

Post-Modernism, The Emergent Church, The Luftwaffe.... And Platform Shoes

Bombs Away!

Post-modernism (PM) is a fairly nebulous collection of ideas, which can affect style, culture and the like. From that point of view, it's probably best summed up as a rejection of all that is past. Ironically, that itself is not a new concept: the fifties and sixties saw desperate attempts to create "ultra-modern" environments. One place which suffered from this sad obsession was Plymouth, which was largely rebuilt after the war. I couldn't have been the only person who saw the concrete monstrosities, and secretly wished the Luftwaffe would come back.

But the *philosophy* of post-modernism goes a bit deeper. Not much deeper, but there you are. It not only rejects the past, it questions everything we thought we knew. Post-modern philosophy declares that objective truth cannot be known...despite the obvious paradox inherent in stating *anything* as a fact: it holds that all beliefs are flawed or subjective...but of course – that is a belief *itself*. It offers no answers, only doubts. In a way, PM is somewhat akin to anarchism – one makes a virtue of ignorance, the other of stupidity.

Dedicated Followers of Fashion

Part of its appeal, is that it allows adherents to criticise or 'deconstruct' what other people think, while not offering a target themselves. For some, post-modernism justifies a Hedonistic lifestyle – after all, any concept of 'right' and 'wrong' can only be subjective. Others, still, embrace post-modernism because it has become fashionable: like the kipper-tie or platform shoes it will pass away, but those who bought into it will move seamlessly to the next fad - unapologetic, unembarrassed ...and apparently unaware of the absurdity of their former allegiance.

And absurd it is. Trawling through the writings of those who shaped post-modernism, we will not find great minds grappling with life's enigmas. On the contrary, we will find people whose *only* contribution is to cast doubt on what others have already said. For some of them, even the laws of physics and mathematics are merely subjective impressions. Personally, I wouldn't be in a rush to let these guys do my thinking for me. The real declaration of post-modernism is not that there is a lack of knowable objective truth, it is the declaration of intellectual bankruptcy.

I Think, Therefore I Might Be

Taken to the logical extreme, post modernists have the same dilemma as anarchists. An anarchist could hardly complain if I (say) battered his wife – after all, that's anarchy for you! Likewise, the post-modernist would just have to live with the subjective impression that I burgled his home, and that something which may (or may not) have been his collection of art, may (or may not) be missing.

PM Meets PC – So Happy Together!

But of course, post-modernists soon return to reality when something hurts them personally. It doesn't happen often – PM is most attractive to those who are least likely to have to deal with the real world. Much the same could be said of *political correctness*, which also shares its inherent hypocrisy. For example: A PC guy can happily affirm an imported, barbaric culture which maltreats women, while condemning his neighbour for watching "Miss World". Alas, there the similarity ends: PM shuns *knowledge*, while PC so often rejects *common-sense*. Despite that, followers of both philosophies still cling to the illusion they are somehow "cutting-edge". I admire faith, but that's just wishful thinking.

Congratulations, It's A...Cuckoo

Somewhat bizarrely for a philosophy which is hostile to the concept of truth, post-modernism has its own churches. Known as the Emergent or *Emerging* Church, it is a loose collection of organisations with (often) an even looser grasp of orthodox Christianity. Some have unkindly suggested that it shouldn't be called a church *at all*, but in a world where Scientologists, Spiritualists and Latter Day Saints are allowed to have churches, that seems a little unfair.

It might also be unfair to suggest that the Emergent Church is merely a cuckoo's egg, laid by the PM movement in the ever-welcoming nest of liberal Christianity. Many (if not all) of its leaders were Christians long before they were assimilated into the PM collective.....and the agenda of the Emergent Church reflects a 'missional' mindset, albeit one which is far removed from any mission Christ ever gave us.

We may – of necessity - only look at this movement in general terms. One expression of the Emergent Church will differ from the next, but we can check out a few of the more common traits.

A Pre-Modern Solution To A Post-Modern Problem

They start from the point that PM represents a radical shift in thinking, and that we need a new type of Christian to relate to it. Whether or not it represents a radical shift in thinking – or a shift *from* thinking – is debatable. But what *isn't*, is the need to bring the gospel to these people. Does that indicate the need for a new type of Christian? *Of course not!* From the inception of Christianity, it has been capable of making an impact in any culture and against any belief system. What *is* needed, is someone who will take the *uncompromised* message of truth to those who don't believe....dare I say, it is precisely the *old* type of Christian that is needed?

Emergent church-goers believe that the traditional church is hide-bound by its own culture. They are absolutely right. But their solution to the problem is absolutely wrong. They say we should re-examine every doctrine and practice of the church, and change them where necessary. Just a moment, though...wasn't their problem with the *culture* of the church – what's that got to do with doctrine? In reality, however, they have a major problem with doctrine, too.

“What Is Truth?” – Was Pilate The First Post-Modernist?

Like the other post-modernists, they assert that objective truth cannot be known. Interesting one: the only logical conclusions of such a belief is that God is unable or unwilling to reveal objective truth to us....or that he has created us with an inability to grasp it. The Emergent God is therefore *limited* or *obstructive* when it comes to 'truth' (something we may have previously thought he was big on) or he's just *unreasonable* - expecting us to respond to the objective truth about himself, even though he's fully aware that we cannot comprehend it.

It is a serious departure from orthodoxy, and the implications are far-ranging – especially in terms of how people understand God, and how they relate to him. I somehow doubt that the Holy Spirit has led Emergents into 'all error'...I don't even suppose many of them have thought the issue through. This strange view of God is just one inescapable outcome of what they *do* subscribe to, rather than a 'joined-up' theology. Simply put, their interest in post-modernism outweighs the influence of the bible in their lives.

We can see this in their attitude to what old, unreconstructed Christians might call worldliness. For some of them, sin is not something to be challenged...and for some of *those*, it is something to be embraced. “How else”, they argue, “can we show others, that we don't think we are better than them?” But since *when* has it been the Christian mission to identify with others, *by adopting their sinful lifestyles?*

Is Pilates The New Gospel?

Naturally, preaching is not high on the Emergent Church agenda...when it is there at all. They prefer to engage in an exchange of ideas with others, which they are pleased to call a 'conversation'. All are welcome to join the conversation, with the frequent exception of those who take Christianity seriously. There is, however, a goal: Emergents are mission minded. They want others to join them - don't ask me why. To this end, they offer the twin incentives of uncritical acceptance of any belief or none...and (cue trumpets) *social action*. Emergents are big on social action...mostly, they offer facilities to their local communities. Very laudable - wasn't it our saviour who said, "Go out into all the world, building fitness centres, squash-courts and conference rooms"?

Part of the obsession with social action (even though it is so often aimed at middle-class leisure activities, rather than helping the poor) is the belief that it is one of only two things which characterise Christianity. Leaving aside the inconsistency of Emergents having a belief (let alone, *two*), the other one is spirituality. They believe a *feeling* of spirituality is a benchmark of Christianity. It's equally a benchmark of paganism, new-age and devil-worship, but let's be charitable: social action and a feeling of spirituality *can* be associated with Christianity. But how do Emergents know their good-works are actually *good*, with no foundational truth to measure them by? Come to that, couldn't their feelings of spirituality be misleading them?

Don't Give Me That Old Time Religion!

As a service provider, the Emergent Church has much to recommend it. As an expression of Christian faith, it has nothing whatsoever. In totality, it represents a reinvention of Christianity, no less complete in its nature than that undertaken by Joseph Smith and his Mormon Church. Gone are the authority of scripture, the revealed nature of God and his moral absolutes. In its most awful form, we have a church (or more properly, a club) where people have effectively discarded the gospel - in favour of showing the world they can sin with the worst of them, doubt with the most cynical of them....and still consider themselves spiritual. Such self-delusion is entirely consistent with post-modernism.

The Emergent Church And Reverse Conversions

It is little wonder that the Emergent Church has no difficulty getting 'bums on seats'....there is something for everyone. Whether punters like poetry or prose, multi-media or medieval mysticism, it's the one-stop shop for that all-important 'feeling of spirituality'. But there's even more to its appeal than pick'n'mix, mood-altering presentations – it's just so user-friendly!

Almost anyone could feel comfortable in an Emergent Church....there is nothing in its message that would seriously offend an atheist, much less an agnostic. The reason for that is all too apparent: they claim to be reaching out to post-modernists (which is true) but they are not reaching out to them with authentic Christianity. In reality, it is the Emergents who have been converted – they have been converted to the PM world view. They are merely extending the hand of friendship to their fellow travellers. It is a *divergent* church, which has veered from orthodox belief...it is a *submerging* church - which is sinking (perhaps, irretrievably) into the mire of popular culture. But emerging? As *what*, and into what?

An Exercise In Mental Masochism

I'd recommend reading the literature published by some of the movement's leaders. Sure, it will be a tiresome task – but it will also be revealing. Cutting through the jargon, the buzz-words, the psycho-babble and the pseudo-intellectualism can be tortuous, yet one thing will come to the fore, time and again. Doubt. It's all about doubt. It's dressed up in a myriad of ways, but it all comes down to doubt. Whether that's doubt about sin, or salvation, or the atonement...or something like Christianity's alleged superiority to other religions – it is the constant theme of the Emergent Church. Often as not, it will be heavily disguised as a 'reconsideration' of some

doctrine or another. The reader will be invited to ponder – as others have been before – “did God *really* say that?”

Relativism Or Relationship?

Objective truth is most certainly knowable. We are not just created with the capacity to experience it, we are created by a God who *wants* us to know the objective truth about himself. The whole purpose of the bible is to reveal God’s objective, understandable truth, and to illicit the correct responses to that truth. The Emergent Church’s denial of this may not make them a greater threat to our faith than, say, the Prosperity Scammers... yet they are certainly a danger to themselves, *and* to those they mislead about the nature of Christianity. They are blind guides. They may be ushering people towards a luxuriously appointed, well-equipped pit...but it’s still a hole in the ground.

Emergents desperately need to reconnect with Jesus, even though (and perhaps, *especially as*) they fondly imagine they *are* connected to him. Such an optimistic view is hardly surprising. I’m sure they feel God is immensely pleased with their make-over of Christianity, and that they are in good standing with him. That’s the joy of redefining God and his truth – his requirements for relationship are inevitably *also* redefined. As all the Emergent God demands is social action and a feeling of a spirituality, he must be very happy. Perhaps we should be happy, too: at least *this* re-invention of God doesn’t insist on human sacrifice, like some of its more extreme (but only equally absurd) predecessors.

This movement presents us with a choice: We can ignore them, or we can try to help them recapture their ‘first love’. If we choose the latter, we may yet find that the Emergent Church can serve a purpose after all....as a point of contact between genuine Christianity, and the Emergents’ post-modern friends.

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Disclaimer: This article about post-modernism and the Emergent Church consists entirely of my own personal opinions, which I may – or may not – agree with.