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POSTMODERN THOUGHT AND
ADVENTIST EDUCATION

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Introduction

In "Postmodernism and the Myth of Progress" Jim Leffel writes that postmodernism is" a shift in thinking permeating all of society (Leffel, 1996). This was most clearly demonstrated to me when a student responded to my suggestion that Christian ethics and morality were important, by saying, that's just your view. In other words, ethics are real to me, but not to her, and she is an Adventist. With the increasing incidence of such comments by students in my courses, I began to study issues of social relativity, moral relativity, and the postmodern.

So, what is postmodernism and what role does it play in Adventist education? To begin with let's examine definitions of postmodernism through the writings of postmodernists, then through the interpretations of Christian scholars.

Definitions of Postmodernism

Probably the most widely used definition of postmodernism is Jean-Fancois Lyotard's in *The Postmodern Condition*: *A Report on Knowledge* in which he defines the postmodern "as incredulity toward metanarratives." He argues that science develops its own rules and has made a privileged place for itself. From its privileges position then science develops rules, which describe where it is at the moment (Lyotard, 1993). Although the modern era seemed grounded in a position of truth, scientific fact, and progress, Lyotard says science itself rejects metanarratives as it changes accepted facts from time to time (Lyotard, 1993).

Using the words of John McGowan, postmodern culture is one characterized by "dependency" and "despair" (McGowan, 1991). It is a "repudiating of universals," an "abandonment of appeals to reason" and a rejection of modernism's claim (McGowan,1991).

According to Stanley Grenz, this despair results from a failure to discover absolute truth outside ones self (Grenz, 1996). Dennis McCallum says "Postmodernism, as it applies to our everyday lives, is the death of truth as we know it." (McCallum, 1996)

At a national conference about two years ago I attended a session on postmodernism. In answer to the question, what is postmodernism, most everyone laughed. Someone said, "that's just the point, it can not be defined." This it appears, is probably the closest to real definition of postmodernism. It is a condition of relativity, with no rules to guide us in our quest for understanding reality and truth. As Gene Veith puts it, in postmodernism"… The intellect is replaced by the will. Reason is replaced by emotion. Morality is replaced by relativism. Reality itself becomes a social construct." (Veith, 1994).

Philosophical Postmodern Positions

Postmodernists argue that there is a "crisis of reason" which means that the old paradigms have been found wanting in what they can deliver and that the old views of morality, knowledge, and power have changed (Peters, Lankshear, 1996). Therefore the postmodernist is seeking for new ways in which to define social and power relations and for educationists a way to deliver education that is not overly reductionist, subjective, or based on structures of power and control that mitigate against individuals. Postmodernism is interpreted in multiple ways for multiple settings. It is interpreted differently in the arts, by feminists, and in education (Peters et al. 1996).

Postmodern Philosophers

I will briefly examine four philosophers who are recognized across disciplines as influential in the postmodern movement. The first is Jean-Francois Lyotard who challenges the basis on which science and knowledge make claims. According to Lyotard, knowledge, or truth,

is not part of a grand scheme but is rather made important by the powerful groups in whose

interests it is to have their specific knowledge privileged (Lyotard, 1993).

Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science,

the majority of them prove to be fables. But to the extent that science does not restrict

itself to stating useful regularities ands seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules

of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimization with respect to its own

status, a discourse called philosophy (Lyotard, 1993).

By privileging scientific knowledge in modernity, and by placing blame on science and

modernity for the ills of modern life, postmodernists and others believe we have "had about as

much terror as we can take" in the form of wars, lack of care for the environment, and of

totalitarian leaders (Middleton, and Walsh, 1995). Thus, Lyotard's disavowal of metanarratives

and his distancing from modernity has made his postmodern positions central to any discussion

of the philosophy of postmodernism.

Second is Michael Foucault who sought for the ultimate reality and the meaning of truth

and reality through the study of madness in mental institutions and by attempting "to transform

the texture of his own daily life," though embracing a homosexual lifestyle in San Francisco

(Grenz, 1996). Foucault completely rejected modernism and his works "deny the supposed

universality and timelessness of categories…"(Grenz, 1996). Foucault was intrigued by issues

of power. He maintains that power is not "institutions and mechanisms", or "a mode of

subjugation" (Foucault, 1993), but rather "an always shifting confluence of manifold capillary

streams, too dispersed and fluid to locate in individual or collective hands… " (Zipin, 1998).

"Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or

allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of

nonegalitarian and mobile relations (Foucault, 1993)." It is important to note that the issue at the center of postmodernism is not just truth, but power. Through placing all groups on an equal footing, power is not held by elite's but is shared across cultures, genders, races, religions, and groups. Knowledge is not necessarily truth but a reconstruction of truth, experience, and necessity, which achieves the goals of special interest groups, or individuals. (Veith, 1994).

Of himself Foucault says "my role - - and that is too emphatic a word – is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed. To change something in the minds of people – that's the role of an intellectual" (Ball, 1990).

In contrast to Foucault "the modern worldview is rooted in the concept of itself" … and "the world as an object accessible to human knowledge" (Grenz, 1996). The significance of this distinction is that for a modernist there is the possibility of self-improvement and the possibility of discovering truth. For Foucault, there is much despair, and the view that a person is simply a "node" in a social construct (McCallum, 1996).

According to our third postmodernist, Jacques Derrida, a deconstructionist, language is a representation of reality but not reality itself. He challenges modernism for its over reliance on "logocentrism" because it connects "to what Derrida calls the 'metaphysics of presence'" (Grenz, 1996). He says of metaphysics and that it has been decentered, dislocated," driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference," and has been replaced by ethnocentrism (Derrida, 1993). Derrida deconstructs the humanist notion of an autonomous self and replaces it with a self that is deconstructing. This deconstruction ends "the pretensions of the

autonomous, self-sufficient ego…" (Middleton et al. 1995) and basic questions about reality, the nature of the self, and human value surface seeking answers.

Derrida attempts to deconstruct western culture reliance on words, whether written or spoken, to be the transporter of reality. He argues that reality can change through continuous discourse about an object or a belief (Grenz, 1996). Grenz states that Derrida's "goal is largely negative and destructive--namely, to disabuse the Western tradition of its logocentrism" which assumes an ultimate reality, God, or truth (Middleton et al. 1995). Through deconstruction, Derrida proposes a form of analysis, which deconstructs language to a point where old orders of rationality cease to exist. "Deconstructionism represents a new kind of relativism, one that is intellectually sophisticated, theoretically grounded, and methodologically rigorous. As it corrodes the very concept of absolute truths, deconstructionism provides the intellectual grounding for the popular relativism running rampant in postmodern society" (Veith, 1994).

Last of the four philosophers is Richard Rorty. His conclusion here is based on his recognized dependence on John Dewey for his views (Grenz, 1996). While John Dewey is best known in educational circles for his influence on American education, most of his writing was done in his primary field of philosophy.

Rorty is a pragmatist which he defines as one who views "what is rational for us now to believe many not to be *true*, it is simply to say that somebody may come up with a better idea" (Rorty, 1991) and whose "view of truth is non-realist rather than realist." (Rorty, 1991). His goal is to show that words cannot accurately "re-present" reality. "His version of pragmatism is simply nonessentialism applied to all the 'object' of philosophical theorizing--truth, knowledge, and morality as well as language" (Rorty, 1991). Both Rorty and Dewey state that words are "merely tools for dealing with reality" rather than representations of reality, and both oppose a

"correspondence theory of truth" (Rorty, 1991). It is important to note that while these pragmatic positions appear to relativize truth, Rorty's point does not make the argument that science for example, is not valuable, but that science should not be "divinized" by proclaiming that it can answer all questions (Rorty, 1991).

Grenz succinctly states the positions of "Foucault, Derrida, and Rorty (which) stand against what has foe centuries been the reigning epistemological principle--the correspondence theory of truth (the belief that truth consists of the correspondence of propositions with the world 'out there') (Grenz,1991)." Failure to discover ultimate truth through science and modernism, many postmodernists turn the arguments of modernists around and particularly philosophize scientific methods away (Grenz, 1991).

Educational Postmodern Philosophers

This overview now leads us to discussion of postmodern educators and philosophers who influence educational thought. There are many educational theorists who articulate and espouse postmodernism's positions. To begin let us look at Henry Giroux, an American educational theorist who suggests that rather than a clear break with modernism, postmodernism reanalyzes the past in the context of new ways of looking at society. It is not an abandonment of the positions of critical theorists such as neo-Marxists and other social workers, rather it rethinks critical positions free of the structured, grounded, and prescribed views of the past (Giroux, 1998).

Paulo Freire the recently deceased Brazilian philosopher, educator, and political activist, "describes pedagogical practice within postmodernity" as "one the humbly learns from differences and rejects arrogance" (McLaren, 1996). It is a practice that does not forcefully

reject prior historical struggles, but rejects the arrogance and certainly that often accompanied them" (McLaren, 1996).]

Michael Foucault had been largely ignored in educational evaluations until recently, in part because of the modernist objective ways in which education has been structured, as well as the need to find truth in education (Popkewitz et al., 1998). Popkewitz and Brennen attempt to locate Foucault in a critical theoretical intellectual tradition in recognition of his attempt to study power relations. Their position is the "Critical refers to a broad band of disciplined questioning of the ways in which power works through the discursive practices and performances of schooling…"(Popkewitz et al., 1998). Their attempt to situate Foucault in Western intellectual thought is at once critical of the form in which power relations have emerged in education, and against Marxist traditions that have dominated much of higher educational thought about education since the 60s ((Popkewitz wet al., 1998). "Whereas previous critical scholarship has treated knowledge as part of the epi-phenomena through which social material practices are formed, Foucault's work is illustrative of a move within critical traditions to focus on knowledge as a material element in social life" (Popkewitz et al., 1998). They argue that "issues of power require making connections between self and self, self and other, and institutional discourses." Knowledge is not "fixed", but rather it is an attempt to understand the social conditions by which knowledge is formed. Epistemology is "an effort to understand the conditions in which knowledge is produced" (Popkewitz et al., 1998). Discourse about schooling and school practices are tied less to the concept under discussion, for example special education, than they are to the power relationship which formed them (Popkewitz et al., 1998).

Popkewitz, and Brennen argue that the notion of "decentering of the subject" means to remove the self or person from the focus of study and instead focus on the condition. Examples

they give are to study femininity rather than woman, childhood rather than children, etc. This is also called historicizing the subject (Popkewitz et al., 1998).

By restructuring the way we think about people and naming the space they occupy, we are able to talk about them, plan for them, and ascribe places for them in society. For example, "Childhood normalizes the way in which children are to be seen, talked about, and acted upon as "learners" or as having a "developmental process" (Popkewitz et al., 1998). This idea may make problematic some of the ways Adventist describe and position one another and is an area for further study. "The strategy to locate individuals in discursive space is a way to understand and make problematic the classificatory criteria through which individuals are to be disciplined and self-regulated" (Popkewitz et al., 1998).

Educators with Reservations about Postmodernism

Not all critical educators subscribe to postmodernism. Michael Apple, while recognizing the influence of postmodernism on his work, never-the-less stands in opposition to much of postmodernism because of his fear that "much of critical 'post' work has lost some of what we gained through neo-Marxist work and has created a false history of 'neo' work" (Torres, 1998). Maxine Greene, acknowledges a need to support people who require moral certitudes (Torres, 1998). Geoff Whitty cautions against the possibility of postmodernism's excesses by "fragmentation of education politics" and thereby opening the way for governments to fracture collective practices (Torres, 1998).

Tenets of Postmodernism

Education may be the area of society that has been the most influenced by postmodernism. Postmodern concepts introduced into Christian educational practice appear useful and egalitarian on the surface, but may be problematic in practice. Constructivism,

values, self-esteem as a prerequisite to learning, and no truth basis, to name a few. Let's unpack these from a postmodern position and compare to an evangelical Christian position.

Truth: The notion of truth, whether it is whether it is knowable, what it is, how it can be known, is a concept that under girds the debate surrounding postmodernism. This discussion occurs over educational practice, theory, science, the arts, and popular culture. Whether truth is relative, concrete, scientific, or corresponding to reality polarizes discussions between postmodernists and objectivists. The way the questions are formed reveals the extent of the polarization.

To illustrate the way the questions from the debate let us begin with Michael Foucault who asks "not 'What is true?' but 'How is truth created?'" In this sense he is saying that truth is a construction based on "knowledge, subjectivity, and power." These three are called the "technologies of truth". Truth then, is constructed through controlling internal discourse (Simola, Heikkinen, and Silvonen, 1998). In reaction to Foucault, Fidelibus counters this position by stating that "when 'truth' becomes a multiplicity of socially constructed 'truths,' and individuals become anonymous within the social groups that define them, we have a recipe for potential disaster…" and that while "it may seem open-minded and tolerant on the surface…its denial of the individual and fascination with power," contain "the makings of manipulation…" (Fidelibus, 1996). This, however is not the only evangelical view of the issue. Recognizing the importance of the individual, Grenz suggests that we need to acknowledge the importance of the individual as part of the community. For this we can acknowledge the influence of postmodernity (Grenz, 1996). Postmodernists"…most common critique is that 'Christians think they have the only truth.' The claims of Christianity are not denied; they are rejected because they purport to be true" (Veith, 1994).

Constructivism: The view that persons construct their own reality, is based on the social construction of reality. In a sense each person has to construct his or her own reality and faith or connection to God, through learning, study, and connecting to what they already know. But to over state the case for constructivism opens the way for a socially constructed reality, which postmodernism says is a social construct of language and experience, entirely separated from truth, God, or faith. Or to put it in the words of Rorty, "there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society… uses in one or another area of iniquity (Rorty, 1991).

In an example of the polarization between postmodernists and fundamentalists, Lynn Fendler describes the difference between constructivist and "fundamentalist" education this way:

"…in fundamentalist character education, to be educated means to embody certain stipulated character traits and to hold particular moral commitments. Similarly, in constructivist pedagogies, which are advocated for their nonimpositional pedagogies, to be educated means to be motivated to engage in problem solving; the educated subject of constructivism is a 'constructed' learner who does not rely on authority for motivation to engage in scientific inquiry" (1998).

Values: The development of values is related to constructivism in that each student Must construct his/her own values. In one sense this is an important idea. If a person merely accepts the parents values and doesn't make them her own, we see a student who is unlikely to remain in the faith relationship to God. On the other hand if she constructs her own values; i.e. makes the values taught, studied, and related to God, her own, by connecting what she learns and incorporating these values into her life, then this kind of construction of values is valid. However

if the values are socially constructed, developed to suit ones need or the current needs, interests, or desires of society at the moment, constructing values is problematic.

Strong voices have been raised against the explicit teaching of values. Nash takes exception to teaching values through books on virtues for example, by saying that values are best taught through interaction, negotiation, and evaluation of "text" be it societal or written form. Virtues or values he argues are rarely taught through didactic teaching or for that matter through an educational process alone (Nash, 1997).

"Thus, in the tradition of Jurgen Habermas (1983/1993), I advocate a kind of 'deliberative competence' or 'communicative action' for all citizens of a democracy. I believe, with Gutmann (1987), that this disposition is essential if we are to realize the 'ideal of a democratically sovereign society'"(Nash, 1997). He then lists the virtues he supports, "virtues of self-discipline, obligation, tolerance, fairness, and generosity," which "enable us to work with others who are different from us, to compromise when necessary, and to realize that no single person or group can get everything they want all the time" (Nash, 1997).

Nash continues by differentiating the postmodern positions he agrees with by stating, "I am ready to add to these democratic dispositions what I am calling the 'postmodern virtues'…a sensitivity to the realities of incommensurability, indeterminacy, and nonfoundationalism; dialectical awareness; and hermeneutical awareness. I take the position that postmodernity need not be nihilistic or anti-religious. In fact, I believe that it is only when we learn to communicate with one another without the need to impose moral certitudes that we can carry on genuinely fruitful democratic conversations across our doctrinal enthusiasms" (Nash, 1997).

Self-esteem: Programs for raising self-esteem often say students will do better in school when their self-esteem is high. It could be argued that this is true, but it could also be argued that

self-esteem rises as a result of success, not as a precondition to it. The problem for some self-esteem programs is not whether they come first or last but their content. For example, about nine years ago the Los Angeles United School District, the largest school district in the country, mandated the use of a new self-esteem program called S.O.A.R. Set Objectives Achieve Results. The purpose of this program was to raise the self-esteem of school children to prevent them from becoming gang members. The specific area of the program they objected to was a section in which students were taught to contact a "friend" when they felt lonely or distressed. Directions, according to parents, matched instructions for contacting a spirit master, or spirit guide, in books on channeling. In this case the parents were successful in having this particular program removed.

The dilemma for educators when describing or using any of these components of education is to not analyze them. For example, if one were to reject constructivism out of hand, then helping students build religious faith based on instruction, experience, and God would be problematic for a teacher. To discount the need for students to develop or construct their own values or to build self-esteem is not defensible.

Postmodernism's Effect on Education

Two threads of Postmodernism appear to be affecting education, and particularly teacher education and graduate education in Schools of Education. The first is through popular culture and second is through philosophical trends. I recognize that these are artificial distinctions since one cannot separate out the influence of one from the other. We have briefly examined the philosophers in the first portion of this paper, following by the educational philosophers who extend the concepts of postmodernism to education and the broader culture. Let us look at one specific example which illustrates not what postmodernism is, but how it paves the way for many

forms of thought to enter education. By use of this example I am neither stating nor implying that postmodernism embraces any form of religious belief or practice. Rather I am saying that the relativistic notions of postmodernism open the way for all beliefs to have equal footing in the debate over what should be taught in public schools.

A few years ago I studied a public school district where parents challenged the Impressions reading series. I will briefly describe two issues. Parents were concerned about the violent content of certain selections, and the number of what they described as occult selections. Our student activity book had approximately half of the books activities on witches, witches conventions, casting spells, and similar activities. In response to parents concerns an administrator said, "We'll tell teaching lower elementary students to make things in the room levitate. An anthology for a lower elementary book had a disclaimer telling teachers the story was so violent they might not want to read it to some children.

As I listened to parents, I sensed and heard concern for something they could not articulate. They did not like the occult activities, however they thought such activities for Halloween were cute. They did not like the violence and relativism they saw but were unable to connect these to a particular set of beliefs or a philosophy.

Besides some self-esteem programs and textbooks that teach explicitly or implicitly relativism of values and beliefs, there is a thread running through popular lyrics, movies, and popular literature that exhibit postmodern thought and connect to the relativism exhibited by New Age thought. This thread teaches that all beliefs are of equal value, no values are better than others, and all religious are the same. A similar thread runs through intellectual and philosophical postmodernism. As universities educate people who eventually become part of the

popular media and hence are the ones who write scripts, lyrics, and other social texts, we can see that there is not a separation of the two strands.

Implications for Seventh-day Adventist Higher Education

What is the meaning of all this for education in Adventist colleges and universities? Most Christian authors seem to agree that postmodernism has affected the higher education through a weakening of the meaning of truth. The assertions that science and scientific facts cannot be proven, and that there are no meanings except on ones perception of meaning formed through the construct of language which has no meaning, are two examples (Hackney, 1999).

As Christian we reject the postmodernist claims that there are no true truths or grand metanarratives on which to build our faith. At the same time, "with God out of the picture, humans loom as the ultimate creators of reality. The self, or perhaps the community or nation is inflated and absolutized" (Marsden, 1997). In response to postmodernism, we dare not over react and embrace modernism's claim to be able to find ultimate truth through human endeavors (Grenz, 1996). Christians recognize that since the Fall there have been limitations to human reason and its ability to find out God. Christians also acknowledge the areas in which human reason during the modern period was able to discover many things through scientific and other objective forms of reason. Christians also may affirm the postmodern view that not all knowledge is good (Grenz, 1996). The postmodernists are correct in their assertions that objective knowledge which humans can discover is not the only form of knowing. As Stanley Grenz says, Christians "believe that the myth of knowledge dispelling ignorance and thereby bringing in the golden are is based on a dangerous half-truth. We must not only be saved from our ignorance but also undergo a renewal and redirection of our will" (Grenz, 1996).

According to Grenz, the reaction of the Christian to postmodern evaluation and rejection of reason, could be a recognition of the importance of salvation, conversion, and God along side a search for meaning' reality, and truth (Grenz, 1996). The Adventist focus on saving the soul while healing the body is a new concept for evangelicalism in general. Postmodernism's post rational view of reality opens a way for evangelicals and other Christians to focus on more than saving the soul. In contrast to the dualism of the modern view of the separation of soul and body, there is now the possibility of viewing people as whole persons (Grenz, 1996).

In brief terms, postmodernism espouses a view of reality which allows for no firm truths, relativizes morality, and equalizes all religions. This form of relativism evangelical Christian reject. In the other hand postmodernism opens the way for Christians to be part of the discussion of different ways of knowing. Postmodernism espouses a radical constructivism which rejects even a suggestion of foundational truths. Christians affirm a constructivism which encourages young people to embrace faith by constructing their own faith based on biblical principles. Postmodernism rejects modernism excesses in developing science which builds atomic bombs, Christians agree while affirming modernism's ability to conquer some diseases.

Finally, based on the discussion above it essential to restate the issues faced specifically by Seventh-day Adventist Christians. Let me briefly restate the contrast between modernism and postmodernism as an Adventist might state it. Modernism presented a difficult position for Adventist Christians by its insistence that science and objectivity could provide answers to all questions. By refusing to recognize the existence of God and his active part in creating and sustaining the earth, modernism limited possible answers to questions. A brief in God might have provided new directions for inquiry and new questions to ask. Postmodernism opens the way for perspectives about the world and life through its emphasis on subjectivity. But relying

on subjectivity, postmodernism realtivizes truth and reality in a way that limits a belief in a particular God, or set of truths.. It questions the existence of facts, calling them pragmatic positions held conveniently for practical purposes, at this time.

The responsibility of Christian educators to understand the times that they and their students are living in is great. With the pervasiveness of postmodern thought throughout all of culture, it is essential to know what it is and what it is not. I would suggest that postmodernism presents significant challenges to Seventh-day Adventist Christians. It is subtly invading all of culture and philosophy and its tenets must be examined, critically, and thoughtfully with ones mind and heart in the control of Biblical principles.

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