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ENRICHING POSTMODERNISM:

Christians and postmodernists drawing aside the curtain of materialism

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Outline

Context:

Our turbulent times are opening up new horizons of thought. The certainties of the market, materialism and of rational, scientific man himself are being called into question across a wide range of disciplines. This critique has led to what many have called post-modernism, an intellectual movement, often criticized by Christians. Post-modernism can however be seen as an intellectual response to a unidimensional world centred around a narrow vision of reason, and Christians can learn much from reading and engaging with postmodernism. This paper presents three “postmodern” philosophers whose thoughts can help fertilise the Christian critique of Contemporary Culture

Subject:

Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), Alain Badiou (born 1937) and Slavoj Zizek (born 1949), three philosophers with strong contemporary influence in radical political circles, each tackling the poverty of material rationality centred upon the self, and each in their way opening up the world of spirit, sacrifice, exchange, truth and transformation. Each has addressed themes of Christian relevance in their books - Jean Baudrillard in “The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact” and “Symbolic Exchange and Death”, Alain Badiou in “Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil” and “Saint Paul: the foundation of universalism”, and Slavoj Zizek in “The Fragile Absolute – or why the christian legacy is worth fighting for” and “The Ticklish Subject: the absent centre of political ontology”.

Theme:

Jean Baudrillard, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Zizek will be presented as allies in helping us communicate an understanding that is God centred, spirit-centred and Other-centred. Each can help us in our critique of the spiritual poverty of the contemporary world and show that we do not stand alone in looking forward to God's world.

Relevance:

Christ calls us to a renewed understanding of the world, one founded upon love and truth. The question of how we know is one that postmodernism addresses, believing, as Christians do, that simple scientific empiricism and analytic reason are insufficient to reveal either the nature of ourselves or of this world in which we find ourselves.

Gallileo decentred the physical siting of the earth within the cosmos. Conversely, and unobserved by many, he centred knowledge on human reason. This gesture of thought gave humanity the brashness to explore the physical parameters of its existence, and reveal to itself, through travel and science, the geography and biology of its being. This faith in analytic and empirical reason, centred on the knowing subject, has given us the Modern world, and enabled humanity to dominate (or at least seem to), and change, the surface of our Earth, with some geologists now referring to a new geological era, that they call the anthropocene. It brought also an arrogance that humanity could control its destiny through colonisation and exploitation of Nature.

Postmodernism, like Christianity, offers a critique of this position. It is addressing the ways in which we think and articulate reality. Like Christianity, it is critical of self-confident reason, it exposes the explicatory poverty of materialism and it is unable to believe that today's world represents human destiny. Through exploring the realm of human thought, postmodernism stands in relation to the subjective world of human being in a similar way to that in which the empirical scientists stood towards the physical world, four centuries ago. Christians need to be careful not to adopt an unreflective, hostile attitude towards postmodernism in the manner by which many Christians historically opposed both Science and Human Rights.

Christian understanding of Heavenly reason and Christian confidence in the universality of the human condition can enrich and support the postmodern critique of contemporary thought and power. The hopes and insights, literally embodied within Christian lives, can serve as an example to Postmodernists that there is an alternative to the modern world.

ALAIN BADIOU:

Knowledge versus truth – knowledge remains external to us -it simply reinforces our prejudices. Truth enters into and overpowers us. We meet truth in truth events which change us forever, and through which we become witnesses to a new being. Evil arises when we deny, corrupt or limit truth or want to impose it on others. For Badiou, Truth extends human subjective being out into what he calls the void, but which Christians would call God's world.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD:

Subject versus object; symbol versus sign; symbolic/gift exchange - Humans require a symbolic register, but today we are dominated by Hyper-reality in which there is no symbolic reference, and so we escape into virtual worlds. Symbolic (or gift) exchange versus the exchange of signs (or commodities). "The only way to overcome the system is to make it a gift to which it cannot reply". "I know that God exists but I do not believe in him". Were he still alive, Christians would show Baudrillard through the living reality of Christ within us, that Christ, God, love and hope are real and worth believing in, since in faith, a new world is brought into being. We would also show that we give the gifts of ourselves.

SLAVOJ ZIZEK

The spectrality of truth – truth shimmering in all its dimensions. The subject as the new ground for knowledge. The three registers – the imaginary, the symbolic and the real (that which appears to be reality but is in fact masking the Real, namely the unquestioned ideology which today is the logic of capital accumulation). In Christianity, the imaginary, the symbolic and the Real are brought into new harmony, founded upon the Real of Providence (God) and the living reality of Christ within us.