Mission in Postmodernity: An Asian Perspective*

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Abstract: *This paper identifies the contrasting features of postmodernity and modernity: Self and Community, Modern and Postmodern Hermeneutics, Reason and Experience, Absolute Truth and Plurality of Truths, Metanarratives and Particularities, and Centre and Periphery. Their implication to mission is discussed from an Asian perspective.*

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INTRODUCTION

Mission in the last century was associated with the Enlightenment project, modernity, and colonialism. As the centenary celebration of Edinburgh 1910 is on, the need to relook at Mission in the changing context of postmodernity is vital. The Edinburgh 2010 celebration has "Mission and Postmodernity" as one among the nine themes to be studied. This paper aims at giving an Asian perspective of mission in postmodernity. In this paper, I will be discussing the contrasting features of modernism and postmodernism and their implications to Mission.

DEFINING POSTMODERNITY

The European Enlightenment affected the intellectual, social, economic, political, and religious systems of the West from later part of 17th century onwards. Modernism was a process of rationalization of life. It defined human nature and essence in terms of rationality. Reason was enthroned and all aspects of life were

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brought under its domain. It was portrayed generally that modern science was the only arbiter of truth and knowledge. It demolished the hold of religion/faith over humanity. Modernism categorized and segregated everything into centre and periphery, superior and inferior. Male is superior over female, soul over body; mind over body; reason over emotion, and etc. The Western culture was considered civilised and superior to Eastern cultures. It viewed the world from one centre: the Europe and the America. The West was considered the First World, the USSR as the Second World and the rest as the Third World. Modernism believed in 'progress' that human reason and science would solve all the problems of human race. Modernism worked towards totalising or universalising theories which are called metanarratives. Grand theories of philosophy, science, sociology etc. were produced and were considered as the norms.

The enlightened Western society promised a utopian world with scientific advancements. But modernism caused havoc in the world: colonialism, exploitation in the name of exploration, the two world wars in 20th century, the holocaust, etc. These tragedies awakened the French thinkers in the 1960s, to have a critical look at modernism. The reactionary movement against these tragedies became an intellectual movement in the late 60s and 70s as postmodernism. Rudolf Panwitz, a German philosopher used the term postmodernism in 1917 to refer nihilism. Later it was used in the field of architecture. The French philosophers, Jacques Derrida, Jean Francio Lyotard, George Battaille, and Michael Foucault in 1970s popularised this term.

Postmodernism is a term being used today in all fields like art, literature, philosophy, science, religion, theology culture and etc.. It is not possible to give a definition of postmodernism; it is an intellectual trend of the present day that emerged from the later part of 20th century. Postmodernism does not have a set of philosophies and theories; in fact it is against such grand philosophical frame work. However, postmodernism has a say in every sphere of life, and the essence of postmodernism is pluralism. Postmodernism refers to the philosophical streams associated with this trend, where as postmodernity refers to the cultural trend/condition associated with postmodern.

Joe Mannath (1990) identifies seven traits of postmodernism. 1) The world is evolutionary: Changing and it is not a machine but expands. 2) Everything is

Relational: Everything exists in relation to some other. 3) Reality is Mysterious: Reality cannot be fully comprehended. 4) Knowledge is a process and cultural artefact: Knowing is a process, and it is culturally conditioned. 5) Science and technologies are not necessarily always good: Science cannot save humanity, and progress is not always good. Loss of lives due to wars and ecological destruction due to advanced technology are some indicators. 6) New World order: There is no one centre. The West is one among many. 7) Rejection of grand narratives: Grand theories with universal claims are rejected, and particularities find space. Postmodernity enables us to see the world from a new perspective without any inhibition of being irrational.

CONTRASTING FEATURES OF MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

In this section we will look at some of the major contrasting features of modernity and postmodernity and how such shifts in philosophical concepts demand a change in our understanding of Mission in postmodernity. It is not possible to deal with all the philosophical concepts associated with postmodernity; however, I have identified a few concepts which I think, have direct implications to Mission: Self and Community, Modern and Postmodern Hermeneutics, Reason and Experience, Absolute Truth and Plurality of Truths, Metanarratives and Particularities, and Centre and Periphery.

Self and Community

Modernism elevated the self to ideal, the only foundation of knowledge and truth. Modernism talked of autonomous self, capable of being good, an independent and sovereign entity. Individualism was the product of modernism where the individual was elevated above the community. It held the view that individuals were capable of discovering the truth objectively by their own efforts through rational investigation. Mission in modernity was carried away by individualism in some aspects and focussed on reaching the individuals with the gospel. Great emphasis was laid on an individual making a rational choice of accepting the gospel. Modern Mission presented the gospel as rationally valid beliefs while portraying the beliefs and practices of Eastern religion as irrational. The outcome of this emphasis of

mission was discontinuity and burning bridges with their communities, cultural practices and social identities.

Postmodernism has deflated the modern claims about self. "Postmodern critique of Enlightenment is directed to one of its central articles of faith: the belief in the constitution of an *autonomous self,* the subject, the consciousness." (Wilfred, 1999: 64, emphasis as in original). Postmodernism regards self a creation of the cultural, social, political, and historical realities. The self has no existence without these realities. The self itself is plural, it is relational, and that is to say one changes according to the situation or the external realities. "Whatever was thought to have been built on rock-like foundation by the classical philosophy and by Enlightenment, postmodernism has made it all collapse like a pack of cards" (Wilfred, 1999: 64). Postmodernity regards self is a product of a community. Thus it opens the door for a sense of community and solidarity with others.

Mission in postmodernity has to take the community factor into serious consideration. If self is a product of a community, when an individual receives the gospel, we need to be sensitive to his/her roots in the community. The focus of mission is to be the community rather than uprooting the individuals. Therefore the emphasis should not be on discontinuity but on the spiritual identity of the individual. The converts from other religions prefer to keep their social/cultural identity as Hindus or Muslims while they are excited about their spiritual identity as the followers of Jesus. In my research on conversion this was very much echoed by the converts. Janaki, wife of a business man, was not allowed to attend church or any other Christian activities for 30 years. Externally she fulfilled all the Hindu religious requirements as a wife, while internally she followed Jesus. Eventually, the whole family received the gospel and she felt vindicated in her stand of retaining the social/cultural identity as a Hindu for such a long period (Iyadurai, 2007).

When we look at how Jesus went about doing the mission of God, it is clear that he did not want the Samaritan woman to become a Jew to follow him, he did not expect the centurion to become a Jew to heal his servant, and he did not expect the Canaanite woman to become a Jew to heal her daughter rather he made her a model of faith to the Jews. In the Book of Acts, Cornelius was not asked to become a Jew but Peter was asked to have a paradigm shift with regard his understanding of purity and pollution. Mission in postmodernity needs a paradigm shift in letting the people

define their spirituality based on their experience of Jesus within their own communities. It is the mission of God in which God is at work more than what we could imagine or comprehend. Mission in postmodernity requires going hand in hand with God who is active in communities than holding on to the enlightenment paradigm of mission.

Modern and Postmodern Hermeneutics

Modernity held the view that language is capable of expressing ideas without changing them, in the hierarchy of language, writing is secondary to speech, and that the author of a text is the source of its meaning. Modernism regarded hermeneutics as a science to arrive at the given meaning in the text. Under the influence of modernism, the whole enterprise of Biblical Criticism went about textual analysis to move closer to the originals.

Jacques Derrida, one of the key figures in postmodernism, created the school of deconstruction, a strategy of analysis applied to literature, linguistics, philosophy, law, and architecture. Derrida's deconstructive style of reading challenges the idea that a text has an unchanging and unified meaning. Text is independent and it is open to the reader to interpret in a way the reader prefers. The readers' perspective is the key to interpretation. Plurality of meaning is ensured in postmodern hermeneutics. In this regard, another key philosopher of postmodernism, Gadamar (2004: 296) asserts, "Understanding is not, in fact, understanding better, either in the sense of superior knowledge of the subject because of clearer ideas or in the sense of fundamental superiority of conscious over unconscious production. It is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*" (emphasis as in original).

No tradition or culture can claim superiority in understanding a text or reality. This literary theory of deconstruction is applied in understanding reality. "Just as the meaning of a text is dependent on the reader, so also reality can be 'read' differently depending on the perspectives of the knowing selves that encounter it" (Grenz1994:326). In other words, there is no one meaning for life and reality, the reality is understood by individual from his/her perspectives. The victims look at life from the eyes of misery, where as the one who is in power looks at the same reality

as a victory. Reality is relational and plural. Postmodernity opens the door widely for plurality of interpretations.

Postmodern hermeneutics challenges the traditional view of interpretation of the Bible. It gives liberty to the reader to find meaning in a text. It may ring alarm bells in our ears! But we are familiar with the NT authors who used the Old Testament texts to offer their own meanings in the New Testament. Klein et al (1993) argue that the goal of interpretation is not only to find the given meaning but to discover new meanings. They exhort that in humility we need to understand the differences and accept the possibility of different options. On similar lines Wright (2006:39) points out the significance of the plurality of perspectives by saying, "What persons of one culture bring from that culture to their reading of a text may illuminate dimensions or implications of the text itself that persons of another culture may have not seen so clearly." More emphatically, Brownson (1996:15) affirms:

> [T]he reality and inevitability of plurality in interpretation. Because every reading of the Bible is shaped by the individuality and the historical and cultural particularity of the interpreter, there will always be multiple interpretations of the Bible. Therefore plurality in interpretation is not necessarily a sign of interpretative failure, but often of interpretative effectiveness, reflecting a distinctive convergence of the text with the particular context of the reader.

The emergence of contextual theologies, reading the text from our own contexts in Asia is a postmodern phenomenon. They reject the Western interpretation of the text based on biblical criticism which is a product of the Enlightenment. The claim of scientific objectivity by Western interpretation is a myth in postmodernity. Wilfred (1999:76) observes that holding on to tradition as the norm and criteria will only maintain the status quo of the elites. He says, "No serious social transformation can take place as long as tradition becomes the criterion of truth, and until the past is not held under the scrutiny of a critically awakened present." Hence, mission in postmodernity needs to embrace contextual theologies instead of clinging on to traditional—Western and Context-less— theologies. Chris Wright (2006) takes note of the lack of interest in the West about

contextual theologies which emerged as the products of multicultural hermeneutics of the Majority World. He calls for openness in considering their significant contribution to hermeneutics while arguing for Missional hermeneutics.

On the other hand, people read the Bible from their own contexts and claim that God speaks to them. The reading of the Bible is a religious experience and they do it for guidance, solutions, encouragement, and so on. In such reading the "given" meaning of the text is irrelevant but what the text means to the reader in a particular context is significant. They perceive it as a communication from God (Iyadurai, 2007). If this is how God communicates to his people, mission in postmodernity should be open to God and his ways of communicating to his people.

Reason and Experience

Postmodernism dethrones reason from the position of goddess to a demon (Wilfred 1999:67). Postmodernism claims truth is non-rational. Therefore, there are other ways of knowing truth through emotions and intuition. It rejects the idea of knowledge being objective. The world is historical, relational, and personal. It does not exist independently 'out there' to be explored by an individual objectively. The individual is not independent of the knowable, there is no autonomous of the knower. Knowledge is historically and culturally conditioned. Knowledge is a product of culture.

Postmodernism opened the doors of intuition, experience, aesthetics etc to acquire knowledge. This is very much in line with the biblical understanding of "knowing;" it is more of an experiential knowledge than an objective discovery. Modern mission was concerned with presenting the gospel rationally which would appeal to the intellect. In postmodernity, invitation is extended to a person to experience Jesus Christ. Jesus invited people to follow him, not to simply adopt his principles but to walk with him; it was an invitation to experience him. When Andrew and other disciple were curious to know about Jesus, Jesus invited them to "come and see." Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus was again an invitation to experience the new birth which cannot be rationally understood. The mistake of Nicodemus was that he was trying to rationalise what Jesus was talking about.

Therefore mission in postmodernity is not to build a great enterprise of Christianity but to invite people to experience Jesus. Experiential knowledge is valid

in postmodernity and one can openly talk about one's experience without being branded as irrational. A theology in postmodernity has to have its roots in the God-experience. The modern theology based on rationalistic bent is no longer relevant today. A theology which incorporates the holistic view of individual and community with cognitive, affective, physical, social, economical, political, and cultural dimensions is relevant today. Erickson summarises the traits of Grenz's proposal for a postmodern evangelical theology: 1. Postindividualistic: Emphasis to be given to community, 2. Postrationalistic: Knowledge of God based on experience, 3. Postdualistic: Holistic, 4. Postnoeticentric: Emphasis on spirituality. Evangelism alone cannot be the programme of Mission in postmodernity; it has to be holistic.

Absolute Truth and Plurality of Truths

Postmodernism rejects any notion of absolute truth. Pluralism is the essence of postmodernity. All religions are right; no religion can claim superiority over the other. Many interpretations of reality are possible as perceptions vary. As there is no absolute criterion, no interpretation can be verified. All truth claims are valid and the validity can be assessed only on the basis of its usefulness to a community. Truth is understood from a community's perspective, including scientific knowledge. "[T]ruth is what fits within a specific community; truth consists in the ground-rules that facilitate the well-being of the community in which one operates (Grenz 1994:328). Truth is what works. Even the way one looks at truth is conditioned by the cultural realities of a community.

The rejection of the absolute truth by postmodernity is a great challenge to mission. We cannot close our eyes to this cultural reality and go on in the same manner as we do. Though, postmodernity rejects any notion of the absolute truth, it accepts what works as truth. Mission in postmodernity needs to shift the starting point of declaring the absolute truth to showing what works in one's life. And invite people to experience the truth. We are not presenting an abstract idea as the truth but Christian mission is presenting the truth: the person Jesus Christ. We can set aside all theological jargons about Christology and introduce Jesus as a person who brings transformation. So the challenge is to show people that Jesus works in the lives of the members of the faith community. The ongoing transformation in individual lives and in faith communities is the evidence that the truth—Jesus—

works today. When a person experiences the 'truth that works' then he/she may be in a position to understand the absolute truth.

This is evident in my research on conversion. The potential converts did not simply accept Christianity but tested its workability in their lives; only then did they believe in the claims of Christianity. Some began to address the divine being in a generic term (without using any name) in their prayers, and asked the "generic God" to reveal who the true God was. In such cases, the participants reported that their prayers were answered by Jesus. The participants did not have faith when they made these kinds of prayers. They prayed with scepticism and were surprised when their prayers were answered by Jesus. They were taken as proofs that Christianity was true and reliable. Only then did the potential converts believe the claims of Christianity (Iyadurai, 2007). Mission in postmodernity need to present the truth: Jesus, who works in the lives of the people and in turn people will experience the absolute truth.

The challenge to Mission in postmodernity is to be Missional. Mission is not simply proclaiming the gospel but living the gospel in personal and community lives. Mission is not a programme of a faith community but a way of life, constantly showing the people what it means to encountering the truth that works in day to day life.

Metanarratives and Particularities

Modernism offered grand theories; however, postmodernism points out some of the scientific theories are set aside with a discovery of new theories. It holds the view that one single theory cannot be true all the time and universally. Postmodernism rejects all metanarratives (universal claims), whether it is scientific, socialistic, religious or philosophy. Summarising the view of Lyotard, Craig Van Gelder (1996:128) points out,

> He [Lyotard] believed that Enlightenment thinkers made a great mistake when they set one particular kind of knowledge—scientific knowledge— above all others and insisted that all experience be interpreted in terms of it. He challenged the premise that it was possible or desirable to construct a grand narrative, especially one that focussed all reality through the narrow lens of instrumental reason.

There cannot be one single theory or universal claims on reality, truth or knowledge. Reality is looked at from the perspective of an individual which varies from community to community. No one has the right to impose any metanarrative as the absolute truth for all. Postmodernism rejects Marxism, any religious or philosophical claims. It questions the traditional logic of 'excluded middle' by enforcing 'either' 'or'. Postmodernism considers all universal claims or metanarratives as the constructs of societies or communities in order to have control over others. "By challenging the metanarratives, postmodernism has lent support to localised, particular and contextual struggles all over the Third world, as people seek to affirm their identity and their basic humanity" (Wilfred, 1999:76).

The Biblical claims are metanarratives encompassing the entire human race. However, these metanarratives are basically emerged out of particularities of local narratives. Chris Wright (2006:47) high lights this aspect:

> [T]he Bible ... glories in *diversity*, and celebrates multiple human *cultures,* the Bible which builds its most elevated theological claims on utterly *particular* and sometimes very *local* events, the Bible which sees everything in *relational,* not abstract, terms, and the Bible which does the bulk of its work through the medium of *stories.*
>
> This is the grand narrative that constitutes truth for all. And within *this* story, as narrated or anticipated by the Bible, there is at work the God whose mission is evident from creation to new creation. This is the story of God's mission. It is a coherent story with a universal claim. But it is also a story that affirms humanity in all its particular variety. This is the universal story that gives a place in the sun to all the little stories. (emphasis as in original)

Mission in postmodernity can walk with postmodernity in terms of rejecting metanarratives produced by the Enlightenment project. The goal of mission is not to offer a metanarrative (a grand theory of salvation) but to present the truth—Jesus Christ—who appeared *locally* in Nazareth. The biblical grand narrative is not a universal theory but an invitation to experience the truth—Jesus Christ, who has a universal appeal.

Centre and Periphery

Modernism categorised centre and periphery, superior and inferior, first world and third world etc. In modernism there was no room for the 'other', the marginalized were excluded or pushed to the periphery. Normality was defined by the exclusion of the poor, slaves, women, the natives etc. When missionaries came to Asia, they came with the modern mind set. De-Nobili thought if he could win over the Brahmins, he could win the rest of the Indian society. Missionaries looked down on the cultural practices and introduced the Western culture as the superior one.

The deconstruction of the self resulted in shaking the foundation of idealism of the Enlightenment. This has resulted in search of the 'other' or 'alterity'. Postmodernism brought these 'other' to the centre. Postmodernism brought the marginalised and those who were in periphery to the centre. Christian mission can go hand in hand with postmodernity on this issue. The Bible speaks for the poor, fatherless, widows, aliens, and the oppressed. The biblical view of a person is holistic; therefore mission can no longer ignore the social evils and the economic perils due to globalization in Asia. Mission is to be other centred which involves identifying with the poor, Dalits, oppressed, and being a voice for the voiceless. The focus of mission is love in action to enable them to create their own destiny. There is no room for categorizing and dichotomizing; therefore, there is no spiritual or social, it is the individual in entirety in a community. The mission statement of Jesus categorically states this aspect, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (Jn. 10:10). The central mission in postmodernity is to bring the marginalized, poor, women, and the oppressed to the centre.

CONCLUSION

Postmodernism is a celebration of pluralism. It opens up the creative forces to unleash fresh ideas and ways and means to handle life without having an apprehension of being irrational. However, it has opened up the floodgates of interpretation on reality which cannot be regulated by any normative philosophy. The idea of normative or universal does not fit in the thought pattern of postmodernism. However, over the centuries, mission of God continued in spite of the cultural and philosophical changes. In postmodernity, as the people of God, our responsibility lies with us in presenting the truth—Jesus Christ—as a relevant

option to the present generation. Mission, in postmodernity, needs to shed its modern clothing and wear the cloths of different cultures. The focus of mission is to bring the communities in periphery to the centre.

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