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Science, Religion and Postmodernism: Their Inter-Relationships

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Abstract: This introductory article attempts to discuss the phenomenon of postmodernism and its impact on science and religion. A brief, schematic and at times disorganised presentation of what postmodernism is and its relation to science and religion is attempted in this article. That this article remains tentative belongs to the very nature of postmodernism itself. We look for the main ideas of postmodernism, without trying to offer a systematic exposition. In the process we hope to discuss how postmodernism is related to the two pillars of modern (or postmodern) society: science and religion. The term 'postmodernism' seems to have been first used in 1917 by the German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz to describe the nihilism of the 20th century. As the term indicates, the phenomenon of postmodernism cannot be understood apart from modernism. It is a critique of all that has been associated with modernism. It may be regarded as a (positive) response to modernism or a (negative) reaction to it. Hence, we begin with a discussion of the origin and development of modernism. Then we go on to study the origin, development and characteristics of postmodernism. We shall also point out the interdependence between postmodernism, science and religion.

Keywords: Rudolf Pannwitz, Science, Religion, Postmodernism, Modernism

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Science, Religion and Postmodernism

An Exploration of their Inter-Relationships

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1. Introduction

This article is meant to be an introductory one. It attempts to discuss the phenomenon of postmodernism and its impact on science and religion. A brief, schematic and at times disorganised presentation of what postmodernism is and its relation to science and religion is attempted in this article. That this article remains tentative belongs to the very nature of postmodernism itself. We look for the main ideas of postmodernism, without trying to offer a systematic exposition. In the process we hope to discuss how postmodernism is related to the two pillars of modern (or postmodern) society: science and religion.

The term 'postmodernism' seems to have been first used in 1917 by the German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz to describe the nihilism of the 20th century (Puthenpurackal 2000: 97). As the term indicates, the phenomenon of postmodernism¹ cannot be understood apart from modernism. It is a critique of all that has been associated with modernism (Clifford 1994: 62). It may be regarded as a (positive) response to

modernism or a (negative) reaction to it. Hence, we begin with a discussion of the origin and development of modernism. Then we go on to study the origin, development and characteristics of postmodernism. We shall also point out the interdependence between postmodernism, science and religion.

Obviously we make no attempt to give an exhaustive account of postmodernism. What we try to do is to trace the emergence of this phenomenon and its relation to scientific growth and religious development in our (post)modern culture. We hope to show that in the origin and development of postmodernism both science and religion have played significant roles. Conversely, postmodernism has contributed a lot to today's understanding of science and religion. Though the distinction between constructive postmodernism and nihilistic postmodernism as proposed by some Christian authors may be helpful, I have not found it necessary to use it here. In this article I have tried to take a neutral stance towards postmodernism.

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2. Origin, Development and Characteristics of Modernism

Sociologists have made serious efforts to study the way traditional societies evolved into modern ones. The process of modernisation is regarded as a complex, global, systematic, phased, lengthy, homogenising, irreversible and progressive one. Today's society understands a "modern man"² as "an informed participant citizen; he has a marked sense of personal efficacy; he is highly independent and autonomous in his relation to the traditional sources of influence, especially when he is making basic decisions about how to conduct his personal affairs; and he is ready for new experiences and ideas; that is, he is relatively open-minded and cognitively flexible" (Inkeles and Smith 1974: 290).

Briefly, we may see the following predominant aspects in modern societies.

3. 1. *Rationality and Research (Enlightenment)*

The basic ideas of the Enlightenment with regard to rationality may be summed up in terms of the following theses. (1) There is a stable, coherent, knowable self. This self is conscious, rational and autonomous – no physical conditions or differences substantially affect how this self operates. (2) This self knows itself and the world through reason. Rationality is posited as the highest form of mental functioning, and the only objective form. (3) The mode of knowing produced by the objective rational self is "science," which can provide universal truths about the world,

regardless of the individual status of the knower. (4) The knowledge produced by science is "truth," and is everlasting. (5) The knowledge/truth produced by science (by the rational objective knowing self) will always lead towards progress and perfection. All human institutions and practices can objectively be analysed by reason and improved. (6) Reason is the ultimate judge of what is true, and therefore of what is right, and what is good (what is legal and what is ethical). Freedom consists in obedience to the laws that conform to the knowledge discovered by reason. (7) In a world governed by reason, the true will always be the same as the good and the right; there can be no conflict between what is true and what is right. (8) Science thus stands as the paradigm for any and all socially useful forms of knowledge. Science is neutral and objective; scientists, those who produce scientific knowledge through their unbiased rational capacities, must be free to follow the laws of reason, and not be motivated by other concerns (such as money or power). (9) Language or the mode of expression used in producing and disseminating knowledge, must also be rational. To be rational, language must be transparent; it must function only to represent the real world which the rational mind observes. There must be a firm and objective connection between the objects of perception and the words used to name them.

These fundamental premises of modernism serve to justify and explain virtually all of our social structures and institutions, including democracy, law, science, ethics, and aesthetics.

Modernism is fundamentally about order: about rationality and rationalisation, creating regularity out of chaos. The assumption is that creating more rationality is conducive to creating more order, and that the more ordered a society is, the better it will function (the more rationally it will function). Because modernism is about the pursuit of ever-increasing levels of order, modern societies constantly are on guard against anything and everything labelled as “disorder,” which might disrupt order. Thus modern societies rely on continually establishing a binary opposition between “order” and “disorder,” so that they can assert the superiority of “order.” To achieve this, they have to invent things that represent “disorder.” In western culture, this disorder becomes “the other” – defined in relation to other binary oppositions. Thus anything non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, non-hygienic, non-rational (etc.) becomes part of “disorder,” and has to be eliminated from the organised, rational modern society. This “dualism,” I believe, has been sufficiently exposed by postmodernism.

3.2. *Differentiation of Sciences and Classical Physics*

Another vivid feature associated with modernism is the emergence of the disciplines of science and particularly the emergence of physics as the queen of sciences. The classical Newtonian physics has been regarded as the paradigm of scientific progress during the last few centuries. In fact, it epitomises modernism. So we can summarise the basic assumptions of classical

Newtonian mechanics so as to see the philosophy of modernism.

(1) Nature can be described as a huge machine. (2) In contrast to the static medieval world-view, change is given greater scope; but change is basically the rearrangement of unchanging components, the fundamental particles of nature. These particles are still thought to be fixed, with no genuine novelty or historical development allowed. (3) Nature is deterministic rather than (as in the medieval conception) teleological. Mechanical causes, not purposes, determine all natural events, and explanation consists in the specification of such causes. Assuming a complete knowledge of current states (or initial conditions), the future could be precisely predicted. (4) The basic reality of nature consists in the separate fundamental atoms or particles. The theory of knowledge is classical realism: the object can be known as it is in itself apart from the observer. Atomism (the theory holding the universe being composed of atoms) was paralleled by an individualistic view of society (developed, for example, in ideas of economic competition and social contract theories of government). (5) The approach to nature was reductionistic and mechanistic rather than hierarchical. The physical mechanisms and laws were thought to determine all events (except, perhaps, those in the human mind). (6) Newton accepted the Cartesian dualism of mind and body; God, the self-grounding, self-present subject (Tracy 2000: 240), and human minds constituted the great exception in a mechanistic world. Even though the earth was no longer the centre of the cosmic system, human ratio-

nalism was seen as the mark of our uniqueness. But the leaders of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment believed that humanity was also a part of the all-encompassing world machine, whose operation could be explained without reference to God. This materialistic world held no place for consciousness or inwardness except as subjective illusions. Since nature is a machine, it is an object that can be exploited for the good of humans.

Undoubtedly, classical mechanics has been tremendously successful. Still, there is a fundamental problem: life in its richness, diversity and unpredictability, is not comprehended by it. In short, as Michel Serres holds:

Classical physics is a science of dead things and a strategy of the kill.... The world is in order according to this mathematical physics. The laws are the same everywhere... there is nothing to be learned, to be discovered, to be invented, in this repetitive world, which falls in parallel lines of identity. There is nothing new under the sun of identity. It is information-free, complete redundancy ... there is death forever. Nature is put to death or is not allowed to be born. And the science of all this is nothing, can be summed up as nothing. Stable, unchanging, redundant, it recopies the same writing in the same atomic letters (cited in Toolan 2000: 54).³

3.3 Modernism and Religion: Secularisation

The process of secularisation which has led to the privatisation or even elimination of religion has been a significant hallmark of modernism.

At the basic level of analysis, modernisation leads to what Max Weber called “the disenchantment of the world.” It eliminates all the superhuman and supernatural forces, the gods and spirits, with which non-industrial, traditional cultures populate the universe and to which they attribute responsibility for the phenomena of the natural and social worlds. It proposes as the solely valued cosmology the modern scientific interpretation of nature. Only the laws and regularities discovered by the scientific method are admitted as valid explanations of phenomena. If it rains, or does not rain, it is not because the gods are angry but because of atmospheric conditions, as measured by the barometer and photographed by satellites.

Specifically, such a “disenchantment of the world” leads to process of secularisation. It systematically displaces religious institutions, beliefs, and practices, substituting for them those of reason and science. This process was first observed in Christian Europe towards the end of the 17th century.⁴ At any rate, once it emerged in Europe, especially Protestant Europe, secularisation was considered as part of the “package” of industrialism that was exported to the non-European world. Wherever modern European cultures have impinged, they have diffused secularising currents into traditional religions and non-rational ideologies.

Although secularisation is a general tendency or principle of development in modern societies, this does not imply that religion is driven out altogether from society. Against a tradi-

tional background, it inevitably leaves many religious practices in place and may even stimulate new ones. Religious rituals, such as Christian baptism and Church weddings, persist in all industrial societies; the Church may, as in England and Italy, continue to play an important moral and social role. The majority of the population may hold, however insecurely, traditional religious beliefs alongside more scientific ones. There may even be, as in the United States, waves of religious revivalism, involving large sections of the population.

It is nonetheless true that all such religious phenomena, real as they may be in the lives of believers, lose their centrality in the life of the society as a whole. As compared with their place in traditional society, they increasingly take on the character of marginal, even leisure-time, activities. They no longer embody that crucial legitimating power that religious activities have in all non-industrial societies. The religious establishment is aware that to confront the modern state too openly is to risk disestablishment, as in France, or even dissolution, as in communist societies. Baptisms and Church weddings persist as much for social reasons as from belief in their religious significance (Britannica 2001).⁵

3. Origin, Development and Characteristics of Postmodernism

Postmodernism has become the “in” thing today. No branch of science or religion today can ignore the emergence of the phenomenon (or attitude) of postmodernism which remains elu-

sive, vague and hazy and casts a spell on so many cultures, movements and societies. Postmodernism is a movement away from the modern presuppositions. Its emergence may be seen in the following philosophical, religious and scientific processes.

3.1 *From Structuralism to Poststructuralism: Deconstructing the Base*⁶

What began with Marx, Darwin, Freud and Levi-Strauss continues in the twentieth century intellectual history, as new disciplines and sub-disciplines assert their own foundational causative categories from which all else ensues. The way to deconstruct (Pathanmackel 2000: 141) someone else’s theoretical framework is to replace the foundational categories of analysis with a new base.

Philosophers and social scientists began to challenge the very possibility of such a base-superstructure metaphor for knowledge after some decades of dancing in circles. In Marxist theory, for instance, it was clear that elements of the superstructure could and must have causative influences on the economic base of a society. Further, Marxism’s critique of false ideology and its claim to be a true science of history could easily be re/presented as an ideology in need of critique. To disprove a social scientific theory, one “deconstructs” the “base” by showing that the presumed “foundation” is really a product of some other causative phenomena. Thus, Max Weber’s famous study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* seeks to reverse the materialist categories of Marxism and argue that the ideology of

Protestantism changed the economic structure of society, though as an unintended consequence. Weber's inversion of Marx's base and superstructure can be reversed again in an ideological critique of Weber. This philosophical circularity has become a major problem in the social sciences, linguistic theory and hermeneutics in recent times.

Poststructuralism, which is really synonymous with postmodernism, begins to challenge the possibility of such simplistic, unidirectional causative analysis, while continuing to argue that reality is in some significant sense hidden from direct observation and common-sense. Poststructuralism removes all foundational categories by reexamining them as the causative products of some other factors. There is no available a priori, no Archimedean point of reference, on which to ground human reason. What is "reasonable" in this neo-Kantian formulation is somehow an intersubjective projection onto phenomena. There is no direct experience of reality without interpretation; and all interpretation is in some sense constituted by the cultural and personal prejudices of the interpreter.

Associated with poststructuralism is the movement from metaphysical realism to metaphoric realism at the linguistic level. The linguistic move in postmodernism is also characterised by a linguistic movement in philosophy. Ludwig Wittgenstein came to reject his own earlier positivist theory of language, which provides an important transition in charting the move from modernism to postmodernism. Wittgenstein recognised that all lan-

guages, from the mathematical to our mother tongues, are internally self-referential. Language is understood as a kind of game theory, in which the rules are specific to each particular user-group. What we can talk about are language games within the boundaries of rational, irrational, and other-rational. Human reason is a polyglot. Cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural translation are possible. Within the rules of their respective language games, an Orthodox Jew can be every bit as rational as a particle physicist; indeed, they can be one and the same person. There is, however, no master language of Truth, as the scientific positivists and religious fundamentalists had believed.

3.2 From Newtonian Mechanics to the Theory of Chaos: Through Quantum Mechanics

The overthrow of classical mechanics through quantum mechanics and the origin of the theory of chaos usher in a path towards postmodernism.

Quantum mechanics is the science dealing with the behaviour of matter and light at the atomic and subatomic levels. It attempts to describe and account for the properties of molecules and atoms and their constituents – electrons, protons, neutrons, and other more esoteric particles such as quarks and gluons. These properties include the interactions of the particles with one another and with electromagnetic radiation (i.e., light, X rays, and gamma rays).

The behaviour of matter and radiation on the atomic scale often seems peculiar, and the consequences of quantum theory are accordingly difficult to

understand and to believe. Its concepts frequently conflict with common-sense notions derived from observations of the everyday world. There is no reason, however, why the behaviour of the atomic world should conform to that of the familiar, large-scale world. It is important to realise that quantum mechanics is a branch of physics and that the business of physics is to describe and account for the way the world – on both the large and the small scale – actually is and not how one imagines it or would like it to be. Quantum mechanics has attracted some of the ablest scientists of the 20th century, and they have erected what is perhaps the finest intellectual edifice of the period. Still, there are inherent conceptual problems associated with it, that even Einstein could not accept (Britannica 2001).

Like quantum mechanics, another theory that leads to postmodernism is theory of chaos. Generally in mechanics and mathematics, apparently random or unpredictable behaviour in systems is governed by deterministic laws. A more accurate term, “deterministic chaos,” suggests a paradox because it connects two notions that are familiar and commonly regarded as incompatible. The first is that of randomness or unpredictability, as in the trajectory of a molecule in a gas or in the voting choice of a particular individual in a given population. In conventional analyses, randomness was considered more apparent than real, arising from ignorance of the many causes at work. In other words, it was commonly believed that the world is unpredictable because it is complicated. The second notion is that of deterministic motion,

as that of a pendulum or a planet, which has been accepted since the time of Isaac Newton as exemplifying the success of science in rendering predictable that which is initially complex.

In recent decades, however, diverse systems have been studied that behave unpredictably despite their seeming simplicity and the fact that the forces involved are governed by well-understood physical laws. The common element in these systems is a very high degree of sensitivity to initial conditions and the way in which they are set in motion. For example, the meteorologist Edward Lorenz discovered that a simple model of heat convection possesses intrinsic unpredictability, a circumstance he called the “butterfly effect,” suggesting that the mere flapping of a butterfly’s wing can change the weather on the other side of the planet after few decades! A more homely example is the pinball machine: the ball’s movements are precisely governed by laws of gravitational rolling and elastic collisions – both fully understood – yet the final outcome is unpredictable.

In classical mechanics, the behaviour of a dynamic system can be described geometrically as motion on an “attractor.” The mathematics of classical mechanics effectively recognised three types of attractor: single points (characterising steady states), closed loops (periodic cycles), and tori (combinations of several cycles). In the 1960s a new class of “strange attractors” was discovered. On strange attractors the dynamics is chaotic. Later it was recognised that strange attractors have a detailed structure on all scales of mag-

nification; a direct result of this recognition was the development of the concept of the fractal (a class of complex geometric shapes that commonly exhibit the property of self-similarity), which led in turn to remarkable developments in computer graphics.

Applications of the mathematics of chaos are highly diverse, including the study of turbulent flow of fluids, irregularities in heartbeat, population dynamics, chemical reactions, plasma physics and the motion of groups and clusters of stars (Britannica 2001; Pandikattu 2001).

3.3 From Monolithic Religions to Primeval Spiritualities

Modernism had recognised (and privatised) the traditional, established religions. The major religions were classified and studied scientifically. Secularisation did not prevent religions being studied objectively. Still, the movement to the animistic religions and esoteric areas could not have been visualised by modernism.

In spite of the promised secularism to be brought about by modernism what is an astounding religious phenomenon is the emergence of fundamentalism and thousands of divergent religious sects. Some of them seem to be crazy, others like the numerous New Age movements have become respectable. But the undeniable fact is that the religion simply refuses to wither away. To some extent, institutionalised religions have lost their hold. But the non-institutional and sectarian ones flourish (Pandikattu 2001a).

As a typical case, we can speak of the doomsday cults. Waco, Heaven's Gate, Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo ("Supreme Truth"), and The People's Temple, or Jonestown, are shorthand terms often used to recall places, movements and events associated with groups known as doomsday cults. Hearing predictions that there are likely to be more such cults every other year, many who do not belong to them are trying to make sense of these movements, which they find both strange and threatening (Britannica 2001).

All the above phenomena point to a direction totally different from that taken by modernism. It may be argued that they are not conclusive proofs for the emergence of postmodernism. But taken together, there are so many features in these movements which are closely similar to postmodernism, that a close relationship may be reasonably inferred.

3.4. Features of Postmodernism⁷

As already indicated, postmodernism involves a shift away from modernism. It may be perceived as a critical response or reaction to modernism. It seems to be rooted, at least to a certain extent in the scientific and religious trends of our time. It challenges seriously the metaphysical, epistemological and linguistic "foundations" of our culture.

Postmodernism is being talked and written about everywhere in contemporary western society. The term postmodern is being used in many artistic, intellectual, and academic fields. The figures associated with post-mod-

ernism include: Rauschenberg, Baseliz, Schnabel, Kniefer, warhol and perhaps Bacon in art; Jencks and Venturi in architecture, Artaud in drama, Barth, Barthelme and Pynchon in fiction, Lynch in film (*Blue Velvet*), Sherman in photography, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard in philosophy. There are, of course, other subjects that ought to be mentioned: anthropology, geography, sociology the list is endless, and the names of those included lead to vigorous and bitter controversies. But one thing is clear: postmodernism is of great interest to a wide range of people because it directs our attention to the a major transformation, taking place in contemporary society and culture. The term is at once fashionable and elusive (Sarup 1993: 123).

In our own country we can find some postmodern tendencies in the Bollywood movies. Two recent movies *Bombay Boys* and *Pyar Mein Kabhi Kabhi*, seem to have postmodernist tendencies. The first one militates against the stereo-typed formula of the hero's eventual triumph over the villain. It presents a director who in pursuit of a flop movie allows the hero to flee away from the villain. The second one recognises the important contribution of every individual behind the screen by flashing their photos on the screen. It also had many interruptions that appeared to disrupt the continuity of the story with witty reflections and questions thus demonstrating that some postmodern traces are to be found in our cinema.

But postmodernism has its 'minus' points. It tends to lose clarity and precise meaning in the face of multiple

viewpoints. This is brought home by Paul Lakeland when he writes: "there are probably a thousand different self-appointed commentators of the postmodern phenomenon and bewildering discrepancies between the ways many of these authors understand the term postmodern and its cognates" (Lakeland 1997: ix-x).

3.4.1 *Moving beyond the Systemic Boundaries*

Modernism was a long march to the prison of 'order' and 'structure'. It looked for 'order' and 'structure' in everything. (Puthenpurackal 2000: 4-5) Postmodernism moves beyond this enframing of 'order' and 'structure'. For instance, authors, like Edward W. Soja combines the preface and the postscript in his book, *The Postmodern Geographies*, thus doing away the separation between the forewords and the afterwords (Soja 1997: 1-9). This does not mean that it ends up in confusion or chaos. In fact, it looks to be systematic without being systemic. It is an attempt to move to the margins of history. We can see this process of moving beyond the systemic boundaries, if we look at postmodernism as an attitude of mind, and if we realise that postmodernism gives primary to 'play,' to the project of deconstruction and the ideal of differentiation.

A Matter of Attitudes: Postmodernism is not an 'ism' like other 'isms' such as Vaishnavism or Marxism. Normally an 'ism' refers to a clear set of 'ideas,' a system-like arrangement of thought. That is why John Deely says, "postmodernism is a concept in search

of definitions” (cited in Ciapalo 1997: 79). Frankly speaking, we cannot refer to it even as a ‘concept’ because conceptualisation itself means enframing or setting within boundaries. Hence, it is said to be a ‘movement.’ Some scholars like Max Charlesworth hesitate even to call it a movement. He says, “Postmodernism is more a diffused mood than a unified movement, more a climate of thought than a philosophical system” (Charlesworth 1996: 188) it is best seen as a ‘trend,’ an ‘attitude,’ or a ‘mood’. This is the reason, why postmodernist thinkers like to call it postmodernity and not postmodernism (Gregorious 1997: 84). It is not a doctrine but a perspective, and hence a matter of attitude.

The Primacy of ‘Play’: The notion of play is central to post-modern thought. We have seen that postmodernism itself is constituted by the interplay of the ‘given’ and the ‘novel’. Think of children playing or your own playful moments, and you will agree that the word ‘play’ suggests freedom, innocence, spontaneity, flexibility, fluidity, slippage spillage etc. In short, it implies freedom from the enslavement of the ordered or the structured. That is why a postmodernist thinker Lyotard has titled one of his works as *"Just Gaming"* and Derrida talks of reality as a kind of ‘free play’ *difference* (Sweetman 1999: 6-9.)

The Project of Deconstruction: Another attempt to break free of the shackles of the structure is Derrida’s project of deconstruction. John D. Caputo metaphorically characterises this when says, “Cracking the nutshell is what deconstruction is, in a nutshell” (Caputo

1999: 306). Deconstruction can be broadly seen as a method of reading a text. Actually, it is not even a ‘method,’ for ‘method’ implies a set of explicit rules to be followed so as to arrive at a certain positive result (“the truth”) (Madison 1992: 10). In fact, Derrida uses this process of deconstruction to demonstrate that we cannot objectively encapsulate or enframe truth and meaning, for all knowledge is contextual, and is influenced by culture, tradition, language, prejudices, background beliefs etc. Thus, deconstruction challenges and calls into question the exclusivist imprisoning or fixation of truth or meaning and demonstrates the possibility of other possible meanings.

From Realism to Surrealism: We live in an age dominated by the media. The media entertains, educates and perverts us continuously. Today it has become increasingly difficult to maintain the gulf between the real and the imaginary. The gap between the real and the imaginary has narrowed to such an extent that we can say that we are somehow living in a world of magic-realism. No wonder children and even adults remain glued to the idiot box for hours together. Hence, we may call the idiot box the new opium of the poor. This blurring of the boundaries between the imaginary and the real is referred to as surrealism or hyperrealism in academic circles.

3.4.2 Reversal of the Centre and the Periphery

Charles Lemart says “one of the most enduring features of the classic system was that it was always one, mostly unrivalled, imperial centre”

(quoted in Mannath 1999: 7). The elevation of an unrivalled centre results in the degeneration of the periphery. Hence, postmodernism attempts to decentre the imperial centre. They try to show that the centre is an artificial construct that relies on the marginalization of others for its existence, thereby exposing the slipperiness of the dichotomy between the centre and the periphery (Taylor and Winquist 2001: 48-49). This results in the *derigidification* of the petrified centre, allowing the centring of the periphery. I shall point to this centring of the periphery while considering themes like the incredulity of metanarratives, the constitutive otherness, the celebration of the surface and anti-foundationalism.

Incredulity of Metanarratives:

Metanarratives are philosophical, social, religious, scientific etc. views that claim to explain all and everything under the sun, a "Theory of Everything (ToE)." They are referred to as metanarratives because of their universal, exclusivist, totalising and absolute status. Sarup teaches that "the *grands recits* are master narratives of mastery, of man seeking his telos in the conquest of nature" (Sarup 1993: 145). Postmodernism draws our attention to the fact that human conditions differ from place to place, and hence, the clever "grand theory" that would claim to explain all human problems is only a fad. Sarup believes that "philosophy with a capital 'P' is no longer a viable and credible enterprise" (Sarup 1993: 156). That is why Lyotard says, "I define postmodernity as incredulity towards metanarratives" (Sarup 1993: 4). Postmodernism wages a war against all

forms of totalisation. Thus, meaning systems like Christianity, Islam and Marxism are all seen as just one of the many available ideologies in the shopping mall. The playing down of the entire tradition of western philosophy by Nietzsche and Heidegger is an important milestone in the emergence of the trend that brought about incredulity of metanarratives. Richard Rorty signals this tendency when he says, "Philosophical metanarratives are out and mini narratives are in" (Madison 1992: 5). We witness a Derrida who attempts to pull down the logocentrism of entire western philosophy or a Lyotard alleging that the characteristic of modernism was its reliance on metanarratives for legitimisation of both science and state. This shows that the prophetic words of Marx, 'all that is solid melts in the air' are being fulfilled today.

Constitutive Otherness: Western thought can be characterised as the philosophy of 'either/or' or of 'polar opposites'. The binary opposites like good or evil, true or false, sacred or profane, beautiful or ugly, one or many etc., which are so central to it, describe its fragmentary approach. This fragmentary approach gives precision to a notion by placing it within a boundary. Hence, that which is placed outside is seen as 'the other'. In such thinking, 'the other' is discarded for fear of it threatening us.

Postmodern thinking does not see 'the other' as *contrasting* but as *constitutive*. In this context we cannot overlook the contribution of Emmanuel Levinas who emphatically taught that only through responsibility for the other person could human existence could

gain significance. Puthenpurackal makes this point clear when he writes, "Postmodernists see presence as constituted by absence, the real by appearance, the ideal by the mundane, truth by untruth, beauty by ugliness: a philosophy of difference" (Puthenpurackal 2000: 5). Hence, the margins, the periphery, the 'little narrative' are not to be marginalized but are to be seen as the 'constitutive other'. Metaphorically we can say that it is the margins that constitute the text. Thus, postmodernism blurs the rigid boundaries in the conceptual framework, i.e., it transcends the either-or structure and breaks open the boundary of precision. This is the clarion call given by Puthenpurackal (2000):

The new millennium calls for a philosophy of complementarity, a philosophy of the meeting paths, ideologies, thought patterns, cultures, value system etc. No philosophical tradition is so rich that it needs no enrichment from any other tradition, and no philosophical tradition is so poor that it cannot enrich any other. Hence a merging of the apparently irreconcilable opposite poles is both possible and necessary; the principle of non-contradiction, the either/or structure, can be transcended. The movement has already begun; it has to be accelerated still more, so that the new millennium does not witness stagnation, but fecundation and creativity in philosophy.

The Celebration of the 'Surface': The traditional philosophy could be characterised as the philosophy of the substratum. Such a philosophy is built on the concepts of substance and essence. Substance refers to the 'lasting' element in the mutation of all phenom-

ena. Substance thus refers to the basic, foundational aspect in reality as against the flitting accidental element. Postmodernism plays down this substratum philosophy that reached its zenith in modernism. The accidental elements that were pushed aside to the periphery now acquire centrality. This celebration of the surface had its beginnings already in Martin Heidegger's attempt to avoid the error of reification of being, which led him to launch the project of fundamental philosophy.

The Attack on Foundationalism: Postmodernism teaches that the epistemological enterprise began by Descartes and continued by Locke, Kant and various other philosophers in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries was a grave error. Postmodernists are anti-foundationalists to the core. They hold that the question of fact, truth, correctness, validity and clarity cannot be posed nor answered in reference to some extra-contextual, ahistorical, non-situational reality. All these matters are intelligible and debatable only within the framework of a context or a situation or a paradigm or a community that gives them their local shape. Thus, truth or fact is local, there is no absolute or universal truth (Charlesworth 1996: 193). That is why some scholars even describe postmodernism as post-foundationalism.

3.4.3 The Return to the Authentic Self

Modernism with its anthropological turn had placed a crown on "man." But postmodernism puts him back in his place. This "death of man" is beautifully pictured by Schnadelbach:

Farewell to man means the end of the notion that man is the centre of the world, the author of his history and the foundation of all knowledge, including the knowledge of himself. This modern anti-humanism says that man should no longer make himself into a principle but should realise he is merely an ephiphenomen of sub-human and superhuman powers and processes” (cited in Puthenpurackal 1999a: 33).

The “death of man” is also seen in the transrational/suprational approach, and decentring of the subject in postmodernism.

The Transrational Approach: The rationality that was enthroned by modernism is pulled down by postmodernism. Now one must take note that postmodernist thinkers are not pushing irrationality as an alternative to rationality. Rather, the alternative is a post-metaphysical concept of rationality, i.e., they take rationality into a transcendental realm. This is clarified by James L. Marsh, when he says: “the alternative is post-metaphysical concept of rationality, play, questioning, pre-conceptual, critical, asystematic, respectful of mystery. The debate then is not between rationality and irrationality but between two different accounts of rationality” (Marsh 1998: 340).

4. Impact on Religion and Science

Postmodernism invites us to make a radical shift in our thinking pattern. By drawing our attention to the multiplicity, diversity, contingency etc., of reality, postmodernism has achieved a

paradigm shift, which has influenced all dimensions of our existence (Singh 2001: 317). In the context of this paper, I focus mainly on its impact on epistemology, metaphysics, and theology and its confirmation by both science and religion.

Epistemological Non-certainty: With reason at the centre, the correspondence view, which sees truth as absolute, certain and universally valid knowledge came to be accepted by most people. Science was taken as the paradigm of all knowledge and truth. But postmodernism following Nietzsche waters down the value of representational truth held so high by modernism. Now truth is seen as a mere interpretation or a perspective. Thus, the Cartesean-Lockean-Kantian “cognising” subject of modernism – a subject that is nothing but pure, disembodied gaze upon a fully objective world – has been deconstructed. That mind can no longer mirror reality become the mantra of postmodernism. Since truth is only an interpretation or a perspective, the postmodern thinkers show great respect to plurality of perspectives. This epistemological non-certainty is also seen in their habit of keeping the word or text under ‘erasure’ or ‘*Sous rature*’. It is to write a word, cross it out and then print both the word and deletion. The idea is this: since the word is inaccurate, or, rather, inadequate, it is crossed out. Since the word is still necessary it remains legible. This important devise which Derrida popularised originally belonged to Martin Hiedeggar, who often crossed

out the word Being [like ~~Be~~ing] and let both the deletion and word stand, because the word, though inadequate, was necessary.

Ontological Contingency: The western metaphysics focused on the 'stable,' 'unified,' 'One,' which forms the ultimate ground of everything. Hence the world of entities which was seen as multiple and changing was put outside the purview of metaphysics. This platonic bias of the world of ordinary experience was seen in the fact that the world of stability and unity was considered the norm for the world of change. Against this narrow essentialism/substantialism postmodernism embraces a broader perspective, which gives importance to contingency, which was abandoned by traditional metaphysics. One can realise this fact if one considers the efforts of those thinkers who emphasise the importance of the marginalized, the other (alterity), the different etc. In this context it will be enlightening, if we pay heed to the focus of postmodern thinkers on 'absence'. They claim that the entire Western tradition is the metaphysics of presence. The metaphysics of presence equates the primal truth with being and being, is equated with presence: to be true is to be originally and fully present. In this light God is seen as the full presence of being. Indebted to Heidegger who first pointed out the folly of onto-theological thinking and presented the ontological truth as differential movement of 'un-veiling,' postmodern thinkers investigate the ways in which the manifestation of any presence depends on the concealment of some absence. They teach that, be-

cause the manifestation of presence is the differential movement, presence is not possible apart from absence. In all this I think postmodernism is taking metaphysics to a post-metaphysical realm.

Moral Relativity: With the denial of metanarratives, meta-ethical issues such as the possibility of trans-cultural and trans-historical criteria in morality is called into question. The search for universal, neutral criteria remains an unrealistic dream. For we can not transcend our cultural boundaries. Richard Rorty makes this crystal clear when he says "[it is an] impossible attempt to step outside our skins – the traditions, linguistics and other, within which we do our thinking. Thus, postmodernism drives home that morality that is universal and valid for everyone does not exist. Alasdair MacIntyre points this out when he affirms that morality that is no particular society's morality is to be found nowhere.

Theological Humility: Postmodern thought has a profound impact on religious thought in general and Christian theology in particular. The postmodern 'problem of God,' the role of Christian community in a postmodern world and implications of the traditional claim of Christian uniqueness in the face of postmodernism's attention to otherness are some of the important challenges that have emerged in the theological arena. Paul Lakeland devotes an entire book, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented World*, to the task of responding to the challenges posed by postmodernism.

Scientific Openness: It is interesting to note that the modern developments of science run parallel to the worldview proposed by postmodernity. The naïve scientism of logical positivism is replaced by such distinctly positivist lines of approach to reality as relativity theory, uncertainty principle, quantum mechanics and chaos theory (Lakeland 1997: 36-38). Thus, science like postmodernism believes that absolute, certain, objective truth is only a myth. Science has come to admit that the world is a mystery and as such is unfathomable.

5. Conclusion

The key symbols of postmodernism may be seen in today's various human activities. In economics, if capitalism is the paradigm model of modernism, alternative economies, cottage industries that follow the "small is beautiful" philosophy represent postmodernism. The ecologically conscious industries also stand for postmodernism.

In science, as already hinted, the Newtonian mechanics and projectile motion are replaced by fractals (of chaos theory) as the symbol of postmodernism. Fractals, so beautiful to see on the computer screen, has an added affinity for the young generation. In the social life, if monogamy represented a development and the goal of modernism, non-permanent relationship (polygamy) with multiple partners symbolises postmodernism. Single parenthood also is a strong indicator of postmodernism. In the religious field,

the emergence of fundamentalism, New Age movements and the Christian sects and charismatic movements, where the individuals are given attention and priority, represent postmodernism.

In the political field, the emergence of democracy has been a major achievement of modernism. But postmodernism goes ahead and asserts the political independence and individual identity of smaller groups, be it in former Yugoslavia, former Soviet Republics or in India. In the cultural domain the best examples are MTV and CNN where each programme or news is catered to a 30 second slot. The MTV generation (generation-X) is naturally for postmodernism. In the mass media the Shakespearean Dramas and grand orchestras or theatres of modernism are replaced by the multimedia programmes on the internet. Here of course a computer and the internet are enough to compose a musical piece or to make a film. Coming to literature, the printed books and especially the newspaper, which had become the symbol of modernism, are being replaced by CD-roms and emails, which are cheap, fast and transient. They are pointers to the attitude of postmodernism. It is in the field of information technology that postmodernism has its greatest influence. The rate of transfer of information multiplies. If air travel represents modernism, it is the network conferencing that represents postmodernism. Instantaneous, cheap, ephemeral and even free information exchange (through email and mobile telephones) becomes the key to postmodernism.

Discipline	Modernism	Postmodernism
Economics	Capitalism	Alternative Economics
Social life	Monogamy	Temporary relationships
Religious life	Monolithic Religions	Multitudes of religious sects
Political field	Democracy	Affirmation of individual and group identities
Culture	Movies	MTV, CNN
Literature	Printed Books	Email
Information	Television	Video conferencing

Symbols of Modernism and Postmodernism

So far we have seen that though postmodernism is in its infancy, it can legitimately trace its legacy both to the contemporary scientific and religious traditions. At the same time it may be noted that the mainstream religious and scientific leadership is still unenthused by it. But the rank and file seem to be, by and large, shifting their allegiance to a postmodern attitude.

Is postmodernism a movement or a fad? Only the next decade will be able to answer this question! Is it enduring? That is not a post-modern question. What is the basis of it? Postmodernists will refuse to answer. How will it affect the culture? Postmodernism will be indifferent to this question.

Postmodernism exhorts us to live, to celebrate. It is a clarion call to find joy in life, not to encapsulate it with solid foundations and inflexible metanarratives. It is a celebration of the surface, of the ephemeral and an affirmation of the temporal and transient.

It is too early to answer some of the basic questions. Will postmodernism turn out to be another philosophical tragedy and die a natural death leaving some remnants for future historians of philosophy to research into? Will postmodernism lose its fancy and become a mainstream philosophical and scientific discipline? Will it be taught as another “school of philosophy,” as another “theory” which is coherent, systematic and organised? Or will postmodernism usher in a new mode of living, thinking and being, which exposes the shallowness of today’s culture?

Will postmodernism become a constructive and prophetic voice that ushers in more human and humane values? The next few decades will tell. At the moment, we can only imagine what postmodernism is likely to bring about in the intellectual, cultural, linguistic, religious and social areas of our lives.

Notes

1. A better term is 'postmodernity' since it avoids the dangers of an "ism." For the sake of consistency I use the term "postmodernism" in this article.
2. Here we use the exclusive language since in modernism "man" is considered to be superior to woman. For this section I am grateful to Dr Paul Parathazham.
3. The postmodern ambience goes beyond classical physics through Quantum Mechanics, to Theory of Chaos, Einstein-Bohr debate.
4. It is possible that there is something inherently secularising about Christianity, for no other religion seems to give rise spontaneously to secular beliefs.
5. The postmodern move through the emergence of non-institutional religions, religiosity deepens. New age movements, sects. Briefly, we may sum up modernism in the words of John Searle. Searle in his 1993 work, *Rationality and Realism*, assumes the epistemological and metaphysical postulates of the "Western Rationalist Tradition."
 - a. Reality exists independently of human representations. If this is true then this postulate supports the existence of "mind-independent external reality" which is called "metaphysical realism."
 - b. Language communicates meanings but also references to objects and situations in the world which exist independently of language. Contrary of postmodernism, this postulate supports the concept of language to have communicative and referential functions.
 - c. Statements are true or false depending on whether the objects and situations to which they refer correspond to a greater or lesser degree of the statements. This "correspondence theory" of truth is to some extent the theory of truth for postmodernists, but this concept is rejected by many postmodernists as "essentialist." Essentialist is a sharp contrast from the "coherence or narrative" theory.
 - d. Knowledge is objective. This signifies that the truth of knowledge claim is independent of the motive, culture, or gender of the person who makes the claim. Knowledge depends on empirical support.
 - e. Logic and rationality provide a set of procedures and methods, which contrary to postmodernism, enables a researcher to assess competing knowledge claims through proof, validity, and reason.
 - f. Objective and intersubjective criteria judge the merit of statements, theories and interpretations.
6. For this section I am indebted to William Grassie's article on postmodernism available from the internet (metanexus) (Grassie 1997).
7. For this section I am indebted to Ferrao 1999.

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