Faith, scholarship and postmodernism

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Abstract

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Postmodernism represents perhaps the most important philosophical shift occurring in Western thought since the Enlightenment. It is thus crucial for Christian scholars to address the issues it raises. In the United States, Christian scholars have employed at least two different paradigms in discussing the relationship of faith and scholarship. In the integration model, scholars assume that faith and scholarship are two distinct entities that must be brought together, while the worldview model assumes that the scholar always begins with a narrative worldview that subsequently informs one's scholarship. However, the worldview model holds that one's worldview can be influenced and informed by one's scholarship, life experiences, and cultural settings as well. After distinguishing between various kinds of postmodernism – based upon their views of truth, unknowability, and cultural relativism – this article argues that worldview thinking may benefit from the academy's embrace of postmodernism. Although Christian scholars have expressed a wide variety of opinions on postmodernism, I argue that postmodernism's anti-foundationalism and recognition of the importance of perspectival thinking provide new opportunities for Christian scholarship.

1. Introduction

Discussing the relationships among faith, scholarship, and postmodernism is a daunting task, but an extremely important one, since postmodernism embodies perhaps the most important philosophical shift occurring in Western thought since the Enlightenment. Hence, it is crucial for Christian scholars to think carefully about the issues it raises. In this article, I will attempt to outline some of the terms in which these issues have recently been discussed in the American academy, and some of my own reflections upon those discussions. After sketching two common models or paradigms used to discuss the relationship of faith and scholarship, I will discuss some of the disputes within the Christian academy over postmodernism. My hope is that these reflections will prove useful for South African Christian academics in their own attempts to relate faith, scholarship, and their discipline.

Approximately ninety colleges and universities in the United States are affiliated with the Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), which, among other activities, lobbies the American federal government on behalf of Christian colleges, coordinates several off-campus study programs both in the US and overseas, and sponsors a variety of activities encouraging academics to consider the relationship of faith and scholarship. These institutions have identified themselves as "Christian" in terms of having an institutional commitment to the centrality of Jesus Christ to all campus life, practising integration of biblical faith with academics and student life, and requiring a personal Christian commitment from each full-time faculty member and administrator. I am a daughter of the Coalition: I earned my B.A. at one member institution; during my career, I have taught at three other member institutions; I have lectured at countless others; and I am the co-author of a textbook in a series the Coalition sponsors: *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith* (Gallagher & Lundin, 1989). An often-repeated phrase at Coalition schools refers to "the integration of faith and scholarship", and the idea of integration, with, in the American context, its unfortunate resonances of racial separation, has been one of the primary paradigms used to relate Christianity and scholarship during the past twenty-five years.

2. The integration model

In order to integrate, something must be separated, and the integration model operates on the assumption that faith and scholarship are two distinct entities that somehow must be brought together. Faith consists of one realm of knowledge and practice – personal religious commitment, an intellectual grasp of a particular theology, and communal practices of liturgy and fellowship. Scholarship is a separate realm, a professionalised practice devoted to the discovery, propagation, and theorising of different areas of knowledge – whether those be scientific, aesthetic, social, or – even – religious (which in today's secular academy is usually seen more in anthropological or historical terms). Scholarship is conducted according to certain rules of the game, which can differ among disciplines: anecdotal evidence, for example, is viewed quite differently in the natural sciences and the humanities. In order to enter the academy of scholars, one simply learns these rules of the game: how to collect evidence, how to evaluate it, how to theorise about it. It makes no difference if you are female or male, black or white, Christian or Hindu. Yale philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff has an effective image to describe this procedure:

> Before entering the halls of learning we are to strip off all our particularities, particularities of gender, of race, of nationality, of religion, of social class, of age, and enter purely as human beings. If it turns out that we have failed to strip off some particularity and the others in the hall of learning notice this, they are to order us back into the entry, there to remove the particularity which, unintentionally or not, we kept on. [In this view]

> black history, feminist sociology, Muslim political theory, and liberation theology are *bad* history, *bad* sociology, *bad* political theory, *bad* theology. In the practice of learning we are to make use only of such belief-forming dispositions as are shared among all human beings, and we are to accept only the deliverances of such shared human dispositions (Wolterstorff, 1993:8).

But when we leave the hall of learning, or come down from the ivory tower, to employ an alternative educational cliché, we are welcome to add on our Christian faith to the learning that has taken place.

Integration attempts a less schizophrenic lifestyle, trying to combine the two distinct realms in some kind of complementary fashion. Some Christian scholars have chosen to integrate in a personal way: by being truthful, loving, and forgiving, by demonstrating Christian civility and charity in their practice of scholarship and teaching. Others have employed the discoveries of their particular discipline in such a way as to advance the kingdom: someone who engages in communication studies, for example, intending to become a pastor or missionary, and recognising that the insights of this discipline need expansion and elaboration by the addition of a missing Christian dimension. A good example of this kind of approach is *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith* (Myers & Jeeves, 1987), another volume in the Coalition's "Supplementary Textbook" series. Alternatively, a scholar's Christian commitment might prompt her or him to study certain areas: the role of the church in colonization, or the use of Christian symbols in modern art, or – has been argued recently – Shakespeare's commentary on Martin Luther in *Hamlet*. In this model, there are points at which the two areas touch, possibly even overlap a little, but there are also vast spaces in which the two operate independently.

The integration model has significant historical origins. Christianity and learning were not always considered distinct and separate realms; after all, the beginning of the European university system lies directly in the medieval church. The distinction evolved only with the onset of the modern period, in which faith, the supernatural, tradition, and authority fell into disrepute with the rise of rationality and technology. Max Weber (1963) locates the onset of modernity in two related phenomena: first, in the emergence of what he called differentiated spheres, and second, in the increasingly pervasive practice of rationalised thought and action within these spheres. The differentiated spheres were either *social spheres* – economy, state, and household, or *cultural spheres*: science, art, law and ethics. The process of rationalisation, Weber believed, would eventually result in a fully "disenchanted" view of the world, in which religion and the supernatural would play no role. The differentiated spheres, no longer held together by any kind of religious metanarrative, would be entirely distinct and autonomous – so that in the economic sphere an ethic of brotherly (and sisterly) love is not relevant, just as in

the artistic sphere, economic theories play no role. Weber thus provides one account of the secularization of society by the establishment of distinct "spheres" in which faith is either completely rejected, or relegated to its own isolated and definitely less important sphere. With such a paradigm, integration becomes necessary.

3. The worldview model

While in and of themselves many specific examples of integration are admirable endeavours, I prefer to employ a different paradigm for the relationship of faith and scholarship – what I will call the worldview paradigm. This paradigm has been embraced by American Christian academics working out of many different theological traditions, and is the common paradigm that you would find employed, for example, in many books published in the US by Inter-Varsity Press, such as those by Arthur Holmes (1983a and 1983b) and James Sire (1976). However, this way of thinking has primarily been developed by Reformed Christian philosophers and thinkers, following in the illustrious path of Abraham Kuyper. In some American discussions, worldviews are treated as intellectual systems of thought closely related to, if not synonymous with propositional theology. Brian J. Walsh, a senior member of the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) in Toronto, however, argues that worldviews are pre-theoretical in nature; they are a more general "view, outlook, perspective on life and the world that characterizes a people or a culture" (Walsh, 1992:16). Similarly, in an essay called "On Worldviews", James Olthuis, also from the ICS, describes a worldview as "a framework or set of fundamental beliefs through which we view the world and our calling and future in it" (Olthuis, 1985:155). These fundamental beliefs are articulated not in propositions but in a story, a myth, which provides us with an understanding of our own role in human history – who we are and why we are here. Worldviews, Walsh elaborates, are visions *of* life as well as visions *for* life, what is and what ought to be, both descriptive and normative. A worldview gives rise to, prompts, and informs the culture-building activities of human beings. Finally, worldviews are religious in character:

> They are frameworks of beliefs but these beliefs are not theoretical in character. Such beliefs cannot be argued to on the basis of either inductive or deductive reasoning – rather they are the very foundation of such arguments. Worldview beliefs are more likely argued from than argued to (Walsh, 1992:19).

In *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview*, Walsh and J. Richard Middleton (1984) list four kinds of questions that they consider worldview questions, questions that guide all human culture formation:

- Where am I, or what is the nature of the reality in which I find myself?

- Who am I, or what is human nature? How do human beings relate to each other, to the natural world, and to the divine?
- What is wrong with the world?
- What is the remedy? What gives us strength and hope?

The answers to these questions are ultimately determined by one's faith stance: one's relationship to the Creator/Redeemer God, the Scriptures, and the church.

One last point about worldviews: their relationship with culture and faith goes in both directions; it is reciprocal. Scholarship can affect, even change, a worldview, and such a change might mean change in the faith as well. For example, a complex cultural conglomerate – political theory, social reality, moral commitment, and scholarly arguments – worked together, along with the Holy Spirit, to change the worldview long held by certain portions of the Christian church that slavery was scripturally endorsed. Throughout the beginning of the nineteenth century, American theologians from both the north and the south conducted an acrimonious debate concerning the Christian view of slavery. Today, the Christian church agrees that the practice of slavery is a violation of God's will for humanity, but we sometimes forget what a radical change in worldview this necessitated, as well as some significant adjustments to Christian faith. A similar reciprocal process can occur with respect to faith and scholarship. In *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, Wolterstorff (1976) suggests that in the process of scholarship, we work with data, theory, and what he called "control beliefs," beliefs that control what data and what theories we accept. He writes, "The Christian scholar ought to allow the belief-content of his authentic Christian commitment to function as control within his devising and weighing of theories" (Wolterstorff, 1976:72). But Wolterstorff also goes on to insist that sometimes the right thing to do in response to developments in a discipline is to revise one's view as to what constitutes one's authentic Christian commitment. We do, he reminds us, make mistakes on that score:

> [T]he Congregation of the Inquisition viewed the geocentric theory as belonging to authentic commitment. I think they were mistaken, and virtually the entire community of Christians now thinks they were mistaken. We have all revised our beliefs, though we have by no means all revised them at the same point. What originally induced the revisions were developments in astronomy and physics (Wolterstorff, 1976:90).

When we enter the hall of learning, then, we do not enter as "nakedly human" but are clothed in our faith, our worldview, and our control beliefs, and we come to carry on a dialogue, a conversation. "What actually happens when the Christian

enters the hall of learning and begins conversing?" Wolterstorff asks, and then explains,

> A great many different things happen; we should honor the diversity. Sometimes the Christian finds that she agrees with everyone in the room on the topic of conversation. At other times, she finds she disagrees. Sometimes the root of her disagreement seems to her to lie in her adherence to Christianity; sometimes, it does not seem to her to lie in that. Either way, she will argue her case and try to bring the others around to her view. She will try to offer reasons which attach to what they already believe, or provide experiences which will alter their beliefs. She may find she has some allies in this. These allies may be Christians. Then again, they may not be. She may in fact find that she has Christians in opposition (Wolterstorff, 1993:28-29).

Sometimes during the course of the conversation, our hypothetical scholar might change her mind, might reconsider aspects of her worldview in new lights. Conversations, true conversations, not just talking past each other, involve listening, and the Christian scholar must be willing to listen. After all, God grants gifts of wisdom and insight to all humanity, not only those who embrace faith.

Walsh (1992) talks about change in slightly different terms. He is concerned with worldview crises – what happens when there is a chasm between one's faith and worldview and the reality of one's life. He identifies at least three possible responses:

- *Reformation*, in which the reality of life leads an individual or a community to a refocusing or a reforming of their worldview.
- *Conversion*, the abandonment of one worldview for another.
- *Entrenchment*, a conservative backlash to the threat and a subsequent, stubborn hanging on to a tradition, despite the fact that it no longer adequately allows one to cope with historical reality (Walsh, 1992:22).

Walsh's category of reformation is the kind of thing that can occur during those long conversations in the halls of learning. Conversions, too, might take place.

Let me make a few summary observations about the worldview paradigm. First, scholarship emerging from one's Christian worldview is not necessarily unique, but it is faithful. As Wolterstorff (1993:29) says,

> The general goal of the Christian in the practice of science and in the conversation of learning is not difference but fidelity: Not scholarship different from that of all non-Christians but scholarship faithful to Scripture and to God in Jesus Christ.

Secondly, it is important that we be open to the possibility of change originating both from the worldview and from the scholarship. Depending on our own personal temperaments, we may be more likely to turn toward one direction or another: holding blindly to a rigid conception of our faith in the face of evidence to the contrary; or erratically setting our compass of faith by the current direction of the intellectual weathervane. This leads to my third observation – because of the difficulties of such negotiations, such issues must be worked out in a Christian community, in a dialogue among Christian scholars, in prayer, and in regular participation in the life of the church. That is the value of organizations like the Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities, professional conferences such as "Christianity and Literature", and Potchefstroom's Centre for Faith and Scholarship.

4. Christian scholarship and postmodernism

One particularly timely discussion occurring in that great hall of learning involves the attitude the Christian scholar should have toward the phenomenon of postmodernism. Christian scholars across many disciplines have voiced numerous opinions. The pages of *Christian Scholars' Review*, *Faith and Philosophy*, *Faculty Dialogue*, and *Christianity and Literature* over the past ten years have been full of debates on this topic, with contributions from philosophers, theologians, biblical scholars, literary critics, and even economists. Responses have varied widely, ranging from Gary Percesepe's enthusiastic embrace of "the unbearable lightness of being postmodern" (Percesepe, 1990) to Clarence Walhout's dialogical reflections on whether "Derrida can be Christianized" (Walhout, 1985), to Roger Lundin's sharp condemnation of those Christians who have been "beguiled by the blandishments of deconstruction" (Lundin, 1993:204).

Some of these disagreements can be traced to differing assumptions about what postmodernism is. Throughout his book, *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World* (1993) Lundin equates postmodernism and deconstructive criticism, condemning both and aligning himself with figures such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Alasdair MacIntyre, especially in terms of their respect for tradition. Yet all three of these philosophers are identified by Roland Hoksbergen in a recent issue of *Christian Scholars' Review* as postmodern, because of their claims that personal perspectives influence what we can know. Hoksbergen also identifies Wolterstorff as postmodern. But Lundin, again equating deconstruction and postmodernism (which are not necessarily the same thing) argues with reference to Wolterstorff that only "at first glance [does] the deconstructive agenda seem ... similar to the powerful contemporary Christian critiques of modernity and its impasses" (Lundin, 1993:203). Although I can by no means discuss all the complexities of these issues, let me at least attempt to isolate some of the different strands of the

argument. Some disagreements arise from definitional differences; others from what I call perspectival differences – viewing the same thing as either a glass half empty or a glass half full; and still others from fundamental differences in worldviews.

The word *postmodern* can refer to a historical period, a philosophical theory, and a kind of artistic work (in this article, I will only be referring to the first two definitions). In one sense, then, we are all postmodern since we live in the historical period following the modern era (which apparently ended some time after World War II, perhaps in the sixties, definitely by the eighties). Concerning philosophical postmodernism, there is fairly wide-spread agreement on at least three points:

- It is a reaction to, or an evolution from, or a stage after modernism (as indicated in the very word: *post*-modern).
- As such, philosophical postmodernism is critical of the Enlightenment myth of progress that the Golden Age is attainable through human reason and technological achievement.
- Consequently, postmodernism denies the possibility of reaching certainty on the basis of reason alone.

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey (1989) explains post-modernism's rejection of philosophical modernism in this way:

> Generally perceived as positivistic, technocentric, and rationalistic, universal modernism has been identified with the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders, and the standardization of knowledge and production (Harvey, 1989:9).

Postmodern thought, on the other hand, is characterised by "fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or 'totalizing' discourses" (Harvey, 1989:9). The French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984:xxiv) says that postmodernism simply defined is "incredulity toward metanarratives".

Postmodern philosophy distrusts the Enlightenment's optimistic confidence in reason and is suspicious of universal theories that explain the world, preferring to rely instead on narratives based on particular viewpoints, or "standpoint epistemology". Postmodernists are especially skeptical of the claim that pure reason will always lead us to the truth. Some of the most noted anti-foundationalist philosophers have been Christians – philosophers such as Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga, who have argued that it is impossible to form a body of beliefs solely by means of an unsullied reason, because certain control beliefs always come into play. Many Christian thinkers agree with Wolterstorff's

assessment that classical foundationalism essentially is dead and that we must "learn to live in its absence" (Wolterstorff, 1976:52). However, there are many paths that one can take after assuming foundationalism's demise, and it is here, at the crossroads, that the dissension ensues.

4.1 Postmodernism and truth

Perhaps the most basic disagreement concerns how to talk about truth. If we can no longer unquestionably rely on reason to lead us to absolute truth, what are our options? Some, let us call them *hard postmodernists*, consequently claim that "truth" is always a fabrication emerging only from human desire and manifestations of power. Richard Rorty (1989), for example, wants to talk about truth as something that is made rather than found, constructed rather than discovered. Values and truths are merely a matter of personal choice. Concentrating on what cannot be had, the half empty glass, this focus on the human construction of truth often leads to a kind of carefree nihilism. Others, we might call them *soft postmodernists*, do not abandon the search for truth, but conduct it provisionally, examining "truths," as historically conditioned and perspectively limited. They concentrate on what we are able to have in place of absolute certainty, the half full glass.

Many postmodernists are notoriously difficult to pin down when it comes to their view of truth; they would rather talk about something else, such as discursive constructions. Few, when pushed, actually want to abandon the idea completely, and few deny the reality of scientific truth when it comes to taking antibiotics for an infection. The reality of the physical world is not as easily disputed as the reality of ideas lying behind language. Postmodernists, however, prefer to talk about truth only tentatively and to spend their time instead examining specific contexts in which a view of truth emerges. Derrida, for example, argues that the cultural roots of language, the fact that language is always interpretation, means that we are not able to speak about truth and reality in any absolute sense, from a point outside history. Walhout (1985:19) responds,

> Language may be subjective, historical, and culture-bound and at the same time have the capacity to speak truthfully about reality. There is no necessary contradiction between subjective interpretation and truth: some interpretations may in fact be true.

Derrida's own pronouncements on political issues, such as his condemnation of apartheid and his support of Amnesty International's campaign for human rights, demonstrate his lived belief that interpretations, while subjective, may also be true or false; one must take stands, make commitments on the basis of what appears to be the closest stand to the truth.

There is no question that some contemporary theorists have responded to the collapse of modernism by following Nietzche's affirmation of "the playful will for the affirming self" (Lundin, 1993:210), which can lead to hedonism and/or fascism. But an equally strong inclination among postmodern thinkers is corrective in nature, ethical in emphasis, critiquing culture and discourse by examining the power of representation. Barthes may celebrate the almost sexual pleasure he achieves by playing with a text unfettered by authority, but Derrida attempts to unmask the pervasive kinds of oppression he believes are caused by metanarratives. In literary studies, we find both playful deconstructionists and ethically concerned unmaskers of discursive power.

Some historians, such as John McGowan, suggest that postmodernism consists both of anti-foundationalism and a leftist political commitment. McGowan believes that postmodernism "designates[s] a specific form of cultural critique that is resolutely antifoundationalist ... while also proclaiming itself resolutely radical in its commitment to the transformation of the existing Western social order" (McGowan, 1991:ix). A common rejoinder to such claims has been to ask on what moral grounds can such a transformation be based, if no metanarrative exists, no absolute truth? But note the difference between claiming that *no* truth exists and claiming that our *access* to absolute truth is limited or even impossible. Many postmodernists do claim that truth is completely contingent and constructed, but others paradoxically assume that truth is universal and unchanging (somewhere – in the real world, or in the mind of God), as well as contingent and constructed.

4.2 Postmodernism and ambiguity

A second important question, then, is how we are to respond to the limits of our rational knowledge. What do we make of ambiguity, undecidability, paradox, intuition? Christians sympathetic to postmodernism's puzzles are fond of citing 1 Corinthians 13:22: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." Lundin (1993: 204-205) argues that using this text in this way confuses indeterminacy and mystery:

> The indeterminacy promoted in poststructuralism is a very different thing from a biblical sense of mystery. Whereas mystery speaks of a truth that encompasses men and women even as they fail to comprehend it fully, indeterminacy has to do with the vertiginous play of interpretation that has given up on truth and seeks its only comfort in the game-playing potential of language.

But not all postmodernists resort to pure play; many are far more interested in unmasking the terrors that historically have resulted from an overly confident

belief that one has seen or grasped absolute truth. John D. Caputo (1990:164) identifies himself as embracing "a version of postmodern hermeneutics which does not simply jettison every notion of truth, self, ethics, and ... faith, but rather situate[s] these notions within the radical constraints that postmodernism analysis bring[s] out". He continues by pointing out that "religious faith gets to be quite dangerous, and even quite bloody ... when it lack[s] undecidability" (Caputo, 1990:168). (As in the case of the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Rabin, whose murderer, a right-wing Israeli law-student, claimed that God instructed him to kill Rabin.) Other scholars, such as Robert Detweiler (1989), have found in indeterminacy a door to the sacred, or a space for God: a place beyond science, reason, and technology for the holy, the sacred, the ineffable.

4.3 Postmodernism and cultural relativity

A third crucial concept involved in postmodernism is cultural relativity. Diogenes Allen, in an essay called "Christianity and the Creed of Postmodernism" (Allen, 1993), sees the unique emphasis of postmodernism not as its anti-foundationalism, nor its emphasis on interpretation, nor even its rejection of a superhuman reality, but rather all those elements plus cultural relativism. He claims,

> When cultural relativism is added to [these] commonplaces ... we then get the phenomenon of a postmodernist creed. ... It is only when the concepts we use in science, literature, and philosophy are said to be wholly embedded in culture, along with the obvious fact that cultures differ, that we get the heady mixture of postmodernism (Allen, 1993:119).

For some postmodernists, the importance of cultural embeddedness leads to the claim that every cultural idea and practice is just as valid as the next, the only difference lies in the amount of power one has to assert one's position. But Allen's conclusion that relativism necessarily results when concepts are "wholly embedded in culture" is not one with which all Christian thinkers would agree. Walhout has argued, persuasively, to my way of thinking, that Christians are essentially historical in their creation and in their relationship with God, and, as such, human conceptualising is always embedded in history, culture, and society. He claims, "moral principles are not transhistorical or static norms for judging value. Rather they emerge from history and require historical interpretation" (Walhout, 1994:43). Situating morality in historical context does not deny the reality of God or truth, but does realise that we encounter the ultimate only in the particular, the incarnate. Cultural embeddedness is one of the realities of the God-created world, and within a theological understanding calls not for hedonism, nor nihilism, nor assertions of power, but rather conversation. Given the provisional nature of the truth to which we all have some access, should we

not continue talking to and with others in order to correct our own misperceptions? Christians and non-Christians alike?

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) presents a model for this kind of interaction in historical terms in *Truth and Method*. We have, he explains, a certain horizon of historical experience that limits our interpretations or understanding; that horizon is always being extended and its understanding is always evolving. The past, with its own horizon of understanding, remains available to us as a resource to be used to compare with present ways of interpreting experience. Our understanding thus progressively unfolds, but it is always guided by the continuity of historical experience. We engage in continual reinterpretation. What Gadamer says with respect to historical horizons also applies to cultural horizons: positions influenced by religion, gender, or ethnicity provide horizons against which we judge and readjust our perspectives. Wolterstorff (1993:35) proposes that "occupying certain positions gives one the only likely initial access to certain kinds of truth", which he calls "particularism of cognitive access". That initial access endowed by one's perspective, however, can be communicated to another; conversations can take place; as a white, forty-something American woman, I can learn from listening to a black, sixty-something African man, like Chinua Achebe.

These are a few of the many questions that emerge when Christian thinkers wrestle with the large, baggy monster of philosophical postmodernism. I can summarise them as follows: if we agree that the Enlightenment reliance on reason to reach absolute truth is no longer viable, are we then postmodern? If we accept the demise of classical foundationalism, how do we respond? Do we give up on pursuing truth at all? Do we give up on reason entirely? How do we understand the importance of perspective and cultural embeddedness? What kind of authority do we grant to the Christian tradition as represented in the Scriptures, the confessions, and the church?

4.4 Postmodernism's opportunities

Postmodernism's anti-foundationalism, along with its renewed emphasis on the importance of perspectives, aids the Christian scholar in three crucial ways.

- First, postmodernism may open up an intellectual arena in which Christian scholars can more easily speak with the strength of their convictions. As religious historian George Marsden (1994:430) notes in *The Soul of the American University*, "Few academics believe ... in neutral objective science any more and most would admit that everyone's intellectual inquiry takes place in a framework of communities that shape prior commitments". In other words, postmodernism, although not in exactly these terms, admits that worldviews do exist and do affect scholarship. Marsden argues, "Hence there

is little reason to exclude a priori all religiously based claims on the grounds that they are unscientific". If it is indeed important to listen to different perspectives, Christianity deserves a hearing in the academy, and this is an argument we can now make in postmodern terms.

- Secondly, postmodernism's focus on the limits of reason provides a valuable corrective to modernity's deification of the human mind. Christians acknowledge that the fall has affected all areas of human life – including thought and intellect. We also depend on faith, not just reason, to recognise the reality of such truths as God's sovereignty, grace, and love. Our starting point is not reason but the truths of the biblical story.

- Thirdly, postmodernism's concern with undecidability reminds us of the danger of too quickly making up our mind, the dangers of rigidity, especially in our understanding of the Christian faith. Postmodernism has helped us to see how cultural and historical perspectives can revise our Christian understanding. Lesslie Newbigin (1989) who served for nearly forty years as a missionary in India, explains that gradually his cross-cultural experience prompted him to see how his own Christianity had been "domesticated" by his intellectual formation as a twentieth-century Englishman. Similarly, Vincent Donovan (1982) experienced a "rediscovery of Christianity" when he began working with the Masai and viewing the biblical story from their perspective.

However, Christians will part with postmodernists who hold that the only reality is that constructed by human beings, that all rationality is completely flawed, and in the practice of scholarship, we should merely celebrate ourselves, our will, and our pleasures. These theories do not comport with our worldview or our control beliefs, for we acknowledge a transcendent God who created a real world and entered that world in the form of a Jewish man. We believe that God gave us (among many gifts) the gift of rationality, which we can and do employ. Reason may be reliable in many cases, but it is not our god; it is limited in its capacity to produce or discover absolute truth. And finally, we agree that our motivation for scholarship is not an Enlightenment drive to control the world, nor a purely hedonistic desire to play with the world, nor a nihilistic exercise of power over the world, but rather a biblically informed goal to construct our stories in such a way as to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves.

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