

Postmodernism and Religion

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Abstract and Keywords

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Keywords: secularisation theory, spirituality, postmodernism, religious decline, fundamentalism

Introduction

The contemporary religious scene is somewhat bewildering for social scientists, as we observe apparently contradictory trends. Is the situation best captured by secularization theory, or by the notion of a resurgence of spirituality? By the decline in traditional religiosity, or by the upsurge of fundamentalism? Current religious trends make better sense when viewed through the frame of larger, more-encompassing shifts in mental models, and specifically postmodernism—a term often used, but even more often misunderstood.

The first section defines postmodernism, an alternative to modernity's enthusiasm. The second section surveys the literature on three contemporary religious trends—a decline in traditional religion, a resurgence in alternative forms of religiosity, and a fundamentalist backlash—through the analytical lens of postmodernism. The third section sketches more difficult and controversial debates on postmodernism and religion. The final section is a conclusion.

What is Postmodernism?

Starting roughly in the seventeenth century, modernism (the Enlightenment) replaced the pre-modern appeal to faith with an appeal to reason (note that I intentionally conflate different, and often contradictory, schools of modernism—sacrificing, with some trepidation, accuracy for simplicity. I return to this point in the third section below). Without lapsing into the details of philosophical theory (for such details, see Yack 1986; Harvey 1989; Pippin 1999), the implications of modernism ring familiar, as they are still with us today: the modern nation-state, with legitimacy derived from the people rather than from the monarch's divine right; the supreme authority of reason (over tradition or faith); human rights; free markets; and the mastery of nature through science and technology (Pippin 1999: 4–5). Harvey (1989:12) explains how the purpose of the modern project was

to use the accumulation of knowledge generated by many individuals working freely and creatively in the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life. The scientific domination of nature promised freedom from scarcity, want, and the arbitrariness of natural calamity. The development of rational forms of social organization and rational modes of thought promised liberation from the irrationalities of myth, and religious superstition, and release from the arbitrary use of power, as well as from the dark side of our human natures. Only through such a project could the universal, eternal, and the immutable qualities of all humanity be revealed.

Habermas (1983: 9) adds that the early moderns had ‘the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings’. Modernism was a hopeful, excited project, an optimistic unleashing of the human spirit and previously untapped human creativity, after earlier stifling by the bonds of tradition and faith.

Modernism offered a new epistemological appeal, detached from earlier religious confines. Harvey (1989: 13) explains that modernity was ‘a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains’. Even as it broke from the earlier religious monopoly, Modernity did not shed transcendent foundations entirely; for example, Kurtz (1986: 12) writes that ‘the issue of Modernity was fundamentally a conflict between ecclesiastical authority and the authority of independent scholars’, i.e. a new approach to religion, rather than a total jettisoning of faith—what Daly (1985) refers to as ‘the Kantian ideal of religion within the limits of reason’.

But the modern project was not without its doubters. As early as the nineteenth century, the very premises of modernism began to be called into question (beyond more traditional philosophy, as discussed below, some see early hints of anti-modern and postmodern dissent in the nineteenth-century movements of Romanticism and (p. 174) Transcendentalism; see, e.g., Clarke 2006: ch. 5 on the Transcendentalist roots of the New Age movement, which exhibits many of the same traits as postmodernism). What began as doubts

about the limitations of reason (initially brushed aside by modernism's confident optimism) evolved into a fuller critique. Modernism was seen to be spiritually weakening at best, and downright destructive at worst. Pippin (1999: p. xii) describes 'the widespread nineteenth century suspicions (at least on the European continent) that ... the two greatest accomplishments of world civilization, modern natural science and technology, and a progressive, liberal democratic culture, were ... slowly and inexorably enervating and spiritually destroying that very culture'. In many ways, such early grumblings foreshadowed much of the twentieth century's ugliness and many of its problems. The scale and horror of two World Wars galvanized the theoretical concerns. Pippin (1999: 7) explains that:

The great self-confidence and progressivism characteristic of the modern enterprise, and especially what seemed its nineteenth-century fruition, all looked even more difficult to accept after the historical horrors of the twentieth century. The fact that art, intellectual pursuits, the development of the natural sciences, many branches of scholarship flourished in close spatial, temporal proximity to massacre and the death camps has raised for many doubts about not only Modernity's self-assurances, but about all of Western culture, has raised the issue: Why did humanistic traditions and models of conduct prove so fragile a barrier against political bestiality?

Harvey (1989: 13) echoes this thought, explaining that 'whether or not the Enlightenment project was doomed from the start to plunge us into a Kafkaesque world, whether or not it was bound to lead to Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and whether it has any power left to inform and inspire contemporary thought and action, are crucial questions'.

According to the alternative school of *postmodernism*, the modern project, 'laudable though it may have been at one time, has in its turn come to oppress humankind, and to force it into certain set ways of action' (Sim 2001: p. vii). Zuckert (1996:1) traces the concerns back to the 'conviction that modern rationalism ha[d] exhausted its promise and possibilities', starting with Nietzsche. Where some saw aberrations or challenges within the modern project, postmodernism saw unavoidable and logical consequences: colonialism; fascism/communism and industrially planned genocide; the destruction of the natural environment in the name of unfettered progress and technology; the North's 'exploitation' of the South; the horrors of modern warfare, compounded by methodical application of the very science and technology initially meant to liberate humanity; and the spiritual poverty and alienation of mass consumerism. Harvey (1989: 13) explains that 'there are those—and this is ... the core of postmodernist philosophical thought—who insist that we should, in the name of human emancipation, abandon the Enlightenment project entirely'. The postmodern rejection of the modern project is thus both (a) theoretical and methodological, and (b) applied and political.

(p. 175) On the theoretical and methodological side, we see a 'rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties in which life in the West has been structured over the last couple of centuries' (Sim 2001: p. vii). Specifically, postmodernism attacks the very core of the modern project, questioning the existence of any truth (universal or otherwise) and

the ability of human reason to find it. As a radical alternative, postmodernism holds that knowledge and belief are products of the environment, and that we should thus speak of contingent 'narratives' rather than absolute truths. Naturally, different people will have different narratives, as they have different cultural, intellectual, economic, and sociological backgrounds. Thus, a postmodern comparison of narratives replaces the modern search for truth. On the applied and political side, two principal consequences follow from this radical relativism.

First, postmodernism rejects any claim of absolute truth as an attempt to impose one world view over others. No individual narrative has a legitimate right to exclude any other; everything is contingent on context and background, so there is no 'inside track' to truth (see Natoli 1997). In the vocabulary of postmodernism, claims of superiority or truth are referred to as attempts to impose a 'master voice' or 'meta-narrative' (see Lyotard 1981). 'Postmodern politics then becomes a continuous negotiating of various compromises as to what meanings and values are to be represented in the social order and to what degree. Outcomes here are relative to time and place and the already established dispositions of power' (Natoli 1997: 18). There follows a suspicion of certainty and philosophical foundations, and the replacement of absolute 'meaning' with relative 'interpretation'. Pipin (1999: 41) explains that 'for many so-called postmodernists, modernism represents the last game played by Western bourgeois high culture, an elitist code designed only to preserve and celebrate the ... point of view of an exhausted but still immensely powerful middle class'.

Second, postmodernism challenges the main tenets of modern political economy. Thus, the modern nation-state becomes an instrument of centralized repression of minority voices; the supreme authority of reason ends up being but the 'voice' of those in power attempting to impose their personal views as 'the master voice' over all other narratives; natural rights are not universal values, but a Western concept, imposed on the rest of the world by 'cultural imperialism' or even brute force; free markets are seen as the freezing of one particular institutional arrangement that benefits those who have the power to expand their wealth through addictive, exploitative, and spiritually hollow mass consumerism; and the mastery of nature through science and technology becomes an excuse for 'ecocide' in the empty name of progress.

Postmodernism is not just a cute way of interpreting literature, to the delight of sadistic faculty and the terror of students; it has slowly crept into the Western world view (see Huyssens 1984).

This paper is intended to provide an overview of the literature on and trends in postmodernism and religion, rather than a detailed explanation of postmodern (p. 176) theory. Terms such as 'simulacra', '*différance*', 'the Other', and '(k)nots' are thus eschewed, as are such technical subtleties as described by Connor (2004: 4): 'How one capitalized or hyphenated—"postmodern," "PostModern," "postmodern," or "Postmodern"—seemed to many to matter a great deal, along with whether one chose to refer to "Postmodernism," "postmodernity," or simply "the postmodern".' Such details are beyond the present scope,

and the interested reader is invited to visit the literature for greater depth (see, e.g., Lyotard 1981; Habermas 1983; Huyssens 1984; Harvey 1989; Bauman 1992; 1995; 1997; Bertens 1995; Natoli 1997; Sim 2001; Connor 2004).

Postmodernism and Religion

Borrowing from economics (see Friedman 1953), the following analysis does not assume that individuals and religious groups have explicitly or intentionally adopted postmodernism as a personal philosophy, or are even aware that they are acting in a postmodern world (or reacting to it). But they are most certainly acting as if this were the case—and contemporary religious trends certainly fit neatly into an optic of postmodernism (and its discontents). The trends are three.

Twilight of the Churches

First, postmodernism has entailed secularization and a drop in traditional religiosity (this trend started with modernity, and was compounded by postmodernism; whereas the former rejected the tyranny of tradition and faith (and thus the absolute authority of religious institutions) in favor of reason, the latter rejects truth itself—with much more staggering consequences for religion). Secularization is the most obvious implication of postmodernism. While early secularization theories may have been technically incorrect (as discussed in the next section), they have certainly been accurate in predicting a drop in mainstream religious participation and traditional belief, and a retreat of religion from the public square. Indeed, the literature points to a decline in mainstream religion over the past half century (Repstad 1996b; Roof and Agedal 1996; Greeley 1989; Iannaccone 1998).

This is especially the case in Western Europe, where, as Roberts (1998) points out, mainstream Christian Churches are in decline. In a recent survey, 51 percent of French respondents declared themselves to be Catholic, down from 67 percent in 1994 and 80 percent in the late 1970s (Donegani 2007). In general, Weigel (2005: 27) refers to Europe as ‘Christophobic’, having rejected religion in favor of an ‘exclusive (p. 177) Humanism’ that claims to be ‘neutral toward worldviews’ (p. 61; see also Owen 2003), while lacking any ‘transcendent allegiance’ (pp. 49–51). Europeans, he writes, have ‘convinced [themselves] that in order to be modern and free, [they] must be radically secular’ (p. 53).

Viewed through the optic of postmodernism, this should come as no surprise. Lyotard (1981) summarizes postmodernism as ‘incredulity towards all meta-narratives’. And what is traditional religion if not a ‘meta-narrative’, claiming for itself the one truth and one true meaning, along with an associated institutional monopoly on interpretation and salvation? Modernity had already weakened the grip of institutional religion by supplanting faith's exclusivity with reason grounded in faith; postmodernism offered the knell. Not only is reason now under suspicion, but so is truth—along with any attempt to impose one's personal narrative on others in the guise of a ‘meta-narrative’ cloaked as truth. The implications are obvious, and we should not be surprised to read of the drop in religious par-

ticipation and the weakened role of traditional religion. If there are no absolutes, why worship an absolute, and submit oneself to the authority of those who have the power to claim possession of the truth? Neuhaus (1986), for example, asserts that 'the hostility to religion in law, education and public policy today is part of a larger hostility to normative culture'.

From Authority to Expression: A Religious Revival (of Sorts)

Postmodernism has not entailed a decline in religiosity, *tout court*, but a decline in *traditional* religiosity, as new forms of religious expression emerge. Roberts (1998: 188) speaks of 'new religious growths spurt[ing] fungi-like on the stumps and trunks of the fallen trees of tradition'. While a postmodern questioning of 'meta-narratives' and authority has indeed meant a drop in participation in *institutional* and *traditional* religion, it has not meant a complete drop in religiosity or religious participation. Lyon (2000: 75) explains that 'believing subjects show no particular loss of interest in matters that once were the concern of religious institutions (indeed, in many countries, religious interest indices show an upswing), but seek to satisfy that interest in ways that sideline the old institutions'. In sum, 'who needs the authority of religious specialists when the autonomous individual can choose for herself [*sic*]?'

The terms have changed, as consumers of religion—and that is indeed what they now are, consuming ideas in the religious marketplace as they might in the market for goods and services—find new ways of expressing and feeling their religiosity. Lyon (2000: 39) further explains that 'in this world [of contemporary capitalism], political legitimation, central values, and dominant ideologies are no longer needed.... Unlimited consumer choice and a variety of tastes integrate everyone (p. 178) into a spending utopia. It is these factors that are behind the decline of certainty, and of authority'. There is thus an *appearance* of secularization today, rather than actual secularization (see Berry 2004), accompanied by a general return to religion, in what Bauman (in Berry 2004: 172) has called 'the re-enchantment of the world'. B. Martin (1998: 106) explains that 'far from fading away as Modernity bit, religion has acquired a new lease on life in the postmodern era, sprouting vigorous revival movements in Islam and a vast, worldwide expansion of ... Christianity'. In fact, Berger (1992) opines that the secularization and 'post-material values' of Western Europe now constitute the exception rather than the trend.

Postmodernism has thus seen a rise in more personal, alternative forms of religion. In a recent survey (Donegani 2007), a scant 7 percent of French Catholics expressed a belief that Catholicism is the one true religion (down from more than 50 percent in 1952); 52 percent of respondents agreed that it is possible to find truth in other religions. This is particularly striking for a religion that, as recently as 1864, listed in its Syllabus of Errors the belief that 'every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true' (Woodhead *et al.* 2002). Furthermore, a full 39 percent of French respondents believe that all religions are equivalent (Donegani 2007). Donegani concludes (translation my own) that 'it is now up to the individual to appreciate the relative value of a religion, independent of the institution'. Lyon (2000: 23) echoes

this, explaining that 'religion can easily be understood as merely customary behavior (like churchgoing) or as cognitive activity (logical beliefs), whereas in fact it also—more profoundly—has to do with faith, identity, and non-cognitive aspects of life, such as emotion'. See also Bellah *et al.*'s (1985) description of religion as 'habits of the heart ... essential cultural elements of life that connect the abstract structural sphere with the motives and actions of human agents'—rather than more formalistic definitions. Langley (1999) summarizes how 'people have moved away from "religion" as something anchored in organized worship and systematic beliefs within an institution, to a self-made "spirituality," outside formal structures, which is based on experience, has no doctrine, and makes no claim to philosophical coherence'.

Contemporary religious practice increasingly involves syncretism, as religious consumers borrow from different faiths and denominations to find their own comfort blend, increasingly approaching the religious market as a cafeteria menu (see Roberts 1995; Roof and Agedal 1996; Greeley 1989; and Lyon 2000). The work of Ammerman (1994) reveals that Christians increasingly use the services of several churches and religious organizations without necessarily offering primary allegiance to any. Berger (1967) sees the contemporary religious world as a supermarket in which customers are shopping for suitable commodities that address their individual needs. Likewise, Bibby (1987) sees religion as a set of consumer items that are available *à la carte*. Heelas (1998: 3) writes of the loss of boundaries between the religious and the sacred in postmodernism. In general terms, this observed (p. 179) practice fits with postmodernism's theoretical rejection of the strict dichotomies of modernity, e.g. between rationalism and faith (see Derrida 1998; 2002).

Heelas (1998: 5) explains how postmodern religion, like postmodernism, has featured a move from institutions to individuals: 'people no longer feel obliged to heed the boundaries of the religions of Modernity.' This attitude matches postmodernism's rejection of meta-narratives; Bauman (1995) has described the postmodern condition as 'life in fragments', without a need for overarching explanations, institutions, or belief systems. The contemporary question of religiosity has changed from 'How do I conform?' to 'How do I choose?' (Lyon 2000: 43), a question echoed by Bibby's (1987) view that religion has been increasingly moving from religious *commitment* to religious *consumption*. Roof (1993) refers to religious consumers as 'seekers', moving from religion to religion to find their own meaning and satisfaction, in a movement characterized by the catch-phrase, 'I'm not religious, but I'm very spiritual' (see Wuthnow 1998).

New Age and 'spirituality' are increasingly replacing traditional religion, with an emphasis on individual religious experience over institutional teaching, authority, discipline, obedience, the super-individual, and other hallmarks of traditional, institutional religion (on New Age movements, see Clarke 2006). Heelas (1998: 5) explains how, in postmodern religion, 'spiritual experience' is more important than belief, just as 'what works for me' is more important than dogma or truth. The 1996 study on 'God and Society in North America', as described in Lyon (2000: p. xii), 'showed very clearly how much religious activity—often relating to orthodox belief—goes on outside conventional settings of churches, and for that matter, mosques and synagogues. This is a tremendously important as-

pect of contemporary religiosity, central to religion in postmodern times' (see also Lemieux 1996). As Taylor (1991: 14) explains, the general cultural trend is now premised on the view that 'everyone has a right to develop their [*sic*] own form of life, grounded on their [*sic*] own sense of what is important or of value' (see also Wuthnow 1991). In sum, Nolen (1999, A1) explains, people do want a personal relationship with God, but they also want 'an easier, faster, no-fuss, microwavable God'.

A Fundamentalist Backlash

Third, there has been a backlash against the perceived spiritual emptiness of modernity, as exacerbated by the fuzzy relativism of postmodernism, in the form of a fundamentalist revival in all of the world's religions. As an aside, the very term 'fundamentalism' generates controversy in the literature, as it applies, literally, only to US Protestant movements at the dawn of the twentieth century. However, it is a convenient catch-all phrase for literalist, ultra-orthodox movements that derive their 'identity primarily from a posture of resistance to the modern world order' (Hunter 1990: 58). Generally, see Cohen (1990); Kaplan (1992); Nielsen (1993); and (p. 180) Marty and Appleby (1991; 1993a; 1993b; 1994; 1995); for a historical and theological overview of the US phenomenon, see Pelikan (1990); Marsden (1990); Pinnock (1990); and Nielsen (1993). See also the dissatisfaction expressed in Wieseltier (1990); Nasr (1984); and Lewis (1988) on the use of the word 'fundamentalism', a concern more strongly expressed in Hassan's (1990) outright rejection of the word as applied to Islam. For the present purposes, I beg the indulgence of readers who may object to this deliberate simplification.

Roberts (1998: 187) explains that 'traditional religious discourse, forced by secularization to the margins of social life [has been] problematically rebirthed in the subcultures of fundamentalism and New Age'. To be sure, fundamentalism is not, per se, a postmodern phenomenon—quite the contrary, it rejects modernism's secularism and postmodernism's rejection of truth; in fact, fundamentalism could best be described as pre-modern, as it returns to an appeal to faith and authority over reason. But fundamentalism is, in many ways, a reaction to postmodernism, and thus bears mention in this review—not for the details of fundamentalism, which are best left to other essays, but to demonstrate how fundamentalism emerged, in large part, as a reaction to the radical relativism of postmodernism.

Armstrong (2000: p. ix) writes that 'one of the most startling developments of the late 20th century has been the emergence within every major religious tradition of a militant piety popularly known as "fundamentalism"'. As reason displaced religion and the search for meaning, many started seeking comfort in stricter religion, which filled the spiritual void left by the Enlightenment's enthusiasm for logic, reason, and technology, and postmodernism's subsequent rejection thereof. Armstrong (2000: p. x) further explains that, with modernity, 'it was assumed that as human beings became more rational, they either would have no further need for religion or would be content to confine it to the immediate personal and private areas of their life. But in the late 1970s, fundamentalists began to rebel against this secularist hegemony and started to wrest religion out of its mar-

ginal position and back to center stage.' Giddens (1990) and Bauman (1992; 1997) see fundamentalism as an answer to the moral questions thrown up by modernity and postmodernism. When postmodernism challenged the very possibility of truth itself, and those seeking religious meaning started finding it outside the confines of traditional religion, those who stayed within the traditional institutions reacted against the relativistic fuzziness of 'cafeteria religion' by strengthening dogma.

Although not a postmodern phenomenon, the contemporary fundamentalist backlash is exactly that—a reaction to postmodernism, and a fight of absolutes against relativism. Thus did Pope John Paul II (1988) worry, in his encyclical on faith and reason, about 'the widespread mentality which claims that a definitive commitment should no longer be made, because everything is fleeting and provisional' (incidentally, Pope John Paul II was not himself a fundamentalist, but led a battle against postmodernism's radical relativism that is still a *cheval de bataille* of (p. 181) today's Catholic Church, and especially the new pontificate). Lyon (2000) sees fundamentalism as a reaction to the decline in institutional and doctrinal authority, and the parallel rise in individual interpretation (see also Bauman 1998 and Smart 1998). Heelas (1998: 1) explains that 'for some, the disintegration of the certainties of Modernity has left a situation in which postmodern religion ... can develop. For others, the distressing certainties of modernity have resulted in the valorization of a pre-modern past.' Bauman (1998: 74) reminds us that 'the allure of fundamentalism stems from its promise to emancipate the converted from the agonies of choice. Here one finds, finally, the indubitably supreme authority, an authority to end all other authorities'—no doubt appealing in a postmodern world that has dismissed all authorities (and thus metaphysical certainties) as mere 'meta-narrative' power plays.

In an apparent contradiction, the literature points to a decline in mainstream religion (Roof and Agedal 1996; Repstad 1996a), with a parallel rise in fundamentalism (Johnson 1986; Neuhaus 1986; Roof and McKinney 1987). Iannaccone (1998: 1471) summarizes, that 'throughout the world, fast growing religions tend to be strict, sectarian and theologically conservative. In the United States, such groups continue to gain members, even as theologically liberal Protestant denominations ... struggle with relative and absolute losses' (see also Greeley 1989). For general trends on religious development, and especially the mainstream-fundamentalist divide, see Stark and Bainbridge (1985) and Berger (1999).

The apparent contradiction makes more sense when viewed through the optic of postmodernism's rejection of truth and the corresponding backlash: fundamentalism is the reverse of the postmodern medal. Just as postmodernism questioned, then rejected, the modern project, so the rise in religious fundamentalism can be seen as a reaction to both modernism and postmodernism. If the horrors of the twentieth century are seen as fundamental failures of modernism (and inevitable), a pre-modern rejection makes just as much sense as a postmodern one. The direction of the counter-claim is just that—a question of direction (see Johnson 1986).

In a specific geographical example, some authors even speak of a Fourth Great Awakening in the USA (see Johnson 1986). Considering that the first three awakenings were major factors in the American Revolution, the Civil War, and twentieth-century progressivism, respectively, the Fourth Great Awakening—if it is indeed that—promises to be of no minor consequence. Interestingly, this trend includes not only traditional religious groups, but also others concerned with the overall decline in American values and morality (see Marty and Appleby's multi-volume Fundamentalism Project (1991; 1993a; 1993b; 1994; 1995)). Neuhaus (1986) explains that the current rise in fundamentalism goes beyond traditional religious forces, to incorporate many who are troubled by a perceived decline in American values.

(p. 182) Speculation and Futures

The preceding sketch is just that—a sketch. It outlines the major trends and contributions to the literature on postmodernism and religion. Beyond the three fairly straightforward trends—decline in mainstream religiosity, personal religious experience supplanting institutional dogma and participation, and a fundamentalist backlash—other questions are more difficult. Here are three, outlined for consideration.

Making Sense of Islam

The discussion hitherto has focused (intentionally) on general trends, with an admitted (and probably inevitable) emphasis on the West, and thus Christianity, as the home of both modernity and postmodernism. Space considerations prevent a thorough review of the world's religions other than major trends; such a review is, in any event, beyond the scope of this essay.

The case of Islam, however, merits a pause. How does Islam fit into postmodernity (or modernity, for that matter)? Which country is representative of contemporary Islam: Turkey with its nationalist secularism or Iran with its theocracy? Islam and Welty (1996: 159–61) caution us that 'most Muslims take positions that do not lie at either of these extremes'.

The recent trend of radical Islamism would certainly appear to place Islam in parallel with other fundamentalisms. Gellner (1992: 4) comments that 'in our age, fundamentalism is at its strongest in Islam', and remarks that, whereas other religions have declined in the past century, Islam is as strong—or stronger—than a century ago (1992: 5). Dekmejian (1985) sees fundamentalism as a core attribute of the Islamic mind-set. Likewise, Ajami (2004) reports the teaching of radical Islamist Sayyid Qutb, that 'a Muslim has no nationality except his belief'—a clear rejection of modernity's nation-state, just as attempts to impose Shari'a law contradict modern freedom of religion and the separation of church and state. Tibi (1988) opines that Islam is, by definition, incompatible with the scientific-technological culture of the modern world. In more fundamental terms, Mawdudi (1979:

37) expresses Islam's repudiation of modernity—a repudiation along *pre-modern*, rather than *postmodern* lines:

It is neither for us to decide the aim and purpose of our existence nor to prescribe the limits of our worldly authority, nor is anyone else entitled to make these decisions for us ... Nothing can claim sovereignty, be it a human being, a family, a class, a group of people, or even the human race in the world as a whole. God alone is the Sovereign, and His commandments the Law of Islam.

(p. 183) See also Adams (1983); Mawdudi (1976); Choueiri (1990); and Armstrong (2000), as well as Hefner (1998) and Gellner (1992) on Islam and secularization.

Surely such a world view clashes with modernity. Yet, one must be cautious about applying Western paradigms to the Islamic situation, as the latter is so intertwined with colonialism and the forceful imposition of modernity. Ahmed (2004: pp. xii, 28–9) explains that the Islamic world is still wrestling with modernity, let alone postmodernism. What might easily be dismissed as fundamentalism could just as easily be a return to pre-colonial traditions, or a postcolonial search for identity (see Lundin and Lundin 1996; Armstrong 2000). With such different historical experiences, the reaction to modernity will, of course, be different, as the Islamic world has reacted as much to Western colonialism as to Western ideas. Ahmed (2004: 31), reminds us that, for much of the Muslim World 'modernization' amounted to emulation of British ways; and today 'the few Muslim comments on postmodernism are tentative and sweeping; they dismiss it as a continuation of Western modernism, as destructive and doomed ... equated to "Americanization," "nihilism," "anarchy" and "devastation".... Indeed, [they] equate postmodernism broadly with American civilization'. Generally, see Gellner (1992: 10–20) for a commentary on Islam's reaction to modernism. Thus does Clarke (2006: 166) enjoin us that 'such changes as are occurring in [the Islamic world] cannot be fully understood and explained if seen solely as responses to Westernization and modernization'. Moreover, as Abou El Fadl (2004: 15–16) points out, elements of modernization (such as the nation-state, communications and technology, and 'the intrusive modern state') have altered traditional balances in Islam; in essence, the 'modern praetorian state [has] become the maker and enforcer of divine law'. This is further complicated by the politicization of fundamentalist Islam (see Sivan 1992; Abrahamian 1992; Waines 2002; see also Hunter 1990; Hassan 1990 for further cautionary notes).

In addition, dissent, theological evolution, and the debates over interpretation and authority that are so central to the modern-postmodern clash are nothing new in Islam. Clarke (2006: 165) explains that 'although often seen as a response to modernization and globalization, several of the core issues that engage Islamist groups, who are defined essentially by their demand for an Islamic state, have a long history'. Likewise, Abou el Fadl (2004: 15) explains how 'concerns about the reach of the government's power under Shariah law have antecedents in Islamic history, and so, by the standards of the modern age, this is not an entirely novel issue'. In fact, Clarke (2006: 165) continues, the central 'debate on the relationship of revelation and reason did not begin in the Muslim world with the rise of modern science and the impact of Enlightenment thinking from the West,

but can be traced back to earlier times’—even if (2006: 166) modernization and Westernization have ‘widened and complicated the issues that Muslims have had to grapple with for centuries’. For a history of the various Muslim intellectual revolutions and their intended targets, see Clarke (2006: 184). In Islam, this question of interpretation (p. 184) revolves around the conflict (and not a new one, at that) between *ijtihad* (personal interpretation) and the community or scholarly consensus, as led by *‘ulama* scholars (see Clarke 2006: 165 and ch. 7 generally, as well as Abou el Fadl 2004: esp. 7–9). In fact, Clarke (2006: 168) sees an *‘ijtihad* revolution’ in modern Islam—not at all unlike the Protestant Reformation that triggered modernity in the first place.

In light of both the methodological pitfall (of the Islamic world's particular exposure to modernity) and the fact that the interpretation debate is not new in Islam, there exists the possibility that Islam will come to terms with modernity—as have significant segments of Christianity—or other peaceful alternatives to the fundamentalist scenarios presented above. Abou el Fadl (2004: 51), citing Nader A. Hashmi, offers an optimistic perspective, opining that ‘like other religious traditions whose origins lie in the pre-modern era and are scripturally based, Islam is neither more nor less compatible with modern democracy than Christianity or Judaism’ (generally, see Abou El Fadl 2004 on the possible—and indeed historical—coexistence of Islam with very modern concepts such as rule of law and separation of powers). Nielsen (1993: 89) asks rhetorically (if pleadingly) ‘how is it that a religion of the historical richness and strength of Islam has now come to be associated with a one-dimensional reactionary integralism?’ (See also Smart 1998 and Ahmed 2004: esp. ch. 4, on the three trends in contemporary Islam: traditional, modernizing, and radical). Nielsen (1993: 102) concludes that ‘the historical evidence is that the Islamic paradigm is not intrinsically (and has not always been) fundamentalist’. Generally, see Lawrence (1998); Hefner (1998); Waines (2002); and Armstrong (2000).

Static Creeds, Dynamic Beliefs: The Challenge of Study and Self-Reporting

Changing mental models imply changing methodologies. What if we are studying post-modern phenomena with inadequate modern tools? Lyon (2000: 21) cautions us that ‘many contemporary accounts of religion in the modern world are charmingly simple but profoundly misleading. This state of affairs can be traced to a single social one-idea-fits-all theory, called secularization. The theory suggests that the growth of science and technology, of urban industrial social patterns, and of the nation state, has deleterious effects on religious life. Modern society, so the story goes, runs on non-religious principles, churches lose social influence, and people stop attending them.’ As discussed above, secularization theory was accurate to an extent—but provided only half the story.

Furthermore, the decline in mainstream religion is probably much more dramatic than the literature indicates. For example, there are methodologically confusing problems, such as the possibility of ‘belonging without believing’—that is, belonging (p. 185) to a church for social, spiritual, or other reasons, without believing its teachings (Repstad 1996a; Botvar 1996)—or the tension between static (official) creeds and dynamic (individ-

ual) beliefs, which will create huge difficulties in distinguishing between stated and actual preferences. For example, Donegani (2007) reports that only 51 percent of French respondents describe themselves as Catholics; but he further reports that only 52 percent of French Catholics believe in God, and only 18 percent define God according to the teachings of the Catholic Church. What does it really mean to be a Catholic any more? Conversely, what does it mean to claim that religious participation is dwindling—without looking beyond institutional participation? Lyon (2000: p. ix) complains that “‘religion’ smacks of conventional, organized religiosity, inappropriate to today's world of spiritualities and seekers’. Social scientists will have to consider such problems when asking questions and studying religiosity.

Assessing Postmodernism

Finally, the question ought to be asked: what are we to make of postmodernism and its effect on religion?

The critiques

The religious fundamentalists, obviously, have offered their answer, if we consider the fundamentalist backlash to be largely a response to the squishiness of postmodern forms of belief and religious participation. But, moving from the religious to the philosophical, what of scholarly responses to postmodern thought and postmodern attitudes?

The two main critiques of postmodernism are, first, healthy concern about postmodernism's relativism (and the language in which it is conveyed), and, second, a simultaneous sympathy for postmodernism's healthy concern about the limits of reason (and some of the consequences that blind worship of reason has brought to humanity); in sum, postmodernism raises important questions about the modern project, but the answers are found wanting.

Gellner (1992: 41, 48) expresses a worry about postmodernism's twin sins of relativism and obscurantist language when he complains that ‘there is no end to this metatwaddle’, and ‘that relativism leads to sloppy research, appalling prose, much pretentious obscurity, and in any case constitutes a highly ephemeral phenomenon, destined for oblivion when the next fad arrives’; alas, that ‘is not all there is to say’ about postmodernism and its accompanying relativism. Indeed, he continues (1992: 71) with the assessment that ‘Postmodernism as such doesn't matter too much. It is a fad which owes its appeal to its seeming novelty and genuine obscurity, and it will pass soon enough, as such fashions do. But it is a specimen of relativism, and relativism does matter. It is objectionable because it leads to cognitive nihilism, which is simply false.’ Giddens (1990: 46) likewise (p. 186) points to a fundamental inconsistency within postmodernism: how can postmodernism supersede modernism if there are no legitimate foundations (or, for that matter, no foundations at all)?

In spite of his concerns about postmodernism, Giddens (1990: 48–9) recognizes the fundamental dilemma of modernity—‘How can we justify a commitment to reason in the

name of reason?’—as an honest question that is asked, if not answered, by postmodernism. As an alternative, Giddens (1990: ch. 5) suggests a rethinking of modernity to overcome its shortcomings, rather than a proverbial discarding of the baby with the bathwater. Similarly, Gellner (1992: 75–84) offers a third way—beyond the modern–postmodern divide, and beyond the fundamentalist–postmodern schism—of ‘rationalist fundamentalism’. This position ‘retains the faith in the uniqueness of truth, but does not believe we can ever possess it definitively, and ... uses, as the foundation for practical conduct and inquiry, not any substantive conviction, but only a loyalty to certain procedural rules [of logic], scientific procedure, and opening of all hypotheses to inquiry’ (Gellner 1992: pp. vii, 80–3). In a similar vein, Kermode (1968) and Foster (1983) see postmodernism as an extension and self-understanding of modernity, rather than a complete break; see also Bellah (1969) on ‘modern religion’.

Critiques on the critiques

For all their merits, there are two fundamental problems with the existing critiques of postmodernism and religion. First, a scholarly critique of postmodernism and religion is, in a sense, irrelevant. Indeed, lapsing for a moment into pop culture, the simplest analysis of postmodernism and religion is that ‘it is what it is’. Gellner (1992: 72), for example, writes of postmodernism that it is a ‘tortuous, some what affected fad’ of academics. That it is, for sure; but this is only part of the picture. Regardless of its merits, postmodernism has crept into popular consciousness, as a deeper manifestation of what Clarke (2006: 25–6) describes as New Age’s move from elite fad to worldwide mass movement. Regardless of philosophical merits, postmodernism exists and is prevalent; but it is too limiting to critique it exclusively from a scholarly perspective. Indeed, it is a safe assumption that most Europeans and North Americans have not read Derrida, Rorty, Habermas, Nietzsche, and the other high priests of postmodernism in any detail—if at all. It is also safe to assume that most people (whether drawn from the general population, from postmodern Christian denominations, or New Age movements) would fail a test on the basics of postmodernism. Yet more and more people seem to embrace the postmodern ideology, as reflected in institutions (see Petroni 2003, 2004; Wenzel 2007c; 2008), religious practice, and general *Weltanschauung*—again, ‘as if’ they had studied postmodernism and embraced it (see Friedman 1953). Where, then, did postmodernism come from? Is it taught in the schools? Has it made its way somehow into the popular culture, without being identified as such by the very people who embrace it? And if the ideology’s main tenets do not explicitly exist in people’s mind, where do they reside, and how are they transmitted? In and through conventions, language, standards, and ever elusive ‘culture’? Such answers will come from a deeper (p. 187) integration of theology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and even economics, with its insights regarding mental models and institutions (see, e.g., North 1978; 1990; 1994; Pejovich 2003; Wenzel 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2008).

Second, it is a dangerous conflation and sleight of hand to speak of ‘the’ Enlightenment. Out of simplicity, I have conflated here two very different (and often contradictory) schools of Enlightenment thought: namely, the Scottish and Continental Enlightenments. This is a dangerous—if far too common—conflation, as the Scots (Locke, Hume, Ferguson,

etc.) emphasized humility, reason grounded in faith, and a healthy acceptance of human nature, whereas the Continentals (Rousseau, Hegel, Comte, etc.) lapsed into a hubristic cult of reason, leading to social engineering, a complete negation of the individual in favor of some putative 'greater' or 'common' good—and, to put it bluntly, Auschwitz and the Gulag. For details on the two Enlightenments, see Hayek (1967; 1978; 1979); Hampson (1991); Boettke (2000); Porter (2001); Himmelfarb (2004); and Wenzel (2007b). As much as I shudder to conflate the two lines of thought, I must resign myself to the fact that they are indeed conflated in the popular—and intellectual—mind. Even such serious thinkers as Gellner (1992), Giddens (1990), Bauman (1989), and Ahmed (2004) conflate the two Enlightenments. Most strikingly, Giddens (1990: 172) writes that 'totalitarianism and modernity are not just contingently, but inherently, connected, as Zygmunt Bauman in particular has made clear'—totalitarianism is certainly a consequence of the Continental Enlightenment; of the Scottish Enlightenment, unequivocally not. The postmodern reaction, then—if it is indeed a reaction to Auschwitz, the Gulag, the growth of the state at the expense of individual autonomy, the destruction of the environment through ill-defined property rights, and the industrialization of war, all of which are necessary and inevitable consequences of the Continental Enlightenment—makes perfect sense. If we return to the humility of the Scottish Enlightenment, grounded in self-inquiry, doubt, and a foundation of 'faith within reason', then there is room to question the shortcomings of (prevalent/conflated/Continental) modernity, without lapsing into the nihilism and linguistic obscurantism of postmodernism. In fact, I suspect that this is what many thinkers are indeed trying to do, without making the appeal to the Scots explicit.

Conclusion

The above patterns—modernization and secularization, postmodernism, fundamentalism—and the struggles and questions associated with them, exist in all of the world's religions (see Armstrong 2000). Kaplan (1992: p. vii) reminds us that (p. 188) 'examples of real fanaticism, usually accompanied by violence, continue throughout the world with unceasing regularity. Whether the struggles occur among Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus in India, or between Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem, there are enough instances to remind the informed public that fundamentalism and its ramifications are an ongoing phenomenon.' Likewise, the world's religions are affected by the changes of postmodernism.

Space considerations prevent a detailed discussion of all religions. For general trends in the world's religions, see Lundin and Lundin (1996) and Woodhead *et al.* (2002). On Judaism, see Wieseltier (1990); Hertzberg (1992); Friedman (1992); Lundin and Lundin (1996); Haas (1996); Woodhead *et al.* (2002); Kunin (2002); and Armstrong (2000). On Hinduism, see Rudolph and Rudolph (1967; 1987); Nielsen (1993); Lundin and Lundin (1996); Smith (2002; 2003); and Woodhead *et al.* (2002). On Sikhism, see Nielsen (1993); Lundin and Lundin (1996); Shackle (2002); and Woodhead *et al.* (2002). On Buddhism, see Nielsen (1993); Cantwell and Kawanami (2002).

The debate is far from settled, as we are merely observing the ongoing effects of radical shifts in mental models and their effects on religion and religiosity. Concluding with the words of Lyon (2000: 148), we find both a warning and a harbinger of exciting scholarship in the future: 'how faith finds new forms, how spirituality finds new modes of expression, within postmodern conditions, cannot be predicted. The point is not prediction (even if it was for some modernist sociologies), but the tracing of trends, the mapping of everyday experiences.' And, lest we fall victims to our own cleverness, we should not seek to find all answers in scholarship and explicit philosophies, but also in observed actions, participation, and implicit beliefs.

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Suggested Reading

The following are recommended: Berger (1999); Gellner (1992); Harvey (1989); Hayek (1979); Heelas (1998); Natoli (1997); Pippin (1999); and Repstad (1996b).

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