

Postmodernism: A Biblical and Theological Reflection

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Abstract

Postmodernism could be traced to Genesis chapter Three in the fall event when man desire to be like God in their quest for freedom. The term postmodernism presupposes that there is a premodern, modern, postmodern and to the extreme even post-postmodern era. Therefore, for a proper understanding of postmodernism there is need for the understanding of modernism. Postmodernism as a philosophical movement simply means after modernity or a reaction against modernism and it defies clear-cut definition or explanation. It can rather be described than defined. In the verge of the twenty-first century, the postmodern divide has emerged as more apparent than real, thereby defining itself against modernism which hitherto has been the leading era for the improvement of humanity. Hicks alludes to this when he asserts that by most account, we have entered a new intellectual age, postmodern age; leading intellectuals reveals that modernism has died, and that a revolutionary era is upon us. An era liberated from the oppressive strictures of the past but at the same time, disquieted by its expectation for the future. The method adopted in this paper is Theological and analytical method. The features and propositions of postmodernism needs both Biblical and Theological reflection to unveil the response of theologians and the scripture to the unbecoming of the philosophical movement. It is noteworthy that there are some positive things that can be gleaned from the tenets of postmodernism. This paper therefore examined the concept and features of

postmodernism and the biblical cum theological reflection therein. The postmodernists are a blessing in disguise to the church as they wake the church up from her slumber of lukewarmness and inactions in taking her place in the affairs of things. The church should therefore endeavor to give direction and contextualize her message, without losing the content, in this postmodern era in order to remain the only voices that address the challenge and yearnings of the postmodern world.

KEYWORDS: Postmodernism, Biblical, Metanarrative, Modern, Premodern, Theological, Truth.

INTRODUCTION

The term *postmodernism* presupposes that there is a premodern, modern, postmodern and to the extreme even post postmodern era. Therefore, for a proper understanding of postmodernism there is need for the understanding of modernism. Postmodernism as a philosophical movement simply means after modernity or a reaction against modernism¹ and it defies clear-cut definition or explanation. It can rather be described than defined. In the verge of the twenty-first century, the postmodern divide has emerged as more apparent than real, thereby defining itself against modernism² which hitherto has been the leading era for the improvement of humanity. Hicks alludes to this when he asserts that by most account, we have entered a new intellectual age, postmodern age; leading intellectuals reveals that modernism has died, and that a revolutionary era is upon us. An era liberated from the

¹ Simon Kolawole, *Lecture Notes on Postmodernism* (CPH 910) (Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Ogbomoso, August, 2020),1

² Jennifer Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Illinois: Cambridge University Press, 2005),1.

oppressive strictures of the past but at the same time, disquieted by its expectation for the future.³

The features and propositions of postmodernism needs both Biblical and Theological reflection to unveil the response of theologians and the scripture to the unbecoming of the philosophical movement. It is noteworthy that there are some positive things that can be gleaned from the tenets of postmodernism. This paper therefore examined the concept and features of postmodernism and the biblical cum theological reflection therein.

THE HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND CONCEPT OF POSTMODERNISM

There is no movement or philosophical proposition that has no root, history or origin and postmodernism is not an exception. The concept of 'Postmodernism' denotes one that suggests a period after modernism. However, before the era of modernism was the period of pre-modern and modern. Obviously, both periods relate to the history of Western cultural development particularly in Europe⁴. Pre-modern era is described as a period in which the western world believed in the supernatural and domination of an individual by tradition and piety or spirituality⁵.

Modernism is characterized socially by industrialization, reasoning and the division of labour and philosophically by 'The loss of certainty and the realization that certainty can never be

³ Stephen R. C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (Tempe New Berlin/Milwaukee: Scholargy Publishing, 2004),9.

⁴ G. O. Olaniyan, . "Implications of Postmodernism for the church's Efforts at Achieving Objectives of Christian Education in the World." (2), (2015), 100.

⁵ Konstantin Mierau, "The Modern and Pre-modern ; European Culture And Politics" [https:// www.futurelearn.com](https://www.futurelearn.com). (Accessed, May 31, 2020)

established once and for all⁶. Olaniyan argues that modernism was a revolt to pre-modern philosophies as it rejected tradition and authority in favour of reason and naturalism. More so, modernism assumes that individuals are autonomous and the sole source of meaning, and truth should be the individual who through enquiry and rational means come to the realization of such truth⁷.

Consequently, Mclean and Macmillan hold that postmodernism is a school of thought that rejects, opposes, and replaces modernism. It is a reaction to and the reflection of changes that are observed as weaknesses in modernity and the consequent responses to those reactions. These account for the reason why postmodernism challenges the status quo of modernism, vis-a-vis; truth, reason, norms, tradition, and objectivity⁸. Also, Postmodernism is a stream that has gathered momentum over a period time; Hiebert traces its latest and more apparent development to 1979 with the publication of *La Conditione Postmoderne* by Francois Lyotard, he notes that other used the term in the 50's and 60's.⁹ The term 'postmodernism' first entered philosophical lexicon in 1979, with the publication of the *postmodernism* condition by Jean Francois Lyortard. The major postmodern philosophers includes Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), Richard Rorty (1931-2007), Donald Arthur (1931-2007).¹⁰

⁶ Gerald Delanty, "Europe And the Emergency Of Modernity: The Entanglement of Two Reference Cultures." <https://www.researchgate.net/publication> (December 2015) Doi 10.18352/hcm.491 (Accessed May 31, 2020)

⁷ G. O Olaniyan.

⁸ Mclean, I. and Macmillian A. Oxford Concise Dictionary Of Politics (Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 2004)

⁹ Michael Pocock, *The Centrality of Christ in Contemporary Missions* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2005),71.

¹⁰ Simon Kolawole, *Lecture Notes on Postmodernism* (CPH 910) (Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Ogbomoso, August, 2020),1.

On the concept of postmodernism, some scholars posit that postmodernism as a word is indefinable, Vanhoozer alludes to this when he stressed that those who attempt to define or analyze the concept of postmodernism do so at their own peril; this is because postmodernism reject the notion that any description or definition is “neutral”.¹¹ Jim Leffel claims that postmodernism is a shift in thinking permeating all society, and with postmodernism, there is no ethical standard which could be generalized.¹² This connotes that postmodernism having reacted against modernism, has no specific alternative to replace modernism. Postmodernism resist closed, tightly bounded “totalizing” accounts of such things as the “essence” of the postmodern and to David, there is no such phenomenon as postmodernity, but there are only postmodernities, this suggest that postmodernism is undefinable.¹³

The concept has been defined, described and or explained by various scholars from different angles and perspectives. In the opinion of Hossain and Karim, the concept of postmodernism cannot be perfectly understood without first of all, having a good understanding of the word ‘Modernism’ this is so because there is a common debate among scholars that postmodernism is a brainchild of modernism¹⁴. Kester suggests that postmodernity is now the modernist post-truth, the alt-postmodernity or the modernist truths thereby making the anti-thesis become the thesis in their description of postmodernism.¹⁵ On the contrary, other groups of

¹¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003),3.

¹² Anita Oliver, “Postmodern Thought and Christian Education” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* Vol.10 NO.1, Spring 2001. P.6.

¹³ Anita Oliver, “Postmodern Thought and Christian Education” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* Vol.10 NO.1, Spring 2001. P.6

¹⁴Hossain, Dewan and Mand shariful-karim “Postmodernism; issues and problems”In *Asian Journal of Science and Humanities*, Vol.2 (2013), 170-173

¹⁵ Kevin Kester ‘postmodernism in post-truth times’ *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol.50, NO.14, 2018, 1330-1331.

philosophers affirm that the idea is not new but rather, an advanced or an enhanced version of modernism. Hence, Neville submits that postmodernism simply means 'A period after modernity' or 'after modernism'¹⁶. Remarkably to Welsh, postmodernism is the required form of modernism in the late 20th century as it is just an extension of modernism.¹⁷ Generally, postmodernism as a period describes the era that followed modernism and technically, it describes numerous cultural expressions of literature, arts, philosophy, economics, architecture, literally criticism and religion¹⁸. Postmodernism, therefore, as its name denotes, is a rejection of the central principles of modernism, among others, the enlightenment concepts of progress, truth, rationality and identity. It is a philosophy of "Cognitive Relativism" which asserts that objective truth is illusory and that cultural contexts and language itself creates multiplicity of valid subjective realities typically known as 'narratives.

Consequently, postmodernism is an awakening to the limitations of modernity, or as some would say, its bankruptcy, particularly when it comes to providing any final answers about existence, or to resolving problems of human depravity and intractability.¹⁹ As a philosophical school of thought, postmodernism is an-shoot of modernism; a reactionary movement with an attitude of *skepticism*, where intellect is replaced by the will, emotion takes the place of reason, language assumes meaning and interpretation given to it by the individual while reality is considered as a social construct.

¹⁶ Neville, Robert, *The Highroad Around Modernism* (Albany, USA: State University Of New York Press, 1992),3.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Welsh, "postmodernism-posthumanism-Evolutionary Anthropology" *Journal of posthuman Studies* Vol.1 NO.1, 2017 (75-86).

¹⁸Hossain, Dewan and Mand shariful-karim "Postmodernism; issues and problems" In *Asian Journal of Science and Humanities*, Vol.2(2), 170-79

¹⁹ Michael Pocock, *The Centrality of Christ in Contemporary Missions* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2005),70.

The concept of postmodernism is colored with subjectivism or relativism a general suspicion of reason and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power. Here, individual understanding and interpretation of a subject is preferred to universal meaning or scientific objectivity. According to Pocock, the categories of postmodernism are as follows:²⁰

- Reluctant postmodernist- This admits that modernity did not deliver on its implicit or stated promises, but they wish it had.
- Resentful Postmodernist- They are angry that modernity became exploitative, a diversity, culture, and individuality-crushing machine.
- Reconstructive Postmodernists- These are hopeful that a new paradigm is out there; they are pluralistic and dialogue-oriented, they are 'instrumentalists' in that they are looking for what works.
- Re-emerging- They have been thoroughly immersed in postmodern belief and culture; they look for clearer currents in postmodernism.

FEATURES OF POSTMODERNISM

There are some pertinent distinctiveness, tenets and characteristics of postmodernism which is of interest especially on the notion of truth and its validity or rationality. This is because postmodernism argues that meaning is negotiated rather than being exact and limiting.²¹ Butler is of the opinion that Postmodernist thought sees the culture as containing a number of perpetually competing stories, whose effectiveness depends not so much on an appeal to an independent standard of judgment, as upon their appeal to the communities in which

²⁰ Ibid.,76-77.

²¹ Anita Oliver, "Postmodern Thought and Christian Education" *Journal of Research on Christian Education* Vol.10 NO.1, Spring 2001. P.5-22.

they circulate.²² This is in an attempt to describe the distinctiveness of postmodernism from a particular perspective. Postmodernism could be characterized as a growing awareness of modernity's limitation with regard to knowledge or truth and it will not accept the superiority or correctness of any religious position beyond its value for the individual.²³

Kevin J. Vanhoozer is of the opinion that postmodernism reject the epistemological foundationalism that proclaims: "come let us reason together", this does not mean that postmodern is irrational, they do not reject reason but Reason; they deny the notion of universal rationality, reason is rather a contextual and relative affairs.²⁴ Postmoderns like to draw on multiple sources, even if they are disparate, they can be from different religions, or cultures, or countries, no problem. This suggests that postmodernism is the jack of all trade, culture, and worldview and master of none.²⁵ The philosophical position of the postmodern is that there is a crisis of reason meaning that the old paradigms have been found wanting in what they can deliver and that the old views of morality, knowledge, and power have changed. Therefore, the postmodernist is seeking new ways in which to define social and power relations.²⁶

Postmodernism, born under western secular conditions *inter alia* has the following characteristics: It emphasizes pluralism and relativism;²⁷Radical Unity in Diversity; The Denial of Truth-

²² Christopher Butler, *Postmodernis: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford,nd),37.

²³ Michael Pocock, *The Centrality of Christ in Contemporary Missions* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2005),72.

²⁴ Vanhoozer,11.

²⁵ Michael Pocock, *The Centrality of Christ in Contemporary Missions* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2005),72.

²⁶ Anita Oliver, "Postmodern Thought and Christian Education" *Journal of Research on Christian Education* Vol.10 NO.1, Spring 2001. P.6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Foucault asks not, what is true? But how is truth created? This suggests that truth is a construction based on knowledge, subjectivity, and power;²⁹ Constructivism- This is the view that persons construct their own reality based on the social construction of reality. This implies that each person has to construct his/her own reality, values, and faith or connection to God through study and learning;³⁰Deconstruction of languages; Technological Advancement; Skepticism etc the list is endless. Kolawole outline the elements of postmodernism as follows: Anti-essentialism, Antirealism, Anti-foundationalism etc. all of which are a reaction against modernism.³¹

REFLECTIONS ON POSTMODERNISM

From the foregoing overview, concepts and features of postmodernism, it is expedient and necessary to proffer biblical and theological reflection or response to the phenomenon for it not to be a bane for the church and contemporary Christians. Postmodernism can be traced to Genesis chapter three in the discourse between Eve and Satan on not eating the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden. This presupposes that there are biblical bases for postmodernism which in a sense argues whether propositional truth is objective truth. Granted that postmodernist resist one's appeal to the authority like the scripture, God is sense in nature and explained in the scripture and he transcend all reality which postmodernists deny.

The scripture indicates that unregenerate soul do not on their own draw correct conclusion about what they see in nature but through special revelation in the scripture as God is a cognitive

²⁸Olaniyan Gabriel Olatunde. 2015. "Implications of Postmodernism for the church's efforts at achieving objectives of Christian Education in the world. In *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology*, xx (1), 94.

²⁹ Anita Oliver, "Postmodern Thought and Christian Education" *Journal of Research on Christian Education* Vol.10 NO.1, Spring 2001. P.8.

³⁰ Ibid.,9.

³¹ Simon Kolawole, *Lecture Notes on Postmodernism* (CPH 910) (Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Ogbomoso, August, 2020),1

or knowable reality.³² Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives, this was supported by John McGowan who argues that postmodern culture is characterized by despondency and despair of which the Bible need to respond to.³³ Biblically, Jesus is the truth and any other truth outside the Bible is God's truth and the knowledge of the truth (Jesus). The church must reaffirm her doctrine especially the doctrines of creation, biblical inspiration, incarnation and salvation by holding to the divine origin of her doctrine to counter the excessive of postmodernism.³⁴

The transition from modern to postmodern biblical studies involves more than the substitution of critical-historical method of interpretation; for postmodernity, it is the rise of ideological consciousness. The mandate of modern biblical studies to serve truth and pursue objective knowledge has given way to the postmodern mandate to serve the community and pursue justice. Thus, postmodern biblical studies begin by acknowledging the "interestedness" of every text and every reading.³⁵ Hiebert reflect on the phenomenon of postmodernism as follows:

Postmodernity focuses on self and the now-on the concrete in the form of daily life as an alternative to theory. It stresses appearance and image over technical and substance; the unique rather than the general; the unrepeatable rather than the recurring; interminacy rather than determinism; diversity rather than synthesis. It is interested in the eccentric, the marginal, the disqualified, and the

³² Michael Pocock, *The Centrality of Christ in Contemporary Missions* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2005),82-84

³³ Anita Oliver, "Postmodern Thought and Christian Education" *Journal of Research on Christian Education* Vol.10 NO.1, Spring 2001. P.6.

³⁴ Simon Kolawole, *Lecture Notes on Postmodernism* (CPH 910) (Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Ogbomosho, August, 2020),9.

³⁵ Vanhoozer,158.

subjugated. It is deeply suspicious of reason. It sees reason as the basis of the Enlightenment, modernity, and western society, and their domination, oppression and rule of the world. It therefore rejects reason as the basis for diversity and tolerance...postmodernists celebrate emotions, intuition, creativity, and imagination...They have little sense of history. Time is seen as disparate, crisscrossed, and misaligned rather than homogeneous, evolutionary and purposive. It is fascinated with immediate events-with news.³⁶

The above submission presupposes that the bible needs to proffer answers to counter the excesses of the postmodern thought by apologetically emphasizing the centrality of Christ in a postmodern world. Postmodernism espouses a view of reality which allows for no firm truths, relativizes morality, and equalizes all religions which is rejected by evangelical Christians. Remarkably, postmodernist opens the ways of knowing³⁷ of which theologians need to take advantage of to add their voice to the scenario. Therefore, the construction of Christian faith should be based on biblical principles as against postmodern tenets (constructivism) for the contemporary church not to fall victim of the whim and caprices of the postmodern era.

Postmodernist desires individuality and identity in there yearning for significance and the scripture clearly affirms that every individual is supremely significant to God as they are fearfully and wonderfully made. In fact, human beings are the acme of God's creation having been made in God's image and likeness.³⁸ Postmodernism is a serious challenges that confront

³⁶ Michael Pocock, *The Centrality of Christ in Contemporary Missions* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2005),72-73.

³⁷ Anita Oliver, "Postmodern Thought and Christian Education" *Journal of Research on Christian Education* Vol.10 NO.1, Spring 2001. P.18.

³⁸ Michael Pocock, *The Centrality of Christ in Contemporary Missions* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2005),87.

Christian faith and deserve clear and compassionate response or reflection theologically; this is because postmodernism presents an ongoing reality that will continue for some time³⁹also, it is a repudiation of universal, an abandonment of appeal to reason, and a rejection modernism claims, this suggest that postmodernism is the death of truth of which Jesus is the truth that is alive at the right hand of God interceding for Christian.⁴⁰

God is a communal God and he expect communality even in the postmodern world which emphasis individuality, this is because the creation of man began with a communal decision "...let us create man..." thus, the communal God created communal man as human were never meant to be alone; and thus the need for community-church, which is a worldwide, culturally diverse phenomenon.⁴¹ This is because the Godhead is united without contradiction, thus, oneness and unity should be emphasized for the discord of identity in the postmodern world.

Postmodernism demonstrate a profound interest in spirituality, they are skeptical of any unique claims for God, but they are in the market of spirituality. Christian theologians should brace up and confront the unstable nature of postmodernism and portray the centrality of Christ in the postmodern world.⁴² Christian theologians should reject the postmodernist claims that there are no true truths or grand metanarratives on which

³⁹ Michael Pocock, *The Centrality of Christ in Contemporary Missions* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2005), 78.

⁴⁰ Anita Oliver, "Postmodern Thought and Christian Education" *Journal of Research on Christian Education* Vol.10 NO.1, Spring 2001. P.6.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Michael Pocock, *The Centrality of Christ in Contemporary Missions* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2005),82

to build our faith because Jesus is the grand truth that is reliable and trustworthy.⁴³

Postmodernism is a movement that defies identity even among theologians, and there are some theological reactions to the movement. This is because postmodernism is a threat to philosophy and the church as it attempts to wake the church up from her slumber. This is because since the fall, there have been limitations to human reason and its ability to find out God and God can only be found in Christ as the only way to God and the absolute truth.⁴⁴ It is worthy of note that theologians have a herculean task in theologizing in a postmodern era by being apologetics on Christian faith in the midst of misconception about objective and subjective truth or reality. Granted that postmodernism opens the way for acceptance of multiple perspectives, there is a need for theologians and the church to know what is good about postmodernism in order to know what to keep and what to discard therein.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

Postmodernism is multidimensional with its vicissitudes of interpretation and relativism which in a sense is antichristian and anti-bible. This poses a serious challenge and threat to the church and the Christian faith. Therefore, the bible and theological tenets should be used in checking the excesses of the heresies of postmodernism. Jesus is the only way and not one of the ways and any other truth outside Christ is God's truth. Jesus is the hope of all the despondent, despair, and hopeless postmodernists and he is the way to meaningful life and way out of confusion. This is because there is ultimate reality (God) and a real word in contrast to postmodernist and

⁴³ Anita Oliver, "Postmodern Thought and Christian Education" *Journal of Research on Christian Education* Vol.10 NO.1, Spring 2001. P.17.

⁴⁴ Anita Oliver, "Postmodern Thought and Christian Education" *Journal of Research on Christian Education* Vol.10 NO.1, Spring 2001. P.17.

⁴⁵ Anita Oliver, "Postmodern Thought and Christian Education" *Journal of Research on Christian Education* Vol.10 NO.1, Spring 2001. P. 5

the ultimate reality is the God of the Bible who is knowable , though not by a system devised by man but by grace through faith in the incarnate Christ. And as such Christianity could constitute the niche that postmodern desire.⁴⁶

The postmodernists are a blessing in disguise to the church as they wake the church up from her slumber of lukewarmness and inactions in taking her place in the affairs of things. The church should therefore endeavor to give direction and contextualize her message, without losing the content, in this postmodern era in order to remain the only voices that address the challenge and yearnings of the postmodern world. And the church can do this in her answering theology or apologetics. Thus, postmodernism present significant challenges to Christians and it is invading every sphere of human endeavour, therefore, biblical principles should be used to address the situation.⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ Pocock,87.

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