

Terminology and the Evangelical

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It has become fashionable for evangelical thinkers and writers to make frequent use of the terms 'modernity' and 'post-modernity' which makes it important to consider whether this practice aids clarity of thought and expression or otherwise. The usage seems to have originated in the field of architecture during the 1970s and 1980s to indicate the movement from a more severe and utilitarian styling, based on rationality in the use of building materials and rejection of mere ornamentation, to an eclectic willingness to copy and adopt styles from any part of the world or period of history.

On the face of it, of course, the use of these terms can only be temporary since, if 'modern' is taken in its usual meaning of contemporary or current, 'post-modern' is inherently self-contradictory and therefore absurd. This may be fine for architects but theologians should be longer-term in their approach. However, in the meantime the terms are in fact being used by evangelical theologians, as I noted when taking part in international conferences of the Evangelical Fellowship of the Anglican Communion (EFAC) in 1993 and 1995, and the significance of this needs to be considered.

As is so often the case, a major part of the problem which I believe attaches to the use of these terms is the lack of clear and consistent definition. Rather than having any narrower meaning, the term modernity seems to be used to denote the whole of Western civilization in the most general sense and invariably with an adverse connotation. In this the Evangelicals who use it are fashionably in line with many academics in Western, particularly American, universities who despise and denigrate their own cultural heritage. Such academics tend to be left wing or inclined to socialism, opposed both to a free economic system and to Christianity. The great thrust of Christian missions into the world is depreciated by accusing the missionaries of imposing Western norms and destroying indigenous culture rather than simply preaching the gospel.

At the EFAC conferences mentioned I noticed that, while some Western participants were keen to disavow modernity in the sense of Western civilization, some African members had an opposite view and considered

it should be welcomed. They had no desire to preserve pagan culture and practice. Possibly some nineteenth century Western missionaries had too strong a tendency to regard wearing Western style trousers as a necessary outward and visible sign of Christianity, but they were seeking the conversion and liberation of a society characterized by a superstitious fear of witchcraft and enslaved by the need to propitiate the ancestral spirits. My contribution to this discussion was to disclose that the culture of my ancestors was also destroyed by Christianity but I had no regrets about this – the sophisticated paganism of Graeco-Roman civilization and the heathen beliefs of Celt and Saxon were essentially the same as the animism of Africa. In Europe the process took some centuries but eventually the pagan cultures were Christianized and the way prepared for faith in the one true God.

Recently I have been exposed to the writings of David F Wells, the evangelical scholar whose two books *No Place for Truth* (1993) and *God in the Wasteland* (1994) were intended by the author to constitute a two-part study of a single subject. This is the influence of modernity upon Evangelicals in America, which has had the effect of moving them away from an orthodox biblical theology (which focused attention upon the transcendent God whose greater glory should be the primary concern of his human creation) towards a type of man-centred religion devoted essentially to providing psychological therapy as a means of self-realization. The evangelical theological colleges are filled with students who reject theology as mere theory irrelevant to the real purpose of the ministry for which they are training. The function of the church (they believe) is to help people by positive thinking and a successful life style to achieve a more satisfying level of self-fulfilment.

I do not know to what extent Wells' assessment of current Evangelicalism is accurate but I can well believe that it is. However a large part of both his books is devoted to the subject of modernity, and there is continual reference to it throughout. This gave me hope that he might give a clear definition of what he meant by the term. The opening pages of *God in the Wasteland* looked promising. Wells stated that he distinguished between modernization and modernity. Modernization produces change in the outer fabric of our life; modernity changes values and meaning.

The main features of modernization he identifies as:

- 1 *Capitalism* (by which he seems to mean a free market economic system) which has organized the social structure for purposes of manufacturing and production.
- 2 *Technology* which not only facilitates production but (he believes)

makes people assume that whatever is most efficient is most ethical. While condemning the concept that something is right because it works, he does not stop to consider whether often something works because it is right.

- 3 *Urbanization* which has drawn into close contact people of diverse ethnic and cultural groups and fostered the concept of pluralism.
- 4 *Telecommunications*, notably television, which produces mass common reactions and a global ' cliché culture '.

There is no doubt that these four features are indeed major characteristics of the contemporary Western world and thus of the process Wells calls modernization. However, having started by saying that it is necessary to distinguish between modernization and modernity, he then makes no clear distinction at all, but continues with recurrent reference to these four features as in fact constituting modernity. Indeed his basic thesis seems to be that these factors produce as a necessary and inescapable consequence a range of adverse social effects and in particular departure from biblical truth amongst Evangelicals.

Wells gives a good definition of worldliness as 'that system of values and beliefs, behaviours and expectations, in any given culture that have at their centre the fallen human being and that relegate to their periphery any thought about God. Worldliness is what makes sin look normal in any age and righteousness seem odd. Modernity is worldliness...'. He thus follows his definition by affirming the identity of worldliness with Capitalism, Technology, Urbanization and Telecommunications. For purposes of clarity it would be useful when reading Wells to substitute CTUT for each mention of modernity, as a reminder of what he means by the term.

In identifying CTUT as worldliness he is, of course, very close to a certain Anabaptist viewpoint. He regards the Amish as admirable and although he states that 'most of us dismiss as quixotic and doomed their efforts to hold the modern world at arm's length', he does not express any disagreement with them. Rather he suggests that 'the effort to be both modern and Christian produces deep and perhaps insoluble problems'.

Wells makes many perceptive observations on aspects of current society, and there should be appreciation and strong support for his statement of orthodox Christian belief, and his call for this to be taught again in evangelical theological colleges and proclaimed with authority from our pulpits. However all this is within the context of his obsession with modernity. This causes him confusion which is in turn communicated to his readers.

He condemns those who consider CTUT as being essentially neutral factors whose enormous powers can be used for either good or ill, to promote Christian truth or to deny and suppress it. At times, however, he almost admits this view, only to shy away from it and return to the concept of modernity/modernization as the great enemy. He refers to the identification by general evangelical consensus of secular humanism as the principal and most dangerous anti-Christian ideology and comments: 'This perception is not altogether beside the point, but in limiting the causes of irreligion to ideas alone, this consensus overlooks the whole social climate, brought about by our new social arrangements, that makes those ideas seem plausible and even inevitable to so many people.'

By 'social climate' Wells means CTUT. However it is simply not true that these factors in themselves have the intrinsic effect of making secular humanism seem plausible and inevitable. It is the control and use of these powerful factors by secular humanists to convey their ideas, both directly and subliminally, that produces this result, influencing even Evangelicals in the process.

Part of the reason for Wells' view seems to be that he accepts the claim of the Enlightenment and its followers to be the originators of modern science and responsible for the advance of technology and the benefits it has brought. The reality is that modern science originated in the early seventeenth century within the Protestant culture of northern Europe (with Galileo as an offshoot in Italy) and can be regarded as a result of the new way of thinking brought in by the Reformation. Biblical theism, as distinct from medieval Scholasticism and Renaissance neo-paganism, recognised that there could be true knowledge of the universe since it was totally controlled by the creator God. It was not a chance collection of unrelated facts but had meaning and rationality. As the Swedish botanist Linnaeus remarked, the scientist was thinking God's thoughts after him. This provided a secure basis for the investigation of all aspects of nature.

Not only did modern science require a Christian culture for its development but definite Christians have been foremost in effecting its progress. A majority of the founding members of the Royal Society were Puritans. Twentieth century technology is largely dependent on electricity, for which the great pioneering name in the nineteenth century was Michael Faraday, well-known as an evangelical Christian.

The eighteenth century Enlightenment, centred in France, deist and then atheist and strongly anti-Christian, enthroned human reason in place of God and tried to appropriate what did not belong to it and that to which it had no logical claim. It is a pity that the claim seems to be accepted by some Evangelicals who should know better. The Enlightenment, and its

secular humanist followers up to the present century, constitute a virtual parasite on Christianity.

Both Christianity and the Enlightenment worldview are now challenged by post-modernity. This should really be seen as a reversion to pre-modernity, essentially to paganism in its multifarious forms. Wells in *No Place for Truth* has a couple of excellent pages on the characteristics of paganism – its failure to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural, between objective and subjective reality and between the living and the dead. We are today in a situation similar to the first century, when Christianity refused to be accommodated within the religious pluralism of the day and to attract devotees in comfortable and non-exclusive competition with the various forms of alleged spirituality. Here in South Africa today the pressure on Christians to be accommodating is clearly present and will increase.

In summary, I suggest that the terms ‘modernity’ and ‘post-modernity’ be used very sparingly and never without making perfectly clear what is intended by them. Better, in the case of post-modernity, to state the specific aspect which is in mind, whether New Age or religious pluralism or ancestor worship. In the case of modernity, this term should not be used with the connotation of Western civilization in general. If the philosophy of secular humanism is really the issue, let it be stated.

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