

Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 25 • Number 2 • April 2001

*Articles and book reviews original and
selected from publications worldwide for
an international readership for the purpose
of discerning the obedience of faith*



Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
**WORLD EVANGELICAL
FELLOWSHIP**
Theological Commission

Transition From Modernity to Post-Modernity: A Theological Evaluation

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Keywords: Reason, science, Enlightenment, Existentialism, Pragmatism, apologetics, alienation, apocalyptic, nihilism

2. The Relativizing of Truth

In the first section of our historical analysis we sketched the development from Pre-Modern theocentricity to Modern anthropocentricity to Post-Modern individualism. The following sections show the connection of Pre-Modern certainty about faith with the Modern autonomy of rea-

son, and finally, with Post-Modern plurality of truth.

2.1. Pre-Modern Certainty About Faith

Pre-Modern times started with theology as the most important main university discipline. Theology was recognized as the first of the university disciplines at the universities founded in the High Middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas' *Prolegomena* to his *Summa Theologica* laid the foundation for theology as a traditional academic discipline. His method of argument is based on proofs from Scripture, Patristic quotes, and, finally, on ancient philosophy where Aristotle is given the prominent place as the quintessential philosopher.

Theology, therefore, lays claim to the foremost position among all academic disciplines and sciences because its knowledge goes beyond that of human reason (*ratio*). Aquinas, along with Medieval theology as a whole, considers reason as definitely a basic anthropological

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ability which is capable of penetrating reality and making knowledge about the inner world possible. But it reaches its limits in relation to knowledge of God and the way to salvation. Here all academic and scientific efforts are dependent on theology which enjoys the light of revelation. In spite of this interplay between faith and knowledge, however, there was still an awareness of human helplessness because the dangers found in the natural world were so obvious; there was also a strong tendency to attribute unusual appearances to the miraculous. Scientific research remained basic and open at all times for supernaturalistic explanations.¹

2.2. Modern Autonomy of Reason

Modernism presents itself as an enlightenment against traditional knowledge, science and supranaturalism, that is, the triumph of pure reason. The metaphor of light is, interestingly enough, already implied in the term 'Enlightenment.' In the German term '*Aufklaerung*' and also in the French '*siecle de lumiere*' the image of light appears. The 'Age of the Light' claims to overcome the dark Middle Ages with its traditional sciences, that is, with its dependency on literary authorities which had been wrong more than once. The Medieval university, according to the Enlightenment, could not really bring the truth to light on account of its intellectual presuppositions. Thus Kant, called the Enlightenment 'the breaking out of self-inflicted mental immaturity. The promising character of the

Modern Age shines forth in this context as well: we will be able to penetrate everything with reason.' The conviction of the 18th century was that reason could take you a lot further than Christian tradition.

Finally, people posited the following simple idea: why shouldn't reason, if it has been found to be true in temporal things, also have the final word in the area of religion and in regard to the ultimate questions of life? Kant's concept of a 'Religion within the Bounds of Pure Reason' must be understood in this sense. The Enlightenment therefore deals with a comprehensive claim to truth of a secular nature confronting theology in a deeply critical sense.

In this context, the Enlightenment must be considered, of course, as an intellectual movement in Europe; but it also changed Europe as a historical-ideological power. The French Enlightenment had an atheistic orientation through its connection to the French Revolution and thus stood in strict opposition to the church. This attitude is summed up in a pointed way in Voltaire's dictum, *Ecrasez l'infame*—'Whatever you do, crush the infamy (namely, the church). The encyclopaedists Diderot and d'Alembert fought against Christianity as empty madness.

In England, the Enlightenment was strongly influenced by Deism, the idea that, while there is a Creator God, he refrains completely from having anything to do with the world of history. Instead, Deists looked to an early form of monotheism which represented the actual religious-philosophical concerns of the representatives of the English Enlightenment. They wanted to get behind the concrete empirical religions to a common origin in order to distil out the moral aspects of each

1 See Reflection VIII.

one of the different religions. Miracles of nature, they argued, did not merit attention, but rather one should aspire to moral miracles. If people improve their character through education and moral renewal, then they are on the way to the true religion. This is the goal of the religion of reason. The overall aim of the Deists was to purify the Christian faith of all 'unreasonable' ideas, such as belief in miracles, and to eliminate all dogmas offensive to reason such as that of Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity. By this process they hoped to establish a universally applicable, morally-oriented religion of reason.

In contrast to the French and English Enlightenments, a 'pious' Enlightenment developed at first in Germany. In the area of physical theology, it sought to show the traces of divine omnipotence and omniscience in the events of nature as well as in the course of history. The hymns of Christian Fuerchtegott Gellert are representative of this pietistic movement as it was positively influenced by the Enlightenment, which in its early stages at least was faithful to the fundamental tenets of Christianity. Gellert's hymns are spiritual and biblically-based lyrics in which the Enlightenment is brought as close as possible to the Christian faith, even though it is apparent that he is trying hard to penetrate the doctrine of faith from the standpoint of reason and morality.

In the course of the historical development of ideas in philosophy, science, and society, Protestant theology tried then to keep pace with Modernism in the newly developing ideas of mediating theologies. A mediating theology, in this context, is understood as any effort to inte-

grate the form and content of Christian truth with the respective dominant philosophies or ideologies in as unproblematic a way as possible. It must be acknowledged that there was often a missionary motive involved in these mediating theologies. Modern theologians wanted to make it easier for their contemporaries to come to faith by getting rid of everything they thought was offensive. In this context, of course, it soon became clear that the process of accommodation to the respective dominant ideology of the day led to very different, even contradictory, theological ideas.

If we ask for a theological evaluation at the beginning of the 21st century, then it becomes quite apparent that in the process of the historical development of ideas, Modernism has taken on very many different forms. Along with this, the different philosophies and ideologies come and go in ever shorter time periods. It is this very abandoning and replacement of interpretive systems which is, in itself, one of the most basic characteristics of the rise of Post-Modernism.

Using my own terms I would now like to explain in the following section the intensive correlation between general cultural development and the (Post)-Modern history of theology. The serious problems which are visible in this accommodation process will be shown along the way. The second half of the 20th century reveals what is virtually the classic example of the way theology is susceptible to the influence of other ideologies and of the path to the intellectual / spiritual self-destruction of Protestantism.

We can look at the National Socialist ideology of the German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*) in

the Thirties and Forties. After World War II there appeared the existential hermeneutics of Rudolf Bultmann and his school under the influence of German and French Existentialism; this was combined with the programme of the demythologisation of the New Testament. With the political involvement of students at the end of the Sixties and beginning of the Seventies, a Marxist-revolutionary oriented materialistic exegesis was used which was applied to liberation theology.

Yet as time progressed, political theology proved to be spiritually unsatisfying because it did not meet human religious needs. Therefore, 'spirituality for combat' was developed in the context of the 5th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1975 in Nairobi. In the wake of the growing interest in a psychologically experienced reality of faith, German Catholic theologian Eugen Drewermann developed his exegesis of deep psychology which ultimately went hand in hand with the rediscovery of myth and led to a remythologization of the religious along the lines of the work of Carl-Gustav Jung. Today feminist theology has taken up into itself a multi-faceted spectrum of variety of Modernist as well as Post-Modernist mediating theologies. Ultimately behind these theological models is the fundamental conviction of Modernism that the autonomous object of reason is in the right against the claim of inspiration and can therefore put faith into different, new forms.

Despite all the good and honourable intentions which stand behind each of these efforts to accommodate the faith to the contemporary situation, the entire enterprise of modern theology has

become a tragedy. Its problem is clearly demonstrated in a story by the German poet and playwright, Bertolt Brecht, (1898-1956). In one of his calendar stories about 'Mr K.' he relates:

Mr. K. looked at a painting which gave some objects a very original, unconventional form. He said, 'In looking at the world, some artists are like many philosophers. In working on the form, the substance is lost.' I once worked for a gardener. He handed me a pair of hedge-clippers and told me to trim a laurel tree. The tree stood in a pot and was rented out for special occasions. Therefore, it had to be cone-shaped. I immediately began cutting off the wild branches, but, regardless of how hard I tried to get it into this cone shape, the more it wouldn't let me succeed in doing this. I had pruned away too much on several sides. When it finally took on the shape of a cone, the cone was very small. Disappointed, the gardener said to me, 'Well, it's a cone, but where is the laurel?'²

2.3. The Post-Modern Relativisation of the Question of Truth

The specific character of post-modernism lies in the identity crisis of modernism, whose claims to the comprehensive universal truth of reason have not ceased. The passionate conflict for absolute truth was characteristic of the transition from the Pre-Modern to Modernism. It is exactly this struggle for the truth which Post-Modernism has given up, in part out of resignation, in part because of agnosticism. In either case, the possibility of being able to know a universally and eternally valid truth has been abandoned, or else the pre-supposition is that there is no

² Bertolt Brecht, *Form and Substance, Stories About Mr. K.* See Reflection IX.

such truth at all.

This characteristic is important for the intellectual character of Post-Modernism—in day by day life, the question of truth is ignored and one goes about handling the affairs of life in a pragmatic manner. A discussion of truth seems meaningless and fruitless. People may maintain their own individual truths and ethical values and may live them out in their particular context, but these truths and values have no relevance for the public at large. In a pluralistic society there can be no normative worldview or interpretative ideas binding on all. Politically, this situation is indispensable and fundamentally necessary for the well being of a democratic state. However, as we have said earlier, Post-Modernism interprets the idea of tolerance in an agnostic manner: that is, any universal claim to truth is abolished.

The French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, who, along with his countrymen Foucault and Derrida, is one of the main proponents of philosophical Post-Modernism, starts out with the criticism of the so-called meta-narratives. The classical meta-narratives of Judaism and Christianity, and even of Marxism, with their teleologically oriented interpretations of history, are no longer trustworthy. Their ideas are therefore replaced by much more modest stories of a biographical or group-specific nature. The universal span from the Garden of Eden across a centuries-long history of salvation to the eschatological kingdom of God is rejected. The same may be said for the Communist view of history, which leads from a early society without property to a series of economically-based revolutions (brought about by dialectical processes) to the ultimate classless

society.

The presumed failure of all great concepts of history is a characteristic of Post-Modernism and points again to the relativizing of the question of truth; the self-disintegration of reason is tied to this. In the context of central philosophical questions, such as what reason was able to accomplish, even Kant realized that certain unavoidable questions still existed; these included: 'Where do I come from?', 'Where am I going?', 'What should I do?', 'What may I hope for?'. In his analysis of the human ability to attain knowledge, Kant realized that in view of the power of pure reason, answering these questions in the realm of empirical knowledge, or science is impossible. One can find no answer to the elementary basic questions of the transcendence of human existence and human hopes on the basis of pure reason. Therefore, with respect to the questions of meaning and existence, Kant takes the path to individual inner reflection and morality, the private spheres of human life. By virtue of his analysis of practical reason, he looks for and finds in the process of stating the questions the elementary values of freedom, immortality of the soul, and God. Yet, since these matters cannot be known, the individual can answer them only subjectively in practising a reasonable religious faith. As a result of this faith in reason, there is still no basis for the kind of certainty which would be comparable to empirical experiences or logical deductions. The postulates of practical reason deal with the reasonable, yet ultimately fictitious boundaries of existence which are set up in order to solve the existential riddles of life in a way that is satisfactory to the intellect.

The way Romanticism distin-

guished itself from the Enlightenment is very instructive; in our context it is interesting historically because of the critical relationship between Modernism and Post-Modernism. The Berlin Romantics, like the Schlegel Brothers, Novalis, and even Schleiermacher, felt very uncomfortable with the cold rationality and civil morality in the 18th century Enlightenment philosophy handed down to them. Claiming to put feeling, artistic intuition, ingenious creativity, and mystical religiosity back into their rightful place and to elevate them as the central matter of spiritual / intellectual life, the Romantics rejected the encompassing claim of validity of pure reason just as decisively as rationalism had done in its time to the basic tenets of faith in orthodox supernaturalism. Sociologically, there are also some surprising parallels between the 19th century Romantics and the Post-Modernism of our day (for example, the lifestyles and the very complicated relationships between the sexes).

The Neo-Kantians at the junction between the 19th and 20th centuries and the philosophers of critical rationalism and analytical philosophy have thus created in some respects a starting point for Post-Modernism in just the same way as the Enlightenment of Kantian provenance did for Romanticism. Ludwig Wittgenstein emphasizes at the end of his famous tractate *Logico-Philosophicus* the failure of the rational basis for the world and meaning in classical philosophy when he writes:

The right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say

something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method.³

Consistent with this, Wittgenstein ends his analysis with the laconic seventh sentence of the tractate: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.'⁴ But, this intentionally maintained silence is painfully related to the many questions which press upon us, as Kant has correctly shown. We cannot solve this problem using reason. The solution Kant himself suggested as the postulate of practical reason is, however, fragmented and fictitious. Thus it is unconvincing and led ultimately to the agnosticism of analytic philosophers such as Wittgenstein and others. In this respect many Post-Modern philosophers are in a similar basic intellectual situation to that of the Romantics almost two hundred years ago.

In this century, American philosophers have taken a different direction in their thinking from that of the Romanticists. For example, William James, one of the founders of American pragmatism, began first as a psychologist and wrote a book significant for the psychology of religion entitled *The Variety of Religious Experience*. In this work he studies authentic testimonies of conversions, miracle stories, and other religious experiences and compares these to one another psychologically. James assumes as his starting point that such experiences are comparable in

3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 6.53 pp. 188-189.

4 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 7.0 p. 189.

principle. He therefore does not take up the problem of the substantive question of truth and does not even want to decide it. With respect to matters of faith, only his work *The Will to Believe* is important. Here he advocates a pragmatically determined truth which has its relative justification as one's own subjective truth, but of course, it cannot lay claim to any universal validity.

In Post-Modernism, in general, the juxtaposition of religious claims to truth, is subject to such a subjective will. Just as in a supermarket, consumers in a pluralistic society can serve themselves religiously under the motto 'Myths in bags'. A 'pick and choose mentality,' just as in the supermarket, is dominant, thus allowing everyone to stock up on salvation articles according to each person's respective individual religious needs, whether it is Christianity or esoteric religions, magic or mysticism, resurrection hope or concepts of reincarnation. Take whatever you like, everything is available!⁵

2.4. The Importance of Theological Apologetics in Overcoming Relativism

The elimination of questions of truth with the uncertainty produced by this development has also directly affected us as theologians. Therefore, I would like to make a strong appeal for work in apologetics, remembering in particular the work of German theologian Karl Heim (1874-1958) in this area. In 1905 as representative of the German Christian Students' Association in Wernigerode, Thuringia, Germany, he gave an interesting lecture on the

topic 'Are Unsolved Questions a Hindrance to Faith?'. He starts out with a reference to the critical questions of science at that time, especially those of brain psychology and the theory of evolution, but also even the problems of historical-critical exegesis of the Bible. He points out that they presented massive problems, and created doubt among Christian students. Therefore, he demanded that we do work in apologetics in order to be more effective in counselling students with these doubts.

Apologetics does not only have its importance as a discipline of systematic-theology only in the intellectual confrontation with philosophy and the sciences, but it is also important as a discipline of practical theology. It is a matter of responsible counselling of people who have fallen prey to doubt. So in his lecture, Heim applies Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37) in a new way. Like the traveller who has fallen among thieves and is saved by the merciful Samaritan, so the believer needs counselling to help with his thinking when he falls into doubt.

Based on these thoughts of Heim, I would like to comment on the present situation of theological education among Evangelicals. My impression is that evangelical colleges and seminaries by and large stayed on course in view of the challenges of Modernism and Post-Modernism with respect to hermeneutics. In the conflict with mediating ideologies and philosophies we have not allowed ourselves to be corrupted in biblical exegesis, but rather, have asked which method of hermeneutics can be derived from the Scriptures themselves. The essential foundation of biblical hermeneutics has been the primary apologetical

5 See Reflection X.

goal.

However, where we have had greater difficulties due to the fact that we are caught up in the wake of our own culture, is in the comprehensive philosophical debate with the thinking of the Modern Age and currently with that of Post-Modernism. In a multiform pluralistic society which relativizes the question of truth from the very start, a higher and more comprehensive apologetic ability is needed. It is necessary to advance arguments with respect to systematic theology as well carrying on dialogue with respect to practical theology.

I would now like to explain how this apologetic task can be performed, making use of three examples from the history of philosophy. They are from philosophers who represent the thinking of Modernism and each of whom stands over against a philosopher who argues as a believing Christian. With respect to the substance of their arguments, the apologists of the faith present features in their discussion with their 'Modern' counterparts which in part anticipate Post-Modern positions. The theological debate which is called for at the present time cannot, therefore, simply take over the arguments that are presented here, but must already take into consideration the fact that the discussion is juxtaposed with Post-Modernism. My interest here, then, in view of the very sophisticated intellectual questions of debate, is mainly in the way these philosophers exemplify that ability to carry out critical dialogue and to model patterns of thinking.

The first example is that of the Frenchman Blaise Pascal who opposed his rationalistic countryman René Descartes (16th-17th centuries), pointing out the fundamental

necessity of distinguishing between the '*raisons de la raison*' (the reasons for reason) and the '*raisons du coeur*' (reasons of the heart). As a mathematician, Pascal referred to different dimensions of thought which belong to different structures of thinking as well as to different areas of being. They also lead, therefore, to types of certainty which must be differentiated from each other.

Secondly, two Koenigsberg (Germany) philosophers stand opposed to one another, namely, Immanuel Kant and Johann Georg Hamann (18th century). Hamann appeals to the *veritas hebraica* (the Hebrew concept of truth), that is, truth as determined by and with respect to a person. Kant, in his epistemological criticism, had tried to show 'pure reason', so to speak, as the distillation beyond all historical, linguistic, or even personal considerations. He was concerned with the ability to achieve absolute objectivity of thinking and, thereby, to claim the universal validity of the results of thinking. Hamann proved that a pure form of reason so isolated from all biographical or historical influences does not exist. Instead, thinking in the biblical sense, is integrated into the personal covenantal faithfulness of God, in the *emuna* (Heb., trust, faithfulness), which, therefore, can only be truth which is grounded in or based on a person, and thus, responsible.

Finally, Søren Kierkegaard (19th century) developed his *Philosophical Fragments*, a book title which characterizes the whole intention of his thought, in conscious contradiction to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Kierkegaard decidedly opposes the all-encompassing claim of Hegel's system who, with his dialectical analysis of the histori-

cal process, endeavoured to penetrate the universality of all reality and to show it as necessary for reason. Kierkegaard, in a completely modest manner, sought to oppose this with his analysis of existence as a 'philosophical fragment'. In view of his fear and despair, the individual must first attempt the leap of faith into a personal encounter with Christ in order to really and truly achieve his existence.⁶

3. Self and Truth

In the third and final part of our brief analysis of the movement from Modernism to Post-Modernism, I would like to show how the atomization of self in Post-Modern individualism and the elimination of the question of truth have led to a comprehensive and far-reaching existential crisis of meaning.

3.1. The Socio-Cultural Changes of the Time-Space Experience

The processes present in the history of ideas which are shown here are connected to two basic socio-cultural conditions. These conditions, which are indispensable preconditions for the Post-Modern situation, are the compression of time and the acceleration of time.

Time and space as epistemological forms make observable experience possible; they also constitute our existence as an ontological continuum. Therefore, the paradigm change from Modernism to Post-Modernity is directly connected to the change in both of these basic dimensions.

3.1.1. The Compression and Unbounding of Space

The *stabilitas loci*, the clearly defined and defining stability of spatial relationships, is characteristic of the Pre-Modern Age. The *orbis christianus* as the clear realm of western culture provided for both the ancient Mediterranean world and the Germanic and Slavic peoples north of the Alps a geographical context for life which was preserved for many centuries. However, in the 16th and 17th centuries, this was blown open with the discovery of the two American continents, the circumnavigation of Africa, and the advance to East Asia, including the Pacific and finally Australia. In these developments, the truly global dimensions of our planet first came into view. Humanity seen as a whole with its diversity of its languages, customs, and artistic and religious traditions, created the preconditions for modern cosmopolitan and multi-cultural consciousness.

The cosmic problem of modern humanity is tied to the experience of completely different cultures in successive periods. Not only were new continents discovered one after another during this time, but the window to an endlessly distant universe was opened up by astronomy. For Pre-modern civilization, there was an uncontested, spatial centre to the universe, which not only served as home and protection, but was also the exclusive scene of redemptive history. Now it turned out to be a tiny planet rotating in a very marginal solar system somewhere among millions of other galaxies. Thus a person became, in the words of Jacques Monod, 'a gypsy in a remote corner of the universe', a cosmic orphan.

The lifting of the boundaries of

6 See Reflection XI.

space in the Modern Age could be summarized in terms of its extensive destabilizing effect: on the one hand, the whole astrophysical emptiness of our world creates a basic feeling of lostness in an unending, cold, and unfriendly universe. On the other hand, one becomes increasingly aware of the relativity of one's own worldview when cultures engage with each other after a long and intensive phase of colonial superiority. The opening of the boundaries through astronomy and the global compression of space create at the same time the typical feeling of homelessness for the contemporary post-modern individual, who as a world citizen is looking for a way between unbounded freedom and meaninglessness

3.1.2. The Acceleration of Time

The experience of the acceleration of time is directly related to the compression of space and the lifting of its boundaries. A visit to the German Museum in Munich or the British Museum in London makes the process of scientific-technological acceleration clearly obvious. The development of civilization was quite slow for very long periods up to the beginning of the Modern Age, but a powerful push for innovation then began. The focus of the leading sciences moved from mechanics at first to physics, then in general, to chemistry, and finally to biology. But it has led to groundbreaking changes in all areas of life.

In the meantime, the half-lives (in which the entire body of man's knowledge doubles) turn out to be shorter and shorter all the time. The process of modernization has accelerated so much that it can hardly be

understood anymore by the individual, which raises a basic feeling of fear about what is new and uncontrollable. This unsettling characteristic of the Modern Age is one of the sources of Post-Modern scepticism; it is more than simply the rejection of technological advancement by protest groups such as the Green Party.

To depict clearly the change shown here I need only to be reminded of the processes of acceleration at work during the lifespan of my grandfather. Born in 1876, he fled as a school boy to the ditches along the streets with his friends when they saw the first bicyclists ride through their home village. When he died at the age of 93, he had experienced via television the first Sputnik orbit, space technology, and the threat of nuclear weapons. Intercontinental mobility and global networking of communication accelerates time and turns this world into the 'global village' indeed. When I began my ministry at the Bengel-Haus more than ten years ago, the rhythm of the day to day business in the office was still set by the arrival of the good old correspondence by letters ('snail mail' as it is called today). Today this rhythm has been replaced by the hectic pace of continuous contact by fax, e-mail, and cell phone.

Along with the justifiable optimism brought about by progress, the seemingly unstoppable development of scientific-technological acceleration and its impact on time is causing serious fears to our civilization; enlightenment is accompanied by a dark shadow because of these changes.

The ambivalence of the Modern mood of progress and Post-Modern resignation characterizes feelings about life at the turn of the millenni-

um; the twentieth century we have left behind was marked by absolutely opposite experiences. On the one hand, an historically unique improvement in living conditions and health has appeared; the Spanish philosopher, Ortega y Gasset, describes this as 'the revolt of the masses', by which he means that the ordinary people now share almost all the privileges which once belonged to the elite. Participation in the advantages of civilization has become possible by the spread of technology. On the other hand, the twentieth century was the stage of the most terrible tragedies—wars, refugees, mass expulsions and environmental catastrophes, and has, as its characteristic, symbolic words like Holocaust, Hiroshima, and Chernobyl.

A Post-Modern messenger of these ambivalent experiences is reflected in a kind of '*Prinzessin auf der Erbse*' (Princess on the Pea) effect. This is a reference to the fairytale *Prinzessin auf der Erbse* which is about the suffering of a spoiled princess who cannot sleep at night because she feels disturbed by a hard object. Though only a tiny pea is hidden underneath her mattress, for reasons of comfort she asks for more and more soft blankets to be laid on her bed. Yet she has become so sensitive that she still feels her sleep is disturbed by a single pea. So, as philosopher Odo Marquard of Giessen, Germany has pointed out, in its efforts to eliminate all possible causes of suffering, western society is becoming at the same time more and more sensitive to the last remaining pockets of suffering.

3.1.3. Coping with the (Post)-Modern Crisis of Time and Space Theologically

First of all, the acceleration of time corresponds to certain apocalyptic perspectives of the New Testament where the announcement of end times' phenomena is characterized by such terms as 'in short', 'soon', and 'having little time'. The seemingly steady passing of time is accelerated at its end. Yet, Christ still remains the Lord of time because he is the Lord of eternity. He also determines the accelerated process of end-time events and, for his part, shortens the time of tribulations and persecutions. In this sense he gives the assurance that 'my times are in your hands' (Psalm 31:15) and thereby asserts superiority over time. In view of global mass communication and the increasingly shorter half-lives in the doubling of knowledge, it is existentially important to have a spiritual centre.

Christians in general and theologians in particular must find their roots by getting to know the Scriptures and meditating on them, for it is the Scriptures which give orientation and security in a period when there is an accelerating flood of information. In the face of permanent change, divine revelation means concentrating life and thought on the most essential. Knowing what will happen at the end gives wisdom when dealing with the next to last things.

In the Modern period, mankind experienced a destabilization of existence as a result of the astronomical research of Galileo Galilei, but the resulting damage is put into a new light by the biblical teaching on covenant election. In pre-Modern theology, the geo-centric view of the

world was posited as logically necessary by reason of the unique position of mankind in the whole of creation and redemptive history. The central position in the cosmos befits mankind as the crown of creation; the planet earth was also a fitting stage for biblical redemptive history and the history of the church proceeding from it. This theological prejudice was based on the deepest human conviction that divine election was expressed in a dominant and prominent astrologically-fixed positioning of the earth in space.

However, looking at the criteria of divine election in Scripture it quickly becomes clear that God bestows his incomprehensible love on the lowly and despised. This is true with respect to Israel as the lowliest among the peoples, as well as the Christians and the church, who do not belong to the high and mighty of this world. The same is true for God's elective grace bestowed on prominent individual figures in redemptive history, such as Abraham, David, Paul, and others.

It is thereby implicitly underscored that our planet, as a tiny grain of dust at the edge of an unendingly vast universe, has exactly the position in the creation which corresponds to it. The incomprehensible relativity of the world in the physical cosmos corresponds theologically to its unique election as the place of God's revelation.

Finally, the reduction of our world to a 'global village' with all the challenges of a multi-cultural society resulting from it runs against the nature of the church and her commission. Christ has placed his disciples of all nations in a global fellowship of diaspora congregations and sends them to all peoples with the Great Commission. The spiritual

ecumenicity of the church of Jesus Christ corresponds with the international scope of her mission. The phenomena of globalisation, which is occurring at the threshold of the third millennium after Christ's birth, corresponds to the modern experience of the compression of space, and so intensifies our mission.⁷

3.2. Dionysian Nihilism in View of Post-Modern Absurdity

Arthur Schopenhauer founded a kind of pessimistic nihilism based on the primary religions of East Asia which propose that the fundamental human task is to have compassion on all creatures. His philosophy of life, *The World as Will and Perception*, was intended to affect Enlightenment rationalism as well as the idealism of the Modern Age, and thus it supports the rise of the Post-Modern period.

Friedrich Nietzsche took up this vitalistic idea too, yet turned it more radically into an absolutely Dionysian concept of world mastery and world pleasure. His nihilism presumes modern atheism in the cold-blooded murder of God and bases the reevaluation of all values on this horrible act. In the detour that civilization makes into Christian socialization, compassion becomes the mere resentment which the weak implant on the strong, a process which corrupts life itself. Thus, in Nietzsche's opinion, the West has been cheated out of the fruits of the ancient pre-Christian pagan world. For this reason, Nietzsche announces the Post-Modern Age in a poetic hymn. The end of all the foundations of Pre-

⁷ See Reflection XII.

Modernism and Modernism is prophesied with prophetic pathos in Nietzsche's work, *The Gay Science*.

The madman.—Have you not heard of that madman who lit the lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the marketplace, and cried incessantly: 'I seek God! I seek God!'—As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated?—Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. 'Whither is God?' he cried; 'I will tell you. *We killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the voice of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.'

'How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a great deed; and whoever is born after us for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.'

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. 'I have come too early,' he said then, 'my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves.'

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account he is said always to have replied nothing but: 'What after all are these churches if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?''⁸

This text, with the poetic force of his Dionysian nihilism, can almost be read as the Post-Modern Manifesto.

The madness of the insane person who has got rid of God and raised up himself as God in an anti-Christian attitude and thereby lifted all cosmic bounds and moral restrictions has appeared several times in the 20th century. The Post-Modern promise praised by Nietzsche and a product of his foolhardy optimism, has, in the meantime, shown itself to be an illusory ideology in the numerous historical catastrophes of the age. The high point of Dionysius is not just followed by a kind of 'hangover' of our civilization, but, rather, by the historical and human traumas of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Chernobyl with their absolute crises of meaning. It is not entirely erroneous that Adolf Hitler had a place of worship erected for Friedrich

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Random House, 1974) (trans. Walter Kaufmann), Book Three section 125, pp. 181-182.

Nietzsche in Weimar and even visited it quite often; he had the Buchenwald concentration camp built near Weimar.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Post-Modern despair experienced a new flowering of nihilism, especially in the form of French existential philosophy. This arose out of a return to ancient mythology and was formed in the context of the conditions of life in the presently existing Modern Age. Jean-Paul Sartre describes nausea as a basic existential condition of the human person confronted with him/herself, the shock of existence as a result of the human nihilistic poisoning of self. His countryman, Albert Camus, agrees in principle with this shattering diagnosis, yet breaks through evident absurdity with unconditional atheism by allowing the defiant Sisyphus to appear against all despair in daring rebellion.

In Camus' philosophy of existence, we can see modern humanity's unsolvable problem, namely, the resigned self-despair worked out savagely in modern philosophy concerning the virtually unsolvable basic human situation. Camus remarks in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*,

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth. Nothing is told us about Sisyphus in the underworld. Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them. As for this myth, one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the

fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain.⁹

Here, mankind, in our basic situation and longing, is thrust back completely on to the physical world. Hopelessness is experienced as absolute absurdity in which reason and experience in the world, the desire for happiness, and powerless subjection to reality can no longer be experienced; therefore, every independent idea remains open and arbitrary. Post-Modernism has come into this inheritance. The other side of the existential experience of self, according to Camus, consists therefore, as already noted, of human transcendence in a defiant revolt against fate. In accepting the absurd, mankind confronts the true self and gains the daring power to resist, which is reminiscent of Nietzsche's world-affirming nihilism. This is the reason for all of Sisyphus' secret joy:

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.¹⁰

Post-Modernism does away with

9 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1960) (trans. Justin O'Brien), p. 97.

10 Camus, *Myth*, p. 99.

Camus' exalted heroism, and continues on through the absolute world, less in proud awareness and more in numb pragmatism. Post-Modernism considers all lofty ideas to be unnecessary, an emotional hubris which brings little help to the insanity of daily life. People look only for a small amount of happiness for themselves, something which everyone may experience just as they please. The Modern crisis of existence, therefore, reaches a state of decay in Post-Modernism, whose fragments are used by each person to make up his own provisional world. Sisyphus is less like a rebel in this world than a drunkard. It may be justifiably doubted that this person, when he wakes up, can be imagined as a happy person.¹¹

3.3. Christian Faith and Hope Overcome the Post-Modern Crisis of Existence

What is our calling as evangelical theologians in view of a context that argues from an agnostic standpoint? Firstly, there are some important aspects to the disillusionment apparent today in the wake of positivism and the analytical philosophy of language. The exegesis of the Pauline epistles, especially Romans and First Corinthians, as well as the study of the Reformation are helpful in dealing with this situation. Using Scripture and contradicting the theology of the Late Medieval period, Luther discovered that is impossible for fallen humanity to save itself by good works. We find salvation only by God's grace, not by moral effort. God justifies the sinner for the sake of the suffering and death of Christ.

Christ alone brings reconciliation. This is the message of Romans especially.

Parallel to this, it is important now in our modern world to be aware of the corresponding truth regarding the theory of knowledge of the first two chapters of First Corinthians. According to Paul, it is not only impossible to redeem mankind through our own moral abilities, but it is also illusionary to want to find a definite certainty with regard to the ultimate question of humanity by means of pure reason. It is true that mankind, being in the image of God, is characterized especially by the ability to will and to think. After the Fall, however, both of these basic human possibilities of the will and reason are no longer sufficient to restore the broken relationship between God and mankind. By pure reason alone humanity cannot find any certainty regarding faith in any worldview.

In spite of this inability, as spiritual/intellectual beings, we are dependent upon a reliable foundation for life. Therefore, the tragedy of the animal *rationale*, as Thomas Aquinas defined mankind, is that even strength of intellectual talent is not able to deal with and overcome the problem of human misery 'east of Eden'. At the beginning of the Modern Age, even Blaise Pascal spoke in his *Pensées* with great clarity and insight about the limitations of our rational understanding.

It is, therefore, only through God's grace that individuals, who by nature are entangled in agnosticism, can find a solid basis for their lives through the gift of faith. Luther expressed this in an incomparably terse and precise way in his *Shorter Catechism*: 'I believe that I cannot come to believe in my Lord Jesus Christ on my own intelligence or

11 See Reflection XIII.

power, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel . . . ‘

In view of the fact that hedonism has become the most influential Post-Modern worldview, we should confront modern culture anew with the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In our world of empirical facts, we cannot expect people to believe on the basis of myths or rely only on symbols to deal with the difficult experience of death. In view of the problems of human misery, sickness, and death, it is not possible to preach salvation and ultimate human fulfilment simply in a metaphorical fashion. If we wish to do something about reality, we can do it only by confronting the fact of this world with other empirical facts. Therefore, Paul’s method of argument in I Corinthians 15:1-8 is also still very important. Only the historical factuality of the resurrection has the power to move people to seek the risen Christ who is still alive today.

Only people who are not moved by the fear of death can resist the temptations of our hedonistic society. The conviction Paul expresses in Romans 8:16 enables and encourages Christians to give their lives for their neighbours: ‘I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.’ This hope makes a person open to sharing earthly possessions with the poor. It makes us ready to give our own time and energy to those who need spiritual counsel and practical help.

The martyrs of the early church called into question the Hellenistic world of their day with its speculations about the immortality of the soul by preaching the concrete hope of the resurrection of the dead. I am convinced that we as Christians in

our modern world must totally rethink how we preach the contents of eschatological hope in a concrete way. We need renewed courage in preaching the biblical message of Judgement Day without reservation, the promise of eternal life as well as eternal punishment. Only in this way can we gain the real historical context in which the coming kingdom of God can be proclaimed and demonstrated as relevant and evident. The horizon of time must be discovered anew *sub specie aeternitatis*.

3.4. Perspectives for Renewal

In the context of the tremendous changes we have experienced in our world since the late 1980s, I am reminded finally of an event which took place in 1969. During the period of student unrest in western Europe a so-called ‘go in’ was organized by students during the German Lutheran Church Convention in Stuttgart; it took place in an auditorium filled with 6,000 delegates. They unveiled a giant banner where everyone could read the words ‘Jesus is dead. Marx is alive!’ This event was a typical phenomenon for modern secularism. In view of this provocation, Christians then had to ask themselves whether there was still a chance of evangelizing a Europe defined by socialist utopias. Today, after the collapse of worldwide communism, the slogan ‘Jesus is dead. Marx is alive!’ is presented in a totally different light, for Marxism-Leninism has come to its definite end, both politically as well as ideologically.

Therefore, we should study quite carefully the mystery of the church of Jesus Christ throughout church history. Here, we can see that Christ has protected his church and

renewed her again and again through the centuries. I would like to elucidate this briefly using three classic epochs of history.

Did not all appear to be lost in the first few centuries after Christ, especially in view of the Diocletian persecution? Yet, Christ strengthened the early church not only to remain grounded in the faith, but showed himself as the Living One by the fact that his gospel had penetrated into all provinces of the Roman Empire in spite of all pagan resistance.

However dark and lost the situation of the church appeared to be in the period of the Renaissance popes, Christ still gave the Reformation for this muddled situation; it was a renewal of his church from the top down. At the beginning of the 16th century, no one could have predicted from a human perspective that such a profound change in the history of the church was imminent.

The situation was also extremely difficult in the 19th century. The masses followed the philosophical higher critics—such as Feuerbach and Marx. Yet right at this time, Christ gave the Great Awakening in North America and also a number of

outbreaks of revival in Europe. This resulted in a strong missionary movement worldwide which left in its wake churches in almost all the countries of the so-called 'Third World'.

Therefore, I would like to close with the following hope-filled outlook for the future. Through solid teaching and research as evangelical theologians, we have been called to help the church of Jesus Christ of our day to fulfil more effectively her calling in the modern world. It is only the Risen Christ who can give new impetus and new life to our post-Christian world—and this will always be the case. He is able to call a movement into being which, under the current conditions, we cannot even yet imagine. He is the one who shows himself to be the Sovereign Lord of his church. His power is even in effect during persecutions; for small minorities which seem to grow ever smaller, there is hope because his word can cause a new revival. Christ is Lord. That is enough for us to be obedient to his calling in our Modern world as well as in a Post-Modern world.¹²

12 See Reflection XIV.

MISSIONS IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM:

21 Key Trends For The 21st Century

Stan Guthrie

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1-84227-042-7 / 197 x 127mm / p/b / 240pp / £9.99

Paternoster Press, PO Box 300, Carlisle, Cumbria CA3 0QS, UK