PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES THAT ENGULF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

One hundred years have gone by since the first missionary conference was held at Edinburgh in 1910. The world has changed drastically and the challenges facing Christian missions are different from those times. However, many Christians desire to carry on doing the missionary work of the past in the same way, oblivious of the new situations and challenges. Before we embark on the onerous task to explain the postmodern context and the significance of doing Christian missions in such a situation, let us try to capture the spirit of the first world missionary conference at Edinburgh in 1910, and reflect how things have changed dramatically after a hundred years. There is a need now to be sensitive to the recent developments and positively respond to our context, while continuing to be faithful to our call to be part of and participate in Christian missions.

It is known that the world missionary movement did not emerge from the churches, but was the initiative of evangelically minded men and women, who were guided by the Holy Spirit to carry the good news of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. Roger E. Hedlund remarks that this missionary obligation was the primary motive of organizing the Edinburgh Conference.[1] The Edinburgh Conference was not interested in outlining major Christian doctrines and expound on theological positions, rather the focus was on incorporating nearly all protestant denominations in the effort to evangelize and earnestly seek their co-operation in such an endeavour. Nevertheless, the Conference did discuss theological themes like God's promise of salvation, the need to present Christ to a needy world, and the call to engage in missions as an obligation. Two great contributions of the Edinburgh Conference were the new emphasis in Christian missions, namely the task and responsibility to evangelize, and the great opportunity this created to build ecumenism.[2]

The Edinburgh Conference was not ignorant of the astonishing progress that secular science was making. Moreover, the Conference perceived the latest developments in science and technology as a manifestation of God's providence for growth of the world wide mission of the church. There was a spirit of optimism and confidence that characterized Edinburgh 1910. David J. Bosch remarks, "Edinburgh represented the all-time high water mark in Western missionary enthusiasm, the zenith of the optimistic and pragmatic approach to missions."[3] The scenario in the world has drastically changed since the days of the Edinburgh Conference. The religions of the East are now competing with Western Christianity. The West itself has been undergoing a change and has become a mission field. In spite of these changes, Bosch writes,

> Many have tried and some are still trying simply to revive the traditional
> paradigm of mission. After all, clinging to yesterdays images provides solace.
> It provides little else, however, for artificial respiration will in this case yield

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[1] Cf. Roger E. Hedlund, *Roots of the Great Debate in Mission: Mission in Historical and Theological Perspective* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1993), 22.

[2] Cf. Hedlund, *Roots of the Great Debate in Mission*, 33

[3] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 338.

little more than the semblance of returning life. What is called for, rather, is recognition that a new paradigm is needed, a new vision to break out of the present stalemates toward a different kind of mission.[4]

Hence, there is the need to point out the fact that having the same spirit of the Edinburgh Conference, also at the beginning of the 21st century, will result in anachronism. We need to confess that times have changed and therefore the mission strategies need to change. One of the significant developments of the West is the postmodern factor. In this paper, we shall try to analyse the claims of postmodernism. We shall attempt to investigate the important aspects of both postmodernism and postmodernity. An effort shall be made to incorporate the thought patterns of Friedrich Nietzsche. The second section of the paper will look into the prospects and challenges engrained in the postmodern context for Christian missions. Initially a Christian response to the postmodernist assertions is given. The effort taken is not aimed at considering postmodernism as an enemy to be vanquished. Neither is it recommended to regard the postmodern condition as non-existent. The desire is to properly understand the complex issues that are part of the postmodern thinking and to evolve a meaningful Christian response that shall keep the embers of Christian missions alive today.

SALIENT FEATURES OF POSTMODERNISM

In fact postmodernism is a reaction against modernism. Modernism was a product of the Enlightenment and emphasized the importance of freedom from irrational thoughts and blind faith. Modernism heavily relied on human reasoning and intelligence to bring about progress and development. Postmodernism is a revolt against such a notion that progress is possible through human reasoning.[5] If the modern maxim was: "I think, therefore I exist," then the postmodern slogan is: "I feel, therefore I exist."[6]

However, the same science that promised progress during the modern era became the rationale for ushering in the postmodern period. Newton's scientific explanations, which supported modernity was challenged by Einstein's theory of relativity. Heisenberg's "principle of uncertainty" also supported the postmodern cause. Freudian psychology and Weber's sociology also brought the concept of relativism to the social sciences. Thus, we can say that the secular sciences also played a role in the gradual shift that took place from modernism to postmodern ways of perception.[7]

POST-MODERN VIEWS ON DECONSTRUCTION AND THE FACT OF PLURALISM

One of the significant theories of postmodernism is the theory of deconstruction. The basic presupposition and argument here is that meaning is not inherent in the text itself. The meaning depends on the interpreter who is in dialogue with the text. Therefore, there is the possibility of multiple meanings emerging from the text. This argument has a significant consequence. Stanley J. Grenz argues, "Just as a text will be read differently by each reader, … so reality will be 'read' differently by each knowing self that encounters it. This

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[4] Bosch, "Vision for Mission," in *Ministry & Theology in Global Perspective: Contemporary Challenges for the Church,* eds. Don A. Pittman, Ruben L.F. Habito and Terry C. Muck (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman Publishing Company, 1996), 372.

[5] Cf. George Mathew Nalunnakkal, *New Beings and New Communities: Theological Reflection in a Postmodern Context* (Thiruvalla: KCC / EDTP, 1998), 38.

[6] Nalunnakkal, *New Beings and New Communities*, 42.

[7] Cf. Craig Van Gelder, "A Great New Fact of Our Day: America as Mission Field," in *Ministry & Theology in Global Perspective*, 363.

means that there is no one meaning of the world, no transcendent center to reality as a whole."[8] At the same time, those who argue for postmodernism stress the inability of the human to view reality apart from human constructions. The human beings perceive the world from their own perspective. Consequently, there is no objective external basis on which we can evaluate common accepted theories and propositions.[9]

Postmodernism affirms radical pluralism that rejects the possibility to synthesize all stories into one meaningful coherent system. Those who have studied postmodernism contend that postmodern understanding of plurality is radical in nature. They state that plurality in the postmodern context means "more than simple variety, more than lack of consensus and even more than the manifold diversity of reality. Postmodern plurality is radical precisely because it is irreducible."[10] Postmodernism rejects all possibilities to bring order amid plurality. Any such effort to bring order is an act of power that paves the way for oppression and hegemony. Everyone should have the liberty to speak for themselves. Such an understanding can be found in contemporary feminism and also in such similar liberation movements.[11]

Such a notion of liberty that involves the rejection of power that deprives freedom has significant consequences. Kerstin Neumann asserts that postmodernism is a revolt against oppressive forces that suppress minority groups and marginalizes them in society, thereby denying them the right to express themselves and assert their identity. [12] There is, in postmodernism, the tendency to revolt against forces that allow systems and structures being formed. Such systems and structures will lead toward oppression that will result in dehumanization.[13] Any one way of perceiving truth by those who are in power will lead to perpetuating one's own ideology. Postmodernism does not allow any space for such parochial perceptions that provoke conflict and suppress the weak.[14]

REJECTION OF METANARRATIVES AND THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

Postmodernism insists on the need to reject metanarratives, even though metanarratives may give direction and meaning to particular communities. The implication of living in a pluralistic society involves accepting conflicting truth claims which are relative in value. There is the danger of the collapse of the significance of history as a result of rejecting metanarratives.[15] All metanarratives are viewed only as social constructions. It is argued that from the postmodern perspective that, "no metanarrative … is large enough and open enough to include the experiences and realities of all people. Indeed, on a postmodern reading,

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[8] Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 6.

[9] Cf. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 43.

[10] Richard R. Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer, *Religious Education between Modernization and Globalisation: New Perspectives on the United States and Germany* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 68.

[11] Cf. Osmer and Schweitzer, *Religious Education between Modernization and Globalization*, 69.

[12] Cf. Kerstin Neumann, "Phenomenology and Postmodern Construction of Social Consciousness," in *Arasaradi Journal of Theological Reflection,* vol.20 (Jan-June, 2007): 76.

[13] Cf. Neumann, "Phenomenology and Postmodern Construction of Social Consciousness," 80.

[14] Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11.

[15] Cf. Gelder, "A Great New Fact of Our Day," 364.

metanarratives invariably serve to legitimize the power structures that marginalize or trivialize [other] experiences."[16]

Consequently, those who subscribe to postmodern views do not choose to believe in one true story that explains every other story. All stories have their rightful place and each story can claim to be both comprehensive and all sufficient for that particular group. Kevin J. Vanhoozer goes on to explain that the inclination to reject one, true, absolute metanarrative ultimately leads to relativism that is inherent in postmodern thinking.[17] Christopher J.H. Wright, in the same vein, observes that the emergence of contextual theologies were in some way or other related to the postmodern critique of unconditionally accepting one true narrative as absolute in nature. He points out that, "postmodernism, however, not only celebrates the local, the contextual and the particular, it goes on to affirm that this is all we've got. There is no grand narrative (or metanarrative) that explains everything, and any claims that there is some truth for all that embraces the totality of life and meaning are rejected as oppressive power plays."[18]

At the same time, it is surprising to see that in spite of the emphasis on plurality and the rejection of any one metanarrative, the postmodern world view considers the importance of community in the context of the discussions concerning truth. Grenz reiterates that according to postmodernism, "whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on the community in which we participate."[19] He further clarifies the significance of the concept of community in postmodern thinking as follows:

> Postmoderns believe that not only our specific beliefs but also our understanding of truth itself is rooted in our community in which we participate. They reject their Enlightenment quest for universal, supracultural, timeless truth in favour of searching out truth as the expression of a specific community. They believe that truth consists in the ground rules that facilitate personal well-being in community and well-being of the community as a whole.[20]

PERCEIVING PROMINENT ARGUMENTS OF POSTMODERNITY

Postmodernity is usually described as the economic, socio-cultural condition that emerged after the period of modernity. It is the state of being in and responding to the conditions of a postmodern society. Postmodernity is different from postmodernism in the sense that postmodernism is that which adopts postmodern philosophies and has exerted its influence in art, literature and society. However, it is pointed out that a precise definition of postmodernity is almost an impossibility. Many are of the opinion that there is no one particular meaning of the term. Even though many have attempted to define postmodernity, there is no consensus concerning its meaning.[21] The common understanding is that "Postmodernity is more of a condition than a distinct position, a mood rather than a

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[16] J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, "Facing the Postmodern Scalpel: Can the Christian Faith Withstand Deconstruction?" in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, eds. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 139.

[17] Cf. Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress: Christian Thinking on and about the Post/Modern Way," in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn,* ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 85.

[18] Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 45.

[19] Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 8.

[20] Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 14.

[21] Cf. John R. Franke, "Christian Faith and Postmodern Theory: Theology and the Nonfoundationalist Turn," in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, 106.

metaphysic."[22] Postmodernity is perceived as a condition of being exposed to plurality. Vanhoozer remarks that postmodernisms may come and go but the condition of postmodernity will continue to remain.

REJECTION OF REASON AND MORALITY, AND THE ESPOUSAL OF RELATIVISM AND "WILL TO POWER"

Mention was already made that rejecting the importance of reason lies at the centre of postmodern thinking. It is not that postmodernity defends irrationality, which is a usual criticism of the opponents of postmodern thinking, but rationality is redefined in multiple ways.[23] Chris Wright comments, "Postmodernity dethrones reason and goes on to decentre and dissolve the self."[24] Postmodernists reject the fundamental claim that reason is absolute and universal. Contrary to such a notion of universal rationality, postmodernists assert that reason is contextual and fragmented.[25]

A corollary to this view of postmodernity is that reality cannot be discovered and known, rather reality is relative and it cannot be determined.[26] The essential character of postmodernity is the emphasis on relativism. Postmodernity affirms the inability to provide an absolute and final explanation of human reality. Eventually, the conclusion that is arrived at points to the fact that there can be neither universal ethics nor universal truth. Postmodernity rejects any notion of transcendent authority.[27] This emphasis on relativism makes the postmodernists deny every effort to affirm the significance of truth. Euan Cameron insists, "Instead of claiming to offer routes to discern the true, they deny that 'truth' can be discerned at all except at a rather uninformative level of propositional abstractions."[28]

The fundamental argument of the postmodernists is that there is no strong error-free basis that can help to affirm the validity of something to be true.[29] According to them, truth can be conceived only in plural categories. No single faith or ideology can assert that it has monopoly over truth.[30] Postmodernity projects religion and ethics in its fragmented condition. Therefore, in the post-modern condition, there is no possibility for truth claims or moral claims based on an absolute transcendent reality. This state of affairs is what Friedrich Nietzsche called "Nihilism." Nietzsche's emphasis on nihilism can shed some more light on the post-modern situation.

Nietzsche as a nihilist denied any room for "morality." There is no universal morality applicable for all. However, Nietzsche does talk about a different kind of morality which he calls as "will to power."[31] Nihilism, contends Nietzsche, is a reflection of the destruction of traditional values. There is no scope for any kind of values that can be imposed upon anyone. Consequently, the human being claims perfect freedom and rejects any kind of pressure that

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[22] Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress," 77.

[23] Cf. Franke, "Christian Faith and Postmodern Theory," 108.

[24] Wright, "Christ and the Mosaic of Pluralism," in *Global Missiology for the 21ˢᵗ Century*, ed. William D. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 95.

[25] Cf. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity," 10.

[26] Cf. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 7.

[27] Cf. Wright, "Christ and the Mosaic of Pluralism," 94.

[28] Euan Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 222.

[29] Cf. J.A. Kirk, "Postmodernity," in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, ed. John Corrie (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 300.

[30] Cf. Nalunnakkal, *New Beings and New Communities*, 40

[31] Robert C. Solomon, "Nietzsche, Nihilism, and Morality," in *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 202.

can be exerted upon oneself by imposing any form of value system. This is what Nietzsche called the will to power. The will to power is a new kind of value that the nihilist willingly accepts. Nietzsche ridicules the attempt of Christianity to develop a value system on the basis of other-worldly foundations, where group interests are given more attention than the interest of individuals.[32]

Ultimately, Nietzsche burlesques belief in God, the story of the Christian faith, and particularly the concept of reward and punishment given by God to human beings for their behaviour. According to him, these notions have lost their power, which they once exercised on the believers. Grenz argues that this loss of faith in the transcendent being was replaced by the "will to power." He defines the "will to power as "the desire to perfect and transcend the self through the exercise of personal creative power rather than dependence on anything external."[33]

POSTMODERNITY AND GLOBALISATION

Postmodernity has also something to say about globalisation. Today, the world celebrates the success of mass culture, mass media, multi-national corporations and the latest in information technology. We are living in a globalised, consumerist and profit-oriented world. Globalization has resulted in compression of time and space. Joe Arun states, "[W]e are consumed by consumption. What we are is what we consume. We organize our lives in malls and superstores: [which we call] *the Mall culture.* The media plays a central role in our lives. We believe in images and spectacles. The real does not attract: only the hyper-real overwhelms our lives."[34] The fact is that technology has made an adverse effect on our lives by making it mechanical. Indirectly, the process of globalisation has destroyed the celebration of human life that is lived in community and has annihilated community consciousness.[35]

Postmodernity is critical of the tendency to globalise western culture. Globalisation, according to postmodernity, eventually suppresses other cultures. On the contrary, postmodernity intends to promote "multi-culturalism." This may result in respect for other cultures. Postmodernity believes in affirming human life in all its diversity, variety, and multiplicity.[36] J.A. Kirk contends,

> Post modernity tends to be highly critical of the way in which the whole life has become subservient to the drive of global capitalism for expanding markets and increasing profits, with the consequent mobility of capital, internationalization of labour and assertive, commercial advertising. Such a push for growth irreparably damages the vary ecosystem on which economic life depends and therefore becomes self-defeating.[37]

Subsequently, we can state that in response to the fact of globalisation, postmodernity affirms the significance of sustaining the ecosystem and developing a respect for different cultures instead of promoting the culture of the West for the sake of profit.

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[32] Cf. Solomon, "Nietzsche, Nihilism, and Morality," 207.

[33] Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 92.

[34] Joe Arun, "The Postmodern God: Ways of Being Religious in the Postmodern World," in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection,* vol. 73 (August, 2009): 575.

[35] Cf. Arun, "The Postmodern God," 577.

[36] Cf. Kirk, "Postmodernity," 301.

[37] Kirk , "Postmodernity," 300.

AN EVALUATION OF THE POSTMODERNIST VIEWS FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Here, an attempt shall be made to address some pertinent issues that arise out of postmodernist claims. The issues that will be dealt with in this section are as follows: the significance of deconstruction and emphasis of multiple interpretations; the importance of community over the individual; the understanding of truth as relative and the neglect of any metanarrative; and the issue of the "will to power" that represents the spirit of postmodernity.

Christian Response to The Call for Deconstruction and Multiple Interpretations

Christian thinkers are convinced that the end result of deconstruction can only be total anarchy. Christians are critical of the postmodern tendency to deconstruct all that belongs to Christian faith. The criticism is that there will be nothing left "after deconstruction, besides anarchic pluralism, political cynicism, and cultural and moral paralysis. Deconstructive therapy, in other words, is so radical that it runs the risk of killing the patient."[38] It is pointed out that the difference between modernism and postmodernism is that modernism is a closed ideology, whereas the latter is an open ideology. Critics of modernism point out that it promotes hierarchy. On the other hand, the critics of postmodernism are convinced that it will result in anarchy.[39]

Deconstruction has resulted in loss of faith among those who subscribe to Christian faith. Therefore, some have attacked the concern to deconstruct. Christians have reacted to this situation rather than responding to it. There is a need to respond to this situation with humility rather than arrogance. James G. Emerson Jr. categorically states that sometimes as a reaction to deconstruction, Christians become "dogmatic, controlling, over powering and thus destructive."[40] On the contrary, we need a spirit of humility that accepts the facts of life and those who differ from us. At the same time, there is no need to give up our beliefs and convictions.

The postmodern effort to deconstruct eventually leads to multiple interpretations that compete with each other and ends up creating a situation of conflict. The final result of deconstruction is usually the loss of a unifying centre.[41] As Christians, we function on the basis of a unifying centre, namely the eternal word that was revealed in and through the person of Jesus Christ. The peril of postmodern emphasis on multiple interpretations is that no interpretation can be regarded as final, because there is no basis on which a particular interpretation can be judged. However, Vanhoozer points out that "[t]he peril of postmodernity is that of losing the capacity to be informed and transformed by God's word; the promise of postmodernity is that of rediscovering aspects of God's word that enable us to get wisdom rather than mere information."[42] Christians may willingly agree with the postmodernist view in recognizing multiple meaning of the Biblical texts. Eventually, this

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[38] Middleton and Walsh, "Facing the Postmodern Scalpel," 141.

[39] Cf. C.I. David Joy, "Postmodernism and Postcolonialism: Some Preliminary Considerations," in *Indian Theological Journal,* vol.1 (July-December, 2007): 14.

[40] James G. Emerson Jr., *The Effective Parish in the Twenty-first Century: A Pastoral Response in Mission to the Postmodern World* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 48.

[41] Cf. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 164.

[42] Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress," 78.

will lead to a greater appreciation of the Biblical truth. Christians may agree to the postmodern suggestion that imposing one meaning of the text is a temptation to be avoided.[43]

Christian Approval toward Affirming the Sense of Community

Modernity elevated the individual more than the community. The modern world promoted a spirit of individualism.[44] David J.Bosch asserts that "[t]he Enlightenment creed taught that every individual was free to pursue his or her own happiness irrespective of what others taught or said. This entire approach has disastrous consequences."[45] Evidently, this led to the alienation of the individual from the community. Therefore, the modern emphasis on the individual brought more harm than blessings to the community. Bosch reiterates that there is a need to rekindle the spirit of fellowship and interdependence. We need to overcome the temptation only to talk about individual salvation and neglect the importance of understanding salvation as an experience of the community. Bosch insists that survival and salvation are more meaningful within the context of community. He proposes that this generation should realise the importance of being the "us generation" more than the "me generation." To rediscover the understanding of church as a community that is committed to building a community spirit is of paramount significance in doing Christian missions today.[46]

Subsequently, the postmodern perception of community can bring new insights to the Christian community. We need not affirm or unconditionally accept self-reflective, self-determining, autonomous individuals who have no regard for tradition or community.[47] Christian believers need to make a paradigm shift, wherein the role of the community is given more attention than the role of individuals. Grenz develops an ecclesiology on the basis of the postmodern Christian perception of church as a community. He argues that human beings are fundamentally social creatures. The emptiness that is found within the individual can never be filled by the blessings of globalisation. Rather the individual experiences wholeness only in relationship with others. Grenz writes, "[E]ven though the human quest for wholeness can ultimately be fulfilled only through relationship with God, belonging to God is closely linked to participation in community …."[48] Grenz believes that establishing a community of God is at the heart of the teaching of the Bible. God's intention is to build a kingdom community that recognizes the value of living in community. The Bible teaches that God found that it is not good for man to be alone (Gen 2:18).[49]

Christian Reflections on the Postmodern Rejection of Reason and Absolute Truth

Another postmodern emphasis is the call to be post-rationalistic. Many evangelically minded Christians may not agree with this postmodern proposal. In fact, evangelicalism shares the common interests of modernity. Grenz writes,

> Twentieth-century evangelicals have devoted much energy to the task of demonstrating the credibility of the Christian faith to a culture that glorifies reason and deifies science. Evangelical presentations of the gospel have often been accompanied by a rational apologetic that appeals to proofs for the

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[43] Cf. R.H. Duncan Lyngdoh, "Postmodernism: Challenges and Prospects," in *Indian Theological Journal*, vol.2 (July-December, 2008): 17.
[44] Cf. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 167.
[45] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 362.
[46] Cf.Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 362.
[47] Cf. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 168.
[48] Grenz, "Ecclesiology," in *Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology,* 252-253.
[49] Cf. Gernz, "Ecclesiology," 258-259.

existence of God, the trustworthiness of the Bible, and the historicity of Jesus' resurrection.[50]

Therefore, the intention of modernity to elevate reason to a significant position was accepted by modern evangelicals. Responding to the postmodern condition, they reaffirmed the importance of reason and the need to avoid committing intellectual suicide. A true Christian, in their understanding, cannot abandon reason, because Christians have the duty to rationally explain what they believe in. This is a valid argument. However, the postmodern critique of modernity reminds us that our existence does not completely depend on our ability to reason. Human beings are commonly known as rational animals. However, as intellectual beings, we are more than mere rational beings. Everything that pertains to Christian faith cannot be rationally explained. There is an element of mystery that is part and parcel of our belief in God. Therefore, the mystery of God serves as a reminder that the reality of God eventually surpasses human rationality.[51]

Postmodernity's proposal to question every meaningful notion of truth has created deep scars in the minds of faithful Christians. Christians affirm their belief in God and this belief justifies their understanding of absolute truth. This truth is communicated through metanarratives. Therefore, they avoid the temptation to relativize their understanding of truth. At the same time, there are those who call for a positive response to the postmodern notion of truth and advise Christians not to fear but to respond constructively to this issue.[52] However, there are some serious objections that are raised against the postmodern understanding of truth. Postmodernists would argue that human beings construct truth and their own moral values. They assume the role of God as creators and law-givers.[53] The understanding of truth as relative will lead eventually to constructing truth claims according to one's own desires. If desires are manipulated, truth claims can also be manipulated.[54] Here lies the criticism of Nietzsche's "will to power" that replaces belief in God. If the "will to power" is not controlled, it can lead to moral conflicts and chaos.[55]

Yet another reason not to buy the postmodern argument concerning truth as relative is that Christianity is founded on the belief in affirming the absolute nature of truth. Truth is communicated through "words." Therefore, rejecting the notion of absolute truth will ultimately result in the rejection of the significance of words. Rose Dowsett remarks that Christianity is primarily verbal in nature. Dowsett writes, "It is no accident that the scriptures are called the word of God and that the Lord Jesus Christ is the living word.… God communicates in words, and those words are given divinely intended content which we are not at a liberty to change."[56] Dowsett gives yet another reason as to why the postmodern perception of truth as relative is a pitfall that needs to be avoided.

> Another consequence of rejecting the concept of truth, and especially absolute truth, is the rejection of authority. The moment you abolish an objective external final authority, you begin the inevitable slide towards not simply

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[50] Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 161.

[51] Cf. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 169-170.

[52] Cf. Michael Root, "Faith and Order in a Postmodern World: A Response," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol.42 (Fall, 2007): 570.

[53] Cf. Gene Edward Veith, "Postmodernism Under the Cross," in *Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century*, eds. Alberto L. Garcia and A.R. Victor Raj (St.Louis: Concordia, 2002), 169.

[54] Cf. Veith, "Postmodernism Under the Cross," 170.

[55] Cf. James Walter Gustafson and Joseph B. Onyango – Okello, *The Quest for Truth: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Haverhill: Proclaim Publication, 2007), 131.

[56] Rose Dowsett, "Dry bones in the West," in *Global Missiology for the 21st Century*, 457-458.

individual autonomy, but anarchy.… In those cultures most affected by postmodernism, we already see the accelerating breakdown of law and order, a rejection of any concept of limiting personal freedom for the sake of the good of the community, and the supplanting commitment to hedonism and personal gratification.[57]

Therefore, it is highly improbable that Christians will conform to the postmodern perception of truth as relative. However, there is something to carry home at the end of this discussion. The revelation of God in and through Jesus Christ is the form and substance of the absolute truth that Christians cannot compromise at any cost. But all other elements that pertain to Christianity as a religion may not have the same value and need not be considered as absolute truth. Karl Barth emphatically brings home this point that "Religion is never true in itself and as such. The revelation of God denies that any religion is true.… [R]evelation is the truth beside which there is no other truth, over against which there is only lying and wrong."[58] However, it may look as though Christian commitment to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the call for tolerance towards pluralism have nothing in common. In spite of this dead lock, there may be a lesson that can be learnt. The Christian obligation to love the neighbour includes the virtue of tolerance. In building God's kingdom, we need to join the forces of God that produce communities of mutual respect.[59]

Christian Missions in a Postmodern Context

Christian missions, from the time of its beginning till today, has gone through a number of testing times and critical situations. Yet the commitment to do missions has never been vanquished by any external factor. The challenges of postmodern realities provide us with yet another opportunity, for those involved in Christian missions, to come out with a strategy to carry on mission work in spite of the latest developments. The past experiences make it clear that from every situation, Christians have learnt something and their knowledge of Christian missions has only widened, enlarged, sharpened, and clarified.

Obviously, there is no one way of doing Christian missions. Quite often, the urgency to complete the task has blinded Christians from recognizing elements that can enhance our perception of missions.[60] Engaging in Christian missions today involves a commitment to understand and work with all communities, including the postmodern communities. Undoubtedly, we cannot do missions in isolation. We can partake in Christian missions only in relation with other people. As Christians we need to clarify our position, but at the same time be willing to learn wherever we can trace something that can be useful in broadening our concept of missions. For example, postmodernity has ridiculed the attempts "to rationalize gender inequalities and hierarchical structures.… A church in mission should be sensitive to this postmodern challenge by being willing to adopt new models of community life that express gender equality and non-authoritarian patterns of leadership."[61]

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[57] Dowsett, "Dry bones in the West," 458.

[58] Karl Barth, "Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion," in *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings,* ed. Richard J. Plantinga (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1999), 236.

[59] Cf. Lamin Sanneh, "The Church and Its Missionary Vocation: The Islamic Frontline in a Post-Christian West," in *Mission in the Twenty-first Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission,* eds. Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 141.

[60] Cf. James F. Engel and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions* (Downers Grove: Inter- Varsity Press, 2000), 178.

[61] Kirk, "Postmodernity," 302.

In spite of the opportunities that are there to enlarge our vision of missions in a postmodern context, there are also serious disagreements that Christians have with postmodern arguments. First of all, postmodernist views do not provide a criteria or a foundation on which value judgements can be made. Secondly, postmodernism tends to nullify the uniqueness of the Christian faith. The history of God's concern for humanity that is narrated in the Bible and the redemption that is available in and through Jesus Christ are rejected by postmodernism as metanarratives. The fact is that Christians cannot afford to deconstruct this metanarrative, because it can ultimately nullify the Christian message as well as Christian concern for missions.[62]

Even though the rejection of the metanarrative is a central feature of postmodernism, Christians cannot afford to let go of their foundation. However, the church can learn from postmodernism not to yield to the temptation to use the metanarrative as an instrument of power. The church has been interested in its growth which has indirectly boosted its power, added wealth and status to the church. We need to constantly remind ourselves that the gospel of salvation is meant to bring healing and wholeness, and should not be directed toward establishing power.[63]

In a global postmodern world with diverse perceptions of reality, Paul G. Hiebert contends that Christian missions should address the issue of how people of different communities can live together and build a world where there is love, justice and harmony.[64] Jesus prayed for unity (John 17). Christians need to prove that they are followers of Jesus by striving for unity amid diversity. Let us pursue Christian missions in such a way that the gospel of Jesus Christ becomes good news not only for a few but for all. Hiebert writes,

> All Christians are called to be mediators between the gospel and the world in which they live. In the past, the world was defined as the non-West. It was assumed that the West had heard the gospel and was essentially Christian. The rest of the world was pagan and heathen. Today, the church is global. The most vital churches are found in the non-West, and the West is itself a mission field. This has profoundly changed the way we perceive missions.[65]

Today, we are in need of people who can play the role of mediators between different communities whose persuasions, commitments and goals differ from one another. Jesus himself played the role of a mediator between God and humanity. Following the example of Jesus, let us be mediators, who make an attempt to understand different communities and build trust between communities. The role of a mediator will become crucial as we continue to participate in Christian missions in a postmodern context.

In the Christian way of thinking, there is a deep desire for clarity, precision, exactness and certainty. The ambiguity that is part and parcel of postmodernism is regarded by Christians as a danger to be avoided and rejected. However, if we earnestly seek to carry on our mission work within a postmodern context, we need to develop a spirituality of openness where those who question, doubt or are ambiguous in their thinking may not feel rejected by the church. In order to exercise the role of a mediator, the Christian missionary has to develop

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[62] Cf. Lyngdoh, "Postmodernism," 13-14.
[63] Cf. Lyngdoh, "Postmodernism," 17.
[64] Cf. Paul G. Hiebert, "The Missionary as Mediator of Global Theologizing," in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, eds. Graig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 295.
[65] Hiebert, "The Missionary as Mediator of Global Theologizing," 297.

a spirit of tolerance and accommodation.[66] This spirit may be reflected in what M. M. Thomas called "Risking Christ for Christ's sake."

CONCLUSION

Many Christians would like to look only at the negative side of postmodernism. The usual argument is that postmodernism moves away from objectivism to subjectivism; from absolutism to relativism; and ultimately from relativism to agnosticism.[67] Some point out that the spirit of modernity is founded on pride in human reason, goodness, and achievements. On the other hand, the postmodern condition reflects a spirit of sloth. Vanhoozer explains sloth as a sin "that believes in nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die."[68] Such are the hard words directed against postmodernist thinking.

In spite of such criticisms that can be levelled against postmodernism, let us make an effort to carry on our responsibilities of doing missions with an open mind that makes an effort to understand the postmodern communities and also is willing to enlarge our vision of missions through an encounter with them. In conclusion, we may note that we have the opportunity to rediscover the concept of community; learn to affirm all cultures; celebrate unity in the midst of diversity; and resist all forms of oppression that may diminish the possibility of a bright future. May we be willing to play the role of mediators between those who proclaim their faith in God through Jesus Christ and those who subscribe to postmodernist thinking, so that out of this encounter something good will emerge that can sustain unity between human beings and also help in realising God's purposes for this world.

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[66] Cf. Richard G. Cote, *Re-Visioning Mission: The Catholic Church and Culture in Postmodern America* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 160.

[67] Cf. Norman L. Geisler and Thomas A. Howe, "A Postmodern View of Scripture," in *Christian Apologetics Journal,* vol.7 (Spring, 2008): 79.

[68] Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity," 23.

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