

What is Truth

– and who cares anyway ?

Someone whose faith is not grounded in reason is like a stream of water that can be led anywhere.¹

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Christianity claims to be the story of God's broken relationship with his creation and its subsequent healing. If it is true at all, it remains equally true for anyone, in any place, in any culture and in any era. All this depends on an assumption that the concept of truth is universally acknowledged.

In the past, people of different cultures may not have agreed on what was true, but they did at least agree on what 'being true' meant. Yet at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves dealing with the trivialisation of truth; not so much a denial that things can be true, but a suggestion that it doesn't really matter either way.

The Post-modern mind

Post-modernism is an extreme reaction to scientific certainty that answers the question 'is it true?' with the retort 'who cares?' Post-modernism does not deny the possibility of objective reality, but regards it as essentially unimportant. Truth is valid only so far as it directly influences day-to-day experience. It is perfectly possible to accept the historical accuracy of the Gospel and to recognise the logical consistency of Christian philosophy, without acknowledging that any personal response is required.

It is as though we are throwing a lifebelt to a drowning friend who agrees that he will drown without the lifebelt, fully concurs that the lifebelt exists and is able to prevent him from drowning, and even admits that he would prefer to avoid drowning but, as he sinks beneath the waves for the third and final time smiles, shrugs his shoulders and says, 'I just don't feel like catching a lifebelt today'.

Post-modernism sees all opinion as equally valid and post-modernists tend to equate this with all opinion being equally true. He or she will regard as pedantic and irrelevant the observation that this is impossible.

For the Christian, the parameters of truth are wide but not infinite. Christians may, for example, see Christ as a political revolutionary or else as someone meek and mild. We may think of God as immanent or transcendent. What we cannot believe is that God is bad, that Jesus was not God's son, or that the resurrection did not occur. Because it puts at its very centre a sequence of historical events and therefore the whole intolerant, black and white business of absolute truth, Christianity stands in many ways as the very antithesis of post-modernism. Drew remarks that 'Post-modern culture is sometimes described as "Post-Christian" ...more accurately, post-modern culture can be described as anti-Christian. We can expect increased hostility to Christianity'.² So, while it provides little firm structure to belief, a post-modern philosophy can nevertheless restrict philosophical discourse. There can be no perspectives on truth if every perspective is in itself the whole of truth.

Post-modernism pervades current society and profoundly influences even the world of clinical medicine. How does our Christian philosophy differ from a post-modern worldview, and how can we reach across this philosophical divide? Briefly, we differ in what we know (axioms), how we think (rational process) and who we follow.

What we know

The Christian story provides us with some axioms. For example, Christians see the spiritual realm not simply as a metaphor or a vague feeling, but as another dimension of reality. If the Holy Spirit is real, so are bad spirits. This became an issue when our hospital wished to introduce complementary therapies, including *reiki*, that seek to invoke or channel spiritual powers for healing purposes. My view confused people. Most medical colleagues opposed the therapies because they felt

there was little evidence that they worked. The therapists, using a post-modern paradigm, felt it didn't matter how or even whether they worked; if people wanted them they should be provided. For me as a Christian, there was a third possibility; that some genuinely effective complementary therapies are positively dangerous because they invoke a real and unhealthy spiritual power. We risked exposing our patients to adverse effects we barely understand.

How we think

Christian and post-modern thought also differ in the very way in which we construct an argument. With no roots in absolute reality, and no yardstick in absolute truth, post-modern culture is very vulnerable to paradigm shifts. A recent editorial in a leading paediatric journal asserted that as a society we no longer need smacking. The author was voicing a cultural view. She did not assert that children are better behaved, or that smacking has become less effective or more dangerous than in the past. The fact that (in her view) society had 'changed its mind' about smacking was sufficient.

Christian thought does not tell us unequivocally whether smacking is right or wrong. However, it does provide us with principles for us to make up our own minds. Many Christians might agree with the opinion of the editorial (I do not). Like me, however, they would reach their conclusions through the application of biblical teaching, rather than simply because that is the current cultural view.

Who we follow

Christianity pre-dates not only post-modernism, but also the scientific rationalism against which it is a reaction. In fact, the scientific age has no more in common with Christianity than its successor. Ultimately, Christianity is not primarily a set of axioms, nor even a way of thinking; it is a relationship with the resurrected Christ. The gospel is paradoxical in that although it makes sense according to moral and rational arguments, and although absolute truth is in every line, it actually arises from an experiential premise: that God loves his creation enough to die so that his relationship with us could be healed. No post-modern view could be more relational or experiential.

A response

The gospel is accessible to the post-modern culture, as, if it is true at all, it must be so in all times, present, future and past. How then can we present it? St Paul appears to have met post-modernists in Acts 17:16-34. Epicureans believed that happiness is the supreme good – or to put it another way, that morality is experiential rather than absolute. How did Paul respond?

1. Firstly, in verse 22, Paul acknowledges their wisdom. Post-modernists have got a lot of things right that our rationalist Christian predecessors got wrong. Experience, after all, is extremely important and to suggest that we should live a life in which only the rational has value would be quite counter to Christ's teaching.
2. Paul identifies the common ground. He stops before the altar of an 'unknown god' (v23) and uses that as the jumping-off point for a discussion; he doesn't simply contradict them and then expect them to change their philosophy. There is common ground between post-modernism and Christianity; a sense of spirituality, the valuing of individual viewpoints and feelings. All these paraphernalia of the 'holistic approach' are Christian as well as post-modern ideals.
3. Paul then goes on (vv27-31) to say something about what God has done. He states it as historical fact, but emphasises that the reason behind it is to heal the breach between man and God (v27). He says 'this happened, because men needed it'; to use Zafren's words, he emphasises the relational without denying the propositional.³
4. Paul is obviously familiar with the culture in Athens and in concluding his talk is even able to quote two Epicurean poets. If we are to influence post-modern culture, it is important that we are familiar and can engage with it.

Nothing new

We are emerging from an era in which our culture pinned all its hopes on rationalism. In those days, Christians needed to emphasise that the gospel was and is a matter of credible premise combined with rational thought. We are coming into an age where our culture has rebelled against the rational so thoroughly that the nature of truth itself has been questioned. For this new age, we need to emphasise a different part of the Truth. Rather than 'did it really happen?' post-modern society asks 'does it meet my needs?' In the twenty-first century as in the first, Christ does exactly this.

Finally, this reminds us that for all its spin, post-modernism is simply a rejuvenated version of an old way of thinking. There really is nothing new under the sun.⁴

Richard Hain is a Senior Lecturer and Consultant in Paediatric Palliative Care and Oncology in Cardiff

References

1. Dalai Lama
2. Sweet L. *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century Church*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000
3. Zafren K. www.the-river.org/messages/031697keith.html
4. Ecclesiastes 1:9



In post-modern culture all opinions are equally valid and truth doesn't matter. This way of thinking, which profoundly influences society and clinical medicine, is at odds with the Christian worldview which emphasises rational thinking, the existence of a God who communicates truth, and the historical facts of Christ's life, death and resurrection. Paul's address to the Athenians in Acts 17 provides a useful model in communicating the gospel to post-moderns. We need to begin by agreeing with them about the importance of experience and spirituality, but move on to share the good news of God entering history in the person of Christ to heal man's broken relationship with God.