Postmodernism in philosophy of religion and theology

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The term ‘postmodernism’ has been often heard in the closing decades of the twentieth century, first apparently used in the visual arts, then spreading to other areas, including philosophy and theology. It is not easy to give any general definition of ‘postmodernism’. Perhaps the end of the twentieth century with its ambiguous record of progress and retrogression has created a fin de siècle mentality in which there is rejection of the past and an intense desire to begin anew. Both the hopes and fears engendered at such a time are liable to be exaggerated.

The very word ‘postmodern’ is a polemical term, for if you claim to be a postmodern artist or theologian or whatever else, you automatically put all your contemporaries out of date. The merely modern has been outstripped by the postmodern, and in a society like ours the word ‘postmodern’ confers a certain prestige even before we have inquired just what it means. We can do justice to postmodernism only by looking carefully at particular examples as we find them in the work of some leading exponents. But first it will be useful to draw attention to some characteristics which occur in most of those who accept the postmodernist label and which seem to differentiate them more or less sharply from their predecessors. I am going to mention ten contrasts where the postmodernists break with the past. The number ‘ten’ is arbitrary – it could have been less, because some of my points overlap, or it could have been more, because almost certainly I shall have omitted points which other writers would consider important.

Contrast 1. Postmodernism and modernism

This is the most general of the oppositions to be considered. Modern religious thought has been observant of what might be called the ‘canons’ of the Enlightenment, that is to say, it has prized rationality, has been respectful toward natural science and critical history, has questioned authority and minimized the ‘supernatural’ in religion. Rudolf Bultmann would be a good example of a ‘modern’ theologian, especially in his radically critical historical criticism of the New Testament and even more in his program
of 'demythologizing', aimed at removing from Christianity those features which he deemed unacceptable to 'modern man'. Postmodernists cannot simply reject rationalism if they wish to participate in serious dialogue, but they stress the limits of reason, and are at one with the modernists in questioning any authority or privileged opinion.

Derrida stated in an early writing that his philosophical method 'blocks the way to all theology' but seems later to have modified his opinion, and if he has not become a theologian, he could at least be called a philosopher of religion in search of a theology.

Contrast 2. Objectivity and subjectivity

Whereas modernism laid great stress on objectivity, postmodernism seems to lean toward subjectivism. But we have to be careful in assessing this statement. As far as the natural sciences are concerned, I do not think that many postmodernists would urge a return to the view of Bishop Berkeley, that what we call material things are in reality ideas in the mind: esse est percipi, 'to be is to be perceived'. In fact, some postmodernists are convinced materialists, for instance, Lyotard. But in the question of history, the subjectivizing tendency is strong. A good example is the quest of the historical Jesus. In the nineteenth century, there was a vigorous attempt to arrive at a picture of Jesus such as we would have seen had we been present in his lifetime. This quest has been renewed quite recently. But the 'objective facts' can never be fully established. We would need to be able to travel back through time, and see Jesus for ourselves. In fact, we can never get beyond reports, and even the earliest gospel (Mark) was written more than thirty years after the crucifixion, and must itself have had its origin in earlier reports, most or even all of them unwritten. So we have to ask, 'Is there anything except interpretation of interpretations . . .?' What do we make of Derrida's claim that 'there is nothing outside of the text'? Does postmodernism lead inevitably to skepticism or can the way to theology can be unblocked?

Contrast 3. Fragmentation and totalization

One of the most prominent features of postmodern thinking is its tendency to take apart the unities of thought on the ground that these unities have been subjectively projected on to a reality which is itself disparate and dismembered. Clearly, this is another rejection of the Enlightenment, which sought to work toward a unified view of the world. The natural sciences do aim at overarching theories which bring together apparently unrelated
phenomena under one roof. Philosophy was even more ambitious, especially Hegelianism, which earns the disapproval of most postmodernists. Hegel constructed a metaphysical system which embraced just about everything – logic, nature, law, history, art, politics, religion. But do the realities which constitute the cosmos, including the human realities, fit so neatly into the patterns of thought? Here the postmodernists go back of Kierkegaard, who criticized Hegel on the grounds that only God can view the cosmos as a whole.4

But one has to ask the postmodernists whether the sciences could have had their successes unless the cosmos has a rational structure of some sort. (Einstein believed that they could not). The situation is more problematic in the case of an all-embracing metaphysic. What about history, which holds special interest for religion? Extrapolating from records of particular periods, some theologians and philosophers claim to see a pattern in history as a whole. No conclusive proofs are available, but many postmodernists believe that history has neither beginning nor end nor overall pattern. But how can a postmodernist know that history is fragmentary and directionless if he denies that there is any access to objective facts?

Contrast 4. Particular and universal

Enlightenment or modernist thinkers have sought universal laws, and have treated the particular as only an instance of something universal. They have minimized difference for the sake of identity or sameness. Hegel, of course, did not deny difference and believed that throughout the universe there is an unending clash of opposites. But his dialectical method resolved these oppositions by bringing them together in a wider synthesis. The difference is ‘taken up’ (aufgehoben) into a new unity. But while this may be gain, it is also loss, for the particular has an excess of content which has to be discarded in the abstractness of a generalizing concept. Kierkegaard is hailed as a forerunner of postmodernism because he championed the particular. The universalizer should allow more weight to the particular in all its concrete richness (it may be nothing short of ‘revelation’), but could anyone have recognized the revelation as such unless he had already some general capacity for it? So this contrast has to be left undecided.

Contrast 5. Others and self

The theme of this contrast is closely related to the one we have just considered. The notion of the ‘other’ and ‘otherness’, also called ‘alterity’,
are very important in postmodernism. All men and women share a common humanity, yet each one has a certain uniqueness and a unique perspective on the world. Again we can refer back to the nineteenth century contrast between Hegel and Kierkegaard. Hegel took a poor view of Abraham because he chose to live in isolation. Kierkegaard claimed that the individual is a higher category than the community, and praises Abraham for rejecting the universal demands of morality in order to obey what he took to be the voice of God. Postmodernists are divided, not all following Kierkegaard in this matter. Many of them have accepted Buber’s criticism of Kierkegaard, that he concentrated too much on individual experience and was oblivious to the fact that every individual is always involved with others. So the other and otherness figure prominently in postmodern philosophies.

It is the notion of otherness that allows some of them to introduce God into their philosophy, perhaps echoing Buber’s teaching that every particular ‘thou’ is a glimpse through to the eternal ‘Thou’. We shall also meet the idea that God is the ‘wholly other’.

Contrast 6. Relative and absolute

There is a distinctly negative strain in postmodern philosophy, though it does not necessarily lead to nihilism or skepticism. But we have already seen that postmodernists are against authority and tradition, and they question whether human thought can come to grips with any objective reality. And what about God, as Creator and Source of all that exists? Postmodernism has been deeply influenced by Nietzsche as well as by Kierkegaard and Buber, and in particular by Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death and God. So most postmodernists agree that there are no absolute foundations or criteria for our beliefs or moral judgements. Are we plunged into complete relativism?

Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God, but he also asked, ‘Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing, when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all sums? Is there still any up or down? Are we not wandering as through an infinite nothing? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?’ Nietzsche did not enjoy the prospect of utter relativism.

There is no foundation and we are all the time on shifting sands. Our line of questioning has brought us to a point that is no longer academic but touches on the whole of life. But if we say that this is the consequence of atheism, we have to remember that faith too is something like this. In a metaphor beloved of Kierkegaard, faith is like being cast on 70,000 fathoms of water. Faith
is indeed like walking on water, yet it is essentially affirmative, and needs something to which to cling.

And what about morality? Is it too undermined, so that right and wrong become a matter of personal preference, something that has happened already in some areas of human conduct? Some people have begun to look for new foundations, though where can they be found if we have taken a sponge and wiped out the entire horizon? For example, having dismissed the Ten Commandments, once supposed to be of divine origin, people now appeal to ‘human rights’, alleged to have a universal validity. But postmodernists, notably Lyotard, have shown that these rights are themselves relative. We are left with the worrying question raised by one of Dostoyevsky’s characters: ‘If there is no God, then is everything permitted?’

**Contrast 7. Pluralism and uniformity**

All the major post modernists agree in approving pluralism as opposed to uniformity. This has been foreshadowed in the preferences already considered. Pluralism implies the recognition of difference and opposes the dominance of any one group and its ideas. Pluralism is not only negative in denying privilege to any one way of thinking but teaches respect for a variety of traditions, believing that society is enriched by such diversity.

However, even a convinced pluralist recognizes that there are limits, or we may end up with an individualism which threatens the cohesion of society. Pluralism came into being in the modern periods, especially with the growth of religious toleration after the Reformation, and is a modern, not a postmodern idea, still struggling for acceptance in our present confused times. No group has a monopoly of prejudice, and the postmodernists are quite frequently guilty of stating a position quite arbitrarily and privileging it above all others. Presumably this may be expected, if there are no final criteria.

**Contrast 8. Passion and intellect**

Anti-intellectualism is an ever-present danger in human history. It seems that in all human beings, lurking below the surface, there are irrational passions and desires which can break out, bringing chaos and destruction. Examples have not been lacking in our own time, the most frightening being the anti-Semitism which raged through the civilized lands of central and eastern Europe in the middle of the twentieth century. But the problem with ‘modernism’ is that it glorified intellect to the extent of crushing the passionable side of human nature. The natural sciences aimed at being ‘value-free’, that