

THE GREAT DIVIDE:

The Church and the Post-Modernist Challenge

The Church of Jesus Christ today faces a challenge far greater than the Renaissance, more potentially divisive than the Reformation, more insidious in its inroads into the life of the Church itself than the secularist rationalism of the Endarkenment.

If my words sound alarmist, well, I am alarmed. As one who is both a college professor and a pastor, I have had the opportunity to watch this new threat growing in the Academy, and I now see it becoming planted firmly in the lives of Christian young people who subjectively love Jesus, go to Bible studies, and sing all the right choruses. But their minds are increasingly structured and controlled by paradigms which are in deadly conflict with the Christian worldview and the Christian tradition as any of us--Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox, Reformed, Dispensationalist, or Arminian--have ever understood it. And they are blithely unaware of the contradiction. Indeed, pointing out that it *is* a contradiction is likely to have little meaning to them.

What is at stake is not just Christian truth but whether any assertion can be described as true; in other words, not just the Christian message but the very framework of shared experience and categories that makes possible any communication at all between the Church and its members or the Church and the world it was sent to reach. And so, let me describe this new way of thinking, inimical not only to the Christian faith but to anything we have ever recognized as rational thought in the West. Since the Academy is still the primary place from which it flows, I shall describe it as I have encountered it there. For it is important, not simply that we reject and condemn it, but that first we understand it, so we can reject it, and minister to those bamboozled by it, with understanding.

The Christian professor's life is full of challenges. Many of our students come to us like Robert Frost's farmer-neighbor in "Mending Wall." They will not go behind their

fathers' sayings, but like having thought of them so well that they say them again: "Good fences make good neighbors." Spring is the mischief in their professors, who want to put an idea in their heads: "Why do they make good neighbors?" But a certain type of professor, often oxymoronically styled "Post-Modernist," wants to go further: to question not only why they make good neighbors or even whether they make good neighbors (which might be a question worth asking), but whether they are not such arbitrary social constructs that the very ability to distinguish one neighbor from another, or a good one from a bad, breaks down completely. Something there is that doesn't love a wall. But this gives their more traditional colleagues pause. For they fear that, when all fences have been knocked down thus, civilization will have been destroyed, and the Goths and Vandals will come again.

Labels are convenient but problematic, a mixed good or a necessary evil. By "Post-Modernist" here I do not mean all people who have adopted that label or had it applied to them. I am not defending Modernism, nor implying that having gotten beyond it is necessarily bad. Christians were pointing out the limitations of the Modernist Project (the attempt, since the "Enlightenment," to subsume all reality and all knowledge under the rubric of rationalistic scientific objectivity) long before it was fashionable to do so. But they did not do so by throwing the rational baby out with the rationalist bath water. If we are going to leave one error behind, it behooves us not to exchange it for a worse.

Post-Modernism, as I shall use the term here, then, means precisely that style of disillusionment with Modernity which is too sophisticated to be able to make any clear distinction between babies and bath water because it rejects all distinctions as arbitrary impositions upon a reality too complex to be categorized. Angry at itself for having trusted in Scientific Rationality's promise to deliver absolute truth with absolute objectivity, it now cynically rejects all truth claims as equally empty promises. Once burned and twice shy, it starts from the conviction that *anyone* peddling truth claims is selling snake oil. Believing that truth is an illusion, it sees all attempts at analysis or even definition as thin disguises for the imposition of power. Therefore it manifests itself in literary study that ignores (or "deconstructs") traditional issues of meaning or

even aesthetics and concentrates instead on the ways that texts advance the agendas of various groups, usually defined in terms of race, class, or gender. I shall contrast it here not with Modernism but with something far older that I will call "The Tradition."

Not every scholar who has looked at race or gender issues in literature will be fairly represented by the following characterizations. But neither do I mean only the hard-core Derrideans and Fishites; rather, they and the host of scholars (and their students, including Christian students) who have adopted their methods without necessarily thinking through their epistemological and ethical implications, but whose analyses are nonetheless affected by them.

Neither by "Traditionalist" do I mean every redneck or robber-baron capitalist who ever gave the phrase "ugly American" its meaning. But there is a Tradition that holds together thinkers as diverse as Socrates, Erasmus, Aquinas and the great Protestant Reformers, Edmund Burke and Dr. Johnson, Thomas Jefferson and Russell Kirk, C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot, Dorothy L. Sayers and Flannery O'Connor, which makes them all, in spite of their differences, part of a single conversation taking place in the same universe of discourse. Some of these people found themselves on different sides of some fences (some were outside the Church), but they were still able to cooperate in examining and repairing them, to each the boulders that had fallen to each. They differ from the type of Post-Modernist thinker I am describing by believing that, while the usefulness or proper location of any given fence might be an open question, there *is* a difference between one field and another rather than an endlessly open play of French-accented *differance*; and, hence, in not wanting to tear all the fences they inherited from their ancestors down so they can start over again from scratch.

Questioning, to both groups, is an intellectual good. By it the mixture of truth and error, gold and dross, that constitutes our thoughts is refined. But for the Traditionalist, questioning is not an end in itself. It has value in so far as purer gold is desirable. But if we question whether gold is really more precious than lead, the process of refinement grinds to a halt and our intellectual currency becomes debased. When questioning becomes an end in itself, no longer limited either by First Principles (which the Post-Modernist thinks are just arbitrary social conventions) or Facts (which

she thinks are endlessly receding, unfixable, and arbitrarily selected bits of experience), then not one stone is left upon a stone. When the mind becomes its own place, which in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven, then indeed Frost's apples do get over and eat the cones under his neighbor's pines. Then we do not even have the dignity of living in such an ordered and civilized place as the Hell in which Milton's Satan makes such exalted claims for his mind; for Chaos has come again.

The believing Church, as the most forthright denier that the mind is its own place and the strongest contender for an alternative view, bears the brunt of the attack, but what is under attack is something even more basic: the very legitimacy of the larger human conversation of which the Church has been a part. What is questioned is *anyone's* right to assert that *anything* is true. Nay, more than questioned: any "totalizing" or "centering" discourse, that is, any claim to have a viewpoint that is more than blatantly rationalized self interest, is denied as illegitimate at the outset.

This is more than the old modernist Relativism: Truth is not merely denied as *illusory*, as in late relativist Modernism; it is now redefined as *evil*. Truth for the Post Modernist is and can be nothing more than a disguise for the exercise of raw power. Only an ironic infinite regress of questions, never leading to answers, is allowed. One therefore questions everything and affirms nothing, except that all affirmations are illegitimate. This is really the ultimate form of intellectual rebellion against authority, especially the authority of God. Therefore, Christian civilization in general and the Church in particular are singled out for special attention in the application of this intellectual acid that eats away at the foundations of all claims to meaning and authority.

Hence, one of the things that post-modernist scholars love to question is the unique value, the superiority, and hence the authority of our Western, Greco-Roman, Judaeo-Christian civilization. They question the legitimacy of giving its history, its philosophy, its literary canon a "privileged" place in the academy. Now, we have traditionally viewed this civilization as the result of a providential blending of elements from Greek, Roman, Hebrew, and Christian sources that produced a unique and precious set of values: the primacy of truth, the rule of law rather than of men, the

worth of the individual and his liberty, freedom of speech and religion, democracy--treasures which have arisen and been sustainable only in those societies nurtured by this Tradition. Their seeds were planted at least as early as Plato's "Apology of Socrates," and found in Christendom the Providentially prepared soil in which alone they could truly flourish. They emerged only gradually even there, and never perfectly. But the impetus for them was inevitably part of the Tradition, which reached its greatest political fulfillment in the British common law and the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution. Because of the evil that lies hidden in even the best of human hearts, these values are precious and fragile, hard-won by the blood of our ancestors, and in need of constant defense if they are to be preserved. The Traditionalist readily admits that the Mosaic Exodus, Socratic Inquiry, Roman Law, and Christian Love were not at all points compatible. Still, he thinks that the ways they have interacted in our history have produced a set of ideals, consistent at their core, that gives us hope in this world as well as the one to come.

But a certain type of post-modernist thinker looks at this confluence and sees nothing but a pestilent congregation of vapors. Choosing to focus on the tensions rather than the felicities in the complex ways the Four Strands have interacted, she naturally sees nothing but contradictions. Choosing to focus on the West's failures to live up to its own ideals, she blinds herself to the ways in which they have nevertheless given a liberation to the human spirit which it has found nowhere else. Reading history through the lens of her own jaded cynicism, she can see nothing but power being exercised for its own self preservation. To her, the ideals for which the American Founding Fathers pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor are nothing but excuses for the wealthy to hang on to position and power and deny it to everyone else. Christianity is just the white man's religion, Reason the white man's way of thinking, lofty ideals just the white man's smokescreen for his real agenda: keeping women and minorities in perpetual subjection.

To the Traditionalist, the paradigm of Western civilization as the great Oppressor of women and minorities, which exists only by systematically excluding them, is a curious construct indeed. Never mind the fact that this civilization has never

permitted--indeed, stands out among human cultures by condemning as barbaric--such enlightened customs as foot-binding, female genital mutilation, the veil, or suttee. To try to put our imperfect record on human rights in perspective thus would be to imply that there is some absolute standard by which all societies, including our own, can be measured--and that, being a particularly Western idea, must itself be a "Tool of the Oppressor." When the mind is its own place, perception counts as reality. And many women and members of minority groups do perceive themselves, understandably given the mistreatment to which they have been and can still be subjected, as oppressed.

So how, my post-modernist friends might ask me, are black persons who feel marginalized and excluded by a still WASP-dominated society¹ to consider the heritage of Western Civilization as their patrimony? Perhaps by considering that there could have been no "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" if there had not first been Thoreau's "Essay on Civil Disobedience." And there could have been no "Essay on Civil Disobedience" unless there had first been Milton's "Areopagetica." And there could have been no "Areopagetica" unless there had first been Plato's "Apology of Socrates." Thus they might come to see certain Dead White European Males as their potential liberators rather than as merely the engineers of patriarchy and white hegemony. Thus they might come to see Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as a fruition of the Western Tradition, not its negation. And to realize that, if they do value equal protection under the law and at least the chance to be judged by the content of their character as opposed to the color of their skin, it is precisely Western Civilization, that horrible WASP (in its American form) phenomenon, that they had better defend, protect, and transmit to the next generation.

Thus the Traditionalist rests his case. But the Post-Modernist is unimpressed. To her, the mere presence of slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, ongoing racism, sexual harassment, etc., in the history and in the present of the West, is sufficient to reduce the traditionalist case to the self-serving set of rationalizations she perceives it to be. When

she looks at the Church, she sees only its complicity in these evils. She shoves detailed analyses of these phenomena at the Traditionalist, who simply shrugs his shoulders and says he has never denied them. Flawed human nature produces them everywhere, he reminds her; his point is not that the West is immune to them but that it alone holds out the promise of something better. But to the Post-Modernist, that promise, like all human words, is empty air.

Thus the two scholars stand and stare at each other across a huge chasm. They each grow increasingly frustrated with the other, for they are constantly tossing facts and arguments at one another to no avail. Their words fall unheeded into the abyss which divides them. They cannot even, like Frost and his neighbor, cooperate to repair the boundary about whose rationale they disagree. For they are looking at the world through two different sets of presuppositional glasses, whose effect is that everything they see looks different. If the Enlightenment devotion to objective Truth has indeed been exploded, then truth-claims are *truly* [ahem!] nothing more than the most dishonest of power plays. Philosophy and Literature are nothing but class warfare conducted by other means, and the Post-Modernist is just more honest about the situation. But if we think that this alleged explosion has produced more heat and noise than light, then post-modernist analyses tend to be marked by false sophistication, vitiated by a suffocating reductionism, and to be both morally and intellectually perverse. For these scholars are working constantly to undermine the foundations of the very civilization that makes their sheltered academic lives possible.

The difficulty in adjudicating between these two camps lies in the fact that any analysis one might offer is already committed to one of the two paradigms at the outset. If we point out that Post-Modernists are constantly trying to convince us that their insights are true (which, if they actually believed them, is something they ought not to do), or if we notice their dependence on the all-or-nothing fallacy (if an influence is demonstrated, it is immediately taken as proof of a determinism), or if we call attention to their addiction to reductionism, they will correctly respond that these critiques have

¹ Alert readers will have noted that not all of the individuals I have listed as bearers of the Tradition were white, and many were neither Anglo-Saxon nor Protestant. But we are characterizing the caricature of the Tradition as it is

validity only within the traditionalist paradigm, which is the very thing that they are questioning. The very logical distinctions which we have always thought intrinsic to the universe, or at least to the human mind, are dismissed as arbitrary social constructs. Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down; and in this case, it is definitely not elves, exactly.

Well, then, we must strike deeper. But how? Perhaps in the first place by asking whether even questioning itself--of anything, including Tradition--has any meaning in a paradigm from which all answers are rigorously excluded. The Traditionalist does not mind being questioned; self criticism is demanded by his Tradition. Before he builds a wall he wants to know what he is walling in or walling out, and to whom he is like to give offense. He wants to go behind his fathers' sayings (though, if he is a Christian, he is willing to stop at his Father's). But having done so, he still finds himself helping his neighbor repair the fence, for he knows that one thing is not another, that A is not non-A, that some things are really right and others wrong, and that therefore some boundaries are necessary. He does not hold with a kind of questioning in which all answers, all legitimate boundaries, are excluded from the outset, all fences by definition arbitrary exercises of power. He see no point in *that* kind of outdoor game.

Perhaps a second way of striking deeper is to ask insistently what it is that we really value. Which is really our gold: Goodness, Truth, and Beauty (for Christians, as the manifestations of God's character, His Word, and His glory), or "the endless free play of the mind in the text"? That, indeed, is the question. Paths sunder, paradigms are committed to, and interpretive communities are formed at precisely this point. We cannot have it both ways. Either Truth exists and can be known or it does not. Either words have a meaning that can be discerned in context or they do not. Good and Evil are either objective realities accessible to the human mind or they can be no more than subjective preferences. These disjunctions entail one another. Everything follows from that.

With these matters the Church must be fundamentally concerned, especially as she manifests herself in those Reformed traditions that have always prided themselves

on being her most consistent and full-orbed proponents of the Truth with which she is entrusted. For though the Church is not identical to the Western Tradition and indeed must sometimes stand against it, she has contributed a great deal to it, and it is very valuable to her. If it goes down under this assault (considered as an attack on the very possibility of truth claims), she will go down with it (in so far as making a very particular set of truth claims is the essence of her mission). If she survives intact, it will survive with her, as the best of classical Greece and Rome did when she preserved them in monastery libraries in the Middle Ages. If she survives by acquiescing in its destruction, she will be transformed into something that can no longer be called "the household of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and support of the Truth" (1 Tim. 3:15).

God of course will not allow that ultimate acquiescence and transformation to happen, for He always preserves a faithful Remnant; but nevertheless, much damage will be done if we are not vigilant. It has already been done, in our failure sufficiently to arm our young people and prepare them to defend themselves against this new threat, and in our slowness to realize the need to supplement our old apologetic, directed against a Modernist foe who has long been passe. Yet there is reason for hope that such vigilance may be fruitful even without appealing to remnant theology. If there is no objective difference between gold and iron pyrite, people are not going to commit themselves to serious prospecting. And I have a sneaking suspicion that with no foul lines, no bases, and no way to keep score, this free play of the mind is a game that will quickly produce an *ennui* more intense and a disillusionment more deep than any we have seen since the collapse of Rome. Boredom and Barbarism may then seem to be the only options available. We may in fact be entering such a time already. It is surely part of our calling to keep some memory of both Western Civilization and Christian Truth alive and vibrant enough to serve as a viable alternative to those terrible choices in that day.

Donald T. Williams, PhD, is Professor of English at Toccoa Falls College in the foothills of NE Georgia and an ordained minister in the Evangelical Free Church of America. His most recent book is *The Disciple's Prayer: An Intimate, Phrase by Phrase Journey through the Lord's Prayer* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1999). More directly relevant to the present discussion is his *Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters* (Toccoa Falls, GA: Toccoa Falls College Press, 1996).