

Postmodernities, mission and ecology

What on earth does ecology have to do with postmodernity and mission? The report of the study process leading to the Edinburgh 2010 conference rightly picks up three important themes where these concepts intersect, namely that of hope for the future, the postmodern critique of the ideology of mastery and control and the call for priestly duties, described here in terms of the rather controversial notion of “stewardship”.¹

Does this mean that ecological issues are addresses satisfactorily in the report? In my view it is not so strange that the report associates modernity with ecological destruction. This critique of the logic of mastery and control is indeed a standard one in literature in the field of environmental ethics. However, it is somewhat odd that postmodernity is described as being “more in tune with ecological concerns”.² The question is whether such a discontinuity with modernity can be so readily identified in this case.

The report rightly observes that postmodernity hardly has the appeal in impoverished countries of the global “South” that it has in the affluent and perhaps somewhat leisured countries of the global “North”.³ Here one may need to consider the term “sub-modernity” suggested amongst others by Jürgen Moltmann.⁴ This term indicates the impact of modernity on those that are marginalised by the current neo-liberal global economy. One would also need to consider neo-Marxist critiques on whether the economic systems underlying modernity have actually changed. It thus becomes a question of what has actually changed and what has remained the same?

It is fairly clear that something has indeed changed and this may well be expressed in terms such as an “incredulity towards meta-narratives”, scepticism about the dream of progress, a disbelief in universality of human rationality (but perhaps not of human dignity) and prevailing uncertainty. I find the analyses by Zygmunt Bauman on “liquid modernity” and the shift towards a consumer society plausible. The contrast may then be sketched in terms of a shift from an economy oriented towards production to one focusing on consumption, the shift from rationality to consumer choice, taste and feeling, from the Protestant work ethic to the aesthetic of pleasure, from activism to (passive) reception.⁵

This emphasis on the consumer society may help us to understand one of the aspects where a cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity is less obvious than is often assumed. This relates to the celebration of diversity that is typically associated with postmodernism. This suggests an openness to radical diversity compared to the hegemony of mastery, inclusion and control associated with modernity. There is a downside to such diversity, namely the prevailing experience that everything is in flux. Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle therefore occupies an iconic position in postmodern societies. Over everything hovers a question mark. For Christians this prompts concerns over criteria in searching for truth but also in the quest for justice and for human rights and the resistance against evil. How can evil be identified, named and resisted in a climate of diversity and uncertainty?

¹ On this controversy, see Chapter 4 of my *An ecological Christian anthropology: At home on earth?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), alongside numerous other sources.

² See Daryl Balia & Kirsteen Kim, *Edinburgh 2010 Volume II: Witnessing to Christ today* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2010), p. 81.

³ Balia & Kim, p. 69.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a secular society: The public relevance of theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 11-17.

⁵ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, consumerism and the new poor* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1988), *Liquid modernity* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2000), *Consuming life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

What is far more worrying though is the way in which new constellations of unity rush in to fill the ideological gap left by the demise of modern security. Admittedly, unity is no longer provided by the nation state or the tribe or the dream of progress. Here one may also consider the impact of Christian and other forms of fundamentalism that offer simplified constructions of such unity.

However, far more significant than that, especially in terms of ecological concerns, is the impact of the consumer society. The celebration of diversity can easily be reduced to nothing more than consumer choice. Then one may also wish to emphasise the homogeneity and indeed the hegemony of consumerist culture⁶ – a Coca-Cola advertisement in every town in Africa, the same shopping malls everywhere, the same products offered by the same companies to offer us pleasure and healing, if not salvation.

It is this consumer lifestyle, easily associated with societies where postmodernism is celebrated, and the economic production processes required for that, that have led to ecological destruction, most notably to climate change. Not surprisingly, the lifestyle of the so-called consumer class⁷ has been easily exported from North America to other Western Countries, to South East Asia and to every corner of the globe. Tragically, the whole “global village” has come under the spell of the “American dream” of the pursuit of happiness here and now. Consumerism has been described as the most successful and fastest growing religion of all times.⁸ Since the lifestyles of the consumer class are so visibly demonstrated, paraded and advertised, it should come as no surprise that consumerism also describes the hope and aspiration of the global middle class and indeed of the poor, if not the destitute.

Indeed, the dream of everyone is to have their own car and suburban home and to be able to relax with a drink and a barbeque next to a swimming pool, at a spa or resort in the company of friends and influential people. That is indeed portrayed as a form of “salvation”, as heaven on earth. In religious terms this advocacy for a consumer lifestyle is most obviously expressed through the preaching of the prosperity gospel. This has a particularly strong appeal amongst the emerging middle class, for example in South Africa. The impact of consumerism in the South African context was notably recognised in a speech by former president Thabo Mbeki. He said:

Thus, everyday, and during every hour of our time beyond sleep, the demons embedded in our society, that stalk us at every minute, seem always to beckon each one of us towards a realisable dream and nightmare. With every passing second, they advise, with rhythmic and hypnotic regularity – get rich! get rich! get rich! And thus has it come about that many of us accept that our common natural instinct to escape from poverty is but the other side of the same coin on whose reverse side are written the words – at all costs, get rich! In these circumstances, personal wealth, and the public communication of the message that we are people of wealth, becomes, at the same time, the means by which we communicate the message that we are worthy citizens of our community, the very exemplars of what defines the product of a liberated South Africa.⁹

Indeed, the hope and yearning of the world’s poor is to achieve an equally affluent standard of living. The hope of the poor is typically based on what money can buy too. They dream of winning the lotto. They desire the affluence which they do not have and probably have little

⁶ See Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, creation and the culture of modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 13.

⁷ For this term, see especially the Worldwatch Institute’s report on the *State of the world 2004* edited by L. Starke (2004).

⁸ See David Loy, “The religion of the market”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65/2, 275-290.

⁹ Thabo Mbeki, Nelson Mandel Memorial lecture (2006), widely published on the internet at that time.

hope in obtaining. As William Gibson observes from within the USA, this has far-reaching psychological consequences: “The unhappiness often felt by persons of limited income is their sense that they have failed to meet the standards of success held by society and by themselves. They are not affluent but they wish they were. They want far more of the abundance displayed in the television commercials. They are saddled with debt because they have succumbed too frequently to the lure of the ads.”¹⁰

The ecological problem is that the consumerist lifestyles of the world’s affluent centre are in themselves not sustainable. Such lifestyles cannot be replicated by the planet’s entire human population, currently estimated at 6.8 billion. The impact of such levels of consumption on fresh water supplies, air quality, forests, the climate, biological diversity and human health would be severe. The consumer culture enjoyed by the affluent can therefore be maintained only at the expense of the majority on the economic periphery. This also raises question marks about the notion of “sustainable development”. Insofar as development discourse assumes growth in biophysical economic output, such development cannot be sustainable. Of course, the recognition of the limits to economic growth raises serious questions about economic justice. Since so-called “developing” nations demand the right to strive towards the economic prosperity maintained by industrialised countries, it is extraordinarily difficult to come to global consensus on how to address ecological problems such as climate change.¹¹

What, then, are the implications of the interface between postmodernity and ecological destruction for an understanding of Christian mission? Two brief observations would have to suffice here:

Firstly, in a consumer society any form of Christian mission can easily be reduced to the providing of more consumer products, in this case religious goods and services delivered to religious consumers who select for themselves a product that they feel they may need. They select a church where they may feel at home at, where their needs may be met. Where religious affiliation is a matter of choice, churches become vendors of religious services and goods. A commodity-orientated church is in competition with other churches to deliver the best goods and to deliver that in a more digestible form than its competitors do.¹²

Secondly, the need for an appropriate vision for the future is crucial. Without such a vision people perish. In the context of environmental destruction and climate change this is crucial because the future is indeed unattractive. As a result people return to the default position, namely the ennui, relaxation, therapy and boredom of the consumer society. They put their trust their faith in their personal survival skills, in their education, the capital in their bank accounts, in their pensions. Since this is evidently foolish, Christians may need to be bold in proclaiming and embodying a different vision, namely a vision of a renewed earth in which God is coming to dwell, a vision of justice, peace and God’s sustained love for God’s own creation.¹³ Such a compelling vision may not be typical of postmodernity – probably because of the hegemony of the dream of progress, development and a consumerist lifestyle for all.

¹⁰ See William E. Gibson, “The lifestyle of Christian faithfulness” in M. Schut (ed.): *Simpler living compassionate life: A Christian perspective* (Denver: The Morehouse Group, 1999), p. 133-134.

¹¹ For a more detailed survey, see my *Christianity and a critique of consumerism: A survey of six points of entry* (Wellington: Bible Media, 2009). For a discussion of the ecological impact of consumerism, for example on climate change, see my *The church and climate change: Signs of the Times Series Volume 1* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008).

¹² See my *Christianity and a critique of consumerism* for a more detailed discussion.

¹³ See, for example, the document *Climate Change – A challenge to the churches in South Africa*, produced by the Climate Change Committee of the South African Council of Churches (SACC, Marshalltown, 2009), where such a vision is explored in some depth.

Since such a vision is widely recognised not to be sustainable, this often gives birth to despair. Such despair is not conducive to an environmental ethos, praxis and spirituality either. Here the proclamation of the Christian message of hope may indeed become crucial for an understanding of Christian mission in a postmodern context.

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