

59. Making Sense of Post-Modernity

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1. The title which has been suggested for my contribution today is "making sense of Post-Modernity". I like that title. It implies a search for the fundamental changes that are present in our European society. These are changes which shake Europe, even to its foundations, its modern foundations. And this title also implies, that we should look for the sense in these developments; we should seek their meaning. So, how are we to make sense of Post-Modernity? This is a good and necessary question. But one could also ask at this point, a counter question. What sense does Post-Modernity make of us? How will Post-Modernity treat the Christian message? Will it treat it as something meaningful, or as something without meaning?

That is a question which is so intriguing and so important, that I would like to make incorporate it as an integral part of my contribution. So in preparing this talk I have found myself walking up and down the same track. Walking one way is asking the question: how we can make sense of Post-Modernity? Walking the other way is to reflect upon the sense that Post-Modernity tries to make of us, especially if we want to represent the Christian message. And so, I will begin with this second track: let us consider then what the coming of a Post-Modern reality in Europe could imply for the acceptance or rejection of the Gospel. Will Post-Modernity upgrade it, so as to allow the Gospel to make sense, or will Post-Modernity degrade it and render it non-sense?

2. In posing this question we confront, from the outset, a problem, namely that Post-Modernity stands for many things at the same time. Four elements, however, are readily distinguishable, and they are also the traits which are the most relevant for our topic. Let me therefore give each of them a brief label, to assist us in our efforts. I will call these four traits:

- · *deadlock*
- · *peacock*
- · *plurality*
- · *irony.*

I have to admit that this sounds somewhat like Alice in Wonderland. But, having thought about it, that may even be a happy coincidence. For the Wonderland of Alice was not unlike Post-Modernism. For, as you will recall, that was a land in which all things, persons and statements were turned immediately upside down.

Deadlock is the first label. That is the word which stands for the breakdown of all great dreams, all major ideologies, those which have guided modern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. Post-Modernism declares that they all are now proven to be false; that one after the other has made a mess of the world. There is, and has been, a clear deadlock, even a betrayal in the pronouncements of Fascism, but also of Communism and Socialism, and Liberalism is by no means exempt. People can no longer trust these messages, and are now able to see through the hypocrisy that they all represent. Indeed, all of these ideologies are now turned upside-down by the people, because they have become aware of how much suffering they have brought

despite their initial promises. And Capitalism is not excluded. For instance, consider what Lyotard, the great French Post-Modern philosopher, says about the heavy burdens and sufferings which modern Capitalism, up until this day, continues to bring with it for the millions of hungry in Africa, and for the deprived masses in India and Bangladesh. So there is a clear deadlock in all the social and political paths of Modernity. That is the first message of Post-Modernity to our time.

Peacock is my second label. My **Oxford Dictionary** tells me, that a peacock is a bird with splendid plumage and tail-covert that he displays ostentatiously. And indeed, ostentatious display is a typical characteristic of our newly emerging communications and television culture. There truth is no longer the yardstick of what you see and what is shown, but the willingness to impress and to make impressions. Jean Baudrillard, one of the main Post- Modern authors of our time, even defends the position that, in our time, the images which we receive have become more powerful than reality itself. We just see the tail of the peacock and think that it is the reality itself. But if we want to see the other side, the real thing, we will observe that this is no longer possible. We are simply overwhelmed by the images. We cannot take our eyes from them. The world as we knew it, the world in which we observed reality and ruled over the things in it, no longer exists. It is again turned upside down. Post-Modernity says that we now live in the world of things and of images, and that they are ruling us. We simply have to give in; our fascination is fixed upon the tail of the peacock, the images of the new technologies in all their splendid array.

Plurality is my third term. In a world which is possessed by images, and where the great ideologies have brought us to a deadlock, we are taught to fear one thing above all other things: the allure of great stories, grand récits, universal utopias. We may be tempted to adhere to general formulas as world-saving principles, but with Modernity we have seen what untold misery this has brought. So then, the Post-Modern chorus calls upon us to instead return to the small stories of every separate human person. We will thereby love plurality above monotony, also in the media, and this will mean we will deeply distrust all claims about what could be good for mankind as a whole.

This no doubt poses a question: how then are we to live in such a society. If no universal ties exist between people, and if you cannot trust any common goal, how than we should live? The main answer to that question is given by the American philosopher, Richard Rorty. And he does that in one word - and it is also our fourth and last label:

Irony means: we take distance from all public opinions in a relativistic, humoristic way. We listen in a friendly fashion, but we never reveal what our real and deepest intentions are. For if we do you we could be hurt again, we could be betrayed again, we could become a sacrifice. The best way to keep yourself away from those pains is to continually relativize, to continually downgrade the applicability of our own ideas. Why on earth should anyone always have and maintain long-lasting convictions? What is the use of that?

I mentioned four words: deadlock, peacock, plurality and irony. And I hope that you understand not only their actuality, but also their relevance. For indeed, Europe today is on the move to a society where images, more and more, rule. It is a communication-centred society. But this society is also where many people are deeply hurt by their experiences of the past; by the dream-driven fanaticism of Fascism and Communism. And they fear deeply what newly emerging forms of nationalism and racism could do to them and are already doing to them. So keep yourself from those risks, organize your life in such a way that you will not be hurt again. Create your own

smaller word, love your growing consumption, enjoy the experience of gaining ever new images. For who will know what the world of tomorrow will look like? That will be decided in the world of the objects, in the world that lies beyond our control.

3. At this point I repeat the counter-question which I asked at the beginning: how does Post-Modernity see us, how does it want to deal with us? Can it and will it make sense of Christianity?

The answer to that question is, I think, crystal-clear. Christians, Christianity, can be seen as an ally of Post-Modernity. Especially, in so far as there is a war against universal rationalism. Christianity and Post-Modernity join in a common struggle against powerful ideologies. Post-Modernity also appreciates Christianity as a potential breeding place for small personal stories, as the cradle of inspiring images of irony, for all those who have to deal with a strange and bewildering world. So, please let Christians have their own place in the Post-Modern plural society. But there is one condition. And that is, of course, that Christianity should stop trying to retell grand stories. It should clearly refrain from any suggestion that it has a way for the totality of society and for all mankind. For then it becomes a threat to real plurality. Then it even could blow up irony. Let this religion of Christ be aware of its proper place in the private domain where it should dwell in a liberal way, not binding people and their societies to new general rules or dogmas.

4. Of course you are now already considering the question, whether we should be willing to pay such a price. Let me assure you that I will come to that question soon. But first another question has to be considered. That question is this: is Post-Modernism right or wrong in the way it considers contemporary Western Christianity? I am inclined to say, that the answer has to be mainly in the affirmative. Yes, its view on Western Christianity is substantially right, even in relation to each of the four characteristics which I have just listed. For indeed there is also among most European Christians of today the awareness of a deadlock. A deadlock not only in relation to the great pagan ideologies, but also in relation to the social and political message of Christianity itself. Is it not true, that the Christian Church has corrupted its own message for centuries by cooperating willingly with evil political powers? And when the Englishman John Hawkins started the trade of slaves in 1562, did he not give the name of Jesus to the ship by which he transported slaves from Africa? It is just one example how the name of Jesus has been abused. But it is threatening enough to say that there are indeed ample reasons to refrain from the suggestion that Christianity should still have a message for the public realm. And moreover, in relation to the peacock-label: is it not true that images are often far more powerful than words? Did we Christians not over-accentuate the verbal side of the Gospel (as if the words of one era were timeless), and so render the message obsolete? And finally, I think, most European Christians have, in the privacy of their own faith, also begun to mistrust many of the orthodox certainties of the past, as these have been preached by the churches. Indeed, they now often prefer the position of irony, afraid of being misguided by wrong opinions that are generally accepted by the church.

Let me try to conclude my first point. It is true that Christianity can be made sense of, and used by, Post-Modernity to a limited extent. But a growing number of Christians have no problem with these limitations, and they are even happy enough to go along with them.

Think for instance of those Christians, who are already accustomed to restrict the message of the Gospel to the private realm and to the small stories, seeing it as the testimony of the saving of the personal soul for Jesus Christ without any direct social, economic or political implications. For them, the coming of the Post-Modern

society has no threats. It is almost a gift from heaven, a happy escape from all the claims and terrors of classic rational modernity.

5. But in the way in which I have framed this, you can this morning already hear that this is not the position I want to defend. On the contrary. My opinion is that if in this way we accommodate too easily to the sense which Post-Modernity wants to make of us, then we participate in the birth of a caricature of true Christianity, a radical misrepresentation of what the Gospel really means. So indeed it is now high time that I turn to that second way of walking that path, and consider the question about the sense we can and should make of Post-Modernity, seen with Christian eyes, from a Christian point of view.

Here I would like to remind you of the beautiful beginning of the Gospel of John. It is the passage where John refers to the Word of God as present from the beginning, even before the world was created. In this passage it is God the Father who is the Speaker. He speaks his Word, his Son, through the breath of the Holy Spirit. And it is this activity of the Triune God by which the world is made, by which God's Word becomes flesh, part of the creation.

But this view, of course, has immense implications for the way in which we should see this world of ours. If it is born by the Word of God, then it is therefore from the beginning destined to be or to become an Answer. God does not speak a word in vain, without expecting an Answer. Because of that we can and should say, that the fulness of this world is called by the living God to be the Answer, the Response before his face, *Coram Deo*. In all its ways it should become an Answer - in the world of arts and culture, in the economic world, in the world of politics, and in the domain of friendship and marriage - each world according to its own created character.

Let me say it differently. We speak of the use of power in politics, of the use of resources in economic life, of dealing with sexuality in intimate human relations between man and woman. And that is no doubt correct. But power, resources, sexuality - they are created potentialities, they are gifts of God. And that means that they are not, I repeat, not, to become goals in and of themselves, but to become an Answer. The Answer-side of political life is justice. For only in and through justice is power opened up, becoming serviceable to mankind, an Answer to the living God. The Answer-side of economic life is care or stewardship. For only in that way will economic life be saved from materialism and self-centeredness and will it be disclosed to its real calling. Just like in a friendship or marriage, we have to deal with the gift of sexuality. It is there, not to be chosen as a goal in itself, but to open and to deepen the love between two human beings. Love is therefore the Answer-side of sexuality. Sexuality, power, economic richness - they all tend to become a curse for men and society if they are seen in a closed way, worth to be possessed on their own behalf. But if they are opened up to love, to justice, to stewardship, then the earth is blessed and God's creation again becomes the Answer it was called to be.

Why am I telling you all this? In my opinion in this way we can find a better, maybe the real appreciation not only of Modernism, and also of Post Modernism, but also of the role and task of Christianity in the context of our changing European society. I invite you to listen, before deciding to give it a try.

6. Firstly there is the role of Modernity, of Modernism. It has coloured European society for the last three centuries in an unbelievably intense way, even to the extent that we can hardly conceive ourselves as being anything other than **modern** people. But what does this modernity imply? It implies firstly that we should trust our own

rational insights above all. It implies too that we always have the right to order, to recreate society in a rational way, shaping it in a similar way as you might build a machine, a mechanical tool. And it implies that you should also trust those rational works of your own hands. We should trust our own planning-mechanisms, our own market-mechanisms, our own democratic mechanisms. For that is the world of modernity. But I hope that you will agree that it is also a closed world, a world without real answers. For it tends to remove from political life the calling to do justice, reducing it into a democratic power-game. And it tends to remove from economic life the calling of stewardship, accepting that everyone pursues his or her own material happiness through the market. And that the modern world, as we all know, has now come to a crisis. For it has indeed an inbuilt tendency to ruin the environment, to dishonour culture, to subject other people to one's own greed. And so it is, in my opinion, a blessing, indeed a real blessing, that Post-Modernity has now opened its attack on all these pseudo-certainties of modern man. It fights against the hybris of rationality, it demonstrates that world and life are more than an expression and an extension-piece of our self-created mechanisms. We share with Post-Modernism that no human being is destined to become a prey of self-ruling mechanisms, and of the ideologies which blew their idolatrous spirit into them.

But does Post-Modernity give any solution? Or, maybe it gives a partial solution, so that Christianity can try to fill the other part? No, it does not. We should even fully forget that option, because it is deadly dangerous. The crucial point is namely, that Post-Modernity is not only the opposite extreme, the anti-pode of Modernity. It is also the last and final consequence of it. And by that spirit it can easily draw us and the world as a whole into an abyss. For it can also act as the last and final rejection of Western Society to give answer to the living God and to our neighbours, men and women and children wherever they are around this globe.

Let me now remind, for the last time, of the four labels I mentioned earlier: deadlock, peacock, plurality and irony. Where is the opening, the beginning of an answer? I would conclude that the beginning of an answer is to be found in none of them. The attitude of Post-Modernity is not oriented to possible outcomes or to solutions of our problems. Its attitude is much more a matter of advising us not to bother us with our moralities. To stop trying to live with our absolutes. Now that Modernity has failed, it is clear that Modernity is a lie, and so we had better get used to living in the time of inevitability, of contingency, of loss of any real sense of reality. So let us please live as long as it lasts, filled with irony, until it finally breaks up or breaks down. That's the Post-Modern message.

There is therefore a deep sense of ir-responsibility basic to Post-Modernity. It will not bring policy back to justice, nor economic life back to caring for the environment, nor will sexuality be embraced with love. It says to us that it has become useless to resist those powers, so that it is better to give in, and to enjoy your life before you die. Post-Modernism does not exclude Christianity from the row of ideologies which have led us astray; it includes it (r us) in that row. Jean-Francois Lyotard does not describe Auschwitz as the rotten fruit of a pagan culture; it is the rotten fruit of a Christian culture, he says. And is he entirely wrong here? No, he is not. But by making this allegation he implies, at the same time, that deep-down Post-Modernism may gradually become more anti-Christian, more than Modernism ever was, and that it may lead Europe to even more recklessness in its economy and in its policies than were ever experienced in modern times.

7 Does this mean, that we should just deny any hope for the renewal of Europe, and that we should forget the mandate to give witness of the Gospel, also in ways

that will bring healing? On the contrary. For Europe is now standing on a crossroads, literally and spiritually. It is now confronted with spiritual emptiness, with environmental threats, with political disasters (Bosnia), and with a surrender to aggression and abuse of everything valuable in the media. Confronted with that mess of uncleanness Europe can, just like the Prodigal Son in the parable, turn to the causes of that mess, and come to himself, confessing that in all those ways no Answer was given to the Call of the Father. But it can also decide to bring Modernism to its fulfillment, by giving it to its inbuilt doom, and surrendering to the existing powers, withdrawing from any further external responsibility. But Christ is there, standing on this cross-roads, where alternative ways meet, as the Word of God and the answer of the Father, asking, pleading with Europe to stand up. "You cannot avoid Him and you should not avoid Him if you want to live". That should be our message to this sick and overburdened Europe.

But we can only do that in a faithful way if we know that we are a part of this same Europe, caught in the solidarity of its sin and the sins of the churches. So that we have to come to our conversion together at the same time, Christians and non-Christians, turning away from the wicked ways of past and present, returning to the Will of Father. Which means that we are called to begin to walk again along the ways of an Answer, also in our economies and policies, orienting them again to Justice and Stewardship. For it is our high calling, living here and now in Europe to follow our living Answer on all his Ways, liberated from all forms of idolatry, as much from modern self-sufficiency as post-modern Doom and Irony.

Some theses about "Making sense of Post Modernity".

1. Making sense of Post Modernity is only possible if we are willing first to ask ourselves the question of what sense Post-Modernity can make of us. What does Christianity mean from the viewpoint of Post-Modernity?
2. Four labels characterise Post-Modernity: deadlock (of all ideologies), peacock (images which conquer reality), plurality (of opinions), and irony (as the correct spiritual attitude). Therefore Post-Modernity can only appreciate those forms of Christianity, which refrain from bringing any binding, public message.
3. It is remarkable to see, that a growing number of Christians do not have any problem with that restriction, but even applaud it. They accommodate easily to the new post-modern reality.
4. It is however highly questionable if this is the good way of making "sense of Post Modernity". This is especially true if we see the creation of God, according to the Gospel of John, as waiting for our answers - disclosed to the Will of God also in the social, economic and political realm.

Than we see, that

- a) Modernity stands for the closed , mechanical interpretation of the world ;
- b) Post-Modernity correctly attacks this form of rational self-sufficiency, but denies to give an alternative answer - because it is not only the anti-pode of modernity but also the completion of it; and

c) Christianity is caught in the "solidarity of sin" , refusing to be living an Answer as well .

5. In this predicament it is necessary to see that Europe is now literally and spiritually standing at the crossroads. Will it continue to complete modernity till the bitter end of Doom, or stand up like the Prodigal Son in the Parable of Jesus? Here we have to say and to live, that Jesus is standing exactly there where these two ways cross each other, as the living Answer, also for the pains and problems of Europe. A lesser Gospel is not available, and should not be brought - even if it implies the conversion of ourselves as Christians.

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