

The Return to Myth: Apologetics for Postmoderns

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Précis:

At first glance, postmodernism, with its desire to move away from that which is fixed, systematic, and logical, would seem antithetical to apologetics. In “Return to Myth,” I argue that postmodernism, despite the dangers it poses to doctrinal Christianity, can provide apologists with a challenge and an opportunity to reach out to a generation of people hungry for spirituality and purpose. In making my argument, I appeal to the more mystical view of nature and of language that were current in the Middle Ages and then survey the work of three recent, non-apologetical apologists (John Eldredge, Donald Miller, and James Choung) who have pointed the way toward an effective and fruitful engagement with postmodernism.

Although apologetics has traditionally focused on logical, rational proofs for the existence of God, the goodness of God in the face of pain and suffering, the authority of Scripture, and the claims and miracles of Christ, a number of more recent apologists, sensing a widespread cultural change, have sought a less rationalistic approach to the defense of Christianity. That cultural change goes by the name of postmodernism, a worldview that has consciously broken from modernism’s focus on system, structure, science, and empiricism. Whereas modernism is very compartmental in its attempt to categorize all knowledge and phenomena in discrete boxes, postmodernism takes a more holistic approach. Postmoderns yearn to break out of the box in search of mystery, wonder, and awe. As a result, they tend to privilege intuition, imagination, and synthesis over logic, reason, and analysis. They think less like Western surgeons, who divide up the body, than Eastern chiropractors or acupuncturists, who see the parts of the body as being intimately connected.

And they think this way too about the arts, religion, and language. Modernism wants all forms of expression—whether

scientific or aesthetic, secular or sacred—to “behave,” to line up in a clear, logical series of one-to-one correspondences and mechanical causes and effects. Postmodernism, in contrast, yearns for an aesthetic and sacred language that is less fixed and systematic, that is more strange and startling and slippery. People who identify with the postmodern worldview find *both* science and the church to be too constrictive, too black-and-white. They can find no place in either of these “institutions” to breathe or grow or create. They long to resolve rather than to solve, to experience rather than to figure out, to embrace the mystery rather than to capture and tame it. And the same goes for our interaction with the natural world. Modernism has reduced nature to an object to be studied; postmodernism seeks to restore meaning to the cosmos, to return to a sympathetic universe in which the turnings of the seasons and the orbits of the planets have something to do with us. For a postmodern, the universe is our *home*; for a modern, it is only our house.

In laying out this dichotomy between modern and postmodern, I know that I risk falling into the modernist trap of establishing air tight binaries. Still, though it is true that not all individuals will identify with one side or the other of this binary, I find it helpful to lay out a basic framework for understanding those areas of modernism against which a large number of postmoderns have reacted.

The Resurgence of Paganism and Sophistry

On the one hand, aspects of postmodernism pose a major threat to orthodox Christianity and to apologists who would defend Christianity as a worldview that is rational, consistent, and universal. Many today who yearn for a sympathetic universe reject the (western) church and its “overly constrictive” credal statements in favor of a smorgasbord of (eastern) spiritualities: horoscopes, transcendental meditation, the occult, yoga, Indian spirit guides, tarot cards, cabbalism, mediums, martial arts, and so forth. Such postmoderns are still referred to as New Agers, but they might better be called neo-pagans, for they tend to share a pantheistic worldview in which God is not viewed as the Creator of nature but as a part of nature. Pantheists direct their worship

not to the personal God of the Bible but to an impersonal force or spirit that pervades all things.

Though the majority of these neo-pagans seek not power (black magic) but spiritual connection (white magic), they nevertheless find Christian doctrine to be cold, confining, and exclusivist. For the neo-pagan the staleness and rigidity of Christian doctrine can't compete with the awe and beauty of myth. Where, they ask, is the story, the adventure, the romance? What do those old, dusty biblical stories have to do with me? What role do I play in the sacred narrative? How can I feel-experience-know a spiritual reality that is locked up in old books and creeds?

Meanwhile, within academic circles, postmodernism has led to a resurgence not of ancient Greek paganism but of Athenian sophistry. Like Socrates and Plato's enemies, the sophists, many postmoderns consider truth and morality to be relative, changing from culture to culture and polis to polis—even individual to individual! Rather than treat words as potential containers of absolute truth, postmoderns sever the words we use (signifiers) from the meaning they purportedly point back to (signifieds). The postmodern school of deconstructionism posits a breakdown between signifiers and signifieds that prevents us from getting back to any fixed, originary meaning. Every time we try to trace a signifier back to a signified, it turns out to be yet another signifier; in the end we get caught in a swirl of signifiers that lead nowhere.

Deconstructionism, I would argue, has brought back the three propositions put forward by one of Plato's nemeses, Gorgias the sophist. Gorgias rejected the existence of any kind of original, fixed, transcendent Meaning (like Plato's Forms) and posited instead that: 1) nothing exists; 2) if it exists, it cannot be known; and 3) if it can be known, it cannot be communicated. Twentieth-century deconstructionists like Derrida have affirmed Gorgias' cosmic and linguistic skepticism by essentially reasserting his three propositions: 1) there are no signifieds to fix meaning, and no single Transcendental Signified that can fix the meaning of the signifieds; 2) fixed, originary Meaning, even if does exist, cannot enter into our playhouse world of signifiers; and 3) even if Meaning were to exist, and even if it could somehow enter our world, human language would not be able to contain

or express it. For a religion like Christianity, whose faith rests not only on a book (the Bible) that is considered to be the revealed Word of God but on a Savior who is himself the Word of God in human flesh, deconstructionism poses a clear and present danger. If the commands and promises of God can neither be known nor communicated, either in the form of an inspired book or an incarnate savior, then Christianity loses its claim to be God's ordained path to salvation, truth, and eternal life.

The great twentieth-century apologist Francis Schaeffer (who understood, a decade before most of his colleagues, both the benefits and dangers of a postmodern worldview) pointedly titled one of his key apologetical works *He is There and He is not Silent*. By declaring war on all signifieds, deconstructionism has turned God's Presence into absence; by cutting signifiers adrift from any final meaning, it has turned God's Voice into gibberish.

Postmodernism, it would seem, can only pose a threat to the integrity of Christ, the Bible, and Christianity. Surely, therefore, modern apologists should avoid it at all costs. Or should they?

Thinking Outside the Enlightenment (and Reformation) Box

Despite the dangers described in the previous two paragraphs, I nevertheless believe that, if handled properly, postmodernism can provide Christian apologists with a challenge and an opportunity to reach out to a generation of people hungry for spirituality and purpose. But it can only do so if apologists are willing to think outside the box—that is to say, to extend their vision to pre-Enlightenment and, yes, pre-Reformation ideals that can coexist and even be strengthened by a little postmodern slipperiness!

Though the modern world has taught us to dismiss (unfairly) the Catholic Middle Ages as dark, ignorant, and superstitious, the medieval vision was wider than our own and better enabled its adherents to embrace mystery and to perceive wonder and magic in the world around them. There was no need for neo-paganism in the Middle Ages, for the Medievals already *lived* in a sympathetic universe. Though the

Latin word universe, which suggests “unity in diversity,” points to the dynamic vision of nature held by the Medievals, their other word, cosmos, better embodies the fullness of their vision. Cosmos comes from a Greek word whose root meaning is “ornament,” an etymological detail that capture perfectly the medieval faith that the universe is the ornament of God: a thing of beauty to be loved and known rather than merely studied.

In keeping with this medieval view of the connectedness of all aspects of God’s creation, Francis of Assisi wrote hymns to brother sun and sister moon and called the animals his brothers. Rather than dismiss nature as “pagan” or study it as a dead object, St. Francis reclaimed nature from the pantheists, and, through it, celebrated God’s presence in the world. Two centuries later, Dante invited readers of his *Divine Comedy* to join him on an exciting, whirlwind tour of our God-fashioned sympathetic universe. On his way through the heaven of the fixed stars, Dante passes by the constellation of Gemini (his “horoscope”) and thanks it for shining down on him the gift of creativity. No, neither Dante nor his fellow medieval Christians believed that the stars controlled us, but they did believe that the stars *influenced* us with their particular virtues. Today most non-believers *and* believers are likely to reject as foolish (or heretical) the idea that the motion of the stars or planets or seasons can influence us; yet, scientists believe that microscopic strands of DNA determine everything about us, while Christians believe that it was a “star” (most likely a conjunction of stars) that led the Magi to Christ and an eclipse of the sun that marked his death.

The Medievals knew that the world was good and meaningful, for not only had God fashioned it and called it good; he had even deigned to enter into his creation in the form of his Son. Granted, nature and man are fallen and in decay, but God’s entry into man and nature redeemed both. There is no greater miracle, no greater *magic* than the Incarnation. Christianity alone of all religions fully affirms the value and significance of flesh while fully affirming the reality of the spiritual realm. Can there be a more exciting story than that of a supreme, limitless God who stoops down and confines himself to the limits of flesh that he might win his bride, the church, and rescue her from the grip of the devil? Christianity has the best story to tell, and

it needs to be told to postmoderns who yearn to participate in such a story.

As for Christianity being too exclusivist to appeal to postmoderns, we need only recall that most of the early and medieval Church Fathers understood that the writings of the highest pagans (Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Virgil) did not so much contradict Christianity as point forward to it. That is why the Medieval Dante chose the pagan Virgil as his guide through hell and purgatory, and why the Renaissance Michelangelo included pagan sibyls on the Sistine Chapel. It is also why the Apostle Paul quoted two, possibly three, pagan poets (Epimenides, Aratus, and Cleanthes) when presenting the gospel to a group of pagan Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:28).

Although Dan Brown's infamous claim (in *The Da Vinci Code*) that Constantine invented the Incarnation is false, Constantine likely helped influence the way we celebrate Christmas. Faced with the monumental task of converting a pagan empire into a Christian one, the fourth-century church, probably guided by Constantine, wisely chose to celebrate Christmas on December 25: at the time, the winter solstice. In addition to marking the first day of winter, December 25 stood at the convergence of two popular pagan celebrations: the birthday of the Unconquerable Sun and the Saturnalia (an anarchic, Mardi-Gras-like festival that hearkened back to a lost Golden Age). The early church Fathers who agreed to celebrate Christ's birth on a day when pagans were already open to the kind of sacramental magic that was ushered into our world by the Incarnation were not guilty of "watering down" Christian doctrine, but of attempting to build a bridge to people hungry for the True Myth, for what John calls "The true light, which enlightens everyone" (John 1:9; all Bible quotes taken from the ESV). They understood, as post-Enlightenment Christians often do not, that Christ does not kill but consummates the yearning for myth and the desire to return to Eden.

And they knew something else that modern apologists would do well to learn: that rather than browbeat pagans (or neo-pagans) into blowing out their mythic candles, we can encourage them instead to trade them for the Sun (the full Truth revealed through Christ and the Bible).

Four-Fold Meaning

The apologist who would reach postmoderns with the gospel must not be ashamed of the mythic qualities that hang around the gospel story. Rather, he must embrace the supra-rational mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the Resurrection, and then present those mysteries as the answer to mankind's yearning for a magic that connects, synthesizes, and transforms. He must gain eyes to see the paradoxes that underlie the Christian faith, and he must be courageous enough to face those paradoxes in the Bible as well. Only by doing so will he be properly equipped to confront the challenges of neo-paganism and deconstructionism by offering in their stead a higher, redemptive postmodernism.

Far from demanding a one-to-one correspondence, the Bible is rich with poems, symbols, parables, and prophecies that are decidedly slippery. When the early and medieval Church Fathers read the Bible, they discerned in its stories and images not one but four overlapping levels of meaning. Dante, who factored these four levels of meaning into his *Divine Comedy*, offers, in a letter to one of his patrons, just such a four-fold reading of a single verse from the Bible: "When Israel went out from Egypt" (Psalm 114:1). Taken *literally*, this verse refers to the Exodus; *allegorically*, it signifies how Christ freed us from sin; *morally*, it describes the conversion of the soul from bondage to sin to freedom in Christ; *anagogically*, it prophesies that final, glorious moment when the soul will leave behind the body's slavery to death and corruption and enter the Promised Land of heaven. For Dante and the Medievals, these four meanings, though they can be described in terms of an ascending ladder of spiritual revelation, exist simultaneously. Rather than deconstruct or cancel each other out, they are held in tension within the overall biblical narrative. They are slippery, but it is a kind slipperiness that leads toward rather than away from meaning and truth.

And this redemptive slipperiness extends from the Bible to Christ himself. In the Incarnation, God (the Transcendental Signified), emptied himself and took on the form of a lowly signifier (Jesus of Nazareth) while continuing to be a signified (fully God as well as

fully man). As with the four levels of meaning, the Incarnation reveals that our world is more “open” than modernists like to admit, but that that openness does not lead, as a postmodernist might claim, toward relativism and meaninglessness, but toward the mystical yoking of heaven and earth, spiritual and physical, eternal and temporal, God and man.

That is why the best answer to Gorgias’ three propositions is not to be found in a formal proof or syllogism but in the highly literary, decidedly slippery prologue of John’s gospel (1:1-18). For each proposition of Gorgias, John offers a verse that asserts the true existence, knowability, and communicability of the Triune God: 1) “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (verse 1); 2) “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (verse 14); and 3) “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (verse 18).

Non-apologetical Apologists

Though I have been calling in this essay for a new kind of postmodern apologetics, I am aware that the very phrase “postmodern apologetics” is something of an oxymoron. How, after all, can one present a rational defense of the Christian faith if one privileges emotion, mystery, and slipperiness over logic, system, and evidence? If an apologist accepts the ground rules of postmodernism, will he not, by so doing, sacrifice the absolute truth claims on which Christianity rests? In some cases, I am grieved to say, the desire on the part of well-meaning Christians to accommodate the relativistic perspective and worldview of postmodernism has led to a fatal downplaying of key Christian doctrines (indeed, of the very idea *of* doctrine), a suicidal dilution, if not a dismissal, of biblical authority, and/or a self-destructive compromising of basic biblical morality.

Still, Christians who are eager to reach out to neo-pagans and to present the gospel in a language that postmoderns can understand and receive should not be discouraged. Though the danger always

exists that the would-be apologist or evangelist will succumb to the relativism, syncretism, and radical individualism of the postmodern ethos, if he will keep himself grounded in the central credal statements of Christianity and place himself under the authority of the Incarnate Christ, the revealed Word of God, and (forgive me my fellow evangelical brothers and sisters!) the sacred tradition of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church, then he need not be afraid.

I have already suggested above ways in which a vigorous and centered postmodern apologetics can be constructed by rehabilitating medieval notions of the sympathetic universe and the four levels of meaning. I would like to conclude by suggesting a second method for reaching postmoderns that involves emphasizing the narrative and restorative aspects of the Christian faith while not compromising the basic tenets of orthodox Christianity. To illustrate this second method, I will consider briefly three recent works that, though they may not technically be works of apologetics, point the way toward a type of engagement with the postmodern world that I find both effective and fruitful.

In *Epic*, John Eldredge helps bring to life the sacred narrative of the Bible by linking it to some of the greatest and best known fantasy stories.¹ With great passion and bravado, Eldredge draws fascinating parallels between the Bible's story of creation, fall, and redemption and such books and films as *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Gladiator*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Lion King*, and the Harry Potter series. By drawing these connections, Eldredge not only keeps his postmodern audience alert and entertained, but invites them to participate in a great struggle that began long before they were born.

The great stories move us, argues Eldredge, because we are *in* one. In the beginning, the Bible assures us, there was a time of perfect fellowship, a golden age of innocence that is not only recorded in the account of Eden in Genesis 2-3, but that breaks through in those thousand beguiling glimpses that greet us in the pages of our favorite fairy tales. Unfortunately, that fellowship and that innocence are shattered by the appearance of a villain (Satan, Sauron, the White Witch, Voldemort) who breaks into Eden and ignites a struggle between good and evil. In the end, however, a hero, a long awaited Messiah

(Christ, Aragorn, Aslan, Harry Potter), appears and brings victory (the Resurrection) out of what seemed to be utter defeat (the Crucifixion). But the story does not stop there, for the restored and renewed Messiah leaves us with the promise that a time will come, and already is, when he will make all things new. Until we understand this story and our place in it, argues Eldredge, we will feel displaced, unsure of our true identity and purpose. Until our eyes are opened to the true nature of our world, we will understand neither the danger that surrounds us nor the glory that awaits us.

In *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller also seeks to open our eyes to the true nature of our world and of ourselves, but he does so by reflecting not on the great stories and fairy tales but on the everyday trials of his own Christian walk.² Through confessing his own struggles and temptations and sharing his own little triumphs, Miller also makes Christianity come to life as something that is both real and relevant to our postmodern world. In a non-linear, fragmented, improvisatory style, he presents the Christian life not as rigid or restrictive but as something that fosters humility, growth, and community. It is only by accepting God's free grace and unconditional love, he argues (or, better, demonstrates), that we can be freed to forgive ourselves and others, to move out of our existential isolation, to take emotional risks, and to accept others as they are. And, since we cannot be fully alive, or even fully human, until we can do those four things, the Christian message becomes not only a means for salvation in the next world but for self-actualization in this one.

Like one of his key mentors, postmodern guru Brian McLaren, Miller connects with his postmodern audience by privileging authenticity over social conformity, by rejecting all forms of self-righteousness, and by embracing the myriad mysteries that meet us at ever turning of the road. For Miller, as for most "postmodern apologists," two counterintuitive principles stand at the center of his dynamic vision: 1) the journey is as important as the destination, and we are therefore more in need of guides than preachers; 2) Christian community is not something we join after we are saved, but something whose reality and genuineness lead us to salvation.

In *True Story*, James Choung, another disciple of McLaren, also attempts to expand our vision of Christian salvation by presenting the gospel not just as a get-out-of-hell-free card but as the only force that can renew and transform our world.³ Choung, who is more an evangelist than an apologist, presents his fuller gospel through a series of four circles that unintentionally parallel the four acts of Eldredge's epic story, though from a more socio-political perspective. And, in true postmodern fashion, he does so not in the form of a systematic slide presentation but through the mediation of a fictional narrative: a "true story" that he hopes will encourage his readers to participate in the greater "true story" of the gospel.

Choung's first circle presents us with a picture of our world as it was meant to be, a world of perfect harmony between God, man, and nature. Unfortunately, that original plan has been shattered, and so the second circle represents our world as it actually is: broken, unjust, rife with pain and oppression. We all know our world is like this, argues Choung, yet we all know in our hearts that it should not be in this state. The third circle embodies the inner restoration that Christ effected through his death and resurrection. In the fourth, Christians extend that inner restoration to the world that they might bring about the vision of the Lord's Prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Just as moderns must realize that the gospel is not complete until it is extended outward to encompass this circle-four vision, so postmoderns hungry to bring social justice, political reconciliation, and environmental harmony to our torn world must realize that we are powerless to carry out this vision until we have been restored from within by the power of the atonement (circle three).

Eldredge, Miller, and Choung represent but three of a growing number of postmodern apologetical voices that the church needs to hear. Yes, the dangers inherent in such an apologetic are real (Brian McLaren has, to my mind at least, been slowly slipping away from doctrinal orthodoxy), but so are the rewards. The Chinese word for crisis is composed of two characters, one meaning "danger" and the other meaning "opportunity." Postmodern apologetics offers, I believe, just such a crisis.⁴

Notes

1. John Eldredge, *Epic: Discover the Story God is Telling*, DVD (Nashville, Nelson Impact), 2005.
2. Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thought on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson), 2003.
3. James Choung, *True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In* (Downers Grove, IVP), 2008.
4. This essay is adapted from Chapter 21 of my *Apologetics for the 21st Century*, forthcoming from Crossway Books (www.crossway.org) in 2010.