

Should We Be Postmodern to Minister to Postmoderns?

Kwabena Donkor

There is no question that contemporary western culture is changing in its philosophical outlook. Today, western culture is challenging the modern way of thinking, which emphasized objectivity and absolute certainty. Modernity's distinctions between subject and object, knowledge and opinion, and science and superstition, are being blurred in the contemporary postmodern climate. Ministry in times like these calls for reflection, and Samir Selmanovic's two-part article titled "Pastoring on the Postmodern Frontline" (see *Ministry*, July and September 2001) begins an important discussion on this vital issue. Indeed, it raised the crucial question: How do we minister in a postmodern milieu?

These articles raise a larger question about the crucial connection between ministry and theology or, stated differently, between praxis and theory. The author correctly perceives the connection between praxis and theory as unavoidable. In two places in the first part of the articles he alludes to this connection. In advocating the need for change in ministry as we confront the postmodern "hurricane," the author writes, "We must change not only our methods but also our understanding of how people think and feel and thus how we are to think as we seek to meet their minds and hearts."¹ Again, we are admonished that in preparing to deal with practical ministry adjustments, "... there are three conceptual shifts we need to make to increase our understanding, respect, and compassion for postmodern people."²

The author discusses these three shifts as: from triumphalism to humility, from rationalism to mystery, and from objectivism to other ways of knowing. As we consider ministering to postmoderns in the context of these recommended conceptual shifts, a few questions come to mind: Where would these conceptual shifts, if we were to make them "really," leave us theologically? Should we become postmodern to minister to postmoderns? Are these shifts being recommended only as adjustments of expediency, simply for the convenience of ministry? Or are we to make them to really reflect our frame of mind? These articles did not leave me with an unequivocal answer to these questions, yet the necessary connection between ministry and theology requires that we explore this question, because our ministry ought to be informed by our theology. Though I believe that a clear understanding of the postmodern situation is a necessary prerequisite to a successful ministry to postmoderns, I do not think that Seventh-day Adventists should be postmodern ourselves in order to minister successfully to this group.

Postmodernism and modernism's triumphalism

In what sense did modernism represent triumphalism? Modernism's triumphalism is said to consist in its striving for what has been described as the "grand narrative." Postmodernists use the term "narrative" to describe a system of beliefs and values that legitimize a society by acting as a force that binds that society together. A narrative (i.e., the belief system that holds the society together) is "grand" when it is comprehensive in explaining and providing meaning to whatever the society does and believes. Such a belief system, which holds true always, and not only for a particular historic period, underlies and permeates every aspect of the society's life. On the other hand, a belief system may sustain only a segment of people for a particular historic period. Such is a "local" narrative.

Modernism sought to explain and provide meaning to *all* reality on the foundation of reason. In other words, the world was what reason claimed it to be, and this was to be taken as

universally true and for all time. Postmodernism claims that the very idea of a belief system that is always and universally true (i.e., a grand narrative) is no longer credible. It is argued that the very fact of our situatedness in particular historical contexts forces us to experience the world through our individual and unique perspectives ("local" narratives). To claim that one's viewpoint is always and universally true is to demonstrate lack of humility, a mark of arrogance and triumphalism. This was the hallmark of modernism's rationality. However, to be postmodern is to denounce grand narratives of any sort; the postmodern outlook "demands an attack on any claim to universality."³

Postmodernism's insistence that all belief systems are unique viewpoints, contextual and, therefore, provincial has significant implications for Christian ministry in general, and for Adventist ministry in particular. What should Christian ministry do with such "grand narratives" as, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5)? Or, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12, RSV)? Do distinctive Adventist doctrines still have a place in evangelism in a postmodern context?

It is true that throughout Christendom we are urged to show respect for world religions and be accommodative to faiths other than our own. Obviously, ecumenism thrives in such a pluralistic postmodern context. It may be that the shift from triumphalism to humility in a postmodern context represents a "politically correct" move. But a real question remains: Should Christian ministry, and for that matter Adventist ministry, intend to bring postmoderns to an acceptance of biblical grand narratives, or should we not advocate them because they tend to paint our ministry in colors that reflect control and conquest? It is quite significant to note that biblical grand narratives appear to predate modernism.

Postmodernism and rationality

We indulge in questions about rationality when we raise issues about the nature, place, and competence of human reason. It has been characteristic of philosophy from the early Greek thinkers to the modern period to use reason to explain reality in a way that brings coherence and unity to *all* reality. For example, Plato's doctrine of *Forms* or *Ideas* is regarded as one of his significant contributions to philosophy. In Plato's system, the *Forms* represent eternal and unchanging patterns of which the objects we actually see are shadowy copies. But Plato comes up with this doctrine as a means to explain the nature of existence. Plato reasoned that when we say, for example, that a thing is beautiful or that an act is good, we imply that a standard of beauty or good exists somewhere which is distinct from that thing which we say is beautiful or that act which we say is good. Furthermore, while the particular thing that is described as beautiful may perish with time, the very idea of beautiful itself is timeless. For Plato, then, the idea *Beautiful* inhabits a world that is more real than the world, which the particular thing that is beautiful inhabits. Plato concluded that the real world must lie beyond the visible world. In this way, Plato employs reason not only to explain the origins of reality, but also to show the internal relations and connectedness of the individual phenomena of our experience. In this way, reality is brought under the grip of reason to serve as its principle and to explain its origin. Especially in the modern period reason took the form of scientific reason, and only that which was scientific in nature counted for reality.

Postmodernism properly criticizes this form of rationality as arrogant. There are thinkers such as Foucault who wish to dispense with the whole notion of rationality as a western tradition that has turned out to be a repressive myth.⁴ Others, such as Habermas, wish to replace modern

rationality with a procedural rationality. Procedural rationality is when reason is denied the ability to describe what reality is, only the capacity to evaluate knowledge and moral claims in the context of a set of procedures.⁵

Obviously, this challenge to modern rationality appears to make room for the notion of mystery. But will the shift from rationalism to mystery be a safe retreat? There may be questions that we cannot answer, and we should not lose our faith if we were to admit that we do not have all the answers. Nevertheless, Adventist theology and ministry is built on a concept of revelation-inspiration that should enable us, indeed force us, to employ a procedural notion of rationality within the confines of revelation-inspiration. While postmodern critique of modern rationality is a welcome development, I do not think that ambiguity and mystery represent the necessary alternative. We should not lose sight of the fact that postmodern *epistemology* (theory of knowledge), denies us the right to state any position with absolute certainty. If we were to build ministry on such a foundation, to what spiritual certainties would our postmodern friends be called? Or should their spirituality consist in ever developing spiritual beliefs? Or in sympathy with postmodern non-foundationalism, should ministry not be built on certain sure foundational beliefs? The present statement of our theology would seem to deny a practice of ministry that is based on ambiguity and mystery.

Postmodernism and modernity's objectivism

Since in philosophy reason tries to construct and explain all reality in a unified and orderly fashion, modern philosophy tried to conceive of our world as eminently objective. By this, modernists wanted to say that the world of our senses exists really apart from us and should be the proper subject of our study. Furthermore, modern rationality brought unity to all reality by assuming that everything consists of bodies in motion, and therefore everything conforms to a mechanical model. Being objectively real, modernism could easily say that the world could be known objectively through observation and induction. In the modernist system, such objective knowledge is universally and absolutely true. Postmodernism rejects the notion of an objective world, and consequently the possibility of objective knowledge. In adopting this position, postmodernism depends in part on twentieth-century linguistic theory. According to this view, what we generally assume to be an objective world is in reality a creation of ours through our use of language. It is in this sense that language is said to be our access to the world. By this they "contend that what we call the *real world* is actually an ever changing social creation."⁶ Therefore, there are no certain foundations to our knowledge of reality. Meaning, like reality is an ever-changing social construct, based in historical communities and comprising of a web of beliefs.⁷

Given the supposition that ministry (praxis) ought to be based on a sound theology (theory), a more fundamental choice faces us other than the one between the modernist conception of building beliefs on a foundation and the postmodernist notion of a web of beliefs. This is the choice between the belief in the existence of an objective world and the existence of a reality that is the creation of our language. Our choice will profoundly impact our approach to ministry.

Assumptions and consequences

Postmodernism's critique of modernity centers on its concept of rationality, which supports an objective view of reality as explained above. Although postmodernity finds it objectionable to be defined as a worldview, it is precisely that, as Selmanovic rightly observes.⁸ This means that postmodernism, like modernism, employs reason to construct a view of reality, albeit different from that of modernity. Reality, according to postmodernism, is progressive and

relative. In other words, there is not one view of reality that is true for all. Reality is as one conceives it from one's particular viewpoint, hence the notion that "every point of view is a view from a point."⁹ Therefore, the point is inescapable that in the context of belief, whether we approach ministry on the basis of modernity's foundationalism or postmodernity's web of beliefs, we function on the basis of reality as constructed by reason.

Is it possible to find an objective world that is not the creation of reason but in which the parts of all of its experience are meaningfully related? The Bible presents us with such a world not on the basis of reason but on the basis of inspiration. One's stand on inspiration becomes operative here. From the perspective of a "high view" of inspiration for example, the answer to the postmodern challenge that all belief systems represent particular viewpoints may be not simply to state that one's "faith commitment is grounded in history, embodied in the community of my Church . . ."¹⁰ a supremely postmodern answer, but to state as well the basis of the belief in inspiration. This means that we may not minister to postmoderns on the basis of beliefs that are grounded simply in the historic faith community, but preeminently on the basis of an inspired Bible.

Does this mean that in ministry we should not approach postmoderns from where they are coming? Not at all: We should understand the thinking and experiencing processes of postmodern persons in order to minister to them. Yet a sympathetic understanding of postmodernism does not necessarily require the epistemological shifts discussed here. In fact a shift from rationalism and objectivism to mystery and other forms of knowing respectively, represent a shift from one form of rationality to another. Who knows what epistemological approach may be in the offing? Compassion, respect, feelings, emotions, and intuition may all be elucidated from the biblical perspective if we patiently and conscientiously articulate them as we seek to minister meaningfully to postmodern persons.

1 Samir Selmanovic. Pastoring on the Postmodern Frontline(part I)," in *Ministry*, July 2001, 10.

2 Ibid, 11

3 Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1996), 45.

4 Anton A Van Niekerk, "Postmetaphysical Versus Postmodern Thinking" *Philosophy Today* 39 (1995), 177.

5 Ibid., 175.

6 Grenz, 42.

7 See Mark I. Wallace, "The New Yale Theology," *Christian Scholar's Review* 17 (1988): 154-170.

8 Selmanovic, part 2, 20

9 Selmanovic, part 1, 13

10 Selmanovic, part 2, 21