

Faith and Culture

Ideas for leading a Conversation

These sessions are based on the format pioneered by Agora. For general guidance in running these sessions see 'Planning a Conversation' at www.agoraspace.org

Background

In recent years, the whole of society has started to go through a massive shift in culture to what is labelled by some as post-modernism or liquid modernism. This transition has affected the church massively as people have left in droves. This discussion attempts to look at the cultural shift that is taking place and whether the increasing isolation of the church is a necessary aspect of her faithful witness or a failure to read the signs of the times and re-examine church culture.

Starter questions for small group discussion

1. What are the positive and negative aspects of the changes in society in your lifetime?
2. Are there parts of your faith that you are no longer comfortable with? Why? What positive changes in Christianity have you experienced?
3. Are there things in your culture that you would like to bring in to your faith?
4. Are there ways that the church could become more relevant to our society?

One way through the conversation

Do not feel tied to this.

Begin the evening with a short introduction followed by Question One

Your introduction will highlight aspects of culture to which attitudes have changed: Experts of various kinds and institutions, mobility, technology, morality, consumerism

What are the positive and negative aspects of the changes in society in your lifetime?

Discuss this in small groups and then gather together the views expressed.

Take the negative aspects and see if you can find contexts in which they become positive. For example how a lack of respect for authority allows people to challenge experts when they are wrong.

Move on to Question Two

Are there parts of your faith that you are no longer comfortable with? Why? What positive changes in Christianity have you experienced?

Possibilities

Morality – condemnation of ‘unacceptable’ sexual behaviour

Attitude to other faiths

Disconnection from the concerns of the world

Finding church unspiritual

Social concern: Jubilee 2000

Alt Worship

Move on to Question 3

Are there things in your culture that you would like to bring in to your faith?

Likely Possibilities

Aesthetics – candles, lighting, ambient music

Film

Move on to Question 4

Are there ways that the church could become more relevant to our society?

Resources

'A church which is married to the spirit of it's age will be a widow in the next.'

– Dean W. R. Inge

Roots of Modernism¹

Individualism – Each person is ultimately autonomous.

Rationalism – A strong confidence in the power of the mind to investigate and understand reality.

Factualism – The individual, through the use of reason, can arrive at objective truth.

Evangelicalism as a Modernist Construct

As the world moved from a medieval world-view to a mechanistic world-view, the church abandoned mystery and embraced confidence in reason and science as a way of knowing objective truth.

The Bible was criticised as having contradictions to science, history and reason.

While liberals sought to amend the faith in response, conservatives developed “evidential apologetics”. They developed the doctrine of inerrancy, the apologetic use of archaeology and critical defence of the Biblical text as attempted rational proofs. This defence was based on the priorities and tools of modernism.

Forces for Change

The scientific revolution

The philosophical revolution

The communications/technology revolution

Urbanisation – mobility, anonymity

Cracks in Modernism

Progress

Objectivity

Rationalism

Linearity

Truth

Reality

Institutions

Moral Shift

Aspects of Post-modernism

Urbanisation

Pluralism

Holism

Juxtaposition

Despair

Apocalyptic

Friendship

Truth v Reality

Immediacy

Spirituality

¹ Material from this paragraph and the next adapted from Robert E. Webber, *Ancient Future Faith* (Baker Books, 2004)

Post-Modernism

Definitions

'It is not an ideology, but an instinctive mistrust of all ideologies, including ours. It is not itself a culture, but rather the insistence that all cultures can be mixed and matched. It is not an ethic, but rather a tendency to assume that no ethical claims have any wider significance than that of the group norm. Postmodernity is a set of attitudes that affect millions of people who could never articulate these thoughts or even spell 'postmodernity'. It is the air we breathe, the vague collection of presuppositions that is increasingly making up what unreflective people will call 'common sense'²

'Postmodernity is what happens when marginalized peoples refuse to keep quiet anymore, and the result is the emergence of a whole new consciousness, which, while embracing the need for objectivity, insists that non-rational perception is of equal importance; that ambiguity, feelings and intuition provide real information too.'³

'This word has no meaning. Use it as often as possible'

Characteristics⁴

Modernity	Postmodernity
Coherence	Incoherence
Logic	Experience
Unity	Diversity
Principles	Situational Ethics
Abstract Ideas	Practical Techniques
System	Suspicion of Ideologies
Text	TV

Shifts in thinking⁵

Pre-Modern	Modern	Post-Modern
Pre-Critical	Critical	Post-Critical
Superstition	Reason	Intuition
Mythology	De-Mythologizing	Re-Mythologizing

Evangelical Growth Areas

- ✓ Societies in the process of urbanisation
- ✓ Societies becoming literate
- ✓ Societies where the nuclear family is prized

² Meic Pearse and Chris Matthews – *'We must stop meeting like this...'* (Kingsway, 1999)

³ Dave Tomlinson – *'The Post-Evangelical'* (Triangle, 1995)

⁴ Table drawn up from *'We must stop meeting like this...'*

⁵ Table from Dave Tomlinson – *'The Post-Evangelical'* (Triangle, 1995)