

The Wasteland of Postmodernism

By Ian Hunter

Despite today's mind-blowing achievements in science and economics, we feel no thrill.

From pulpit and lectern we hear often that this is a “post-modern” age. What does it mean?

Postmodernism is the opposite, or more accurately, it is the culmination of modernism. What, then, is modernism?

Modernism is the view that life is knowable; that there are enduring truths about life that can be known and communicated from generation to generation.

All intellectual movements have their precedents and antecedents, of course; still, it might be said roughly that modernism began in the mid-17th - century, with Rene Descartes' “Discourse on Method,” and lasted until sometime after the Second World War, the *coup de grace* being delivered in the late 1970s with Professor Jean Francois Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition*.

So, briefly, modernism is the view elaborated by Descartes that there is one big, comprehensive narrative that will explain us and our world.

In other words, modernism accepts the idea of “metanarrative.” and metanarrative means a big, comprehensive story that explains who we are, how we got here, why we are as we are, and where we are going.

The metanarrative may be religious or secular. The Bible and the Quran would be examples of religious metanarratives; the Victorian idea of progress or 20th-century Marxism would be examples of secular metanarratives. Radical feminism is a metanarrative for some today. A metanarrative provides a comprehensive, self-contained explanation for the great “why” questions to which the human mind seeks answers.

From the 17th to the late 20th centuries, modernism held sway. Yes, there were any number of competing metanarratives that purported to explain the human condition, but what was not in dispute was that the fundamental questions were susceptible of answer. In other words, it was not any one metanarrative that characterized the modernist period; it was the premise that metanarratives are both possible and meaningful.

Postmodernism attacks this premise. Professor Lyotard defined the essence of postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives”.

If we date the triumph of postmodernism roughly from Professor Lyotard's book (1979), we would have to concede that the displacement of the intellectual hegemony of modernism by postmodernism has been rapid, comprehensive and corrosive.

Of course, other terms than “postmodernist” have been applied to our now drastically altered society: the “society of spectacle” (Guy Debord); the “consumption society” (Henri Lefevbre); “post-industrial society” (Daniel Bell); “the therapeutic society” (Philip Rieff); the “culture of narcissism” (Christopher Lasch); the “entertainment kingdom,” where we “amuse ourselves to death” (Neal Postman); or, most chilling, but perhaps most accurate: “the culture of death” (Pope John Paul II). Each of these descriptions implies a transformation in the way that we understand ourselves and the human condition.

From the earliest days, Christians have had a metanarrative. It is called the Bible. Our metanarrative begins with the Book of Genesis, with man attempting to comprehend where he came from, whither he goeth, the knowledge of good and evil, why life is as it is; and our

metanarrative ended with the revelation given to Saint John, on the island of Patmos, who saw the heavens open and a new Jerusalem descending.

The metanarrative of Christendom has today largely been lost. It has been displaced by postmodernist mistrust of metanarrative.

A metanarrative shapes who we are, what we believe, what we aspire to be, and what is our vision of truth. When we lose it, we lose our identity, we lose ourselves. G.K. Chesterton saw this coming when he wrote: "Our problem today is not that we have lost our way. Mankind is forever losing his way. Our problem is that we have lost our address."

A recent survey revealed that only 40% of adult North Americans know which biblical figure delivered the Sermon on the Mount. A bare 30% of teenagers can recount the Easter story. On the *Tonight show* a group of American University students were recently asked to name one of the Ten Commandments; the only student to respond said: "Freedom of speech?"

The generations of Canadians who preceded us, who built Canada and who fought her wars, were shaped by the biblical metanarrative. We no longer are. We are orphans without a father, living in a country without a history in a world without purpose, on a globe spinning through a trackless universe, without Creator and without end.

Christians said that without God there could be no truth; the postmodernist replies: "There is no truth." Christians said that without the first cause, there could be neither causation nor purpose to life; the postmodernist says: "Life has no purpose." Christians said that without natural law there can be no right and wrong, only chaos; the postmodernist replies:

"There is only chaos." Christians said that without the Ten Commandments, law has no moral basis; the postmodernist says: "There is no law, only power." The Christian said that without God incarnate, Jesus Christ, there is no hope of salvation; the postmodernist replies: "There is no salvation,"

This is the wasteland of postmodernism.

Ian Hunter is professor emeritus in the faculty of law at the University of Western Ontario.

From: The Report Newsmagazine, May 27, 2002