

## **Post-truth and its Challenges to Christian Mission Work in Asia**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Every year, the Oxford Dictionary chooses a “Word of the Year”. At the end of 2016 they announced, “After much discussion, debate, and research, the Oxford Dictionary’s Word of the Year 2016 was ‘*post-truth*,’ an adjective defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’”. The definition expounded: “The concept of post-truth has been in existence for the past decade, but Oxford dictionaries have seen a spike in frequency this year in the context of the Brexit EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States. It has also come to be associated with a particular noun, in the phrase ‘post-truth politics.’”

“Post-Truth” implies manufactured truth, in which no one truth can be trusted. The concept of post-truth acknowledges that non-elite humans of society have always been manipulated by powerful, aristocratic, and influential figures. People who hold power use their positions to make lay people believe that their particular “truths” are correct; in reality, “truth” is a matter of power and persuasion, not objectivity. In academic circles, post-truth means a “systematic pattern of deviation from norm or rationality in judgment, whereby inferences about other people and situations may be drawn in an illogical fashion. Individuals create their own ‘subjective social reality’ from their perception of the input”.

Post-truth, in short, does not refer to deliberate lies. It is a phenomenon beyond mere statements we happen to disagree with. Post-truth means deliberately ignoring reason, rationale, facts, science, knowledge and statistics to follow an emotionally-driven agenda. It means shutting down and silencing truth-speakers in case the facts cause offence. In short, it means unfettered liberalism. Extreme liberalism is responsible for creating the post-truth society. In other words, it is Liberalism that normalized the idea that facts shouldn’t matter. It is Liberalism that prioritises emotions over facts and creates this Post-truth society.

Historically, the origin of this term is from the Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich who coined the term “*post-truth*” in 1992 in an essay published in *The Nation* in the context of the Persian Gulf War. He stated, “We, as a free people have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world (Flood, 2016).” Though the realistic implications of “post-truth” is deplorable, many begin to accept it with the belief that it becomes useful if we read it as a shorthand for life after the pursuit of truth, or in other words, a way of life in which there is apparently no way to separate fact from fiction.

Today we are told there is no such thing as fact, that there is no such thing as science, and that there is no such thing as reason. We are told that all “truth” is propaganda. What this mindset does to society, to our constitution, to our thoughts is far more menacing. All these ideas and processes have brought lack of clarity, confusion and reduced commitment to Christian values and life. Consequently, post-truth challenges Christian discipleship in the present world.

This paper is divided into seven parts. The first part investigates the historical development of a post-truth society. The second and third sections describe the characteristics of the postmodern and relativistic world of today, and its movement towards post-truth society. This is followed by a study of the salient features of postmodern culture and a post-truth society. The fifth part concentrates on common reactions among laypeople to the present post-modern and relativistic society in terms of the rise of cultural nationalism, religious fundamentalism and people’s movements. The sixth part examines how these processes affect Christian life and its values in contemporary times in terms of loss of authority, loss of foundations of knowledge, and breakdown of important structures of society and culture. The last part is the conclusion drawn from the above study.

## **HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS OF POST-TRUTH SOCIETY**

Many thinkers of today, prominent anthropologists, sociologists and others, have described the contemporary situation as being a globalized, postmodern and post-truth world. According to these experts, the cultural journey of humanity has been passing through the stages of “Pre-modern”, “Modern”, “Post-Modern” and “Post-Truth”. Pre-modern societies were characterized by a world led by supernaturalism, tradition, faith, beliefs and collectivism. By the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, due to various economic, social, political and cultural shifts, human understanding began to take a different turn. This cultural shift is popularly understood as “modernism”. Modernism was defined by belief in progress through human reason. These thinkers claimed to be enlightened. Philosophers in this enlightenment period were eager to develop universal morality through objective science and law. Enlightenment was characterised by rationalism and finding the truth through empirical methods of science. Thus, during the Modern Era (1650-1967), importance was given to Truth as a purpose to be sought in life through rational inquiry.

Supreme confidence in human rationality came to be questioned by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The immeasurable devastation and consequent misery of the two world wars and the increasing depletion of resources and serious environmental problems of the contemporary world began to prompt questions about the assumptions of the modernization process. Many intellectuals felt science and technology failed to provide meaning to both the personal and occupational lives of individuals, and failed to resolve some of the institutional problems of modern society, including humans’ quest for meaning.

World War One and World War Two reshaped the boundaries of nations. The independence of nations after World War Two led to more pronounced cultural and religious assertions among newly emerged independent nations, leading to the multicultural reality of the world. Today, with the drastic increase in communication and migration, the world is experiencing a rapid shift of people and their cultures. The market economy moves the sources of production to the easily available and cheap labour force. These changing trends and fast moving populations have brought a lot of changes in what is now clearly a multicultural world.

As multiculturalism becomes increasingly evident in many parts of the world, each culture and religion claims space and autonomy. They compete with one another as the best culture or religion for the future. As a result, the modernist's quest for a universal culture and truth came under doubt. This has given rise to the postmodern era

The question arose "What is Truth?" at the beginning of the postmodern era caused people to fight over truth claims. By 1967, after many wars competing truth claims, people became so exasperated that many intellectuals including some theologians began to abandon the pursuit of Truth and came to the conclusion truth cannot be known. This exacerbated the post-truth situation. More and more people are influenced by this phenomenon. As a result, our culture becomes more liberal—increasingly driven by the heart rather than the head—and we increasingly are shaped by emotion rather than objective facts. Indeed, we increasingly hate the truth for its divisive nature. We call out "hate speech." We call people who speak it, "bigots".

## **THE POSTMODERN AND RELATIVISTIC WORLD OF TODAY**

Postmodernists question the philosophical assumptions of modernism, namely rationality, positivism and empirical methods used in science to amplify reality. Postmodern culture sees doubt as a form of health. It often derives meaning and conclusions through experiments with sensations, sex and drugs, and if confronted with the teachings promoting traditional values or wisdom of former ages, it proudly rejects these sentiments as outdated and no longer relevant to contemporary humanity.

One of the themes that characterizes the times we live in is the break-down of absolutes. This results in morals-sexual anarchy; in metaphysics-doubt; in epistemology-confusion and in ambiguity. Symptoms of this cultural and intellectual malaise are discernible everywhere. Postmodernism doubts any grand theories and generalizations. A coherent general understanding across cultural boundaries is seen as virtually impossible (Bhargava, 1999). Key analytical categories may not be as universally applicable as in modernism, as we had once imagined. Paul Heelas explains postmodernism in this way: "The culture becomes disorganized; less black and white. The distinction between high and low fades away. The claim that one tradition should be adhered to because it, and it alone, is valid, is rendered invalid. And rather than authority and legitimacy resting with established orders of knowledge, authority comes to rest with the person." (Heelas, 1998: 3-4).

In the words of James Beckford, postmodernity consists in a “willingness to abandon the search for overarching or triumphalist myths, narratives or frameworks of knowledge” (as quoted in Paul Heelas). Postmodernism is a revolt and a reaction against modernism. Postmodernism is imbued with the sense of a “collapsed signification and challenged humanism.” It is amorphous, eclectic, pluricultural and ideologically and aesthetically not clear-cut. Postmodern culture celebrates a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes, irony, and playfulness (Pflug and Michael, 2012: 256 - 271). Postmodernity goes against certainty, objectivity and the progress orientation of modernity. Meaning is not universal and fixed, but precarious, fragmented and local. Hence, according to many social thinkers, truth is “more than anything-a state of mind.” It refers more to a cultural condition (Bhargava, 1999).

The implication of the postmodern understanding of “truth” in a wider cultural perspective has been that all is relative, nothing is sure, not fixed. All is in a flux. Postmodernity rejects order and certainty. It is sceptical about categories and any idea of a stable meaning. Instead, ambivalence, variation, fragmentation and emotion are celebrated as guidelines for how we should understand the social world. Sometimes, postmodernism stresses instincts and the drive for pleasure as central to how an individual should function. Postmodern ideas and values are projected in the powerful media. The media has a tremendous impact on the young. In recent years, television has begun to dictate terms in our homes. Children often remain glued to the television and a serial in the evening often replaces face-to-face conversations in the family.

## **FROM POSTMODERNISM TO POST-TRUTH**

Linked to this is the “post-truth society.” Many analysts and commentators of the contemporary world suggest that today people are living under the influence of “fake news” in a “post-truth” world that is impervious to facts. This also refers to the demise of historical thinking. In the era after the Cold War and the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the “Cold War anti-communism” mentality ceased to be the organizing principle of an American-led status quo. This experience led the millennial generation to believe that they are the makers of history, with the capacity to shape the world anew, according to their understanding of the common good. Seen in this light, post-truth emerges as the corollary to the end of history. Postmodernism and post-truth define an era in which pursuing the truth hardly seems pertinent because however hard you look, and even if you find it, you cannot expect to change anything anyhow. This thinking has accelerated the increased use of the internet when a large proportion of the population really cannot distinguish reality from fantasy and are not able to fact-check the news they find on the internet.

Political commentators have studied the impact of the 24-hour news cycle which tries to please the emotions and expectations of the viewers instead of reporting factual events and happenings. Post-truth politics is a political culture in which debate

is framed largely by appeals to emotion disconnected from the details of policy, and by the repeated assertion of talking points, factual rebuttals to which are ignored. Post-truth differs from traditional contesting and falsifying of truth by rendering it of “secondary” importance. In the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell depicts a world in which the State changes historic records daily to fit its propaganda goals of the day. In 2016, “post-truth” was chosen as the Oxford Dictionaries’ “Word of the Year” due to its prevalence in the context of that year’s Brexit referendum and U.S. presidential election (Freedland, 2016).

Today, a large proportion of the world’s population, especially the youth, is affected by postmodern and post-truth culture and its value system. Postmodern liberal ideas emphasize that what is morally sound and desirable is to be determined by each individual and that one should not judge the actions of other people in terms of one’s own moral values. Thus liberalism inherently entails moral relativism. Karl Acham points out that the root cause of the cultural crisis in the Western world is related to this moral relativism leading to exaggerated individualism (Acham, 2000: 123-137).

## **SALIENT FEATURES OF POSTMODERN AND POST-TRUTH SOCIETIES**

### **a) *Loss of Foundations of Knowledge***

In his article “The Postmodern Condition,” Lyotard (1984; first published March 1979) makes a pivotal statement in the debate about the substance of knowledge. He announces the chief theme of the postmodern turn: the decline of the legitimating power of “metanarratives” as a distinctive characteristic of postmodern culture. Metanarratives refer to foundational theories (theories of knowledge, morality, or aesthetics) and grand stories of social progress which have been central to the legitimating of modern knowledge, culture, and social institutions (Inbody, 1995: 524).

One of the postmodern thinkers, Michel Foucault, urges that we abandon the enlightenment quest for the foundations of knowledge and systems of knowledge as this conceals knowledge’s entanglement in power. The shift from metanarratives to local narratives and from general theories to pragmatic strategies suggests that in place of assuming a universal mind or a rational knowing subject, we imagine multiple minds, subjects, and knowledge reflecting different social locations and histories (Foucault, 2001; first published 1966). Due to this, the human sciences may become instruments of bureaucratic social control. Such knowledge abandons absolute standards, universal categories, and grand theories.

The value of postmodern knowledge lies in making us aware of and tolerant toward social differences, ambiguity, and social conflict. All the same, postmodernity is characterized by a loss of certainty in the sphere of knowledge, a loss of central organizing principles governing society and unstable unitary standards of cultural excellence or morality, and a decline in the belief in a unitary, coherent self.

The legitimation crisis reaches virtually every area of contemporary life. When previously held metanarratives are deprived of their authority, what follows is a plurality of views and values. With no universally held values, there is no way that any one particular value system can be universally legitimized and accepted. The result is a plurality of values and value systems with each competing against the others. Furthermore, even within a given cultural value system there may not be enough moral and political support to ensure legitimation. This has resulted in a fragmentation of society into special interest groups based on ethnicity, religion, and economic issues. This fragmentation has paralyzed the political process, destroyed the idea of the common good, and given rise to intense competition for increasingly smaller pieces of the political and economic pie. Significantly, this same fragmentation is taking place in the mainline Christian denominations and in contemporary theology (Bauman, 1992: 96).

### **b) Loss of Authority**

The theme of a decentred world is pivotal to postmodern thinking. For example, the chief claim of *The Order of Things* by Michel Foucault is that the concept of “man” is not the origin of human sciences but its creation. Similarly, in the *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault argues that the sexual subject is not the natural origin of sexual truths but that sexual knowledge (for example, sexology and psychiatry) helps produce sexual subjects (Foucault, in Hurley, 1978 (vol. 1), 1985 (vol. 2), 1986 (vol. 3), 2018 (vol. 4 [posthumous])).

This affects the everyday life of the people. There was a time not many years ago when chastity before marriage was accepted as a given. To be sure, there were those who did not always live up to that ideal, but virtually everyone accepted it as the ideal. College professors now report that there are students who do not even know the meaning of the words abstinence and chastity, to say nothing of the sexual ethic underlying these terms. Sexual activity prior to marriage, living together without being married, and alternatives to traditional marriage such as gay and lesbian relationships are so common in contemporary culture that most people accept this new situation as a given reality. As a result there is moral ambiguity and value confusion in today’s world.

### **c) Breakdown of the Foundational Structures of Society and Culture**

All the above features of the postmodern, post-truth and relativistic culture of today affect the very foundations of human society. There is a fracture in the heart of families, in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to educate and spend time with one’s children given current working patterns. Another problem that affects family life is that of the growing awareness of the issue of gender equality, a subject that leaves many men confused about how to take on a more equal role in the family, and in turn leads to a rise in violent forms of behavior. The real threat to the stability and cohesiveness of societies according to Acham comes from a growing deterioration in human relationships (Acham, 2000: 123-137).

Exaggerated individualism has led to apathy, indifference and lack of social commitment which, in turn, have contributed to the breakdown and disintegration of the family, erosion of social bonds, loss of faith in public institutions, drug abuse, and the spurt in crime and delinquency in many societies. In Britain, one-third of all marriages end in divorce and nearly 20 per cent of British children witness the divorce of their parents before they reach the age of 16. It is anticipated that this trend will grow and that in a few years only 50 per cent of British children will experience a normal, conventional family life (Bockok and Thompson, 1992; Ahrono and Rodgers, 1987). In recent years, the United States and many European countries have experienced a dramatic increase in the divorce rate. A survey of marriage in more than 30 European countries revealed that living together without the formality of marriage is becoming increasingly common in all European countries. There is a steady increase in the number of people living alone as well as people who express feelings of loneliness. The high crime statistics that are seen among those living alone in the world points to the rise in stress levels, while an increasing number of people turning to sects feel a sense of belonging, acceptance and of having a clear code of conduct. It is very significant that in the same countries where mainstream religions are on the decline, there has been a marked increase in the number of sects, therapy groups, self-help groups, etc.

## **REACTIONS AGAINST GLOBALIZATION, POSTMODERN, POST-TRUTH AND RELATIVISTIC CULTURE**

### ***a) Cultural Nationalism and Religious Fundamentalism***

While globalization as a homogenizing process is active, we also observe that cultures and religions are asserting their separate identities. Globalization creates a troubled relationship between the native and the international. The claim of the emergence of a global culture is accompanied by cries of alarm that local values and nation-states are suffering from a sense of threat to their identity (Hall, et al., 1996: 619). This has given rise to ethnic revivals, struggles for indigenous rights and religious fundamentalism as defensive reactions to globalization and relativism. They have risen from a desire to defend and preserve valued ways of life against what are seen to be pernicious effects of foreign and global influences. Fundamentalist religious movements and cultural nationalism emerge in order to strengthen the identity of one's nation and culture. Religious nationalists are not just religious fanatics. For the most part they are political activists who are seriously attempting to reformulate the "modern" language of politics in order to provide a new basis for the nation-state. Religious and nationalist movements often invoke authenticity and "authentic culture" as a weapon against what is foreign and alien.

Today, in the context of globalization sweeping the world where cultural as well as religious identities are becoming more porous, social and cultural movements have emerged in order to protect national, cultural and religious identity. A popular view has been spreading, aided by politicians, that each country has its own religion



and Asian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam are the religions of those countries in Asia where they are dominant. Religion is being employed to consolidate national identity and dominance. Hence there is a connection between nationalism and fundamentalism. Religion is being used as a political tool.

All this indicates that contemporary societies have been experiencing both a crisis in religion as well as a global resurgence. This resurgence has taken place, according to social scientists like Gertrude Himmelfarb (2004), largely because of an identity crisis and because science and technology have failed to give meaning in both the personal and occupational lives of individuals and have also failed to resolve some of the institutional problems of modern society.

## **POSTMODERN AND POST-TRUTH CRISES IN CHRISTIANITY**

While all cultures and religions are affected by the process of globalization and postmodern attitudes, it seems Christianity and Western cultures are much more affected than Asian cultures, where religions like Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism dominate. As a result, Christianity is under great strain in the postmodern culture of today. The Christian message is affected by postmodern ideas of relativism. This is so because, influenced by relativistic thought, many begin to believe more and more that all religions are the same and we should not compare and make value judgments about other religions. To believe that any religion is intrinsically better than another, it is felt, is to be somehow wrong, offensive, and narrow-minded. The attitude of relativism leads to ambiguity, confusion and lack of commitment to the Christian ideal. This is what is happening to many Christians today. It is estimated that the departure of Catholics from their church occurs at an annual rate of 1% (Alegre et al., 2008: 3).

Asian cultures and religions, on the other hand, seem to have a built-in worldview to cope with and absorb postmodern relativism. For example, for Hindus, the ultimate reality is infinite and cannot by definition be grasped in its totality by the finite human mind. All religions grasp some aspects of it and miss others. For Hindus, all religions are different ways of understanding and realizing the ultimate reality. As one of the Vedic maxims asserts, "Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti," "Truth or Reality is one, though sages call it by different names." In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna says that "whoever comes to me through whatever route, I reach out to him," and that "all paths in the end lead to me" (Bhagavadgita, 4:11; 9:22). Thus, Vedanta Hinduism has been insisting that there is one eternal truth; sages have identified multiple paths to achieve it. Similarly, Vedanta Hinduism also teaches that, just as all rivers flow into the same ocean, so all religions lead to the same ultimate reality. Hence, no one religion should claim to possess the Truth. The Hindu seers have been propagating this for thousands of years.

Though religious differences are acknowledged in this position, they are believed to be unimportant, unrelated to the essence of religion. The differences are attributed to ignorance or social and historical circumstances. From this, Hindus hold that the ethical quality of life and not a body of dogmas lies at the heart of their religion. Beliefs



are not important in themselves but only insofar as they affect one's ability to lead a good life, and are to be assessed not in terms of their cognitive validity but their moral effects. Hindus are therefore allowed considerable freedom of religious belief including borrowing those of other religions provided that they lead to what the wider society takes to be an acceptable way of life.

Similarly, Jainism teaches Anekanta as one of its three basic principles. Anekanta means reality is one but has many aspects or facets and every aspect is a partial truth. Hence, no one can claim to have absolute truth. At face value, it looks as though Hinduism and Jainism are liberal religions which may be easily affected by the postmodern trends. In reality, these religions have well-protected coping mechanisms to keep their members within their fold against the postmodern wave.

While the Hindu theories allow their adherents considerable freedom of belief, Hinduism tends to be extremely restrictive of their freedom of conduct. Different individuals lead different ways of life because these are appropriate to their temperament, moral capacities, and stage of life or position in society. While this protects them against others' interferences and ensures their negative freedom, it also severely restricts their choices, denies them the positive freedom to reject their way of life in favour of another, and discourages them from joining the intolerable practices and institutions of their society. Hindu pluralism is basically a form of peaceful coexistence with other religions in a spirit of relative indifference; each is expected to remain confined to its boundary and never to challenge the other's beliefs and practices. Hindus are expected to follow the dharma of their caste on pain of social ostracism and, in traditional Hindu kingdoms, of legal sanctions. As the Bhagavadgita says, "It is better to die doing one's dharma than to adopt that of another." The Hindu pluralism is controlled by a hierarchically structured caste system which accommodates differences by grading them on the basis of a distinct vision of human excellence (Parekh, 2003: 48-53).

Although it tolerates a wide variety of sects and ways of life, and considers them best for their followers, it does not grant them equal status and dignity. This Hindu tolerance is also controlled by the caste system, i.e. the Hindu is free to hold whatever beliefs he/she likes as long as he/she observes his/ her caste duties. Hindu pluralism is not only hierarchically structured but is also the basis of a new hierarchy. As the Bhagavadgita says, those of inferior intelligence (*alpha medhasan*) who worship inferior gods receive inferior spiritual rewards. Although there are different ways to attain *moksha*, some, such as *jnana yoga*, are generally considered the highest and most reliable.

Through these inbuilt mechanisms, Asian religions and cultures try to cope with the onslaught of the global postmodern trends. Among the strengths of Asian cultures and religions is the strong sense of family and communitarian values. The problem or weakness of Western culture, thereby of Christians in the West, which is influencing

the Asian Christians, is the excessive, exaggerated and aggressive individualism which results in the breakdown of the family and communitarian value system.

## CONCLUSION

This article shows that the contemporary situation of the world may be characterized by a postmodern, post-truth culture. Postmodernism suggests that we have gone beyond modernism but does not specify where we are going. But if it does not specify where we are going, does it mean that we must remain rudderless and just drift along with low tides and high tides? Or, and this seems to be more appropriate and relevant, must we seek a guiding compass? If a guiding compass is a reasonable requirement, then postmodernism and post-truth society will not provide it. Gertrude Himmelfarb, speaking in relation to trends in contemporary historiography, says it derides the quest for truth and related values and underwrites nihilism.

So, in what direction shall we look and what truths and values shall we endeavour to pursue in keeping with our higher interests and purposes? Nationalism, fundamentalism and several other people's movements thrive in this vacuum. As Christians we need to understand that in the postmodern world, we are placed squarely between the times of modernity and that which is yet to come and is yet unnamed. Making the right choices is crucial. Christian discipleship requires discernment, commitment and action to counter the prevailing postmodern and post-truth society. This is not easy, but it is an ongoing process. If we sow the seeds of the gospel values today, we will reap the fruit tomorrow. We Christians must rediscover the enduring faith in Risen Christ which is the foundation of our faith which is beyond postmodernism and post-truth society.

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