

Christian Witness in a Prefuturist Context

By Michael Jobling

Over the centuries a swing of the pendulum effect has taken place in Western culture, one major philosophical and cultural trend replacing another in turn. Each successive movement (classical, baroque, romantic, modern, postmodern) has been both a reaction against and a development from the one that preceded it. These successive cultural movements have seemed to emphasise alternate sides of the brain, swinging between “right brain” movements, which emphasise emotion, freedom and abandon and “left brain” movements, which emphasise logic, structure and control.

Left brain – order, logic, reason, norms, mind, control,	Century	Right brain – freedom, choice, emotion, spirit, Abandonment to outside forces,
	12th–14th	Medieval
Renaissance	15th–16th	
	17th	Baroque
Classical	18th	
	19th	Romantic
Modern	Late 19th–early 20th	
	Late 20th–present	Postmodern

The twentieth century saw first the heyday of Modernism and then Postmodernism, the defining influence at the end of the century. When will a new movement emerge – and what will it be? What comes next? The term “prefuturism” was coined during the 1990s, initially as a joke (“sometimes I can’t tell where Postmodernism ends and Prefuturism begins”), but an Internet search reveals that some people are now using it more seriously. Other cultural gurus have talked about “post-postmodernism”.

What post-postmodernism, or prefuturism, may consist of is still taking shape. Postmodernism will continue to be an influence for many years to come. But seeds of change are sprouting – and the more Christians can keep up to date with the changes, or even ahead of them, the more effective will be our dialogue with tomorrow’s people about the Good News. The purpose of this article is to speculate about the trends in order to stimulate thought and help us to keep ahead of the game.

Return to Reason

If the pattern of the last five centuries continues, we could expect an eventual swing away from the right brain aspects of Postmodernism and a return to the more logical and structured left brain approach which was a feature of scientific modernism and the classical enlightenment. Another possibility, perhaps more likely, is that we shall see more of a synthesis. Rather than a complete swing of the pendulum, we may see the development of a more balanced approach which integrates the two sides of the brain in a continuing trend that avoids the constant swings. The balance of old and new technologies will be important in defining this. The twentieth century was the era of music, television and cinema. Stories flourished and people thought text was boring. The

last decade has seen the rise of more text-based, logical media associated with the computer, the internet and text-messaging. In years to come the visual and the verbal, imagination and technology will be increasingly intertwined. We shall be able to reason with people again – but they will still enjoy videos.

Rediscovering Togetherness

The turn of the century brought a succession of defining events that produced a major shift on the cultural landscape which is likely to be formative in the future. These include

1. The collapse of European communism
2. The death of Princess Diana
3. The September 11th atrocity.
4. The fall of Saddam Hussain
5. Live 8
6. Other terrorist atrocities.
7. The growing awareness of global warning.

Each of these events contributed to bring people into sharp awareness of their connectedness as human beings – their shared experience and belonging together.

Postmodernism was essentially about individual choice – individuals breaking free from the constraints of faith, family, community and culture and making their own choices, becoming consumers rather than citizens. Diana's marriage to Prince Charles challenged the old order. She raised the hope that anyone could be royal. Diana's achievement inspired us to reach out and get what the world had to offer for ourselves. During the '80s and '90s, Britain was a collection of individual consumers. Our sense of national connectedness was increasingly eroded. But Diana's tragic death in 1998 drew the population of Britain, indeed, much of the western world, into an experience of shared emotion. When Diana died, we rediscovered togetherness.

Technological developments are also contributing to this togetherness. Past generations felt an identity with tribes and nations. These old tribal loyalties were increasingly eroded by the mobility made possible by modern means of travel and the ubiquitous presence of radio and television. However, a new kind of togetherness is developing as a result of the internet, email and mobile phone technologies. Using these technologies the young people in the church I belong to are in almost continuous contact with one another as a group throughout their waking hours. We are increasingly seeing this new togetherness demonstrated in collective responses to major issues (the fuel crisis, the Countryside Alliance, Live 8). The individualism of the 20th century is being eroded as people increasingly think and act as part of a network.

Future Focus

The beginning of both a new century and a new millennium has to be a defining moment, bringing a major change of perspective. Chiliastic paranoia tends to mark the end of centuries and millennia but their beginning tends to be marked by utopian dreaming. Our horizon is far in the future now and the sense of ending has been replaced by a sense of beginning. Rather than fearing the end of what became people

will more and more begin to look for the start of what is to come. For Christians, there is a danger that, with the decade of evangelism and the millennium celebrations behind us, we might experience a sense of anticlimax and a falling off in our enthusiasm. But the world around us is asking questions about its future that offer us exciting opportunities to share our Good News. This is a time to remind ourselves that the message of Jesus was not “the end is nigh” but “the Kingdom is coming”. Christianity is itself a start of century movement of Utopian dreaming (though admittedly defining its own calendar).

Collective Choices

In the postmodern era we had the luxury of individual choice. In the era that is beginning our choices will increasingly need to be taken together by mankind, or at least by the western world as a whole. The Northern Ireland Peace process and the Iraq war and its aftermath have demonstrated that, in today's world, no nation can act alone and all nations must consider the whole of mankind in the decisions they make. They have no alternative. We are beginning to find that our individualist consumer economy has had effects on the world's ecology with devastating collective implications which can only be remedied by co-operative solutions – recycling and restricting the emission of toxic gases.

Where Do We Want to Go?

The question “where do we go from here?” is defined by the question “where do we ultimately want to go?” This is a pressing question which mankind can only answer together. We do not yet know the answer but we need to find one and we cannot find it alone as individuals for ourselves, we must decide together and the collective choice of mankind will define our future – or lack of it.

Previous movements have sought to define man according to his origin. A good example is the discussion of origins which took place in the Darwinian controversies of the late 19th century which were essentially a clash between the medieval/romantic/revivalist approach and the classical/modern/scientific approach. Each nation and each religion defines itself by its history.

Medieval Supernaturalism defined the origin of man in terms of Biblical stories retold in mystery plays. The renaissance redefined man in terms of Greek and Roman mythology. Classicism returned to a semi-Biblical foundation in its underlying Deist theological basis – the universe owing its existence to the original clockmaker creator. The Romantic movement defined mankind in reference to a fairy-tale *Urzeit*, a make-believe once-upon-a-time past. Modernism defined man in terms of his descent from the apes (or his ascent from the primeval slime).

Questions About the Future

But the time has come for us to look for our identity as human beings, not in the past, but in the future. What is most important is not where we have come from, but where we are going; not what we have been but what we are going to become.

In the age we are entering the most vital questions are not about the past but about the future. This is true in economics and in politics, with regard to the environment, in medicine, genetics, and in many other ways too. I believe that, as the 21st century really

gets going, we shall see interest in the past declining and interest in the future growing. After all, the future can be shaped, while the past is unchangeable. Why waste time on what you cannot change? There are lessons to be learned from the past, but the future is what is important.

Although to some degree we can shape the future together, there is also a sense in which it calls us on and shapes us. What we are is an expression of our ideals – what we want to be. Each step forward (in science, for example) opens up new possibilities for research and development. Human cloning, face transplants, developments in nuclear weaponry or telecommunications face us with choices which are in fact no choices because even if we decide not to move forward we cannot stop others from doing so.

Metanarrative Dreams

The future will be a reaction from postmodernism but it will also carry aspects of postmodernism with it. The new future focus will bring with it the need to dream new dreams. The future cannot be analysed and studied like the past. Ultimately it can only be dreamed of. People are going to need dreams to choose between – future orientated metanarratives which in a sense are not metanarratives but options for a collective choice that shapes our future being.

A great danger will arise from people who do not have the courage to face the collective choices mankind has to make. An ever present danger will arise from those who want to run back into the security of old, tribal, past-focused loyalties and unload the awesome responsibility onto patriarchal, repressive leaders. Freedom is too precious for us to allow it to be destroyed in this way. And yet there is a need to correct the unbalanced individualism of postmodernism because choices for the future in a scientific world can only be made together.

To sum up, we can make some contrasts and comparisons between Postmodernism and the emerging Prefuturist outlook.

Postmodernism	Prefuturism
Individualistic	Collective
Freedom	Not repressive but allows freedom of choice limited by necessity for survival
Individual Choice	Choosing together
No metanarratives	New, teleological metanarratives
Reacting to modernist, romantic and classical pasts	Responding to the call of the future, not the influence of the past Learning from the past but not defined by it
Pragmatic	Mixture of Idealism and pragmatism

Implications for Religion

The three major monotheistic religions have always had a future focus, Christianity more so than Judaism and Islam. Eastern religions possibly have less to offer in a prefuturist world because their worldview with its ideas of reincarnation and the wheel of life is more geared to an eternal present than a sense of progression. However, Eastern religion does provide us with some valuable correctives:

- They remind us that that the present is to be seized and used because it is in fact, all we have.
- They give us a sense of realism about the future – a reminder that, left to himself, mankind is more likely to go round in circles than to make progress.

God as our Goal

Christians have traditionally viewed God as our origin. But there is also much in scripture about him being our goal – he is Alpha and Omega, author and finisher. We can view him not only as our Creator and Origin but as what we may become. “We shall be like Him (Jesus)” is an essential part of the Christian hope. If we are going to be like him whether he exists now or not is irrelevant because he exists already in embryo in us. Suppose God only exists because we bring him into being by our faith? Is the thought of him not also bringing him into being in us? And when that process is complete, will we then be able to tell whether he created us or we created him, since God is self-creating? He is our Omega as well as our Alpha. To see him as what we are to become is not to deny him because if we become him, he will be. Faith was marginalised in modernism and postmodernism. Now it has a new importance in giving us “a future and a hope”. If there is a God, what are his future plans? If God does not exist, what kind of God are we going to be? What kind of world are we going to create?

Central to Christian faith is the belief that God has created us for a purpose. Christian thought is full of powerful images of the future – the New Jerusalem, the City of God, the new people created from the breaking down of the old racial divisions, neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male nor female. “Leaving behind what is past,” says Paul, “I strive for the goal of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus”. Creation, he says is groaning like a mother in childbirth as she gives birth to the sons of God.

Revisiting Eschatology

Eschatology has become the poor relation of the Christian disciplines in an academic and popular reaction to the fanciful and overdetailed Adventist approaches that grew in the 19th century. But it is time for us to grasp the eschatological nettle afresh and to see what scripture has to say to a future-focused society.

Part of the picture for Christians has to be the judgement to come. Mankind will pay for the choices it makes. That’s a fact. Whatever we sow we reap. We are already reaping the whirlwind sown by the accumulation of our individual postmodern consumer choices. The Christian message is that God also holds us responsible for the choices we make and that there is a day of reckoning to come.

Engaging with a Prefuturist Culture

In summary, what should be a Christian response to a prefuturist culture?

It is vital that Christians take a lead in identifying the important issues facing society, the choices to be made and the implications of those choices. In this we will be fulfilling a role similar to that of the Old Testament prophets.

We can engage others in dreaming dreams of the future. In doing so we can be the salt and light in society that Jesus commissioned us to be.

We can offer biblical dreams for the future, related to the kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem, the people of God – even the hope of becoming like Jesus. In doing so we may find ourselves, knowingly or unknowingly, speaking into our world the creative, prophetic word of God that brings life into existence out of nothing and shapes order out of chaos.

We can warn of the Biblical future and its probabilities in relation to our individual and corporate pasts – the judgement to come and the eternal realities of a Heaven to be gained and a Hell to be shunned.

Fear and Failure

Finally, Christianity, more than any other faith, has much to say about fear and failure. The eschatological vision of the end times in Scripture sees men's hearts failing them for fear. That vision is now a daily reality. People around us live in fear related to the results of past choices and the fear of making the wrong choices in the present. The Christian good news is that God can deal with our past choices, can guide us in today's choices and will be there to help us when we have made wrong choices.

Toppling the Statues

The cross of Jesus marks an eternal new beginning, freedom from the claims the past makes on us. Dreaming the future makes us aware of our implication in the sins of our ancestors. Our dreams of the world as it could be make us reject and condemn those who have made it what it is, feeling guilt and shame that we are among them. Toppling statues doesn't remove the guilt. Only Jesus can do that. "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more" is Jesus' response of grace to the adulteress, to each of us and to all humankind at the start of a new millennium.

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