

## **The 1998 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture**

### Growing Up Postmodern: Imitating Christ in the Age of "Whatever"

#### Introduction

Descartes is history. That's the conclusion of postmodernity. Foundational truth is out, relativity is in. Trace it to Hiroshima, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Challenger explosion. Technology is not the panacea we thought it would be. Trace it to Watergate, liposuction, spin doctors. Truth is not an objective reality anymore. Trace it to institutional differentiation, Baskin Robbins, cable TV. Choice can paralyze as well as liberate.

Nobody knows this better than the young people whose coming of age coincides with the turn of the millennium. They live in a world where microchips are obsolete every eighteen months, information is instantaneous, and parents change on weekends. The one constant in the postmodern adolescent's experience is upheaval. Truth changes daily. The signature quality of adolescence is no longer lawlessness, but awelessness. Go ahead, youth say to the church. Impress me. When everything is true, nothing is true. Whatever.

It's true that we live in a world that considers truth too relative to specify. The comics brought us mutant "X-Men" and now "X-Women"; consumer thinking brought us X-brands and X-spouses; pop culture brought us X-Files and Generation X. The letter "X" is having a banner decade, labeling "whatever" we don't have the time or the inclination to explain.

Maybe the word "whatever" found its way into the contemporary adolescent vocabulary because "X" describes precisely the Truth they seek. In the early church, the Greek letter "X" (chi) referred to Jesus Christ. This generation of young people is neither the first nor the last in search of "X." Paul recognized this quest in the Athenians, who went as far as to erect an altar to "an unknown god":

What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. . . The One who is Lord of heaven and earth. . . made all nations. . . so that they would search for God. . . . God will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom God has appointed, and of this we are assured because God raised him from the dead. (Acts 17:23-31)

We all seek "X," God's Truth beyond relativity. We are here because we are called to imitate and obey and proclaim this Truth to all who worship unknown gods. The Truth is out there, for young people and for us.

May you find grace to peruse the "X-Files" of your own life in the days ahead, as we grope for "X" together. Though, indeed, he is not far from each of us.

Godspeed,  
Kenda Creasy Dean  
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry

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# Youth between Late Modernity and Postmodernity

Martin E. Marty

*Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven and earth — as in fact there are many gods and many lords — yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom we are all things and through whom we exist.*

1 Corinthians 8:6

**W**e will not pay too much attention to the context of this text. Paul is writing to Corinthian believers about a distinct problem: whether the baptized should eat meat sacrificed to “so-called gods.” We and our young people have problems enough of our own, and no doubt some of them are similar to those that plagued Corinth. But we shall try to hurry to our modern Corinthians.

Why, then, cite the text? First, because it poses a situation common to Christians through all ages. And, with youth in mind, we have to say also Christians of all ages. The young are busy making decisions, many of which have to do with what signals they will both receive and accept. Will the lures of their culture, many of which amount to “so-called gods,” receive their devotion? Or can and will they continue to be disciples, acknowledging one God, one Lord? In both the cases of God, called by Paul “the Father,” and of the Lord, “Jesus Christ,” the same holds true: “all things” come from this God and this Lord, and through this God and this Lord we “exist.”

The particular time and place that appear to set the stage for the cast of characters here called “youth” are coming to be called “postmodern.” This is neither the time nor the place for us to set the world straight about whether there is such a thing as postmodernity. Neither is it the occasion for us to contribute to debates over literary and historical theory. University departments, libraries, and salons are full of discourse — itself a postmodern activity — about postmodernity.

Our task is to fill the concept of postmodernity with enough substance so that we can address the question of Christian faith and discipleship among today's young. Thus, we shall describe only enough of what gets called postmodernity to advance the Christian question.

The young are pioneers living on the frontier between what gets called "late modernity" and early "postmodernity." Those who observe them and who participate in their perceiving and deciding have reason to note two ironies.

First, many of those who whine about the present scene, a scene that credibly occasions whining as well as devastating criticism, now look back at the time we may call "high modernity" as "The Good Old Days" for faith, church, living, and being young. Yet when such modernity prospered and had not yet been questioned by many who thought it was time to put a "post" in front of it, the period was viewed as being destructive of faith. Might we not do better simply to deal with the issues that our grandparents faced and then to deal with those that are before us, rather than to determine whether the old was "better," whether what has just passed was the only arena God could present to those who would be faithful?

Later we shall describe at least three features of high modernity. For now, let it be noted that what one historian called "the pitiless and persistent rivals" to Christianity appeared in this period, which began with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Its thinkers proposed to replace faith with reason, Christian knowledge with critical, scientific, skeptical learning, and life under Christ's Lordship with the idea of progress. In the nineteenth century and after, the bearded godkillers of modern times — Nietzsche, Darwin, Marx, and Freud — issued their devastating challenges to faith. In practical living, ordinary people took on ways of life that undercut inherited patterns of nurture.

In the United States, religious institutions and impulses not only survived but also remained surprisingly strong. However, the faith communities had lost their privileged status, and religion had to settle for being put in a little, private box. "Religion is a private affair," Americans came to say. They assigned it a time on weekends when there was leisure. They gave it a place: home, away from work, away from where basic decisions about culture and society were made. Those were "modern times," and Christians came to accept both the bargain and the contract the society offered, although they were critical and often grumbled, retreated on many fronts, and tried to win back on others. But following the Lordship of Christ in any profound way was as hard then as it has always been and will always be. Those times were not a Golden Age for faith. Yet they inspire nostalgia. When we look upon the bad old times as the good old days, we evade dealing with what is.

Today we are given a new cultural package. We do not have to accept it. Nor do we have to accept descriptions of it, which are self-contradictory. They reach

different people and different communities in different ways. But that cultural package provides the air we breathe and the environment for what I call the mental “furnished apartments” we keep on redecorating and in which we continually rearrange the furnishings.

The young, those pioneers at the borders of postmodernity, are living in a culture that bears many resemblances to the world in which Christianity began. It is a time when “so-called gods” and “many gods and lords” beckon as they did then. Two thousand years ago, the faith and the believers, despite greater hazards and obstacles than those we know, survived and prospered. Harassment, loss of privilege, persecution, and even martyrdom shadowed their lives. Yet in the midst of distractions and lures, among the many philosophies and attitudes that people around them held to and displayed, they endured. It may be that they offer a better precedent for dealing with youth and the faith than does the recent past.

Both a plague and a feature of postmodernity is its fluidity and viscosity. It takes different shape under many eyes and in many hands. So postmodern definitions are unstable, temporary, and easily contradicted.

What preceded postmodernity? We will use an extremely broad brush and speak of “premodern” times first. There is no need to be precise about chronology. These are the “olden days” of the Middle Ages, of Reformation times, up until the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Of course, features of these times lived on and live on, and there are pockets where premodernity still reigns. The Amish are not the only dropouts and holdouts in respect to modernity and what followed it. But they did not and do not prevail.

Second, we will look at elements of modernity in its “late” forms, the world we are leaving but continue to live in, as do our young. And then, postmodernity, so named until the period is over, and historians can give it a better name. (No one woke up one day in 1200 A.D., for instance, and said, “Let’s call our times ‘the Middle Ages.’” We do that later.)

First, youth and vocational choice. In earlier times, most people had fewer vocational options than today. Boys became what their fathers had been, through apprenticeship, and girls were destined to follow their mothers’ grooved existence patterns. Nobles gave birth to nobles, peasants to peasants. Then, modernity led to the chopping up of life, what we call “differentiation” and “specialization,” of sorts that live on. Every profession, career, skill, and craft was precisely defined. In religion, for example, one might enter the clergy and have a clear career track for forty years: as pastor, chaplain, missionary, or whatever. Young Catholics took a lifelong vow and that settled it.

In postmodern times choice is rich, change is sudden, stability is hard to come by, and loyalty is subject to the loosening of bonds. The young person may become

anything at any time in any place. Adults retool, take on second vocations or professions or tenth careers. They choose to have temporary liaisons and to cohabit for the moment and without commitment. Marriage bonds are insecure, and vows are easily broken. Philosophies to justify the decisions that go with these, and therapies to treat them when things go wrong, compete in the marketplace of ideas and cures.

Postmodernity is a name given to a *time*, and we live not only in a time but in a description of a time. Thus: the beginnings. The expected end of the world. War times. Peace times. Doomsday. Morning for America. And we measure the use of time differently in the face of the various urgencies and luxuries these imply.

Picture the premoderns, who lived lives measured by sunup and sundown, seedtime and harvest. The monks pulled ropes on bells in the village church tower, and peasants dropped their plows and tools to bow for prayer. They would await another recognizable bell before they returned home to rest. Modernity brought precision to schedules. Nine to five. The eight-hour day. The forty-hour week. The weekend — a modern invention if ever there was one. Predictability on the calendar. Assigned roles.

Youth today observe and experience a postmodern approach to time. The weekend expands and dissolves. Leisure and vacation patterns do not follow a liturgical or even a national calendar any longer. Mother and father mesh schedules, if they schedule at all. People graze rather than sit down to eat. Women in the work force by necessity and choice have flexible schedules. The swing shift and night shift and all-night television blur boundaries of day and night. Postmodern times give the illusion of being ordered, “digitalized,” but they induce society-wide chaos. And young people adapt to it and often thrive.

Postmodernity can be viewed as *place*. Paul Lakeland in *Postmodernity: Christianity in a Fragmented Age* (Fortress Press, 1997) came up with some vivid images of this time. Consider shopping. In premodern times, Main Street was made up of a parade of stores, run by Mom and Pop — and mainly Pop. In modern times, the department store thrived. One entered it, found departments in rational order, marched down clarified aisles, and paid in cash. The postmodern invention with which youth are much at home is the mall. Now, space is undifferentiated. The outdoors is brought into the indoor mall, and products are offered in dazzling and chaotic arrays.

Or, consider hotels. The premodern inn was a homey place, similar to today’s Bed and Breakfasts. The modern hotel had an entrance, a registration desk straight ahead, elevators to the right or left, straight corridors to rooms. The postmodern hotel, the Hyatt or the Marriott, has huge indoor atria, a jumble of open spaces that suddenly close. There are zones, arenas, and glass elevators. Private and public

spaces become interfused. Is that better or worse than the inn or the defined hotel? It is what is available and in fashion.

Art: the assemblage, collage, montage, made up of uncoordinate bits and patches, replaces the modern and what went before it. The contemporary art that challenges and would succeed modern art has no frames or pedestals to set it apart. It clutters a floor, extends out from and into recesses in the wall, is complicated by flashing lights or sound, and blurs the boundary between art and non-art.

The nation-state as a modern invention replaced feudal estates of premodernity and overlooked tribal and natural boundaries. The product of rational choice, it was backed by armed might and imposed by colonial powers. Postmodernity has not seen the disappearance of the state, but today the various tribes and peoples try to redraw boundaries and engage in "ethnic cleansing," with no clear program in their wars. Every day invisible boundaries shift, and where someone's land stops and no-man's land begins is not clear.

No survey of postmodern situations would be complete without reference to mass media, which convey, embody, exemplify, and influence everything else. Channel-surfers, we are told, scoot past one hundred choices per hour; whoever uses a remote to coast through the channels will see a jumble of competing images. The same effect can come from watching one or two videos on MTV. All realities are equidistant and equally near, similarly alluring and forbidding at once.

What is truth? Truth is the zone in which decisions about gods and lords, God and Lord, are made and grow complex. Almost all students, victims, or advertisers of postmodernity notice that relativity and relativism are characteristic features of whatever it is. In premodern situations, there was one privileged channel of truth. Absolutes came from the laws, legends, and customs handed down by seniors or other authorities. Modernity presented a circumstance in which there were many truths, but some principled use of reason aided in discriminating and coming through critical inquiry to truth.

In postmodernity, relativism at worst and relativity at best complicate the seeker of a way, *The Way*. As one teacher reported, a student wrote, "Hitler had his ideas and way of life, and I have mine. How do I get to judge what he lived by?" This is the extreme case that prepares us for all the moderate ones along the way.

Young people stand between late modernity and postmodernity. Rainer Maria von Rilke wrote of how each turn in the world "reveals such children, to whom no longer what's been and not yet what's here" appears. Sophisticated college-bound teens and poor young people in the poorest parts of town partake of elements of this climate. For some, it is not difficult to proceed from the old to the new. For others, perhaps for the culture as a whole, certain periods are especially stressful and revealing: thus, "the Sixties." Historian Jacob Burckhardt wrote that at such

times “whole generations falsify themselves” and go through periods of extreme rejection and experiment. Thirty years later, more moderate experimentation continues and may be a semipermanent feature of postmodernity.

A third of a century ago, Herman Kahn and Norbert Wiener wrote about the year 2000. They presented a “longterm, surprise-free, multifold” trend in a “sensate” culture, which they suggested would become ever more programmatic, pragmatic, contractual, empirical, and secular every year. But, they also reported that the great philosophers of history in our time, who took the long view, foresaw beyond these times (=postmodernity, now?) a period of great ferment and change. They imagined new religions — some of them renewals, some of them scientifically synthetic, some nationalistic. But Kahn’s and Wiener’s philosophies posited a world in which the passions were stoked, the stakes were high, and the decisions were urgent. In such a scene the modern solution would no longer do. Such a moment has evidently appeared in postmodernity with its spiritual options.

Not all the turns leading up to this moment in history are destructive of faith, of the attempt to “imitate Christ” in the age of “whatever.” Political scientist Robert Booth Fowler spoke of “modern” in terms of “liberal” or what we might also call an “open” republican culture that is defined by three features.

The first feature is that it privileges “secular rationality” as the basis for communication, community, discourse, and argument. Reason is used to achieve societal and personal ends; there is no need to invoke the sacred, the transcendent, the divine. The patient expects the neurosurgeon to apply modern, scientific method, not to settle for “Mormon brain surgery,” or Baptist, or Buddhist. Just expert scientific work.

Legislative processes and engineering are also supposed to proceed according to this method. Modern architecture is cool, programmatic, and rational. Consider Mies van der Rohe’s buildings; they could be anywhere. They have no setting, no history, no decoration.

Religion has made some use of such rationality. Modern bureaucracies in denominations and committees to advance ecumenism have often followed its principles. Religious institutions rejected by many youths display this characteristic.

Nonetheless, however necessary secular rationality is and will remain, it has been found to be spiritually unsatisfying. So the “so-called gods” are back. Most bookstores have sections labeled Spirituality, New Age, Holistic/Wholistic, Occult, Ancient, Asian, Metaphysical, Self-Help, Inspirational, and the like. Its patrons are well-off, well-educated grandchildren of secular man and secular woman, the normative models of two generations ago.

Second, the need to be tolerant to the point of being indifferent characterizes the modern liberal society. Ideology is pushed to the background, and religion

becomes a “private affair.” Such acceptance of the lack of belief or the presence of different belief in others makes possible the end of holy wars. One glance at places in the world where many gods and many lords become associated with ethnic and tribal strife should convince us that we have a good thing going.

However, to a young person growing up in such a world, it soon looks as if tolerance means lack of belief. Many youth adopt this lack of belief as a mode. Others are turned off by it and seek refuge in fundamentalisms, “cults,” extravagant and extreme movements. In a society where “the committed aren’t civil and the civil aren’t committed,” apathetic civil youth are learning that to many people beliefs *do* matter and that *mere* tolerance does not do justice to them. So, again, this motif has been found to be spiritually unsatisfying, and young people seek ways past it, if they are not victims of terminal apathy. In postmodernity, will they find Jesus Christ and the “way” he brings?

A third mark of modernity that also carries over into postmodernity is extreme individualism. Young people obsessed with “peer group pressure” often disguise their loneliness. They are taught to be ambitious, to compete for market favors, to be themselves. But the stakes are high, and they take refuge in self-enforced group boundary life. They seek an identity, but they do not find it in the individualist braggadocio or isolating alienation of older siblings.

The question is, will the community to which Jesus Christ calls us appeal to today’s young though it has not for almost two generations before them?

That mere “secular rationality” did not cover everything and satisfy all, though it included elements beneficial to believers, is obvious today, and the young, lacking historical perspective, can see this as well as any. In their own vernacular, they confirm this observation in millions of particular situations.

In the modern understanding, we make political, ethical, and economic decisions on the basis of secular rationality. That is, participants begin their discussion and argument “in the original position” that commits them to use only standard models of reason. Then it occurs to them that not everyone can be in on the decision. Animals, nature, fetuses, the comatose, the poor and oppressed and uneducated, the retarded, children, the senile, and more cannot be in on the decision.

So, we call in many elements that we have associated with the spiritual and the religious. We jumble intuition, memory, community, tradition, affection, and hope. *Then* we decide what to do and how to live. Maybe teenagers have always done this in their “unreasoning” moments, but they turned out not to be incapable of reasoning. They just surrounded reason with many other avenues of approach. Now most of the culture does this.

The young are caught between demands and opportunities in acute ways. They are given mixed signals. The market world tells them to compete. The com-

munity world urges them to cooperate. Which shall it be? Establishments tell them to use reason and to be reasonable, but they do not see rationality in the practices of those who urged reason upon them. They are starved for more than reason alone can give them. They want modern technological medicine, with painkillers, MRIs, and CAT scans. But they also want the presence of a physician who will speak to them, a nurse to communicate the deeper things, a pastor who opens the world of the spirit and, maybe most of all, the caring parent.

Most youth are overwhelmed by the relativism that comes with postmodern observance. They may be put off by those who run away from such a way of life into subcommunities called fundamentalism. But the serious among them, as they mature, seek other ways. Mere tolerance and mere indifference are not attitudes and expressions that will do justice to their dreams and passions.

Individualism? Yes, the young will buy into the ideology of individualism. But their peers are at least a vestigial reference group, reminiscences of what community ought to look like. So while they want to be regarded as individuals, they are learning the price of loneliness and isolation, the arrogance of “doing it my way.” They may not look to the church as a place to find community, but it remains an agency that offers some possibility.

In their search for their vocation, their way that has its own decisive stamp, they are involved as are so many adults today in establishing some sort of identity in a world of flux. They seek some measure of authority in the midst of relativism and relativity. They want some spiritual experience, not merely to be told about spiritual experience.

No youth counselors or elders can come onto such a scene and find a ready audience of young people who will give privileged access to churchly authority or traditional texts. But they can also recognize that the young people are not the first Christians or potential Christians to be associated with scenes like those we described.

Early Christians, most of them young — in a world where life expectancy was so very low — lived in a culture of “many so-called gods” and the relativity that came with that culture. They were equidistant from all the Greek and Roman and sometimes Egyptian altars and icons that Paul and his contemporaries denounced. They were sorting out what was Jewish and what non-Jewish in Jesus and the communities associated with him. In the midst of the many gods came messages that there was a clarifying voice available: “for us” there is and was to be one Lord “through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

Does that one Lord stand a chance in the current go-round of “whatever”? ❁