

The Emergence of the Postmodern Mind

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History reveals that the Twentieth Century was the time of serious cultural change in the West. The old Enlightenment paradigm with its naturalistic assumptions was wearing out and the new paradigm of postmodernism was about to get its chance (actually the fragmentation of the postmodern thinking was revealing itself by the late 1960s).¹ According to the postmodernism, Truth was no longer to be found outside of man, but inside; truth was subjective and no longer objective (this was a neo-Romantic movement). Modernism was giving way to postmodernism. Now, truth was to be created, not discovered. Furthermore, nature is good and civilization has made things bad.

This was a major shift in thinking giving evidence that a new paradigm was about to emerge. What many intellectuals² had struggled for during the first half of the 20th century was now on the verge of making its celebrated debut. Although the paradigm of the Enlightenment tended to discount Christianity, it at least maintained the notion of truth as being something that was objective and something that could be discovered. In that sense both Christianity and science could argue for the superiority of their respective claims within the larger intellectual environment (although, of course, Christianity was refused a place in the debate because it was only a religious voice). But with the dawn of the postmodern paradigm, the discussion was over. Now the larger intellectual environment in which the discussions were to take place left each man as his own integration point by which truth could be known internally. No longer was there to be any claim for objective Truth.

The change came about because of certain assumptions concerning the nature of reality. In time, as Richard Tarnas says,

The basic a priori categories and premises of modern science, with its assumption of an independent external world that must be investigated by an autonomous human reason, with its insistence on impersonal mechanistic explanation, with its rejection of spiritual qualities in the cosmos, its repudiation of any intrinsic meaning or purpose in nature, its demand for a univocal, literal interpretation of a world of hard facts—all of these insure the construction of a disenchanted and alienating world view.³

Earlier Tarnas had praised the postmodern mind saying,

There is an appreciation of the plasticity and constant change of reality and knowledge, a

¹Maybe no better example of this fragmented thinking can be found in the fact that 1976 was declared by periodicals in the west as the year of the Evangelical. Just a decade before the same periodicals were celebrating the “God Is Dead” theology. It is not that suddenly the Evangelical Christians had won the day, but only that President Jimmy Carter began to use the language of an Evangelical. It must be clear that it was only the language that became popular, people were not turning to Christianity in droves. But that did not matter. It was a religious thing that could be separated from the rest of culture.

²Some of the names included in this group are: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty

³Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 431

stress on the priority of concrete experience over fixed abstract principles, and a conviction that no single a priori thought system should govern belief of investigation. It is recognized that human knowledge is subjectively determined by a multitude of factors; that objective essences, or things-in-themselves, are neither accessible nor positible; and that the value of all truths and assumptions must be continually subjected to direct testing. The critical search for truth is constrained to be tolerant of ambiguity and pluralism, and its outcome will necessarily be knowledge that is relative and fallible rather than absolute.

. . . Reality is not a solid, self-contained given but a fluid, unfolding process, an “open universe,” continually affected and molded by one’s actions and beliefs.⁴

At least the Enlightenment and the Hebrew-Christian world view agreed that reality really existed independent of the mind. They disagreed on how that reality could be known, but they agreed that it was objective. The postmodern mind viewed reality differently and saw Christianity as either outdated or at best only appropriate for personal religious concerns. This is in fact where a number of intellectuals had suggested culture should go, and it was now becoming evident that this idea was catching on at virtually all levels of the industrialized world. But what postmodernism had to do in order to advance its own this position was to pronounce the Enlightenment as failure.⁵ As a promoter of postmodernism, Richard Rorty says, “For now the question is not about how to define words like ‘truth’ or ‘rationality’ or ‘knowledge’ or ‘philosophy,’ but about what self-image our society should have of itself.”⁶

The postmodern view is one of fragmentation, it offers no unifying principle. As Richard Tarnas, a proponent of postmodernity, writes, “Properly speaking, therefore, there is no ‘postmodern world view,’ not even the possibility of one. The postmodern paradigm is by its nature fundamentally subversive of all paradigms, for at its core is the awareness of reality as being at once multiple, local and temporal, and without demonstrable foundation.”⁷ Tarnas, approvingly writes of the postmodern mind, “Despite frequent congruence of purpose, there is little effective cohesion, no apparent means by which a shared cultural vision could emerge, no unifying perspective cogent or comprehensive enough to satisfy the burgeoning diversity of

⁴Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 395-96.

⁵Of course, another group of new intellectuals is now reacting against the postmodern agenda and arguing for a return to the Enlightenment project. This is most recently seen in the Humanist Manifesto 2000 which calls for a return to the Enlightenment ideal as the sure solution of mankind’s problems. So there is a division within the intellectual camp on just what the next step should be. It seems, however, that the postmodernists are right in their assessment of the Enlightenment, but wrong in their solution. Those who wish to return to the Enlightenment agenda seem blinded to its obvious failure.

⁶Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 581.

⁷Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 40.1

intellectual needs and aspirations.”⁸ In fact, there is no center.

What is amazing, is that this is celebrated by intelligent people. Without a moral center, there is no way to determine what constitutes the circumference of life and, hence, it is open to anything. The postmodern paradigm is the abandonment of any philosophical attempt at finding any real solution because it is assumed there are no solutions. Philosophy is out, objective religious belief is out. This, of course, is the very thing warned against by Russian philosopher Alexis Khomyakov in his letter to Y. F. Samarin lamenting the growing disinterest in philosophy in his own country at turn of the Twentieth century, “It does not come to anyone’s mind that practical life itself is only the realization of abstract concepts brought more or less fully into consciousness, and that a practical problem very often includes an abstract nucleus accessible to a philosophical interpretation which will lead to the right solution of the problem.”⁹

The postmodern paradigm shift meant a radical shift in world view thinking. The flood of panentheistic teaching of Eastern religions fit well with this notion of truth being subjective and internal, that rational thought is a hindrance to moral and spiritual advancement. These ideas were spread and continue to be spread globally by what is known as New Age teaching. This syncretistic and consequently broad movement fits well with the ideas of the postmodern paradigm. David Spangler, a major promoter of the New Age ideology, teaches a monism when defining the New Age. He writes, “The simplest answer for me is that it [monism] is the condition that emerges when I live in a creative, empowering, compassionate manner. It manifests when I recognize and honor both the intrinsic wholeness of my world and the value and importance of everything within it. It arises when I honor each person, animal, plant, or object as unique yet also as a part of myself, imbued with a spirit of personhood, sharing whatever worthiness and sacredness I claim for myself.”¹⁰ M. Scott Peck, well-known psychiatrist and promoter of New Age world view ideology, argues that the most spiritual state of man is when man accepts himself to be one with the universe.¹¹

This is a clear example of the shift in world view thinking. The rationalism of the old Enlightenment project had created a spiritual sterility and man craved to have something ‘spiritual’ to own. The New Age spirituality provided something that fit well with postmodern thinking, it did not have a judgmental God before whom men were accountable and it emphasized an intuitive inward path to truth. To legitimize its ideology, New Age thinking

⁸Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 409.

⁹Alexis Khomyakov, “On Recent Developments in Philosophy,” in *Russian Philosophy*, vol I, ed. James Edid, James Pl Schalan, Mary-Barbara Zeldin (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 222.

¹⁰David Spangler, “Defining the New Age,” in *The New Age Catalogue* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), Introduction.

¹¹It should be pointed out that Christianity teaches a wholistic view of life, but on different grounds. Christianity teaches a unity to life because all life comes from God, that God is the Universal that gives meaning to all of the particulars He created. That is really very different from the idea that oneness is possible because man is part of God. There is a “wholeness” to life in the Hebrew-Christian world view and it supports the notion of interrelatedness, but only on the grounds of a created order.

attempted to attach itself to science. It should be pointed out that not all sciences were receptive to this New Age ideology, especially some of the hard sciences like biology and physics.¹² However, there has been a growing acceptance of the New Age panentheistic world view within medicine.

In time, because of political developments in places around the world, closed societies have now been opened to these new ideas crafted in the West. Through the vehicle of mass media, it was only a short time before cultures that had lost their moral center began to influence many other societies. Eventually, this moral disintegration influenced a growing number of cultures as the moral break up of the center threatened the very stability of those cultures.¹³ Consequently, it has become the conviction of many that unless the moral center be regained and strengthened by adopting a new moral paradigm, these cultures may spin out of control, pulling away from the center and losing all sense of direction and purpose. This will not only affect individual cultures, it will have a global impact. The end being that that which had such great promise eventually will collapse on itself for want of a sufficient moral center. It must be emphasized that at this point in human history this moral crisis is not reserved for some small area or people group. The fact is when one considers the problems plaguing the global community, it is obvious that the moral crisis in some way touches virtually every nation. It is true that some cultures are affected more than others, but a universal nihilistic phenomenon that destroys all meaning and true identity is rapidly becoming the order of the day. As one punk rocker explained:

“I belong to the Blank Generation,” a young woman told another writer researching the punk world. The Blank Generation was a punk rock song. (The woman was, at the time of being interviewed, in bed with another woman and a male photographer). She said: “ I have no beliefs. I belong to no community, tradition, or anything like that. I’m lost in this vast, vast world. I belong nowhere. I have absolutely no identity.”¹⁴

Although many in society would not be so blatant in expressing the loss of purpose, millions express this lostness in different ways with every turn of the globe. Many just embrace materialism with all the gusto they can muster, while others simply try to escape the meaninglessness through alcohol and drugs. Surely, no one in their right mind would celebrate such moral despair or support a world view that promotes the same.

As has been pointed out, the Twentieth Century has given man amazing technological achievements while at the same time it has alarmed many by its decreasing sense of moral direction. Consequently, this century has had both its celebrants as well as its critics. The

¹²For example, Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, Second Ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1984) tried to argue that the eastern monistic view of reality fits more closely to what is being discovered in physics than does the Hebrew-Christian world view. In spite of his argument, at that time, few in physics were convinced.

¹³I use the term “society” to speak of groups of people that form communities. It is a general term to speak of people groups functioning together. The term “culture” is used to identify everything that is a part of a given society. That means law, art, government, institutions, families, etc.

¹⁴Quoted in Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear-Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 51.

celebrants point to the great strides in science, both in terms of knowledge and technology. The critic laments the growing reductionistic view of morality. It has been a century when science demanded objectivity of knowledge, but culture argued for moral relativity. It is not that science had gained some new knowledge that pointed away from the moral codes of antiquity. Instead, what has happened is the result of a philosophical shift and not new evidence.

What seems undeniable is the fact that the influential societies of the world are faltering morally while moving ahead technologically at break-neck speed. It is not that one calls for the slowing down of science. Instead, it is a call for the re-establishment of the Hebrew-Christian God as the base for a moral paradigm that will inform society how it should appropriate the knowledge gained and the technology developed so that it promotes well-being and not destruction. Furthermore, there is a need for a moral paradigm that will serve as a faithful guide in determining which human behavior is acceptable and which is not. This is always a delicate balance between giving man responsibility, and, therefore, personal choices and at the same time setting some limits so that the freedom of choice does not fracture society by that freedom being used to promote selfish ends.

It was the intention of the founding Fathers of the American system that social harmony should not be achieved at the expense of personal freedom and that personal freedom should not be unfettered so as to disrupt social harmony. Therefore, they looked for some means whereby each man would be expected to control his selfish desires that otherwise would destroy the republic. And for those who would not control their evil acts, there would be a system of justice that would minimize their destructive or disruptive behavior. Seeking to find a solution, James Madison wrote, "There are two methods of curing the mischiefs of faction: the one, by removing its causes; the other, by controlling its effects."¹⁵ It was his view, and the one adopted by the leaders of that time and then agreed to by the citizenry, that the better choice was to have means of controlling the effects of disruptive choices rather than removing choices altogether. This seems to be the wisest choice. Therefore, the question that mankind faces at the beginning of the Twenty-First Century is whether or not it is possible for a nation to develop a moral paradigm that will give moral direction and restore moral stability without restricting individual choice altogether.

Although much of the world is facing a moral crisis due to a cultural moral amnesia, still man continues to think in moral categories. Because of this, it is still possible at this time to discuss publicly the importance of morality and to forward a moral paradigm that can offer hope within the current moral decay. This moral paradigm, however, will only be effective if understood and practiced within a world view that acknowledges the Transcendent Being. Furthermore, the urgency of such a paradigm is indicated by the growing concern with the moral breakup of western culture. That is not to say that everybody is talking in the same way about morality, but everybody is talking about morality. For example, an issue such as the right of one nation to interfere with another nation's internal affairs is a moral issue that concerns many. Other societal issues such as, child abuse, spousal abuse, drug addiction, alcoholism, pornography, and AIDS are staring the world in the face and demanding effective answers. The best science

¹⁵Alexander Hamilton, James Madison & John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: New American Library, 1961), 78.

has to offer is some means of mitigating the consequences, but it has no power to address the actual causes of such destructive behavior.

Further, moral discussions have arisen because of science. Questions surrounding genetic engineering, cloning, Artificial Reproductive Techniques (ART) and physician assisted suicide are only a few of the large issues that demand moral guidelines. All of these issues are still discussed using moral terms like good, bad, wrong, right, fair, unfair and so forth. So, although men may not want to admit that these are moral problems, they talk about them in moral categories which clearly testifies that they are moral issues. One of the burning issues today is that of stem cell research and the use of frozen embryos for experimental purposes. It is clear that technology itself has no ground for determining the direction of such practices. In fact, it is technology that presents society with the problem, and it is societies responsibility to give science moral direction so that technology does not devour the humanness of mankind. But at this point, at least in the western world, there is no generally accepted moral paradigm adequate to the task for such gigantic moral questions. The choice is before us: either we must work together to find a moral paradigm that will guide humanity safely over the troubled waters of technology or humanity will drown in the technological flood. There is no neutral ground in this and it seems that there is little time to waste.

