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Lutheran schools in a post modern era

Some concepts are easily defined by words. Some are not. Post modernism is one of those slippery concepts which is difficult to define. Even the term used to describe it makes it difficult to define positively, because that which went before it, namely modernism, defines it. The significance of post modernism is not simply that it comes after modernism, but that it rejects modernist thought.

Perhaps it is sensible to first take a quick look at modernism, so that we can understand what post modernism is reacting to.

Modernism holds up ideals from the Enlightenment period of the late 18th century. Philosophers and intellectuals of the Enlightenment placed a deep faith in the power of human reason. The era was marked by leaps in scientific understanding. Humanity has the power to unlock the secrets of the universe. Through the use of science and reason, unending progress in knowledge can be attained. Solutions to the problems of poverty and injustice will be found, and humanity will live on a higher moral plane. Modernity sees the history of humanity in terms of the grand narrative of advancement and solutions to problems.

Post modernity challenges the Enlightenment, modernist view of reality.

Many would identify the first post-modern generation as being Generation X, or the Baby Busters. This is the generation born after 1965 (or 1962 according to some authors). Increasingly, sociologists refer to another post modern generation, known variously as, Generation Y, the Millennial Generation, the Bridgers, the Next Boom, the Echo-Boomers, the New Boom, and even the Vava Boom (because so many mothers of this generation have their children later in life, usually in their thirties). This generation are those young people born in the later part of the '70s – which includes students in Lutheran Schools.

Clearly, modernism has not delivered its promises. The history of human beings since the Enlightenment is not a story of perpetual advancement. Very real risks associated with environmental degradation and the existence of technology which can destroy the earth casts a pall over the positive up-beat myth of the Enlightenment. We have not solved the problems of poverty and injustice. We are numbed to stories of serious famine and other natural disasters. Generation X is the first generation in living memory which does not expect that its standard of living will be better or at least equivalent to their parents. The post modern generations feel a deep sense of betrayal.

Since modernism has failed to save the world through the rational Enlightenment, post modernism also rejects the notion that life and the decisions we make must be underpinned rationally, logically and scientifically. There is a willingness to consider that there is something more to life than rational modernist thinking. Spiritual realities are a possibility, and can be opened up and explored. New Science in the area of cosmology has opened up the possibility of a greater power. Science ceases to become the domain of purely rational thought.

The rejection of rationalism also means that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Morality and spirituality are subjective. Post modernism freely expresses the thought that what is right for you may not be right for others. To insist on absolute truth in spiritual or moral matters is to arrogantly force your truth onto others.

The use of story is important in communicating truth in the post modern world, because it stresses the importance of experience rather than relying on rational thought alone.

Modernism's grand narrative – the myth of perpetual advancement by human beings – is deeply mistrusted in the post modern world. Grand narratives belong to those philosophies and religions which offer universal solutions to human problems. These movements are linked with stories of war, oppression and the abuse of power. Furthermore, the grand narrative tends to express one "truth" and ignore other people's "truths". To sum up, modernism places its faith in objective, absolute and universal truth which can be attained by human reason for the good of humanity. The grand narrative of perpetual advancement is valued.

In contrast, post modernism questions the concept of objective truth, and instead puts forward subjective truth. Human intuition and feelings are as important as reason. The grand narrative is mistrusted, but stories are valued as vehicles for expressing truth.

While Gen X and Gen Y are post-modern generations, there are significant differences between them. Generation X has been widely characterised as a pessimistic, cynical generation with a deep sense of betrayal by previous generations. The poet of the generation is Kurt Cobain, whose songs and very life reflects much of the pain of this generation. They see their Baby Boomer generation parents as a driven generation, who value work and its rewards above relationships. Xers have a deep longing for community, which affects the way they think about work, friends, the church, and society in general. Spiritually, Generation X has been intrigued and even shaped by the rise of New Age spirituality. Its emphasis on subjective spiritual truth, and discovering your own spirituality is appealing to many of this generation.

In many ways, Generation Y is a paradoxical generation, shaped by postmodernism, as well as educational, economic and technological trends and forces. Generation Y is the digital generation. The influence of the Internet and IT in general has profoundly changed the way Gen Y learns and sees the world. They are a street wise, media savvy and technologically literate generation. Yet they display more conservative attitudes than the Xers. They are generally more confident and optimistic about themselves and their future than Gen X, but paradoxically, are pessimistic about the future generally. Differences in people's religion, sexuality and lifestyle are accepted, and yet they have a strong sense of personal values. They tend to be reticent to "join" things, but are willing to help out. Short term, sacrificial, fun activities are appealing. The experience of team and community are deeply valued. Gen Yers look for honesty in people, institutions and relationships. They experience busy, stressful schedules. Mental health is the fastest growing health issue of this generation. Competition is high in school and work life. Desire to do well at school to earn good money. Yet at the same time, value time with friends, to explore interests, and for socialising.

The spirituality of Gen Y is marked by diversity. Naturally, no one "truth" is absolute. Many young people are fascinated with nature based pagan religion. Yet, paradoxically, there seems to be a greater acceptance of organised religion. This generation is less rational, and therefore is able to embrace mystery more easily. This is the generation which inhabits our classrooms, and is on the receiving end of our institutional practices.

What are the issues confronting Lutheran schools in relation to Generation Y? Obviously, the reality of Generation Y growing up in a digital world means that schools need to be responsive to IT. Not only do we need to be able to use these tools to guide students in how to process information, but we also need to understand that Generation Y uses this technology for much more than information.

There are particular challenges to teaching the Christian faith inherent in the Gen Y classroom. Ethical and moral teaching based on the notion of objective truth is generally rejected by Gen Y, and instead morality is a range of options from which I can chose what is right for me. Gen Y's tendency to mistrust the grand narrative is a further issue. The Bible presents a grand narrative, namely the liberation and redemption of the whole world through the person and work of Jesus Christ. When the biblical narrative and the story of the Christian church are associated with conflict and power, Gen Y reacts negatively. Obviously, Christian ethics, and the biblical narrative should be addressed, but in a way which is sensitive to the audience. I can't offer you ways to deal with these issues, but I have found that honesty and being willing to discuss issues in a non-threatening way is more fruitful than mounting a rational defence. At the same time, we do our students no favours by dumbing down Christian teaching, or avoiding conflict.

Worship in the School provides both challenges and opportunities when reflecting on the generation of young people in our schools. Postmodernism put the possibility of exploring spirituality on the agenda. Lutheran schools are well placed to provide a place where our students can experience and enact the Christian faith in worship. When reflecting on school worship, it is important to remember that Gen Y is able to embrace mystery. Providing space in worship for reflection, meditation and meaningful ritual acts can be helpful. It is interesting that Taize worship attracts a significant number of Gen X and Y, partly because it is able to express the mystery of God.

I can't remember the last time I spoke to a group of young people in a worship setting without telling stories. A good story need not be killed with explanation – in a sense it will be able to explain itself. Putting forth a well argued, rational argument will not capture the imagination of Gen Y, and will confirm that Christianity has nothing to do with my life. Stories have the ability to appeal to post-modern, post-rationalist GenY

because they can communicate biblical truth by connecting the listener to the message rather than by appealing to the listener through a rational process.

Messages are sent to Gen Y by the school as an institution, too. Gen Y seeks honesty in the institutions that they deal with, and are very sensitive to hypocrisy in institutions. Lutheran schools as institutions need to be clear about what they stand for, and maintain practice consistent with their stated ethos.

I do not write this article as an expert on postmodernism. I am just a school pastor interested in understanding the changing world of young people. I am on a journey. I want to encourage you on your own journey to understand the world of our students, so that you may grow in being the presence of Christ in their world.

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