

Session 2 - Background briefing

From modernism to postmodernism

Pre-modernism, Modernism, Postmodernism

In 'pre-modern times' (up to about 1600), people saw humanity as God's creation. If they wanted to find the truth, they would appeal to God's authority, mediated through the church (in the person of the Pope) or the State (in the person of the King, with his 'divine right').

Then in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a huge change took place. Historians call this change the Enlightenment, and the way of thinking that it produced is called modernism. In modernism, 'man is the measure of all things'. If we want to find the truth, we appeal to human reason, unaided by any kind of authority, divine or royal.

Modernism has lasted about two hundred years, and in some ways it is still going strong today. But in the second half of the twentieth century, it began to fray around the edges. There were a number of reasons for this:

- Two world wars rocked our confidence in human goodness.
- Environmental problems such as Chernobyl rocked our confidence in science and technology.
- Increased travel and communications rocked our confidence in our own culture. We are increasingly aware of the wide range of different beliefs and cultures in the world. It seems increasingly arrogant to think that we alone have all the answers.

Today, we live in a new world, characterised by 'postmodernism'. In postmodernism there is no over-arching 'truth for everyone'. If you want to know what is 'true for you' you consult your feelings and you make personal choices.

Three buildings

A tale of three buildings may help us to get to grips with these changes:

Work on Cologne cathedral in Germany began in 1248, and it took over six hundred years to complete.

It is 157 metres high, made for the glory of God, pointing towards heaven, and used for worship – an imposing reminder of the power of the church. It is a monument to authority. It was built to last for thousands of years, because God is eternal and humanity is the subject of a divine destiny and purpose.

The Eiffel Tower was built in 1889 for an exposition commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution. At 320 metres high, it was, until 1930, the tallest building in the World. Although, like the cathedral, it points towards heaven, it was certainly not made for the glory of God, but rather for the glory of man. It is a monument to the power of technology and human reason. It was built to last for centuries, because man controls his own destiny.

The Millennium Dome, built in 1999, is 320 metres across and 50 metres high. It's an egg shape, not pointing anywhere in particular. Like the Eiffel tower, it was not made for the glory of God (even though the millennium it celebrated was the anniversary of Christ's coming into the world). Neither was it really made for the glory of man. If anything it was made so the punters could have fun and the operators could make money. It was filled with diverse 'zones' with different, perhaps contradictory, messages. It was built to be used for a single year, because the future is uncertain and we should live for the moment. Within a year after its close, the Dome lay empty, unused, and semi-derelict.

Where do you look for truth?

The key issue in understanding our times is the question of where you go to find the truth:

- Do you turn to the authority of church or State? This is the pre-modern answer.
- Do you turn to the authority of unaided human reason – this is the modern answer.
- Do you turn to your feelings and choices – this is the postmodern answer.

However, postmodern people are very suspicious of any claims to know the truth. Jean-Francois Lyotard is a postmodern guru. In a famous phrase he defines postmodernism as:

'a suspicion of metanarratives.'

A metanarrative is any ‘explanation of everything’ – anything that seeks to be an over-arching account of why the world is as it is. Christianity is one such metanarrative.

So are Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. So are Marxism and Darwinism. In many ways, a metanarrative is similar to what we called a worldview in session one.

The most important single issue for us is that people today are deeply suspicious of claims to know ‘the truth’. They see the desire to inflict your truth on other people as arrogant, bigoted, and intolerant. This raises some major problems for us as Christians as we try to share the Good News with people today, and the rest of *Facing the Challenge* is taken up with these issues.