

6C Modernism and Postmodernism

Cultural Worldviews

In addition to the three primary categories of worldview, certain major philosophical views that characterized whole “ages” have developed, primarily in western culture, which unconsciously shape or describe the thinking of many people. In general, the first emerged from a Theistic worldview, and the latter ones grew out of a naturalistic worldview. We may define a set of “cultural worldviews,” mindsets that shape an entire culture with respect to authority and truth. Scholars delineate three primary historical periods in Western Civilization: Premodern (Medieval), Modern, and Postmodern.

Premodernism

A premodern worldview was common throughout much of Europe before and during the Medieval Age (200 AD to 1500 AD). The Premodern period was characterized by a widespread belief in God and the supernatural. Ultimate truth could be known. While life was uncertain, one’s role was solidly defined (since a man usually picked up the occupation of his father). Premodernism also suffered from various superstitions and a strong sense of control from those in authority: nobles, kings and priests.

Concepts associated with Premodernism:

- The world was highly structured and controlled.
- Everything had a place (which was basically fixed).
- God was included, mostly controlling at the top of the chain.
- God extended control over all of the world through the King and the Church.
- Emphasis was on authority and given truth.
- The over-riding narrative centered on this chain of control.

While emphasizing the place of God as Creator, the Medieval mindset was closely tied to Church and authority. The flow of authority was described by a detailed system represented as the “Great Chain of Being” that included everything on earth:

- God
- Pope
- Church leaders
- King
- Nobility
- Common people
- Animals
- Plants
- Non-living matter

Modernism

Modernism (1500 AD to 1960's) was ushered in by the Enlightenment. The Modern mindset flowed from a combination of the Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, the Protestant Reformation, and the breakup of the Holy Roman Empire. [1] As the Church's power weakened, new nations emerged, and scientific findings blossomed, the Premodern model of the world faded.

- People's lives and destinies were much more fluid.
- Progress, primarily through science, was inevitable.
- God was no longer an integral part of the worldview.
- God's authority gave way to human autonomy.
- The emphasis was on reason and empirical science.
- Knowledge was possible through experience, experimentation, and reason.
- The over-riding narrative centered on human development and progress. [2]

Central to Modernism are five "pillars":

1. Reason (the ultimate guide to all truth)
2. Education
3. Science
4. Man ("the measure of all things")
5. Progress (inevitable, if science and education are in place)

Paul Johnson [3] surmises that while the Modern world began in the mid- 1700's, it wasn't fully realized in Western Europe and America until about 1830 (primarily growing during the period 1815-1830) with the rise of technology, industry, literacy, income growth, and the spread of competing ideas.

(Rene Descartes) concluded: I think; therefore I am.” (or, in Latin, cogito, ergo sum). So, without realizing it, Descartes' project removed God from center stage, replacing it with the human knower as the starting point. The effect would be momentous. The rationalism of the European Enlightenment (c. 1650-1800) reflected this shift. This period was both optimistic about human potential and reason, but was also skeptical about church authority/state churches and Christian doctrine ("dogma").

This was just one of many modernist projects that assumed that human dignity, truth, and reason could be preserved without God. Besides rationalism (with its emphasis on reason), there were Romanticism (with the emphasis on feeling), Marxism, Nazism, and other utopian schemes that sought to displace God as the starting point for understanding and living. The Jewish-Christian worldview that had deeply influenced the West was now being challenged.

While some still maintained God as Creator, most of the links of the “Great Chain” were broken, and people saw themselves as autonomous, with power over animals and non-conscious matter. The Modern mindset expected science to solve our problems. [4]

Postmodernism

Postmodernism arose in the late 20th century, initially in art and literature, with the realization that the optimistic goals of Modernism had failed to bear fruit. The Postmodern mindset developed from a distrust of science and the failure of the promised progress.

- Progress had seen several setbacks. Not everyone was financially better off.
- Peace had not come to the world. In fact, the Twentieth Century had seen two world wars and multiple smaller wars.
- Science had given rise to technology and also to nuclear weapons.

- Science had not met or explained our deepest needs.

All previous ways of knowing were questioned, and all ways to power were rejected. This was accompanied by a loss of optimism about human progress and hopes for peace and prosperity. The conclusion was made that there is no authority and no real truth.

The concept of postmodernism as the opposition to all metanarratives was first espoused in detail by Jean- Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* [5]. A metanarrative is an overarching account that leads to an interpretation of all events and gives meaning to all experiences. It is like a worldview expressed as an all-encompassing story. Metanarratives could include Enlightenment Humanism, Marxism, Freudianism, Scientism with its promise of Progress, and various world religions. Postmodernism (where we are today) is primarily characterized by the absence of any grand narrative, any over-riding truth.

Postmodernism had its roots in existentialism but steps away from existentialism. The existentialists often thought deeply about life and concluded that there is no meaning to existence. Both begin with the self, but existentialists developed in a Modernist milieu, offering a way to live. Postmodernism is more theoretical, always a reaction, critiquing humanism as well as Christianity and all that went before.

Sire has characterized these aspects of Postmodernism: [6]

1. Things and events have no intrinsic meaning
2. Continuous examination of the world requires a contextual examination.
3. Interpretation of any text depends not on the original author but on the values of the reader/interpreter.
4. Language is never neutral, but always value-laden.
5. Language involves ideology.

As a result,

- Science and scientific progress is suspect.
- God is not a meaningful construct.
- The emphasis is on feelings, subjectivity, and self-expression.
- There is a question whether any truth exists outside the individual.

- PM denies there is truth, meaning, or external reality.

Like many negative philosophies Postmodernism contains its own contradictions: [7]

1. Postmodernism's rejection of all metanarratives becomes a metanarrative, the criticisms of master stories becomes the master story itself.
2. Postmodernism's notion that we have no access to reality is a claim about reality--it is really real and true that we can't get to what is real and true!
3. Postmodernism's critique of the autonomy and sufficiency of human reason is based on the autonomy and sufficiency of human reason.

Postmodernism does have significant impact on literature and psychology but minimum impact in engineering and science. Scientific laws are fixed. Safety, functionality, and morality are not up for grabs. In design, however, we might look for new ideas in aesthetics, shapes, textures, and other subjective areas. In design we find the emphasis moving away from the technical and the profit-orientation and looking instead at human needs, social impacts, and innovation, including new ways of thinking.

What has killed secular humanism? People are beginning to realize that, far from creating a humanistic utopia, secularism has produced two devastating world wars, a series of mounting ecological disasters, and a "disenchantment of the cosmos." The West has begun to lose its faith, not in religion, but in human reason. Oddly, the death knell was sounded not by robust Christian witness, but by the "atheistic" postmodern children of secular humanism. The withering barrel of the postmodern laser gun has been aimed not so much at Christianity as at the ideology of Enlightenment secularism, at the belief that reason could deliver objective truth. This postmodern, relativizing of all truth has undermined the faith of modern man in his own rational abilities. This "postmodern" thinking is taught in the vast majority of philosophy departments throughout the world as "gospel truth." [8]

References

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