

CAN WE SPEAK OF A POSTMODERN CHRISTIANITY?

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1. Introduction

Christianity is grounded in absolute truth-claims, whereas Postmodernism¹ upholds a strong sense of relativity of truth. This poses a problem whether we can speak of a postmodern sense of Christianity. The issue is related with more queries such as, while Christian theology harps on monotheism, the belief that there is only one God who as the ground of all existence is rejected by postmodern thinking, be it theological or philosophical or socio-cultural. Hence, does it mean that postmodernism be viewed as the most recent brand of atheism as part of the extension of the modernist secularism and humanism. Since, after the medieval period, there seems to be a philosophical passivity on the part of the Christian theologians/philosophers, except certain moralist claims, does it mean that Christianity is vulnerable to postmodernism? Broadly speaking, the issue is, Can a Christian be a postmodernist without losing his/her being Christian, and a Postmodernist being in some sense a Christian? How should Christian thinkers respond to postmodernism: as a threat or as a challenge or as new outlook by which the Christian has to re-look at his theological/philosophical grounds? Of course, this would call for a critical dialogue and a deeper analysis between these two positions, the Christian and the Postmodern.

A critical dialogue between any two positions or persons is possible when both of them agree to meet for purpose of putting forward their set of opinions or claims and may engage to 'see' whether there are any common grounds of agreement between them, to see the points of divergence and respect the points of divergence more than the points of convergence; the method of engaging a critical dialogue, I suggest is possible by adopting

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¹By 'postmodernism', I refer to the perception of a reality existing independently of thought and language as illusory, that which is normally perceived as real or truth is, in fact, a linguistic construct of the phenomena of subjective experience that is continually adjusted in response to a fluid social consensus.

the method of ‘falsification’² than verification; for, verification is only possible to matters of fact rather than to theoretical positions/issues. Moreover, the mode of falsification is less provisional, for instance, it takes only one proposition to falsify the entire scheme or system of thought, yet treat the same for pragmatic purposes. For instance, to say that petrol is the best form of energy is falsifiable by another proposition that atomic energy is the best form of energy, and the proposition that atomic energy is the best form of energy may further be contra-posed by some other form(s) of energy under scientific experimentation. The interesting thing is that, by treating atomic energy as the best form of energy, the proposition that petrol is the best form of energy is falsified but not completely verified to be counterfeited, rendering it completely impractical. Further, for example, it only takes one black rose to falsify the proposition, ‘All roses are red’. Falsification, if employed, amounts to certain mutual corrections between positions or propositions and in no way completely throws them outboard. Falsification, as a mode of engaging critical dialogue, guards against any ‘excommunication’ of each other’s positions. This sense of a dialogue to some extent is to risk certain claims in one’s position/belief/theory; but it is, at the same time, an invitation to enter freely to exchange of opinions, engage in mutual corrections, and view one’s limitations in the belief-system in the light of the other. To a large extent, to engage in a critical dialogue is to set oneself into a rational and ethical demonstration of one’s long owned set of ideas, to correct the positions, if found conflicting, and appreciate the other, correct the other’s ideas, if needed, and, thus, enrich each other. The aim of a critical dialogue is to enter into ethical relationship by becoming mutually conscious of one’s limits and enrichments.

The study attempts to contra-posit both Christianity and Postmodernity so as to see whether there is any space for a reciprocal discussion between them. I hold that the Christians, in general, and ‘Christian scholars’,³ in particular, have to learn to unlearn from postmodern sensibilities. In other words, my intention here is to employ a critical dialogue between Christianity and Postmodernity. I assume that there is common political space or ground for both to engage in such a

²Thomas Khunn speaks of the mode of falsification as against the logical positivist hard verificationism to the question of the progress of science. He claims that science progresses not solely by verifying its statements, rather by treating its claims falsifiable by agreeing to the possible anomalies that need further scrutiny.

dialogue, and to refrain from viewing mutually as antagonistic positions. The common ground, I believe, is the affirmative dimension of Christianity in the embrace of the discriminated poor, and the postmodern sensibility of the affirmation of ‘differences’ as against any universality.

2. No Absolute Truth: A Postmodern Call for Solidarity

Postmodernism “affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on the community in which we participate... There is no absolute truth: rather truth is relative to the community in which we participate.”⁴ Such a position of the postmodern seems contradictory to the Christian position that the monotheistic God is the absolute truth, which, in the medieval theological language, is conceived as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence, the Trinitarian aspects assimilated into the oneness of God and such a God is conceived to be three-in-one-person whose aspects are both transcendental and immanent simultaneously. I do not propose to enter into an analysis of the mutual consistency of such descriptions; rather my point is that the Christian monotheism taken together with all its theological hermeneutics and its Hellenistic Greek groundings remains in disagreement with the postmodern rejection of any absolute truth claim.

A Christian scholar, say X, might argue that the postmodern idea that truth is relativistic, specifically community-constructed and context-conditioned is not in opposition to Christianity as a specific culture which believes in its own specific sense of truth and, in fact, postmodernists do allow the advocacy of the any specific sense of truth given to any historical cultural sense of cultures. Then, the postmodern sense of affirming the particularity of truth-constructions, however, does not mean to defend such a position of X. It does not warrant such escapist argumentation. In fact, the opposite is true with the postmodern claims. It

³The use of the term *Christian scholar/thinker* needs to be clarified. A thinker can be Christian but this does not mean that all Christians are Christian scholars in virtue of being baptized Christian. Just because some one is an ordained/baptized Christian, it should not be assumed that s/he is a Christian scholar. To systematically think about Christianity is different from merely being an ordained/baptized Christian. So also, a Christian thinker to some extent need not overtly affirm that s/he is a Christian. Membership is different from thought-analysis. It is communal to hold that only Christians are Christian scholars.

⁴Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, Grand Rapids: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 8.

does not preach that all truth-claims – be that of Christian, Hindu, or Islam – are true because they are specifically grounded in the differentia of cultural milieu, rather they argue that what is called or conceived to be true is a matter of arbitrariness, and constructed and, therefore, truth is no truth but a myth promulgated by cultures.

Postmodernism evidently rejects the existence of any source of truth, morality, and intelligibility distinct from human cultural constructions. Application of this idea amounts to the denial of any God, be that of Christian, Judaic, or Islamic. Postmodernism as a form of extended modernism, known as late-modernism, has its roots in the intellectual tradition of modernism which markedly denies the idea of any supreme Being/God as the source and guidance of the universe. Thus, by extension, Postmodernism professes a complete denial of any absolute truth or Godhead. The denial of any absolute truth by the postmodernists would position them in the line of renaissance thinking as secular and atheistic. The postmodern atheism and the Christian theism are, thus, mutual boundaries to be conscious of/and appreciate each other of their grounds. But this I hold need not be a limitation for engaging a critical dialogue. The Christian theistic proposition stands outside the boundary of falsification, for it is a not proposition to be falsified or even verified, rather its meaning layers/hermeneutics have to be sought within the life-situation of Christian community, by tracing its historical and cultural traces. The theodicy argument whether God exists or not is not, therefore, a matter of argumentation/concern for the postmodernist, since he holds that most of cultural claims are not factual, therefore, beyond verification, and what is claimed to be true is cultural constructions, therefore, relative pertaining to a need for ‘inward’ analysis within the spectrum of the formation of such belief systems. The relativistic position of Postmodernism opens up the space for the Christian scholar to engage in mutual communication with each other’s claims. In a sense, the postmodernist here is not rigid like the positivists; he/she only guards himself or herself against any conceptual subjugations or assimilation by mentally remaining free from any ‘conversion’ to ontologisms. One can be reminded of the Lyotard’s affirmation: “The principles and the contexts have to be chosen by living human beings against their own life-worlds and in the light of their lives with others, by persons able to call, to say, to sing, and using their imaginations, tapping their courage to trans-form.”

Richard Rorty, one of the most prominent philosophical defenders of postmodernism, defends the basic postmodernist position. He insists that

there is no absolute reality independently existing which can be said of revealing the reality to us apart from our own minds or of other human minds.⁵ He holds that each human being interprets reality in accordance with his/her own subjective condition, which, in turn, is influenced by the social and the cultural. Truth, for Rorty, is an intersubjective agreement among the members of a community.⁶ That intersubjective agreement permits the members of the community to speak a common language and establish a commonly accepted reality. The end of inquiry, for Rorty, is not the discovery or even the approximation of absolute truth but the formulation of beliefs that further the solidarity of the community, in order "to reduce objectivity to solidarity." He argues that once the notion of objective truth is abandoned, one must choose between a self-defeating relativism and ethnocentrism, neither of which can be justified in a manner that is not circular. He responds that one "should grasp the ethnocentric horn of the dilemma" and "privilege our own group." As far as any new beliefs that we are to consider, they must at least roughly cohere with those already held by the community, or, as Rorty puts it, "We want to be able ... to justify ourselves to our earlier selves. This preference is not built into us by human nature. It is just the way we live now."⁷ Rorty speaks of a human community of solidarity based on the liberal principles such as equality and secularity.

The postmodern denial of any absolute truth claim and its rejection of objectivity of modernity are well intended to replace these claims for community solidarity. To say that there is no absolute truth, that truth is not out there, does only mean that our claims are linguistic human constructions or creations and this, therefore, opens up the possibility for interactions in an inter-subjective manner. What can be said of God, from the point of view of postmodern, is that our talk about God (theology) is a matter of language descriptions and as such linguistic descriptions (sentences) need not be objectified to be true. For reasons of clarity let me summarize the argument as follows: The postmodern claim that all human inquiry, thought-frames, systems of beliefs, theoretical positions occurring in language and language-descriptions are only relative for language. They are entirely culturally determined and, therefore, our claims of objectivity

⁵Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 13.

⁶Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 21.

⁷Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 29.

have to be suspended, which would open up the space for interaction in view of solidarity.

3. A Call against Vulnerability of Ideological Imprisonment

The old Aristotelian metaphysics through which Christianity theologized itself, from which its theologians and practitioners (not all) cannot redeem themselves, unfortunately maintains a metaphysical position in the footsteps of Aristotle, that the “starting point of demonstration” of our beliefs or claims “must either be affirmed or denied and that a thing cannot at the same time be and not be”⁸ relegates the Christian thinking to be crudely absolutistic and attribute objectivity. The postmodern sensibility against our claims of absolutism and objectivity of truth amounts to correct the Aristotelian Christian thinking in us. To treat our claims beyond the truth of the so-called laws of logic/thought (the law of identity, etc.), does pave the way for a dialogue as against systemic imprisonment within ideological constructs. In other words, the postmodern invitation to do away with the logical rationality is an affirmation of relativity of our truth claims and thereby positions each other in a comfortable place for ethical and social communication.

The scepticism of the postmodern is not a threat but only a challenge and the Christian theism need not be afraid the postmodern atheism but can remind or become conscious of itself to its alleged (wrong) foundations of Aristotelianism/Scholasticism. To treat the Christian theism as a combination of either true or false propositions is different from treating them as matter of cultural constructions.

The postmodern release of the clutches of binaries or categorical oppositions (‘to be or not to be’ or ‘God is or is not’ type of discussions) calls for a re-look into our own belief-systems – the cultural/ideological constructions – to unmask their pretensions, to become aware of our cultural-self in and through which we are enchained, and unchain the process of self-consciousness. The absolutistic attitude of the Christian and its alleged all-knowing catechetical attitude for some time need to be bracketed as to pave way for a mutual presence. The space for irrationality by the postmodern is a reminder for the Christian’s rigidity of its coherency logic to claims of absolutism. In this sense, the postmodern is not a disguised enemy of the Christian but a prophetic voice against the

⁸Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, III.2.996b.28-30.

clutches of the binaries/structural logistics/ideological imprisonments of the very same Christianity in which one is a partaker.

Let me illustrate what is meant by the postmodern sense of being *beyond-binary*. The idea that X is holy is intrinsically linked with the idea that Y is unholy. Both X and Y is positioned in a binary relation, a mode of categorical opposition. The Aristotelian logic of non-contradiction is the mode in which X and Y are construed in the very same system. To consider X to be holy, the construct requires Y, yet another construction to be relegated in the subjugated realm of unholiness. The Christian idea of holiness is linked with the very same ‘Christian’ idea of construing unholiness and, by extension and application, the human beings in the Christian community may be positioned in the value hierarchy of holiness to unholiness, from God to Devil, from highness to lowness, from the ‘called-few’ to uncalled many. To say that God loves us simultaneously is to affirm that the devil hates us, and those who are construed in the political space of holiness automatically presupposes to love the humankind and, in the order of hierarchy, the lower ones are construed oppositional. To render authority/power to holiness would, then, automatically mean the reduction or erosion of power or authority of those who are downgraded in the order of hierarchical holiness. So, the question of emancipation primarily begins in the very same constructs in which we are bound. Foundationally, the ethos of emancipation is not ‘out there’ for the salvation of ‘others’; the very same system with its conceptual/logical constructs and the ontological foundations need to be released. It is not that X is to redeem Y alone, but the point is, both X and Y are to be set beyond the construed binaries of thought and culture. Both sinfulness and holiness are, thus, two sides the very same coin and the coin is marketed culturally.

The postmodern sensibility of engaging a mode of *beyond-boundary*, thus, exposes the linguistic and cultural constructions within the system. The rigidity of the system needs to be exposed in order that a vacuum is created; a sense of void is ushered in to perceive life afresh: relativism of the postmodern aims at a fresh outlook than its destruction. In a sense, it destroys the old ways of thinking to pave way for freshness of thinking beyond any absolute claim. The strict borders are, thus, eroded, the question of identity (as in the language of Aristotle) is looked afresh, in a mode of relativism, where there is the merging of the boundaries, a

profound space for interaction. Thus, it is a call against our own vulnerability to the ideological constructs.

4. Deconstruction: A Mode to Expel the Authoritarian Centre

The postmodernists carry out deconstruction as a mediation to unravel the authoritarian centre of the structure or linguistic and cultural totality. Derrida suggests the way of deconstructing the text in question. As we explore the reciprocal possibility between Postmodernism and Christianity, we need to be reminded of Derrida's caution in employing deconstruction of the given-text or structure. He says: "I was quite explicit about the fact that nothing of what I have said had a destructive meaning. Deconstruction has nothing to do with destruction. [I]t is simply a question of ... being alert to the implications, to the historical sedimentation in the language we use and that is not destruction."⁹ Derrida was against any totality and he favoured, "the death of the centre" by a mode of deconstruction. Derrida, in his writings, especially in *Grammatology*, analyses western philosophy as a totality, a metaphysics of presence, supported by a series of founding concepts or centres, that each one hoped to rule or dominate other systems of thought, by remaining unsullied it promoted practices of domination. He says:

Successively, and in regulated fashion, the centre receives different forms or names. The history of metaphysics like the history of the West is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix ... is the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word. It could be that all the names, related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre have always designated an invariable presence – *eidōs, arche, telos, energia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man and so forth.¹⁰

Deconstruction, for Derrida, begins by identifying the centre of a system, or the privileged term in a violent conceptual hierarchy and represents an intervention to make that system or hierarchy tremble. The postmodernists' sensibility to resist any totality or monopolization points out similar directions by a mode of deconstruction to restore the differences and particularities as they are in their inter-connectedness and

⁹Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Maryland: John Hopkins University Publications, 1997, 271.

¹⁰Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, 40.

in ruptures, which are robbed or straightened within the imprisonment of the absolute truth claims.

In the interface between postmodernism and Christianity, the Christian thought, as promulgated by the medieval thinking, is translated, as a social structure – the Church, which needs to be brought in face the task of deconstruction. The purpose, of course, is not destruction but identifying the privileged centre(s) and its conceptual and cultural hierarchy in favour of rebuilding an authentic sense of Christian community. The question, therefore, revolves around the exposure of the determination of Being, the *eidos*, the *arche* of the Church hierarchy with its alleged value-ascriptions to restore non-centeredness, namely, the community of the Christian in the spirit of the gospel. Within the Gospel, there is no reference to any authoritarian centre, for the gospels narrate the ethos and ethic of restoration of the discriminated and disadvantaged people. So long as there is a cultural investment of power and authority identified at different individualized power centres, the church will remain a cultural text of the matrix of power relations with all its metaphors of love, but deep down chained to the philosophical traditions of the West, webbing grand narratives such as Salvation, Kingdom, universal brotherhood, etc., sustained by a process of self-legitimation.

5. Incredulity towards Grand Narratives

Jean-François Lyotard, a foremost postmodernist, who first distinguished between the modern and the postmodern, claims that the term “modern to designate any science that legitimates itself (self-legitimation) with reference to a meta-discourse ... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working Subject, or the creation of wealth.”¹¹ The terms meta-discourse, grand narrative, and self-legitimation need certain clarification. A meta-discourse or a grand narrative is the overarching theoretical construct, explanatory of the social or cultural structure or text by which human lives are interpreted in a specific manner, in the light of the grand narrations provided within the system. Moreover, a grand narrative is one that self-legitimizes itself, devoid of any readiness to falsification or any testability or scrutiny. For Lyotard, “this is not to suggest that there are no longer any credible narratives at all. By meta-

¹¹Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: University Press, 1989, xxiv.

narratives or grand narratives, I mean precisely narrations with a legitimating function.”¹²

Rejecting the defining narrative structures of modernity, Lyotard announces the *post*-modern age “as incredulity towards meta-narratives.”¹³ The purpose of waging a war against any meta-discourse is to pave way for the voice of those narrations, silenced by the totality or truth claims of the meta-narrative. It is an attempt to refine ourselves to the subjectivized conditions (enslaved) within the totalized construct. “Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert’s homology, but the inventor’s paralogy.”¹⁴ The issue, then, is to identify those grand narratives or meta-discourses within Christianity that have been promulgated to devoice the voices of the differences of cultural texts.

Directionally, I might suggest that the pronounced spiritualism of the Church and amazing material wealth of the Church themselves are such totalities which might veil the church from listening to voice of the differences actively, responsibly, and politically in differentia of the cultural contexts of the Christian people across the globe. For example, the narrative that as Christians we are people of God, though sounds great, has perpetuated disability to take responsibility of the problem of casteism within the Christian communities of India. In other words, the type of meta-discourses available in the official church benumbs the Christian church to act locally and politically and often the church personnel, I mean those who are invested with power by ecclesiastical rationality, tend to take security in the moralistic meta-narratives. For instance, the meta-pronouncement of the Church that God loves the humankind in a specific sense denounces or discriminates the church from loving the disadvantaged in a discriminate manner. The universal love veils the love in particular with specific risible ways. Insofar as such meta-narratives remain not intervened, questioned, or interpreted in the light of the specificities of differentia of cultures, the church in India will remain a minority less political of its capacity and vulnerable to political majoritarianism. The truth of all meta-narratives cautions the postmodernists as exaggerated error. In short, I appeal that the Indian

¹²Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, 19.

¹³Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

¹⁴Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, xxv.

Church has to break itself from its own self imposed or self-legitimated clutches and iron cages of hierarchical bureaucratic western rationality. This can be done only by developing sensitivity to the voice of the voiceless, i.e., those who denied representations within the structural hierarchy of the church itself.

6. Meaningfulness in Pluralistic Relativism and Relationality

The writings of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose writings ignited the post-structuralists and postmodernists, and Derrida's writings provide certain insights into the question of meaningfulness that the Christian church might embark upon for interventions. For Saussure, the question of meaningfulness is a matter of arbitrariness, whereas for the Christian church the question of meaningfulness is a matter of theological centrality. For Saussure, both 'arbitrariness and relationality in the network of linguistic structure, as against any objective or central text, is a matter of meaningfulness. He writes: "In a language, there are only differences, without fixed terms."¹⁵ Jacques Derrida indicates such intrinsic nature of difference with his own concept of *différance*, indicating not only differentiation, but also the deferment of the moment of closure, that is, definition and, hence, the perpetual play of difference. "*Différance* is the nonfull, nonsimple, structured and differentiating origin of differences." The writings of Derrida expose the view that postmodernists do, in fact, reject any absolute truth claims, that of both subjectivity and objectivity. Emphasis of differentia, for Derrida implies a serious sense of the differentia of the Subject Self in the plurality of differentia of cultures. Difference, for Derrida, "is at the origin of all ethics as of all would-be centres. It is the spatialization and temporalisation which precede all centres, all concepts and all reality, making these things possible," both by difference and deference.¹⁶

Would the Christian, then, revisit its philosophical constructions of what makes meaningfulness? Would the church be ready to allow itself to be challenged by the postmodern considerations of the question of meaningfulness? Can the Christian Church be ready to respond to the strong sense of non-centeredness, a rejection of any centred author as the

¹⁵Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, London: Fontana/Collins, 1981, 120.

¹⁶Jon Simons, ed., *Contemporary Critical Theorists: From Lacan to Said*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, 88.

meaning-giver? Derrida holds that the perceiving or meaning-giving essential self (the Perceiver or the Supreme Perceiver, ‘The Gaze’ of Foucault) is also not devoid of deconstruction-for-difference. The Subject itself is called into question here. For Derrida, the difference is not only of the people or objectivity, but also of the Self (For the Christian theological linguistic description about God, Church, lay-people, etc.) that differentiates. Will the Christian scholars treat postmodernist cautions as a risk or a challenge? The implication of the statements of Derrida, such as the “Subject, too, cannot be assumed to be a unitary whole without difference, but rather, must in turn, itself be deconstructed”¹⁷ or “The deconstruction of objectivity runs parallel to the deconstruction of subjectivity”¹⁸ must be carefully studied. As objective truth is a narrative, so also the subjectivity that assumes the authorship of objectivity is also a social construction, a myth to be dispensed with. The spirit of the western Christian as the provider of meaning for the rest of the world has to be suspended if only the postmodernist sensitivity on the question of meaningfulness is rendered explicit to the conceptual centralities of Christianity. Would the Christian allow himself to the postmodern critique of the notion of ‘centred-Self’ shared by a web of power-relational selves epitomized in universalism and grand generalizations? This, in fact, is an area of tough dialogue from both ends of Postmodernism and Christianity.

7. Conclusion

Hostility of the postmodernists against absolutism and centrality of the Self, their deconstruction of hierarchical power relations, etc., have positive ethical content. Most of these insights are simultaneously tied with their heightened sensitivity towards differentia, of the people, namely, the subjected and the subjugated people. This is the rich area of mutual interface between the spirit of the Gospels texts (devoid of the Roman theological texts) and postmodernism. Their resistance to forms of totalitarianism or territorial geo-politics of the powerful nations and voices against different forms of dominations would invite the Christian church to revisit itself, its ideological, and structural patterns of power relations. At the same time, it is a call to join hands with the postmodern cravings towards the restoration of those lives of the people who are systematically denied of their live-forms.

¹⁷Jacques Derrida, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1991, 64-65.

¹⁸Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 16.