, and cultures have their own narratives, each equal

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report On Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1984), 24.

² James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 216.

with the others, and none having dominance or greater authority. One of the challenges with postmodernism is defining it; at different times the worldview is defined in different ways. Heath White explains that it is “not a theory or a creed: it is more like an attitude or a way of looking at things.”³ There are weaknesses and strengths, like most worldviews. The following summary of Postmodernism’s tenets is based on Groothuis’ criteria for worldview evaluation:⁴

A. Ultimate Reality: With regards to the question of ultimate reality, Kant wrote that “Our age is the age of criticism, to which everything must be subjected. The sacredness of religion, and the authority of legislation, are by many regarded as grounds of exemption from the examination of this tribunal. But, if they are exempted, they become the subjects of just suspicion, and cannot lay claim to sincere respect, which reason accords only to that which has stood the test of a free and public examination.”⁵ Everything is open to be questioned, with the recognition that understanding is shaped by culture and context. As such, it is impossible for any one person to be able to claim to have an exclusive hold on reality since they are unable to get past their own social constructions.

Derrida is one of the primary voices of postmodernism, although he labeled himself a deconstructionist. He wrote that “In what one calls the real life of these existences ‘of flesh and bone,’ beyond and behind what one believes can be

³ Heath White, *Postmodernism 101: a First Course for the Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 11.

⁴ Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: a Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: IVP Academic, 2011), Kindle location 721.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Amazon Kindle, 2011), Kindle location 18.

circumscribed as Rousseau's text, there has never been anything but writing."⁶ By this he means that each individual interprets reality through their own lens of language.

B. Source of Morality: Postmodernism claims there is no one source of morality, instead there are endlessly differing interpretations of what morality is. Derrida argues that the pursuit of being ethical in fact makes people irresponsible, a temptation to fall into the fallacy (according to him) of believing there is an absolute.⁷ As such, morality is fluid, dependent on culture. Sire suggests that Foucault, perhaps the most radical of the postmodern voices, would claim that "the greatest good is an individual's freedom to maximize pleasure."⁸

C. Nature of Humanity: While humans are born with certain aptitudes or potential, the nature of humanity is socially determined. Taken one step further, there is no such thing as human nature, it is a social construct. Foucault writes,

"To all those who still wish to talk about man, about his reign or his liberation, to all those who still ask themselves questions about what man is in his essence, to all those who wish to take him as their starting-point in their attempts to reach the truth, to all those who, on the other hand, refer all knowledge back to the truths of man himself, to all those who refuse to formalize without anthropologizing, who refuse to mythologize without demystifying, who refuse to think without immediately thinking that it is a man who is thinking, to all these warped and twisted forms of reflection we can answer only with a philosophical laugh – which means, to a certain extent, a silent one."⁹

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ Pr, 1976), 158.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death: and, Literature in Secret*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008), 62.

⁸ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 228.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Reissue ed. (New York: Vintage, 1994), 342.

- D. **Spiritual Liberation Attained By:** This type of liberation is acquired by recognizing that there is no one truth, but feeling free to pursue spirituality that gives the individual moral satisfaction. Christian Smith calls this “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” a belief system that essentially teaches happiness comes from being a good, moral person.¹⁰ He contends that not only is this a popular approach in general, it has invaded the Christian church to a significant degree as well.
- E. **Ultimate Authority:** There is no one ultimate authority; much like the impossibility to know an ultimate reality, is impossible to know an ultimate authority. At the same time, the various narratives or belief systems are viewed as attempts at gaining power. While according to postmodernism there is no purely objective knowledge or truth, the collection of knowledge and stories does give power or authority. However, it is considered oppressive if others’ knowledge or metanarratives give them the power; ultimate authority for oneself should reside within the individual based on their own knowledge.¹¹
- F. **History and the Afterlife:** History cannot be fully known as those who recorded it did so through their own culture and biased lens. While it may be possible to be able to have a strong idea of what happened, it cannot be known with certainty because of the cultural bias of those who recorded it. Likewise, because it is impossible to know anything with complete certainty, it is not possible to know for sure if there is an afterlife or what it

¹⁰ Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Reprint ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Kindle location 3526.

¹¹ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 226.

would be like. In this spirit, Kant writes that all “our knowledge begins with experience,” however, because experience is shaped by other factors, it is limited.¹²

Evaluation of Postmodernism

For the purposes of evaluating postmodernism, the points focused on below are the criteria provided by Groothuis for test and evaluating worldviews. His intent is that they are universally applicable criteria, however some critics feel that the extreme differences between varying worldviews make it impossible to have one set of evaluating criteria.¹³

- A. Does it explain what it ought to explain? This is one of postmodernism’s great weaknesses. Even in researching this paper it was difficult to find a solid definition of the worldview. Many authors stressed its intangible qualities, and constantly shifting definitions. What the proponents of postmodernism do attempt to explain is with the caveat that it could be wrong, and that it is rooted in culture and social constructs that change over time and location. With a value system based in relativity and the lack of absolutes, definitions and explanations become difficult to achieve. White writes, “postmoderns kept the modern distrust of authority but lost their trust in reason and have found nothing to replace it.”¹⁴
- B. Does it have internal logical consistency? This is a challenge for postmodernism and ultimately, one of the first places critics go to in their attacks. With one of its basic tenets

¹² Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Amazon Kindle, 2011), Kindle location 447.

¹³ Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: a Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*, Kindle location 485.

¹⁴ White, *Postmodernism 101*, 41.

being that truth is relative or not truly knowable, that very belief cannot be considered dependable or true for all. As Sire puts it, “the rejection of all metanarratives is itself a metanarrative.”¹⁵ This is not just a criticism from Christian apologists, the faulty logic is also a reoccurring challenge from secular circles. Their frustration is that postmodern relativism “eliminates universal human rights, contributes to pseudoscience ... undermines moral and rational discourse ... makes communication between those of differing worldviews impossible, and so on.”¹⁶

- C. Does it have coherence? Postmodernism is largely consistent in maintaining its value of truth as relative, however, there is little to no coherence in the “truths” that are believed and accepted. With each individual forming their own narrative, contradictions abound. Even within individual belief systems there are often times incoherent combinations of beliefs. Having said that, though, postmodernism does have one strength in particular; an acknowledgement of mankind’s imperfect ability to form truth and reality. While the wide acceptance of relativity has its failings, embedded in that belief is a humble recognition of man’s imperfections.
- D. Does it have intellectual and cultural fecundity? Postmodernism on its surface encourages creativity and productivity as it encourages each person to explore and pursue their truth. However, it has resulted in a spiritual laziness; Christian Smith describes in his descriptions of “moralistic therapeutic deism” notes how half of the religious population

¹⁵ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 239.

¹⁶ Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2000), 48.

in America believe it is okay to mix religious beliefs with little thought to their compatibility.¹⁷ Rather than being the freeing experience expected, accepting all truths as valid strips the world of meaning and value.

- E. Is it simpler to explain? Simpler belief systems are preferable to unnecessarily complex ones. Postmodernism actually comes across initially as simple to explain; truth is relative. It is only as people begin to dive into the ramifications of it that it becomes more complex and contradictory. As previously mentioned, even defining postmodernism has many scholars challenged to do so because of its constantly changing nature. Sire points out that “postmodernism is in flux, as is postmodernism’s take on the significance of human history, including its own history,” and as such even the core people committed to the belief system are in flux as well.¹⁸

Christian Alternative

Following the same criteria as the previous section, here is an evaluation of the Christian worldview:

- A. Does it explain what it ought to explain? Christianity claims to contain all that is required to pursue it within the scriptures. While there are pieces that are difficult to understand, the core tenets of salvation and pursuit of Christ are able to be explained. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 makes exactly this point, driving home the value that scriptures have been given so that followers of God can be prepared for every opportunity.

¹⁷ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, 74.

¹⁸ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 229.

- B. Is there internal logical consistency? For a book written over the span of 1500 years, in multiple languages, with dozens of different writers from all walks of life, it is incredible how unified the message of scripture is. While on the surface there may be some contradictions in the scriptures, with further study and understanding of the culture and understandings of those who wrote the scripture the contradictions are able to be removed. McDowell writes that “allegations of error in the Bible are usually based on a failure to recognize basic principles of interpreting ancient literature.”¹⁹
- C. Does it have coherence? This question is a little more challenging. Abstractly, yes, Christianity has coherence. The belief that God is all powerful and defines truth requires that that reality remain unchanging and unified throughout all of time. As Dr. Smith points out, “Far from being limited to a particular aspect of life, the biblical worldview is comprehensive.”²⁰ However, as imperfect beings, humans have interpreted the meanings of scriptures in different ways, formed different denominations, wasted resources and energy on infighting and disagreements, all of which contributes to an image of lacking coherence.
- D. Does it have intellectual and cultural fecundity? While postmodernism claims to have achieved this, as previously stated it actually results in spiritual laziness. Christianity, on the other hand, through its admonitions to search out the scriptures, to pursue

¹⁹ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, [Rev., ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 46.

²⁰ Dr. C. Fred Smith, *Developing a Biblical Worldview: Seeing Things God's Way* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), Kindle location 115.

Christlikeness, to do our best for God’s honor, and to not just blindly accept the teaching of those around us, does an incredible job of challenging its adherents to intellectual and cultural fecundity. Groothuis affirmed the intellectual credibility of the Christian worldview when he wrote, “The universe as a contingent and designed system is best explained by a noncontingent Creator, who depends on nothing outside Himself (Acts 17:25) and who created the universe to operate in various goal-related ways. Living systems presuppose intelligent design and cannot be explained on the basis of merely chance and natural laws.”²¹

E. Is it simpler to explain? Simpler belief systems are preferable to unnecessarily complex ones. Where at first glance postmodernism seems simple and then upon closer examination is revealed to be complex, Christianity is the opposite. Many look at the churches, their practices and traditions, hear older translations in outdated English, and assume that Christianity must be complex. Instead, on closer examination, Christianity is revealed to be incredibly simple to explain; at its core it is about creation, fall, and redemption.²²

Defense of Christianity

In a defense of Christianity with regards to the postmodern worldview, a strong starting point is on the issue of truth. While postmoderns claim truth is relative, that there is not a defined metanarrative from which truth comes from, even in so claiming they have contradicted

²¹ Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 180.

²² Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: a Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*, Kindle location 795.

themselves. By virtue of believing that that truth; that all truth is relative, they have embraced a metanarrative that defines and shapes their beliefs. Aristotle once argued that truth relies on a tangible thing; it cannot be based on nothing. He famously wrote, “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true; so that he who says of anything that it is, or that it is not, will say either what is true or what is false; but neither what is nor what is not is said to be or not to be.”²³

What Aristotle so eloquently communicates is this: a thing is either true or false. It cannot be true for one person, but false for another. Different truths cannot contradict each other, logic requires that one admits conflicting truths reveal at least one, if not both, to be untrue. Postmodernism is correct on one front; man is shaped and influenced by his context, his culture, the bias and lens that have been shaped in his perspective over the course of a lifetime; it is why man only holds pieces of the truth.

If mankind cannot possess a complete truth, who is able to know it? Is it not something that requires the existence of a God? A being perfect and powerful enough to both know and understand all truth? Tied to truth is the issue of objective morals. While relativism would suggest that morals vary from person to person, suggesting ultimately that evil does not exist, in reality this is an easier topic to defend. In his core, man knows good and evil. God claims throughout scripture to have written His law on the heart (Jer. 31:33, Heb. 8:10, Rom. 2:15). This is revealed not in man’s actions, but in his wants; he does not want to be mocked, he does not want to be robbed, he does not want to be attacked, he does not want to be cheated – he does not

²³ McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, 586.

want these things because in his heart he knows they are wrong and he does not want them to happen to him.

Objective moral values do exist, whether or not individuals are willing to acknowledge them. Groothuis notes the “goodness to deity” argument in his book²⁴;

1. If a personal God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist.
2. Objective moral values do exist.
3. Therefore, a personal God exists.

Perhaps mankind’s fascination with, and hunger for, truth is rooted in its creation. Scripture claims that man is “made in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27), and while sin corrupts and renders man imperfect, his desires are still impacted by that holy lineage. Isaiah 65:16 calls God “the God of truth,” a God mankind is designed to be in relationship with, and created in the image of – of course truth is a center point of man’s philosophical discussions. John 14:6, Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” Scripture claims to have the exclusive hold on truth; the Christian church is called “the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).

Moral truth exists, therefore God exists. Since God exists, and both warrants and claims a hold on truth, then the scriptures must be dependable. When Christ claims in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” it must reflect an exclusive reality regarding man’s restoration to his Creator. John 3:16 summarizes how that is accomplished; “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” By placing one’s trust and faith in

²⁴ Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: a Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*, Kindle location 3625.

the saving power of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, eternal life and restoration is achievable.

Conclusion

In modern society, postmodernism has natural appeal. The world is more connected than any time in history, with people throughout the planet being connected to and with people of different belief systems and cultural biases to a degree never before seen. Moral relativism paves the way in theory for all these differing backgrounds to coexist without diminishing one another. But as demonstrated in this paper, its foundations quickly collapse under the contradictions and fallacies. Instead, through the very truth postmodernism tries to redefine, it is revealed to be an imperfect worldview and points to a moral truth that ultimately proves the existence of God.

Christianity is not just a superior worldview, it is proven time and again to be the only functional worldview.

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