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PHILOSOPHERS, THEOLOGIANs, POSTMODERN STUDENTS: WHY THEY NEED EACH OTHER

By Joseph J. Feeney, S.J.

In November 2001, *Newsweek* interviewed a Princeton undergrad about his education, and with palpable regret he said “he had been taught how to deconstruct and dissect, but never to construct and decide.” Reading his comment, I acutely felt his sense of loss, and wondered whether a similar loss affects undergrads at Jesuit universities. This issue of *Conversations* prompts me to ask how much our professors of philosophy, theology, and religious studies help students to “construct,” to “decide,” and even to *affirm*—specifically, to affirm *meaning* and *faith*. I write, then, to propose a dialogue with philosophers and theologians about our students.

A number of my own students, I find, are “postmodern”—skeptical about truth, emotionally wary, prone to parody. Since 1993 I’ve taught “Modernism and Postmodernism” at Saint Joseph’s University (we study literature, music, art, and architecture, but not formal theory), and for their final essay I ask if they are modernist, postmodern, traditional, or some mix of these. Such a personal essay first baffles, then entrances them, as they discover aspects of themselves they never noticed. Probing their own lives, they tell me about themselves (I am always touched and honored by their trust in me), and a fair number call themselves postmodern in whole or in part. Thus allowed to know them, I find it my role as, well, professor of postmodernism, to raise this issue with my colleagues in philosophy and theology. I offer, then, a three-part invitation to dialogue: (I) What is postmodernism? (II) What do my recent students (Fall, 2006) say about themselves? (III) What kind of dialogue do I propose?

-I-

The word “postmodern” resists easy definition. Some dictionaries just omit the word, others focus on philosophy or architecture. *The New Oxford American Dictionary* (2001) is more encompassing, defining postmodernism as

a late 20th-century style and concept in the arts, architecture, and criticism that...has at its heart a general distrust

of grand theories and ideologies as well as a problematic relationship with any notion of “art.” Typical features include a deliberate mixing of different artistic styles and media [and] the self-conscious use of earlier styles and conventions...

In my own teaching, I begin postmodernism with a 1967 essay from *The Atlantic Monthly* where the novelist John Barth asserts that traditional art forms are tired, used-up, worn out, and can be used only “with ironic intent” as a wry comment on, or parody of, the past. As postmodernism develops, such suspicion of the past affects attitudes and convictions, and both art *and* life seem worn out, random, incoherent, meaningless. With little depth or stability, postmodern works glitter with surface verve: bright colors, bizarre collages, playful contradictions, references to their own artifice. For example, John Fowles’ novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) parodies Victorian prose, mixes past/present and fiction/reality, and has three endings. In Jeff Koons’ sculpture “Three Ball 50/50 Tank” (1985) three basketballs just float on water in a glass tank. Boundaries are pushed, freedom reigns. No longer able to be surprised or shocked, postmodernists grow cool and detached, their dulled emotions relieved by laughter and parody. I must say, though, that I find postmodern works fun to read, see, hear, and teach. But such freedom has its cost: like that Princeton student, people “deconstruct and dissect” but find it hard to “construct and decide.”

In the recent *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (2002), Christopher Butler of Oxford University reviews both theory and practice, finding the “party” of postmodernists “not particularly united in doctrine” yet “certain of its uncertainty.” “A deep irrationalism [lies] at the heart of postmodernism,” he writes, and “a kind of despair about the

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Enlightenment-derived public functions of reason.” Yet, he concludes, “I believe that the period of its greatest influence is now over.”

-II-

But postmodernism is not over for our students—the fragile, lovely people who sit before us in our classrooms. Many live with emotions dulled, trust and meaning limited, religious faith lost. Let me quote (with permission, for which I thank them) two of my postmodern students from last fall. One writes,

Life is completely random. Life is chaos. By acknowledging this simple truth I can elevate myself above the bullshit and find some meaning in life, and by that I mean I can make life mean to me virtually whatever I want...I can choose to interpret my life and the world around me in whatever way I see fit. That is a great power.

About belief, he continues,

Who knows if there is indeed a god or a Christ? If there is, I am not concerned...I would be satis-

fied with death as a complete non-entity. I do not want to waste my time puzzling over who created me and why I was put on the Earth...Polytheism is just as acceptable as monotheism, and atheism is just as feasible as Wicca...I say simply that God is whoever you wish him to be; live freely.

A second student describes his own stance:

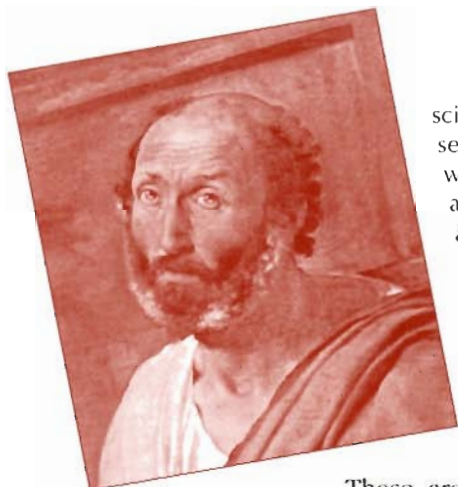
I think the postmodern world has given me my sense of humor—nothing is too ridiculous, and offensive (usually) equals funny...I don't take things seriously anymore...I cannot find any attachment for characters in a television program or movie—they are not real and there's no sense in feeling emotion for them...I became so cynical. And sometimes that cynicism bothers me...I just don't care about the outside world anymore...I am critical of everything—that way I don't get attached to something.

And about belief:

I don't believe in God or any religion, in fact, I believe in nothing. I see a chaotic world around me; I can't even begin to try to explain my con-



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sciousness. I've given up trying to search for answers—how the world was created, what is right and what is wrong, is there an afterlife?

He concludes, "What's next? I don't know. I would love to see what I am like 5 or 10 years from now—it's as big a mystery to me as it is to anyone else."

These are the students, the postmodern students, who sit before us at Jesuit universities. Not all students, of course, are postmodern. Many have strong faith; indeed, a current research project at UCLA on "Spirituality in Higher Education" finds undergraduates far more spiritual than is widely believed, though the students say they are ignored when they seek spiritual help from their colleges. Yet others have lost their faith in high school or in college, and a number, like the second student above, have lost their ability to feel:

I think the news media have had a profound impact on my worldview. How can I allow myself to feel emotion when watching the video of the World Trade Center fall to the ground? Just like every other American, I will never forget that day—but I don't think I was ever sad. I came home from school early that day, I remember my seeing sadness in my mom's eyes. I watched the news and then I went outside and played football with my friends. Sure, I felt sorry for the victims, but it was a gorgeous September day and I wasn't going to allow some outside event to govern my happiness.... I've seen that footage hundreds of times since then—I'd be in a state of clinical depression if I allowed myself to be sad. I have to cut it all off and feel numb.

What can I, a professor of English, say to such students? How can our professors of philosophy and theology help them, and help me? To seek an answer, I propose a dialogue of professors which I hope to begin here.

-III-

As we work to help our students, who might enter this dialogue? First, those who teach literature, philosophy, and theology—and of course our students, chaired perhaps by the dean of arts and sciences. Later, psychologists, sociologists, historians, campus ministry, student life, and the counseling center can well join in.

The basic issue is the plight of our students: are they, like the Princeton undergrad, taught *only* "to deconstruct and dissect" and not "to construct and decide"? Do we teach *only* information without offering meaning and faith—as if they were graduate students and not undergrads? The key word, I note, is "offer": we do not proselytize or browbeat, but we can surely offer, even advocate, certain stances, for we dare not stand by as students flounder. We who teach literature, philosophy, and theology, must offer more: this is the *magis* of a Jesuit education. And students deserve this educational "more," with a careful *balance* on our part: (1) we teach our fields with intellectual integrity and (2) with academic freedom, (3) in Jesuit institutions committed to faith (a triune God, Jesus as the Christ), (4) to justice (prophecy, service, the poor), (5) to the Catholic Church (with ecumenical consciousness), and (6) to each individual student. To help our students, I suggest, we professors need a dialogue on academic and religious *cura personalis*.

About what might we talk? About how best to offer our students—postmodernists and all the others—a worldview that questions *and* affirms. Literature offers them a rich humanism; philosophy, meaning and synthesis; theology, a belief that is intellectual, centrist-Catholic, ecumenical. Outside the classroom, campus ministry, service-learning, and semester-break trips offer their own invitations. To end, I return to my title: Why do philosophers, theologians, and postmodern students need each other? So philosophers can offer meaning, so theologians can offer belief, so students can discover—and affirm—both meaning and belief. We don't want our students to be like that disappointed Princeton undergrad in *Newsweek*. ■

