

## FEW THOUGHTS ON POSTMODERNISM

*Moanaro Aier, M.Th II*



Epistemology is a branch of study of knowledge. In other words, it is about how we know what we know; how do you know what you know. Now, the foundation of epistemology till the time of reformation was on God who knows all things, the universal knower. That means, what we know is based on what God knows. What we know is a small part of God's infinite knowledge. How do we get that part of God's knowledge? People understood that we know something of what God knows because God reveals to us through nature, Scripture and Jesus Christ. Even though we know is just a tiny part of God's knowledge, it was believed that we can certainly and truly know what we know because it is revealed to us by God.

Then there was a major shift in the epistemology during the seventeenth century. This fundamental shift in the understanding of epistemology was contributed by French philosopher Rene Descartes. In order to make sense to the intellectuals of his time who were skeptical about the existence of God, Descartes developed an epistemology from a totally different basis, an epistemology that is no longer based on universal knower. In his discourse on method, he came up with the formula called, *ego cogito, ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am." The idea of "I think, therefore I am," is that you may doubt the existence of God, or the existence of everything, but not your own existence. Even if you doubt your own existence, the fact that you are think-

ing and doubting your own existence proves that you exist; because you are thinking, you must exist. You cannot deny your existence. You think therefore you are.

In this system of epistemology, the basis of knowledge is 'I', the one who is thinking, and no longer all knowing God. But the problem is that, I say "I think, therefore I am," you say "I think, therefore I am," and another person also says, "I think, therefore I am," but it turns out that what all of us think does not always agree. You claim to know an absolute truth, I also claim to know it, and still another person also claims to know it; but the absolute truth we claim we know is not same most of the time. So people came to con-

clusion that there cannot be any absolute truth as such. This is the root of postmodernism.

### **Critical look at Postmodernism**

Truth claim: Postmodernism says that there is no absolute truth, and we are not allowed to make any truth claim. It is strictly restricted in post modern culture. But the problem is that, to say that “there is no absolute truth” is in itself one absolute truth. It’s like you are shouting that you don’t exist and personally I wouldn’t believe such a contradictory claim.

### **Tolerance**

Earlier tolerance was understood in terms of a person who may have a “strong view” on anything but allowing others to express their own views, even if it is different. But the postmodern understanding of tolerance is that one should not have any strong view on anything. But the thing is that postmodernism has a “strong view” that we should not have a strong view. Moreover, if you don’t take postmodern position on anything, you will be considered as an outdated and a worthless person. Postmodernism would say, “you think like I think, believe what I believe, and accept my views. If you don’t, if you disagree with me, you are simply ignorant, narrow- minded and stupid.” Isn’t this how we also often judge

people who don’t agree with us, be it gender issue, homosexuality, or any other issues? If I say homosexuality is wrong, for instance, I would be condemned as being intolerant towards LGTB community. In fact, there are universities where one is not allowed to speak against homosexuality. So, expressing one’s view is considered intolerance, but suppressing or stopping that view from being expressed is not intolerance. Can this be real tolerance?

### **Biblical Interpretation**

Postmodernism also has influenced Biblical interpretation. For example “reader-response criticism” is a result of post modern thought. This method says that meaning of a text is not in the text but in readers. Readers create meaning of the text for themselves. So it’s not about what the author wants to convey to us through the text, but how we understand the text. But the question is, if you saying something and people interpret your statement in a different way, would you be happy? Would you not try to make corrections? This is what happens between politicians and media very often.

### **Heresy**

Postmodernism would not allow us to say that anyone is wrong. We cannot say someone is wrong

because it will hurt others. With this kind of perspective, there is no heresy in postmodernism. The only heresy left is to say that there is heresy. No absolute truth; only subjective truth. Whether something is right or wrong depends on an individual or an interpretive community. The danger is very clear to us as Christians.

### **Morality**

Another problem connected with the above point is in regard to morality. Who is there to say that this is right and this is wrong? Bible? But we can say that the same text can be right or wrong depending on the context, right? Context is very important but it can be very dangerous as well. Polygamy is right or wrong, homosexuality may be wrong for some but not for others. It seems that postmodernism is taking us back to a period similar to that of the period of judges in the history of Israel where everyone did what was right in his/her own eyes.