

# IN RESPONSE - POSTMODERN PLURALISM

by Dennis Prutow

Volume VI, Number 10, October, 1997

In God's providence, we live in a *postmodern* world. Modern culture is *passé*.

"Culture," as used here, refers to all human behavior, including popular entertainment, art, religion, education, scholarship, economic activity, science, technology, law, and morality.<sup>1</sup> Modernity, a child of the enlightenment, involves a view of life and the world in which human beings are at the center. Given enough time, energy and native ingenuity, all human problems can be overcome. The space program is the product of modernity. Science, technology and courage took us to the moon. We speak of the miracles of *modern* medicine. We can overcome dread diseases. We prolong life. We save the lives of the pre-born and the prematurely born. I'm typing on a *modern* computer.

Gene Edward Veith says, "The modern world, properly speaking, began in the 1700s with the enlightenment."<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson indicates, "[I]t is helpful to join the many scholars who view Descartes as the transitional figure at the beginning of the period labeled modernity."<sup>3</sup> This places the beginning of the modern era around 1600. Richard Pratt concurs.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Oden puts it this way,

The modern period may be used to describe the period since the French Revolution, or by some writers the period since the beginning of printing, about A.D. 1450, or some point in between such as Descartes or the idea of the social contract.<sup>5</sup>

What characterized the premodern era, the time before 1600? The premodern period, before the printing press, was the time of the Bible and of the Western intellectual and cultural traditions, both Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman.<sup>6</sup> This was also the era classical Christianity and a period of widespread mythology, superstition and paganism.

The modern era, beginning around 1600, saw the rise of "autonomous individualism" and "secularization."<sup>7</sup> This is the time of hard science and reason. Man is at the center of the universe.

This age of reason, scientific discovery, and human autonomy is termed

the Enlightenment.... Enlightenment rationalism saw the whole universe as a closed natural system of cause and effect. Every phenomenon must be understood in terms of a cause *from within the system*.<sup>8</sup>

Postmodernity is a reaction to Enlightenment thinking. We are not in control. We cannot solve all our problems given enough time and talent. "According to the postmodernists, the problem with the Enlightenment is not its uncritical dependence upon human reason alone, but its assumption that there is such a thing as objective truth."<sup>9</sup> This, of course, leads to extreme relativism. All opinions, races, governments and religions are equal. We celebrate diversity rather than unity. In education this means the *universe* revealing the Creator-God no longer confronts us. A *multi-verse* confronts us. We give this *multi-verse* meaning. As Stanley Grenz therefore indicates, "The central hallmark of postmodern cultural expression is pluralism."<sup>10</sup> Carson agrees. "Philosophical pluralism is the approach to cultural diversity that is supported by—and supports—postmodernity."<sup>11</sup>

When did the cultural shift occur? "Between 1960 and 1990 postmodernism emerged as a cultural phenomenon."<sup>12</sup> Thomas Oden looks back to the 1960s.

It is only in the period since the mid-1960s that the bitter fruits of modernity, which have for two centuries been in gestation, have been widely grasped, gorged, disgorged, and found socially undigestible.<sup>13</sup>

Stanley Grenz also agrees, "Most scholars associate the postmodern shift with the counterculture of the 1960s."<sup>14</sup> Of the students radicals of the 1960s, Robert Bork says, "They and their ideology are all around us now."<sup>15</sup> The radicals of the 1960s are the leaders of today in business, politics and education. As a result, the culture has changed and is continuing to change.

Compare modernism and postmodernism using the vehicle the television show, *Star Trek*.<sup>16</sup> *Star Trek* with Captain Kirk and crew is decidedly *modern*. We join the voyage of the star ship Enterprise going where *no man* has gone before. If

the crew gets in trouble, native ingenuity and courage win the day. Mr. Spock, the Vulcan, is without emotion but supremely rational. The rational must guide decisions. Spock often counters the ideas of the crew of the Enterprise by saying, "Captain, that is not rational."

Contrast *Star Trek the Next Generation* with Captain Picard. The crew is much more "multi-cultural." Several new species are aboard. The new Enterprise goes where *no one* has gone before. Counselor Troy replaces Mr. Spock. She uses her extra-sensory powers and psychological prowess to help guide the crew. The android Data is a storehouse of knowledge and facts without emotion. Data represents our preoccupation with trivia. He wants to become human, to have emotions. As such, Data represents the drift away from the rational.

With this beginning overview of postmodernism we turn to three additional characteristics of the new cultural scene, pragmatism, power and pleasure. The big questions are: Is it practical? Do I have choice? How will it make me feel? Pervasive cynicism and panic in human hearts are the inevitable results.

'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1997 by Dennis Prutow.

<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Toward Gomorrah* (New York: ReganBooks, 1996), 2

<sup>2</sup> Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 32.

<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 58.

<sup>4</sup> Richard, Pratt, "Theology of Ministry," RTS Class Notes, July 12, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Oden, *After Modernity.... What?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 44

<sup>6</sup> Oden, 48.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Veith, 33

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Carson, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Grenz, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Oden, 46.

<sup>14</sup> Veith, 40.

<sup>15</sup> Bork, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Grenz, 1-10.

# IN RESPONSE - POSTMODERN PRAGMATISM

by Dennis Prutow

Pluralism, the idea all opinions, races, governments and religions are equal. Absolute truth takes a back seat. Pragmatism assumes the front seat. When we think of pragmatism, we think of the question, "Does it work?" There is a companion question. "Is it practical?"

With truth in the background and pragmatism in the foreground, public relations and image making become important. David Wells point out that by the 1970s, the projection of a public image took center stage. "Image and inner life were thus disengaged from each other."<sup>1</sup> Wells goes on to say,

This being the case, it took great skill to present one's "image." Erving Goffman speaks of modern people as having become performers who stage their own characters and accomplishments. This art often requires freeing oneself from the need to tell the truth and turning instead to "the techniques of management impression." A whole industry has grown up to teach people how to market themselves by creating effective self images.<sup>2</sup>

Politicians, businessmen, entertainers, and even church leaders build images. Correspondence to reality carries little weight. An agenda takes precedence.

In his new book, *Leading With My Chin*, Jay Leno tells a mildly embarrassing story about himself on the old Dinah Shore television show. The problem with the incident is that it didn't happen to Leno. It happened to another comedian, Jeff Altman.

Leno told Joseph Adalian of the *New York Post* last week that he liked the story so much he paid Altman \$1,000 for the right to publish the tale as his own....

This naturally opens up a whole new industry—selling life stories to needy comedians and unexciting public figures.<sup>3</sup>

A whole new industry has begun. If it works, do it. If it sells, do it. If it advances the political agenda, good.

Robert Reich, the former secretary of labor, has written a charming, funny memoir about his time in office that has a major flaw. It's fictional. On ex-

amination, it turns out that one scene after another in *Locked in the Cabinet* bears no resemblance to reality. Reich's habit of misrepresentation is so pervasive as to seem downright pathological.<sup>4</sup>

Revisionist history is one thing. Acceptance in academia is quite another. As Chapman laments regarding Robert Reich and Brandeis University,

Certainly it would be unpleasant for the school to have to discipline or fire a well-known professor whom it so recently hired. But tolerating Reich's dishonesty is a much greater embarrassment.<sup>5</sup>

Or is it? Not if pluralism and pragmatism hold sway as they do in our *postmodern* culture.

We live in different times. We need to realize this is the case.

Today people have little patience with systematic thinking and abstract ideas. Pragmatic questions (what works? what's practical) dominate contemporary discussions, from Congress to church boards.<sup>6</sup>

This comes home to me as I look at my own seminary education. I graduated from Fuller Theological Seminary in 1968, almost thirty years ago. At that time, my professors were the last of the charter faculty. They were elderly men who received their seminary training in the 1920s and 1930s. My seminary training is therefore rooted in 1920s and 1930s. It is distinctively *modern*. Couple with this the facts that [1] I am dealing with a book, the Bible, written in the *premodern* era, [2] I teach from a Confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith, hammered out in the early *modern* era, and [3] I am living at the edge of the third millennium attempting to minister to people in the *postmodern* era. The older and middle aged folks in my congregation come right out of the fifties. They are an Ozzie and Harriet, Happy Days, crowd. They think and act *modern*.

My emphasis on the rational from both Scripture and the Confession is foreign to many of the younger ears of my congregation and my culture. People in the culture are not asking, "Does it make sense?" They want to know, "Is it practi-

cal?" I hear this emphasis in the church. "Pastor, give us something practical."

Pragmatism within culture is powerful. In the military, the Joint Chiefs of Staff are less likely to be great commanders but staff officers. For example, during the Vietnam War, President Lyndon Johnson appointed Earle Wheeler as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. "Wheeler's most notable qualities were those of a skilled staff officer. He was a master administrator who gave lucid, well organized briefings."<sup>7</sup>

What are evangelical churches looking for in pastors? "In this new clerical order, technical and managerial competence in the church have plainly come to dominate the definition of pastoral service.<sup>8</sup> The practical thing is to keep the organization of the local church running smoothly. Churches therefore need pastors gifted as managers and administrators. "The older role of the pastor as the broker of truth has been eclipsed by the newer managerial functions."<sup>9</sup>

As pluralism and pragmatism become more pervasive in society, the anchor of truth erodes. What is the result?

Arthur Kroker, himself a postmodernist, says that the key psychological mood of postmodernism is *panic*, a "free fall" that comes from "the disappearance of *external* standards of public conduct... and the dissolution of the *internal* foundations of identity"... Without external standards and without internal standards, there is only cynicism, panic, and "free fall."<sup>10</sup>

*Is Providence cultivating fear and panic?*

'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1997 by Dennis Prutow.

<sup>1</sup> David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 152.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>3</sup> John Leo, "This column is mostly true," U.S. News and World Report, December 16, 1996, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Chapman, "Reich's fables embarrass a university," The Kansas City Star, July 14, 1997, B2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Veith, 83.

<sup>7</sup> H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 109.

<sup>8</sup> Wells, 233.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Veith, 82.

# IN RESPONSE - POSTMODERN POWER

by Dennis Prutow

Pluralism: All opinions, races, governments and religions are equal. Pragmatism: Whatever is most practical takes the front seat. Pluralism gives us a plethora of options. Pragmatism selects the most practical for the given situation. The postmodern world majors in this essential power of choice.

Objectively, there is the choice of television channels. Sit in your chair, remote in hand, and surf through hundreds of selections. Go to the mall and spend the day. Superstores offer an extraordinary variety of clothes, crafts, communication devices, computers, cameras and cosmetics. There are jewelry stores, appliance stores, furniture stores, book stores, food courts, gourmet coffee shops. Spend the day under one roof browsing and buying. Malls with the most choice get the most play. This is one reason *modern* strip malls give way to *postmodern* indoor multilevel variety malls including, multi-screen movie theaters. "The ultimate postmodernist structure may be Minnesota's Mall of America, a mall and a theme park rolled into one."<sup>1</sup> Choice is in.

We see this in our homes. Teenagers often think they are deprived if they do not have an adequate choice of clothing for school each day. Adults are not exempt. I recall staying in a guest bedroom one evening when the host excused himself to obtain some clothes for the following day. He opened one double door closet filled with suits. After carefully going past twenty or thirty suits, he selected one of the closet full. He then went to the adjoining double door closet to select a shirt from a rack filled from left to right. The power of choice in action.

We see the postmodern look in the mega-church. Many church buildings are similar to malls complete with huge entry ways, fountains, skylights and foliage. There are also a multitude of programs. There are groups for the young marrieds and young divorced. There are all manner of support groups. There are basketball leagues and volleyball leagues. There are contemporary services and traditional services. Choice. This is what it is about. If you cannot provide choice, you cannot

provide adequate services to your community.

Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral is something like a religious theme park, featuring babbling brooks and luxuriant plant life (inside the building) and multimedia sensory overload.<sup>2</sup>

Another manifestation of combined pluralism, pragmatism and the power of choice is an extreme aversion to passing moral judgment.

In 20 years of teaching, Prof. Robert Simon has never met a student who denied the Holocaust happened. What he sees quite often, though, is worse: students who acknowledge the fact of the Holocaust but can't bring themselves to say the killing of millions is wrong. Simon reports that 10 to 20 percent of his students think this way. Usually they deplore what the Nazis did, but their disapproval is expressed as a matter of taste or personal preference, not moral judgment. "Of course I dislike the Nazis," one student told Simon, "but who is to say they are morally wrong?"

Overdosing on moral nonjudgmentalism is a growing problem in schools. Two disturbing articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* say that some students are unwilling to oppose large moral horrors, including human sacrifice, ethnic cleansing, and slavery, because they think that no one has the right to criticize the moral views of another group or culture.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Simon calls this unwillingness to say something is wrong, absolutophobia.

Many trends feed this fashionable phobia. Postmodern theory on campuses denies the existence of any objective truth: All we can have are clashing perspectives, not true moral knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Tolerance becomes a byword. We speak of alternate lifestyles and of values. Differing groups have their own sets of values. There are feminist values, homosexual values and traditional values. This is all part of the postmodern scene. Unfortunately, the evangelical church has taken up the language and too often the

position of the culture by speaking of Christian values.

What are values? They are preferences. They embody the principles *you* may find of value but which *others* ignore while clinging to another set of values. Gertrude Himmelfarb observes the concept of

"[v]alues" brought with it the assumptions that all moral ideas are subjective and relative, that they have a purely instrumental and utilitarian purpose [pragmatism], and that they are peculiar to specific individuals and societies. (And, in the current intellectual climate, to specific classes, races, and sexes.)<sup>5</sup>

Christians ought not to speak of values. Rather, the currency of the believer ought to be virtues. "So long as morality was couched in the language of 'virtue,' it had a firm, resolute character."<sup>6</sup> For this reason, when C. S. Lewis speaks of Christian behavior, he turns to a discussion of virtues.<sup>7</sup>

Once again, if values by which to live are a matter of choice, the consequences can be and are quite disastrous. Morality is declining. As a result, fear is rising, "fear of what drugs are doing, fear of crime, fear of declining standards, fear of the future. At heart there is a moral vacuum, a restlessness...."<sup>8</sup> It is the fear and restlessness of which Augustine speaks, "Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou has formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee."<sup>9</sup> *Is Providence ordering the current cultural shift to accentuate this sense of fear and restlessness to move people to seek Him?*

'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1997 by Dennis Prutow.

<sup>1</sup> Veith, 118.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> John Leo, "A no-fault Holocaust," U.S. News and World Report, July 21, 1967, 14

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Demoralization of Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1960).

<sup>8</sup> Carson, 402.

<sup>9</sup> Whitney Oats, ed., *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1948), 1:3.

# IN RESPONSE - POSTMODERN PLEASURE

by Dennis Prutow

Pluralism: All opinions, races, governments and religions are equal. Pragmatism: Whatever is most practical takes the front seat. Power: The power of choice. Pluralism gives us options. Pragmatism selects the most practical and the most pleasurable. Postmodernism is pleasure driven. Postmodernism is consumed with narcissism and hedonism.

Two of the greatest evidences of this trend in our culture are entertainment and athletics. Movies, music, video games, on-line services and television attempt to gorge the senses and manipulate the emotions. All of these means are used to escape reality. In fact, virtual reality is far better than reality itself. Turn on the computer, put on the goggles, handle the joy stick [pun intended], and enter the virtual world for a journey across space and time involving your favorite activity. Sadly, pornographers are taking advantage of the new technology. The Wall Street Journal reports virtual sex on the internet is a huge growth industries.

What we are saying is that the rational is set aside in favor of the pleasurable. "Entertainment, gratification, and sensory stimulation displace reason, morality and truth."<sup>1</sup> The wider variety of pleasurable activities, the better. Pleasure becomes an end in itself. How I feel at the moment becomes the essence of life. As Neil Postman puts it,

Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas; they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials.<sup>2</sup>

The primary news makers are therefore celebrities and not scholars, scientists or thinkers. News becomes entertainment. Politics features the video bite. We no longer seek pleasure in rational discourse but in irrational images. When the image no longer gives pleasure we move on with the remote or joy stick in hand. We operate with reduced attention spans.

Athletics is the other great pleasure producer in our culture. As with entertainment, sports are in one degree or another participatory. We get our kick from either going to the event or playing in the game. The more action and the more vio-

lent the better. We will switch channels in athletics too.

The rise of so-called extreme sports is part of the postmodern mosaic.

Kristen Ulmer is a hard-core addict, and she knows it. Ever since her first childhood schuss down a snowcovered peak, she has been hopelessly hooked on adrenalin. In her teens she abandoned the cozy confines of ski resorts for the 70-degree inclines and 50-foot drops of rugged wilderness trails. By her early 20s she was the nations foremost "radical skier," and darling of cinematographers eager to capture her perilous cliff jumps and set them to rock soundtracks for the MTV crowd.<sup>3</sup>

Note two particular points. First, there is a vital connection between extreme sports and entertainment within the MTV generation. Second, part of the package is addiction, addiction to adrenalin and other drugs manufactured by the body.

Adrenalin addiction is widespread in our culture. Workaholics drive themselves during the week. Unable to come down off the high induced by adrenalin at work, these folks look for greater lifts at week's end. Hence many of them turn to extreme sports.

[A] sport known as BASE jumping (for Buildings, Antennas, Spans, and Earth), officially established in 1980, now lures hundreds, who parachute—often illegally and at night—off fixed objects such as radio towers and bridges.<sup>4</sup>

When I discussed extreme sports at a summer conference, one young man explained how he and some friends repelled from a bridge late at night. When they came to the end of the rope, they dropped to the canyon floor below. They had no idea how far they were from the ground. Why? For the thrill and the excitement.

All of this has a profound effect upon the church. Individuals hooked on adrenalin enter a traditional worship service and inevitably find it boring. Part of the mix may be these people are withdrawing from adrenalin highs experienced during the week. Traditional worship does not "grab" them.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, too many people are addicted to adrenalin including Christians. Adrenalin and endorphins secreted by the brain are powerful drugs. They produce a sense of euphoria and well-being.

I believe there is a corresponding spiritual danger. Becoming dependent upon adrenalin arousal for the good feelings of life can create an association between spirituality and high arousal. In other words, one doesn't feel "spiritual" unless one is being stimulated by adrenalin arousal.<sup>6</sup>

I therefore think many folks do not know the difference between adrenalin arousal and the Holy Spirit. They want the same feeling in worship they receive racing down a hillside on a skateboard or attending a tough basketball contest.

Postmodern churches cater to the pragmatic wish for pleasure pleasing choices. The mega-church can fulfill this consumer demand. Small churches simply cannot compete with the mega-church or the world nor should they.

The pursuit of pleasure is an effort to cover nagging anxiety, restlessness and fear. When the pleasure ends, reality strikes. The results should be clear. "Postmodernism is passive, cynical and insecure."<sup>7</sup> Does Christianity answer the questions and the fears of postmodernism? Is it practical? The gospel of Jesus Christ is the most practical thing in the universe. Do we search for power? The gospel is the power of God. What of pleasure? The chief end of every human being is to glorify God and *enjoy Him forever?* Christianity has the only solid answers to prevailing postmodern cynicism, restlessness and insecurity.

'In Response' is published by the Sterling Pulpit, Post Office Box 303, Sterling, KS 67579-0303. Copyright © 1997 by Dennis Prutow.

<sup>1</sup> Veith, 82.

<sup>2</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 92-93.

<sup>3</sup> Brendan I. Koerner, "Extreeme," U.S. News and World Report, June 30, 1997, 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-52.

<sup>5</sup> See my pamphlet, "The Effects of Adrenalin Addiction on Worship."

<sup>6</sup> Archibald D. Hart, *Adrenalin and Stress* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Veith, 83.