Imagine that teacher Susan Jones falls asleep in the 1950s and miraculously wakes up 50 years later, in the early 21st century. What changes will she notice upon re-entry to the educational scene?

The most obvious change will be the technological advances—lightweight portable computers, the Internet, wireless telephones, digital media, exploration of the cosmos, 24/7 television infotainment.

At a deeper level, however, Ms. Jones will likely be puzzled and even disoriented by the way many young people think, talk, write, and view the world and life. The decline in educational standards is also likely to cause concern, with students increasingly ignorant about art, geography, history, and the sciences.

Adventist Education *and the* Challenge *of* Postmodernism

BY HUMBERTO M. RASI

Since the 1980s, Western culture has been undergoing a significant shift affecting the humanities, social sciences, education, and religion. This development also poses a threat to the prestige and power of the sciences.

Allan Bloom sensed this cultural shift more than 20 years ago in his classic book, *The Closing of the American Mind*: "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. . . . Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue."[1]

In this article, we will situate postmodernism in the context of Western cultural periods, sketch the main ideas advanced by its leading proponents, review the impact of postmodernism on certain aspects of contemporary culture, and assess some of the challenges it poses for Seventh-day Adventist education.

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Cultural Periods in the Western World

To begin with, we must acknowledge the difficulty in drawing a clear profile of postmodernism. This is because the cultural change from modernism to postmodernism is still underway and incomplete. Second, no postmodernist has provided a clear definition of the movement. In addition, there are many shades of postmodernism, from the intelligible[2] to the obscure,[3] and even some of those who are seen as representatives of the movement refuse to be so labeled.

It will be useful, nonetheless, to approach the task by exploring the postmodern turn in the flow of Western socio-cultural history.

The Premodern Period (5th to 15th centuries) reflected a theocentric society and culture. Human beings were seen as created by God and living under His sovereignty. Truth was revealed by God through the Christian Church, which provided a unifying meta-narrative. Authority was exerted vertically in all areas of life. In politics, feudalism, with its marked class distinctions, paralleled the hierarchy of a powerful church structure. Education was available only to a minority, and most people were illiterate. Scholasticism was the dominant theological and philosophical school of thought. It largely relied upon and elaborated on the church fathers' writings. Science was in its infancy, with Aristotle providing the main conceptual model.

Tradition molded customs and controlled behavior. Each individual occupied a preordained place in society. Wars, famines, and pandemic diseases killed thousands of people. Ethics were based on a mixture of divine law and human convention. In the field of knowledge, theology and tradition ruled.

The Modern Period (16th to 20th centuries) marked a shift from theocentrism to anthropocentrism. In politics, many social groups experienced a bumpy journey from feudalism to national identity and representative democracy. Humanism and the Protestant Reformation ushered in a new cultural era in Western Europe, which eventually reached many other locations. Truth was no longer accepted as revealed by God, but as discovered by humans. In religion, Christianity slowly lost its privileged position, and the predominant culture moved from theism to deism to agnosticism. God and supernatural revelation became marginalized in public life. Religious convictions were confined to the subjective, as human reason emerged as autonomous and dominant. Formal education reached a larger portion of the world's population. Increased knowledge and emerging technology gave humans the power to harness and exploit nature and make life more comfortable. Modern science gradually moved away from its Christian roots and became more experimental, ambitious, and successful in its technological achievements. Darwinism became the preferred philosophical foundation of science, postulating the spontaneous origin of life and a long organic evolution guided by chance and natural selection, which culminated in human beings. Bloody revolutions and devastating wars impacted millions. Ethics became anchored in autonomous human reason and social consensus. Philosophy, and later science, emerged as the dominant disciplines.

The Postmodern Period (late 20th to early 21st century). During the past 30 years, Western culture has been undergoing a general shift toward postmodernism, which can be seen both as a reaction against and a radicalization of certain aspects of modernity. It reflects a relentless pursuit of absolute human autonomy and individual freedom.

Although the transition toward postmodernism is incomplete, certain foundational ideas can be discerned:
• Human beings are incapable of arriving at absolute, reliable truth.
• Knowledge is individually constructed rather than discovered.
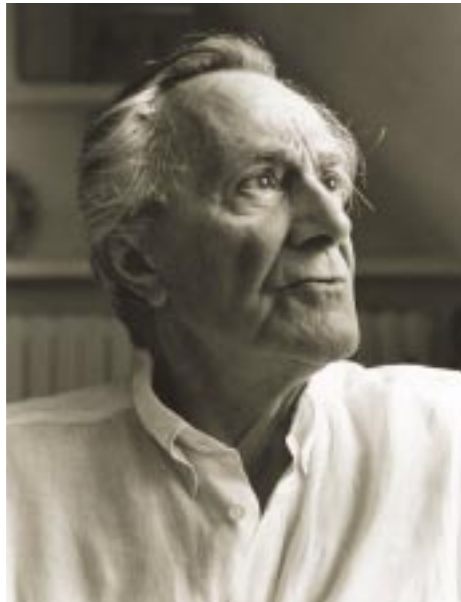

THOMAS KUHN

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• Humans are prisoners of language, which limits their perspective on reality.
• Any worldview or meta-narrative that claims to be universal is oppressive and marginalizes certain people.
• The personal narrative is a trustworthy method of understanding and communicating reality.
• Ethics are relative to time and place—depending on what is acceptable within a community.
• "Spirituality," rather than doctrine, is at the core of religion.
• Preferred attitudes are relativism, irony, ambiguity, and skepticism.

In this postmodern climate, literary theory, sociology, linguistics, and communication are the predominant disciplines. The various electronic media play a major role in spreading postmodern concepts and lifestyle throughout the world.

Three trends can be identified within postmodernism:

Radical postmodernism has provided the philosophical foundation and is the engine of change creating this new cultural climate.

Eco-libertarian postmodernism emphasizes environmental care and equal rights for all social groups.

Eclectic postmodernism attempts to preserve some rational and scientific features of modernism while accepting many characteristics of the new culture.

Antecedents and Representative Voices

Several thinkers have provided the ideological foundation of postmodernism:

Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996). This renowned U.S. historian of science wrote *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962, 1970), whose main thesis is that science is not an empirically autonomous and objective enterprise, but instead a socially and historically constructed activity guided by dominant paradigms. Scientific progress is not incremental, but proceeds in stages. During periods of "normal science," scientists conduct research and practice their specialties in the context of a generally accepted set of assumptions and rules. Scientists are aware of some phenomena that cannot be understood within this model, but assume that in the future they will be explained. When these anomalies become too numerous to fit into the predominant model, a period of "revolutionary science" follows, with the old and the new frameworks competing for acceptance. If the new model prevails, a paradigm shift occurs, which explains the

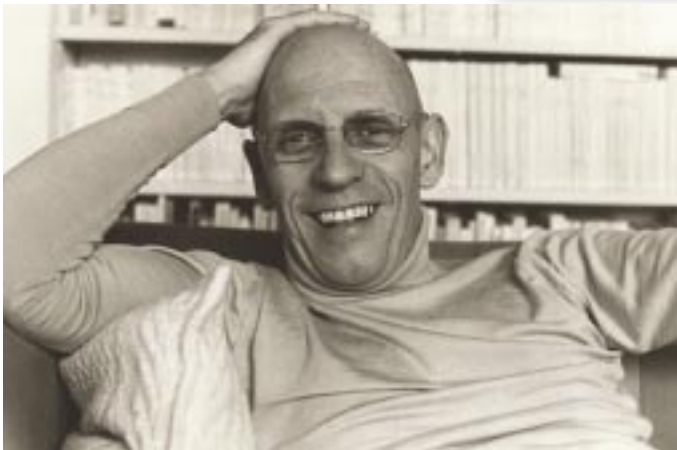exceptions and provides the basis for new approaches and research.[4]

Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998), a French philosopher and literary theorist, described postmodernism as "incredulity toward meta-narratives" (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1979). For him, there was no unifying, large-scale story or universal theory that could explain human history and behavior. He questioned the power of reason and stressed the importance of sensations and emotions in human decisions. He believed that science has claimed for itself an undeserved position of prestige and authority, and this hegemony must be contested and rejected. Humans belong to different communities of meaning, each with its own language codes, rules, and micro-narratives. In his essay "Lessons in Paganism," Lyotard proposed that
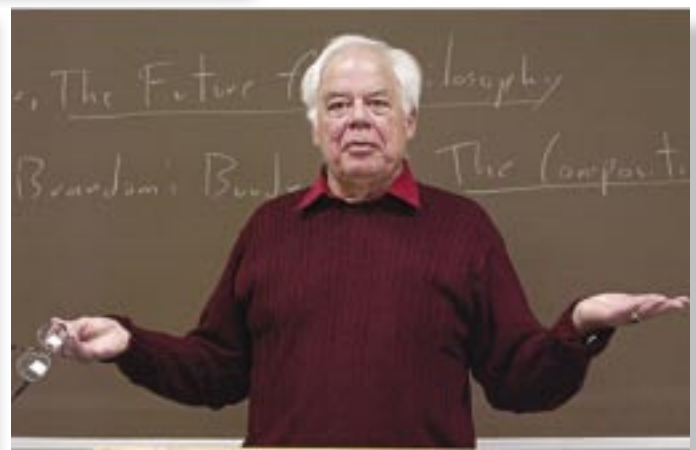

JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD

just as pagan religions worship different deities rather than one God, justice must also accept a plurality of criteria, rules, and judgments—there are no universal ethics.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984), a French philosopher and historian, rejected traditional notions of truth, history, and morality. In books such as *Madness and Civilization* (French, 1961), *The Order of Things* (English, 1970), and *Discipline and Punish* (English, 1977), he argued that those who occupy positions of power in society use the medical establishment, the penal system, and even public education to control the populace. He held that truth is never absolute, but the product of power relations and oppres-

MICHEL FOUCAULT

RICHARD RORTY

JACQUES DERRIDA

sive ideologies, and that reason creates arbitrary standards of normality that must be abandoned. Foucault demonstrated his ideas by a "liberated" lifestyle and experimentation with drugs. He died at age 57 of AIDS.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), an Algerian-born French philosopher, was the founder of deconstructionism. He saw Western culture as built on certain presuppositions and biased dichotomies—sign/signifier, speech/writing, nature/culture, sacred/profane, mind/body—that should be questioned. Derrida held that all texts have implied hierarchies that impose a certain order on reality and called deconstruction the task of revealing and unsettling these dichotomies.[5] For him, language was an unreliable vehicle for communicating meaning and truth. He asserted that there is no single meaning to a text, nor does it express any absolute truth. The reader is therefore free to interpret a text without reference to the author's intention.

American philosopher **Richard Rorty** (1931-2007) maintained in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) that there is no logical correspondence between language and the objective world. He also rejected the privileged position of science in modern culture, asserting that there is no need to understand the meaning of life or discover ultimate truth (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 1989). Rorty held that humans should be free to hold their beliefs lightly, avoiding religious and secular fanati-

cism. Referring to fundamentalist Christianity, he wrote: "When we American college teachers encounter religious fundamentalists, we do not consider the possibility of reformulating our own practices of justification so as to give more weight to the authority of the Christian scriptures. Instead, we do our best to convince these students of the benefits of secularization. . . .So we are going to go right on trying to discredit you [parents] in the eyes of your children, trying to strip your fundamentalist religious community of dignity, trying to make your views seem silly rather than discussable."[6]

Other postmodern philosophers include Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Paul Feyerabend, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan, but for our current purpose, these profiles provide an overview of core postmodern ideas.

In summary, postmodernism's major themes center on language, truth, power, identity, interpretation/hermeneutics, equality/rights, the environment, and personal freedom.

Impact on Culture

A survey of the contemporary landscape reveals the impact of postmodern premises on cultural emphases and scholarly practices. In language, for example, there has been a shift toward gender-inclusive speech and politically correct expressions. In

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literature, the traditional canon is being expanded or has been replaced by a new list of authors from the margins of society, emphasizing the transgressive—the deliberate breaking of literary conventions and moral taboos. In history, documented events from the past have been reinterpreted and at times manipulated to fit the agenda of multiculturalism.

The effects of postmodernism on theology are significant, moving the discipline away from propositional claims based on the Scriptures to culture-specific, socially constructed religious concepts. The Christian meta-narrative is challenged or abandoned altogether. This has caused the core of Christianity to shift from creed-based to general spirituality, triggering a disconnect between personal experience and fundamental beliefs.[7] Several liberation theologies—African, Asian, black, feminist, Latino—have emerged, in addition to process theology, which postulates an immanent God who is becoming Himself as He interacts with the universe and human beings. In parallel fashion, Christian worship and music have moved toward popular sentimental expressions that mirror media spectacles.

Toward a Christian Evaluation of Postmodernism

How should we assess postmodernism and its socio-cultural impact? Evangelicals and Seventh-day Adventists are divided

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in their evaluation of this new trend. Some perceive it as a positive development that opens new vistas and opportunities for Christians in the intellectual arena, while others believe postmodernism undermines the validity of the biblical meta-narrative, rationality, and the propositional truths revealed by God.[8]

Using biblical-Christian worldview as a foundational template,[9] three major categories can be identified in postmodernism:

Valuable Insights

Postmodern authors have provided us with perspectives compatible with the Christian worldview that help us to:

• Appreciate anew the intrinsic worth and dignity of all human beings and their inalienable rights, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or condition;

• Acknowledge the significant role that the culture plays in forming our personal identity and ideas as well as prejudices;

• Recognize both the inability of human language to capture the whole truth and its power to manipulate, exclude, and control others;

• Highlight and critique the blind optimism, arrogance, and deterministic assumptions of scientism,[10] along with its harmful effects on Planet Earth; and

• Understand that the Bible contains not only doctrines, but also narratives that reveal a living God mercifully interacting with His creatures in their struggles.

Potentially Problematic Components

Postmodernism's positive concepts can be corrupted or taken to extremes that produce negative outcomes. See the list in the box below.

Destructive Concepts

Some postmodern ideas are incompatible with biblical Christianity:

Positive Postmodern Value	Corruption/Extreme
Tolerance	Once power is achieved by a particular group, it often deteriorates into hostility toward those who disagree with the new order.
Recognition that knowledge is both discovered and constructed	Denial that ultimate truth is revealed by God and personally embodied in Christ
Respect for other cultures	People become reluctant to judge immoral practices and to condemn evil.
Opposition to the corrosive individualism of modernity and emphasis on the role of the community	"Group think"
Concern for the marginalized in society	A sense of victimization; people tend to separate into social and tribal groups that compete for power
Regard for the environment	The sacralization of nature and devaluation of human beings
Interest in spirituality and individual piety	Indifference or animosity toward organized religion and its teachings
Benefits of electronic media	Preference for "virtual reality"; detachment from real life and its responsibilities
Allowing Christians a seat at the intellectual table	Considering biblical principles as only one among a multiplicity of equally valid perspectives on truth

• Both modernism and postmodernism reject God as a reality and enthrone human autonomy in its search for unfettered freedom. However, without trust in a Creator, Sustainer, and Lawgiver, humanity inevitably sets its own agenda in the struggle for power and pleasure.

• Rejection of a shared worldview and meta-narrative undermines the sense of purpose that men and women need to experience fulfillment: If we don't know our origin or our destiny, how can we find meaning in our existence?

• The relativism that characterizes much of postmodern thought deprives knowledge and values of a reliable foundation: What is the trustworthy point of reference in matters of truth? Are ethics relative for each individual and for time and place? Or are there actions that are wrong at all times in any culture? Who decides? On what basis?

Challenges to Adventist Education

As postmodern ideas exert a wider influence on contemporary culture, the fundamental philosophy and principles of Adventist education are also at risk.[12] For example:

• God and His written revelation, the Scriptures: Are they a reliable and a solid foundation for our beliefs, ethics, and hope?

• The story of salvation: If universal worldviews are no longer considered valid, how will we convey Christianity's foundational meta-narrative—Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation—to our students?

• Christian beliefs and values: If cultural relativism is embraced, are there any universally valid biblical teachings that are applicable to all believers?

• Standards of behavior: Who will establish the norms and take responsibility for applying them in an educational institution?

• Bible history and prophecy: Do they have any meaning in a postmodern context?

• Adventist identity, distinctives, and mission: Can they be maintained and carried on in a postmodern world?

• Worship music: On what basis will we decide what type of music is appropriate for worshiping God?[13]

A Thoughtful Response

These challenges demand a thoughtful response on the part of Adventist educators and administrators. Here are a few suggestions for consideration:

• Select carefully the textbooks and reading materials assigned to students, taking into account the worldview and values espoused by the authors. Be ready to discuss whether the views presented are congruent with biblical principles.

• Foster the formation of small faith communities among Adventist students, using the electronic media and personal interaction. Assign to each a mature mentor.

• Involve students in worthwhile service projects designed to address real human needs, including service learning as part of the school curriculum.

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• Recognize the role of emotion, and nurture students' creativity so they can express their ideals and concerns.

• Guide students in developing reliable personal standards for evaluating and critiquing art, cinema, drama, literature, and music based on timeless principles and standards of goodness and beauty.

• Accept and affirm that the Adventist Church is a global community, with members who are united in biblical faith, doctrine, and mission, but belong to diverse cultural communities.

• Create the conditions whereby students may establish a relationship of mutual trust with mature Christian teachers/mentors.

• Balance the narrative and doctrinal dimensions of biblical preaching and interactive study, addressing the deep spiritual needs of students in a way that leads to friendship with God, personal transformation, and positive action.

• Help students comprehend and internalize the Great Controversy meta-narrative as a frame of reference for understanding the meaning of their lives and making wise choices.[14]

Conclusion

This overview of a significant cultural trend of our time, with its philosophical assumptions, leaves some key questions unanswered:

Will postmodernism become the dominant global ideology of the 21st century or longer, or will it turn out to be a passing cultural phase that will self-destruct due to its internal contradictions?[15]

Will science and technology and even the administration of justice be able to operate using radical postmodern principles and views?

Will postmodernism evolve as modernism did during its move from the Enlightenment to the industrial revolution to 20th-century science and technology?[16]

The 21st-century world in which Christ's followers are to fulfill their mission resembles the mixture of ideologies and religions that first-century Christians faced—materialistic, pagan, superstitious, hedonistic, apathetic, confused, and anxious. God will help us find our way between the extremes of modern rationalism and postmodern relativism.

Above all, Adventist educators need to be ready to be both committed and compassionate as we seek to provide biblically anchored, wholistic Christian education to our students in a postmodern cultural context. Jesus—"the true light that gives light to every man. . . , full of *grace* and *truth*"—has promised to be with us "always, even unto the end of the world" (John 1:9, 14, NIV; Matthew 28:20, KJV).[17]

Humberto M. Rasi, Ph.D., *served as teacher, editor, and administrator in Adventist institutions and as Director of the General Conference Department of Education (1990-2002). Although retired, he continues to lec-*