

# Postmodernism

## Pre-Post-Modernism

As we've been discussing in this series on Worldviews, it has been clear that once the Enlightenment ideals took their place in the academic and political spheres of life, the road began to bend steeply down hill toward Nihilism. Being dissatisfied with the prospects of a hopeless, purposeless life, most people chose other, more individualistically purposeful Worldview choices such as Existentialism or EPM.

All of the Enlightenment Worldviews (Deism, Naturalism, Nihilism, Existentialism) were summed up in the phase of history known as Modernity. But there were specific elements of Modernity that were not stable enough to support that many worldviews. What made the foundations of Modernity falter? How did such a "strong" series of worldviews built on *reason* become unstable? Cultural currents.

In his book, *The Sacred Canopy*, sociologist Peter Berger identified three cultural currents that rapidly changed the shape of the Western, modern world.

### 1. The Process of Secularization

- from the Latin *saeculum*, meaning "this present age," contextually "worldly things"
- Christianity has ceased to be the motivating center of Western life.
- Our world "has erased transcendence from our reality map" - Huston Smith
- **But is America really more secular than sacred?** Not necessarily on the ground level. But it is coming, and quickly. **Why? What influences push it?** The upper levels - educators and politicians. **Why else?** Lack of social support for cohesive Christian community.
- "Enlightenment was of the few. Secularization is of the many." - Owen Chadwick

### 2. The Process of Privatization

- The process by which a chasm is created between the public and private spheres of life, where spiritual things are placed within the private arena.
- "When left unchecked, this process makes the Christian faith a matter of personal preference, trivialized to the realm of taste or opinion." - J.E. White
- Faith is no longer accepted outside of our private lives. It has become little more than a reflection of ourselves.

### 3. The Process of Pluralization

➤ In Berger's book, he describes "religion" in its traditional role as a "sacred canopy" covering a culture. But today, the canopy is gone, and we are left with a bunch of tents under which we choose to dwell.

➤ **What fueled this process of pluralization?** Immigration

- "But pluralization means far more than a simple increase in the number of faith options. The sheer number of choices and competing ideologies suggest that no one perspective or religious persuasion has the inside track on the spiritual realm." - J. E. White

➤ We now live in what Malise Ruthven calls a "divine supermarket," a.k.a. syncretism. It is a mix and match of religious (and secular) elements that allow us to choose our own, personal taste over what has been for millennia considered *truth*.

➤ In perspective then, though the Enlightenment attacked Christianity because its central beliefs had been disproven by science, our current culture attacks it based on the fact that it claims an unchanging and universal truth.

## The Marks of the Cultural Currents

1. Moral Relativism: What is true for you is true for you, and what is true for me is true for me.

➤ What is *moral* is dictated by a particular situation in light of a particular culture (Situational Ethics).

- Are there black and white/right and wrong truths that are true regardless of the situation or culture?

➤ The shift from Modernity to Postmodernity is highlighted by there not simply being more immoral people than in centuries past, but by their being immoral and not considering it to be wrong.

2. Autonomous Individualism: Each person is independent in terms of destiny and accountability.

➤ Ultimate moral authority is self-generated. We answer to no one but ourselves.

- What do you think was the historical genesis of this individualistic autonomy?

➤ The shift in thinking from Modernity to Postmodernity was from people not only arguing that they had the *right to do* what seemed right to them, to people thinking that the world *actually was* how they saw it.

3. Narcissistic Hedonism: Personal pleasure and fulfillment are the forefront of concerns.

➤ In our culture, personal well-being is everything.

➤ How do injustices continue, even when they are obviously wrong?

➤ Stanley Grenz has noted that Anselm's words "I believe in order that I may understand" were changed in the Enlightenment (beginning of Modern era) to "I believe in what I can understand," being changed further in Postmodernity to "I believe when I understand that it helps me."

4. Reductive Naturalism: Only those things that can be empirically *verified* in nature can be known.

➤ Science has become the new religion - *scientism* if you will. As J. E. White has said, "No longer is it simply a question of whether a test-tube can prove God; the test-tube *is* God."