

## Picasso, Human Stain and the Search for Identity

*When we look to the life and work of Pablo Picasso, we see most of the characteristics of what later was called postmodernism. His work was so influential and powerful that one can call him without exaggeration the prophet of postmodernism. This workshop will first give a description of the characteristics of postmodernism and then give illustrations from Picasso's work of each of these characteristics. We will then examine and critique both from a Christian worldview.*

**Wim Rietkerk** was educated at Leyden University in Philosophy of Religion and graduated in Theology at Kampen. He has worked as a pastor for many years along with leading L'Abri Fellowship in Holland. He is the author of several books including co-authoring *What in the World is Real: Challenging the Superficial in Today's World*. He currently serves at the Chairman of L'Abri Fellowship's International Board of Trustees.

### Introduction

1. What does it mean to be Postmodern?
2. The word "post" means "after." It refers to a turning point away from the "modern." Postmodernism teaches us that modernism is outdated. It is old-fashioned. It has lost its magic, its truth.
3. The man who used this term "postmodernism" for the first time is the American artist Ihab Hassan, who wrote several articles on modern art in the mid-70's. In these writings he coined the word "postmodern" to indicate post-war art.
4. Picasso.  
We see in Pablo Picasso's work already most of the characteristics of what later was called postmodernism. His work was so influential and powerful that one can call him without exaggeration the prophet of postmodernism.
5. What are the characteristics of postmodernism?

German philosopher Habermas, who is personally opposed to the tenets of postmodernism, describes this way of thinking as a rejection of the roots of Modernism, while retaining its fruits:

"The project of Modernity, as formulated in the 18th century by the "philosophers" of the Enlightenment, consisted of their efforts to develop an objective science, universal morality and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. This objective was accompanied by extravagant expectations: it would not be long before mankind was able to control the forces of nature. Mankind would be set free from the shackles of ignorance and poverty. A world was awaiting us that would be truly free, genuinely emancipated and able to stand on its own legs."

### 6. Nihilism

The postmodern movement has arrived at the conclusion that all these ideals have been shattered, and that they were largely utopian anyway. The twentieth century has done away with them all.

### 7. Lack of Hope

If we are to anticipate the future, it can only be done with a strong sense of foreboding

and imminent danger. No other century has created so much misery as our present century.

#### 8. The Enlightenment Enlightened

Anyone who has listened to me thus far could say, "but this is a very pessimistic worldview!" It leads us beyond "the line of despair," in Francis Schaeffer's terminology. But the amazing thing is, that this is not true. Instead of pessimism, there is the joy of de-burdening in postmodernism. OK, there no such thing as a universal truth, but let's keep smiling and enjoy life.

This is perhaps expressed more clearly by artists than philosophers. A good example, in my view, is the film "Down by Law" by Jim Jarmusch. In this story, three prisoners are able to escape from prison by mere coincidence. Once they are free, they do not really know what to do. There is no logic in the movie, nor any reasonable answer to the questions of life, but it is very funny. Although life is portrayed as meaningless in this movie, at the end the three men continue their lives in a very pleasant and joyful way. Postmodernism is "nihilism with a smile."

9. Postmodern man will continue to enjoy the fruits of our civilisation, but he will reject the roots of it. As Habermas wrote, "He will pick the flowers of all past achievements and make it into his own bouquet." But he does not believe in the values and ideals of modern culture anymore.

10. What is central to this mode of thinking? In my view there are at least three elements:

- A. The loss of (a unified view of) truth
- B. The search for true identity, true freedom, and true humanity/humanness
- C. The need for a legitimate place for plurality

#### 11. The Loss of Truth

Speaking about biblical truth today would probably be identified immediately with just another ideology, or with the rise of a Christian fundamentalism. So the challenge that postmodernism presents to us Christians is this one: how can we explain that the biblical revelation is not an ideology?

Today we must emphasise that Christian truth is something completely different from the truth of the Enlightenment.

#### 12. Truth is found in a Person

When we are confronted with postmodern ways of thinking, we meet the challenge of communicating the gospel as a non-ideological truth, as something totally different from the truth of the Enlightenment thinkers: the truth of the Christian faith is not to be found in a system, but in a Person.

#### 13. What is Christian Truth?

The Apostle Paul contrasts "Christian truth" with the concept of truth according to Greeks and Jews, i.e., the cultural "powers" of his day. He says: "The Greeks are searching for wisdom, and the Jews are looking for signs" (1:22). Until the present day our world population might be divided along these two lines: the "mechanists" and the "mystics," as Os Guinness once defined them.

14. We have a message for postmodern man: the truth we believe in is a Person, who will never kill or crush the personality of man. Christianity is not a totalitarian ideology. Ideologies focus on a kind of truth that uses people for a higher purpose, that makes them subordinate to a final goal. Christ does not do that. He sets each man free from the bondage of self-centeredness and provides him or her a place, where he or she can grow as a truly free human being.

If the final reality is non-personal, we will always be hurt, damaged or killed by it. How can we find a refuge in an impersonal reality and still keep to our personal reality?

15. The Search for True Freedom and Humanity (Identity)

Faith in a truth being a Person brings us directly to another view of man. The biblical view of man is that he is created after the image of God. This means, if God is there and He is personal, then man also is really existing and a personal being. But we can only accept that, not when we have academically proved that this is so, but when the barrier between that personal God and ourselves is removed.

We are guilty people. We have taken the place of God and we have killed our brother Cain. We deserve to die. But in the cross of Christ God offered us reconciliation. When we bow down before this Person and at the same time accept our true personal nature, we will be set free. This initiates a process of growth, that finally leads to the reception of a "white stone," with a new name on it, that no one knows except the one who receives it.

16. A Legitimate Place for Plurality

Finally, it will be a real challenge for us Christians to show that Christianity allows plurality. This is not just a matter of teaching, but much more of daily life! We are called to demonstrate in our individual lives as well as in our Christian communities, that plurality is possible. Take away the truth in the lies of the devil and you've broken his power. The truth of postmodernism is its understanding of plurality, its emphasis on differences and diversity. The worst testimony to postmodern people today would be a monotonous, gray, uncreative, stereotypical, or perhaps even racist Christian message.

God's truth allows incredibly much room for diversity. It has mystery, there is unexplicable depth in it. Differences between people, races, sexes, languages, lifestyles and professions are enormous.

Christians should in the first place demonstrate creativity and plurality on the basis of Paul's teaching of "what no eye has seen, nor ear has heard."

To summarise once more my points:

1. There is ultimate truth. But it is personal, non-ideological and different in origin, taste and smell.
2. This truth gives man identity and sets him free. "If you follow me, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32)
3. Within this unity there is a great diversity. We believe in a plural society, not in a pluralistic society.