

A SHORT AND EASIE METHOD WITH POSTMODERNISTS

John Warwick Montgomery

Abstract: *Among the major secular opponents of the claim that there is “no other name by which we must be saved” than that of Jesus Christ is the philosophy of Postmodernism.*

We contend that the often prolix contemporary theological attempts to refute Postmodernism have generally produced more heat than light. The proper approach is hardly that of John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (*Humble Apologetics*), who makes unnecessary concessions to the Postmodernist mentality, and, in doing so, weakens the classic case for Christianity. Rather, we need to recognise that Postmodernism is epistemologically flawed from the outset and that even its advocates cannot consistently live by its worldview.

This paper therefore treats (1) the nature and origins of Postmodernism, (2) the law of non-contradiction, illustrated by an interesting computer program in the Pascal language, and (3) the objection that “religious” claims should not be subjected to the same rigorous epistemological criteria as claims in everyday life.

I. Introduction

Our title is derived from a celebrated and often reprinted 18th-century work of apologetics: Charles Leslie’s *A Short and Easie Method with the Deists: Wherein the Certainty of the Christian Religion Is Demonstrated*.¹ It is our contention that the detailed and often prolix contemporary attempts to refute Postmodernism have generally produced more heat than light. We also believe that the proper approach is hardly that of John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (*Humble Apologetics*), where unnecessary concessions to the Postmodernist mentality weaken the classic case for Christianity.² The right method to follow is not that of the aphorism, “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em,” but a

¹ 8th ed., London: J. Applebee, 1723.

² See the trenchant review by Canadian judge Dallas Miller in 4/3 *Global Journal of Classical Theology*, October, 2004 (www.phc.edu).

realisation that Postmodernism is epistemologically flawed from the outset and that even its advocates cannot consistently live by its worldview.

II. The Nature of Postmodernism

Postmodernism, admittedly, is an amorphous phenomenon—rather like the New Age mentality: exceedingly difficult to pin down owing to the fact that its adherents and fellow travellers do not maintain a single credo. But one of the most helpful analyses of the phenomenon has been provided by D. E. Polkinghorne, who identifies four basic themes: (1) foundationlessness, (2) fragmentariness, (3) constructivism, and (4) neo-pragmatism.

The tacit assumptions of this epistemology of practice are: (a) there is no epistemological ground on which the indubitable truth of knowledge statements can be established; (b) a body of knowledge consists of fragments of understanding, not a system of logically integrated statements; (c) knowledge is a construction built out of cognitive schemes and embodied interactions with the environment; and (d) the test of a knowledge statement is its pragmatic usefulness in accomplishing a task, not its derivation from an approved set of methodological rules.³

The Postmodernist, in maintaining that no concrete epistemic foundation exists, focuses on the immediate and the local, not on any general truths (since there are none); for him or her, the only reality is the product of one's personal constructs and the question is never whether x is true but whether by accepting x one will arrive at a satisfactory outcome. Advocates of this viewpoint include American psychologists George A. Kelly (creator of "PCT"—Personal Construct Theory)⁴ and Kenneth J. Gergen.⁵ Postmodernism has impacted not only psychological counselling, but also the wider spheres of law, literature, philosophy, theology, and the media.⁶

III. Historical Excursus

³ D. E. Polkinghorne, "Postmodern Epistemology of Practice," in S. Kvale (ed.), *Psychology and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1992), pp. 146-47.

⁴ George A. Kelly, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (New York: Norton, 1955).

⁵ K. J. Gergen, "Toward a Postmodern Psychology," in Kvale, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-30. On Postmodernism in general, see Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism; A Brief Insight* (New York and London: Sterling, 2002).

⁶ Cf. Montgomery, "Speculation vs. Factuality: An Analysis of Modern Unbelief," in his *Christ As Centre and Circumference* (Bonn, Germany: Verlag fuer Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2012), sec. 1.

How did such a viewpoint come about? And how could it have gained influence in a western world that prides itself on scientific objectivity? The answer lies in Luther's profound insight that the history of our fallen race is that of a drunk reeling from one wall to the other.

In the 18th century European thought, especially in Germany, jettisoned the Christocentric insights of the Protestant Reformation for so-called "Enlightenment" rationalism.⁷ By the 19th century, philosophers—the most influential being Hegel and the post-Hegelians—had convinced themselves that they could arrive at the very "essence" of universal truth by unaided human reason.

In reaction, Danish lay theologian Søren Kierkegaard saw such efforts as *hubris*. He recognized that it is a chimerical dream to think that one can arrive at the essence of the universe by human reason. Because mankind's finite condition is characterized by *Angst* and estrangement, it is impossible to get beyond "*Existenz*"—one's own subjective condition. The only solution is to find Christ, the source of salvation, at the heart of one's personal existence.

But the existential movement originating with Kierkegaard developed chiefly along atheistic lines in the writings of 20th century philosophers Heidegger and Sartre. Kierkegaard's remedy ("truth is subjectivity") for the disease of rational idealism turned out to be as bad as the disease itself, for it spawned a subjectivistic perspective that has impacted almost every aspect of modern society.⁸

⁷ See Montgomery, "From Enlightenment to Extermination," *Christianity Today*, 11 October 1974; reprinted in Montgomery, *The Shaping of America* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1981) and in *Christians in the Public Square* (Calgary, Alberta: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology and Public Policy, 1996).

⁸ The proper solution is to recognize that, although we cannot by unaided human reason arrive at the meaning of the universe as a whole, we do indeed have the ability to investigate particular facts (in science, history, etc.)—facts such as the historicity, character and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One thereby encounters *special revelation*—biblical truth—which provides by God's grace and not by human rationality an objective grounding for subjective salvation and insight into ultimate issues. I have developed this in my many apologetics writings.

Consider a few prominent examples. In philosophy of science: the Kuhn thesis (progress in science is the result of changes in philosophical perspective, not the consequence of newer or better objective evidence). In law: the Critical Legal Studies movement (“CLS”), holding that legal texts have no inherent, objective meaning; we are thus to employ them politically so as to achieve our personal, subjective ideals of justice.⁹ Literature: the “hermeneutical circle,” which asserts that the meaning of a text can never be established apart from the subjective stance of the interpreter (cf. James Joyce’s *Ulysses*). Music: the atonal (Schoenberg). Art: post-impressionism, Dada, and their successors (Marcel Duchamp’s “Nude Descending a Staircase”).¹⁰

In such a subjective cultural context, the appearance of Postmodernism seems entirely comprehensible—perhaps even inevitable.

IV. Story-telling

One of the most common (and frustrating) aspects of discussion with a Postmodernist is his or her insistence on “telling one’s own story.” You are allowed—indeed, encouraged—to tell your story: let us say, the story of your conversion, based on your solid conviction of the factual truth of the Christian gospel. This is then followed by the Postmodernist’s story, which, needless to say, is incompatible with the position you have just set forth.

This incompatibility, however, does not bother the Postmodernist to any observable degree. Why? because for him or her there is no single, objective truth. Each of us constructs reality as he or she sees fit, and the issue is simply the pragmatic effects of those constructs in one’s experience.

One is reminded of existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre’s account of his encounter with a young resistant during the German occupation of France in World War II. The young man very much wanted to escape through Spain to join De Gaulle and the Free French in London, but his mother was dependent on him. What should he do? Sartre’s response was: “Decide! There are no omens in the world, and, if there were, we would give them their

⁹ Montgomery, *Christ Our Advocate* (Bonn, Germany: Verlag fuer Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2002), pp. 32-33.

¹⁰ Cf. Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1970).

meaning.”¹¹ We are not told the young man’s reaction to these words; we expect he went away mumbling: “That’s the last time I go to an existentialist for advice!”

The fundamental problem here lies in the fact that (to paraphrase George Orwell), although all stories are equal, some are more equal than others. That is to say, there are sublime (and true) stories, and there are horrific (and damnable) stories. Would we really be willing to accept Hitler’s story as set out in *Mein Kampf* and treat it as having the same validity as the story of Jesus’ loving sacrifice of himself on the Cross for the sins of the world? Surely, there are objective ethical values that cannot be ignored. Descriptively, the world is full of stories; normatively, they must be distinguished on the basis of the moral quality and truth-value (if any) they represent.

A trenchant critic of Postmodernist therapy writes—and the very same point applies *mutatis mutandis* in the theological realm:

How can a person be encouraged to acknowledge truly unpleasant truths, especially those sordid, unflattering facts which may lack the compensation of a tragic dimension, if one assumes that there is no distinction between truth and mere fiction—but only stories about stories about stories? And what is to prevent psychotherapy from turning into an elaborate workshop for rationalization, a place for spinning self-justificatory fantasies and fostering all the subtle complacencies of narcissistic entitlement and self-satisfaction?¹²

And beyond the realm of “self-justificatory fantasies” rises the spectre of political power. Those who have the power are in a position to choose the story that is heard and prevails. Where there is no objective standard for distinguishing true from false stories, those with power will make the choice—excluding, imprisoning, killing those who disagree.

V. The Law of Non-contradiction

The Postmodern error cuts far deeper than psychological and ethical considerations. The Postmodernist’s refusal to reject stories in contradiction

¹¹ J.-P. Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Philosophical Library, 2000).

¹² Louis A. Sass, “The Epic of Disbelief: The Postmodernist Turn in Contemporary Psychoanalysis,” in Kvale, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

with other stories betrays a solipsist epistemology: there is no objective world; only worlds constructed by the storytellers exist, and these pose no problem even when in mutual contradiction.

The difficulty with such an approach is that no one can consistently live that way—and, as Francis Schaeffer was wont to say, a philosophy that even its adherents cannot live by cannot possibly be true. The Eastern mystic may declare that the material world is *maya*—illusion—but will still treat it as real and employ a map to find a Chinese restaurant. The adherent of the cult of Christian Science may declare pain to be unreal but will still scream when stuck with a pin—declaring (at minimum) that “the illusion of pain was almost as bad as the pain would have been.”

The Postmodernist, whilst declaring that mutually self-contradictory stories can all be true, nonetheless assumes the law of non-contradiction. He or she hardly believes—to take an obvious example—that the story being told at the moment can simultaneously be true *and* false. If told that he or she just said non-*x* when *x* had been in fact declared, the Postmodernist would certainly attempt to correct the listener.¹³

Let us consider a practical illustration both of the ethical point raised in the previous section of this paper and of the logical point just made. A Teetotalers Club and a Drinkers Club have mutually exclusive membership requirements. There is, however, suspicion that the same individual or individuals may have joined *both* societies. A computer programme is therefore developed to determine if this is the case:¹⁴

¹³ Cf. the discussion of multiple logics in Montgomery, *Tractatus Logico-theologicus* (4th ed.; Bonn, Germany: Verlag fuer Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2009), proposition 2.2.

¹⁴ The following programme is set out in the standard Pascal language—as are programmes on the author’s website: www.jwm.christendom.co.uk. To run this programme, one must employ a Pascal compiler; we suggest THINK Pascal 4.5 (available free on the web). It is worth noting that all computer operations (not just this one) rely on the law of non-contradiction: “The entire computer concept is founded on the law of non-contradiction: in binary computer language you must choose ‘yes’ or ‘no’—a ‘dialectic answer’ is no answer at all. There are no neo-orthodox computers” (Montgomery, *Computers, Cultural Change, and the Christ* [Wayne, NJ: Christian Research Institute, 1969], p. 15).

```

program Hypocrite (OUTPUT, First, Second);

{Identifies persons who have hypocritically joined both a Drinkers}
{Club and a Teetotalers Club, and demonstrates the absolute}
{necessity of the law of non-contradiction in all areas of life,}
{practical as well as theoretical, i.e., the principle at the root}
{of all formal logic that A cannot = ~A at the same time under the}
{same conditions. The programme will name the first common entry}
{appearing on the two membership lists; only after deleting that}
{name from the lists and rerunning the programme will a second}
{hypocrite be identified--and so on. When all common names have}
{been removed, the programme will show no result; this will}
{likewise be the case should no hypocritical common member of the}
{two organisations exist. Membership pledge of the Drinkers Club:}
{"I promise in the name of St Paul to imbibe an alcoholic drink}
{each day--a fine French wine if possible." Teetotalers' pledge:}
{"I promise in the name of Carry Nation never to drink an}
{alcoholic beverage, even for my stomach's sake."}

var
First, Second: TEXT;
Name1, Name2: string;

begin

WRITELN('Object: to identify at least one hypocrite who has joined
both the Drinkers and the Teetotalers Club.');
```

```

RESET(First, 'drinkersfile');
RESET(Second, 'temperancefile');
```

```

READLN(First, Name1);
READLN(Second, Name2);

repeat

if Name1 < Name2 then
begin
READLN(First, Name1);
end;

if Name2 < Name1 then
begin
READLN(Second, Name2);
end;

until Name1 = Name2;

WRITE('A hypocrite, whose name appears on both lists, is: ', Name1,
'!');
```

```

end.

```

The membership lists of the two clubs are as follows; they are fed into the above programme as text files:

Drinkers Club Membership List

Gangee (Sam)
 Johnson (Samuel)
 Luther (Martin)
 Montgomery (John)
 Schlonk (Alphonso)
 Twist (Oliver)
 Xavier (Rodney)

Teetotalers Club Membership List

Falwell (Jerry)
 Heartacre (Silvia)
 Loopy (David)
 McAgony (Alister)
 Perfect (Wholesome)
 Schlonk (Alphonso)
 Ziltch (Methusula)

The programme “Hypocrite” is then run and the result is as follows:

Output Result of Running the “Hypocrite” Programme:

Object: to identify at least one hypocrite on the member lists of the Drinkers Club and the Teetotalers Club.

A hypocrite, whose name appears on both lists, is:

Schlonk (Alphonso)!

It is our contention that the Postmodernist, no more than the anti-Postmodernist, would be satisfied with Schlonk’s conduct and would insist that he cease to be a member of at least one of the two societies.

VI. But Aren’t We Dealing with “Religion”?

The objector may well retort that our examples appear compelling, but they operate in the non-religious area—and in matters of religion it may well be proper to allow a multiplicity of diverse (even contradictory) viewpoints, since religious assertions are metaphysical in nature.

Our ethical example (Hitler’s story) shows, however, the interlocking of ordinary life with absolute moral values. Indeed, there is no bright line

separating religion from other spheres of life. All knowledge is interlocked. Our divisions of the pie of knowledge are arbitrary—to facilitate study and because no one can master all areas of thought. Physics slides into chemistry, chemistry into the biological sciences, biology into psychology, psychology into sociology, sociology into history, history into literature; etc., etc.

And where the Christian religion is concerned, earth and heaven conjoin. God reveals himself in ordinary human history and human experience—through prophets and apostles and principally through the incarnation of His Son for the salvation of the human race. Thus the same law of non-contradiction that informs ordinary life will apply equally to ultimate questions of religious truth.

As C. S. Lewis put it, the Christ-symbol Aslan and the false god Tash cannot be blended into a “Tashlan.”¹⁵ There is one and only one proper foundation: “Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). There is only one saving story, namely the gospel story. As Jesus said expressly: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes unto the Father but by me” (John 14:6). And thus, from the days of the Apostles, the church has always proclaimed: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

¹⁵ In *The Last Battle*, the concluding volume of the Chronicles of Narnia.