

A letter to Jarys: Postmodernism and Christianity

Dear Jarys,

I've enjoyed our many discussions over the past year - about politics, the environment, and world religions. I have appreciated your willingness to take the time to join me reading stories about Jesus and reflecting on their significance to our lives. I appreciate the fresh perspective you bring to our discussions about texts that have grown very familiar to me.

Recently, I had the opportunity to think more about my way of viewing the world through what I understand to be a Christian worldview and to compare it to the way you seem to view reality which might be described as a Postmodern worldview. I hope that by stepping back and discussing worldviews we continue to build trust and facilitate further mutual understanding and discussion. Please feel free to disagree and correct me where you disagree with how I describe these worldviews and highlight how these descriptions are different than your own perspective.

Four Question to understand a worldview

In comparing Christianity and Postmodernism, I will compare the way they answer four questions suggested by Brian Walsh:

1. What is the nature of reality?
2. What is the nature of the human person?
3. What is the human predicament?
4. What is the solution?¹

Understanding the worldview of Modernism

Postmodernism, as its names implies, is what happened after Modernism. Therefore, before describing Postmodernism, lets discuss Modernism. Modernism views the nature of reality, the universe and everything in it as made up of fundamental particles and energy. Through a natural process, these fundamental building blocks are evolving to greater and greater complexity and sophistication. Modernism often views humanity and all its representative cultures as having started in primitive states and gradually evolving over time. Modernism assumes that through enlightened human reason, humanity will continue to develop and progress closer and closer to perfection.

¹ Walsh, Brian. "Worldviews, Modernity and the Task of Christian College Education." *Faculty Dialogue: Journal of the Institute for Christian Leadership*. No 18 (Fall 1992), 19.

Modernism does not explicitly deny the existence of God or the supernatural, but it often finds that they are unnecessary to understand and describe the world as it is observed.

Contrasting Postmodernism and Modernism

Postmodernism questions the many assumptions and presuppositions made by Modernism. First, it questions scientific rationalism and its trust in human observation and rationality. Second, Postmodernism questions Modernism's purely material view of humanity and human predicament. Postmodernism sees the modern view that "all that matters is matter" as, at its best, one truth among many, and at its worst a cultural product of a self-interested people and culture. Finally, Postmodernism challenges the Modern view of progress because any goal towards which history might "progress" is itself socially constructed, and probably for the self-interested purpose of the community that defined it. By challenging Modernism's assumptions and presuppositions, postmodernism attempts to be more honest, wholistic, and inclusive.

Understanding the worldview of Postmodernism

Postmodernism starts to answer the first question, (what is the nature of reality?) by clarifying what reality is not asserting that there are no metanarratives.² Metanarratives are stories (narratives) that are overarching and objectively true. According to Postmodernism, reality can only be defined by micronarratives, stories we, and those we identify with, embrace to be true. Reality, therefore, is not objective, but subjective, and defined by each individual observer or community of observers. This perspective is in stark contrast with the assumptions of Modernism which believed that there is an objective reality that can be discerned through observation and the application of reason.

It is difficult to state succinctly the Postmodern view of the human person and the human predicament since one of the characteristics of Postmodernism is the lack of any single overriding metanarrative. However, in the development of Postmodern thought there are some common ideas, many of which are articulated well by Marx and Nietzsche. Andrew Murray, writing about Postmodernism describes, "Marx as its philosopher and Nietzsche as its prophet."³ Nietzsche observed that as Modernism and its reliance on reason and affection fail to provide means to describe what is right and good that they will be replaced by pure will. This becomes the essential identity of the human person for Postmodernism – a being who wills. Humanity creates their own reality, their own tradition, their own truth, and their own identity through sheer will.

² C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 94-5.

³ John Courtney Murray, S.J., *The Problem of God* (London: Yale University Press, 1964), 86.

I found that one of the final scenes of the movie *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003) exquisitely illustrates the Postmodern view of the human person and their predicament. In this scene Neo is battling Agent Smith, a program in the computer world who originally functioned as a mechanism for control. Agent Smith and Neo are battling within the Matrix, the computer-generated reality which most of humanity experienced as their day-to-day life. Since the second movie Smith has mass-produced himself by taking over the bodies and the individuality of all the humans and humanoid programs within the Matrix. In this final battle Smith, and all of humanity made in his image, faces off against Neo.

Smith represents the logical conclusion of modernity and Modernism's vision of progress. As a program he epitomizes logical thinking and reason. He is a technology at global scale. This image is reminiscent of Warhol's portrayals of modernity as represented in his pictures of Coke bottles or Campbell's soup cans filling a canvas. Smith, like the Coke bottle, has filled the canvas, which in his case is the Matrix. Neo, on the other hand, is the Postmodern alternative. He is known as "The One," a human who fights as the champion of both humanity and the machine world as their last hope against Smith and his totalizing control. On the way to this battle Trinity, Neo's love interest, has died. As Neo arises after a severe beating by Smith, Smith pauses to ask him why he fights. Taunting Neo, Smith recites all the usual answers – love, truth etc. and asserts that they are mere social constructs, have no objective reality, implies they are not worth fighting for. Smith, the audience of the movie, and all who long to see Modernism and its totalizing effects defeated await Neo's response. Neo's answer is Nietzsche's answer and the Postmodern's answer. "I choose to" Neo proclaims, as he goes on to fight and ultimately destroy Smith from the inside out. Postmodernism's response to Modernism is choice. Postmodernism views the human person, the crisis she faces, and the solution in the same way. Modernity has produced a bland and horrific reality (like Agent Smith). All sense of God (Trinity) is gone, "God is dead" proclaims the prophet Nietzsche. Truth and love are mere social constructs. Humans are beings who, by will alone, may confront this reality. Postmodernism's solution is to assert your will, to choose - your path, your identity, your reality.

Comparing the Christian and Postmodern worldviews

I hope you have found my summary descriptions of Modernism and Postmodernism fair and, with respect to Postmodernism, somewhat descriptive of the how you understand the world. With this background, I would now like to share how Christianity might be understood. Christianity, like Modernism, believes in an objective reality and an objective truth that is independent from any human subjective experience. From the Christian perspective, this reality may be described as made up of the community of the Christian God and everything God has created. Christians understand

God as a community, one being in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which we call the Trinity. However, like Postmodernism, Christianity recognizes that all humans experience reality subjectively and lack access to the objective truth through our own observation and reason. Christianity acknowledges that all human observation of reality is biased and prone to flaw, as Paul of Tarsus wrote, "...for now we see in a mirror dimly."⁴ Therefore, while Christianity disagrees with the Postmodern denial of an objective reality, it does so with humility. The Christian believes that there is one ultimate story with God as the author, and hence one overarching metanarrative. However, no human institution or tradition has full knowledge of the story, God alone as the author of this metanarrative is able to speak *authoritatively* as to the nature of this reality.

Christianity (at least the Christian tradition I embrace) like Postmodernism, views humans as created beings in the image of God. Christian view the power to choose as one of the ways we reflect the image of God. Christians, like Postmoderns, view choice as one of humanity's greatest qualities but also view choice as simultaneously the cause of humanity's greatest failing. The problem, as Christianity understands it, is that all of humanity has chosen to seek our way independently from God. The parents of humanity, Adam and Eve, initiated and epitomized this rebellion in the beginning of our shared story as described in Genesis 3.

As a result, we fail to live up to our full potential and are unable to see the world clearly. On our own we are hopelessly bound to biased perceptions of reality. The Christian predicament describes a state similar to the view of Postmodernism, that there is no shared metanarrative, no shared objective truth in the universe, and no pervasive awareness of God. While some recent strains of Christianity blame Modernism and its dehumanizing application of reason for our collective experience, the historic Christian faith for the most part have fostered and embraced reason and science. However, the Christian traditions attributes our state to our refusal to trust God and how we instead grasp to be independent from God. Our declaration of independence has left us broken in all our relationship – disconnected from God, ourselves, one another, the earth, the entire created order, and even reason itself. Postmodernism often attributes the experience of evil and the perceived absence of God as being the result of the irreconcilable conception of an all-powerful and all-good God. Christianity, however, explains our experience of evil and the perceived absence of God as a result this rebellion, sometimes summarized in the word sin.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

Comparing the Christian and Postmodern solutions

The difference in the solutions proposed by Postmodernism and Christianity flow from their varying answers to the first three questions. For Postmoderns, humanity is left with choice. As we see Neo overcome Smith and the perceived absence of God (represented in the person of Trinity) by sheer will – “I choose to” – so the Postmodern person creates their own sense of reality and truth - through will. Although some audiences were disappointed with this answer by Neo, this answer accurately represents the Postmodern solution. Those who embrace Postmodernism do not look to something outside of themselves as an answer to their predicament, not truth, love, justice, honor, etc. Instead, the Postmodern boldly faces the world as it is experienced, and through will seek to shape reality into the form they desire.

In contrast the Christian believes that without outside help the human predicament is hopeless. Left alone humanity will suffer despair or live in denial. The Christian however believes that we are not left to ourselves. Instead, God has come to be with us. God, in the person of Jesus, enters into the human experience, represents us in repentance and obedience, and rescues us from the ultimate consequence of our rebellion. This coming by God in the person of Jesus is anticipated in the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament), described in the New Testament in the Gospels (the four biographies of Jesus), and interpreted by Paul and other writers who composed letters featured in the rest of the New Testament. Christians believe that people should respond by aligning our will with that of God, looking to his leadership once again, and by accepting God’s merciful offer to represent us in the person of Jesus - who lived and died in our place. While Postmodernism places hope in the human will, Christianity finds hope in God’s will to rescue us and God’s invitation to align our will with that which is good and divine.

I hope you have found that I have represented your worldview fairly and clearly and that my description of the Christian worldview is at least informative, if not compelling. As you can tell I find many aspects of the Postmodern worldview insightful and helpful as correctives to ways I have previously thought. I hope my description of the Christian worldview might serve you similarly.

Warmly,
Jon