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Through A Mirror Dimly: Social Constructionism Through the Lens of Faith

by Amy Quillin, Ph.D

ABSTRACT

Postmodernism has often been excoriated in Christian circles for its departure from commonly recognized principles of truth seeking. How can we, as educators, help students grapple wisely with this pervasive worldview in the context of encouraging a biblical and vibrant development of their faith? Are there components within postmodernism that might help inform students' faith development? This article will examine social constructionism, a variant of postmodernism, from the lens of Christian faith and spirituality, and will attempt to answer some of those questions.

INTRODUCTION

Like the yearly running of the bulls in Pamplona, every fall introduces new and returning students to the nations' college campuses. The development of students' faith on these campuses, both Christian and secular, faces many challenges not the least of which are competing worldviews.

The zeitgeist of current culture may best be reflected in postmodern thinking. If that is even moderately accurate, how then does a Christian college student—either in Christian or secular settings—respond? How does their faith and spirituality intersect with a pervasive postmodern worldview? In what way can we as educators encourage them to think reflectively, humbly, and well about this issue? How does postmodernism inform their faith development, and conversely, how does their faith inform their thinking about postmodernism? This paper offers a way to hopefully further enlighten the discussion on those questions.

An old parable tells the story of three blind men describing what they each believe to be three distinctly different things in front of them. One describes a long, thick, somewhat flexible cylinder, and concludes it must be a heavy rope. Another describes a very tall, large, solid immovable column with a rough exterior and deduces it must be a tree. The third describes a long skinny, flexible cord, with an evenly textured top half and a bottom half that is a shock of coarse-like string; he decides it must be a whip. As the familiar story goes, all three men were not, in fact, describing completely separate entities, but rather three distinct entities on one rather large elephant, namely the trunk, a leg, and the tail. The parable sets the stage for the direction of this paper

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which has as its purpose the consideration of postmodernism's social constructionism through the lens of Judeo-Christian faith and spirituality.

Social Constructionism

Definitions for both social constructionism and spirituality are somewhat amorphous and varied. Social constructionism in some ways defy definition; and even the way in which this author chooses to elucidate several characteristics of social constructionism in the hopes of defining it may itself, according to social constructionists, be a social construction. What one chooses to use in the process of definition is filtered through a biased lens and results from historical and cultural influences that help shape his or her worldview. Nevertheless, an attempt at a definition will be made.

Social constructionism purports that our beliefs, ways of thinking, and values are not inherently, innately, or objectively given, but rather are constructed within the framework of social interaction with others (Gergen, 1985; Gergen, 1994; Freedman and Combs, 1994; Gutterman, 1994). "Realities are socially constructed ... and constituted through language (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 27, 29). Reality and knowledge defy objectification, but are, rather, "a linguistic creation that arises in the domain of social interchange" (Gutterman, 1994, p. 228).

Furthermore, stories or narratives—both personal and cultural—serve as the means through which realities are organized and propagated (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Individuals live in a larger cultural story that maintains its narrative in various ways—institutions, norms, values—and they live and construct personal narratives in the ways they choose to talk, dress, and interact with others. Stories are never static, but are always subject to change both personally and culturally. Additionally, social constructionism refutes the idea of a universal basic human nature or concept of self. Self, according to Cushman (1995) "embodies what the culture believes is humankind's place in the cosmos. ... There is no universal, transhistorical self, only local selves; there is not a universal theory about the self, only local theories " (p. 23).

The result of the previous "tenets" is that universal truth is a fallacy; only subjective, local understandings of the world reside in the collective agreement of linguistic creations (Gergen, 1985; Freedman & Combs, 1996). Since reality is constructed, individuals subjectively experience their reality, not objectively know it. Finally, social constructionists, purport that viewing social reality as they do presents opportunities to assist in subverting the dominant culture that often perpetuates stories that oppress and marginalize individuals (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Gutterman, 1994). Western culture, for example, propagates dominant stories of racism, sexism, classism, and so forth, all of which either intentionally or unintentionally categorize, and thus marginalize, people who fall into certain categories. Those categories are often viewed as "truths" by the culture and its individual members, and the stories, then, of those "isms" continue to be perpetuated. Social constructionists, however, would contend that those categories are mere constructions, perpetrated by a culture that may be reluctant to change those categories, and so-called "truths," because of the shift in power that such a change might cause.

Social constructionism suggests, therefore, that (a) reality cannot be objectively known; (b) reality is constructed in the course of dialogue with others through the use





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of language, contextually formulated and mutually understood; (c) reality manifests itself through narrative; (d) the culture in which we live both shapes and is shaped by our realities; (e) the concept of self and human nature is not a universal one, but is stipulated by the culture in which the individuals find themselves; and (f) the culture itself often marginalizes its people groups with its creations of categories and so-called truths.

Spirituality and Faith

Spirituality and faith, like social constructionism, also defy definition in many ways, and some descriptive characteristics, rather than definitive definitions, may be more helpful to this discussion. According to Fowler (1981), “wherever we properly speak of faith it involves people’s shaping or testing their lives’ defining directions and relationships with others in accordance with coordinates of value and power recognized as ultimate” (p. 93).

Spirituality’s increased popularity in both entertainment and academic venues has given rise to competing views of this construct from different paradigms. Although definitions and views vary widely, certain components of spirituality find agreement among those attempting to describe it. These include: meaning and purpose, transcendence, and relationship to others, self, and that which is perceived as Ultimate (Elkins et al., 1988; Ingersoll, 1994; Westgate, 1996). Benner (1989), however, offers a description specifically of a more Judeo-Christian spirituality:

Spirituality is the human response to God’s gracious call to relationship with himself. ... it has its origin, meaning and ultimate fulfillment in God’s grace. It is grounded in our having been created in God’s image, designed for deep and intimate union with him. ... [spirituality is] our response to a deep and mysterious human yearning for self-transcendence and surrender, a yearning to find our place. (p. 20-21)

This construct of relationship holds chief importance in this author’s understanding of spirituality, and imbues its descriptions with more than just sterile abstractions. Among other descriptions, the Bible portrays God as a passionate bridegroom in pursuit of his bride (Isaiah 62:5; Jeremiah 3:14), as a nurturing mother sacrificially protecting and playfully comforting her young (Isaiah 66:13; Matthew 23:37), as a friend sharing the intimacies of close companionship (Exodus 33:11; John 15:14, 15), and as a father desiring to give his children the very best that he has (Psalms 103:13; Matthew 7:9-12). As Benner noted, God initiates relationship with his/her creation, and spirituality and faith development can only be understood in the context of this relational desire, and the privilege and responsibility we have to respond to and reflect it. Without relationship spirituality erodes into mere abstract rhetoric and/or pharisaical legalism.

The following assumptions can guide the consideration of postmodernism’s social constructionism from the lens of Christian spirituality and faith development:

1. There exists an infinite, transcendent Being, namely God, who created and sustains the world and its inhabitants, and has initiated relationship with those



inhabitants. The entire scope of the reality of God's existence stands beyond our ability to fully comprehend it, is not dependent upon our will to construct it, continues to exist in spite of our attempts to ignore or mitigate it, and remains constrained by the limitations of language to fully describe it. God's absoluteness is, admittedly, predicated on a degree of faith since the "fact" of this absoluteness defies human attempts to verify its certitude.

2. Truth exists. This statement is made with tentative caution, and with the added caveat that what we know of truth we know in part—gradations, varieties, and flavors—since what constitutes the whole of truth cannot yet be known. Truth is infinite and eternal; humans are finite and temporal. We only know, in part, the whole of truth.

With God as its genesis, and Christ as its ultimate fulfillment, truth expresses itself in myriad ways through the creation as a reflection of God's character and purpose on earth. Because truth is not confined to the finite, temporal, here-and-now, but is rather infinite and eternal, it exists in the paradoxical tension of fluid definition contextually framed, and the transcendent experience that both defies and incorporates culture, language, and history. Taylor (1992) cautioned against confusing truth with certainty. Certainty, intended to insulate individuals against the encroaching reaches of doubt and the interminable struggle for meaning, is a fallacy. Truth, on the other hand, accepted by faith, embraces doubt, pursues and provides the platform through which the struggle for meaning plays itself out, and invites individuals to live boldly and with passion in an uncertain world. Far from the sterility of abstract dialogue, truth manifests itself in the lived reality and storied lives of individuals' interactions with others, giving voice to the ultimate reality of Jesus as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 3:16, RSV).

3. People bear the image of God. They do so in myriad ways, but specific to this discussion, they reflect the person of God in that they are (a) relational, designed for relationship with God and others; (b) volitional, they possess the will to choose; and (c) purposeful, they move toward some desired ends based on their relationships and their choices (Crabb, 1987). Inherent in every individual, these characteristics will manifest themselves in as many different kinds of ways as there are individuals. God's image is certainly not confined to these characteristics, but individuals have been endowed with these traits as lived-out expressions of God's character.

4. God has revealed him/herself and engages in relationship with us primarily through the narrative process. Stories, parables, and metaphor constitute much of scripture and provide not so much a rigid set of instructions, as an invitation to participate in an on-going narrative that is a relationship with God and his/her creation. Scripture's repeating theme is, indeed, a love story with God as the heartsick, and often jilted, lover in passionate pursuit of those he/she loves.

Spirituality then, as espoused by this author, purports a passionately relational God who has revealed him/herself in the context of narrative, who transcends our ability to fully comprehend or describe him/her, who holds forth a reality of truthfulness in the context of relationship that both incorporates and surpasses the confines of social





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and historical location, and who has predisposed creation to bear his/her image. With this lens in place, spirituality will now critique—and be critiqued by—the tenets of postmodernism's social constructionism.

How They Differ

If all social reality is only that which we construct, it precludes the existence of God or any transcendent being that claims to exist beyond the human realm. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God's existence predates human existence, which negates the idea of God as a social construction. How can one construct something that already exists? Further, if the idea of God is only a social construction, then that idea has lost its transcendence, since God is then constrained and confined within the language and shared meanings of individuals. If we reduce God to only that which we socially construct him/her to be, he/she fails to possess any qualities or magnitude of qualities beyond what we, in our finite minds, can comprehend and express. God then becomes a manageable, even malleable, entity, and a mere expression of our own construction. Some may argue, however, that individuals may construct their God to be transcendent and eternal; but the finite and temporal individual, then, dictates transcendence and eternity toward a supposedly infinite and eternal being. How can the finite create infinity? How can the temporal construct eternity?

Furthermore, if truth and reality are merely constructed, and nothing transcends that construction, we have no way in which to evaluate ourselves, our communities, or our world apart from what serves us most usefully. Gergen (1994) stated a constructionism makes no denial concerning ... poverty, death, or the world out there, more generally. Neither does it make any affirmation. ... constructionism is ontologically mute. Whatever is, simply is (p. 72). With no higher authority or entity to which we appeal, apart from ourselves or even our historical context, we are relegated to those constructions that are held by the majority of people who find them most useful.

Taken to its natural conclusion, the idea of social constructionism silences any appeal to that which transcends our construction; and the idea of any kind of ethical or moral authority on which to measure behavior is rendered moot, because the "objective" basis on which to measure it gives way to "whatever is, simply is." What remains then, is merely the ability to describe what *is*—or at least to describe what is socially constructed as *is*—not what *ought* to be. Social constructionists then abandon any right or ability to assert the prescriptive *ought* and forfeit any claim of moral agency in their world (Walters, 1999; italics his).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) purported "no construction is or can be incontrovertibly right; advocates of any particular construction must rely on *persuasiveness* and *utility* rather than *proof* in arguing their position" (p. 108, italics theirs). That statement acknowledges the universality of human frailty and finiteness; humans are not in a position to ever assert being beyond error. Additionally, it honors the differences of individual experience in regard to reality—which is different than saying that reality itself changes for every individual. To say, though, that no reality exists other than that which can be socially constructed with persuasiveness and utility is to travel a dangerous path.



Jewish concentration camps, the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Rwanda, the early Crusades, slavery, racism, sexism, and all kinds of “isms” all were/are initiated and sustained by the constructions of reality perpetrated by those who were most persuasive about their utility. Those constructions of reality served, and continue to serve, a usefulness to those who most convincingly promoted that reality. If the only reaction offered to those incidents, however, is “whatever is, simply is,” and if no basis for ethical or moral reasoning exists, then we are precluded from asserting with any authority that Hitler was wrong, ethnic cleansing is heinous, and slavery despicably violates the human spirit. Taylor (1996) made this argument

We are all relativists to a degree, and should be. But we should also reject the kind of dogmatic relativism that suggests there is no such thing as truth and falsehood or good and evil in themselves, and vilifies anyone who suggests otherwise. This kind of relativism ... ultimately leaves us defenseless and powerless. No practicing moral relativist can lift a hand, or even a voice, against violence, aggression, racism, sexism, or any other evil in the world. (p. 144)

A social constructionist who concedes no higher authority than what is culturally constructed as most useful is limited to merely *describing* events of genocide, slavery or violence, and is rendered mute in *prescribing* what might possibly ought to have occurred in those situations.

Finally, social constructionism asserts that individuals have no universal, inherent nature (Cushman, 1995; Gergen, 1994; Hoskins and Leseho, 1996), that the whole of who we are is constructed from interactions with others within certain cultural settings. Certainly social interaction, cultural contexts and historical settings influence the development of who we are as individuals and societies. However, to make the claim that the whole of who we are is the sum of our social interactions and cultural contexts, presumes that individuals are in fact social or relational in nature. If social interaction presumes to have the influence constructionism claims it has, individuals require an inherent predisposition to those social influences. It necessitates that people are inherently socially or relationally oriented. Further, the impact of those influences, if individuals are going to be shaped by them, also presumes that those individuals have choice and are predisposed to making choices. Finally, social constructionism’s assertion of the primacy of social interaction and the individual’s ability to be shaped by them, in making decisions accordingly, further presupposes that individuals make those choices purposefully. For social constructionism to claim that the self is void of a universal, inherent nature and is comprised only of the sum of what is experienced through social interaction in a cultural context appears contradictory since that claim necessitates within the individual an inherent social, volitional, and purposeful orientation.

How They Inform Each Other

Despite the differences between spirituality and social constructionism, similarities do exist. Postmodernism’s social constructionism can, indeed, critique and inform our thinking of spirituality and faith development so that we become better readers of Scripture and livelier participants in the larger story God is crafting in and around us.

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Social constructionism honors the primacy of social relatedness and the impact that social connections have on individuals and communities. That we are relational beings designed for connection, predisposed to engage in the intricacies, complexities, sorrows, and joys of relationship is a tenet that both spirituality and social constructionism seem to share. The concept of relationship and social connection is critical to our being human, and both social constructionism and spirituality place a high premium on it.

Social constructionism also reminds us of the importance of culture, context, the use of language, and historical framework in the interactions we have with others, and it is a reminder that those of us who espouse a Christian spirituality need to hear often. God's desire for relationship has been the consistent—and constant—message expressed through the vagaries of culture, people groups, and language, from the Old Testament to the ecumenical church today.

Admittedly, the ecumenical church, serving as God's representatives on earth, has often failed miserably in its attempt to communicate this message of relationship. The Inquisitions, the Crusades, slavery, misogyny, violence against groups of people who fail to conform to certain behavioral prescriptions, all serve as indictments against a church that has missed the mark in honoring both God's message and the cultural and historical richness offered by different people groups. Postmodernism gives voice to that richness and serves as a signpost to that which the church, in its hubris, has often neglected. Hudson (1998) reminds us:

Postmodern thinking critiques the modernist tendency of limiting the voice of God to one voice and instead calls us to listen to the ensemble of many voices. ... [it] emphasizes difference by recognizing that many perspectives give us a better view of God. (p. 22)

Additionally, the need for humility is also evident in our quest for truth. As we continue to encourage faith's development in ourselves and in students, we need to remind ourselves to keep our minds open, our curiosity piqued, and our hearts pliable to new discoveries and nuances of reality. Postmodern thinking challenge us in our faith development to hold the idea of truth cautiously and inquisitively. As much as God has revealed him/herself through scripture, through history, and through the lives of others, he/she remains hidden still, infinite and beyond our ability to fully comprehend. The whole of truth is not and cannot yet be fully known, as Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, wrote "... for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall fully understand ..." (I Corinthians 13:12, 13, RSV). That does not, however, negate truth's existence nor our desire for it. Rather, it fosters the love of questions, the embracing of paradox, the appreciation of life's fluidity and circularity, the acceptance of mystery, and a reflective humility. Hudson (1998) stated "True sight does not begin in sight. ... the sighting of truth begins with the acknowledgment that I am blind" (p. 20).

Finally, social constructionism's emphasis on the importance of narrative aligns squarely with spirituality's assertion that story is one of the more common and compelling ways that God reveals him/herself. A social constructionist and postmodernist reading of scripture can allow the narrative of Scripture to "breathe" to not be static,





but instead to be alive. It invites us to bring our own stories to the text—our culture, our history, our shared understanding of language—and engage with the larger story of Scripture. We are encouraged to passionately pursue the person and truth of God in both Scripture and the storied lives of others.

Because Scripture transcends culture, and the truth emanating from it defies the constraints of time, our own stories can be seen transposed against the pages of the ancient narratives. The story of Job, for instance, becomes our story of demanding from God answers to the heart-wrenching events of life and the need for persistence and faith when answers are not forthcoming. The story of the woman caught in the act of adultery and forgiven by Christ resurrects itself in our lives as we recognize the ways in which we have been outcasts, deserving (figuratively) imminent stoning, and have then been granted a reprieve—the slate wiped clean—and our accusers, “not without sin,” made mute and sent away.

The most compelling narrative, of course, is the incarnation. If viewing reality as socially constructed presents opportunities to empathize with and honor the voices of the disenfranchised and those marginalized by the dominant culture’s metanarrative, Christ’s incarnation, the gospel itself, represents the zenith of that opportunity. The gospel is, paradoxically, its own metanarrative, “the greatest story ever told,” and yet Crouch (cited in *Christianity Today*, 2000) stated:

the problem with most such stories [metanarratives] is that they tell the truth in a way that benefits someone [and oppresses others]. But the Cross is a story in which the other is met by the non-other; God becomes the other and endures the full experience of marginalization. ... to be excluded ... to be crucified on a garbage heap—that is what the central figure of the story, indeed, the Author, the Person with all the power in the story, embraced. (80)

What was endured in the incarnation, and particularly at the crucifixion, was the full expression of oppression and marginalization to an extent never before, or since, realized. Christ’s response to that marginalization (perpetrated, lest we forget, by the fundamental religious leaders of the day) scripted a new story of response, “Father, forgive them,” and honored those who feel most poignantly the brunt of oppression perpetrated by the powerful. Scripture supports that the kingdom of God is not orchestrated by those who wield the most power, but rather by those who in some ways appear the least useful to society. It invites the voices of those outcasts to speak and live a new story, a story that has its beginning and ultimate fulfillment in the person and work of Christ, and gives meaning to the creative expressions of our individual and corporate stories.

CONCLUSION

How might the earlier parable of the three blind men now be understood? Social constructionism may contend that each man is constructing his own reality of what is before him. A Christian view of spirituality and faith, however, would counter that although each man encounters what appears to be a completely separate reality, they all experience a different part of what is a greater reality.

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Though differences exist between the two, postmodernism's social constructionism can inform our way of thinking about spirituality and Christian faith development by emphasizing the importance of the multiplicity of voices in dialogue, the significance of the cultural and historical context in which conversations take place, and the way they influence the individual and communal meanings of those dialogues. It invites us to glimpse the magnitude and complexity of language, relationship and story; it also comforts and awes us in reminding us that God "cannot be encircled, surrounded, or encompassed with language" (Hudson, 1998, p. 17). Social constructionism serves to remind us that though truth exists, it remains tenuous, and in the living of our stories we must be aware of our own "blindness" as well as attentive to the nuances of reality brought to life by the narrative of others and our participation in the transcendent story of God. Postmodernism's social constructionism invites our faith, and that of our students, to be strengthened on the anvil of a competing worldview, and humbled by the many ways in which God whets our appetite for the truth that will one day be revealed in its entirety, "face-to-face," and understood fully.

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