

Mission After Modernity

- post modern thinking and today's mission

MISSION IN A SECULAR CULTURE

Modernity and postmodernity

Any study of mission at the start of the 21st century must include some understanding of two major cultural shifts taking place in western society. In this session we will examine the first of these – the gradual shift from modernity to postmodernity.

This shift has been underway since at least the 1960s and is neither complete nor unchallenged. Where it will lead, nobody yet knows, though there are many suggestions. What is clear already is that many familiar ways of thinking are under threat from quite different ideas, values and expectations. This is the context for Christian mission today and it will probably continue to be the backdrop to mission for the rest of our lives.

We must first get to grips with modernity. Even though this worldview is struggling and something new may be emerging, it remains tremendously influential on all our lives. What may be emerging can, in any case, be understood only as a development of, or reaction against, modernity.

Secularisation and secularism

Modernity is a *secular* worldview that conceives of the universe as a closed, self-sustaining system, within which humanity is autonomous. This has been the dominant worldview in European society over the past 300 years and has also been exported to most other parts of the world through the global impact of western culture. It remains immensely influential and is the basis upon which western society operates, at least in the public domain.

It is important to distinguish between *secularisation* and *secularism*, and to examine the implications for mission of both these aspects of contemporary culture.

Secularism is a *philosophy*: it is a system of thought that rejects all forms of faith or religion and accepts only what can be derived from the senses. It regards human beings as autonomous and answerable to no higher authority. It rejects the notion of God and adopts humanist and materialist perspectives and values. Secularism is openly hostile to Christianity and all other religious explanations of reality. Other terms that describe aspects of this worldview are:

- Scientific materialism – only the material, physical world is real, and scientific progress is enabling humanity to develop and harness the resources of this world.
- Rationalism – reason is the arbiter of knowledge and the sure foundation upon which decisions can be made, relegating revelation to the status of myth.
- Modernism – this worldview has delivered humanity from medieval superstition and ignorance and brought us into the modern world.



Secularisation is a *process* – Os Guinness explains it in this way: ‘The process through which, starting from the centre and moving outward, successive sectors of society and culture have been freed from the decisive influence of religious ideas and institutions’. This process is not necessarily hostile to Christianity and other religions, but indifferent; religion is simply regarded as peripheral.

Secularisation is, of course, integrally connected to secularism, but the two are not the same. We may choose to reject secularism as a satisfactory way of interpreting reality. The process of secularisation, however, is observable and undeniable: we live in a vastly different culture from the medieval era; we are caught up in an ongoing process of cultural change that removes religious beliefs, practices and institutions from a predominant position in society; and we are influenced by this process in every aspect of our lives.

Question: Secularism is hostile to Christianity, whereas secularisation is indifferent. But which is more dangerous to the churches – secularisation or secularism? Why?

From sacral to secular

The alternative to a secular society is a *sacral* society, where all aspects of life are imbued with religious significance. In a sacral society, church and state are not really separate, although they may operate through different organisations, and church and society are not distinct. Being born into a sacral society means adopting the religion of that society. Three examples of sacral societies are:

- Primal societies whose members have animistic beliefs and where spirits inhabit everything and influence human life at every level.
- Europe under Christendom from the 5th century to at least the 16th century, where Christianity was the religious glue holding society together.
- Modern Islamic states that resist secularisation and insist on Islamic law being enforced.

Sacral societies have some very significant strengths:

- A sacral society is a unified culture where life is not compartmentalised and where everyone is operating within a shared framework of meaning and values.
- In a sacral society everyone belongs to one another and functions within a system where there is agreement on fundamental issues of morality, religion and purpose.
- A sacral society is a stable and secure environment.

But there are also some serious weaknesses:

- Sacral societies are generally characterised by a high degree of superstition and fear, since one of the main uses of religion in such a society is to uphold the status quo and discourage freethinking.



- A sacral society often operates as a totalitarian system that oppresses the powerless.
- A sacral society values uniformity very highly and cannot tolerate dissent.
- Although the religion that rules such a society is all-pervasive, it may also be essentially nominal for most members of society.

Secularisation gradually erodes the authority of the religion of a sacral society, destroys the 'sacred canopy' – the overarching explanation of reality under which members of that society have lived – and challenges the worldview upon which a sacral society is built. From the perspective of mission, this process can be seen as:

- A positive development (removing superstition and oppression, exposing nominality).
- A negative development (a move away from religious awareness within society and towards compartmentalisation).
- Bringing mixed results (a social trend that presents new challenges and new opportunities).

Lest we too quickly regard the process of secularisation as negative, we need to ask whether we would prefer to live under medieval Christendom or an Islamic regime. We need also to reflect on the fact that, in some parts of the world, the arrival of Christianity has been a major *cause* of secularisation. The use of western medicines to cure diseases and western techniques to improve agricultural yield introduces some of the fruits of a secularised society into another culture and presents a major challenge to its worldview, where healing and good harvests were thought to be the results of the favour of spiritual forces.

The shift from a sacral to the secular society within Europe happened in stages, separate enough to differentiate, but overlapping and reinforcing each other:

- The Renaissance (14th to 16th centuries) was a significant intellectual awakening that began to ask all kinds of new questions. It shifted the focus of attention from God and eschatology to questions about this world. It rediscovered ideas and perspectives from before and beyond Christendom and involved renewed study and investigation of the natural world. Rather than accepting theological explanations, non-sacral explanations were sought.
- The Reformation (16th century), although essentially a religious phenomenon and not in itself a threat to Christendom, assisted the process of secularisation by challenging the unity of society, and encouraging critical judgment.
- The Enlightenment (18th century), a further intellectual movement, emphasised reason, observation and experimentation as the way to discover truth, relying on human abilities rather than revelation. Though most of the Enlightenment thinkers continued to operate within a Christian framework of thought, their methods and principles laid the foundations for the emergence of a modern, secular society. The rise of science and our reliance on its discoveries are key components in a secular society. The Enlightenment marks the transition from the sacral medieval worldview to the modern secular worldview.

- Industrialisation and urbanisation (18th to 20th centuries) have enhanced this process, by separating people from the natural world and locking many into a man-made environment, detaching them from community and pushing them into increasing individualism.

The main convictions of the secular worldview include:

- Reason is the only sure basis for knowledge and decision-making.
- Objectivity is possible because subject and object are separate.
- The world operates through the interplay of cause and effect.
- Progress, development and modernisation are worthy and achievable goals: all problems are in principle solvable.
- There is a difference between facts and values – only scientifically established facts can be trusted; values are unreliable, matters of opinion only.
- People are regarded as free and autonomous individuals.

A central feature of secularisation is the dominance of materialism and consumerism within contemporary society. If spiritual values are marginalised, material things are not surprisingly accorded greater significance. A clear indication of this is the extent to which economics dominates public and political debate and is regarded as one of the defining factors in personal fulfilment. It has been suggested that shopping is the main cultural pursuit of Western society, and that the Enlightenment dictum – ‘*Cogito ergo sum*’ (I think, therefore I am) – has been replaced by ‘*Tesco ergo sum*’ (I shop, therefore I am)! Shopping malls, it is argued, are the new cathedrals of a secular society, accompanied by services for all the family and piped music to create the right atmosphere – shopping is no longer just functional, but a holistic experience.

Secularisation and religion

Secularisation has had a number of effects on the role of religion within European society and the way in which religious beliefs are practised.

- There has developed a clear separation between *private* and *public* domains. Life is now compartmentalised rather than unified. In a secular society, religion is still acceptable in the private domain but not in the public domain: it can affect personal decisions and family relationships, but it may have no decisive influence on legislation, foreign policy, public morality or corporate issues.
- Pluralisation is a consequence of the process of secularisation. There is no longer a shared worldview but a multiplicity of options – religious and non-religious. In a secular society, provided such plurality is kept to the private domain, this does not cause problems. Consensus is achieved by not allowing any one worldview to dominate. The level of freedom and the scope of the private domain will vary from society to society.
- Religious views may be treated with respect or regarded as anachronistic, but there will be an assumption that these are neither to be imposed on others nor to contribute significantly to public debate. The church may still be regarded with some affection, but at the expense of functioning primarily as a ceremonial or

historical anomaly. Or it may be marginalised and trivialised, treated both by its members and others as a club for those interested in such things.

Churches that have not recognised what is happening – or have given up the struggle to engage in the kind of mission that challenges this worldview and insist that all aspects of life have religious significance – may unwittingly allow secularisation to impact their own communities and activities:

- The church may accept the dichotomy between the public and private domains, embrace privatisation and restrict its activities to the private sphere, concentrating on personal rather than social morality, on family and church issues rather than social issues. In its teaching, it may avoid public issues or teach, explicitly or implicitly, that certain principles (such as those in the Sermon on the Mount) apply to personal relationships but not to public policy. It may measure commitment in terms of local church involvement, rather than missionary engagement with the wider culture. And it may restrict the meaning of evangelism to a recruitment drive for new members.
- The church may adopt secular models and techniques without recognising or questioning their underlying secular assumptions, such as the use of marketing and management principles, or the demand for numerical growth. It may be important also to question the extent to which materialism has invaded the churches: the emphasis on church buildings; the amount of money spent on repairing, upgrading or building new church buildings; the tendency to avoid discussing issues of lifestyle; unthinking reliance on technology; and the invasion of prosperity teaching. It is not that all of these developments are necessarily wrong in themselves, or that churches should not adopt contemporary practices and make use of the benefits of secularisation, but it is crucial that churches engage critically with the secular assumptions that underlie many of them.
- The church may marginalise the spiritual dimension of its own life and message and become enslaved to secular assumptions. Belief in the miracle of the resurrection may be accompanied by disbelief in contemporary miracles. Self-help programmes may usurp the place of prayer. The church may become powerless to engage with the spiritual forces that secularism denies exist – but which have not thereby been removed from a secular society.

Question: Examine your own church in light of the above three points. What evidence can you find that the church has resisted secularisation or succumbed to this?

The last point – about the marginalising of the spiritual dimension of church life – is of considerable significance for mission in a context where there are many indications that the secular worldview is in serious trouble. Modernity is far from defunct and will continue to form a major component of our contemporary mission context into the foreseeable future. But there are within our society many signs of a reaction against secularisation and of dissatisfaction with secularist perspectives. Because this process and its associated philosophy tends to marginalise certain important dimensions of

human life and experience – such as love, purpose, meaning and spiritual experiences – it has been found unsatisfying by a growing number of people.

Religion has been making a remarkable comeback in Europe, even in the most aggressively secular societies. The political changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have been accompanied by renewed interest in religious experience. In the West, too, there are signs of a religious renaissance. This comeback takes many forms, most of them not Christian:

- Interest in Eastern mysticism and meditation
- The emergence of the New Age movement
- The growth of cults and new religious movements
- Expressions of resurgent neo-paganism
- Widespread interest in Celtic culture and religious views
- The attraction felt by some westerners to Islamic ideas
- Pathways to religious experience marketed as ‘secular’ techniques
- Fascination with the occult.

None of these expressions of religion may be strong enough to challenge the basic secularity of our society or to produce a new form of sacral society, but a process of *deseccularisation* appears now to be underway.

A major mission challenge facing the churches is that we are living in a period of social turbulence, where the processes of secularisation and deseccularisation are both operating. We will need to find ways to communicate effectively both with those whose assumptions and values are secularist and with those who are interested in spirituality but regard the churches as secularised and impotent. No one approach – and probably no one local church – can engage successfully with both.

Question: How secular is your own country? Thinking of your friends and relatives, which of the processes of secularisation and deseccularisation do you think are most influential in their lives?

Mission in a secular society

Some of the implications for mission of living in a secular culture are:

- Secularisation is part of our mission context, so we will need to understand its impact on our society and its attractions if we are to engage with individuals and communities who accept – often without thinking – secular assumptions.
- As with all cultures, we will need to be discerning in our critique, recognising positive elements to affirm and negative elements to challenge. Secularisation has brought enormous benefits to contemporary society, but it also poses fundamental threats to human wellbeing.

- Secularisation may be difficult for us to detect because it is so pervasive and we have become so accustomed to it. It poses a significant threat to the church, which has already imbibed many secular perspectives.
- Secularism, on the other hand, although apparently more threatening, is relatively easy to detect and resist because it is explicitly antagonistic to faith.
- We will need to ask what is the good news for secular society and for individuals who are shaped by secularisation or espouse secularism.
- We will need also to think carefully about the role of the church in a secular culture, whether accepting a role in the private domain is adequate, and whether it is possible to proclaim the gospel as 'public truth' without endorsing a sacral society.

What are secularists like? It is important not to see those who operate on secular assumptions as uniform. A number of different positions have been suggested:

- Aggressive secularists: these are hostile towards the church, who regard religion in any form as promoting harmful superstitions and distracting attention from the real problems society faces and the secular solutions that must be found. They may well be active promoters of secular philosophies.
- Mere secularists: these are indifferent towards religion and the church; since they regard these as irrelevant, they tend to be neither supportive nor hostile.
- Pragmatic secularists: these are, on the whole, positive towards religion and church and may even regard themselves as Christians; they may be in favour of personal religion, as long as it does not intrude into the public domain, or of civic religion to give colour and dignity to ceremonial occasions. But religious values have little or no impact upon their own lives or beliefs.

Secularists may be intellectual and articulate. They may also function instinctively in line with social expectations without thinking through their beliefs. Secularists may be affluent and successful, or poor and powerless. Secularists may be unhappy or searching for meaning, as evangelists often assume; or they may be happy, fulfilled, caring, moral and living meaningful lives. Biblical teaching about human nature requires us to believe that there are areas of need and inadequacies within the worldview of a secularist – but it is important not to assume that these are recognised or deeply felt. It is worth noting also that secularism has impacted the diverse communities that make up contemporary society: there are secularists from Muslim, Hindu and Jewish backgrounds as well as those with a Christian heritage.

It has been claimed that the following are characteristics of many secularists:

- They have a negative view of church and religion and are often ignorant of basic Christian teaching.
- They are oriented towards this life rather than concerned about death.
- They are conscious of doubt rather than guilt.
- Those who are successful experience some disillusionment with materialism.
- They suffer from multiple alienation – from God, the natural world, from other human beings, and from the spiritual dimension of their own personalities.
- They have no sense of overall purpose or meaning in universe.

Question:

1. What kind of evangelistic strategy might your church adopt in order to share the gospel with secularists?
2. What message would you be trying to communicate?
3. What is the role and mission of the church in relation to a secular culture (as distinct from individual secularists)?
4. How can it challenge its relegation to the private domain?
Or should it accept this and adapt?

FROM MODERNITY TO POSTMODERNITY

A worldview in transition

The prefix 'post-' can be found attached to many words in contemporary writings, especially those deriving from sociologists, such as: post-industrial, post-Christian, post-Marxist, post-colonial, post-structural, post-feminist, etc.

'Post-' simply means 'after'. These terms, therefore, have a limited meaning: they imply that one era has come to an end, but they say little about what follows. But some of them provide further evidence of the conviction we noted earlier – that western culture is in trouble, even crisis, because the long-dominant secular worldview is no longer adequate. It seems that new ways of thinking are needed and that these are, in fact, already emerging. The most familiar of these 'post-' words is *postmodernity*.

This term is an indication that the modern worldview is under threat. This worldview has some remarkable features and has brought significant benefits to our society. But it also has weaknesses, many of which have become increasingly clear during the 20th century. Its underlying assumptions have been challenged by many scientists, sociologists, economists and philosophers, as well as by theologians. Some of its weaknesses can be related to the list of convictions we considered earlier:

- The reliance placed by society on reason and science is inadequate. Reason is not the only basis upon which decisions are taken. Science does not have all the answers, nor is it equipped to deal with certain questions. The exclusion of other areas of human experience in making discoveries and decisions is unhelpful. The persistence and resurgence of religion in secular societies offers significant evidence that a rationalist and secularist worldview is unsatisfying.
- The claim that objective knowledge can be obtained by keeping subject and object apart is now widely regarded as illegitimate. Such separation is impossible – there is interaction between the scientist or researcher and the object under investigation. Pure objectivity is an illusion: there are inevitably presuppositions involved, which need to be taken into account in evaluating data obtained and conclusions reached. Not only is this claim unsustainable; it is also dangerous. It results in a mechanistic approach to the world and exploitation of the environment.

- Interpreting the universe purely in terms of the interplay of cause and effect is reductionist, excluding questions of meaning and purpose that are important to everyone. We cannot live as human beings in a world that has no meaning or within a worldview that excludes such questions.
- The optimism that all problems are inherently solvable – and will indeed be solved as humanity progresses towards maturity – has been almost destroyed. The evolution of the human race towards maturity has received a major setback through the experience of two world wars and a host of other conflicts that have revealed what little progress has been made in relating with one another. Material development for one part of the world has been attained through exploiting the rest of it. Advances in technology have solved some problems but have created others, and the destruction of the world and its human passengers through nuclear warfare, plagues or ecological disaster is now recognised as a possible accomplishment of such ‘progress’.
- The division between facts and values is now generally thought untenable. All facts are interpreted facts: there are no ‘value-free’ facts. Belief systems give a framework within which facts make sense. Scientists and historians (among others) operate with their own belief-systems.
- The emphasis on freedom, autonomy and individualism – which was liberating as a reaction against an earlier, more restrictive culture – has militated against community development and the achievement of greater social justice. It is more readily accepted now that persons only really know themselves as ‘persons in relationship’.

The secular worldview remains influential, but it is no longer as dominant and free from critique as it once was. The mood of optimism and sense of inevitable progress has given way to a mood of uncertainty, cynicism and pessimism. The contemporary situation seems to be that we live in a culture where a worldview is crumbling, but where no clear alternative emerging. ‘Postmodernity’ is the term many are using to describe this change of mood and uncertainty about the future. We live – and engage in mission – in a period of cultural transition.

Postmodernity

Postmodernity has become a popular term in a wide range of disciplines from architecture to sociology, from literary criticism to philosophy. Although it was first used in the 1930s, it became more familiar in the 1960s. There is now an enormous amount of literature on various aspects of postmodernity and attempts to apply postmodern thinking to every conceivable subject. Some of this is intellectual and abstruse; but there are also popular expositions.

Postmodernity is not easy to define because of its scope and the many variations in the ways it is used. Indeed, some have grown weary of the term and have suggested that it has been so overused as to make it useless. Its continuing popularity, however, means that we still need to grapple with its implications. Postmodernity is perhaps as much a mood as a set of beliefs. It carries a range of meanings:

- Some use it to mean that modernity is moving into a new phase, denying that this worldview is in terminal trouble. Barry Smart writes: ‘Postmodernity offers us the possibility of a critical view of modernity. Not the end of modernity, but the possibility of

a reconstituted modernity. Calling modernity to account, demanding that the costs as well as the benefits are acknowledged, the unintended consequences and the limits recognised, postmodernity represents ... modernity coming of age'. Others speak of the 'radicalisation' of modernity, denying that we have moved into a 'postmodern social universe'. Others speak of 'liquid modernity'.

- Some use it to signal the collapse of modernity, arguing that postmodernity has no distinctive content of its own but simply marks the end of an era. Graham Cray writes: 'One of the best descriptions of post-modern culture is that of 'shopping', that the world and all of history is a vast supermarket, and you can just pick out the ingredients you like, and assemble them into your own version of something.'
- Some use it to describe features of a distinctive worldview that is coming into being, albeit not yet fully formed. Mike Featherstone writes: 'To speak of post-modernity is to suggest an epochal shift or break from modernity involving the emergence of a new social totality with its own organising principles.'

Common to these interpretations is a recognition that we live in a time of cultural uncertainty. What is unclear is whether this will lead to the emergence of a new and more diversified culture, or to a reassertion of the culture of modernity, either in a chastened and modified form, or with renewed vigour. The export and globalisation of modernity over recent decades means that, whatever the impact of postmodernity in the West, modernity will remain a significant component in the culture of the global village, with every prospect of recapturing its erstwhile heartland.

The main features of postmodernity (apart from the above critique of modernity) might include:

- A commitment to relativism in relation to questions of truth. There are no absolutes. Truth is in the mind of the believer as much as beauty is in the eye of the beholder.
- There is no 'big story' or metanarrative. Any attempt to claim that there is becomes oppressive and excludes other stories and the people who tell them.
- Meaning is subjective rather than objective. When reading a novel, for example, the original intention of the author of the novel is irrelevant: a text means whatever the reader understands by it.
- Spiritual values are significant and belief systems must be taken seriously, though without allowing claims to exclusivity. Society is secular in the sense that no one value system will dominate, but not in the sense that spirituality will be downgraded.
- Imagination is necessary as well as rationality.
- The world is seen through a biological rather than a mechanistic model: concern for the environment is vital.
- Understanding humanity as part of the environment rather than separate from it will enable us to treat the earth more responsibly.
- There is a search for wholeness through diverse philosophies and techniques.
- Institutions, hierarchies and structures are distrusted in favour of networks and grass-roots activities. Styles of organisation and leadership are changing. Male domination and patriarchy are challenged.
- Iconoclasm – a refusal to give respect to established traditions or to take anything, including itself, too seriously; an emphasis on what is chaotic and

fragmentary rather than on order and harmony. This can be seen at a popular level in both pop videos and modern advertising, with their constantly changing images.

- A readiness to hold together contradictory beliefs; a 'pick 'n' mix' society, including pick 'n' mix religion: Graham Cray illustrates this with the story of singer Peter Gabriel, who had both of his children confirmed and christened at the Self Realisation Fellowship in Los Angeles. His wife reported: 'It was lovely actually. A mill in the middle of this wonderful lake and they were christened in six different religions.'
- Pluralism – a commitment to choice at every level; questions of truth are set within a context of pluralism.
- A recognition that modern culture is diverse, global and a constantly shifting set of sub-cultures.
- The medium as the message, an emphasis on style rather than content – as seen in the growth of style-based rather than content-based magazines.
- Deep scepticism.

The New Age movement

One well-known expression of and reaction to postmodern culture is the so-called 'new age' movement – a movement that is far from uniform and as difficult as postmodernity to delineate or summarise. The 'movement' has many points of entry, embraces diverse concerns and interests and is highly resistant to classification or institutionalisation. In this it is very much a postmodern phenomenon.

New age ideas have undoubtedly been very popular over the past 25 years or more, although there is growing evidence that any sense of a 'movement' is evaporating. It is difficult to assess the number of (almost entirely white, middle-class) people who are committed to the worldview that undergirds these ideas. There is a tendency to pick and mix ideas and practices that individuals find attractive. But new age ideas have become influential and are often taken for granted in many sectors of society. This has resulted in a kind of 'designer-spirituality' – which challenges the supposed secularity of western society but is often rather vague, undemanding and individualistic.

Michael Green has offered a list of the philosophical principles on which new age thinking is based:

- Monism – the belief that all reality is one, like a seamless robe, so that all differences are illusory.
- A belief that the divine is impersonal – a force, essence or energy.
- Pantheism – everything is God, the divine spirit infuses everything.
- Human beings are divine.
- There are no moral absolutes, evil is illusory.
- Our resources are within us – salvation comes from within.
- *Karma* (wrongdoing) leads to suffering and the need for reincarnation – but moral evil is illusory, so we need, not forgiveness, but illumination and release from ignorance.
- Paranormal powers are available to us.
- All religions are essentially one.

- The human race is evolving towards the new Age of Aquarius, planetary unity, peace and prosperity. Dogma, reason, division and ignorance hinder this process and must be swept away.

Why has this philosophy or religion – which is in most ways a westernised version of the ancient approaches of Hinduism or Buddhism – been popular in recent years?

- It is part of the postmodern reaction against materialism and secularism.
- It contains a perennially popular emphasis on self-realisation and human potential.
- In a world of religious rules and religious conflict, it offers freedom from dogma and also from undue moral restraint.
- It addresses issues that have been neglected or badly handled within western culture (e.g. care of the environment).
- In a culture where spirituality is back in vogue, it purports to fill the spiritual vacuum left by the decline of Christianity in Europe.
- It offers hope of better times to a weary and cynical society, unimpressed by the claims of modernity and affected by the despairing mood of postmodernity.

Christians have reacted in various ways to the new age movement:

- Some have been proponents of conspiracy theories.
- Some have been antagonistic to demonic elements in this philosophy.
- Some have identified positive elements that are a challenge to the churches.
- Some have embraced new age ideas to the point of syncretism.

Question: How do you think the churches should respond? What kind of church would be attractive to someone from a new age background?

Modern, postmodern and premodern

Identifying dissatisfaction with modernity and features of what many are describing as postmodernity does not mean that a new worldview has come to dominate Europe, let alone the rest of the world. We are in a period of uncertainty, of transition and of cultural turbulence, the outcome of which will not be known for some time. There may be evidence of the features we have described as postmodern, but there are also other trends and crosscurrents.

There is the continuing and pervasive influence of technology that is based on the culture of modernity. In other parts of the world, the culture of modernity exported from the West continues to advance rapidly into cultures that seem powerless to resist its onslaught. In the West, the techniques of modernity are used to promote the message of postmodernity: for most, postmodernity does not require the dismantling of the gains of modernity but the metamorphosis of the culture that produced such gains. The blend

of modern technology with spirituality is evident in films such as the *Star Wars* series, where 'the force' and military hardware operate in partnership. There is as yet no way to know whether the influence of modernity will continue to be eroded and postmodern values and features will gather force, or whether modernity will make a comeback – chastened or reinvigorated – and dispel postmodern ideas.

There seems also to be a revival of interest in premodern cultures, especially in Celtic culture and religion, and in medieval and mythological themes. Themes and practices from ancient Eastern religions and pre-Christian European religions are being reappropriated. The questioning of modernity leads backwards as well as forwards, asking what values and heritage of earlier cultures were lost through the Enlightenment or even earlier through Christendom. Serious study of these cultures goes hand in hand with idealistic romanticism, but the search for roots is unsurprising in a time of cultural and spiritual uncertainty.

There is a revival also of fundamentalism in its various forms – Islamic, Christian, Hindu, secular, etc. This is a worrying feature of contemporary culture, threatening to return us to intolerance and violence, but it appears to be a desperate attempt to cling on to certainties in a time of doubt and transition.

Sometimes linked with fundamentalism, but a trend in its own right, is a revival of nationalism as a defensive response to globalism. Local culture and local rivalries take on renewed importance in a culture that is dismissive of such local heritage in an attempt to create modernist uniformity and uncertain about values and purpose under the onslaught of postmodernity. Shifting economic with political developments allow such nationalism to surface with a vigour – and often violence – that shocks those previously unaware of the depth of feeling and centuries of cultural oppression.

Question: What evidence for the contemporary cultural interweaving of modern, premodern and postmodern elements can you detect in recent novels, films, TV series or songs?

Mission in a postmodern society

How do we respond to the postmodern dimension of the contemporary mission context? The challenge facing us as we consider mission in a postmodern environment is to remain flexible and alert, neither buying uncritically into an apparently emerging culture that may be short-lived, thereby leaving the church stranded in a cultural dead-end; nor remaining 'trapped in a modernist mode' (Robert Warren), ignoring or resisting cultural changes that require clear and creative thinking about the shape and role of the church in society. Warren suggests we will need to be 'bilingual; able to relate to those who belong to the old order, as well as to those who live in the new'.

David Bosch describes this situation as a 'paradigm change' (a change in the way in which data is interpreted, a partial worldview shift), similar to others faced by church and society in previous centuries. He urges: 'Neither extreme reactionary nor excessively revolutionary approaches ... will help the Christian church and mission to arrive at greater clarity or serve God's cause in a better way. In the case of each

paradigm change reviewed so far, there remained a creative tension between the new and the old. The agenda was always – consciously or unconsciously – one of reform, not of replacement.’

Avoiding extreme reactions is especially important in a situation where there is no certainty about how the cultural turbulence will be resolved. Jumping on to what seems to be the main bandwagon risks hitching a ride on a wagon whose wheels are about to fall off! Courageous and creative responses to contemporary society must be combined with discernment and patience.

Postmodernity offers new challenges and new opportunities for mission:

- Openness to spiritual reality, which means that religion is back on the agenda and can form part of conversations without embarrassment.
- A search for roots, identity and meaning, which requires careful listening in order to understand the questions and connecting points with the gospel.
- Scepticism about materialism, rationalism and scientism, echoing the concerns often raised by Christian apologists.
- A pick and mix approach to religion and morality that downgrades everything.
- Strong resistance to moral absolutes.
- Scepticism about truth claims and reaction against exclusive religious ideas.
- Distrust and dislike of institutions such as the church and an assumption that Christianity has been responsible for causing environmental and social damage.

Exercise:

How would you explain the gospel to someone influenced by postmodern and new age ideas?

Reading and Resources

- R Appignanesi and C Garratt, *Postmodernism for Beginners*, Icon, 1995
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