

Possible Responses of Jesuits in Science to Critical PostModern Culture

Louis Caruana SJ (Gregorian University)

GC34 mentions the fact that some philosophers are using the term ‘postmodernism’ to refer to current, global, cultural trends (§ 103108). To understand this term, one needs first to clarify the original idea of modernism. The term ‘modernism’, when used to describe culture, refers to a certain kind of optimism. For modernists, reflective analysis can lead to the basic, fundamental nature of reason, common to all thinking beings. Philosophy, as a logically consistent structure, will eventually arrive at an objective position that will be beyond all doubt, valid for all points of view. The modernist viewpoint therefore discredits the importance of the refractive nature of national worldviews and traditions. It views as an obstacle the idea that humanity is split into western and eastern, into scientists and nonscientists, into rich and poor. Lack of uniformity is a handicap. One should seek to level down all deviance from the norm. To do this, one has to look into the human subject, and extract the essential features common to all, features embedded within human nature. The assumption is that reality allows only one description. Once we arrive at this description, we can safely tell others about it, even perhaps impose it onto their culture for their own benefit.

Postmodernism is a cultural backlash against modernism. Thinkers who identify themselves with postmodernism are very suspicious of the modernists’ way of thinking. Indeed, for them, all *doctrine* as such is suspicious. Such thinkers are confident that, in spite of Descartes’ arguments, the human subject is not self-transparent at all. They insist that the subject is *essentially* dependent on language, practices and traditions. They hold that reason is not a universal given, but itself dependent on the local culture and historical epoch within which people live. They claim that reality is not a singular entity but a plurality of expressions without any kind of convergence. For them, both culture and reality are, and should be, *fragmented*. Some people may enjoy a kind of personal, religious faith, but a universal faith is not considered a good for humanity. Hence, Christianity, with its universalist programme, is a clear target. Natural Science is a target as well. Practically none of its atemporal claims about the nature of things is taken seriously, because, as postmodernists say, a scientific revolution tomorrow can revise all we take for granted today. Moreover, one can see that there is a comeback of things like astrology, white magic, witchcraft, and other new-age curiosities. Christianity and Natural Science, therefore, find themselves placed in the same basket: both to be surpassed by postmodernity. Scientists and Christians show the desire to say something about reality with a certain self-confidence. In doing this, they are, for postmodernists, quite amusing. They are a kind of fossil from the Enlighten-

ment, identifiable by the characteristic insensitivity to the parochial nature of their thinking.

The only respectable thing to do in this postmodern phase of world history is to help others realize that their discourse is always one among many others, that it can be confronted by rival modes of articulation. This kind of help, this therapy, is called *deconstruction*. It involves, among other things, making others aware of the fact that they are not driven by the pure desire to know, but by unconscious prejudices that they had inherited during their formation, from their previous choices and previous intellectual engagements, prejudices that become apparent only when their mode of discourse is set up against a rival. One can see that postmodernists refuse to get involved. They discuss only what others say. They insist on sitting on the fence. What they have to offer is not a systematic discourse but a metacommentary.

How can Jesuits in Science respond to such a postmodern culture? The first step is to understand what is happening. Burying one's head in the sand, or in the laboratory, doesn't help. I will try to explain what is happening by using the idea of colonialism. By colonialism, we understand the act of one country sending some of its citizens to live in another in view of establishing relations with that country. In some sense, colonialism can be considered neutral, neither good nor bad in itself. In fact, exchange of ideas and mutual appreciation between peoples can only come about by overcoming the natural boundaries that keep them apart. In the course of history, however, one sees that the relations between peoples established in this way were often intolerably aggressive and dominating. The colonisers often acted unilaterally, seeking their own advantage and that of their motherland, disregarding all respect towards human dignity, and even breaking the laws that were in force in their own country of origin.

This is the kind of colonialism that is clearly visible. The colonialism that is *not* clearly visible is cultural colonialism. Modernism, as a way of thinking, can be seen as a kind of cultural colonialism. As was said above, the modernist trend is to be overconfident as regards one's capacity to arrive at the true description of reality. Such confidence makes some people eager to go around telling others of their viewpoint, eager to sell it to them, or even eager perhaps to impose it onto their culture for their own benefit. Postmodernists have become aware of the dangers of this kind of cultural colonialism. They have taken, therefore, the diametrically opposite view. In fact, they have gone too far. They have moved from one extreme to the other. What we have now is cultural apartheid. Each culture has its own truth. Impenetrable walls have been built between peoples. From the trend to level down all cultural variety, we have moved to the opposite trend to promote cultural isolationism.

Once we have an idea of what is happening, we can ask: what practical measures can be taken by Jesuits in Science? Three strategies will be briefly sug-

gested. The first concerns our *presence*: being side by side with other scientists. Such a situation is an opportunity for us to help our colleagues know what is happening beyond the horizon of science. The diagnosis of culture carried out by postmodern thinkers is certainly useful as a *description* of certain trends in global attitudes. It is however dangerous when presented as a *normative* discourse: when presented not only as how things are, but also as how things should be. Jesuits in Science can be effective catalysts to counteract the fragmentation of humanity by promoting those core values that have been recognised internationally and expressed in the language of human rights.

The second possible response concerns *education*. Jesuits in Science can counteract the helplessness and cynicism associated with postmodern trends by emphasizing a return to *learning from* creation. Knowledge originates from elsewhere: it is not the pure product of our minds. This is a point onto which both science and genuine religion converge. Science discovers what is *given* in creation. It receives. Religion is concerned with what is received as well, received through revelation. Education should therefore impart to our students a healthy balance between tradition and novelty. Students should see us as teachers who encourage them to have a certain respect to what previous generations have handed down to us and also have the responsibility to make it better. Sometimes, what previous generations hand down to us is considered 'guilty until proved innocent'. This attitude, also linked to postmodernism, is selfdefeating in the long run.

The third possible response concerns the *genuine opening of the self to the transcendent*. Jesuits in Science, themselves immersed within a global postmodern culture like everyone else, can emphasize the aspect that we are all on pilgrimage towards the fullness of truth. It would be good if we could all become pilgrims of reverence, who do not use science as a weapon against humanity or against God, but who engage in it with modesty, a modesty that highlights how human words are never enough to encompass the greatness of God. Believers and unbelievers, modernists and postmodernists alike can all acknowledge that humanity has not yet arrived to the fullness of truth. Jesuits do well to recall that concepts used to refer to God must be left open. As St. Augustine wrote: if I understand it, then it is not God. There is still much work to be done.