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Author(s): Robert Enns.

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FAITH AND LEARNING

SWITCHING LENSES: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON 'POST-MODERNITY'

Robert Enns

One's faith perspective always influences one's definitions of cultural realities. But cultural categories also shape how one experiences religious faith. As a sociologist, I know that insights from my academic discipline have provided some of the perceptual "lenses" through which I filter my own personal faith; my faith, in turn, has also influenced selected elements of the sociological tradition which have captured my attention. A few examples of sociological works which have enabled me to interpret the place of my own religious commitments within the context of modern society are: Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and his typology of "church-sect-mysticism"; Peter Berger's notion of *The Social Construction of Reality* and *The Sacred Canopy*; and, more recently, Robert Bellah, et al on the *Habits of the Heart* which are foundational in American culture.

Post-Modernity as a Window and a Mirror

More recently I have noticed repeated references to a concept which appears not only in the sociological literature but also in other disciplines as diverse as mathematics and philosophy. I share, in a preliminary way, what the notion of "post-modernity" offers both as a new "window"

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Robert Enns is a professor of sociology at Fresno Pacific College, Fresno, CA

on our social and cultural situation, and also as a “mirror” which enables us to reflect in new ways on our Christian faith. “Post-modern” (with or without the hyphen) is a notion which proposes to “name” new realities to which many of us may have become vaguely sensitive but for which we may not yet have an appropriate interpretive framework. Part of the problem is that “post-modernity” calls into question the adequacy of the very conceptual and valuative categories which we utilize in the conduct of our daily thoughts and practices. “Post-modern” refers to quite new ways of experiencing the world and our place in it. “Post-modernity” suggests a new “hermeneutic” approach. It involves a fundamental shift in the “paradigm” by which we frame the basic questions we ask and the answers we find adequate. “Post-modernity” represents a shift in our “megaparadigm” at the most fundamental and inclusive level. John E. Toews, along with others, has offered as a metaphor for “post-modernity” the “tsunami” (tidal wave) which rearranges every contour of the familiar landscape by which one earlier oriented one’s “place” in this world (as well as the world-yet-to-come).

Of course this is not the first such far-reaching transformation in the meaning of human existence. Christian faith provided a foundation for the social and cultural reconstruction which followed the collapse of Greek and Roman civilizations. That synthesis gave rise to the extended period of social, cultural (and religious) coherence which we refer to as the “medieval” period (or, more pejoratively, the “dark ages”). Protestant reformations, political revolutions, Newtonian sciences, industrialization and urbanization, large-scale bureaucratic capitalist and socialist economies, and the emergence of the nation-state as the social unit of greatest potency combined to bring to an end that long era of social and cultural equilibrium.

The old order was replaced. The “modern” paradigm which grew out of the enlightenment, consisted in the confidence of the individual’s capacity to observe objectively, and in the “right” of individuals and groups to reconstruct material (and other) realities rationally. This paradigm replaced the power of the old political and religious traditions. The modern faith in “progress” was based upon profound insights and powerful technological developments. But it has become clear by now that the modern period has also produced monstrous violence against both the physical environment and against persons defined as marginal or inferior by reason of gender, race, ethnicity. The individualism, materialism, rationality, patriarchy, bureaucracy, racism, nationalism, and the optimistic activism which have characterized the “modern” era into which most of us were born, and which most of us have come to take for granted, has now borne its harvest of bitter-sweet fruit.

“Post-Modern” Means No Return to the Old

Out of the fruits of this “modern” era have emerged the new seeds of “post-modern” constructions which we are just now beginning to encounter and understand. The term “post-modern” itself is obviously defined negatively. Whatever “post-modern” will finally prove to mean, it represents what emerges out of and moves beyond the “modern” era. Hence “post-modern” does not in any way point toward a return to earlier ways of being in this world. We cannot retreat to ways of thinking which fail to recognize the positive results of scientific inquiry. We cannot return to the patriarchal and racist hierarchies which were foundational to the “traditional” world-views of most of our ancestors, whether peasant, aristocrat, colonialist, or entrepreneur. Some “post-modern” thinkers emphasize the “deconstruction” of the fundamental features of the “modern” world, including the subject/object duality of enlightenment rationality, and the absolutist, propositional thinking of any sort of “foundationalism.” It is probably appropriate for those of us who are Christian to recognize, together with critical post-modern thinkers, that all “hermeneutics,” including our own, are in fact “local hermeneutics.”

“Post-modern” Thinking Offers New Possibilities

But I have been even more impressed with the suggestions of those “post-modern” commentators who provide “constructive” pointers to new ways of being, especially for those of us for whom biblical faith remains important (but without the baggage of the “modern” forms of thought and practice which are alien to the biblical texts). Three such commentators deserve notice.

- In *A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993) William E. Doll, Jr. provides a particularly accessible survey (for novices like me) of recent developments in a wide range of fields (including mathematics, physics, biology, psychology, and philosophy). Doll emphasizes the implications of the creative and “self-organizing” patterns toward which recent scientific findings point. He invites us to join in “negotiating the passages” of meaning which might be found in these creative, self-organizing patterns. For those of us who are interested in theological reflections on all of this, he recommends the kind of “process theology” which is represented by John Cobb, Jr. and others.

- In *God and Religion in the Postmodern World: Essays in Postmodern Theology* (New York: State University of New York, 1989) David Ray Griffin (an associate of Cobb) invites us to recognize in the “postmodern” (no hyphen) developments new resources for living in greater faithfulness to the biblical way. He discusses the implications of “postmodern” insights

for thinking in new ways about such issues as creation/evolution, life after death, spirituality, and ethical concerns, including imperialism and nuclear proliferation.

• *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) is a work by Walter Brueggemann which reflects a more familiar approach. Brueggemann, too, attempts to find in "postmodern" thought insights which will help us read the biblical texts more authentically, without the limiting constrictions which accompany "modern" presuppositions. He provides six examples of biblical texts which he exegetically interprets in a "postmodern" mode.

Sociological concepts have helped me to recognize that the forms of Christian faith that I had come to take for granted had more to do with the historically specific experiences and insights of Calvin and other reformers than with the person and teachings of Jesus. Sociology has helped me to understand how my location in American society has shaped the ideas and practices which I once thought were identical with the Kingdom of God. Sociology has provided insights into the socially constructed qualities of my "realities," including my particular version of religious experience. Eight years of living in Japan and working to understand relationships between Christian faith and Japanese culture have reinforced, for me, the importance of remaining open to new and very different insights into the limitations of our inherited understandings.

All of this makes me bold enough to suggest that the variety of ideas clustered around the notion of "post-modernity," too, offers abundant opportunity for new levels of insight and understanding. The prospect of a "post-modern" Christian faith includes the promise of release from using the rationality, individualism, and activism of "modern" culture to do battle, in the name of biblical faith, with other versions of that same "modern" culture. But being "post-modern" will confront us, also, with the problem of moving forward toward new patterns which remain yet unknown rather than attempting to restore traditions which once provided meaningful strength and hope for our spiritual forebears.

I conclude by suggesting only one example of what all of this might mean for Mennonite Brethren. There will be no room in a "post-modern" context for placing limitations on roles on the basis of gender, either within or beyond the context of the church. "Deconstructing" the implicit patriarchy of our social institutions will open them to new creative, inclusive possibilities which would have been unthinkable in the context of the cultural traditions which we have inherited. A living and shared faith in Yahweh as the God of all of history may give us the courage to participate in and contribute graciously to the far-reaching changes which are upon us.