

Part of a dialogue in which I defended the possibility of theistic postmodernism, on Talisman9, Thu, 23 Nov 2006.

<http://www.sonjavank.com/sen/> under Bahai-related postings

From: Sen McGlinn
To: talisman9@yahogroups.com
Subject: The efficacy of spiritual-religious beliefs
Date sent: Thu, 23 Nov 2006 21:15:10 +0100

- > By claiming that I "caricature" postmodernism, i.e.
- > misrepresent it, you are claiming for yourself a privileged
- > viewpoint on what postmodernism actually or truly is, i.e. claiming
- > that you know the objective truth about postmodernism.

Not at all. Any one-sided simplifying picture of postmodernism would be a caricature. So would a one-sided simplifying picture of modern or medieval or classical philosophy. These are all complex phenomena that cannot be summed up by reference to one author. In fact, what would one call an account of medieval (or Islamic) philosophy that left out religion, or vice versa?

- > However, postmodern
- > philosophy expressly denies that any viewpoint is privileged over
- > any other,

- > Claiming that none of its critics truly understands postmodernism
- > is, of course, one of the standard (if incoherent,
- > self-contradictory) postmodernist defences

Perhaps this is because people who grasp what postmodernism is, say, Of course, how obvious ...

This does not mean that the critics are stupid, but postmodernism is only obvious if one lives in a postmodern world, with a postmodern world-view. It seems obvious because of its natural coherence with the postmodern world, with our intuitions about how that world works and what was wrong with the societies of the modern era

- > If you think that I am caricaturing postmodernism please name a
- > postmodern philosopher who (a) accepts an privileged point of view;
- > (b) accepts a final point of view or the statement (Derrida,
- > Foucault) that "all interpretations are misinterpretations" (c)
- > rejects ethical and epistemological relativism; (d) accepts the
- > concepts of objective, discoverable (as distinct from constructed)
- > eternal truth/reality and (e) rejects the proposition that reason
- > and science are merely culture bound, specifically Enlightenment,
- > enterprises. It would help if at least some of your citations came

- > from one of the major postmodernists who have largely shaped the
- > movement, i.e. Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard or Nietzsche (the
- > foundational father of the movement).

I do not have to bow a knee to any authorities to be a postmodernist -
I am a postmodernist and I can answer for myself.

a) I do not accept any uniquely privileged point of view in this world. God as the exception simply underlines this: to claim a uniquely privileged point of view is to claim to stand in the shoes of God, it is blasphemous and presumptuous.

The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue for ever to be, closed in the face of men. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court.
(Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 49)

b) I accept the view that all interpretations - including my own - are misinterpretations, being incomplete at best. Every claim that "it means this" is misleading:

the literal meaning, as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended. Thus it is recorded: "Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people. And when the Qá'im shall arise, He shall reveal unto men all that which remaineth." He also saith: "We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain."

(Baha'u'llah, The Kitab-i-Iqan, p. 255)

c) I accept both ethical and epistemological relativism:

The good deeds of the righteous are the sins of the Near Ones.
(Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, p. 126)

It is clear to thine Eminence that all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his journey beholdeth in the realms of being, proceed from his own vision.

(Baha'u'llah, The Seven Valleys, p. 18)

d) I reject the idea that the eternal truth/reality is discoverable. Only its attributes can be known to us, and we have to take it on trust that they point towards one essence:

so that the Incomparable Friend may come unto His own place - that is, the effulgence of His Names and Attributes, not His Essence (exalted is He), for that Peerless King hath been and will be holy

for everlasting above ascent or descent. (Abdu'l-Baha, A Traveller's Narrative, p. 63)

e) I reject the proposition that reason and science are merely culture bound, specifically Enlightenment, enterprises. They are universal, and evidence of them can be found in every reasonably complex society that has left us some material evidence of its life. I also reject the claim that European sciences since the enlightenment have some privileged claim to represent "science" as such.

> Being a "postmodern theist" is, of course, an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

Pius X claimed that it was impossible to be a modernist and a believer (PASCENDI DOMINICI GREGIS para 6). Religion somehow survived the good Pope, and found modern forms in the modern age, and I expect it will do the same in the postmodern age.

> the 'God's Eye View (of which more later) would constitute a "grand narrative,"

Not being God, I would not know, and I am curious to know where you have your information from. I do know that religion's view is not a grand narrative that one can use in other fields such as history, science and politics. But religion is not the same as God.

> Briefly - and as you admit below - for postmodernism, God must be
> the Great Exception - but this leads to at least one major problem.
> In a philosophical nutshell, it leads to a revival of Plato and Kant
> and essentialism: God's objectively true knowledge constitutes a
> given reality on which human interpretations/misinterpretations are
> based, i.e. the noumenon or Plato's version thereof, the World of
> Ideas, or Schopenhauer's World Will and its "gradations". Each case
> divides the world into (a) a foundational reality and (b) the
> appearance or expression of that reality and its human
> (mis)interpretations.

Yes, well put.

> But this division, of course, is the ontological basis of
> essentialism - which postmodernism unanimously rejects because
> essentialism threatens the whole business of no privileged
> viewpoints or objective knowledge or eternal truth and so on.

I have used essentialism and neoplatonism throughout Church and State, without claiming a privileged viewpoint (despite what some people have said I claimed). Naturally I do not claim to speak about the essence of God

- > In short, the mere existence of this Great
- > Exception is enough to throw the whole postmodern enterprise into
- > disarray.

Would that be a bad thing?

Postmodern philosophies and theologies are too young and tentative to be ossified

I would really appreciate it if you could put something like this in a short review and attach it to my book on Amazon. It would be great for sales, and I wouldn't get the blame :-)

- > First, we get absolutely true, objective and eternal ethical
- > knowledge from the Manifestations; this is what constitutes the
- > unchanging core that runs through all dispensations.

You claim to have the capacity to encompass the whole of the teachings of all religions? That's quite a claim. I merely take in what I can, and there is always more and room for more

He drinketh the seven seas, but his heart's thirst is still unquenched, ... (Baha'u'llah, The Seven Valleys, p. 10)

- > Second, the Writings tell us that we can actually make progress in
- > knowledge

But that means we do NOT have absolutely true and objective knowledge already? We are all on the path towards ...?

- > IOW not all misinterpretations are
- > equal,

I already said that. If they were all equal the relativity of truth would fly out the window. See my last post

- > Third, the Writings are full of things we can know - the existence
- > of God, Manifestations, progressive revelation, etc. This is not to
- > say we understand the full implications of these truths ...

Spoken like a true postmodernist. Stronger: we can be sure that we do NOT understand the full implications

- > the rejection of "grand
- > narrative" is incompatible with the Baha'i Writings because
- > "progressive revelation" is certainly a "grand narrative" of
- > humankind's entire spiritual evolution.

I do not think progressive revelation can properly be used as a grand narrative. It is a theological, not a historical concept. It is unprovable scientifically, and unusable politically (try using it as a basis for ecumenical endeavours, and watch the fur fly). So, no grand narrative

- > The Writings also accept the
- > concept of progress, both in religion/spirituality, science and
- > social development - which means that some are more primitive than
- > others, as Abdu'l-Baha mentions, for example, in regards to Africa
- > (SAQ 19).

I have no problem with the concept of progress - I do reject the idea that progress is inevitable. I see history more as cyclical, with times of progress and times of decline. I have high hopes that the dawn of the postmodern era is a time of progress:

Now the new age is here and creation is reborn. Humanity hath taken on new life. The autumn hath gone by, and the reviving spring is here. All things are now made new. Arts and industries have been reborn, there are new discoveries in science, and there are new inventions; even the details of human affairs, such as dress and personal effects -- even weapons -- all these have likewise been renewed. The laws and procedures of every government have been revised. Renewal is the order of the day.... Unless these Teachings are effectively spread among the people, until the old ways, the old concepts, are gone and forgotten, this world of being will find no peace, nor will it reflect the perfections of the Heavenly Kingdom.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha, p. 252)

But it is not inevitable that the progressive forces will win out. It could go the other way, with a swing back to conservatism, and a new "winter"

- > Furthermore, in the Baha'i Writings, we have other privileged
- > viewpoints: Abdu'l-Baha's as the appointed, and "unerring" (WOB,
- > 134) authorised interpreter of Baha'u'llah. The same is true of
- > Shoghi Effendi: "He is the Interpreter of the Word of God,"
- > `Abdu'l-Bahá, referring to the functions of the Guardian of the
- > Faith, asserts"(WOB 148). No individual Baha and no Baha'i
- > institution is in a position to claim this, i.e. Abdu'l-Baha's and
- > Shoghi Effendi's interpretations have absolute privilege and
- > primacy.

Each Manifestation brings a form of religious truth relative to the needs of an age. The Master and Guardian do not escape this

limitation, they are subordinate to and under the shadow of the Manifestation - thus not absolute. Shoghi Effendi is quite clear that his role as Guardian does not entail any universal validity:

"The infallibility of the Guardian is confined to matters which are related strictly to the Cause and interpretation of the teachings; he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc.

(Shoghi Effendi, Directives from the Guardian, p. 33)

and that the Baha'i Faith as a whole is only a religious system, not an economic system, scientific system etc:

The Cause is not an economic system, nor its Founders be considered as having been technical economists.

(Shoghi Effendi, Directives from the Guardian, p. 20)

- > There is
- > an eternal "golden core" (Skutch) which lasts through all
- > dispensations.

But if the next Manifestation says, what you thought was the core is the peel, and the real core is "an apple a day" ... then that becomes the core and we munch our way to salvation. The freedom/infallibility of the Manifestation is a doctrine that serves (or should serve) precisely to *prevent* anyone claiming to know what the core is.

- > Yes, but progressive revelation means that that not all of these
- > "multiple versions of religious truth" are of equal value or utility
- > at all times or that they all express the truth with the same degree
- > of completeness or adequacy. Just saying there are "multiple
- > versions of religious truth" does not make one a postmodernist.

This is certainly a big step from the religious views that characterised the medieval and modern periods. But if you do not want to call yourself a postmodernist, that's fine by me. Define your own identity: it's the postmodern thing to do

- > Some views are universally valid, such as Abdu'l-Baha's statement in
- > SAQ 184 that "Man was always a distinct species, a man, not an
- > animal."

Valid as science? are you serious and mean this literally?

- > Also the view that there is a God, a triangle on a plane has
- > 3 sides, that in this material world people need oxygen to breathe
- > and food to eat in order to live, that 500cc is more massive than

> 250cc and that armadillos are not oranges and do not grow on trees.

...

> Not all truths are relative to history or culture, such as those

> I listed above.

But I think that the view that there is a God is relative, it is a valid statement in religion, a disputable one in philosophy, but meaningless or pernicious in science and politics. The characteristics of a triangle are valid within geometry, but if a triangle exists outside of geometry (as in human relations) then the laws need not apply. If a triangle is defined as only existing within geometry, then its laws are safe - but limited and conditioned by being defined within one kind of discourse. Your third statement is not meaningful even within physics, but I suppose you meant to illustrate the general principle that more is more than less, ie, that there are tautological truths. That is, tautologies exist. That is, there is more than one way of saying the same thing. I can live with that.

I can live with the earth-bound nature of armadillos too : to say that all truths are relative does not entail believing that all statements are true. Perhaps there is a symbol-system in which armadillos are in some sense oranges, just as Christians are sheep and sins are forbidden fruit, but I am not really up on armadillos.

> What does that historical tidbit prove about the logical and
> coherence problems inherent in postmodernism, or its problems with
> the Baha'i Writings?

I do not think that postmodern people have greater problems with Baha'i Writings, so I will leave that aside. The point was that one cannot pick out one item of a coherent system of truths that are relevant/relative to one society, and critique it against the standards of another system. You have to step inside and understand the system as a whole, in its inter-relations.

> Postmodernism and globalization are *not* the same thing.

I do not think you can actually mean this. Is there any good future for humanity, after the modern age, that does not involve globalisation? I cannot conceive it. If the future sweeps us towards globalisation then (as I said in my essay in Warburg, Hvithamar and Warmind's _Bahai and Globalisation_), globalisation is the process, and the postmodern is what we imagine the outcome of the process will be. (Bahai meets globalisation: a new synergy? p 269). It is almost tautological

Constructive postmodernism

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2220>

looks attractive at first. I suspect the authors would also feel generally positive about the postmodernism I have proposed in Church and State and Bahai meets Globalisation. However

- I did one terrible semester of study of Whitehead and process theology, and decided at the end that Whitehead was rubbish as theology (maybe if one thinks of it purely as philosophy it makes sense). I think the constructive postmodernists' case would be stronger if they ditched the references to him.

- I am also uneasy at the communitarian overtones: I think that the "atomistic" individual, who "knows of his own knowledge, and not with the knowledge of another" is an adult, and the person who is still shaped within the matrix of social relations is still a child, however old he/she may be. I also do not think that the family provides a good model of social relations, since the obligations in a family are natural obligations, whereas social obligations are chosen and contractual. A society in which the obligations are regarded as natural (as in traditional and homogeneous societies) cannot offer its members sufficient choices to make for real freedom.

- I completely reject their idea of a new village economics -- the world is going the other way, to globalised markets and global specialisation, not to village self-sufficiency.

- they put economics under the umbrella of politics, which is not postmodern and not practicable. The result of this is that the economy collapses, it cannot work in a world with mobile capital and increasingly mobile labour,

> To recognise that understanding varies from age to age was nothing new ... As Horatio says to Hamlet, "It needs no ghost my lord to tell us this."

When you understand postmodernism as a whole, you also say, "of course. It is self-evident." Then one moves on to doing something constructive for the postmodern world

> I just don't think we have to adopt postmodern philosophy in order to reach the goals you set out. In fact, I think it would be disastrous if we did because we would be importing a whole lot of intellectually defective and self-destructive philosophical premises and principles into the Faith.

So be selective. I would certainly not say that anyone should pick one expression of post-modernism and turn it into a new comprehensive ideology (how modern!). But however you do it, address the world as it

is and as it is becoming, without carrying over baggage from philosophies that were designed for the modern or pre-modern world-view, because they may be elegant and true, within their own terms, but they will not help people to live in the world.

Philosophy and theology should be pastoral, they are handmaids not queens, and the theologian or philosopher is not the Nietzschean hero but a helpful sounding-board for ordinary people. The starting-point for a postmodern philosophy should not be what some previous celebrated postmodernist said, but the intuitions of any reflective person of today -- the night cleaner or long-distance truck driver as much as the musician or professor. Ordinary people do in fact manage to live in a functionally differentiated, organic, complex, morally ambiguous and individualised society, but the world-views that we have inherited, the ideas of "what religion is" and what "justice" means and what a "person" is and many other things, have been developed in the modern or pre-modern age. The intuitions that are enabling people to live in the world should be made explicit, "criticised" (in the constructive sense, as literary criticism brings out the beauty of a literary work), clarified, reinforced with evidences, and examined for the presence of inappropriate old world baggage.

There I go again: criticise, clarify, purify and strengthen. It will not win anyone tenure, and it could get a guy in trouble, but it could also contribute to the good of the world. People might say, "thank you, your philosophy really changed my life."

I really hope your coming workshops on postmodernism encourage some participants to positive engagement, and do not just strengthen their resolve to hold back the tide

Sen