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postmodernism and the denial of the metanarratives

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my two beautiful daughters.

Jean-François Lyotard

Jean-François Lyotard was a French philosopher and leader of the movement known as “poststructuralism.” Philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault share almost the same perspective in what is also known as postmodernism. Lyotard became associated with the Marxist group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, founded by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort. Lyotard’s work has concentrated on questions of art, language, and politics.

Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in 1979, an occasional text written at the request of the Quebec government, which catapulted Lyotard to the cutting edge of critical debate where he introduced his definition of postmodern as “incredulity towards the metanarratives.”

In his text, Lyotard highlights the increasing skepticism of the postmodern condition toward the totalizing nature of metanarratives and their reliance on some form of “transcendent and universal truth”:¹

"Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives[. ..] The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language[...] Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?" — Jean-François Lyotard.

Lyotard and other poststructuralist thinkers (like Foucault)² view this as a broadly positive development for a number of reasons. First, attempts to construct grand theories tend to unduly dismiss the naturally existing chaos and disorder of the universe, the power of the individual event. Second, as well as ignoring the heterogeneity or variety of human existence, metanarratives are created and reinforced by power structures and are therefore untrustworthy.

The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy adds to Lyotard’s reputation: “Many, including Lyotard, regard *The Différend* (1983) as his most original and important work. Drawing on Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigation* and Kant’s *Criticisms Judgment* in reflects on how to make judgments (political as well as aesthetic) where there is no rule of judgments

¹ Lyotard, Jean-François. Introduction: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1979: xxiv-xxv.

² Gary Gutting, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, 2nd ed., Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 36.

to which one can appeal. This is the *différend*, a dispute between (at least) two parties in which the parties operate within radically heterogeneous languages games so incommensurate that no consensus can be reached on principles or rules that could govern how their dispute might be settled. In contrast to litigations where disputing parties share a language with rules of judgment to consult to resolve dispute, *différends* defy resolution (an example might be the conflicting claims to land rights by aboriginal people and current resident). At best, we can express *différends* by posing the dispute in a way that avoids delegitimizing either party's claim. In other words, our political task, if we are to be just, is to phrase the dispute in a way that respects the difference between the competing claims."³

However, as we have said in the beginning of this paper Lyotard became well known because of his critical debate where he introduced his definition of postmodern as "incredulity towards the metanarratives." In order to write as clearly as possible I wish to begin sharing a few perspectives on postmodernism including a Christian perspective as well and then move to the metanarratives and try to present a solid response to Lyotard's perceptions.

In his book *The Postmodern Condition, A Report of Knowledge* Lyotard describes postmodernism as following: "... it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts."⁴

The philosopher John D. Caputo wrote a book called "What Would Jesus Deconstruct?" where he shares different aspects of what he supposes that Jesus would do if he was here today. In his book he disagrees with the Christian perspective on postmodernism rejecting the idea of nihilism and relativism stating: "I am inclined to think, more postmodernism situation, one is always a little lost, where being lost and being on the way, far from excluding each other, mutually imply each other. That is what I mean by giving the spiritual journey some postmodern teeth. I agree this is a little unnerving, but I do not agree that it is "relativism". Rather, it is what I just called "hyper-realism"."⁵

³ Robert Audi, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 523.

⁴ Dorothea Olkowski, *Postmodern Philosophy and the Scientific Turn* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 7, <http://lib.myilibrary.com?id=362639> (accessed August 5, 2014).

⁵ John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Pub. Group, 2007), 50, [Electronic Format](#).

Caputo's book from the very beginning starts with a conjectural statement of what would Jesus do in different situations. There isn't a single preposition acceptable in that regard of what Jesus would act based on his character, testimony and view of the Scripture, rather, the book induces the reader to assume that by chance or forced by culture Jesus would act according to their thinking. I would surmise that the writer did not read Romans 11:34: "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" The answer is NONE! Consequently, making conjectures of how he would act using behaviorism as something that Jesus would get along with is unacceptable. It is not philosophy because there is no logic on it, rather, it looks more like an astrology book. The assertion of the writer which says: "Deconstruction saves us from idolatry, while scriptural literalism succumbs to the idolatry of a book."⁶ Demonstrates the writer ignorance towards the Protestant Reformation assumption. Jim Powell in his book *Postmodernism For Beginners* says: "There is a little agreement on the subject, partly because "Postmodernism" - whatever it is-is an attempt to make sense of what is going on now-and how we can see the present clearly only in retrospect."⁷

The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy don't provide a clear definition of postmodernism, however, it says that: "Postmodern philosophy is therefore useful regarded as a complex cluster concept that includes the following elements: an anti- (or post-) epistemological standpoint; anti-essentialism; anti-foundationalism; opposition to transcendental arguments and transcendental standpoints; rejection of knowledge as accurate representation; rejection of truth as correspondence to reality; rejection of the vey idea of canonical descriptions; rejection of final vocabulary, i.e., rejection of principles, distinctions, and description that are through to be unconditionally binding for all times, persons, and places; and a suspicion of grand narratives, metanarratives of the sort perhaps best illustrated by dialectical materialism.

In addition to these things postmodern philosophy is "against", it also opposes characterizing this menu of opposition as relativism, skepticism, or nihilism, and it rejects as "the metaphysics of presence" the traditional putatively impossible dream of a complete, unique, and closed explanatory system, an explanatory system typically fueled by binary oppositions."⁸

⁶ Idem, 146.

⁷ Jim Powell, *Postmodernism for Beginners*, reprint ed., For Beginners Documentary Comic Book (Danbury, CT: For Beginners LLC, [2007?]), 22, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&an=784956> (accessed August 5, 2014).

⁸ Idem, 725.

The description of the The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy fits well with the Christian perspective of postmodernism. In his book *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, D. A. Carson writes: “One of the principal arguments of this book is that confessional Christianity cannot whole embrace either modernity or postmodernity, yet it must learn certain lessons from both, it must vigorously oppose many features of philosophical pluralism, without retreating to modernism.”⁹

William Lane Craig gives us a picture of what postmodernism might look like: "During the 1970s the postmodernist critique of objective canons of rationality and truth revitalized the old debate between historical objectivism and relativists. Rooted in Continental philosophy and hermeneutics and in anti-realism of Wittgenstein, there has emerged a powerful postmodernist current of relativism which flows through virtually every academic field, including history. Calling the conflict between objectivism and relativism the "central cultural opposition of our time."¹⁰

Now that we have some good resource about postmodernism we must move towards the metanarratives and then to a response to Jean-François Lyotard. We learn from the *New World Encyclopedia*¹¹ that metanarrative or grand narrative or mater narrative is a term developed by Jean-François Lyotard to mean a hypothesis that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences, and social, cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values.

In this setting, the narrative is a story that functions to legitimize power, authority, and social customs. A grand narrative or metanarrative is one that claims to explain various events in history, gives meaning by connecting disperse events and phenomena by appealing to some kind of universal knowledge or schema. The term grand narratives can be given to a wide range of thoughts which includes Marxism, religious doctrines, belief in progress, universal reason, and others.

⁹ D A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, epub ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 2009, 1996), 32, <http://images.contentreserve.com/imagetype-100/0354-1{7958cbc0-3ff0-4fb3-af8f-3fb375299037}img100.jpg> (accessed August 5, 2014).

¹⁰ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2008), 216.

¹¹ *New Word Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Metanarrative,” <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Metanarrative> (accessed August 5, 2014).

The concept was criticized by Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard refers to what he identifies as the postmodern condition, which he characterized as increasing skepticism toward the totalizing nature of "metanarratives" or "grand narratives."

It is a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience. The prefix meta means "beyond" and is here utilized to mean "about," and a narrative is a story. Thence, a metanarrative is a story about a story, encompassing and explaining other 'little stories' within totalizing a schema. Jeremy Worthen in his article "Theology and history of metanarrative: clarifying the postmodern question"¹² explains that Lyotard's influential formulation is based on the claim that there are two basic patterns of knowledge: 'science and non-scientific (narrative) knowledge. In traditional, pre-scientific societies, he argues, the narrative mode of knowledge clearly prevails as the mode in which collective wisdom is summarised, articulated and handed on across the generations. But once science, by which Lyotard means any form of abstract, analytical, schematic form of explanation, appears on the scene, then there is immediately a problem about how these two figures of knowledge are to relate to one another, with 'scientific' thinkers still using narrative forms of explanation to give legitimacy to their projects of knowledge. Now for Lyotard, the difference of opinion between these two forms of knowledge has been going on since the beginnings of Western intellectual history; he finds traces of it back in the dialogues of Plato and talks of the entire history of cultural imperialism from the dawn of Western civilization governed by the demand for legitimation. For scientific knowledge, according to Lyotard, raises questions about legitimation in a means that narrative knowledge within a traditional culture does not. Jeremy Worthen summarizes Lyotard assumption in this last paragraph in his article: "Such fears and such beliefs sit oddly under the shadow of the cross. Yet so too do the relativism and skepticism of the postmodern condition: in Lyotard's world, there is nothing left to die for, and the crucified messiah and the first martyrs of faith, who refused to accept the easy-going pluralism of the Greco-Roman religious world, look sad and absurd. Between grand narrative and relativism, does anything still remain?"¹³

Elmer John Thiessen wrote the following about Jean-François Lyotard's claim's that postmodernism is 'incredulity towards metanarratives: "This again would seem to go counter to orthodox Christianity, which surely is a metanarrative par excellence. Not so,

¹² Worthen, Jeremy. 2001. "Theology and the history of metanarrative: clarifying the postmodern question." *Modern Believing* 42, no. 4: 15-23. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed August 5, 2014).

¹³ Idem.

argues Smith. Lyotard is not objecting to big stories – grand, epic narratives that tell an overarching tale about the world. Instead, for Lyotard, metanarratives are a distinctly modern phenomena: ‘they are stories that not only tell a grand story... but also claim to be able to legitimate or prove the story’s claim by an appeal to universal reason’. Metanarratives, according to Lyotard, are ‘false appeals to universal, rational, scientific criteria – as though they were divorced from any particular myth or narrative’. The problem here is that we as human beings cannot ever get outside of our own narrative. Scientists too function under the rubric of a narrative that cannot itself be legitimated by science. Thus, for the postmodernist ‘every scientist is a believer,’ according to Smith.”¹⁴

Therefore, for the postmodernist there are no metanarratives at all. The metanarratives are acceptable by a larger group of people such as Buddhism, atheism, Christianity and so on. “In claiming that there are no metanarratives, postmodernists mean that there is no way to decide which among competing worldview is true, and more importantly, there is not single worldview true for everyone. There are no metanarratives, only local ones.”¹⁵

“Tolerance is the highest value in this age of radical pluralism in which all outlooks on life are to be accepted, most are even interesting, but none are true. As competing metanarratives, worldviews are throughly “deconstructed” and now they are regarded as privatized micro narratives possessing little if any public authority.”¹⁶

As it was already stated, our generation faces a crisis that has affected all spheres of life, whether in the fields of psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy or theology, issues that were defined in the past, this was returned as major challenges to society. The issues surrounding homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, racism, poverty, religiosity among others, brought back to a state of uncertainty.

This topic of uncertainty is not a question that affects only the church, but the whole society, we live in a time in which our society believes their questions are legitimate, but there is no answer. They don’t want any true answer, but want to stay in this state of intermittent

¹⁴ Thiessen, Elmer John. 2011. "Who's afraid of postmodernism? taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to church." *Evangelical Quarterly* 83, no. 4: 347-351. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed August 5, 2014).

¹⁵ James Porter Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 149.

¹⁶ David K. Naugle, “Chapter Nine: Theological Reflection on “Worldview,”” in *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), under “3417” Kindle.

challenging all manner of absolutes with questions for which themselves have no answers. On the other side is the church, which believes it holds all the answers, but don't demonstrate that with mercy, humanity and biblical wisdom. The church alleges that she is ready to answer any questions but she doesn't know how.

The postmodern era has led the society and church in a empyrean of dubiety even in what is regarded to the basic questions of life. The crisis of values is not solely an issue of religion, particularly of Christianity, is a crisis of humanity. This ideological vagueness is undoubtedly one of the hallmarks of postmodernism. The postmodernists have rejected all kinds of absolute truth, and established a world where truth is individual and what is true for one may not be to another one.

The French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky prefers to apply the term "hyper-modernism", and identifies some of its effects on society such as individualism, consumerism, hedonism and ethical problems.

The effects of post-modernity can also be felt in the church. And here we are not talking about liberal churches and spiritually asleep, even in conservative churches we find some effects done by the deconstruction and denial of metanarratives. It is important to underline that postmodern thought is not institutionalized, as if it were a standard of conduct of governmental, but above all it is an individual thinking of those looking for freedom, privatizing true to use it as it is convenient.

One of the most catastrophic effects of postmodernism in the church is related to the authority of Scripture. In the neo-Pentecostal movements, and much of the Pentecostals, the office of the leader has the exact same or even more authority than the Bible. Of course, it's all very subjective, they do not state so, but when questioned about certain doctrines and teachings, some say for example, that it is a spiritual revelation. Associated with the problem of negative authority of the Bible, they think that they have the right to interpret the Scriptures according to their standards, forgetting that Scripture interprets itself and with that re-interpret theological positions are assumed behaviorism, according to your criteria. That's why today when a divorced pastor is asked about divorce, he will hold his own interpretation which justifies his situation. And then is repeated with all other cases, such as homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, racism, poverty, religion and others. When confronted with the word, always present their stuffed reasons of doctrinal error and an empty spirituality. Upon which the apostle Paul told Timothy: "And will turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto fables." (2 Tim 4:4).

As much as postmodernism has affected the entire belief system of mankind, it failed to respond satisfactorily four fundamental questions of lives. These are questions that haunt the humanity and that in one way or another, all of us, at some stage in life we just have to deal. In one of the conference's *Desiring God*, John Piper, clarified that "some will face it as youth. Others in their old age, some in moments health deathbed.

These questions are not linked to color, race, gender, social or religious position, are always the same question: The four questions are: 1. Who I am? 2. Why I am here? 3. What is wrong with the world today? 4. How can we mend what is wrong?"¹⁷

I think that we will face a very hard time ahead of us as church and theologians, a time when will be necessary for us to follow a direction contrary to the world. It doesn't mean that we have to necessarily close ourselves to the world, but that we will walk in the other direction and as we move, we invite the lost man to reverse his steps and follow us towards God. Jesus said: "... My kingdom is not of this world ..." (John 18:36). If God's kingdom is not of this world, we cannot adopt the world trends and, instead, we have to show them a more excellent way.

It is unfortunate when the church is influenced by the world, taking positions contrary to Holy Scripture, postures rejected by the Church Fathers and Reformers, based on a pseudo cultural context and hermeneutics strange, distinct from the biblical. A missionary explained this matter very well saying that many have made serious mistakes, because they are "so involved on identifying the world, that they allow the values of the world to undermine the values and standards of Christianity. Jesus identified himself with man, but remained truly divine (Philippians 2:5-10). Similarly the church cannot abandon its identity and core values in order to attract people. The gospel is still the gospel only if it continues to transform man and not just lure him to be a member of a church. The gospel is the power of God for man's salvation (Rom. 1:16), and not for their adjustment in anyone system.

Let us return to the Gospel, and be a biblical church, whose values are established in the Word of God. Man like Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault may represent a huge challenge for us philosophically, not simply because they have strong and difficult assumptions which are difficult for us to answer and to deal with, but also because the church in many places have lost its position and we stopped to be an influential church, especially to the mind molders. I think that we can develop some very fine philosophers and theologians to beat the lies and the confusion created by these postmodernist philosophers.

¹⁷ John Piper and Justin Taylor, *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007), 57.

Of course it will not be an easy task and in some cases like Europe, we might need years to draw inside of schools, colleges and universities with Christian teachers in the areas of social science, biology, chemistry, mathematics, anthropology and philosophy to influence the new generation.

As a missionary and pastor in Europe, I fully understand and identified with the feelings and perception of William Lane Craig about the post-Christian and secularized European culture, where it is becoming increasingly difficult to get a hearing. The problem of the developed culture of resisting the Christian faith prominent in Europe creates an urgency to the task of sharing simple but sound reasons to believe with young children, adolescents and youth while they are still open to change.

I think that subjects as this cannot make us scare of hold tight to the truth and to feel encouraged to enter in this new intellectual mission field and be light in those dark and confused places. The Great Commission of Christ still stands as a firm command to us: “And Jesus came to them and spake unto them, saying, All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” (Mat 28:18-20). My personal prayer has been that God will enable my generation to do his work in the era.

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Author

Married for thirteen years and a father of two beautiful girls, I was born in the city of Petrópolis, RJ, Brazil, in January 1974. I hold an undergraduate degree in Biblical Studies and Theology (BA), a Master Degree in Church Administration and Leadership (MA), a Doctor Degree in Ministry (D.Min.) and actually pursuing a Doctorate in Philosophy. My work includes serving as a local clergyman and a seminary professor. I'm member of the Society of Christian Philosophers, member of the Sociedade Brasileira dos Poetas Aldravianistas, member of the Movimiento Poetas Del Mundo, member of the União Brasileira de Escritores and member of the Academia de Letras e Artes Lusófonas and affiliated with the Mission Board of the National Baptist Convention. By working in several countries, it gave me of a major cross-cultural experience. My theology is reformed and as a poet, I've a melancholic style following the pattern of the ultra-romantics of the XIX Century, as a humanist I'm characterized by the idea that man gets his true essence in the knowledge of God. I live in Lisbon with my family and have published books on spirituality, theology, philosophy and anthologies.