BRAND NEW CHURCH?

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The church and the postmodern condition

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For Amy, Millie and Olivia

'Writing turns you into somebody who's always wrong. The illusion that you may get it right someday is the perversity that draws you on.'

Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*

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1

Why bother with the postmodern condition?

I'm told that cooking a frog can be quite a tricky business. Attempt to put it in a pan of boiling water and it will, apparently, hop straight back out. Instead, the chef should place the frog in cold water, where the little chap will merrily swim around. Only then should the heat be turned on, so that the frog slowly, gently, falls asleep, unaware of what is to become of it.

Without taking the analogy too far, I would like to suggest that we all grow up being gently 'cooked' in the waters of family and local practice; national identity and history; global technological, political and economic change. Of course maturity, education and travel may alter one's perspective, and it is possible to become more deeply aware of the way people and institutions operate, but none of us ever understands completely all that has gone into making us who we are.

It is a small step from considering how we are affected by sociocultural 'cooking', to asking how this may have impacted the church. Indeed, debates on this topic have raged from the days of St Paul onwards. Some have maintained that the church is good news because it is uniquely resistant to its surroundings, and offers peace and safety. Others would dismiss this position as unreal escapism and argue that the church is good news only when it is incarnate within society and culture. But might

becoming incarnate (a) cause the church to lose its distinctiveness and integrity, and (b) indicate a loss of faith in the church's own beliefs and practices? Could it reduce the church to just another player in political and cultural popularity contests? This book ponders what the church is called to be in the contemporary Western world – a world that bears striking similarities to the ancient world while also being enormously different.

Today we live in a high-octane, high-speed, non-stop, credit-fuelled blast, trying to make the most of every moment we've got. We are deeply influenced by technological and free-market advances that no one could have dreamed of a hundred years ago. The last century has seen an obsession with 'big projects' – attempts to bring unity, civilization or peace to the whole world, to improve trade and to make money. Western colonial expansion, international missionary movements, and the rise and domination of multinational companies are all examples of these big projects. Any hope that such efforts would bring peace or unity to the world, however, died in the course of two world wars. Generations have been left questioning why these big projects failed so spectacularly in their aims when those projects have succeeded in advancing technology and increasing wealth. Indeed, there is now a discernible attitude of cynicism directed towards all big projects, whether political or religious: everything is vanity and greed. This mix of technological optimism and political cynicism is very much a part of what I later define as 'the postmodern condition', and with which this book is concerned.

Over the last six years, I have travelled around the UK and USA to ask various church leaders their views on the church and the postmodern condition, and what kinds of things their churches are up to. It has been a fascinating and encouraging experience: the church that I have encountered is thoughtful,

active and confident in the gospel. Despite many reports of its terminal decline in the Western media, if the church leaders I have met with are representative of the whole, then the church has good reason to be hopeful about its future. Though holding many different views, these leaders all appear to take seriously the need for the church genuinely to engage (positively or negatively) with what it perceives to be the postmodern condition.

In the course of the book, I also reflect on commentaries on the Western church and relevant works of contemporary theology. By engaging with the kind of thinking found both in local churches and in theological colleges and universities, I hope the reflections that emerge will be neither impractical nor superficial.

I will begin in this chapter by defining what I mean by the postmodern condition (it really isn't as complicated as it sounds), explaining why I use that particular term, and why I think it matters. In Chapter 2 I will review the way other writers have recently attempted to explain the church in the contemporary West through their engagement with the 'emerging church' movement. Whatever one's view on the emerging church, the discussions around this movement serve as a focus for questions about the church and the postmodern condition, and help identify various positions. This chapter also offers an explanation and evaluation of the way the emerging church movement has been presented and defined by various writers.

The third chapter is an edited collection of six transcripts from meetings I have had with church leaders in the UK and USA, presented as a single conversation. Reflecting on the understandings of the relationship between the church and the postmodern condition presented by these church leaders, as well as the writers presented in Chapter 2, enables me to describe what I see in the church today. Chapter 4 offers a map of how

the church relates in different ways to the postmodern condition, showing where the church is in conflict with the postmodern condition, where it is in dialogue, and where it is in danger of surrendering its very nature in order to be popular. The last two chapters then argue why 'dialogue' is the most appropriate and enriching way for the church to understand itself: the fifth explains more specifically how this 'dialogue' functions, while the sixth suggests what this church-in-dialogue looks like in practice.

What is the postmodern condition?

I understand 'the postmodern condition' (also the title of a book, of which more in a moment) to be made up of two concepts: postmodern-ism and postmodern-ity. Both are broad-brush attempts to explain a complex of issues, but they are quite effective shorthand. 'Postmodern-ity' refers to the social, cultural, political and economic changes that the world has seen over the past few decades, leading to a greater sense of individualism, a 'smaller' world with 'less' time, and a greater focus upon free-market capitalism. 'Postmodern-ism' is a philosophical term describing attempts to ask what one may know, while questioning many claims to truth. It is a far more complicated and contested term than can be summed up by 'relativism' or 'pluralism', even if these are important elements within postmodernism. In order to make my own view as clear as possible, I will briefly outline some of the work of four thinkers associated with the postmodern condition.

Jean Baudrillard

While he wasn't the first to use the term, Jean Baudrillard is a thinker most closely associated with the concept of the

postmodern condition. This is partly due to associations made between his work and the *Matrix* movies (much to Baudrillard's disapproval), and partly because N. T. Wright often refers to Baudrillard as an exemplar of the postmodern condition.[1] Through his playful and pessimistic social commentaries, Jean Baudrillard presents his view of a world that has become 'hypermodern'. When reading his work, there are times when one wonders if he is employing a cutting irony or making a serious philosophical enquiry, not that he would necessarily wish to separate the two, or even recognize these categories as valid. With this in mind, it is always dangerous to take Baudrillard at his word; proof-texting his work in order to define the postmodern condition is definitely out.

Baudrillard's presentation of hypermodernity is an attempt to say that all of humanity has been reduced to nothing more than a gaggle of zombies who mindlessly respond to anything that stimulates them.[2] Such is their reliance upon the media, these zombies really only experience the world through the way media simulates it, rather than experiencing the world itself. These media simulations of reality are said to project a world that is godless and solely focused upon capital gain. I find this all quite depressing and wouldn't recommend it as bedtime reading: existence is reduced to nothing more than consumption, for the whole world has become a giant supermarket in which humanity is condemned to walk mindlessly round circular aisles that go everywhere yet lead nowhere, shopping for spectacular-looking objects that will never deliver their promises.[3]

It's difficult not to regard Baudrillard's presentation as somewhat simplistic, but if not taken literally, his 'hyper-reality' can be appreciated for the imaginative suggestions it makes about how powerful the media can be in engrossing and absorbing one's views of the world, and how one acts within it.

David Harvey

Like Baudrillard, David Harvey has a negative view of the postmodern condition, seeing it as an insidious, nihilistic 'swamp'[4] that allows consumerism complete control over all thinking and doing. Unlike Baudrillard, however, he writes in order to save people from this repression. Harvey is a 'social geographer' who is also a Marxist, and believes that only through such a big project as Marxism can the free market be curbed from profiteering in all spheres of human life.[5]

For Harvey, the postmodern condition is in direct opposition to Marxism: arising from the desire to increase personal wealth,[6] technology has been developed to the point where it has compressed time and space. This is to say that because a person can physically travel the world in days, not years, can communicate instantly across the globe, and can employ technological developments to do more in a working day, then the world is experienced as smaller and time as shorter than it was just a few decades ago. While this could potentially have led to spending less time 'at work', the fact that this whole project has been driven by the desire to make money means people spend just as much time at work, getting more done in the same amount of time, and so making more money.

Looking at the postmodern condition from his Marxist perspective, Harvey is concerned at the way relativism has gained such a dominant voice that the big projects (such as Marxism or Christianity) that have a solution for the world are treated as arrogant. This relativism has become so widespread, he believes, that those who are 'different' from oneself are treated as sharing nothing in common at all. Harvey stands firm on his Marxist principles and challenges both of these assumptions. First, saying that big projects are invalid because they claim a unique understanding of truth is nonsense, as such a

standpoint is in itself a truth-claim, attempting to argue that there is no truth. Harvey believes that this invalidates such postmodern posturing,[7] and so does not provide a strong enough argument as to why a big project cannot be an appropriate response to the postmodern condition. The confrontation of falsehood with the truth is the only appropriate response to the postmodern condition, and allows Harvey to do that which Baudrillard claims is futile: to go behind the media representations of the world in order to formulate a true representation of reality.[8]

This can be seen more fully in his second criticism: that the postmodern condition applies the term 'difference' as a cynical ploy for greater domination by the rich.[9] If another person, or group of people, can be said to be so different from me that there is no common humanity between us, then that person or group is a different species. Such an understanding of the world, suggests Harvey, allows the rich to continue living in their own world, unaffected by the world of the poor. But this is grossly inhuman, and Harvey wishes to see people liberated out of such unfairness. He believes this can happen through a new form of Marxism that offers hope to those who have been enslaved by the technological developments and capitalist expansion of the rich.[10]

While David Harvey's criticisms of the postmodern condition rightly point to an ethical vacuum at the heart of much postmodern enquiry, they do so in a way that suggests that the 'big project' approach is the only viable alternative. One needs to question why Harvey so forcibly insists on this. All big projects rely upon a 'big story' to present the vision of where a project is leading the world. Postmodern criticism of such projects not only questions their truth-claims, but also highlights their poor track record: do big projects ever deliver on their claims? Further, there is a strong argument that these big projects are

simply a cover for one group's attempt to dominate the world at the expense of others.

Given that Marxism depends upon the big story of liberating the masses, one can see why postmodernism is proving to be a particular threat. In Harvey's work, Marxism and postmodern thought are presented as a clash of desires for the world, and Harvey attempts to show the postmodern condition as the less powerful of the two. In following this approach, however, he is not fully able to engage with the critique that big projects and stories are held in disdain by many people, not necessarily because of any commitment to capitalism, but because there is genuine concern that they inappropriately impose foreign value systems and, even more seriously, are simply fantasies. Here, though, is the rub: Harvey cannot fully engage with these criticisms because to do so would mean he would have to hold to the possibility that Marxist liberation is something less than a universal truth. Harvey uncompromisingly lives within a particular story, and his hope is that others will recognize the futility of capitalism in any of its forms, and join him.

Jean-François Lyotard

At one time a member of a revolutionary Marxist group in Algeria, Lyotard rejected Marxism as just another Western attempt to tell the world how to live. Many years later, in 1979, in a succinct and simple work, he dared to attempt to define the postmodern condition and so ignite the imaginations of others who were equally disenchanted with big projects. In a term that is often misquoted, Lyotard defined the postmodern as 'incredulity toward metanarratives',[11] which, rather than being a denial of their existence, is an expression of exhaustion and indifference in the face of the big stories that were intended to

lead all of humanity and the world into a great Enlightenment, but were perceived to be failing.

Throughout his work on the postmodern condition, Lyotard repeats his claim that the big projects that seek to make the world conform to particular standards and live according to a certain understanding of reality are either mythical, violent, or both. Rather than choosing to live within the least evil project, or to do nothing, Lyotard calls his readers to be 'witnesses to the unpresentable'.[12] What he means by this is to live in a very hopeful manner, resisting the assumption that the powerful will continue to be powerful, and instead seeking after the emergence of forgotten, sidelined or new ways of being. This is to adopt a position of 'paralogy', which Lyotard defines as moving against the established methods of reasoning.[13] Doing so, however, may involve difficulty in understanding postmodern thought, as it attempts to express itself in ways that can seem strange.[14]

Lyotard's advocating of paralogy contradicts David Lyon's usually very helpful commentary on the philosopher that he 'sidesteps the question of social transformation'.[15] What Lyotard is suggesting is not a progressive transformation in a Marxist sense, but a focus upon what the powerful centre has marginalized so that it may be re-presented. It is this 'paralogy' that is transformative, not as a prescribed action, but as a way of being in relation to, of *resisting*, the big stories peddled by those in power. This point is highlighted by Lyotard in an interview he gave in his later years, in which he insisted that 'what we have to resist is at bottom despair and surrender',[16] which are the effects of these big projects.

In this sense, the postmodern condition is not merely a novelty, or playing for the sake of play, as it is often unfairly caricatured. According to Lyotard, those who occupy a postmodern position challenge those in power, and their claims