



35. What on earth is Post-Modernism?

I was asked to explain this at the APCM. Post-Modernism is a term used loosely to describe certain loosely-connected tendencies in art, architecture, philosophy and political thinking, as well as intellectual and religious life, which are current at the present time.

What links them together is a rejection of all 'systems', whether of style or ideology. Thus in architecture, there were formerly recognised architectural styles - the normal mediaeval way of building was superseded by the rediscovery of Greek and Roman models, leading in this country to the Georgian and Regency styles. Later came the Victorian 'Gothic Revival' (of which St Mary's is an example).

Architectural revivalism was totally rejected by the 'Modern' architects of the 1930s and after with their self-consciously 'functional' buildings. 'Modernism' has now been repudiated by 'post-modern' architects, who feel free to design buildings that are striking to look at, even if they incorporate features that a strict 'modernist' would exclude on the grounds that they are unnecessary. The approach is one of 'pick and mix'. Anything can go with anything. Similar tendencies are said to be at work in the field of art, literature, and drama - this is the age of the self-consciously 'ironic statement'.

In politics and intellectual life, too, there is a rejection of rigid thinking. The idea, accepted in the ancient world, that we live in a time of decline from a lost 'Golden Age' was challenged by the 'Age of Enlightenment' of the 18th Century. It was stood on its head by the 19th and 20th Century belief in automatic and ever-accelerating 'progress'. Now the idea of necessary progress to perfection or decline into barbarism is rejected.

The shattering of faith in the Marxism has produced a distrust of ideology of all kinds. In philosophy, all texts and statements are approached with suspicion, 'deconstructed' to construe the 'subtext', the assumptions that underlie the words used, that subconsciously manipulate the intended audience. The climate is one of extreme scepticism. This results in political life in a multiplication of groupings for 'single-issue' purposes and the decline of well-established organisations.

In a recent presentation to the Rickmansworth Deanery Synod, the Reverend Mark Stibbe, Vicar of St Andrews Chorleywood, looked at these developments and considered how they might affect religious life and, in particular, the mission of the Church. He pointed out that although the downfall of Marxism might be thought to be favourable to the Christian Gospel, this was not necessarily so. There is a widespread cynicism and distrust of long-term commitment of any kind, whether in relationships or religion. All reasoned argument is distrusted. The search among the young is for 'authenticity'. Trust is given to individuals rather than to ideas.

The 'pick and mix' approach is applied to spiritual life - hence the attraction of 'New Age' movements of various kinds. Mark Stibbe thought that for the Church there was likely to be a retreat from the conventional parish organisation into small groupings; similarly in worship the structured service was he thought in decline.

This post-modernist phase, if there is indeed a connection between all these various tendencies, is perhaps a transition, a reaction to what has gone before. Old landmarks seem to have vanished and people feel themselves to be adrift. For some Christians, this feeling leads to a groping after old certainties; others find themselves constrained to challenge these. Whether or not Mark Stibbe's analysis is correct, the Church as always needs to renew itself constantly to remain alive.

(I am no sort of authority on Post-Modernism! If you want to know more, and have access to the Internet, there is a useful outline at www.infed.org/biblio/b-postmd.htm)