

## Reaction to "Apologetics in a Postmodern World" by Justin C. Cloute

"Without God, everything is allowed!" Thus spoke Dostoevsky.<sup>1</sup> A literary prophet, he uttered those words several years before Nietzsche came along with his Übermensch notion. The Übermensch, as our essayist points out (p. 6) was a concept Nietzsche saw as the only hope left for finding meaning in a world that had unthought God. Before Nietzsche wrote it down, Dostoevsky could already see where this idea would lead.

In his scholarly, closely-argued, and powerful essay, Pastor Cloute helps us see the causes and effects of such a worldview. He rightly points out that postmodernism is not so much a systematic philosophy for life as it is a condition or prevailing mood in which late-modern human beings live. It is at once skeptical towards truth and self-aware, both highly individualistic and intensely tribal--with personal choice reigning supreme over all. And whether or not postmodern reasonings still hold any power over our minds, the effects of them remain. We see those effects both in the essential and often unspoken assumptions by which we live (what now passes for 'common' sense),<sup>2</sup> and in the moods of anger, loneliness, and meaninglessness which hang over all like some dank mist at midnight.

Pastor Cloute shows us how we got here, doing yeoman's work in the process by walking us through the subterranean regions inhabited by such worthies as Derrida, Foucault, and, of course, our good buddy Nietzsche. On the way down he shows us the entry point of structuralism and its impact upon how we think about language. Again, Pastor Cloute does not mean to say that such a mental substructure is accessible to the mind of every postmodern man. But with Vergil we realize that it's always good to know the reason for things.<sup>3</sup> Such knowledge helps us make sense of the fractured landscape we now inhabit. There's a cause for our tribalism, our destruction of authority, our ability to cling to (often self-refuting) personal truths, and our loneliness.

If the modernist directed us to the vanishing point on the horizon and said, "We're on the path of truth; keep walking and eventually we'll get there!" the postmodernist has come to believe that the vanishing point *is* the point, and it is pointless. We are left inhabiting a flat and immanent landscape with no God's eye view of anything except the one we choose for ourselves. There's nothing outside the text.

Our essayist's response is filled with pastoral compassion and empathy. He describes his own struggles dealing with a postmodern point of view. He emphasizes the importance of listening, recognizing that our audience is not one, but many. The approach for Christians struggling with an answer to postmodernism may not be the same as our approach to the non-believer. With Christians, our arguments find their source in Scripture. With non-Christians, common sense and natural law are also useful. The questioning of basic assumptions may serve

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes disputed by trolls on the interweb, this phrase comes from "The Brothers Karamazov." See [https://infidels.org/library/modern/andrei\\_volkov/dostoevsky.html](https://infidels.org/library/modern/andrei_volkov/dostoevsky.html).

<sup>2</sup> "Choice is the supreme good" "authority is bad" "sin is a fairy tale" "no one has the right to tell us how to live" "we are creatures of our culture" "I have the right to live as I please so long as I don't hurt anybody." Timothy Keller attributes this insight to Charles Taylor. He uses the term "unthoughts" to describe them--a term coined by Foucault to describe "unchallengeable and self-evident common sense" (*Preaching: communicating faith in an age of skepticism*, Viking Press, 2015, 125-126.)

<sup>3</sup> "*Felix is qui causas rerum scit.*"

to answer some objections posed against the perception of Christian doctrines being rooted in fantasy, and no more compelling than the myth of Santa Clause.<sup>4</sup> If Christianity is absurd, so is postmodernism. Not only is it self-refuting, "it's a belief system that is impossible to live by" (p. 20).<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the real power is not found in pointing out the flaws in other folks' metanarratives or worldviews, but in the beauty of a story that can become the centerpoint and source of all narratives: a counternarrative conceding the malice, madness, and meanness of modernity (and postmodernity!), but confessing a triumphant, "Yes...but!" It's a story built upon the gospel paradox.

We tell those stuck in an immanent world, unable to touch God's face, "Here in the Crucified is God come down." To those who long for significance, we say, "Find your center in him who became nothing for sheer love of you." To those who believe all stories are power-grabs, we tell the story of him who "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped." To the individualist, we speak of him who was selfless, to destroy our loveless and self-centered way of life and to welcome us back into neighborly love. To those lost inside their houses and trapped behind their flickering screens, we respond by setting the solitary in families. Before those consumed by the bitter stories their tribes tell them, we confess the one who takes people from every tribe and tongue and nation and makes them into one body, united for all eternity. Jesus does not annihilate the individual. He makes us more truly ourselves than ever we were. He does not destroy culture but transforms it from within by giving it love's beating heart.

Our essayist also knows that there is no love without truth, and no truth without love. "The selfless love of Christ compels us to love others" (28). The beauty of Christian love in a pagan, postmodern world is the way that "God's love reaches its *telos*" in us. If our zeal against the false philosophies and 'unthoughts' of this world does not lead us to an equal zeal to rescue, nurture, welcome and help individuals who are confused and struggling in their grip, then we *are* the hypocrites our critics claim. "See how they love!" was a powerful apologetic in the first four centuries of the Christian era. It remains so today. It's as unanswerable as a sunrise.

If I were to note a couple areas where I would like our essayist to explore his thinking with us a little more, one would be the matter of structuralism (8). I believe that there are elements of truth in the structuralist's concept of linguistic *choice*. If a writer uses the aorist as his default tense in his Greek narrative, but then chooses to intersperse it occasionally with an imperfect, the fact that he has made such a choice bears some significance. I believe our essayist would agree with me that it was the post-structuralists like Derrida, really, who so exaggerated the binary, self-contained nature of language that they made choice the only or the overriding factor in meaning production. Post-structuralists also exaggerated the arbitrary nature of signs to the point

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<sup>4</sup> "You stopped making sense...since you let God in, you believe in sin, but of course there's no such thing, just like there's no Santa, no equality before the law"--The Radio Department, "You Stopped Making Sense." With thanks to my son John for introducing me to it. It's a beautiful song, despite these lyrics, expressing the rootless atheism of many we may meet.

<sup>5</sup> like the Greek skeptic who proclaimed that all was appearance and nothing knowable. One of my teachers in Madison remarked, "Pyrrho was said to be convinced that all things were simply appearances and opinions so that he could commit to nothing for certain. He would even step into a street in the path of an oncoming wagon." He then dryly added, "It was a good thing his disciples were there to pull him out of the way."

of sheer absurdity. Meaning was no longer a property of the author's intention, encoded in the text, but of the present reader's interaction with the absent author's writing--infinitely malleable. My point, if I have one, is that there is value in some of what structuralists may have to say if we don't push their conclusions too far.

Another area is one that my daughters have made me more aware of, living as they do in Minneapolis St. Paul. In conversations with them, I have long been a strong advocate for reclaiming natural law as an apologetic concept. But they have warned me about the dangers of such a project so far as their non-believing contemporaries are concerned. Now, to my way of thinking, I see the usefulness of natural law in discussion in much the same way as I believe the essayist does: chiefly as a common sense bridge between us and the non-believer, with the emphasis on "common sense." For example: is a suspicion against every authority ultimately sustainable (can a society function if we all live like Pyrrho?)

What I would like to ask the essayist is this: does your own pastoral experience jibe with what my daughters tell me: that if we start by trying to *make the case* for the *existence* of natural law at the outset, we will get nowhere. The concept is just rejected on its face. Nevertheless, whether we argue the *concept* or not, it still "works" at a common sense level. As my daughter Miriam said in describing the ethic of her contemporaries, "I can do whatever I like so long as I don't hurt anyone.--that's what they believe, dad." Then she conceded, "But who defines what 'hurting someone' means?"

I am sure that your essay will provoke many more questions as our audience thinks over its implications. It will because it's a *thoughtful* essay. It will also inspire a desire to dig more deeply, and to follow some of the pathways you have suggested in your manuscript. It will because it's a *scholarly* essay. Finally, it will also generate a sense of gratitude: you have served us well in your investigations. You have not only looked at postmodernism and its implications thoroughly but have stated things beautifully.<sup>6</sup> Your compassion and pastoral heart are visible on every page.

For all of it, our thanks!

Paul O. Wendland  
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<sup>6</sup> I won't soon forget, for example, those "pre-telescopic stargazers trying to understand the universe by gazing up at the balls of light in the night sky" (18).