

# S A A E CULTURAL HUMILITY – KINGDOM CONFIDENCE

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Postmodernism is a word best avoided. The history of the 'cultural concept' is complex and is unfortunately usually reduced to a series of clumsy slogans within most discussions. This is a symptom of the fact that there are no convenient formulations which adequately take into account the vast philosophical, economic, cultural, moral, aesthetic and political dynamics at play under the unhelpful banner of 'postmodernism'. However, whilst still grossly inadequate in isolation, Fredrick Jameson's subtitle to his book *Postmodernism* gives us a helpful start point, framing Postmodernism as the 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism'. The maturing historic effect of capitalism has, within a complex weave of ideological ideas and technological development, gradually commodified every aspect of cultural life. This process undermines the value and expediency of our foundational cultural and historic narratives, of which 'Christianity' is one, by removing any intrinsic value to these 'big stories' and instead valuing the moment of selective and subjective consumption of each narrative. We all become increasingly idiosyncratic consumers of culture and its interplay of narratives to the point that nothing is true in itself, but rather retains limited value in its openness to the demands and freedoms of the market. We then arrive at some of the slogans of our postmodern age, 'tell me your truth and I'll tell you mine', where truth and ideas are relative and loosely 'owned' in as much as they appeal to the demands of the individual who has increasingly

become a compliant consumer of both 'everything' and 'nothing'.

In the light of all this, there is a recognition that postmodernism is neither a linear process nor a destination, but rather an attempt at describing a cultural, philosophical, moral and aesthetic explosion. It is a rather maddeningly complex and rapid movement of ideas that instantaneously removed both the foundations and the ceiling of former structures, resulting in a new borderless landscape where the consumer is truly free, to fall into the abyss, rise to new heights, or transgress formerly forbidden boundaries. However, it must be noted that Postmodernism is also a term that is increasingly regarded as describing a philosophical 'dead end' and its use within both the academic world and the media has diminished considerably over the past ten years. Having said that, the symptoms of 'postmodernism' persist and, in such areas as gender politics, sexuality, and language it is conceptually as promiscuous as ever.

It is worthy of note, that the rise of the 'alt-right' within many western nations and the exponential growth of YouTube phenomena such as Jordan Peterson and Ben Shapiro suggest an anxiety or longing within certain elements of our western culture that rejects much of the postmodern 'politic'. I wonder whether this is evidence of an increasing desire to find the comforting 'hand rails' of meaning, identity and purpose, or in other words to affirm

conceptual borders collectively. One can see this being played out literally within the bewildering landscape of the Brexit vote and some of its motivating factors, to define Britain more clearly as an independent nation, to affirm the border. Much of the discourse of these movements and personalities is not something I necessarily endorse, but I am interested in the fact that they appear to be gaining so much traction in a supposedly 'post-truth' age.

Jordan Peterson's book *12 Rules for Life - An Antidote to Chaos* has sold millions of copies and topped the best seller list in the USA for several months. His lectures and YouTube videos have also attracted many millions of views and are particularly appealing to young men. Peterson offers nothing more than traditional 'maps of meaning', in a loose sense restoring old narratives as a means of understanding what it means to be human and develop a more satisfying and honest understanding of suffering and death. I mention this as I feel it is important for us to recognise the possibility that postmodernism has served to highlight an innate longing for meaning within the human condition, and missionally speaking, the same 'God shaped hole' questions begin to rise to the surface once again. Equally, the recent publication of *The Madness of Crowds* by Douglas Murray highlights the increasingly insidious nature of the cultural phenomena growing out of the postmodern soil, which is flowing as an overly extended, ideologically

motivated identity politics and social justice. His work is controversial, and again I don't necessarily endorse all his sentiments, but his popularity and the way in which his concerns have resonated with a diverse audience, raise some interesting questions. Without the space to explore them properly, these questions include: How do we secure justice with no foundational narrative? Why does identifying as being oppressed create a universal and unquestionable seat of authority? What kind of world does this particular ideology seek to create? It seems to me that elements of our culture are playing an old game in a new situation, reaching into the playful and frightening abyss of postmodernism to attempt to pull out the aging white rabbit of a utopian future - a trick attempted many times, and often with terrifying consequences. It is into the furore of this 'madness' that we need to keep a confident hold of the 'old, old story', it gives a foundation to justice, reveals the humble authority of Jesus, and the Kingdom as our only authentic destination. Through our love, humility and confidence in Jesus we have the antidote to the madness, but we must not neglect to pray and confidently speak his truth.

I am also aware, after 10 years of church planting, that the church has possibly over-emphasised the need to be culturally relevant and has unwittingly fallen into the error that Leslie Newbiggin highlighted in *Foolishness to the Greeks*, that the missionary always risks either syncretism or irrelevance in seeking to communicate the gospel message effectively, and I question whether we have drifted into syncretism. Of course, there is the continual missional need to affirm and mine the divine voice 'preveniently' present in culture, but one must achieve this without affirming every neoliberal and politically expedient convention. As the academic Terry Eagleton, at the conclusion of his insightful exploration of 'Culture' warns, 'If those who speak of culture cannot do so without inflating the concept, it is perhaps better they remain silent' and I believe we have been inflating the concept and bowing the knee too often. In short, I am suggesting that we should avoid the suffocating and diluting effect of over-emphasising the centrality of cultural literacy and palatability, but equally without neglecting the humility of walking the landscape, learning the language of our neighbours, communities

and wider society, and obediently listening to the Holy Spirit.

When we consider Jesus, he seems reluctant to affirm many of the dominant cultural themes and norms, both politically and religiously. He rather announces a new culture, that of the Kingdom, that welcomes the other, the lost, the broken and the outcast; it turns the other cheek and loves its enemies. This welcome transformation is made by means of the sacrificial love of the King, who gave his life as a means of rescue to all who would receive it. This moment of grace is a gift realised by personal invitation, and this invitation is by its very nature a moment of surrender and welcome to the transforming power of the King. The Kingdom message of Jesus transforms rather than affirms the status quo, the sick are made well, the lost are found, the tax collector gives away his wealth, the dead are raised to life. Without a surrendered welcome the Kingdom message becomes either corrosive or inert, as with the Pharisees or the rich young ruler. The Kingdom message has an eternal authority that demands the surrender and transformation of the culture it inhabits, not the other way around.

We need to recover our confidence in the transformative power of the Gospel, that it gives meaning and purpose in a world that is becoming sickly with the opiate of relativism and meaninglessness, that it gives hope in a world of pain and division, and gives freedom from shame and a relational connection with a divine parent who knows us and came looking for us in Jesus. He took our death and sin and gave us his righteousness and life, a timeless truth that needs sharing now more than ever.

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