

**THE STUCK SYNDROME****ARTICLE 3: MEET THE NEW CULTURE—IMPACTING THE POSTMODERN**

The world around us is changing faster than we think. It just could be our perception of the culture may already be outdated. Just as it only takes a few months for our computers to become obsolete, so our understanding of the world around us becomes antiquated. One way in which our world has been changing has been progressing steadily for some time. It is defined as the Postmodern culture and it is global. Perhaps you have been unaware of it, perhaps you have underestimated the impact of it, but unarguably it will influence future generations immensely. Postmodernism is a reaction to the modern world we are so familiar with. It is an attempt to bring meaning where reason and science have failed in providing answers. So where in the modern era we touted things like: order, regulation, stability, singularity, and fixity, we now find the postmodern embracing: chaos, uncertainty, otherness, openness, multiplicity, and change. Postmodern individuals abhor orthodoxy and absolutism and revel in liberty and mystery. In Japan we can see indicators of postmodernism in young people's aversion to traditional school, business people's mobility between employers, in the endeavors of people to display their uniqueness. The Postmodern culture is altering business, architecture, art, education, technology, philosophy, you name it. Whether we like it or not, it will also alter the way we do church.

Personally, I do not feel postmodernism is something to be feared, quite the contrary, I believe much can be gained from it. Not only will it teach us new ways in which to think and live, it will provide the church with a whole new set of fresh opportunities, that is, to the church that is keen to it. Postmodernism seeks to free us from the stiff academic ventures of the old paradigm, to dash mankind's fantasy of autonomy, as well as seeking to bring a sense of sacredness and unity into life. This is a potentially wonderful ground in which Christianity can work. I specifically say "Christianity" because in Postmodernism, institutions, such as the church, are viewed skeptically. The skepticism arises from the perception that these institutions do not help us encounter God. An accusation we would do well to heed. Therefore, for the postmodern, the traditional church may be the last place on earth she would like to be, the last place on earth in which she would seek God. The Postmodern would more likely seek God on a beach, or on a mountaintop, while gazing at the stars, or walking a road in Tibet.

Consider for a moment the implications for the church of the old paradigm and the newer way of viewing things:

| <u>Modern</u>                    | <u>Postmodern</u>                  |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Structure and function           | Diversity and pluralism            |
| Goal oriented                    | People oriented                    |
| Self interested, individualistic | Global concern, community oriented |
| Hierarchy oriented               | Consensus and collaboration        |
| Materialistic                    | Civic virtue                       |

Rationalistic / Scientific method

Value of personal experience

In looking at the global scene, the East has likely been more Postmodernistic than the West. This accounts for the massive import of Eastern thought into the West in the past couple decades. It is startling to see how much the growth of postmodernism has changed the scientific outlook of the West. Bookstores in the US overflow with books on issues like the paranormal, dreams, and angels. In fact, the number one TV show in the US is a drama about the working of angels on earth. The change is evident in Europe as well. Though Europe was the birthplace of the Enlightenment as well as techno-scientific civilization, today in Germany more than 10% believe in witches, and in Italy over 57% of people go to fortunetellers. Strangely, however, Christianity in Japan tends to be much more Western than the secular culture. Likely, much Western or Modern culture came to Japan attached to the gospel. I look forward to seeing a much more Japanese Christianity develop in the future.

So what are some of the practical implications of the Postmodern change for the church? Of course, it must radically influence the way we seek to communicate with the culture. When my father was church planting in Tokyo he found that a high percentage of the men who got saved were engineers. His theory at the time was that the rational aspect of Christianity appealed to brains that were trained to think rationally. Fifteen years later I was doing evangelism at Waseda University in the Engineering School. Remembering my father's experience, I look forward to young men responding to the rationality of the gospel. But in sharing with scores of students I discovered that this was not the case at all. What I unmistakably noticed was that students were not looking to be moved intellectually, but rather emotionally. They wanted an experience of God. That is Postmodernism. It is interesting that that very same year Aum Shinrikyo was also vying for the souls of young men at Waseda's engineering school. Aum's promotional posters showed Asahara Shoko levitating in the lotus position, promising a supernatural experience. Tragically they did succeed in recruiting quite a few promising young men at Waseda.

Are we relying on obsolete approaches to share the Truth? I recall an experience when an evangelism strategist visited Japan. He shared a "great idea" with the leadership of Campus Crusade. His strategic target to impact young people was Shibuya. He advised we take advantage of the arrangement of roads leading into the train station. First we could publicize the identity of Christ in the main intersection of the station. Then in each street that led away from the large intersection we could support different aspects of that identity apologetically, using banners, tracts, and loud speakers. Sounds like a good idea. But in consideration of the approach, it is very modern, it is cold, systematic, appeal to the rational modernist, not at all the experience that the postmodernist young person is looking for.

This is where many Christians start getting uncomfortable. Postmodernism definitely throws a wrench in the machine of the way we have thought and done things. Some may even think of it as sacrilege. I remember the interesting response of pastors in my doctoral class to the implications of postmodernism. Of a class of about fifteen almost all were defensively against the postmodern paradigm. It was almost as though you could gauge by the age of each minister the response. The older they were, the more against the idea of considering postmodernism, the younger they were, the more positive. Just about every

pastor seemed to be confusing postmodernism as a doctrine as opposed to a culture. As every missionary should know, however, in order to communicate, one must learn a new language. It is as common sense as not using bungotai in today's Sunday schools. Every generation has a slightly new language, a slightly new way of looking at the world.

What do younger people value today? That is for us to discover. Some of the changes that George Barna had studied in the US seem to apply to Postmodern Japan as well. Here is an edited list:

Relationships count. Institutions don't.  
Diversity in people is good.  
Change is good.  
Enjoying people and life is more important than productivity and achievement.  
There are no absolutes.  
Spiritual truth has many forms.  
Express yourself.

Things change rapidly. We should never forget that younger people do not think the way we do. This may be uncomfortable for us. But the truth is that it is not bad or good, just different. We have but two choices. We can understand them and adjust the church to them, or we can insist on our way, and drive them away. In consideration of how precious younger generations are for the church I vote that we not just cater a little to them, but that we only cater a little to ourselves, in favor of them. This is what Christianity should be especially good at, dying for the sake of others. For that matter, in a few decades, that will literally be the case anyhow. We will be gone, yet they will remain.