

## **Theological Education and the Challenges of Postmodernism**

Dr. Nathan H. Chiroma

*Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi Kenya  
and*

*Research Fellow Department of Practical Theology and Missiology, University of Stellenbosch*

*Theological education is facing new challenges in the postmodern context. These challenges range from denial of absolute truth in a situation where different groups socially construct their 'truths' which may be mutually exclusive and yet considered to be equally true. Other challenges include; the normalization of sin in the name of tolerance for diverse 'truths', 'realities', or 'orientations'; resurgence of a new syncretistic spirituality that combines various practices of different religions together as long as they produce 'results' for the practitioner in a situation that seems like the premodern time where people worshipped many gods and not a particular God; and the rejection of reason, metanarratives and authority as mask of power in hermeneutics of suspicion. With the ultimate aim of Christian theological education being the proclamation of the gospel, how prepared are theological institutions in Nigeria and around the world to provide the kind of theological education that will adequately equip graduates with appropriate knowledge and skills to live the Christian life and proclaim the gospel in this era of postmodernism. Using qualitative methods, this study explores the preparedness of theological institutions in dealing with the challenges of postmodernism. 12 faculty members from 3 different seminaries were interviewed for the study and 12 graduates were also interviewed regarding how prepared they were to face the challenges of postmodernism after their training. The findings of the research revealed that both the seminaries and their graduates agree that postmodernism pose certain challenges to the church today, however theological seminaries are yet to come to terms with how to prepare their graduates in order to adequately face and deal with postmodern challenges. Results showed that areas in which seminaries needs to improve upon in their task of preparing pastors to deal with the challenges of postmodernism, include among others, recruiting seasoned younger faculty members, realigning their curriculum to the current realities of church composition, maintaining constant engagement with their graduates and above all prepare pastors from a holistic perspective.*

**Key words,** *Theological Education, Postmodernism, Christianity, Theological Seminaries*

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### **I. Introduction**

Theological Education is in a state of crisis in many parts of the world. The interrelated question of means and ends as well as aims and purposes continue to be raised. The shift from a modern to a postmodern culture brings additional challenges to theological education. Theological education therefore has to reflect on the implications and compatibility of this new understanding for Christianity today. Theology is that activity by which human beings relate their faith in God to the patterns of meaning that prevail in any historical period or culture (Cox, 2009:176). Hence the shift from a modern to a postmodern culture, obviously requires new theological reflection. For Christianity to still be relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it will require an understanding of the challenges postmodernism poses to theological education and their implications to Christianity.

### **II. Introduction to Methodology**

This research was conducted from a practical theological perspective. It reflects on the relationship between theological education and the challenges of postmodernism. Osmer's model serves as a guide that directs the discussion in the research, namely: what is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? and how might we respond? (Osmer, 2008:4; 2009:7). Qualitative method was used, through focus group interviews and the data was analyzed using thematic analysis.

### **III. Objectives of the Study**

The following objectives served as guide for the exploratory study:

1. To ascertain the extent to which theological educators and their graduates understood the meaning and implications of postmodernism.
2. To find out the form and extent of challenges that post modernism is posing to the contemporary church.
3. To find out how well are seminaries preparing their students to face the challenges of postmodernism
4. To find out how prepared are the seminary graduates in dealing with the challenges of postmodernism in their various ministries

#### **IV. Research questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is your understanding of postmodernism
2. What do you perceive to be the challenges (positive/negative) of postmodernism to the Christian ministry?
3. How well do you think your graduates are prepared to face the challenges of PM in their Christian ministry? (faculty)
4. How well have you been equipped by the seminary to face the challenges of PM in your current Christian ministry? (graduates)

#### **V. Unit of analysis**

The unit of analysis for this study comprises of three theological seminaries in Northern Nigeria (Baptist, Anglican and ECWA<sup>1</sup>). A total of 24 respondents (10 women and 14 men) were interviewed for the study, 12 faculty members four from each seminary, and 12 seminary graduates, 4 from each seminary, those who graduated between 2009-2015.

#### **VI. Theological framework for the study**

The task of theological training is to nurture gifted leaders who are in turn to nurture other believers so that the church can effectively fulfill her missional mandate. Because of the relationship between theological training and the practice of ministry, enriching theological training will enhance ministry in the churches, thus translating theological training into practical ministry. The effectiveness of theological training must therefore be measured by how it enhances the practice of ministry in the work of its graduates.

Graham (2002:228-36) stresses that the overall aim of theological education should be the development of theological learning; practical preparation for ministry; spiritual and ministerial formation; and growth in personal maturity. He (2003:58-77) further states that theological learning situations should be characterised by a combination of approaches that will enhance personal construction of knowledge, explicit and implicit instruction through modelling and practice, which, when combined, can be viewed as a process of mentoring. As theological students develop their knowledge about theology, they should also understand and articulate their personal theology and begin to discern the activity of God in their personal lives and in the lives of others. Additionally, theological education needs to provide seminary students with the skills necessary to exercise their God-given ministries. These skills should form part of a complex competency that includes elements of leadership and discipleship, collaboration, empowerment and mutuality (Graham 2003:58-77). Speaking of the aims of theological education, McKinney (2003:2) emphasises that theological education should be characterised by commitment to the following aspects:

- Biblical training: Knowledge of the Bible must be central to theological education and a devotion to the word of God as the authority for all of life, both with respect to how theological students think and how they live.
- The great commission: The spread of the gospel must be incorporated in theological education. Theological students must be equipped to become world changers with a passion to win the world for Christ.
- Holy living: Issues of character, lifestyle, integrity, and godliness must form part of the ingredients of the aims of theological education. Seminary students must be taught how to integrate belief, behaviour, right thinking and right living.
- Ministerial formation: Theological students should be equipped for meaningful church-related ministries. There should be a connection between theory and practice that will produce meaningful ministerial praxis.

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<sup>1</sup> ECWA Stands for Evangelical Church Winning all

Though theological education has come under much scrutiny in recent years especially in Nigeria; instead of recasting the entire model, a few cosmetic changes have been made in the hope of contextualizing and fitting-in in this new era. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first Century there seems to be a new challenge that will need to be addressed if theological education is to be relevant not only to churches but to Christianity, and that challenge is postmodernism. Theological seminaries in this paper are denominational schools that are geared towards preparing men and women for various ministries in various contexts.

### **Toward an Understanding of Postmodernism**

Postmodernism is a term which came into use in the second half of the twentieth century. The term is used to describe the alteration in the prevailing attitude and culture that the Church finds itself in. Understanding postmodernism and its implications and responding adequately to the foreseeable challenges is vital for the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it continues its efforts of fulfilling Jesus' great commission (Matt 28:16-20).

At the heart of the term postmodernism is the word 'modern' and therefore to understand what postmodernism is, a grasp is needed of the change from premodern to modern to postmodern. White (2015:63) summarizes this movement helpfully; "Premoderns placed their trust in authority. Moderns lost their confidence in authority and placed it in human reason instead. Postmoderns kept the modern distrust of authority but lost their trust in reason and have found nothing to replace it."

Postmodernism then, is a term used to reference that which has come *after* modernism. Modernism, eminent since the days of the enlightenment, can be caricatured as the age of reason. Postmodernism can be caricatured as the rejection of reason. Hick (2004:16) provides a typical postmodern outlook by stressing that; "If reason is our source of meaning, we have no meaning. If truth is to be found through reason, we can have no truth." Postmodernism can be said to be a reaction or response to modernism in the late twentieth century. So postmodernism can only be understood in relation to modernism. At its core, postmodernism rejects that which modernism champions. While postmodernism seems very much like modernism in many ways, it differs from modernism in its attitude toward trends. To fully understand postmodernism, one would need to understand its basic characteristics.

### **Characteristics of Postmodernism:**

It is not in the scope of this paper to give an exhaustive discussion on postmodernism, the purpose of this section is to highlight the key characteristics of postmodernism. Postmodernism believes the view that there is no absolute truth and truth is relative. Postmodernism asserts that truth is not mirrored in human understanding of it, but is rather constructed as the mind tries to understand its own personal reality. So, facts and falsehood are interchangeable. Postmodernism rejects Western values and beliefs as only a small part of the human experience and often rejects such ideas, beliefs, culture, and norms. Postmodernism rejects any notion of a universal, overarching truth and reduces all ideas to social constructions shaped by class, gender, and ethnicity. In postmodernism, there is no objective, universal truth; there is only the perspective of the group. In postmodernism, all viewpoints, all lifestyles, all beliefs and behaviors are regarded as equally valid.

**Social Constructivism.** Meaning, morality and truth do not exist objectively; rather, they are socially constructed. This is at the heart of the postmodernist worldview. Truth, with its attendant concepts of meaning and morality, are "constructed" by society. Everything centers on the story that the community has created to establish its validity. The community in which a person places himself creates their own versions of meaning, morality and truth. Thus, what is truth for one group is not necessarily truth for another. Rewriting history for the good of the "story" is the basis of truth.

**Cultural Determinism.** Individuals are shaped by their culture. Culture is created by language, and we are trapped in a "prison of language." We are trapped because language does not communicate; it conceals. This is one reason that some philosophers consider postmodernism to be only the logical end of modernism, for in modernism, language began to change. In modernist theology for instance, terms that had one meaning historically began to be used to mean something else.

**Rejection of Individual Identity.** People exist as members of a group, not as individuals. This is a major distinction between postmodernism and modernism. The individual has no place in postmodernism. The modernistic concepts of human creativity, autonomy of the individual, and the priority of humans over all else are rejected as wrong values. The problem is that creativity, autonomy, and human priority are values that exclude and oppress other humans. Postmodernists argue that *groups*, not individuals, must empower themselves and assert their own values.

**Inability to Transcend Culture or Group.** There are no absolutes in postmodernism. This is the result of the previous tenets. If history can be rewritten, if truth is flexible, then any claim for a truth that transcends culture or the group must be rejected. While there is a postmodern "church," most of these "churches" argue against a

Christianity based on biblical truth (Allen, 2013:46). This is why someone like Rob Bell can argue that in spite of biblical claims that Jesus alone is the way to salvation that God's love will end up taking all (or least the vast majority of people) to heaven.

**Power Reductionism.** All institutions, human relationships, and moral values are masks for power. All the person holding a modernist worldview wants to do is control others. Likewise, postmodernism rejects reason, because reason is simply an illusory mask for cultural power. Logic is simply seen as a means of control (Anderson, 1995:16).

**Revolutionary Critique of the Existing Order.** The modern society needs to be replaced. Modernism is tied up with scientific knowledge, but this is an outdated modernism. Science, at least hard science, is too tied to their premise of absolute truth. Segmentation of society into various groups is the only action that will allow true cultural pluralism. There is a connection to Marxism in this characteristic. Marx's theory was that society must change and that the result of any revolution would, by definition, produce a better society (Aldof, 20006:19). Change does not need direction. Evolution is demonstration of the progress that random changes will produce. Theoretically, this would result in complete freedom for the various communities; but in reality, the urge for power may overcome this ideal.

The challenges of postmodernism are real and have a huge impact not only on theological education but on Christianity. Theological education therefore has to reflect on the implications and compatibility of this new understanding of the self and the world for a Christian understanding as revealed in the Bible and expounded in other relevant texts and adequately prepare students to minister relevantly.

## VII. Research findings/discussions

### Understanding Postmodernism:

Major themes that emerged regarding the understanding of postmodernism among theological educators and their graduates, include among others: False teaching, technology, western influence, Satanism and another gospel.

**False teaching:** Most the respondents equates postmodernism with false teaching. *"I see postmodernism as a way of spreading false teaching and corrupting the word of God."* Another respondent argued that *"postmodernism is from the pit of hell and must be rejected in all forms and shapes."*

**Technology:** Some of the respondents argue that postmodernism is a product of technology. They see advancement in technology as a tool that is used to propagate postmodernism. *"The advent of social media, technology, is cause of postmodernism, people even come to church now with those gadgets and never listen to the word of God"* Similarly, another argued that *"I see postmodernism as the product of technology, where it is taking people away from God, into selfishness, pornography and fraud."* Another respondent added that *"the postmodern generation are more technologically inclined than God inclined"*

**Western Influence:** Another major theme that came out of the respondents understanding of postmodernism is Western influence. Some of the respondents argued that *"Africans are truly spiritual, but with the Western influence, it brought about post modernity where people are not ashamed of sin and are against righteousness."* They add that *"we never knew things like gay and lesbianism it all came from the west as a result of postmodernism."*

**Satanism:** Some of the respondents equates postmodernism with Satanism. *"Postmodernism is the worship of Satan and it is from the pit of hell."* *"Postmodernism is the devil's strategy to derail the church from God and to focus on him, and unfortunately some churches have fallen prey"*

**Another gospel:** Some of the respondents relates their understanding of postmodernism to another gospel, *"postmodernism is another gospel that the Apostle Paul discussed in his letters"* echoes one of the respondents. Similarly, two of the respondents added that *"The gospel of Jesus Christ is the true gospel, but postmodernism preached a gospel that is contrary to the true gospel."*

It is became very evident from the research finding that most of the respondents associated their understanding of postmodernism with a negative connotation. They seems not to see any positive aspect that comes with postmodernism. Their understanding of course will shape the way they teach and the way students are also prepared to do ministry in the postmodern context.

### Challenges (positive/negative) of postmodernism to the Christian ministry:

Major themes that emerged in the area of challenges that postmodernism poses to the Christian ministry/church are: Relativity, Hyper-grace, Sycrretism, and Nominalism. The respondents agreed that postmodernism, if not theologically engaged, it posed certain challenges to the Christian church/Christian ministry. Some argue that *"postmodernism promotes relativism which in turn became theologized as hyper grace."* *"Postmodernism promotes the fact that there are no absolutes, and if that is true, then believers will begin to explain away their sinful behaviors"* and when that happens, *"it will lead to the fusion of various beliefs and accommodating other false teaching, which will eventually lead to syncretism and nominalism."*

How well are seminary graduates prepared to face the challenges of postmodernism:

The major themes that emerged from the faculty regarding the preparation of their students to do ministry in the postmodern era are: adequately prepared, half-baked, faculty not even aware of postmodernism, seminaries lacks modern facilities, and revision of curriculum. This is a question that was addressed to the seminary faculty, some of them argued that *"all their graduates are well prepared to do ministry in any given context"* while others feels that *"the question of preparing students for postmodern ministry must start with helping the faculty to understand postmodernism and it tenets"* similarly, *"most of our seminaries are far behind when it comes to modern facilities, you cannot train pastors about postmodernism without proper facilities like internet, online libraries, that provides great avenues for interaction with the postmodern world."* *"Most of the our curriculum are what we inherited from the early missionaries in the 60s, and the 80s, some of the courses are not even relevant for today, so for us to prepare students for the postmodern context we will need to revise our curriculums."*

How well have you been equipped by the seminary to face the challenges of postmodernism

The major themes that emerged from the graduates appear to be quite similar to that of the faculty, some of them feel they were fully prepared by the seminary to face the challenges of doing ministry in the postmodern context *"we may not have been taught about postmodernism at the seminary, but all the classes that we were taught, one could easily do contextualization"* however, other respondents were of different opinion *"candidly, we have not been adequately prepared to do ministry in the post modern context, most of the lecturers are not even aware of the full meaning of postmodernism, some of them are still using their notes from the 70s and 80s to teach in the 21st century"* additionally, *" I must confess that yes we got adequate theological knowledge for ministry, but not enough to minister in the post modern context, looking at the context of the church and the demographics, many of the young people are actually ahead of us in matters pertaining to postmodernism, they seminary needs to do better"*

The data gathered for this study reveals that both faculty and seminary graduates are aware of postmodernism and the challenges it poses for doing ministry today. Hence there is a need to look at the challenges and their implications as they relate to seminary/theological education today.

### **VIII. Implications of postmodernism for Theological Education**

The first challenge of postmodernism to theological education is its involvement in the moral discourse. Theological seminaries must come to terms with the reality that postmodernism is the reading of our present times, and it is our present reality that forms the matrix from which all theological education occurs. Knitter (2012:145-160) warns that "unless theological education can blend and balance all the ingredients of postmodern consciousness, it will not be claiming students either in their own subjectivity or in the role they must play as ministers and theologians in the postmodern world." Greater emphasis should be placed on the student's understanding of contemporary culture, its ability to analyze it, and the skills needed for proper ethical analysis. Theological education should be willing to make meaningful and significant use of field of sciences to properly understand the challenges of postmodernism.

Secondly, the challenges of postmodernism require that theological education must not create individuals who are conformists, but individuals who are committed to transformation, first in their own lives by Biblical values, and subsequently in the world around them. There is a challenge for personal accountability in both spiritual as well as personal life. Mwangi and Klerk (2009: 11) argue that it is only by being open and transparent that educators are going to lead the students to be personally accountable to their peers as well as the Churches and societies they serve. They need to see themselves as perpetual disciples and learners. The challenges of postmodernism demand that theological education enhance learning that will help disciples think out-of-the-box. Third, the challenges of postmodernism must force theological institutions to strive and to inculcate commitment in the students who will live out the Bible's values and not just its outward accoutrements. The learning must augment a revolutionary life-style that will not perpetuate cheap grace models, but will turn the world upside down. They need to recast the vision, as they plan to be transformation agents in various walks of life. Theological institutions, if they do not shy away from the risks and demands of postmodernism, can play a vital role in developing intelligent and compassionate societies. Postmodern culture is fundamentally hostile to the Gospel, because it is hostile to any god which is not of its own devising. We need to prepare students who know how to think theologically in the face of this kind of intellectual hostility. Cox (2009:179) stresses that we need to make it clear that theology is not a "plug and play" peripheral; doing theology is not a matter of Frequently Asked Questions. Theology answers the most critical questions in life.

Fourth, theological education must clarify, deepen, and expand the students' understanding of who they are as the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, wherever the Lord has placed them. They need to learn to think critically

and rigorously about their Christian heritage. This is because the postmodern mind-set can have a devastating impact on the human personality. If there are no absolutes, if truth is relative, then there can be no stability, no meaning in life. If reality is socially constructed, then moral guidelines are only masks for oppressive power and individual identity is an illusion. It is through the sharing of a person's life as well as their intellectual insights and theological beliefs that life-giving change comes to others. Truth must be embodied as well as articulated, incarnated as well as revealed.

Lastly, postmodernism demands that our theological education become missional. The incarnational theology of Jesus Christ must be the foundation for theological education. At the same time our missional involvement must move from craving for numerical conversions to the transformation of human lives with a strong theological foundation. We have to take a fresh look at the central core of the Christian message. This requires a direct return to the sources of revelation – the Scriptures – especially to the person of Jesus Christ as we see him in the gospels. We must purify our minds of the restrictive Christendom-centered theologies that have blurred the universality of Jesus Christ.

Theological education needs a new reflection and remolding to be transforming and challenging, open to seeing the signs of the times and working of the Spirit of God in our postmodern world that is filled with challenges and promises. Our theological factories need to stop churning out old models of graduates who are not equipped to handle the challenges and pressures of the post-postmodern, pluralistic world, and are considered antique even as they step off the assembling line.

### **IX. Conclusion**

Theological education has a responsibility to both examine the claims and concerns of a postmodern world and protect the integrity of the truth entrusted to it in the Bible. Marrying the two is a task which will require constant checks and balances. Theological seminaries must also embrace the opportunity that postmodernism has presented it and learn from some of its observations. Theological seminaries must take their proper place and provide the answers to the questions of authority and the failure of human reason. This knowledge is only really attainable through God's revelation since the reasoning capacity of the fallen mind of sinful man alone has failed and will continue to fail. However, theological students must be equipped with skills that will help them reason out their faith intelligently in order to engage the postmodern minds.

Theological education of the twenty-first century faces the greatest challenge of the scientific and technological revolutions, especially in the realm of information technology. Theologians should be able to go into the 'whole world' including the postmodern (philosophical and information technology driven) world and present the gospel. In the global world, theology cannot remain a privatized domain of a few scholars, theologians, or theologically trained Christian workers and clergy. The demand is to equip every member of the body of Jesus Christ that they may begin to think theologically and be better communicators of the good news of Christ.

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