

REACHING OUT IN OUR TIME

The
Dangers
and
Delights of Postmodernism

"Postmodernism" is on the lips of many people. For some, it evokes all that is good and exciting about intellectual advance during the past three decades or so; for others, it signals the abandonment of truth, the adoption of nihilism, multiplied confusion, and God-defying arrogance. For many others, its meaning is unclear. They know it is something they are supposed to be excited about or concerned over, but they are not quite sure what it is.

The meaning of postmodernism is not transparent. Moreover, its range of application—it has been applied to literature, art, communication theory, architecture, epistemology, jurisprudence, the philosophy of science, and more—means that its associations for one person may be very different from its associations for someone else. Seventy-five years ago a particular architectural style was called "modern." Then style changed; so what should the new style be called? If "modern" refers to the contemporary, then every style should be called "modern" in turn, at least for a while. But because "modern" had been attached to the previous style, the new style that displaced it had to be called something else. So the new style was called "post-modern." Something similar has happened in several domains.

Still, one use of the label "postmodern" very largely holds the rest of its uses together. This is its use in the field of epistemology. Epistemology is the study of how people know things—or at least of how they think that they know them. Initially, this sounds terribly abstruse. For the practical (like those, for instance, who repair their own automobiles), it can sound downright silly, like medieval debates over the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin. Yet we have all adopted some form of epistemology. We come to our beliefs—those things that we claim to know—by a wide range of means. But when we move outside our usual circles (especially if we travel much and listen well), we become aware that many people see things very differently. They dismiss as bunk what we take as obvious. For example, while

BY D. A. CARSON

Americans mourned after 9/11, many Muslims danced in the street. We knew that the destruction of the twin towers in New York and the violence against the Pentagon in Washington were evil acts of terrorism, while they knew that they were just and courageous deeds, sanctioned and blessed by Allah. Here are two competing truth-claims. But what are truth-claims? And how does one “know” them? Christians need to think about epistemology.

We shall gain a better appreciation of the role epistemology plays if we indulge in a quick historical survey, before summarizing the strengths and weaknesses of postmodern epistemology.

Premodern Epistemology

“P”remodern” here refers to the period from the late Middle Ages through the Reformation to the dawn of the

Enlightenment (c. A.D. 1200–1600). For most Europeans during that time an account of human knowing would go something like this: God exists and knows everything. We human beings, made in his image, know only an infinitesimal part of what God knows. In fact, if we are to know anything, then we must come to know some part of what God already perfectly knows—and so revelation is required. Revelation can come through Scripture or the church’s teachings or by the Spirit’s illumination or through experience or by means of what we today call “science.” (For these premoderns, the means or locus of revelation was not as important as its reality.) On this general point, Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin agree: human knowing is a small subset of God’s knowing and comes to us by revelation. Where they differ is on how much revelation is given through each means. Aquinas was convinced that

Why Should Christians Th

Postmodernist epistemology is a pretty abstract topic. So what are the practical lessons that we can glean from thinking about it?

First, it helps us to avoid two errors. We should cherish and cultivate some elements of postmodernism and abominate others. So any response to it that is either completely negative or uncritically positive is wrong. Complete rejection of everything postmodern is culturally backward, intellectually wrongheaded, and denies the common grace found in every culture. Yet we should be wary of those who think of themselves as “postmodern Christians” or “post-evangelicals” or the like. By and large, they dismiss modernism (or some caricature of it) with scorn while uncritically adopting a postmodern agenda without careful biblical reflection. “We want relational truth, we want Jesus the truth incarnate, not propositional truth,” they say. This is wise in its affirmation and foolish in its denial. For example, there are at least eight “believe that _____” clauses in John’s Gospel, where what is to be believed is some propositional truth (see John 11:27, 42; 14:10; etc.). Some of these cases make it clear that believing some specific proposition is essential for salvation (see John 8:24; 20:31). Scripture can be expounded in inaccurate, boring, and irrelevant ways, but this does not mean that we should give up the faithful exposition of God’s Word by which we are taught not to sin against him (see Ps. 119:11). Almighty God esteems the person who is humble and contrite and who trembles at his word (see Isa. 66:2). And godly leaders are charged with making a habit of regular and deep reflection on that word (see Deut. 17:18–20; Josh. 1:8–9; 2 Tim. 3:14–17).

More specifically, postmodern emphases can enhance our Christian lives in these ways.

1. Postmodern openness to “spirituality”—which often means something like “authenticity”—encourages us to ensure integrity, humility, and consistency between our teaching and our conduct. If people visit our churches and face condescension, dismissiveness, self-righteousness, or what is perceived as religious cant and sloganeering, they will leave pretty quickly. As far as I can see, postmodern visitors cope equally well with innovative styles of churchmanship and more conservative styles, provided they “read” what is going on as genuine, authentic, sincere, humble, and unfaked. These have always been Christian values, so here postmodernism merely provides us with an extra incentive to be what we should.

2. Postmoderns often value personal relationships over truth structures. Of course, we do not want to sacrifice the gospel that was “once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3), but it is always good to be reminded that lost men and women are not mere potential information receptacles. They are people—God’s image bearers. We should always mirror Jesus’ attitude as he wept over Jerusalem (see Luke 19:41–42). There are countless ways we can adjust our evangelistic priorities if we remember this.

3. An astonishingly high proportion of Western preaching during the later modern period focused on the Bible’s discourse texts. Preachers paid relatively little attention to its many narrative passages. Of course, we must always teach the whole counsel of God, but how we do that can vary enormously. Many of us

enough was revealed through nature and experience that someone could, by paying proper attention to these sources of "natural revelation," gain some significant knowledge about God. By contrast, Calvin was convinced that "special" revelation—revelation coming through Scripture, the Spirit, and the church—was necessary for us to know anything about God in the way that we should.

Premodern epistemology was very open to the supernatural. That meant it held countless millions (at least on the popular level) in thrall to beliefs and "knowledge" that most of us would dismiss as laughable today: silly superstitions, the magical powers of relics, high confidence in omens and astrology. The Reformation significantly weakened some of these beliefs. Yet it is worth noting that even this epistemology—which was substantially correct in recognizing that all human know-

ing is a subset of God's knowing and consequently a function of revelation—could nevertheless be corrupted by sinful human beings and thus coupled with indefensible superstition.

Modern Epistemology

Modern epistemology arose by moving away from God to the autonomous individual. It begins with the "I." Historians often point to René Descartes as the crucial transitional figure. Early in the seventeenth century he saw that many of his acquaintances in the intellectual world were rejecting both premodern epistemology and Christianity. Some of them were atheists. So he sought for a common intellectual base, a foundation on which both he and they could build their beliefs. He eventually settled on his famous axiom, "I think, therefore I am" (in Latin, *cogito, ergo sum*).

Think about Postmodernism?

need to learn how to preach from the whole range of literary genres in the Bible, including the narrative passages, instead of remaining comfortably at home in the more linear thought of its discursive texts.

At the same time, we should confront and correct postmodernism on these matters.

1. While postmoderns tend to like narrative, they are deeply suspicious of "metanarrative"—the big story that makes sense of all the little stories. But the Bible's sweeping story line, from Genesis to Revelation, is the metanarrative within which all the individual narratives of the Bible, and our own stories, must be interpreted. With biblical illiteracy growing both within and outside the church, the need to emphasize the Bible's main story line becomes increasingly urgent. This big story line helps to establish a Christian worldview. Unless we are content to drop isolated Christian insights into the shifting sands of alien worldviews, we must reestablish this story line in the minds of Christians and then draw the connections that enable this metanarrative to give us a Christian worldview.

2. Among other things, this means reestablishing the horror and obscenity of all idolatry. We must preserve the biblical insistence that salvation means being reconciled to God and thus to others, that we are God's image-bearers and so our first obligation is to recognize our creatureliness and dependence with gratitude and faith, and that this "world" is passing away and so our hope is set on the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness. We are so adept at teaching Christians to be fulfilled,

and so practiced at inviting them to live the abundant life, that we neglect to prepare them to die well. Yet only those who are passionate about laying up treasures in heaven are equipped to live and serve well here.

3. Because of the postmodern penchant for open-ended interpretation, it is becoming more and more important for Bible teachers—whether they are speaking to large crowds or leading small groups or counseling others one-on-one—to show that their teaching and encouraging are grounded in Scripture. Now, of all times, we must not back away from God's Word. Instead, we must become more explicitly scriptural, so that Christians see that we always trace the most fundamental issues back to what God has said. Then if someone replies, "Oh, that's just your interpretation," we must never let this evasion go unchallenged. With the text open before us, we must ask our challenger what his or her interpretation is and then examine what Scripture actually says. Where there is uncertainty, we should admit it; where an interpretation—whether theirs or ours—is weak or false, it must give way to Scripture.

Common grace assures us that no worldview is entirely mistaken; the pervasive power of sin assures us that no worldview in any way removed from Scripture is benign. Let God be true, and every worldview a liar.

by D.A. CARSON

Descartes was not a skeptic. He was Roman Catholic all his life. He published his acceptance of this axiom—along with a number of other philosophical claims that have not stood the test of time—in the 1630s, and it exerted wide influence. Descartes was convinced that whatever else might be doubted, as long as “I” am a thinking being “I” cannot doubt my own existence, for there must be an “I” who is doing the thinking. Hence, “I think, therefore I am.” Here, surely, was a foundation that he and his skeptical friends could share. And Descartes was persuaded that from this foundation he could erect an argument that would move people toward theism and even Christianity.

In other words, in modern epistemology we start with an adequate foundation, add methodological rigor, turn the crank, and out pops truth.

The critical elements that sprang out of his work and developed into modern epistemology can be summarized as follows: (1) The foundation of our knowledge is no longer God in his omniscience, but “I,” the human knower. So human knowledge is no longer seen as a subset of God’s knowledge but as something grounded in nothing more than each of our existences as individual thinking beings. (2) It is assumed that absolute certainty—a certainty borne of true knowledge—is both desirable and attainable. (3) The structure of human knowledge and certainty is profoundly “foundationalist.” Descartes looked for a commonly acceptable “foundation” on which he could build all the rest of human knowledge—what we might call the “superstructure” of human knowledge, including our belief in God and in the existence of a world that exists independently of our consciousness. Foundationalism has been assumed in most modern disciplines from history to microbiology to particle physics. In each discipline there are axioms, fundamental assumptions, and then conclusions that are built upon those axioms and assumptions. Usually, the autonomy of human knowing—that is, its independence from God’s knowledge—is either an explicit or implicit part of these disciplines. (4) To establish rigor and control in each discipline, there is a strong emphasis on method. Until very recently, a doctoral dissertation in the Western world has been checked as much for its methodological rigor as for its results. In other words, in modern epistemology we start with an adequate foundation, add methodological rigor, turn the crank, and out pops truth. (5) Truth itself is understood to enjoy what some have

called “ahistorical universality”—that is, if something is true, it is true everywhere, at all times, for all peoples, in all cultures and languages. If we can show that water is made up of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen, then that is as true in Peru and Pango Pango as it is in Mexico City or Medicine Hat. It was true in A.D. 1300 and it is true in A.D. 2003. Real truth is objective truth that transcends culture and history. It is true whether anyone believes it or not, and that is why it is to be pursued and cherished. (6) Although it was certainly not so in Descartes’s time or for a long time afterwards, modern epistemology has increasingly been linked in the Western world to naturalistic assumptions.

Naturalism claims there is nothing more than matter, energy, space, and time. Modern epistemology was originally developed primarily by theists (many of whom were Christians) and deists. Darwin, however, made athe-

ism intellectually respectable, and so in the twentieth century modern epistemology was increasingly linked to naturalism, not only in scientific circles, but also in the sweeping rise and fall of communism and fascism.

Postmodern Epistemology

So what about postmodern epistemology? Of course, history is messy. The transition from one historical movement to another is not abrupt. Invariably, some forces prepare the way for a shift and others retard it. And even when there is a new paradigm, not everyone adopts it. Even today many modernists argue for their corner and many other thinkers have mixed epistemological pedigrees.

Even during the reign of modern epistemology, there were many anticipations that all was not well. Yet for convenience we may accept the common assessment that postmodern epistemology came to prominence in much of the Western world about 1970. It is usefully analyzed with reference to its rejection or modification of all six of the elements of modern epistemology.

1. Postmodern epistemology continues to fasten on the finite “I”—or, more corporately, on the finite group, the “we.” But it draws very different inferences from this axiom than modern epistemology did. Because all human knowers—or groups of knowers—are finite, they think and reason out of a specific and limited cultural framework, some specific “interpretive community.” I am a white, middle-aged, European Canadian, with a reasonable amount of Western education behind me, and a white-collar job. Surely it is not surprising if I look

at things differently than, say, a sub-Saharan African scholar or a twelve-year-old illiterate street prostitute in Bangkok.

2. Reflect deeply on the first point, postmodernism insists, and absolute certainty will no longer be assumed to be possible. To be frank, it is mere illusion, the product of disreputable arrogance. Moreover, absolute certainty is not even desirable. It engenders a narrow outlook and cascading self-righteousness. Surely it is better, postmoderns tell us, to encourage insights that flow from many different perspectives, including different religions and diverse moral codes.

3. Because the "foundations" that we erect are produced by finite human thought, we should abandon the comfortable illusion that they are secure. Postmodernism is profoundly anti-foundationalist.

4. Similarly, as finite human beings we invent our methods, which are themselves shaped by particular languages and cultures and social groupings. Consequently, no method has any deeper significance than the preference or convenience of some particular group. To hold, as modernists did, that to build on a firm foundation with rigorous methods would enable us to uncover truth was self-delusion, for neither our foundations nor our methods transcend our limitations.

5. From these first four points we must infer that whatever "truth" we discover cannot possibly enjoy "ahistorical universality." It will be true for one culture, but not another; it will be true in one language, but not in another; it will be true for this social grouping, but not for that one. Even in the scientific domain, it is argued, we are learning that large theories are not infrequently overthrown by later theories, that Western medicine has its triumphs and failures while Chinese medicine can make similar claims, and so on. Any claim to have achieved "ahistorical universality" is just one more form of modernist hubris.

6. Many postmodern voices still speak out of the assumptions of philosophical naturalism that are common among late modernist thinkers. Yet substantial numbers of postmoderns are now convinced that there are many, many ways to "knowledge" and "truth"—i.e., to "knowledge" and "truth" that are helpful to you or your "interpretive community." They will happily applaud traditional science, while anticipating the breakthroughs that will come by "feeling" rather than thinking ("Feel, Luke, feel!"). They accept both astrology and religious claims because they do not take them to be different in kind. Anecdotal evidence is as persuasive to such people as controlled, double-blind scientific experiments. Consequently, many postmoderns think of themselves as more "spiritual" and

less "naturalistic" than their modernist forebears.

The Correlatives of Postmodernism

Many complex social factors interact with postmodern epistemology without necessarily being either its causes or its effects. For instance, significant shifts are taking place in the processes of secularization, in our assumptions about the nature of tolerance, in our approaches to religion and morality, in our strengthened individualism, in our estimations of what is important, in our rising biblical illiteracy, and especially in our unrestrained devotion to horizontal, social analyses that squeeze out God. These developments often strengthen postmodern epistemology as well as often being strengthened by it. For example, the more biblically illiterate our culture becomes, the less likely we will be to retain our Judeo-Christian roots and the more open we will be to the pluralism that postmodernism strengthens. In that sense, biblical illiteracy may be a contributing cause of postmodernism. Conversely, the stronger the hold that postmodernism exercises on the culture, the less incentive there is to read the Bible as an authoritative revelation. In that sense, biblical illiteracy may be one of the results of the impact of postmodernism on the culture. It is similar with each of the other factors I have mentioned.

What we must recognize is that Christians should not adopt either modern or postmodern epistemology. Both epistemologies make some important and true claims; and each also makes claims that Christians will want to deny. Some Christians, intuitively sensing the dangers of postmodern epistemology, pan it entirely, reverting to the more familiar modern epistemology. They conveniently forget that epistemological modernism has not always been the Christian's friend. Others cherish postmodernism, not least because of its freshness and iconoclasm. They view askance anything that has ties to old-fashioned modernism. So what is required is some evenhanded reflection on both the strengths and the weaknesses of postmodern epistemology.

Strengths of Postmodernism

1. Postmodernism tellingly criticizes modernism's vaunted autonomy and firmly checks its considerable arrogance. This is no small gain. Epistemological modernism has encouraged us to think that human beings enjoy both the right and the ability to stand in judgment of God. It does not easily allow us to see the fundamental obscenity implied in obscuring our dependence upon him; it is too busy thinking large thoughts about human beings and our potential, and small thoughts about everything we see and study, including God.

Postmodernism is properly sober about human finitude. Rightly applied, that is a great gain.

2. Postmodernism is much more sensitive than modernism to the deep and undeniable differences that characterize people of different races, languages, ages, cultures, and genders. For about ten years I worked part-time for the World Evangelical

Postmodernism articulates what we should have known...there is more to human knowing than rationality, proofs, evidences, and linear thought.

Fellowship, organizing a number of conferences that brought together theologians and senior pastors from many corners of the world. Just watching these people coming into a room and greeting one another was an education. As the groups discussed papers and tried to reach consensus as to what Scripture says, we all became aware of the different baggage that we each carried, to say nothing of different cultural expectations about what was courteous, what was funny, what was persuasive, and so on. Postmodernism's emphasis on the finiteness of the "I" has made us rejoice in cultural difference and made us suspicious of haughty cultural hegemony. That is not all bad. It reminds us of the enormous role of presuppositions in all human knowing. Of course, that is why Jesus' disciples, prior to the cross, had no category for a crucified Messiah (e.g., Matt. 16:21ff.), even though Jesus repeatedly explained the notion. It took the cross and the Resurrection for the pieces to come together in their minds.

3. Postmodernism articulates what we should have known but what modernism made difficult to see, namely, that there is more to human knowing than rationality, proofs, evidences, and linear thought. No matter how much we retain the view that evidence and logic are fundamental to human reflection and discourse, we are now much more aware of the way that aesthetic, social, intuitive, linguistic, and other factors influence our thinking. Postmoderns are often more impressed by the authenticity of relationships than by the brilliance of linear argument. And for Christians that, surely, is a plus, because Christians are to be known by their love for one another (see John 13:34–35). Invite a biblically literate postmodern into a Christian family or Christian church that overflows with love, integrity, and compassion, and the most challenging elements of "apologetics" have already been looked after.

4. Postmodernism is implicitly religiously pluralistic, as was the Roman Empire in the Apostle Paul's time and for several centuries after that. The imperial government in Rome made it a capital offense to desecrate a temple—any temple—for

the rulers were determined to prevent religious differences from erupting into bloodshed. Moreover, pagan defenses against Christianity assumed that all religions are valuable and lead to "god." From a Christian perspective, this assumption is not a good thing. Nevertheless, this pagan outlook increasingly characterizes today's Western culture.

Developments like these may not be very honorable, but they have at least one beneficial side effect: Many of the New Testament documents—and especially those depicting the church in a gentile setting—speak much more immediately and prophetically to our situation than they did to Western Christians half a century ago. For example, Paul's address to the Athenians (see Acts 17:17–34) and his letter to the Colossians now bristle with immediate and urgent relevance. So postmodern cultural trends have played a crucial role in enabling many of us to read our Bibles with fresh eyes and from a slant that is very close to the one adopted by the New Testament's first readers.

Weaknesses of Postmodernism

Yet we must not be naive. Postmodernism has many weaknesses.

1. It habitually exaggerates the difficulties we have in communicating with one another. This is perhaps most amusingly demonstrated when postmoderns accuse their reviewers of not really reading their books closely and carefully. In other words, in spite of their theories, postmoderns expect their critics to treat their published works fairly, in line with their authorial intent as displayed in their text, although this runs against some of their postmodern claims.

2. Postmodernism pushes its claim that all knowing is subjective by regularly presenting us with a frankly manipulative antithesis: Either we finite human beings can know things omnisciently or we are necessarily adrift on the sea of "knowledge" without a compass and without a shore. But this antithesis is appalling: it demands that we be God or lost in subjectivity. In reality, as premodern epistemology understood, we may know some true things but never in an omniscient manner; we may know that certain things are objectively true but never with the absolute certainty accorded to God alone. Recognizing this allows us to construct models of human knowing that are much closer to what each of us actually experiences than what either modern or postmodern epistemology give us. But if we permit this absolute antithesis to stand, then postmoderns will always win the epistemological debate.

3. When postmodern thinking is applied to realms such as doctrine and morals, it does more to loosen the constraints of living with integrity and with self-denying concern for others (to say nothing of living with a high regard for orthodoxy) than any other single development in the past century. This thinking erupts not only in courses in cultural anthropology (which today could not possibly condemn, say, child sacrifice, since doubtless the practice was very meaningful to its practitioners) but in our science fiction (e.g., *Star Trek: Voyagers* never tires of story lines in which alien cultures with behavior and stances utterly abominable in our eyes are in reality no less fine than our own—it all depends on one's point of view). It makes us uncomfortable with concepts like "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) or with a defined gospel, the abandonment of which is nothing other than the rejection of God, a rejection that spells anathema (see Gal. 1:6, 8–9).

Postmodernism's more radical forms are hopelessly deficient when it is important to talk about truth. By exaggerating the challenges we face when we try to communicate with others (the first point), and by deploying an unnecessary and manipulative antithesis (the second point), postmodernism destroys the objectivity of truth. Postmoderns correctly perceive that there can never be, among finite knowers, an uninterpreted truth. But from this they incorrectly infer that there cannot be any knowledge of objective truth at all. Radical hermeneutics (with German roots), radical appeals to the nature of language (developed in France), and radical claims in the social sciences (from America) have conspired to convince us that objective knowledge is forever beyond us. Nothing, however, has actually been shown except that omniscient, objective knowledge is forever beyond us. But we finite human beings can know some things objectively, even if nonomnisciently; we can know in the only ways that finite beings can ever know—with such a powerful degree of approximation to what is really true that it serves no purpose to say that we do *not* know objectively. Our knowledge is always in principle correctable, as all finite knowledge must be, but it is not for that reason not knowledge. And Christians can add that our knowledge is all the more securely based because God, with his omniscient mind, has chosen to disclose himself to us in human words. The implications of this revelation cannot be teased out here, but they are of staggering importance.

4. After rightly challenging the sheer arrogance of modernist epistemology, postmodernism displays its own brand of arrogance. Postmoderns are so certain that uncertainty is our lot that they insist

that even if there were a God who spoke and disclosed himself, we could not possibly know that he had. This is stunning arrogance, arrogance of a form that goes on to transform what has traditionally been called "tolerance" into a new and terrifying intolerance. In the past, I might insist that some claim is nonsense, but I would defend to the death the right of others to claim it. In other words, I might strongly disagree with certain ideas, but I would tolerate the person upholding them. But under this new, postmodern view of "tolerance," we are tolerant only if we take all claims to be equally valid. Those who challenge this view are taken to be intolerant—and they should not be given any respect or attention, because they are so intolerant. Thus postmoderns have infinite tolerance for all ideas—though why it should be called "tolerance" when they cannot disagree with any of these ideas is not transparent: Can I properly be said to tolerate what I do not disagree with, but display no tolerance whatsoever for those who disagree with their postmodern ideology?

Concluding Reflections

This essay does not respond to postmodernism systematically. That would demand quite a different piece. Still less have I attempted to sketch an alternative Christian epistemology, although astute readers will detect the direction I would take. My point has been simpler. Informed Christians will neither idolize nor demonize either postmodernism or modernism. Both are founded on profoundly idolatrous assumptions. And both make some valuable observations that, when they are properly integrated into a more biblically faithful frame of reference, enable us to reflect fruitfully on the world in which we live.

So here are, simultaneously, some of the blessings of common grace and some of the distortions of fallen, would-be autonomous rebels. ■

D. A. Carson (Ph.D., Cambridge University) is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, and is a council member of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. He most recently edited Worship By the Book (Zondervan, 2002).