

# That's So Meta: The Post- Postmodern Church

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Sometimes it seems to me that everything in this world is defined by 'post's. I was born in South Africa to a post-war Dutch immigrant, fleeing post-industrial Europe for a post-colonial future. In the post-apartheid economic drop, we moved, post hoc, back to postmodern Holland where I still live. The change from a racist to a post-racial society was a shock to me. My inborn fascination with language led me to pursue postgraduate studies at Newbold College in post-structuralism. There I met my post-feminist wife. She studied post-apocalyptic fiction, and is now pursuing a PhD in posthumanism. Currently, I work post-pastorally as an administrator, in this post-lapsarian world. More specifically, in post-Christian Holland. The best part about this paragraph? I didn't even make up a single one of those words.

These days we seem eager to explain what we come after, but not where we currently are. If you were to ask me where I currently am, I would tell you I'm from the Netherlands. We have one of the fastest-growing European Adventist churches, though sadly, like many European churches, our growth mainly happens through immigration. What's behind these changes in the European church? It has something to do with yet another 'post' – in this case post-Christianity.

## **United States**

Before I bring Europe into the equation, let's look at the USA for a moment. Nowadays more and more people are unchurched in the USA; in fact, about half of the people living there don't go to church regularly. Despite this, however, these people remain Christian. Let me explain what I mean with some statistics from a recent study by the Barna Group:

When asked to identify their faith beliefs, 62% of unchurched adults consider themselves Christians. Most of the churchless in America—contrary to what one might believe—do not disdain Christianity nor desire to belittle it or tear it down. Many of them remain culturally tied to Christianity and are significantly interested in it. More than one-third (34%), for example, would describe themselves as “deeply spiritual.” Four in ten (41%) “strongly agree” that their religious faith is very important in their life today. More than half (51%) are actively seeking something better spiritually than they have experienced to date. One-third (33%) say they have an active relationship with

God that influences their life and are most likely to describe that relationship as “important to me” (95%), “satisfying” (90%) and “growing deeper” (73%).<sup>1</sup>

What this information boils down to is that, although a large percentage of Americans don't regularly attend church, and might not represent what Adventists would call 'Christians', Christianity still plays a very important role in their day-to-day lives.

## Europe

Now let's compare this to data from Europe.<sup>2</sup> In the USA half the population does not attend church regularly, but most of these people still consider themselves Christians. The European picture is radically different.

In the Netherlands, a 1999 survey put the portion of the population that goes to a religious service once a month at one in four. Since then this number has dropped to 12-16%. Now less than one in ten people go to church once a week, which is less than a third of the percentage of weekly attendees in the USA (26%). In fact, in the Netherlands more than half of people would never go to church at all if it weren't for weddings and funerals. If you were to ask a Dutch person: 'Does religion occupy an important place in your life?' Two out of three would say 'No'. If you were to go just a little bit north to Sweden, that number would be even higher (83%).

Only one in four of the Dutch believe that there is a God.

The worst part is that these are averages. The statistics are skewed by the large, much more religious generation of baby boomers. In almost all of these statistics, if you look at the generation born after 1980, you can divide the numbers by half. For my generation we can say: 7% go to church once a month, 85% never go to church at all.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/698-10-facts-about-america-s-churchless#.VNv4QEJy1vU](http://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/698-10-facts-about-america-s-churchless#.VNv4QEJy1vU).

<sup>2</sup> These statistics are a combination of the results found in the following places: [www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/vrije-tijd-cultuur/publicaties/artikelen/archief/2013/2013-3929-wm.htm](http://www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/vrije-tijd-cultuur/publicaties/artikelen/archief/2013/2013-3929-wm.htm); [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_341\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_341_en.pdf); [www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/bevolking/publicaties/bevolkingstrends/archief/2013/2013-het-belang-van-religie-voor-sociale-samenhan-pub.htm](http://www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/bevolking/publicaties/bevolkingstrends/archief/2013/2013-het-belang-van-religie-voor-sociale-samenhan-pub.htm); [www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/vrije-tijd-cultuur/cijfers/incidenteel/maatwerk/2013-religie-mw.htm](http://www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/vrije-tijd-cultuur/cijfers/incidenteel/maatwerk/2013-religie-mw.htm); and [www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/vrije-tijd-cultuur/cijfers/incidenteel/maatwerk/2013-religie-mw.htm](http://www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/vrije-tijd-cultuur/cijfers/incidenteel/maatwerk/2013-religie-mw.htm).

While many in the USA leave the church, it seems that most remain Christian in an important way. Though they may be post-church, they are certainly not post-Christian or even anti-Christian. Europe, on the other hand, is emphatically post-Christian. What do I mean with this term? We can broadly define a post-Christian society as follows:

A society or culture where Christianity no longer is a meaningful part of civil discourse or public policy. This is a society where, over time, diverse values, religious and secular, have marginalised distinctively Christian beliefs, symbols, and rituals.

The times they are a-changing. We are looking at new world order, a new zeitgeist. Though it hasn't yet hit the USA as hard as it's hit Europe, post-Christianity – along most of the other 'posts' – seems like it's here to stay. Fortunately for us, there is one 'post' we may not have to worry about for very long: postmodernism.

## **Postmodernism**

I always like to say: 'My dad is postmodern, I'm something else altogether.' You see, postmodernism died in 2000. We are living in the post-postmodern age (bear with me on the name), and that means that these are exciting times. Why are we no longer postmodern? For that we need to take a quick look at our history.

Rewind your mind to the 1900s Europe. Actually, rewind even further. Back in the 18th century we had the Enlightenment and later the Industrial Revolution. We had two centuries of great advancement, and amazing new scientific discoveries. Many scientists living in the nineteenth century even thought humankind would know everything there was to know within 10 or 20 years. In general there was a huge sense of optimism.

This society also believed in Progress, with a capital P. Mankind was moving Forward. We were going Somewhere. In history, we call this time period and all its ideas the modern era. In this era, society imagined that as a result of their immense knowledge they would eventually achieve Utopia. A heaven on Earth: this is what people really expected. They were waiting for a perfect, wonderful society, brought about by Technological and Scientific Progress. But instead of a Utopia, what did they get?

Armageddon.

Seriously. Almost an entire generation dead in the trenches of World War I. And then, just make sure everyone knew it was not a hiccup on the road to Progress, we had another World War from 1940–1945, this time with some genocide added to the mix. What was the result of this double Armageddon? Our dreams were dashed. Our hopes were hazed. Society expected Utopia and got Dystopia instead. This was a greater disappointment than the Great Disappointment. And people realised a number of things. Firstly: Progress clearly did not exist, because it did not happen. In fact, all of these modern ideas with capital letters were lies. But worse than this, we learned that powerful people and organizations use big ideas to oppress other people: Nationalism to get you to fight, Progress to get you to work, Salvation to get you to pay. The Powers that Be paint big pictures so that they can use and abuse us. The church did it throughout the Middle Ages, and now, in the twentieth century, it turns out that the governments do it too.

## **Disbelief**

With this revelation about how big pictures were abused by those in power, not only did people stop believing, they became distrustful of all big pictures. This distrust killed the gospel. 'For God so loved the world' was just too big, and had been misused for too long.

But it *still* gets worse. People realized that the way power gets you to believe in big pictures is by building truth claims into them. The Catholic church claimed they knew the truth, and people wanted to do what was true and right. But this truth was just an excuse to get people to buy into their pardons, to get people to pay them money. And the governments did exactly the same thing. So not only were big pictures (or 'metanarratives') now out the window, so was anyone who said anything about truth. This distrust killed the churches. The organization proclaiming 'I am the Way, the Truth' was no longer believed.

This was all part of what the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard called the 'postmodern condition'. Society had moved past the modern, with all its hopes and dreams, to something new: the postmodern. An age of disillusionment.

## The Postmodern Defined

Now, the postmodern is notoriously impossible to define. That's a bit of a running joke among academics. Virtually every article on the postmodern begins by saying that its very nature makes it impossible to describe definitively, and then tries anyway.<sup>3</sup>

So let's give it a go.

Firstly, in postmodernism there is disbelief in metanarratives. No more Utopias. Furthermore, there is a distrust of truth claims. No more ultimate Truth. Finally, everything becomes fragmented. This started with anti-nationalism, moved into the distrust of major units in society, and eventually even the individual was seen as fragmented.

That is postmodernism, in essence.

In the minds of many it was science and the critical method that killed religion, but these are tennets of modernity. The decline of Christianity took place much later, when a postmodern generation left the church. A postmodern generation, growing up in a modern world, who automatically distrusted all truth claims and metanarrative. This postmodern generation did *not* raise their children as Christians. And I'm putting that mildly.

## The Postmodern Generation

Who is this postmodern generation? Not me. I was only born in 1979, the same year Lyotard published his book *The Postmodern Condition*. He was an academic, not a prophet. He was describing the cultural trends in Canada and France back in the 1970s, not our current culture in the twenty-first century. Lyotard did not describe me, a 35-year-old European, today. Lyotard described my parents' generation, people who are now 50, 60, even 70 years old. My dad is postmodern, I'm something else altogether.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. It begins with the sentence, 'That postmodernism is indefinable is a truism.' The first word of the second sentence is 'However.' Gary Aylesworth, 'Postmodernism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2015, 2015.

I am the generation that wasn't raised Christian, not the generation that left the church. I am the generation that doesn't know what the Bible is, not the generation that stopped reading the Bible. My parents' generation is where you'll find the anti-Christians. My generation is just ignorant.

Of course, I'm talking about Europe here.

The European postmodern generation, torn by a war on their home soil, left the churches behind. In the USA the postmodern generation protested and demonstrated. Opposition rose against the Vietnam War, against racial segregation, against the discrimination of women. The American belief that there are 'truths' that are 'self-evident', and that people have 'unalienable rights', hung on for a while. While the Europeans rejected truth and metanarratives completely, their American peers seemed to have trouble with that. Belief in 'Liberty' and 'Democracy' remained strong, as did belief in 'the church'. The effects of postmodernity were never as evident in the USA, and so, for the moment, the USA is less post-Christian as well.

For the moment.

### **Post-Christianity**

America has had its own crises recently: the credit crunch, the collapsed World Trade Center, the political stalemate, climate change. In Europe the postmodern generation left the church, while in the United States the current generation is the most likely candidate. But this generation is not the postmodern generation.

Now, we generally notice that people inside the church are less postmodern than those outside. This is probably due to the modernizing tendencies of Adventism. The church loves truth claims and loves the Great Controversy, our metanarrative. If you go to church regularly, you are formed by church and accept these modern tenets more easily. What I notice in the church, however, is that we often think that the members are not postmodern. We have postmodern ministries with postmodern sermons. We show postmodern videos and hand out postmodern postcards. We seem to feel we are ministering to the postmodern world outside the church, like postmodernism is some kind of Babylonian influence.

This is a crazy idea. Most of the church in the West is postmodern. The church is not ministering to postmodern people. The church is postmodern people ministering. This divide that we have created does not exist, and in essence we ask our members to remove their hats when they enter the church – only those hats are their postmodern identity.

If my dad is postmodern, what am I? Times change, and the cultural landscape now is very different than it was forty years ago. While the younger generations are clearly influenced by postmodernity, just as the older generation was influenced by modernity, these generations are moving on. There are new buzzwords that replace the postmodern: metamodernism, posthumanism, neo-modernism, new materialism, to name a few.

We minister in a post-postmodern world. This is a world where postmodernity has happened; a world that has been changed by postmodernity. When we minister we need to keep that in mind. This is a serious challenge for the Adventist church.

## **Post-Postmodernity**

At the risk of making us even more exhausted by 'posts', what is this post-postmodern, post-Christian culture we belong to? Like with all ideas, it takes a while for us to put these things into words. Academics have postulated a number of suggestions about where we are not and where we are headed, but recently I read an article about one idea that really resonated with me: metamodernism.<sup>4</sup> Note the 'meta', like in 'metanarrative'.

Postmodernity is characterized by the destruction of hope in a better world. The Utopian ideals of progress, ultimate knowledge, and peace died in the trenches of France. This led to great cynicism in our culture. Nothing could be seen as sincere or real. Growing up in a world without hope has led to what this thing called metamodernism, and these metamodern people have found a way to juggle both cynicism and hope in one worldview.<sup>5</sup> Metanarratives can't be trusted, but without a metanarrative there is no hope. Metamodernism brings back the hope in 'a kind of

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<sup>4</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2 (2010). These two scholars also maintain a blog on metamodernism: [www.metamodernism.com](http://www.metamodernism.com)

<sup>5</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism', *Studia Neophilologica*, 2014, 1–13.



informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism.’<sup>6</sup> In other words, there’s hope in a good future, even though we know that it will never be.

Earlier I said we live in a ‘post-’ world. And that is stupid. If we live in the present, every single thing in the world is ‘post.’ Many of us are now post-breakfast. And the past is still with us; the breakfast is in our stomachs. But what does that mean? Nothing really. Saying we are post-breakfast is much less interesting than saying we are busy digesting. That’s why this new trend is not called post anything, but ‘meta’. Beyond modernism. Bigger than postmodernism. Digesting both.

A very simple definition of metamodernism is this: it ‘attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find.’<sup>7</sup>

## Dealing With Metamodernism

If we thought that postmodernity was a challenge, then I don’t know what this is. In my country, most of this generation is not in the church, but can you imagine if they were to join?

How does the church deal with new members who believe in something they know can’t be true? How do members react when my generation joins and prays to a God that they know is not there? When they passionately read and interpret the Word of God, loving every syllable but knowing it’s produced fiction? When my generation is ironic and sincere *at the same time*?

Now don’t get me wrong, I am *not* saying that God is not there or that the Bible is fiction. I am saying that if we are successful in evangelization and retention, we will have members who, *no matter what*, will always think these things. Who think in contradictions and cannot think without paradoxes. And it’s a challenge.

In my post-Christian country, there is a generation of metamodernists. This generation grew up knowing there is no truth and distrusting all meta-narratives, yet feeling this desire for both. If, somehow, despite the generally ineffective evangelism methods of most churches, a metamodern individual gets in touch with

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<sup>6</sup> Vermeulen and Van den Akker, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Vermeulen and Van den Akker, p. 5.

a church, two things happen. On the one hand this individual feels a coercive force causing her to identify with the Christian message, and on the other hand, she will remain intellectually aware of its implausibility. Believing in spite of herself, in an informed naivety. Believing in a better world that will never truly come, a pragmatic idealism.

And is this so strange? I do wonder. Faith is, after all, the assurance of things hoped for.

## **Paradoxes**

Christianity is a religion of strange paradoxes. James teaches that we will be exalted through humbleness (James 4:10). Paul says to the Corinthians, whenever I am weak I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:10). Jesus says that we will receive through giving (Acts 20:35). Paul tells the Romans that by being set free we became slaves (Romans 6:18). Jesus teaches that through dying we live (John 12:24). Paul tells the Philippians that gains are losses, and losses are gains (Philippians 3:7-8). And Jesus says that if you find your life you will lose it, and if you lose your life you will find it (Matthew 10:39).

These contradictions are what metamodernists thrive on. Oscillating between conflicting ideas, moving back and forth between two poles, always focusing on one and ignoring the other, to immediately swap around and focus on the other, ignoring the one. For metamodernists the meta-narrative is not dead, it just needs some reframing. I see many metamodernists in church. People who, despite their cynicism, hope against hope for a better future.

This hope against hope is also something perfectly American and very current. Recently the USA has been producing a lot of young adult dystopian stories: *Divergent*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*. These are movies where the world is terrible, and where just watching the lives the characters have makes you uncomfortable. There's a future, but how great does that future look to most of us? The government has collapsed, the social structure has disintegrated, the world is over.

I don't want to spoil any of these stories for you, but trust me when I say there's light at the end of the tunnel. It may not be not much, but it is a future. These movies resonate with young adults because the young adults are metamodern. They

feel like they were born into a world where everything has collapsed, a world ruined by previous generations – but focusing on that is boring and stifling, They can easily get behind stories where heroes fight against that negativity for a better future, even if it's only a little better.

I see many metamodernists in church, people who, despite their cynicism, hope against hope for a better future. We need to be a church that allows space for this believing disbelief. For sincere irony. For people who thrive on paradoxes. How can we be that church?

### **Church for the Post-Christian Age**

Fortunately, the problem is not the gospel. The gospel, 'God loves you' is a great message. The meat of the message (or 'vegetarian meat-replacement of the message', I should say) is great. The problem is the modern sauce that we put on the message. To continue the metaphor, the Adventist pioneers developed a wonderful, nutritious dish for the modern age. The church grew up, big and strong. In many modern cultures we are still growing fast, but in the West we are barely growing at all, and if we do grow it's among the modern immigrants, not the postmodern (or metamodern) ones.

This is a difficult realization, because through the years the Adventist sauce has slowly become Adventism itself. Our pioneers believed in searching for meaning in the Bible, and finding answers together. While we still believe this, we hardly practice it. We don't organize evangelism campaigns where we help people search for answers. We show them, we tell them, we teach them.

The main problem is that we know people have questions, so we give them answers. People have questions, so sermons give the answer, so Bible studies give the answer. But that is the wrong way of dealing with contemporary culture. People don't want answers, or at least, not just one answer. They want to find their own answers. And an answer earned is always better than an answer given.

The inhabitants of this post-postmodern world are good at discovering answers. This is a generation of people who are excellent at looking up all the right answers, and then developing their own answers from there. We just need to give them a chance

to take that last step. They are story-savvy. They are critical readers. They can deconstruct texts left and right without even knowing that's what they are doing.

An answer earned is always better than an answer given. This is not even new. Think of the gospels. A man comes to Jesus and asks a simple question: 'Who is my neighbor?' Jesus responds with: 'Well let me tell you this incredibly complicated story about a man, a Samaritan, a Levite and a donkey. And then I'll ask you the same question.' Jesus hardly ever gave answers. Jesus taught by asking questions. He helped people answer their own questions, and often there was more than one answer to be found.

Unlike Jesus, we generally teach by giving answers. Answers that the people around us don't want. If we want to be effective, we need to assume that people don't want the truth (even though we know how wonderful it is). We need to assume that they don't want the Great Controversy (even though we value it so highly). They don't want *the* answers. They just want *our* answers.

People want experiences. They want guides. They want little pieces of the puzzle, fragments that they can add together to make their own whole. Adventism has excellent fragments: health, rest, Jesus, a loving God, a wonderful future, forgiveness. We should share these pieces of the puzzle. We need to connect, not with the health message, but with a great recipe. We need to connect, not with the Sabbath, but with the Sabbath Sofa. If you don't know what that is, give it a Google.<sup>8</sup> We need to connect, not with the cross, but by sharing the relief that forgiveness brings to a guilty conscience. We need to connect through Jesus, not theology.

We need to stop thinking we know the answers, the path, or the life. Rather, we need to share *our* lives, *our* path, *our* answers, so that others can find *their* life, *their* path, *their* answers. So we can find answers together. And we need to keep hoping against hope for a better future.

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<sup>8</sup> Or check out [www.sabbath.org.uk](http://www.sabbath.org.uk).