



RESPONDING TO SECULARISATION:

MODERN DANGERS AND POSTMODERN OPPORTUNITIES

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Just over a year ago Lex McMillan, Head of the School of Counselling at Laidlaw College, presented a paper at a research conference of counsellor educators organised by the NZ Association of Counsellors.¹ I was intrigued when Lex explained to me what he was thinking of doing. His paper looked at the education of counsellors and one of the key elements of his paper was the issue of how a Christian understanding of the Trinity provided a framework for thinking about the counselling process and the training of counsellors.

It impressed me that Lex was willing to speak in this kind of context in such a distinctly Christian way. Here was a robust discussion of the relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity happening – not in a church setting – but at a conference organised by the NZ Association of Counsellors. Here was an example of Christian theology at work in “the public square.” However, what impressed me even more was the positive response he received. Many were impressed with the thoughtfulness of his paper. Lex told me that the speaker after him referred to his presentation on several occasions.

Lex mentioned a number of things to me as he reflected on the experience. The main thing that stood out was that he said he could only speak in such a theological way because of the space created by postmodernity. As he spoke about the Trinity he was not saying that this was “truth” that everyone should believe. Rather, he was offering a particularly Christian way of seeing the counselling process. The main point of his conference paper was to say that counsellor educators should be clear about their guiding and underlying philosophical assumptions that give rise to the aims of counselling. In addition, he also thought it important to acknowledge some of the past mistakes of the church in imposing particular views. Thus, for Lex, his conference paper was an exercise in dialogue not monologue.²

What I aim to do in what follows is to put forward two basic proposals regarding the church’s response to the challenge of secularisation.³ First, in responding to this challenge, rather than trying to

¹ Lex’s paper was entitled “Troubling the Idea of Normal.”

² In addition, Lex stated that he understands dialogue to be one of the central marks of participation in trinitarian life of God.

³ In this respect I am speaking into the context of the church in the post-Christendom Western world which includes, according to my understanding, the church in New Zealand. What follows is based on a presentation I gave at the New Zealand Christian Network National Forum on Secularisation in February 2012.

regain a lost position, lost power and lost privilege, the church needs to take up a new posture. This new posture should not be determined by the cultural rules that give rise to fundamentalist secularism, which I will call the rules of modernity. Rather, this new posture should actually be determined by the gospel. Secondly, as we think about this new posture and think about our current cultural context, we ought to see postmodern thought not as an enemy (which is often portrayed), but rather as a kind of ally. It is an ally because what postmodern thought does is critique the assumptions of secularism.

I find two authors/thinkers particularly helpful here, and in what follows I will draw heavily on their thinking. The first is Lesslie Newbigin, the well-known missionary thinker and practitioner who after forty years in India gave serious thought to what mission might look like in the West. The second is James K. A. Smith, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College in Michigan, USA. Both these scholars help us think through our response to what might be called fundamentalist secularism.

FUNDAMENTALIST SECULARISM IS THE KIND OF SECULARISM WHICH PUSHES RELIGION AND FAITH OUT OF THE PUBLIC SQUARE AND THE ARENA OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE. FAITH IS PUSHED OUT INTO THE MARGINS OF PRIVATE, SUBJECTIVE, NON-RATIONAL BELIEF

THE ASSUMPTIONS OF FUNDAMENTALIST SECULARISM

Fundamentalist secularism is the kind of secularism which pushes religion and faith out of the public square and the arena of public discourse. Faith is pushed out into the margins of private, subjective, non-rational belief. As such, this kind of secularisation can be thought of as being a product (or consequence) of post-Enlightenment modernity.

Post-Enlightenment modernity proceeds on the basis of the scientific method. Such a method in turn proceeds on the basis of reason and rationality, unencumbered by things like superstition, tradition, and religious belief. According to this method, reason grants us the power to identify, collect, analyse and describe the facts. And only facts can be considered true.

Newbigin sums up this approach well when he states:

The thinkers of the Enlightenment spoke of their age as the age of reason, and by reason they meant essentially those analytical and mathematical powers by which human beings

could attain (at least in principle) to a complete understanding of, and thus a full mastery of, nature – of reality in all its forms. Reason, so understood, is sovereign in this enterprise. It cannot bow before any authority other than what it calls the facts.⁴

To use reason is to be rational. To be rational is to be autonomous, independent, unbiased, neutral, objective and free from the influence of any particular tradition (including any particular religious tradition) or faith stance. This approach leads to a number of basic splits: splits between facts and values; between knowledge and belief; between science and faith; between the objective and the subjective; between the public and the private; and finally between the secular and the religious.

The upshot is that religion has no place in the public realm because religion is not concerned with facts; instead, it is concerned with “values.” It is not objective; instead, it is subjective. And it cannot be proven by science; instead, it proceeds on the basis of faith. This is the argument of fundamentalist secularism.

This kind of secularism says: “We want a public square which is not compromised by the irrationality of religious belief. We want public discourse which is not compromised by this kind of irrationality. And the same goes for political discourse... and academic discourse... and philosophical discourse.” Thus, according to the rules set down by fundamentalist secularism, when we, as Christians, enter into these realms we need to leave behind the irrationality and the unreasonableness of our religious belief.

There is, of course, a basic assumption at work in the argument of fundamentalist secularism. It is assumed that it is possible to hold an autonomous, unbiased, neutral, objective point of view which is free from the influence of a particular tradition or particular faith stance. It is here, however, that the critiques offered by postmodern thought come into play.

PROPHETIC POSTMODERNISM

Before these critiques are considered, a distinction must be made. For some this can be a confusing distinction, but it is, nevertheless, an important distinction. A distinction must be made between postmodernity and postmodernism.

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: the Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 25.

Postmodernity can be thought of as “our current cultural moment.” It is a label that is given to certain features of contemporary Western culture. Postmodernism (or Postmodern thought) is best thought of as a philosophical and theoretical project. It is an intellectual movement influenced by philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault.

As James K. A. Smith notes in his book, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church*,⁵ there is a kind of trickle-down effect between postmodernism and postmodernity. In other words, the philosophical movement has affected our contemporary culture. But, equally important, many elements in cultural postmodernity (our current cultural moment in contemporary Western culture) are the result of post-Enlightenment modernity. Two significant examples are individualism and consumerism.

In *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism* Smith puts forward the proposition that postmodern thinkers and philosophers are our friends. The reason for this surprising claim is because, in Smith’s opinion, they help make room for religion in public discourse by challenging the assumptions and rules

of fundamentalist secularism. Smith in fact sees postmodern thinkers and philosophers as prophets who bring a prophetic critique against the idolatry of modernity. In fact, they announce the twilight of the idols – modernity is coming to an end.

In relation to the basic assumption of modernity that it is unbiased, neutral, objective reason which determines rationality and knowledge, postmodern theorists argue that such an assumption is simply not sustainable. The reason is that there is no such a thing as pure reason. It is a myth. There is no such thing as an unbiased, neutral, objective standpoint. But more significantly, for our purposes, there is nothing wrong with this. Postmodern thinkers therefore call into question the ideal of pure reason and rationality and thus call into question the project and doctrine of secularism.

The critique of postmodernism says to the post-Enlightenment modernists, “What you are calling ‘rational’ is not ‘just reason.’ It is based on a set of prior commitments. It is based on a belief system.” So, according to Smith, the basic critique

⁵ James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 20, footnote 8.

of postmodernism has the effect of levelling the playing field. This in turn means that religious belief cannot be discounted as irrational.

On this basis it means that Christians (and other people of faith) can say to the fundamentalist secularist, "If you get to bring in your fundamental beliefs and commitments and pretend that they are rational and objective, then why can't I?" All of us should be able to come into this public square and the sphere of public discourse with our particular beliefs and commitments. Thus the postmodern perspective actually opens the door for religion. Instead of being an enemy, postmodernist thought can be thought of as being an ally.

But for many Christians the acceptance of this position is not that easy since there is a basic belief that postmodernism is anti-religious. In this regard, some will point to the most commonly cited definition of postmodernism, defined by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*: "[s]implifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives."⁶ Isn't this a problem for Christians? Isn't the Christian narrative just such a metanarrative?

This is a fairly complex issue, but in response, Smith argues that for the ordinary thinking Christian who knows of this quote, "metanarratives" are generally thought to refer simply to big stories that tell an overarching tale about the world. However as Smith argues, this is not what Lyotard meant. A big story or a grand story is just a "meganarrative," not a "metanarrative."

For Lyotard a "metanarrative" has a more specific meaning. The key thing about metanarratives is the nature of the claim that they make. They are stories that not only tell a grand story; they also claim to be able to legitimate or prove the story's claim by an appeal to universal criteria. The key issue is one of legitimation. In relation to modernity and its metanarrative there is, for example, an appeal to science or scientific method for legitimation. In other words, there is an appeal to the universal criteria of a shared autonomous reason.

The question then arises as to whether the Christian faith proceeds on the basis of the kind of metanarrative which Lyotard describes. Smith's answer is straightforward, "[t]he answer is clearly

negative, since the biblical narrative and the Christian faith claim to be legitimated not by an appeal to a universal, autonomous reason but rather by an appeal to faith."⁷

In our debates about how we respond to secularisation I believe this is a crucial point. Some Christians would want to respond on the terms that post-Enlightenment modernity sets; on the basis of pure, objective, autonomous neutral rationality. However, this is, ironically, the path that leads to secularisation.

SECULARISATION AND THE CHURCH

This kind of critique of post-Enlightenment modernity and response to secularisation can also be found in the writings of Lesslie Newbigin. On his return to England after forty years serving as a missionary in India Newbigin observed the triumph of post-Enlightenment modernity. On this basis he called for a "missionary encounter" between the gospel and modern Western culture. However, Newbigin observed, one of the barriers to such an encounter was the church itself.

It is undeniable that modern Western culture has been shaped by the gospel, but in return, modernity has influenced the church and how

Christians in the West have understood their faith. The problem of the so-called Western church is that it has for too long learned to peacefully co-exist with post-Enlightenment culture. It is, therefore, now extremely hard for the church in the secularised West to recover the posture of a missionary culture.

For Newbigin, Western Christianity exhibits "an advanced case of syncretism."⁸ This is because the church in the West has uncritically accepted the foundational faith commitments of its culture and has been absorbed into this culture without posing any kind of radical challenge to the assumptions of the culture. In other words, we have bought into the assumptions of post-Enlightenment modernity and it is these assumptions which have caged the gospel.

I recently mentioned to a few people that I was thinking about the challenge of secularisation. Several of them independently gave the same response. They asked, "Is it secularisation in society or in the church?" This is a key question and issue.

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6 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

7 Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 70.

8 Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 67.

I would suggest that the challenge of secularisation is greatest, not in the context of society, but, in the context of the church. This is because many Christians have bought into, usually without even knowing it, the assumptions of post-Enlightenment modernity. We have bought into the resultant splits between the public and the private. In other words, we have gone along with the assumptions which have led to the “privatisation of faith” and of the gospel itself.

We, in the modern, contemporary, Western church, have created our own splits: between the public and the private; between Monday and Sunday; between the secular and the Christian; between work and ministry; between the material and the spiritual; between being human and being Christian. These splits are arguably the result of us buying into the assumptions of post-Enlightenment modernity, or as Newbigin names them, the plausibility structures of post-Enlightenment modernity. It is these forces which have lead to secularisation and it is these same forces which have been, and continue to be, at work in the church.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

In terms of the way forward I would suggest that two things need to happen.

First of all, we need to recover the centrality of the gospel in making sense of the world. In other words, the gospel needs to once again function as our plausibility structure. Michael Goheen, whose PhD looked at the thought of Lesslie Newbigin, puts it like this:

If the gospel is true, then its light will make more sense of the world than the limited insights of the [dominant] cultural community. The mission of the church is to embody the gospel in such a way as to offer an alternative way of understanding and living in the world.⁹

For Newbigin the gospel was public truth. It didn't belong in the private realm. It needed to be released to speak into all areas of life, into all aspects of society.

The modern way of seeing the world appears in many respects to be collapsing. The church has the

⁹ Michael W. Goheen, “Liberating the Gospel from Its Modern Cage: An Interpretation of Lesslie Newbigin’s Gospel and Modern Culture Project,” *Missionalia* 30 (2002): 370.

opportunity to offer an alternative vision of reality. In constructing this alternative vision our starting point will be crucial. Are we beginning with the assumptions of modern Western culture, or are we beginning with what we understand to be the truth of the gospel?

When Christians are asked on what grounds they make their claim that Jesus is Saviour and Lord, Newbigin argues, “what is really being asked, of course, is that we should show that the gospel is in accordance with the reigning plausibility structure of our society... and that is exactly what we cannot and must not do.”¹⁰ Instead, Christians offer an entirely “new starting point for thought,”¹¹ that is, God’s own revelation in those events to which the Scriptures testify, and whose centre is Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we need, as Smith argues, to take on board the prophetic role of postmodern thinkers. The assumption of pure, objective, neutral, unbiased reason is a myth. This might be a hard sell for most

Christians who are steeped in the assumptions of modernity. However, this claim actually makes room for religious discourse in the public square. In other words, it opens up space for a radically Christian witness in our postmodern world, both in thought and in practice. This new context, ironically, allows us to actually be the church.

Our current cultural situation, which in many respects is a mixture of modern and postmodern influences, means, as Smith argues, that we may need to actually push further this prophetic postmodern voice and even say to some of the postmodern theorists that they are not being postmodern enough! However, at the same time we must be careful that, in taking the opportunities that postmodernism opens up, we do not return to our modernist ways or our modernist mindset and try to force or impose our version of universal rationality on others. We need to be aware of our past mistakes and speak very much with a great sense of humility

Nevertheless, one of the things that the postmodern agenda allows is for Christians to talk about and highlight pre-existing commitments and beliefs. In other words the postmodern approach allows us to get everyone’s presuppositions on the table. Then, in that context, we will be able to tell the

¹⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

story of the Christian faith, “allowing others to see the way in which it makes sense of our experience and our world.”¹² This, in my opinion, is exactly what my friend Lex did!

This means learning how to dialogue rather than simply monologue, and this new position of dialogue means that we must regain a sense confidence in our own voice while at the same time valuing the voice of the other. Our own sense of confidence in our voice, however, will only come from grasping the radical nature of the gospel for the interpretation of the whole of life and the world. All these factors: confidence, listening, dialogue are perhaps things that most Christians will need to learn, and perhaps even be trained in.

THE CONGREGATION AS A HERMENEUTIC OF THE GOSPEL

In all of this thinking about the challenge of secularisation we need to avoid underestimating the importance of the local congregation. For Newbigin, it is here that all of this needs to be worked out. In response to the question, “How are we to communicate the gospel to the world?” Newbigin states, “I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”¹³ It is in the context of the local congregation that the primary missionary encounter takes place because it is here that the gospel first of all takes shape in the lives of ordinary people. This means that it is here, before anywhere else, that culture and the reigning assumptions which shape society are encountered by the gospel. It is here, before anywhere else, that the challenge of secularisation must be faced.

On this point, the final words are perhaps best left to Newbigin:

If the gospel is to challenge the public life of our society, if Christians are to occupy the “high ground” which they vacated in the noon time of “modernity,” it will not be by forming a Christian political party, or by aggressive propaganda campaigns. Once again it has to be said that there can be no going back to the “Constantinian” era. It will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new

creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.¹⁴

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IT IS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE LOCAL CONGREGATION THAT THE PRIMARY MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER TAKES PLACE BECAUSE IT IS HERE THAT THE GOSPEL FIRST OF ALL TAKES SHAPE IN THE LIVES OF ORDINARY PEOPLE

¹² Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* 74.

¹³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Geneva [SZ]: Eerdmans; WCC Publications, 1989), 227.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 232–33.