

Whose Hope? Paradigms for Christian Religious Education in a Postmodern Age

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A mother and daughter stood in a local shopping mall. With her finger wagging in the air for emphasis, the mother lectured the daughter: “When I was your age... When I was your age...” The daughter waited. Finally, she interrupted, saying, “Ma, you were never my age.” The mother, stunned by the response, was silent. (Story courtesy of Tom Groome.)

The story illustrates two points of entry for discussing patterns of generational and cultural change. The daughter represents Gen X and the Millennial generation. Gen Xers were born between the early 1960s and early 1980s, while Millennials include those born from the early 1980s to the present (Howe and Strauss 1993 & Howe and Strauss 2000). These two age cohorts have grown up in a world of intense change. As a result, their perspectives on life are often significantly different from those of Babyboomers and people of earlier generations (born during or before the early 1960s). For instance, in growing up in a “communication and computer age” Gen Xers and Millennials have been flooded with images and data and have needed to become much more sophisticated at processing information than youth in any previous age. Culturally, the complexities of contemporary life have triggered a shift from modernity to postmodernity. The modern worldviews that dominated from the Enlightenment to the recent past are grounded in the conviction that we as human beings can come to know our world and order our lives with reasonable clarity and confidence. During the modern era greatest emphasis was placed on the power of reason, objective thinking, and faith in progress. In contrast, the ebb and flow of our multi-faceted, often ambiguous, and ever-changing postmodern world of today provides the baseline of experience for Gen Xers and Millennials. From a religious educator’s perspective, there is growing emphasis on efforts to explore the perspectives and stances of Gen Xers and Millennials, and to consider how education in Christian faith needs to be adapted for postmodern culture (Beaudoin 1998 & McAllister and Springle 1999).

Reflecting on the mother in the story offers a second way of thinking about the changing nature of contemporary life. The mother represents those of us who have reached the generative stage of life, a time when a great deal of our energy is focused on being teachers, mentors and guides for those of younger generations. We were often shaped most significantly in our youth by modern outlooks on life rather than by the rising currents of cultural postmodernity. Consequently, as we become aware of the tremendous cultural shifts taking place today we might, like the mother in the story, be reduced at times to stunned silence. As religious educators we may find ourselves asking: “How can we contribute to forming people in faith in a world of accelerated change, a world in which the wisdom of the past may not be fully applicable or relevant in the present?”

In this essay I address the challenge of mature Christians to find effective ways to mentor and guide others in an age that presents so many unexplored issues. I examine three significant shifts that characterize the currents of postmodern culture, and outline three paradigms for responding to these shifts. Finally, I suggest that religious educators evaluate these three responses in light of the hope they engender.

Signs of a Shift toward Cultural Postmodernity in Christian Faith Communities

1. Within many Christian faith communities there is a re-thinking and re-imagining of the dynamics of educating for the development of a sense of Christian identity.

The dynamics of fostering a sense of Christian identity have been understood frequently as involving “nurture” and/or “conversion.” Within many Christian faith communities the commonly accepted practice is for children and adult neophytes to be nurtured gradually in faith. The goal of such nurturing is to enable people to come to understand the doctrines and practices of a faith community as a foundation for developing a relationship with God and forming a sense of personal and communal identity as a Christian. There has also often been a sense that while nurture may lead a person to learn about Christian faith, people do not truly embrace Christian faith until they have a conversion experience, that is, an encounter with the Divine that leads to a decisive faith commitment. Conversion is envisioned in some traditions as a dramatic, perhaps once-in-a-lifetime, experience of turning from sin in order to be open to God. In other traditions significant life passages or events (such as emerging from adolescence, giving birth to a child, experiencing God profoundly in nature or working through a mid-life transition) are viewed as having the potential to trigger conversion experiences that can lead to or renew a commitment to God and a life of Christian discipleship. While there may be debates about how the dynamics of nurture or conversion relate to one another, understandings of these dynamics tend to be based on the conviction that in order to develop a sense of Christian identity believers must embrace established Christian understandings of meaning and value. That is, either established understandings are transmitted to a person or a person learns to correlate his or her life with Christian Faith or Christian Story.

In our increasingly postmodern world the dyad of “nurture” and/or “conversion” is being transformed and in some cases superseded by a sense of Christian identity as “constructed.” Consider, as an example, the postmodern construction of Christian identity by a couple I will call Rita and Joe. Joe grew up in a German-American, Catholic community in the northeastern United States. Rita grew up in a Mexican-American, Catholic community in southern Texas and northern Mexico. During her teen years Rita was among a large number of Mexican-Americans who moved into Joe’s neighborhood and parish. When Joe and Rita met, they fell in love and married. They believed that their faith perspectives would eventually meld together into a unified and comprehensive Christian vision of life.

Today, as they raise their three children, Rita and Joe approach issues of faith in a new way. First, they have come to value their religious differences. Indeed, Joe and Rita want to preserve these differences insofar as they feel that each of them brings unique and valuable religious traditions and customs from their respective backgrounds into their family. Second, together with their children, Joe and Rita are trying actively to construct a sense of Christian identity that is appropriate for them. Rita and Joe draw from various strands of their religious backgrounds, and are open to exploring other faith traditions as well. They are not just nurturing their children from a font of established Christian wisdom or inviting them to be open to profound conversion experiences. They have a new awareness of how the Christian perspectives they grew up thinking were normative and universal for all Christians, if not all people, are rooted in the specific outlooks, concerns, histories, and social contexts of their respective

German-American and Mexican-American Catholic faith communities. Moreover, they are mentoring their children in how to weave together strands of meaning from our pluralistic, multicultural world into a framework of faith that provides a sense of personal centeredness and that enables them to make meaningful connections with God and others.

Generally, contact among ethnic groups within Christian denominations, life situations that create connections across Christian denominations or between Christians and people of other faiths, the realities of single-parent and blended families, and a host of other postmodern complexities create situations in which established structures of meaning and value no longer prove to be adequate. A radical awareness of the historical and bodily situatedness of all human knowing and doing gives rise to a sense that the resources and traditions of the past are not trans-historical or universal structures of meaning and value, but can be taken as historical examples, raw materials, or even as fragments that need to be selectively and creatively combined in constructing a sense of faith identity that can guide thought and practice in the present.

2. There has been a shift from a focus on religious belief and developing a religious worldview toward a greater emphasis on the importance of religious experience and connecting spiritually with God, others, the world, and one's "inner self."

In the past education in faith often focused on learning the doctrines, prayers and rituals that expressed a particular Christian understanding of the world. Faith formation moved toward an embrace of a framework of meaning and value (i.e., a Christian metanarrative) that was applicable to all life situations. Adherence to this Christian worldview provided security and offered a foundational framework for approaching most if not all dimensions of life. Moreover, we often grew up with the sense that the core aspects of a Christian worldview were held in common by the members of our family, faith community, neighborhood, nation, and perhaps even by all people of good will.

Today, growing diversity, pluralism, multi-culturalism and rapid rates of change have led many religious educators to focus less on Christian metanarratives. On the one hand, there is postmodern sense that we must increasingly face new, unprecedented situations, and that the established truths of Christian metanarratives are less helpful as guides for our lives and faith communities. As a result, we find a greater focus today on cultivating spiritual experiences that lead us beyond anxieties and discomforts with our life situations and that foster a sense of connecting with an inner self, the world, others and God. There is also a greater openness to drawing from a variety of religious traditions to foster a sense of spiritual vibrancy. On the other hand, in our postmodern age we begin to expect difference rather than a shared worldview when we approach a colleague, a neighbor and sometimes even a member of our own family. Consequently, religious education has come to place greater emphasis on navigating difference and connecting spiritually with others despite the diversity of beliefs found among the various communities of which we are a part.

A postmodern focus on religious experience and connecting spiritually with others can be illustrated by an encounter with a Catholic I met about six years ago. Jerry is an active volunteer and leader in his parish. Moreover, Jerry's spirituality is marked by a religious eclecticism, a drawing together of spiritual resources from various Christian denominations and a combining of Christianity with insights and practices from other faith traditions. While Jerry attends mass at his parish, he is also involved in a Bible-study group at an evangelical Lutheran church. In

addition, he practices yoga and Buddhist meditation. Jerry claims that all of these things help him to connect with God and other people, and remain personally centered. Jerry is not interested in finding a way of bringing together the various strands of his spiritual life into some overarching and comprehensive religious understanding of life. Jerry is content to explore connections between his numerous spiritual practices, note incompatibilities and even inconsistencies among them, and to continue to explore a variety of spiritual paths in terms of what “works for me,” that is, what provides him with a sense of centeredness and the meaningfulness of life. Additionally, Jerry continually seeks out others who also value spiritual openness and with whom he can share a search for meaning and value in a complex and ambiguous world. (For another example of postmodern spiritual questing see Hampl 2000)

3. There is a redefining of the nature of authority in many Christian faith communities today.

Within the cultural paradigm of Western modernity, large institutions supported broad frameworks of meaning and value. Churches, schools, business corporations political parties, branches of the military and other large institutional structures provided authoritative and comprehensive accounts of what life can and should be like. These comprehensive accounts and the authorities that represent them are being questioned more frequently today. On the one hand, the representatives of large institutions are perceived less often as speaking with complementary voices. Rather, it is increasingly common for us to feel stretched by conflicting visions of life presented in our faith communities, jobs, and local communities. As we are caught in the midst of increasing social fragmentation we are more often raising critically reflective questions about these authorities. On the other hand, there is a growing awareness that the interests pursued by large institutions are always rooted in specific, limited and at times even sinful perspectives, and are, even at their best, never fully reflective of a universal worldview. (This awareness is often fueled by the exposing of corruption such as in the crises of sexual abuse and institutional authority in the PTL Club / Jim Bakker organization in 1987 and the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston in 2002.) Accompanying this awareness is a sense that we can no longer take the perspectives presented by established authorities as unquestioned “givens.” but need always to consider whether or how much of established, authoritative frameworks of meaning and value we will accept. (Harry Lee Poe offers an analysis, albeit an overly pessimistic one, of the shift from a modern to postmodern senses of authority in *Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*: 77-92.)

The questioning of established institutions and authorities is clearing the way for the acceptance of multiple sources of religious authority in the lives of many Christians. To begin, more and more of us are turning to popular culture for religious guidance. For example, in *Virtual Faith* Tom Beaudoin discusses how he and many other Gen Xers experience the play “Rent” as capturing the spiritual struggles of their generation, taking on the authority of a spiritual classic for them (1998: xiii). Similarly, I have met Babyboomers for whom Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell have become primary religious authorities. As Moyers and Campbell have explored the symbols and texts of faith in Public Broadcasting specials, they have given voice to the spiritual yearnings of many mid-life Babyboomers.

A renewed sense of the importance of Christian witness in the world is one among many other factors contributing to the development of multiple sources of religious authority. More

fully, greater emphasis is often placed today on the need for Christians to make meaningful and morally responsible connections between faith and everyday life. We are challenged to ask how our faith affects the way we parent our children, do our jobs, interact with our neighbors, vote, are involved in the civic life of our communities, and participate in the marketplace as consumers. Moreover, as we embrace a theological understanding of the Christian vocation in the world, we sometimes develop a sense of being able to speak with a unique sense of religious or spiritual authority that we may not be sure how to relate to established structures of authority in our lives.

Consider as an example my experience with a group of counseling psychologists who are exploring how their faith convictions affect their professional practice. As they draw upon both their professional competence and their deep religious commitments, the counselors have an increasing awareness of their unique competence to address religious and spiritual issues when such issues are brought up by their clients. However, they have sometimes found themselves at odds with established authority structures in both their professional and faith communities. The counselors' openness to addressing spiritual issues in their professional practice has been challenged within their profession because of deep-rooted suspicions of religion in mental health counseling. They have also reported feeling that their efforts to live their faith in their everyday lives are applauded on a theoretical level, but are not really welcomed in their faith communities. Generally, these counseling psychologists illustrate a growing trend in the church. Within the Christian churches today there is a movement away from an understanding of religious and spiritual "authority" as singular and embodied most fully in the leadership of denominational structures, toward an acceptance and balancing of multiple religious authorities, including a balancing of personal and professional competence with the authorities of the various institutions of which we are a part.

Responding to Cultural Postmodernity

The Christian churches have been responding to the emergence of cultural postmodernity for nearly thirty years. Moreover, it is possible to characterize these responses as fitting into three broad categories (Lakeland 1997: 41-44)

1. Counter-Contemporary Responses: Some Christians focus on the formation of faith communities that assert Christian beliefs and practices over and against a contemporary loss of meaning and the limitations of cultural postmodernity.

Analysis of the tremendous changes taking place in Christian faith communities leads some Christians to outrage as they judge the influence of cultural postmodernity to be negative. For example, according to Stanley Hauerwas, "Our world and our lives are far too fragmentary and disordered to know where we are" (2000: 37). More importantly, the overarching and inclusive frameworks of meaning and value (i.e., a metanarratives, including Christian metanarrative) of modernity have always been self-deceiving efforts to impose a false order upon the ambiguities of life. The falsity of modernity's metanarratives is shown by the readiness of modern people to resort to violence to defend their worldviews. From Hauerwas's point of view, postmodernity does nothing to address the fragmentation and tendency to violence in our world. Advocates of postmodern perspectives attempt to convince us by a kind of intellectual slight of

hand that the plurality, ambiguity, and complexity of our times are not a result of our failure to make sense of our lives and world, but are, instead, a virtue to be celebrated. From such a perspective, the growing cynicism and despair of our times are the result of more and more people seeing through the illusions of postmodernity. Hence, Hauerwas rejects “modernity and its bastard offspring postmodernity” (2000: 42).

Hauerwas, and others link postmodernism to global capitalism (Jameson 1991 & Eagleton 1996). Their arguments are based on the claim that advanced capitalism absorbs all aspects of human culture into an endless cycle of economic production and consumption. They contend that the result is a postmodern culture that exaggerates the extent to which we face new, unprecedented life situations that require us to construct (that is, produce and then consume) a never-ending cycle of new understandings of the world, new senses of social and personal identity, and new frameworks of religious meaning and value. From such a perspective, the more spirituality becomes intertwined with popular culture, the more it becomes another consumer commodity subject to the forces of the global market.

Hauerwas argues that we need to re-center our lives in the church as a community of Christian character that stands as a potentially world-transforming alternative to the alienation and resulting violence of the modern/postmodern world. He claims that, “Our hope as Christians is in an *altera civitas* of which we believe we already have substantive intimations in the church.” From Hauerwas’ perspective, the church can provide us with “a better hope” (see Heb. 7:18-22) than either modernity or postmodernity (2000: 10).

The counter-contemporary stance that Hauerwas exemplifies serves as the operative theology of many Christian faith communities today. In such communities one is likely to hear discussions about the Church as a “culture of life” standing against a secular “culture of death.” Faith formation tends to highlight the importance of conversion as a turning from a predominantly sin world. Quite often the primary virtues are listening and obedience. One must overcome the destructive influences of postmodern, consumerist, alienating culture and learn to listen and be obedient to the Divine voice of Truth made known through the wisdom and authority of the church.

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Before we can evaluate the counter-contemporary stance we need to distinguish between trivializing and questing postmodernity. Postmodern sensibilities give rise to a range of attitudes toward life and the world. At one end of the spectrum, we find *trivializing postmodernity*. From a trivializing postmodern perspective, we live in a world that has lost or is losing all sense of meaning and value. Our hopes and life goals are diminished by the dissipation of generally accepted structures for personal and social identity formation and an increasing awareness of the limits of established structures of authority. As they become skeptical about living truly meaningful lives, those who fall into trivializing postmodernity tend toward skepticism, the parodying of life, and the conclusion that all we have left is to chase after limited and transitory experiences that will divert our attention from the absurdity of human existence. (In popular culture examples of trivializing postmodernity abound. For example, *Seinfeld*, the highest rated television show a few years ago, is about “nothing” or a group of people who lead trivial, “do nothing” lives. Similarly, Matt Stone and Trey Parker’s film *South Park* illustrates a trivializing of the power of language, the importance of relationships, and the meaning of social life.) As it reaches its lowest ebb, the currents of trivializing postmodernity can lead to what Joseph Feeney has called wounded postmodernism. In taking the postmodern critique of modernity to the

extreme, wounded postmodernism results in “a sense of exhaustion, a loss of feeling and meaning, minimal expectations, and hopes, and a desire to parody everything” (1997:13). As it hits bottom, wounded postmodernism can become a wounding postmodernism that lashes out violently against the world. There is a strain of destructive wounding postmodernism within the Millennial Generation (Powers 2002).

Questing postmodernism lies at the other end of the spectrum from trivializing postmodernism. In contrast to a trivializing focus on the production and consumption of a never-ending cycle of experiences that numb us to the pain of a loss of true meaning and value, questers see the present era as providing us with new opportunities to fashion meaningful modes of thought and action for today. Building upon a critique of established structures of meaning, identity formation, and authority, questers generally seek to promote imaginative creativity and the construction of genuinely new and authentic patterns of self-identity and social solidarity. For questers the postmodern agenda culminates in freedom to envision and embrace new, more life-giving ways of being. Questers strive to promote a hope in the future that is grounded in a realistic sense of both the achievements and limitations of the past. (J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series provides an example of questing postmodernism in popular culture. Harry’s life is marked by conundrums, secrets and seemingly impossible situations. Still, as Harry and his friends battle the forces of chaos, Rowling leads us to see that the complexities and ambiguities of Harry’s world -- and by extension the complexities of our own times -- can lead him -- and us -- to be open to magical, even wondrous, possibilities for new life and new creation.)

Now, advocates of the counter-contemporary stance are both right and wrong in their critiques of emerging cultural postmodernism. They are right in their diagnoses of the ills of trivializing postmodernism. They can help Christians to recognize the destructive dimensions of our individualistic, consumeristic post-industrial society. However, the champions of the counter-contemporary view are wrong in so far as they fail to recognize the positive phenomenon of questing postmodernism. While there are aspects of questing postmodernism that need to be critiqued, contemporary spiritual questing can help us to discern God’s active presence in contemporary culture, calling us forth to reconstruct our world in more life-giving ways. *In so far as those who advance a counter-contemporary stance diminish our appreciation for the presence of God in postmodern culture they add to rather than diminish the trivializing tendencies of our times.*

A second irreparable fault of this first option is revealed when we examine closely the central counter-contemporary distinction between the church and the world. Despite its rhetorical appeal, it is impossible to maintain this distinction. As Kathryn Tanner’s analysis of culture makes clear, it is impossible to articulate a meaningful sense of “Christian community” as separated from “the world” by 1) some sort of social or cultural boundary, or 2) an internal coherence that can be found in the church but that does not normally exist in “the world.” On the one hand, if we try to discuss the uniqueness of Christian community “the incredible expanse of Christian practice across differences of time and place, and the diversity of what Christians say and do even in any one of these times and places, makes questionable the status of Christian practices as some sort of whole” (1997: 94). On the other hand, there have always been internal disputes about Christian identity and the significance of Christian faith, and no clear sense of the universal meaning and significance of Christianity has ever emerged from reflection upon the internal logic of Christian faith.

As Christians we do not begin with a distinct cultural identity or an internally homogenous set of beliefs and practices. Christian identity is never a “given” that, once we claim it, places us in contrast to the world. Rather, Christianity always exists as the historical realization of Christian faith within the world rather than in contrast to it.

Pastorally, in order to sustain the ruse that they stand as an alternative to the world, advocates of counter-contemporary stances must blind themselves to the many ways their own perspectives are grounded within and could not exist without the cultural currents they criticize and reject. Additionally, within counter-contemporary communities theological reflection may distort relationships with God. For instance, counter-contemporary theological stances may block their adherents from being open to the ongoing presence of the Spirit within the world (and not just within the church).

2. Late Modern Stances: Some Christians focus on adapting modern theological projects so that they can be carried into the postmodern era and continue to provide a foundation for fostering Christian self and social identity.

Late modern accounts tend to highlight the loss of meaning and value that results from the questioning of foundational and metanarrative accounts of life and the world, and then to try to reformulate such accounts so that they overcome postmodern challenges. For instance, in *Deep Symbols* Edward Farley begins by noting that, “We live in a society quite puzzled about itself.” We are “shell-shocked” by the rapid pace of change and societal problems. Farley suggests that our confusions “are partly the result of a loss or diminishment at the very heart of culture . . . namely, a loss of society’s powerful deep symbols” (1996: ix). According to Farley, a partial disintegration of the “interhuman” (that is, the “primordial sphere of relation”) and other features of postmodern society have “like a virus infected and weakened the words of power” and deep symbols of our culture (1996: x). As a result, such deep symbols as tradition, moral obligation, and hope have been “trivialized, dismissed” (1996: 25). Moreover, this weakening of deep symbols has led to a loss of shared cultural meanings and created an environment in which violence and other threats to life are more likely to occur and more difficult to counter.

Farley suggests a three-step process for responding to the loss of deep symbols. We first need to note that the power of deep symbols has eroded but not disappeared. Thus, the initial step is to center our attention on dimensions of life where the deep symbols still appear relevant. As Farley explains with regard to the deep symbol tradition:

Thus, even the most radically subversive social groups, the most now-oriented subcultures, cannot quite accomplish utter traditionlessness. When these members marry, raise their children, struggle with their sufferings and guilt, enjoy the cycles of day and night, winter and spring, and bury their dead, patches of the old wisdom show up in their sensibilities and their rituals (1996: 39).

The next step involves sorting through and disentangling the various strands of culture to understand the developments that led to the demise of a deep symbol. Finally, we must strive to recover our deep symbols by rethinking and re-embodiment them for the present (1996: 40-41).

Farley’s method is illustrated by his discussion of the deep symbol hope. He begins by claiming that, “Hope has little place in the way postmodern society confronts problems or understands the world. What makes more sense in such a society is planning, organizing, or predicting” (1996: 96). Yet, hope survives. However, when we disentangle the threads of hope

in our world today we find that the meaning of hope as a deep symbol has been bifurcated. On the one hand, the postmodern movement away from overarching and encompassing frameworks of meaning and value toward a focus on the construction of reality has led to a sense of subjective hope that gets expressed as personal preference in the phrase “I hope...”. On the other hand, hope is sometimes idealized today as “an external outcome or event” or an “objectified future” that exists as something better beyond the present (1996: 96-97, 109-110). Farley contends that as a result of this bifurcation there has been a diminishment of hope in concrete, everyday relationships among people. This contributes to a loss of meaning and sense of the banality of life in postmodern culture. What is needed Farley argues is a recovery of hope as a primary virtue that “embraces both a way of individual existence and a community’s ethos” (1996: 123). Farley envisions a recovered hope as “a way of existing” that connects persons to one another and ultimately to a transcendent source of meaning and value. As such it is a “transindividual form of hope” (1996: 106-108).

Pastorally, late modern approaches like the one presented by Farley serve as the operative theology in many Christian faith communities today. More fully, there is a tendency in many faith communities to focus on common experiences that go beyond differences and open people more fully to the transcendent dimensions of life. That is, there is a sense that as people (to use Farley’s words) “raise their children, struggle with their sufferings and guilt, enjoy the cycles of day and night, winter and spring, and bury their dead” they can become attentive to dimensions of life that unite them with others and God. In such faith communities, faith formation frequently focuses on exploring and/or reasserting the deep symbols of Christian faith as a foundation for personal and social identity in world that is often marked by fragmentation and the trivializing of meaning and value.

Late modern strategies have served the church well. They have helped many Christian faith communities become or remain places of life-giving nurture. At the same time, they are marked by a number of significant weaknesses. First, late modern approaches to Christian faith depend upon there being commonality in our experiences of raising children, suffering and other significant life passages. However, there is increasing social conflict about ultimate issues. In fact, in some faith communities there is no longer enough commonality about the meaning of significant life passages to sustain the consensus required for a late modern approach to remain a viable strategy for Christian faith formation. As debates about when life begins, end of life issues, and responsibilities of parents for their children grow more intense in our culture, including within our churches, late modern appeals to being open to common experiences of the transcendent become less credible.

Second, there are increasing number of people who become marginalized in late-modern Christian communities. For instance, Pam is an award winning community organizer. She regards her work as ministry. However, while Pam remains committed to spiritual practices of prayer, spiritual direction, and conversation with others about faith, she is currently taking a “sabbatical from the church.” Essentially, Pam is a postmodern spiritual quester whose life focuses on the new opportunities for spiritual growth presented by postmodern culture rather than the decline of traditional religious practices. In an environment where late modern approaches dominate, she has not found a faith community in which she feels truly at home. *Generally, the greater diversity within our culture and the increasing number of postmodern spiritual questers are rendering late modern approaches to faith formation more difficult to sustain.*

3. Stances that Embrace Postmodernity: Increasing numbers of Christians are focusing on the new possibilities offered by the positive dimensions of postmodernity, and are open to discerning the presence of the Spirit in postmodern culture.

Cate Siejk, in *Learning to Love the Questions*, expresses the view of many Christians today when she suggests that postmodernity provides opportunities for new insight. Siejk explores how postmodern theories of knowledge embrace the richness of experiences found in the differences, diversity, multiplicity, and change of our world today. She argues that openness to the insights of these theories can spark a critically reflective pedagogy that fosters novel, imaginative, and liberating understandings of faith (1999).

Among people who strive to embrace postmodernity there is often a re-fashioning of how Christian faith convictions are understood to allow for greater dialogue within our increasingly diverse societies. For instance, Paul Lakeland argues that Christian convictions preclude dialogue “with the non-Christian world, religious or secular” when they are presented in a dogmatic way, that is, as “claims about the way the world is or should be,” that are “placed *in front of* the person and community, as a blueprint for history or a program for the reform of the world.” In other words, if we think that the answers to any questions about our lives and world already are or can be found only within Christian faith traditions, there can be not true dialogue with others. In contrast, Lakeland suggests that we think of Christian theological statements as claims “about the ways in which we are as individuals and faith communities within a wider world of which we are inescapably a part. They articulate the difference that we bring to the encounter with the other.” Lakeland suggests that our primary theological task today is to discern how we are called to embrace a sense of personal and communal identity as Christians while at the same time developing and maintaining a respectful and nondominative relationship with those who do not share our Christian faith convictions. (1997: 91-92, emphasis as in original).

Reflection about social issues among those who strive to embrace postmodernity is often marked by the dynamics of openness and discernment. On the one hand, there is often greater openness to exploring both the strengths and limitations of how we as Christians contribute to and are in turn shaped by the world of which we are a part. There is also increasing openness to insights and perspectives from other religious traditions, popular culture and the various facets of everyday life. On the other hand, postmodern Christians are less and less likely today to treat all sources of knowledge and spiritual insight as equal. Rather, there is a growing interest in discernment as a way of diving below the surface in search of deeper truth. With increasing ability contemporary Christians are learning to compare and evaluate various and often competing frameworks for understanding the world as they move beyond open receptivity and attempt to respond authentically to what God is enabling and requiring of them both personally and socially. (For a brief discussion of responding to God’s call in our postmodern world see Roebben 2002: 186.)

Postmodern openness and discernment are illustrated by a growing concern with “economic discipleship.” Increasing numbers of Christians are focusing on the ways contemporary life is affected by advanced capitalist, consumerist society and how Christians should respond to the social injustice perpetuated by our market economy (Beaudoin 2001). Now, a postmodern awareness of the situatedness of all human knowing and doing may lead us to begin reflecting on global capitalism by focusing on how our lives and faith communities are

linked to the benefits and burdens our global economy. For instance, we might be open to recognizing how the buying practices of Christians and Christian faith communities often support the inequalities of the global economy and how the socio-economic divisions produced by global capitalism are often replicated, and hence reinforced, in Christian faith communities today. (That is, upper class Christians tend to gather in upper-class congregations while poor Christians often have little choice but to join poor congregations.) After examining the effects of global capitalism in our own lives we might then move outward to gain a broader sense of the overall impact of global capitalism in our societies.

Then, we might draw from the resources of Christian traditions as we begin to explore how we can address the realities and injustices of our consumer culture and market economy. As we move outward we might draw insight from various sources of secular insight and the wisdom of other religious traditions. When we are ready to focus on how we might respond to the realities of global capitalism, we will want to return to our faith traditions and weigh every option in terms of how it resonates or fails to resonate with our sense of personal and social identity as Christians. Our goals in the end will be to discern how God is present to us as we consider the available options, and to strive to discern what God is enabling and requiring of us in responding to global capitalism. Note well, in this process the church does not serve as potentially world transforming alternative to the world. Nor is this a process of the church reaching into a storehouse of wisdom to recover resources that can help us solve contemporary problems. Rather, from a postmodern perspective the church and the world are always intricately intertwined. Openness to the movement of the Spirit is openness to the transformation of the church in the world, and the transformation of the world that includes the church.

Postmodern openness and discernment needs the virtues of prudence or practical judgment and hope. First, practical judgment is needed for distinguishing between the postmodern developments that hold a promise of leading to positive new possibilities and those that might lead to a trivializing of life. Second, as Bert Roebben notes, issues of vulnerability are much more central for educators and religious educators than they were in the past (2001). As people seek guidance in dealing with the complexities and ambiguities of contemporary postmodern life, they may turn more frequently to educators. At the same time, if we as educators are honest with ourselves we must admit we are often as perplexed by our times as those who turn to us for guidance. Hence, the virtue we need most is hope. While having a realistic sense of the trivializing and negative aspects of postmodern life, we need to foster a hope that the positive and spiritually open dimensions of postmodern culture can provide a framework for constructing authentic understandings of meaning and value that are appropriate for today. Most importantly, we must remain open to the presence of God in the world with the hope that no matter what twists and turns our lives and world take that we will remain able to discern the guiding presence of the Spirit.

The hope of those who embrace postmodern culture stands in contrast to the projected better hope of the counter-contemporary viewpoint and the recovered hope of late moderns. The better hope of counter-contemporaries is in reality a false hope or a counsel of despair. Counter-contemporaries are unable to face the realities of present-day life so they project an alternative hope into an idealized church, much as schizophrenics create an alternative reality because they are unable to face the challenges that confront them in the environment in which they live. Similarly, there are extreme forms of late modernism that idolize and place all hope in a church of the past because they can not cope with the church and the world as they actually

exist. Even the most open forms of late modernism are marked to some extent by a lack of hope in the goodness of creation and the guiding presence of God in our lives. Hence, they strive to pump hope into the present by trying to recover something lost in the past. In contrast, as postmodern culture strips away our pretensions of beginning with clear and distinct ideas, and as it draws us back continually to recognize the situatedness and hence limitedness of all human knowing and doing, it can leave us, surprisingly, with new hope – hope that we can be open to breaking down barriers that held us back in the past, and hope that we can discern God's presence leading us to a greater solidarity with one another and greater appreciation for the Wonder and Mystery that transcends all.

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