PERSPECTIVES

Our Postmodern Moment, Part 1: Diagnosing the Problem

Theology

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We live in a time of toxic polarization.

It's not just that people hold different opinions. It's that we hold our opinions vehemently—often with disdain or anger towards those who disagree with us. This is true also for Christians, whether on the right or on the left. It has become vividly clear that we who are followers of Jesus are not exempt from the temptation to absolutism, where we close ourselves off from genuinely listening to other points of view or even to look down, and denigrate, those who hold opinions different from ours. This absolutism among Christians has prompted a reaction from many in the church over the past few decades, who have undergone what they call "deconstruction," the project of stripping away aspects of the faith that they find to be oppressive. It has led some to become post-Christian, abandoning the faith entirely.

In this essay, I'm going to analyze the nature of our contemporary polarized culture, which many call *postmodern*. Acknowledging that the term *postmodern* has a wide variety of meanings, I'll explore my own understanding of the term and how I think it appropriately describes our contemporary culture. This will require sketching the core commitments of the modern worldview that began to be articulated in the Renaissance and that held sway in western cultures from the scientific revolution through the Enlightenment until the nineteenth century, while attending to the seismic worldview shift that occurred in the twentieth century. My focus won't be on description of the postmodern; I'm not going to give a full exposition of the various features of our times. Rather, my emphasis will be on diagnosis. I hope that by probing beneath the surface symptoms, we might discern what is the core problem of our current conflicted culture. This diagnosis will form a prelude for my follow-up essay, where I'll explore whether authentic Christian faith—rooted in the Scriptures—has the resources to address our current toxic situation with healing and hope.

Can a Book from Nearly Thirty Years Ago Help?

Nearly thirty years ago, Brian Walsh and I wrote a book called *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (InterVarsity Press, 1995). I was a doctoral student at the time, trying to grapple with the chaotic cultural situation in the world around me in the early 1990s, while rethinking various aspects of my own faith in light of that situation. You could say that I was going through my own "deconstruction." But this was nothing new for me. My entire adult life has been a journey of rethinking the Christian faith—stripping away unhelpful theological and cultural accretions. In my case, "deconstruction" was always accompanied by "reconstruction," as I tried to articulate a better, more faithful understanding of biblical faith that could empower believers to live the way of Jesus.

My journey started with undergraduate theological studies in Jamaica. It's impossible to do theology in the Majority World without being aware of how much of our theological inheritance is culturally conditioned. I then moved to Canada for graduate studies and then later to the USA for a tenure-track faculty position. Along the way, I served as a campus minister at four universities. My journey also traversed the disciplines of theology, philosophy, and biblical studies (with a focus on Old Testament). This journey has informed all my teaching and writing, whether for the academy or the church.

In *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, Brian and I analyzed the "postmodern" situation, trying to understand how we got here and some of the basic contours of our contemporary context, while mining the resources of Scripture to address that context. I've had many people in recent years tell me that the book seems to have been written specifically for our present polarized cultural climate. For this reason, I've been asked to share some of the argument of the book that might still be helpful for us today, while going beyond the book to explain how my ideas have developed since then. Revisiting some of these proposals from thirty years ago is not meant to be nostalgic—a trip down memory lane. Rather, I want to use these proposals to help us better understand the nature of the postmodern problem and to suggest how recovery of essential aspects of the Christian faith might actually be part of the solution.

A Paradoxical Argument

The argument of *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* was paradoxical. On the one hand, Brian and I emphasized the large biblical story from creation to eschaton as the nonnegotiable grounding of the Christian life. We even drew on the term *metanarrative* to describe this story. This term had become famous through its use by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. "Simplifying in the extreme," Lyotard wrote, "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives" (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi [University of Minnesota Press, 1984], xxiv). Now, we are well aware that we went beyond the technical meaning of *metanarratives* in Lyotard's definition of the postmodern. Whatever Lyotard intended, *our* point was that to be a Christian means—among other things—to submit ourselves to a Truth that is beyond our construction. Yet the existence of such a Truth (or metanarrative) is precisely what more and more people in the "postmodern" world have found impossible to believe. This commitment to a nonnegotiable overarching Truth is what led some reviewers of the book to claim that we were stuck in modernity, with its absolutist claims.

On the other hand, Brian and I sought to learn from the postmodern context, taking seriously the complexity and difficulty of life, the undeniable suffering and violence in the world, and the multiple points of view not just between different cultures, but the pluralism of worldviews within cultures. We affirmed that no one has a "god's eye view" of anything. We are all located somewhere, shaped by our context and our identity, and this must affect the truth-claims that we make (including our interpretation of the Bible). We clearly affirmed that *we* were not exempt from this contextual

shaping, even though we were followers of Jesus, trying to understand and articulate biblical Truth. This led some reviewers to charge us with the sin of relativism.

How is it possible to be committed to a metanarrative, while honestly acknowledging of our own subjectivity? How could we have it both ways? Were we (are we) just mixed up?

Three Umpires and the Nature of Knowledge

Let me tell you a story.

Three umpires were having a beer after a baseball game. One said: "There's balls and there's strikes and *I call 'em the way they are*." The next umpire replied: "There's balls and there's strikes and *I call 'em the way I see 'em*." The third umpire said: "There's balls and there's strikes and *they ain't nothin' until I call 'em*."

In *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, Brian and I used this story to illustrate different ways that people understand the nature of knowledge. The first umpire has a traditional understanding of knowledge as simply recounting "objectively" what is there. This is what most people in the dominant cultures of the modern world assumed. They simply knew the Truth, without any remainder. Their knowledge was essentially the same as the Truth. This is sometimes called *naïve realism*. It can certainly lead to absolutism, where we assume that those who disagree with us are simply wrongheaded (or even morally evil).

The second umpire recognizes that everyone sees reality from where they stand, shaped by their particular context and location. Their perspective is not the same as the reality or Truth they are trying to describe, but it is a legitimate attempt to try and reach this Truth. This is sometimes called *critical realism*, though it could also be called *perspectival realism*. This was the point of view that Brian and I affirmed as our own understanding (more on that in part 2 of this essay).

The third umpire is what we might call a *constructivist*. We suggested that more and more people in the "postmodern" world were leaning toward this understanding of knowledge. It's not that people claim that there is no external reality. Rather, they act as if this reality has no definite shape or contours in-and-of itself. It is our perception—and more importantly—our language or description—that defines reality. This gives great power to the human knower. Besides calling this view *constructivism*, we might call it *radical subjectivism*.

Our analysis of the third umpire as characteristic of the postmodern condition was one of the touchstones that people pointed to in their suggestion that the book seemed prescient. Isn't the third umpire an apt description of our current *post-truth* society, where different groups proffer "alternative facts"? There doesn't seem to be any external Truth that we can appeal to in our discussions. All we have are competing truth-claims, with no rational adjudication possible. It's the group that has the most power that gets their version of "truth" implemented. So, maybe the philosopher Michel Foucault was right: all truth-claims are at bottom power plays!

What Exactly Is the "Postmodern" Situation?

Here I want to introduce some analysis of the postmodern situation that goes beyond what we proposed in *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*. A careful reader of that book would notice (as we ourselves noticed) that we weren't sure exactly how to characterize the cultural context we were writing in. We used the term *postmodern* a lot, but also *late modern*, *hypermodern*, and *ultramodern*. Whereas the term *postmodern* suggests an epoch that comes *after* modernity, it seemed to us that our contemporary cultural situation was in certain respects a continuation of modernity. But we didn't give a clear analysis of this point. The closest we came to exploring this was in a brief note where

we contrasted two impulses in the modern period, which we named the *Baconian* and the *Cartesian* (41).

The *Baconian* impulse takes its name from the Englishman Francis Bacon (1561–1626), one of the early proponents of the so-called scientific method. Bacon affirmed that the great value of the newly developing natural sciences was the ability it gave modern people to control or harness nature for human benefit, which would inevitably and progressively lead to a better world. Bacon's famous aphorism was "Knowledge is power." This impulse emphasizes that human beings are powerful subjects who can act on the world to shape it to conform to their desires.

The *Cartesian* impulse is named after the Frenchman René Descartes (1596–1650), the so-called father of modern philosophy. Like Bacon, Descartes agreed that science gave modern people great power over nature (this was a common affirmation of many writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). But Descartes's distinctive impulse was the desire to place science on a proper rational footing. He wanted to ground modern science on an "indubitable" foundation (a foundation that couldn't be doubted by any rational person).

To that end, he reasoned as follows: Although he could doubt any truth-claim, he couldn't logically doubt that he was doubting. But doubting was a form of thinking, so he couldn't doubt that he was thinking. And if he was thinking, then he (the thinking subject) must exist. Descartes's famous dictum was "I think therefore I am" (Latin: *Cogito ergo sum*). Although most philosophers believe that this is a deeply flawed argument, Descartes believed that from this supposedly firm foundation he could establish the entire edifice of modern science.

Whereas the Baconian impulse is the desire to exercise power over the world, the Cartesian impulse is the quest to attain Truth without the taint of human subjectivity. Both impulses characterized the modern period.

The Cartesian impulse maps onto the position of the first umpire (though Descartes was clearly more nuanced in his understanding of knowledge). And the third umpire looks like he would affirm the Baconian impulse (while taking it to its logical extreme).

Modernity as an Unstable Hybrid

In the years since Brian and I wrote *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, I have been teaching regular courses on worldviews. This involved helping students understand the normative worldview of Scripture, along with varieties of actual "Christian" worldviews. But I have also attempted to help students understand the shift from the modern worldview to the postmodern condition (with its pluralism of worldviews). Through my teaching, I have tried to clarify how the Cartesian and the Baconian impulses of the modern worldview are in fundamental tension with each other—how modernity has always been an *unstable hybrid* that was in danger of breaking apart.

The Cartesian impulse is one particular version of an idea shared by most cultures of the world throughout history. Pretty much every society or group of people has assumed that there was some universal standard (some Truth) that was genuinely beyond us, which we do not invent, but which makes some sort of claim on us. Whether that standard or Truth was thought of in religious or ethical terms and whether it was narrated in stories or explained in abstract concepts, all societies and groups throughout history have affirmed some sort of universal Truth that we need to acknowledge and comport ourselves toward in an appropriate manner in order to live a good life.

Observant Jews claim the Torah as normative, Christians have the Old and New Testaments, Taoists try to follow the Tao, Plato had the Forms, some philosophers have appealed to natural law, and even tribal peoples have had the tradition of the elders. I have come to think that the Cartesian

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impulse is a specific—modern—version of this pervasive belief in a universal Truth that makes a claim on all of us. In this way, modernity is in basic continuity with premodern cultures.

What was radically new in the modern period was the Baconian impulse to control the world and make it conform to our wishes. This impulse arose from the modern ideal of human autonomy, the aspiration to make the self the center of reality, articulated (among other places) in Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (published in 1496). *Autonomy* comes from the Greek words for "self" (*autos*) and "law" (*nomos*). Autonomy is not quite the same as independence, though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Human autonomy means that we are *a law unto ourselves*. Instead of submitting to an external, transcendent Truth, which makes a claim on us, we prefer to define our own reality, to construct our own norms. When Plato quoted the opinion of the sophist Protagoras that "man is the measure of all things" (*Theaetetus* 152a), he clearly thought it was ludicrous. How could any rational person believe such a thing? Yet today, this is a widely accepted assumption, an inheritance of the modern worldview.

Descartes's philosophical argument was an attempt to ground universal Truth in the rational human subject. He thought that by starting solely with his own thinking, he could come to a firm, indubitable scientific knowledge of the real world. For him, the path to Truth ran *through* the autonomous human subject.

But Descartes wasn't simply trying to solve a philosophical problem. There was a political and ethical motivation for his project. Descartes made his famous argument in two treatises, *The Discourse on Method* (1637) and *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), both of which were written during a time of brutal religious violence in Europe. Like many moderns, he assumed that a commitment to neutral human rationality could transcend the partisan religious points of view that dominated Europe during his lifetime and lead to genuine human progress. After all, it was a Catholic-Protestant conflict that started the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), resulting in over eight million deaths (both from the conflict itself and from disease and famine triggered by the conflict). The implication was that if people could put aside their partisan (especially religious) ideologies, they might come to rational agreement about the nature of the world and the ideal of universal human progress could be achieved.

The Fracturing of Modernity

But it didn't work out that way. No unanimity was achieved—not then, not now.

The human race has never attained a singular, agreed-on, perspective on reality. Indeed, the conflict of perspectives has only proliferated in our postmodern time. The only unanimity to be found (if we could call it that) is the widespread commitment to human autonomy. We have steadfastly refused to give up on *that*. Indeed, we have hyped up and flaunted autonomy. This is the point at which the *postmodern* could be thought of as *hypermodern* or *ultramodern.*

Not only has the modern world not come to any universal consensus on Truth, but our disagreements have often led to violent conflicts, outstripping even that of the Thirty Years War. Modern nation-states without an established religion or that were avowedly secular (from Hitler's Germany to Lenin's Russia and Mao's China) have far exceeded the devastation and human slaughter perpetuated by religious wars. The problem, it turns out, was not religion per se, but *ideology*—in the sense of a partisan point of view that has been absolutized.

I've come to understand that modernity represented an unstable hybrid of two contradictory impulses that cannot be reconciled. The idea that we could begin from the autonomous human subject and attain to a rational, universal Truth that all people can agree on has turned out to be a pipe dream. If

each person autonomously comes to their own understanding of the world, perspectives will inevitably multiply and fracture.

So, going beyond Lyotard (and simplifying in the extreme), I define *postmodern* as the consequence of jettisoning the Cartesian impulse (the aspiration to universal Truth), while taking the Baconian impulse (human autonomy) to extraordinary lengths or heights. Postmodern people find it difficult to believe in any metanarrative that is true and normative for all people. But we have not given up on human autonomy. Instead, we have hunkered down on the human subject as the center of reality, regarding ourselves (or our group) as the standard for what is true. We have embraced the position of the third umpire.

Postmodern Tribalism

Notice my mention of *groups*. People are not simply individuals; we are intrinsically communal beings. Fredrich Nietzsche may have exhorted each individual to become the center of their own reality, his ideal for the future of humanity, which he called *Űbermensch* (in his 1883 work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). But we crave community. So instead of each person in our postmodern time articulating their own individual perspective on reality, we break down into tribes, congregating (either in person or in virtual spaces) with like-minded others. I have thus come to characterize the postmodern situation as one of *tribalism*.

The problem is not that we are communal beings. Nor is the problem that we have perspectives (as the second umpire admitted). The problem is that we make our perspective (or the perspective of our group) absolute (as the third umpire did) by refusing to acknowledge any external touchstone by which our point of view might be held accountable. This is the core problem of our contemporary culture.

This means that there is only a hair's breadth of difference *in practice* between the first and the third umpires. It doesn't matter if you think that you call balls and strikes *as they are* (the stance of modernity) or if it is *your calling them* that makes them balls and strikes (the situation of postmodern tribalism). Neither umpire is willing to be corrected. Both view their perspectives as absolute, so anyone who disagrees must simply be wrong.

All we have left is a shouting match, which typically degenerates into name-calling and the denigration (even demonizing) of those we think are outside the pale. This results in cancel culture (from both the right and the left) and, in extreme circumstances, violence against those we understand to be our enemies.

In part 2 of this essay, I plan to explore whether Christianity is part of the problem or whether recovery of essential aspects of the Christian faith might actually be part of the solution.

https://johnwesleyfellows.org/perspectives/our-postmodern-moment-part-1-diagnosing-the-problem/