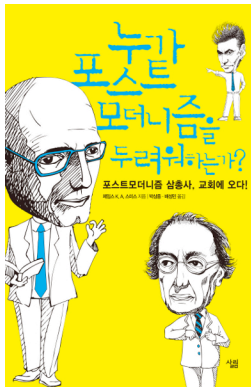


## Preface to the Korean Edition of *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*

James K.A. Smith



I am very grateful for the interest of Korean brothers and sisters in my little book, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* And I'm especially grateful for the work of the translator in making it available to a wider audience. This confirms once again that our postmodern world is a globalized world—a strange world in which an American book, written by a Canadian, focusing on French philosophers, can be of service to Christians in southeast Asia. A small, strange world indeed. Of course, the issue of postmodernism is now a global concern precisely because the culture and ideas of Europe and North America have been exported around the world via the markets which are themselves a product of modernity.

In fact, the publication of this Korean translation provides an opportunity for me to clarify something which I wish I had made more specific in the book. In particular, I would like to clarify both the difference and relationship between modernity, postmodernity, and postmodernism. As I see it, “modernity” is a shorthand term to describe an ethos that emerged in Europe and North America, beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and developing into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. The French philosopher Rene Descartes is often seen as the “father” of modernity in this respect, but there are other important aspects of modernity, including the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

What defines this “ethos” of modernity? Here I would focus on just a few features, almost all of which are embodied in Descartes *Meditations*. Grappling

with issues of doubt and knowledge, and on a quest for certainty, Descartes retreated from society and isolated himself within his room in order to meditate on problems of knowledge. Above all, his meditations were governed by a quest in the form of a question: Is there anything that is certain? If things I considered certain in the past turned out to be false, what's to prevent that from happening to all the things I now consider certain? How do we know, he mused, that everything we've taken to be true isn't just the illusion of some evil demon, a diabolical god bent on playing with our minds? But then Descartes hit on something: Even if there was an evil demon deceiving me about everything, in order for me to be deceived I would have to exist. So even if I'm deceived, it must be the case that I exist. Therefore, it seems that there is one thing that is certain: That I exist.

Having found this Archimedean point, this one sure foundation, Descartes asks the next question: *What* am I? What sort of a thing is this "I" that exists? Descartes conclusion is now a familiar concept: "I" am a "thinking thing." The essence of the human person is identified with the mind, not the body. The result is a "rationalism" that would come to dominate modernity.

From Descartes, then, we see two themes that will be amplified in modernity: first, a picture of the human person as an individual. When Descartes shuts himself up in his room to think all by himself, he is enacting a picture of the human person that would come to mark modernity, seeing human persons as individual, self-sufficient, atomistic, dis-embodied entities fundamentally isolated from others. The seeds of modern individualism were, in a way, planted by Descartes' isolated exercises in thinking.

This picture of the individual would resonate with later movements in modernity that came to expression in the Enlightenment. In particular, both the scientific and political sides of the Enlightenment would emphasize *freedom* or *autonomy*. The scientific Enlightenment emphasized that in order for knowledge

to be “rational,” it had to be unbiased and “objective.” Thus it was necessary to throw off the influence of faith, tradition, and the church in order to achieve the “autonomy” of rational thought. This eventually gave birth to the vision of “secular reason.” On the political side, liberation and autonomy were the watchwords of the American and French Revolutions: nations should be freed from the authority of the king just as individuals should be freed from the influence of authors. “Liberty” was viewed as the ability to choose what *I* want to pursue as “the good.”

Now, these are just a couple of features of *modernity*. But what does this have to do with postmodernity or postmodernism? Here I would like to emphasize a distinction between *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*. As I use the term, “postmodernITY” refers to a constellation of cultural phenomena, whereas “postmodernISM” refers specifically to philosophical movements in the late twentieth century. And the relationship between the two is complicated.

Many of the phenomena we associate with postmodernism—things like the explosion of media technologies, economic globalization, social fragmentation, etc.—I would describe under the term *postmodernity*. And as I see it, these phenomena are, in fact, the fruit of *modernity*. In other words, a lot of the things we associate with “post”-modernity are *hyper*-modern—they are the amplification of shifts that took place in *modernity*. In this respect, there is a great deal of continuity between *modernity* and *postmodernity*. Indeed, we might simply describe *postmodernity* as “late *modernity*.”

However, *postmodernism* as a philosophical movement is a critique of the assumptions of *modernity*. And insofar as *postmodernity* is just “late” *modernity*, then *postmodern* philosophy would actually be very critical of a lot of the cultural phenomena we associate with *postmodernity*. So on this picture, there is a great deal of continuity between *modernity* and *postmodernity*, but *discontinuity* between *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*.

And here's why I think Christians should be interested in postmodernism, even if they should be critical of postmodernity: the assumptions of modernity are not very consonant with Christian faith. In other words, I don't think modernity is really a friend of Christianity—despite the fact that so much of Protestant Christianity has bought into the assumptions of modernity. The modern emphasis on autonomy and individualism—amplified in isolating gaming and communications technologies—run counter to the Gospel. And so Christians should be interested in the critique of modernity. And it's just such a critique that we find in postmodernism.

My goal in *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* was not to argue that Christians should “be postmodern.” Rather, my argument was that Christians would find an ally in the postmodern critique of modernity—and that this critique could be therapeutic, helping the church to see the ways it has been complicit with modernity that are not consistent with the biblical vision of human flourishing. In other words, postmodernism could help us remember how to be the ancient people of God longing for a kingdom that is to come.

By engaging postmodern philosophy in this way, I just saw myself carrying on the tradition of Saint Augustine who was happy to “plunder the Egyptians” in order to bring every thought captive to Christ. So just as Augustine critically appropriated the work of Plato in order to articulate Christian wisdom, so I have critically appropriated the work of Derrida and Foucault in order to articulate the shape of faithful Christian discipleship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is not at all a blanket endorsement of their work, nor am I claiming that they are “Christian” in any way. I simply suggest that their work can actually help us—by common grace—to discern something about our present. We could use the same principle of approach with *modern* philosophers. Indeed, in other work I have critically appropriated the work of Leibniz, and other Christian scholars have critically appropriated the work of Kant and Hume and Hegel. Furthermore,

there are “modern” philosophers like Pascal and Kierkegaard who exhibit a radical Christian vision. So my critique of modernity is not an “all or nothing” model.

I would expect Asian philosophers and theologians might approach Confucius or Daoism with a similar approach. Augustine could critically appropriate the work of Plato because he was confident that, since God alone is the author of truth, whenever philosophers hit upon the truth, they are discovering something about God’s world. “All truth is God’s truth,” Augustine said. By this he didn’t mean that “anything goes.” Rather, he was emphasizing that since God is the fount of truth and the source of creation, even non-Christian philosophers can glimpse things that are true. Like John Calvin, Augustine was convinced that a God who can speak through Balaam’s ass could also speak through non-Christian philosophers—and that we shouldn’t refuse to listen wherever God might be speaking. I have tried to take that stance of “critical listening” with postmodern philosophers.

Finally, let me say a word about my use of the term “liturgy” in this book. I understand that for many Protestants, “liturgy” sounds like a “Catholic” term. I would say two things: First, I think it is important for Protestants to see themselves as part of the “catholic” tradition of the church. In my Reformed tradition, we regularly affirm the Apostles’ Creed in which we affirm that we believe “in the holy, catholic church.” So yes, in a way, I do think liturgy is “catholic.” But second, I use the term “liturgy” simply as a shorthand to describe the rhythms and rituals that are part of Christian worship. And this is true of *any* service of Christian worship, even worship that see itself as opposed to liturgy. For instance, pentecostal and charismatic worship still has its own “liturgy”—patterns and rhythms of worship. In this sense, “liturgy” is not a bad thing—it simply describes our practices of worship. I would like to redeem the notion of

worship for evangelicals. Indeed, this is the burden of my new book, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2009).

We in the North American church have much to learn from our Asian sisters and brothers. I hope this translation of *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* might provide a way for us to continue that conversation.

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