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The website for *A New Kind of Christian*

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### *The Three Postmodernisms: A short explanation*

The first postmodernism is the one that modern people talk about a lot. It's a big scary monster of nihilism and relativism and self-destruction that seeks to undo all that is good in modern Western civilization. This definition of postmodernism (it denies truth, denies reality, denies morality) is useful, I think, to scare people so they'll stay loyal to their modern institutions, which, they are told, are the last bulwark against the chaos at the gate. This postmodernism is absurd: it says, "There is no truth," which means that if the statement is true, it is also false. This first postmodernism probably doesn't exist outside the imaginations of frightened modern people and those who seek to intimidate them – plus among some college freshmen who get carried away after drinking too much.

The second postmodernism is the closest reality to the first fantasy. It's actually a kind of adolescent postmodernism. It's the kind of postmodernism that some people like to declare as being "over" since September 11, or since 1990, or since I'm not sure what. This adolescent postmodernism is associated with one or more of the following:

1. Relativist Pluralism
2. Consumerism

### 3. Alienated European intellectuals

### 4. Political Correctness

Some people call this extreme postmodernism or deconstructive postmodernism. I call it adolescent postmodernism because it has many of the characteristics of adolescents, and because it is an early phase that must give way to other phases. Outside of sophomore English and graduate philosophy classes, you don't find this form of postmodernism much any more.

Although it's not the phantasm presented by the first postmodernism, this one can be dangerous. If some alienated European intellectuals tell enough people that any point of view is as valid as any other and that it's politically incorrect to say anything is "selfish" or "wrong" or "arrogant" or "destructive," and if consumerism then comes along and appeals to their basest self-interest, with little concern for one's neighbor, community or world ... you have a really bad recipe for a really putrid future.

The third kind of postmodernism is what we might call "emerging postmodernism." It can't be fully defined yet; it may be decades away from mature definition. But it moves beyond the four characteristics described above.

1. It sees relativist pluralism (the irrational idea that all opinions or views are equally valid) as a kind of chemotherapy intended to stop the growth of modern reductionistic rationalism (the oppressive idea that all reality can be reduced to mechanisms that the mind can understand via validation by the five senses). In

order to kill the malignancy, the patient has to take dangerous medicine that would prove poisonous if taken in too high doses or for too long.

Emerging postmodernism agrees that modern reductionistic rationalism needed to be stopped or “deconstructed,” and it sees that relativist pluralism “worked” as a chemotherapeutic agent, but it doesn’t mistake this dangerous short-term medical necessity as a long-term regimen for health. It seeks to move beyond relativistic pluralism, and sees “emergent thinking” and “integralism” as better alternatives to both modern reductionistic rationalism and relativist pluralism. (For more on emergent thinking and integralism, see my book “A Generous Orthodoxy,” or Ken Wilber’s “A Theory of Everything.”)

2. Consumerism is the product and perhaps the fuel of late modernity, the idea that life is about consuming products (and pre-packaged experiences), that a person’s life consists in the abundance of his possessions (and experience packages). Emerging postmoderns see consumerism as another modern malignancy, not unlike reductionist reationalism, because of the havoc it inflicts upon the individual soul, upon cultures, and upon the planet as a whole. Consumerism is such a powerful Goliath or Caesar that it is hard to imagine any David or Jesus that could stand up to it, but emerging postmoderns’ sympathies and hopes lie, not with consumerism itself, but rather with an as-yet unarticulated better alternative to consumerism. Just because both emerging postmodernity and consumerism are present at the same time does not mean that the two are friends.

3. While alienated European intellectuals have indeed written the formal philosophy of adolescent postmodernism, and while they (and others) are beginning to popularize some of the emerging postmodern thought, emerging postmodernism must become a global endeavor. In the two-thirds world, it will more likely be called “post-colonial” rather than “postmodern” for obvious

reasons. By nature, emerging postmodernism seeks to listen to diverse voices, especially the voices of women, the poor, the oppressed, Native Peoples, nonwesterners, and the uneducated. There are many cultural barriers that need to be crossed for this to happen as it should, and slow or uneven progress should not be interpreted as no progress.

4. Political correctness, or attention to using non-discriminatory language, has been an important tool in the attempt to bring marginalized voices to the table. But it is a tool (which, like any tool, can be misused); it is not the goal. The goal is the pursuit of truth and justice.

So, unless you're talking about something seeking to go beyond relativistic pluralism, beyond consumerism, beyond Euro-American intellectualism, and beyond political correctness, you're not talking about the third postmodernism.

With these three postmodernisms (and no doubt, others too) in circulation, it is understandable that people get confused with the term postmodern.

As a follower of Christ, I am less interested in articulating the ideal definition of this movement in words than I am in helping contribute to what the postmodern world becomes in reality. I am hoping that many people of faith and vision can play a formative role in what will happen beyond modernity and adolescent postmodernity: seeking to be salt and light, seeking to do good works, seeking to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with God.

In other words, the best answer to the question, "What will happen with the emerging postmodern movement?" is this: "It depends on people like us."

When I look at the postmodern landscape, I see "fields ready for harvest," as Jesus said. But so far, in spite of so much being at stake at this critical moment in history, those willing to get out into the fields and do the hard work of seizing

the moment are too few. There are plenty of critics who stand at a safe distance on the modern road that runs beside the postmodern fields, shouting their criticisms and warnings. Instead of joining them, you will, I hope, pray to “the Lord of the harvest” - so that more workers will become willing to jump into the action and get their hands dirty in the postmodern fields, making visible the good news of Jesus.

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