

ESSAY

Multiple Modernisms and American Christianity: Where is the Church?

Kenneth A. Schmidt, Brandman University

As a child during the early and mid-1960s, I often wondered why Sunday School materials seemed antiquated. Of course, I did not use the term *antiquated* as a child; old fashioned in my view. The design and approach looked as though the materials were written during my parents' childhood, not mine. The pastel-colored pictures had a calming appearance. Jesus was fair skinned with light brown hair, while the scribes and Pharisees had a distinctively dark, foreboding appearance. Christ was always portrayed as gentle and calm, with an air of royalty about him. Little children were often portrayed either hugging him or playing in the dirt at his feet. Flowers and birds were always present, and the sky always blue. Raised as I was in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, there was a slight but noticeable Germanic influence on the materials. Despite the unrealistic images, the content was always straightforward and biblically based. Faith was simple, comforting, and consistent. By my adolescence, all of that changed.

Adolescence is a difficult time in anyone's life, and during the early '70s it seemed incredibly difficult. Jesus changed, or so it seemed. He was no longer the Christ of my early childhood, but a street-smart revolutionary. Society was changing at a rapid pace, but few could identify why. I wasn't sure I liked this new Jesus. The Jesus portrayed in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970) and *Godspell* (1973) opposed to his portrayal in *King of Kings* (1961) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), and it left me confused. Who was Jesus? If Christianity couldn't tell me who Jesus was, then something was wrong. I recall my pastor purchasing several copies of Malcom Boyd's *Are You Running with Me, Jesus?* (1965) for our teenage bible class. Boyd's work was among the best sellers, but the book did not engage our class. The book's cover, which showed a balding Episcopalian priest smoking a cigarette while engaged in a conversation, prompted laughter. That the book came with Charlie Byrd guitar accompaniment was incredibly annoying. Guitars? Not in our church! I recall the snickering and jokes about the older generation trying to sound 'hip' and making Jesus out to be the best buddy one could have. I remember jokes that the next pictures we should expect would show Jesus in a tee-shirt and faded Levi's. For those living in a small rural farming community, the book seemed to have an appeal to the city kids, but not to us. In retrospect, maybe our distaste for this portrayal of Jesus spoke more about us than the image. Perhaps, as adolescents, we had a desire to hold fast to something of our childhood, something unchanging and eternal. Maybe city Christians

were different than country Christians, and Boyd's book was written more for the former than the latter. Whatever the case, this was clearly not the Jesus of our childhood.

As much as it shocked to me to see Jesus portrayed in this fashion, it was during my adolescent years that I developed a rudimentary theory about why Christian educational materials seemed woefully dated and irrelevant. The authors of the elementary Sunday School materials depicted and addressed a faded memory of youth, not the current youth, and furthermore, it was their idealization youth. Hence, the questions and concerns addressed by curriculum developers were not those of the current generation. The developers' distant recollections of adolescent angst, combined with their perception of how current adolescents addressed societal changes, created the curricular framework. Adults seemed out-of-touch with the reality of high school, peer relationships, and the metaphysical questions often pondered in the adolescent mind. Like a loveable old grandparent, the church was from a different age.

Before the late 1940s, most Americans operated with the modern perspective—a firm belief in individual initiative, progress, democracy, freedom, science, and technology. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, modern society believed that universal truths, extracted through objective reasoning and science, would be discovered, embraced, and ultimately lead to an age of increased prosperity and widespread justice. However, this modern mindset was not friendly to Christianity. From its origins in the Age of Reason and Enlightenment, modernity inherited a belief in a reality apart from a Christian idea of God. Society, consumerism, moral relativism, and reductive naturalism replaced prior notions of God. As Williams (2007) noted,

It is never just about how we fit into the cogs of society, or about economic production. The more our education system is dominated by functionalism, skills, productivity, and the more our whole society is determined by that kind of mythology, the harder it is for the religious voice to be heard. There is a real abrasion between lots of the forms of modernity and religion. (para 11)

By the close of World War II, people questioned the veracity of modernity. Changes in belief systems do not occur overnight, and such shifts in a worldview should take decades, even centuries, to occur. However, that was not the case. The modern era first had books, followed by radio and cinema; the postmodern era had books, radio, cinema, and television. Television brought some novel as well as recycled ideas into American homes. Many of the ideas were based on postmodernism. Television informed the adolescents of the 1970s more than it did those of the 60s. Television was in its infancy during the 1960s, but by the 70s, it had developed as a powerful medium. Those born in the mid-1950s through 1990s were fed a steady diet of postmodern thought through television and schools (Dickerson 2007; Henry 1994). Public education openly spoke about implementing postmodernism (Petterway 2010; Slattery 1999). A simple Google search of postmodernism in American education will provide the researcher with over a million sites ranging from how to teach postmodern values to postmodern school

management. Skill, Robinson, Lyons, and Larson observed that television programs portrayed religion as insignificant, and opined that, “over time, the consequences of these actions may actually impact the strength and viability of these institutions as a social force in society” (1994:265). Popular comic strips reinforced the image (Lindsey and Heeren 1992). Perhaps the skepticism and cynicism of postmodernity, coupled with the often hypocritical faith of televangelists and their emphasis on politics and money, led to an antipathy against religion. However, the cinema usually depicted Christians as either self-righteous, judgmental, backward hypocrites, or medieval and bizarre. Popular films, such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *Carrie* (1976), Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979), *The Meaning of Life* (1983), and *Footloose* (1984), are a few examples. It is possible that the youth of the 1970s had the impression that the church, as a modern social institution, was out-of-step and unable to respond to the social and cultural shifts. Even public education dismissed the historically significant role of religion (Boyer 1997). Several have suggested that might indeed be the case, and have pointed to the eclecticism of New Age spiritualism, cultism, and spiritual personal growth seminars as an individual's means of spirituality (Huss 2014; Mercadante 2014; O'Loughlin 1999).

As ideas spread quicker and became more accessible, we were told by social critics such as Postman (1979, 1982, 1985, 1992, 1995), Lasch (1979), and others that critical thinking decreased. The world seemed smaller because of television, and it may not have been the loss of critical thinking as much as it was the inability to cope with the volume of information. As the postmodern worldview advanced quickly, skepticism of modernism, particularly Western modernism, became popular in the 1970s. Cultural relativism, cynicism, and a belief that truth may exist independent of human consciousness, with no objective means of identifying it, became standard. While many Americans living in the 1970s were conscious of a cultural shift, it was difficult to define it as anything other than change. One wonders if parents in that era were aware of the postmodern emphasis in public education. The tumultuous 1970s were marked by antiwar protests, Watergate, Equal Rights, and the popular *I'm OK, You're OK* (Harris 1967) mentality. Generation X born to the Baby Boomers was caught in the tidal shift. Confusion resulted, as older siblings either supported their parents' ideals or joined the 60s counterculture.

As that shift occurred, where was the church? It seemed as though most denominations were still caught up in the modernist battles of the past with Darwinian evolution theory, Relativism, Marxism, the evil influence of cinema and rock, and fundamentalism. Some, like my denomination, were battling liberal theology and biblical interpretation. Meanwhile, Generation X of the 70s was trying to maneuver postmodern beliefs to reconcile the differences. This last point is significant for two reasons. First, postmodernism was the result of disenchantment with modernity. The burgeoning generation of postmodern adults intellectually fed their younger siblings. Second, some of the baby boomer generation's attempts to reconcile the differences between modernity and postmodernity resulted in the

advent of present-day meta-modernism, or post-postmodernism. In this case, the shift took place in books, cinema, television, and, later, the internet. By the dawn of social media in the late 1990s, new ideas were communicated at an astonishing rate, and postmodernism was in full bloom. And with each technological advance in communication, society appears to adopt a corresponding worldview. As Boboc (2012) observed,

Postmodern individuals have to live in a world governed by overwhelming, non-stop communication, which is a constant informational revolution with no preset aims. They find themselves in competition with their virtual reflection in a hyper-reality created to fill in the ever-growing gap that has been distancing them from other fellow humans. Consequently, all standards have become either obsolete or irrelevant to new generations because of the constant search for gratification of one's own self-regenerating pleasures "unconstrained by a hierarchy of foundational and transcendental reason and values" (Usher and Edwards 1994:11). In an unprecedented manner, popular culture supports postmodernism's resistance toward metanarratives (Peters 1998).

This phenomenon poses serious hermeneutical issues, as anyone spending time on social media can attest. With the fluidity of words, memes, and word limits such as those on Twitter, thoughts are constrained. Expressing sincerity in 50 words or less is a challenge in social media. Social media is centered on the individual, despite being social in the name. Selfies, profiles, and Facebook's ever-present question "What's on your mind?" are focused more on the individual's narcissistic tendencies and less on the exchange found in previous social interaction. It should not be surprising that individualism is an essential factor in the rise of religious Nones and SBNR (Spiritual but Not Religious, or Spiritual but Not Affiliated, depending on one's interpretation). The increase, well documented by Pew Research (2012, 2017, 2018), suggested several reasons for the phenomenon. However, technology and communication were not among them. One cannot help but wonder why, when technology and communication are such vital components of contemporary society.

Meta-modernism claims to function as a mediator between modernism and postmodernism. Where postmodernism emphasized irony, nihilism, skepticism, deconstruction, relativism, and the rejection grand narratives, meta-modernism seeks romanticism, hope, sincerity, and the possibility of the grand narratives and universal truths of modernity. However, one should not be surprised by such a shift, considering the response of German Romanticism to Enlightenment skepticism. History can teach us many lessons about human nature. As this shift took place, many Christian denominations were still battling postmodernity. American Christianity is like the firefighter busily stamping the dying embers of a fire that has passed, while the raging flames are a mile ahead. With all its potential, American Christianity is seemingly caught in society's past instead of its present, and without a vision for the future.

If all of this sounds somewhat simplistic, it should. If this commentary stirs Christian sociologists to examine meta-modernism and Christianity, it will serve its intended purpose. Postmodernity seemed to be a significant problem the church must face, but what about the current situation of meta-modernity? Naturally, there is a substantial overlap of worldviews. Society does not completely close one intellectual chapter before it quickly begins the next. However, technology substantially accelerates the process. The modern worldview still exists. The current blind trust in science was never more evident than in the recent COVID pandemic, with some praying for science to save humanity with a vaccine. Quarantine became a quasi-monastic lifestyle, and donning masks became an outward sign of the faith. When state and local governments imposed the stay-at-home orders and closure of churches, the churches scrambled. Online services were used, but were they effective? Some events stir humans either to return to the old gods or to seek a new god. If current events appear confusing, look to history for answers. It has been suggested that COVID might end both modernity and postmodernity and stimulate a new age like that of the 14th century (Baranowski 2020). Could that new age be meta-modernity? If that is the case, how will Christianity, particularly American Christianity, respond?

The myriad results of American Christianity's lack of timely responses to socio-cultural trends are both frightening and informing. For example, decline in U.S. church membership began slowly from the 1970s through the 90s, then accelerated, resulting in a "20-percentage-point decline since 1999 and more than half of that change occurring since the start of the current decade" (Jones 2019). It is possible the overall results of postmodernism on the 1970-1990s adolescent generations resulted in a disenchantment with organized religion due to Christianity's failure to respond to technology.

The mainline conservative American denominations must now no longer face the dying embers of postmodernism, but the rapidly developing flames of meta-modernism. Already, the signs are there. However, at this point, a warning about sources is necessary. One will not find many peer-reviewed articles and books about meta-modernism and Christianity, at least not yet. However, there should be! Many metamodern Christians can be found on the internet, in blogs, social media platforms, and chat rooms. There one will find a growing interest in Christianity in the United States and abroad. At first glance, one might be pleased to see a renewed interest in religion; however, that is just what it is—religion, spiritualism, and the spiritual experiential journey. Meta-modernism supports a renewal of religious and spiritual experience, but faith is another issue. For example, one can be a follower of Hinduism yet claim to be also Christian by adding Christ to the Hindu pantheon of gods. Disdain for western institutions and beliefs is a common feature (Mercandante 2014). The metamodern individual is romantic, inclusive, and oscillating between opposing views while searching for peaceful coexistence. The spiritual experience is a critical component, but traditional orthodoxy and doctrinal purity are not necessary.

Are mainline denominations prepared for the new worldview? And how can the church respond? Recently, a series was developed that responds well to the metamodern infatuation with technology while entertainingly presenting the Gospels. *The Chosen* is a program depicting the lives of Christ's disciples and Christ's ministry. The first episodes are available on YouTube; however, to watch the entire series, one must download the app and pay a nominal fee. The monies go to funding the series and 'paying it forward' for others to watch, making this program an evangelistic tool. In the program, one can see Christ depicted as the Son of God among the people. Jesus dances at a wedding feast, jokes with his disciples, and talks with children. This is not the Christ depicted by Max von Sydow in the 1965 film *King of Kings*, but rather an understandable and unpretentious Jesus. Interestingly, *The Chosen* is not a Hollywood production, nor is it the result of an interdenominational effort to evangelize. If denominations are not prepared to respond to the metamodern, then individual Christians will. A media series about the life of Christ can only last so long. One can reasonably assume it will end with Christ's resurrection or His ascension. Then what? The viewers will have thoughtful, meaningful questions and will seek answers.

Those questions will be framed within a metamodern worldview that attempts to resolve the cynicism and fragmentation resulting from postmodernism. Will the church be prepared to respond? Will Christian sociologists inform the church, or busy themselves with dying embers? Amidst the burnt-out ruins of human philosophy, Christ remains unshaken and untarnished, directing humanity to the Gospel's eternal truth.

References

- Baranowski, Mariusz. 2020. *Postmodern Society and Covid-19 Pandemic: Old, New and Scary II*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342232777_.
- Boboc, Marius. 2012. "The Postmodern Curriculum in a Modern Classroom." *International Journal of Education* 4(1):142–152. doi:10.5296/ije.v4i1.1167.
- Boyd, Malcolm. 1965. *Are You Running with Me, Jesus?* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Dickerson, Linda W. 2007. *A Postmodern View of the Hidden Curriculum*. Unpublished doctoral Thesis. Georgia Southern University-Statesboro.
- Harris, Thomas Anthony. 1967. *I'm Ok, You're Ok*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Henry, Matthew. 1994. "The Triumph of Popular Culture: Situation Comedy, Postmodernism and 'The Simpsons.'" *Studies in Popular Culture* 17(1):85-99.
- Huss, Boaz. 2014. "Spirituality: The Emergence of a New Cultural Category and its Challenge to the Religious and the Secular." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29(1):47-60. doi: 10.1080/13537903.2014.864803

- Jones, Jeffrey. 2019. "U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades." Retrieved September 11, 2020 (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>)
- Lasch, Christopher. 1979. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company
- Lindsey, Donald B., and John Heeren. 1992. "Where the Sacred Meets the Profane: Religion in the Comic Pages." *Review of Religious Research* 34(1):63-77. doi:10.2307/3511446
- Lipka, Michael and Claire Gecewicz. 2017. "More Americans Now Say They're Spiritual But Not Religious." PEW Research. Retrieved September 11, 2020 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>).
- Mercandante, Linda A. 2014. *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual But Not Religious*. New York: Oxford.
- O'Loughlin, Maria. 1999. "Postmodernity and the New Age of Enchantment." *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 88(352):363-370.
- Peters, Michael, ed. 1998. *Naming the Multiple: Poststructuralism and Education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Petterway, Arthur L. 2010. *Implementing postmodernism in changing the role of school administrators in America's schools*. Retrieved on September 11, 2020 (<http://www.eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED510281>)
- Pew Research. 2018. "Why America's 'Nones' Don't Identify with a Religion". Retrieved September 11, 2020 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/>).
- Pew Research. 2012. "'Nones'" on the Rise." Retrieved September 11, 2020 (<https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>)
- Postman, Neil. 1979. *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- Postman, Neil. 1982. *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- Postman, Neil. 1985. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Viking.
- Postman, Neil. 1992. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. New York: Knopf.
- Postman, Neil. 1995. *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. New York: Knopf.
- Skill, Thomas, James D. Robinson, John S. Lyons, and David Larson. 1994. "The Portrayal of Religion and Spirituality on Fictional Network Television." *Review of Religious Research* 35(3):251-267.
- Slattery, Patrick. 1999. "Postmodern Education." *Teaching Education* 10(2):37-38. doi: 10.1080/1047621990100205
- Usher, Robin and Richard Edwards, eds. 1994. *Postmodernism and Education*. London, UK: Routledge.

Williams, Rowan. 2007. *The Conflict Between Religion and Modernity*. Retrieved September 11, 2020 (<http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/718/the-conflict-between-religion-and-modernity>).

Direct correspondence to Kenneth A. Schmidt at schmidt@brandman.edu