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IS POSTMODERN RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE POSSIBLE?

Gary L. Comstock

Not long ago, interreligious conversations were regulated by the ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty. We are suspicious of these noble sounding ideals today. In a world of liberation theology, feminist criticism, and the hermeneutics of suspicion, can there be any new, "postmodern," rules to govern our religious dialogues? Not able to consult any general theory, or "metanarrative," in order to provide the answer, I simply tell the story of the only postmodern Catholic I have ever known. On the basis of that experience, I argue that something like the old rules will have to accompany us into the new age.

Christians engaged in dialogue with members of other religions are justifiably interested in postmodernism.¹ Whereas "modern" Christians from Kant to Kung assume Christian claims should be supported by evidence, "postmodern" thinkers believe we ought to move far beyond this position. Religious beliefs on the new view would not be like scientific beliefs, or even like beliefs at all. We would be wrong to think of them as propositions corresponding (or not corresponding) to reality. Rather, we would see religious "beliefs" in more playful ways, perhaps as linguistic Rook cards randomly shuffled and unpredictably played. For postmodernists, religious language is to be assessed more by aesthetic than logical criteria, more by the canons of good punning than good syllogisming.

There is a crazy kind of promise in this strange idea. If postmodernism can defuse our dogmatic temperaments and lead to an authentic reinterpretation of Christianity such that we would all feel less compelled to construct barriers between our tradition and theirs, or if it can merely help us to understand better what it means to participate in dialogue with others, then postmodernism may well be worth much of the current hype.

Before we agree to walk down the aisle, however, it will pay us to consider the idea carefully. Suppose we grant that the notion "postmodern Christianity" is neither a contradiction in terms nor a meaningless phrase. Suppose we grant that postmodern Christians would actually want to continue to engage in conversation with members of other traditions about matters of genuine religious concern. We can still ask whether that conversation would be intelligible. The question interests me because I am a Christian committed to interreligious conversation but am dissatisfied with the approach of modern liberal theology. I would like someone or



something to supply me with a new understanding of what I'm doing, and to give some guidance—perhaps some new rules—for how to go about it. Postmodernism promises to fit this bill. But can it? What would postmodern religious dialogue look like? Would there be an acceptable—and an unacceptable—range of behaviors? Could there be some things we would be told not to do, and some we would be told we ought to do?

Things used to be so clear. In the old days, Jews could look to the biblical prophets for instruction about how to behave in conversation: “Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates the judgments that are right and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, says the Lord” (Zechariah 8: 16-17). If the prophetic books weren't good enough for them, Christians could hear the message reiterated in Paul's instructions to the Christians at Ephesus: “Put away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor . . . Let no evil talk come out of your mouth, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion” (Ephesians 4: 25,29). Premodern Jews and Christians were instructed to seek the truth and avoid falsehoods, to do justice and avoid immorality, to work for wholeness and avoid divisiveness. Truth, goodness, beauty.

The rules were only slightly less clear for modern thinkers. Even as they shunned the authority of the biblical narratives and turned away from the particular traditions that continued to try to live by the texts, modernists discovered their own metanarratives which, ironically, offered them much the same rules. Whether you think of Kant, John Rawls or Jurgen Habermas, the rules for conversation are the same: say things that are accurate, that do not unduly coerce others, and that lead ultimately toward consensus. Truth, goodness, beauty.²

Postmodernists or not, many Christians today have trouble both with the biblical injunctions and with the rules supplied by modern theology. We are uncomfortable with the idea, whether it is loosely derived from the Bible or more strictly taken from Reason, that the same universal principles undergird every particular conversation. We are immediately skeptical about the claim that from these principals we can derive, ahead of time, three ethical rules about how everyone in every dialogical situation ought to behave. Our skepticism is (pardon the expression) well-founded; we have seen too many guided conversations, too many interreligious dialogues decided in advance by the patriarchal or antisemitic or triumphal pre-suppositions of one of the parties. Consider each of the three rules purportedly grounded in God's word, or transcendental Kantianism, or pragmatism.

Truth. For prepostmodernists there was such a thing as right and wrong interpretations of the biblical text, actual historical facts to which texts did or did not correspond, and true and false propositions about the relationship between the story and reality. As a consequence, we thought we were justified in becoming upset with someone we suspected of lying, intentionally trying to obscure “the facts,” unduly

disrupting the conversation, or doing anything that seemed contrary to the spirit of truth-telling. Now, thanks to the work of deconstructors, philosophers of history, narrativists and critics of ideology, we are much more circumspect. Are there really any facts of the matter when it comes to interpreting texts? Even if there are, is it not clear that the rhetorical form we adopt in order to relate those facts coerces them into a message suited to our own interests? For postmodern Catholics and Jews, anyone claiming to be “seeking the truth” needs to be carefully scrutinized. What is he *really* after? What does he really want? Who is he really trying to protect?

Goodness. We used to think that there were things called objective moral truths. In our dialogues we would not just be courteous; we tried to be responsible and fair in our interpretations of what the other was saying. We would not abide anyone who failed to respect the intentions of another. It was simply not permissible to treat anyone in the circle as anything less than an autonomous end-in-himself. But now we see that appeals to crosscultural moral norms are often just another way of controlling access to the circle. Such appeals are very effective in keeping women and Africans out of the conversation. We just tell them they must first master the rules generations of white westerners have called “rational.” But is there really such a thing as “the good” independent of any particular tribal narratives about it? Even if there is, is it not clear that those who think they know what it is simply use this knowledge to protect their hegemony over the conversation? For postmodern Presbyterians, Muslims and Conservative Jews, anyone claiming to be “doing good” needs a second look. What is the status of his remark? Why would he want to say that? Whose good is furthered by such a claim?

Beauty. In the old days we believed our efforts at conversation should begin with introductions, work slowly into the subtly submerged tensions between us, eventually get around to stating our disagreements, and then build toward a resolution in which we could agree on some matters, agree to disagree about others. In this way we could forge a consensus, even a community. It was an aesthetic ideal; an artistic whole of different voices blended together. We wanted people to air their differences, but we would not permit disruptions for disruption’s sake. Radical intrusions would have to serve, somehow, the ends of the group, the good of the whole. If we could not see how to orchestrate seemingly random sounds into the melody pursued by the rest, then we had no recourse but, peaceably and delicately as possible, to silence them. In the era of feminist and post-Holocaust theology, we are rightfully skeptical about the notion of peaceful silencing. And in the era of Charlie Parker and the Paul Winter consort, we are rightfully suspicious of the desire to guard too rigidly against unplanned, “stray” sounds. We worry about efforts to plan and build one world, one conversation of mankind, one story of humanity. Which tribe came up with this particular idea of aesthetic wholeness anyway? Why is it that those who benefit most from monopoly capitalism and bureaucratic socialism like the image so much? Why

do the powerless and the marginal seem to have so little use for it?

For postmodernists the answers are easy. The three rules—truth, goodness, and beauty—cannot be trusted to provide the basement for the house of inter-religious conversation. The blueprints for *that* house were not only finished long ago by the church's draftsmen, but it was built, occupied, and began needing repairs centuries ago. To gain entrance to that conversation you have to play by house rules. But the rules have been used too long and too often to keep people out. Many devout Christians want a new place to talk. Will postmodernism help us design and run it? If it turns out that there is such a thing as an authentically religious postmodern Orthodox Jew running around, and she finds an authentically religious postmodern evangelical Christian who wants to talk about God, where will they meet to get in out of the rain? Will they have to take their shoes off? Will they have to refrain from smoking?

Since I do not know the answer to these questions, and since (as a self-respecting postmodernist) I refuse to consult any metanarrative to supply the answers, I have only one option open. And that is to tell a little, localized, story.

Postmodernists may bristle at the claim, but what follows is a true story. Happily, it may also serve the purpose of edification. I once had a colleague I will never forget; I'll call him Doug. Doug was the only true postmodern Catholic I have ever met, and he is the only postmodern person with whom I ever carried on a running religious dialogue. Running dialogue is exactly what it was. Doug was fond of talking about any and every old thing whatsoever, and it was rare to bring up a subject he was incapable of becoming interested in. (The one counterexample that comes to mind is college basketball. He had no use for what is now ambitiously called "the philosophy of sport.") Doug was well-liked by almost all of his colleagues in the philosophy department, and not only because he was so amiable. When someone threw him a curve he was wont to respond "Oh! You wanna talk about proper basicity? Yeah, we can talk about that. We can talk about that if you want to." And then he would proceed to explain to you, in clearer terms than you had heard before, just what the subject was that you thought you had introduced. He was a remarkable fellow.

One day Doug gave the department a paper in which he explained his fondness for the late Wittgenstein. His postmodern temperament, it became clear, was not simply an intellectual preference; he was constitutionally skeptical about language. All of us are engaged in many diverse forms of life and the linguistic conventions that attend them. What distinguished my friend was that he not only espoused a particular metaphilosophical view; he tried to live it out. He had no native trust in the ability of language to hook up with the world, and he treated his colleagues, his students, and his body in ways consistent with his skepticism. This is not to say that he mistreated others, but he did disdain the uninteresting, the everyday, anything that lacked vigor. A Superman in outlook and tempera-

ment, he made few attempts to hide his passion for the new and frenetic.

Doug used to come into my office from time to time and ask, in his unmistakable falsetto voice, "So, have you found any good books lately on sightings of the Queen?" The first time he asked, I had no idea what he was talking about, or who the Queen was. But I soon found out. It was the holy Mother, the Virgin Mary, the feminine image of the deity itself. Doug was obsessed with her; he would go on for hours about sixteenth century miracles in which a Portuguese cloister of devout nuns observed a woman in white robes baptizing infants and curing boils. He knew of eighteenth century apparitions of the blessed Virgin, in which her Highness sang to the dying and nursed the newborn. Doug would tell stories, an unending series of stories, whose main character was the mother of God in her healing, therapeutic, and loving ministrations.

Given his philosophical views, Doug's Catholicism struck me as odd. I knew that he attended mass regularly, but I also knew he followed Wittgenstein more rigorously than the Pope or Jesus. So once, as a wintry Iowa afternoon turned into evening in my study, I asked him about that. "You seem so fascinated by all this stuff about the Queen," I said, "but you don't really believe it, do you?"

"Believe it?" he replied. "Are you kidding?"

"But Doug," I pressed him. "Real Catholics don't get interested in this mysterious stuff *because* it's so weird. They get interested in it because they have strange experiences with the divine and subsequently need to make some sense out of them. You've got it all backwards. So why does it continue to intrigue you?"

When Doug didn't particularly like the turn a conversation had taken, he would occasionally stop talking altogether and—as he put it—"just blow farts." Suddenly remembering this argumentative technique, I regretted having asked this last question as soon as I'd uttered it. To my relief, however, he did not put a malodorous end to this particular dialogue. He went on, in his own cryptic way.

"Wittgenstein said you can't *talk* about God. But he didn't say you couldn't whistle it." Only then did he walk out, humming some tune from one of the dozens of Italian operas he had committed to memory.

There is a final picture of Doug I want to leave with you. I once asked him how one could derive any sort of ethical constraints from his metaphilosophy. This time he just laughed, made some disparaging remark about the tightness of the Protestant sphincter muscle, and left in good humor. But, in the paper he wrote before he died, he directly addressed the question. Here are his views on ethics, religion, and Catholicity:

If you've read [the preceding paper] you perhaps understand why it is precisely the ultra-rational types such as L.W. [Wittgenstein], myself, Augustine, Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Kenny, Alexius Von Meinong, and Elizabeth Anscombe who are so easily rounded up and taken in by the Catholics. Once you *see through* this obligation nonsense [and see

that Kantian claims about our moral duties are just one way of controlling people, then] you might become justifiably frightened by the rapidly expanding possibilities of what you *might do* [Doug's emphasis]. And don't think, Kantians, that the fear here means that we really do want to be good in your sense. Surely, if "decadent" means anything, it means "doesn't want to be good in your sense of 'good.'" No, the fear just means that we fear we'll get into trouble if we can't persuade ourselves to resist acting out certain possibilities.

None of us ever suspected how seriously Doug meant this paragraph. What "rapidly expanding possibilities" would "justifiably frighten" us? For Doug, it meant, in part, suicide, which he committed within a month after reading his paper. But what about his postmodernist Catholicism? Shouldn't that have given him some reason *to go on*, as Master Ludwig (as Doug called him) said? The next paragraph in Doug's paper gives the answer.

The trick to staying out of trouble is to get a "stay-out-of-trouble weight" that is *so heavy* you can't get it off and so you stay-out-of-trouble. And believe me kids; Catholicity is *so heavy*—unlike the superficially rationalized, "moral obligation" systems of ethics, you can see through it (Catholicity) and yet still believe it.

Really? I wanted to ask him. Really? You can see through your religion *and* still believe it? But he went on to qualify his remark:

Well, "believe it" in the sense that you behave in a way that keeps-you-out-of-trouble, or "believe it" in the sense that in case you don't behave safely, then "believing it" adds a certain spice to whatever trouble you do get in. No *rationalized* ethical propositions can add spice to sin in the way that a mystery religion in the old sense can. I think this is what Wittgenstein meant in the *Tractatus* when he said that there are no propositions of ethics because propositions can express nothing that is higher. The *highness* is, of course, *Her Highness*. You know—"She-who-takes-the-weight-away." All of this is perhaps better expressed in images than in words. Your plane for Chartres Cathedral is boarding at gate number one

Consider the image. Postmodern religion is religion that you "see through," that you don't *really* believe. Why stick with it? Because if you don't, you might float off into something really serious, become light, like a leaf, blow away. Postmodern religion is a tool you use to weight yourself down. But notice how unbelievable the idea is. How could you put a weight on top of yourself that would be heavy enough to hold you down yet light enough not to crush you? The image is as rhetorically persuasive as the one about pulling yourself up by

your own bootstraps. But neither one is, *in fact*, possible. If religion is your only weight, but it is a weight that you can literally see through, how can it possibly be heavy enough to keep you down? What happened to my friend seems to prove the point. Doug's "stay out of trouble weight"—his postmodern Catholicism—did not prove heavy enough to keep him out of trouble.

Above all else, my friend prized the continuation of conversation, much in the same way as Richard Rorty says he does. But, as Doug's own neuroses showed him and us, "continuing the conversation" can hardly serve as a rule to motivate, much less justify or regulate, continued dialogue. Why keep talking just to keep talking?

I admired Doug; unlike some deconstructors and postmodernists, he actually tried to live out his beliefs. And, while it would be unjustified to rest any final judgments about postmodernism in general on this one case, there do seem to be some lessons about the possibility of postmodern religious dialogue in Doug's story. One is that if we really want to "keep the conversation going" then we will have to try to respect the intentions of our partners. Otherwise our partners may not put up with our own idiosyncratic habits. Another is that we will have to try to say things we more or less believe to be true. Otherwise our partners may not know which of our statements to affirm or challenge. Another is that we will have to strive for consensus at appropriate moments. Otherwise our partners may not see any purpose in continuing the dialogue at all.

Our skepticism about the biblical and modern rules of conversation teaches us that we must open ourselves to an unprecedented amount of unexpected, "irregular" contributions. Disruptions may be necessary to insure that no group seizes control.³ But, not unironically, my experience with Doug leads me to think that something like the old rules are going to accompany us a ways further. Without some rough rules—perhaps even metanarratives—like the true, the good and the beautiful, I do not see what reason we would have to keep talking.

There is a weight that must be borne when believers try to speak seriously about religion. It is a real burden: one not artificially imposed, but actually inherited from the history of relations between our traditions. I can see that wordplay and punning might be just what we need to overcome the pointless polemics of which Christians and Muslims, for example, have been guilty. But my sense is that truth, goodness and consensus are going to reemerge as the ideals that give us the rules by which we all want our conversations bound. For, lacking any such guidelines, what is there to prevent me from turning my back on the burdens, shuffling off to my study, and blowing gas and whistling, as afternoon turns into night?⁴

NOTES

1. "Postmodernism" is notoriously difficult to define. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), Jean-Francois Lyotard explains the term by opposing it to modernism. Modernism is the belief that science is in conflict with stories, and that science is the sole road to truth. Scientific knowledge, moreover, must try to legitimate itself; it does so by reference to various "metanarratives." Such metanarratives might come in various versions: in epistemology, in the story that knowledge rests on a few unquestionable beliefs (Descartes), in ethics, in the story that morality rests on a few rational principles (Kant, Donagan), in science, in the story that true discoveries result from adherence to a single objective method. By "modern," Lyotard means "any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this (philosophical) kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (p. xxiii).

Postmodernism doubts the validity of any of these grand legitimizing stories. An "incredulity toward metanarratives," it believes there are stories, but they are incommensurable, heterogeneous, indeterminate: "dispersed" (p. xxiv). This skeptical attitude can be found in the philosophy of religion of American "a/theologians" Mark Taylor, Carl Raschke and Thomas Altizer (see, for example, Taylor's *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology*, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1984), in the philosophical writings of Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida, in the architectural ideas of Michael Graves and Stanley Tigerman, the subversive narratives of Donald Barthelme and John Barth, and the disturbing films of David Lynch.

2. The best example of a modernist ethic might be Karl-Otto Apel's attempt to establish moral norms on a "transcendental-pragmatic" basis. According to Apel, one cannot consistently argue against the view that there are ethical foundations: "For, as long as he *argues*—for whatever position—so long must he presuppose the ethics of the ideal communication-community which is always anticipated—more or less counterfactually—by the speech-acts of meaningful arguing." What are the rules of Apel's transcendental-pragmatic conversational community? They are the norms of the ideal speech-situation: "reciprocal acknowledgement of persons as equal partners and [tailed in this,] the norm of equal rights and duties in using argumentative speech-acts for proposing, defending, explicating and possibly questioning validity-claims, as e.g., truth-claims and (ethical) rightness-claims." "The Common Presuppositions of Hermeneutics and Ethics: Types of Rationality beyond Science and Technology," in *Research in Phenomenology* 9 (1979): 51. This, in my language, is truth, goodness and wholeness.

3. As I have seized control of this conversation. If this seizure was not apparent before, it is in these concluding paragraphs. I wish that it had not taken a self-confessed "deconstructor" to point this out, but Gary Percesepe has effectively held my feet to the fire. What is needed is another voice (or two) to contest, unravel, and reweave my interpretation of Doug's story. The other Gary suggests some tough questions for this one. Who says that Doug's philosophy worked against him? Couldn't it actually have been on his side, fighting *against* other forces assailing Doug, perhaps from his love life, or his diet, or his brain cells? Who knows what really went on in there? How do we know that what Doug thought had any connection at all with what he did? And even if this Gary's right that Doug's philosophy was tied to his final gesture, by what authority do I come to deliver the message that Doug's views were nihilistic? Grant Gary C. that one and Gary P. has another; supposing Doug's philosophy was suicidal and nihilistic, what has that to do with the affirmative, playful, punning spirits of many postmodernists?

Self-reflexive and self-questioning discourse (such as I have just employed) may be a rhetorical device to anticipate and deflect criticism. Nonetheless, I cannot help but try to defend myself by disclaiming responsibility for one of my subtexts. It appears to this reader that the author of the article thinks that there is a higher-order discourse, to which Gary C. has access and which can legitimize his claims about truth, beauty, and goodness in conversation. To the extent that the author thinks this, he should be uneasy. I cannot simply disown it; I wrote the article. But, in my final authorial and authoritative gesture, I wish to signal my discomfort. I do not mean to suggest that there is an absolute set of fundamental principles for conversation, timeless and universal. I do mean to suggest that, in the absence of any such *a priori* principles, we have to work that much harder to find new ways—peaceful, energetic, and courageous ways—to go on, together.

4. I wish to thank Susan Shapiro, Jim Buchanan, Françoise Dagenais, David Roochnik, Keith Pheby, Gary Percesepe, and William Alston for helpful criticisms of this paper. I originally read the paper in slightly different form to the “Rhetoric and Religious Discourse” section of the American Academy of Religion in December 1986, the Philosophy Department of St. Olaf College in February 1987, and the Wheaton College Summer Philosophy Seminar in June, 1987.