

GC35: A Postmodern Faith-Justice Mission?

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Introduction

Postmodernity's emphasis on the human subject, one of the cultural frontiers where the Society of Jesus needs to be present today, gives the promotion of justice in the service of faith a better opportunity to enchant the world with God's presence than was possible under modernity. For the same reason, postmodernity also gives religious faith many new kinds of public presence and action in the world. Religion under modernity had an undifferentiated and controlling public presence of the kind prevalent in pre-modern and pre-secular times; by contrast, postmodernity allows a new form of post-secular public presence, one which Paul Ricœur, the famous philosopher of religion, might call "second naiveté".

Given many of the religious critiques of postmodernity, this hypothesis seems counter-intuitive. We acknowledge and agree with many of the theological critiques made of postmodernity, such as the questions raised in this journal by Etienne Grieu SJ, and elsewhere by Carlo Cardinal Martini SJ. Nevertheless, we see new and exciting possibilities for faith and justice in postmodernity. What does this hypothesis mean, and on what grounds does it stand? What should the faith-justice commitment look like in a postmodern cultural context?

Let us begin by looking briefly at what postmodernity reacts to, that is, its dialectical partner and "opposite", modernity.

Modernity

Modernity³ relegated religious faith and moral values to the private realms of family life, personal conscience, and other realms that did not participate directly in public life. In this way, the realm of public, shared life could be governed by more "objective" forms of reason. Based on a narrow view of empirical science and its successes, modernity effectively modeled reason on instrumentality. This meant, among other things, that "objective" reason was objective because it was "technical" and ostensibly free of values. But value-free reason also reduces persons to objects to be manipulated and

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³ The modern cultural period is seen by scholars as beginning with the Enlightenment or with the scientific revolution in European cultures. One of its principal characteristics is confidence in reason's ability to ensure human progress. The postmodern cultural period can be seen as beginning after the First or Second World War, with the loss of such confidence.

calculated, or to instruments to help with such objectification. In this understanding of objectivity, faith is subjective, as are all values, including justice, because they are “of the subject”. Modern understandings and uses of reason seek an objectivity that does not know how to deal with and judge the things of human subjectivity. So if modernity cannot eliminate the things of subjectivity, like faith and values, then it prefers to marginalize them or, more politely, to confine them to private life. The resistance of the liberal and neo-liberal market mentality to justice considerations is an example of such marginalization.

Modernity has not been entirely bad for religion. It has contributed at least two things: the differentiation of religion from other areas of life, and greater, more systematic skill in the use of reason in religion. The need for various forms of Christianity to learn to live with each other in peace led not only to the privatization of religion, but first to the differentiation of religion from other areas of life. This differentiation has challenged religion to discover what its specific contribution to the good life is. Religion has had to learn how it is distinct from the contributions of other disciplines such as politics, economics or science. Differentiation has also freed religion from seeking to dominate all aspects of life. While this has been a challenge for religion, it has also been a maturing experience. Secondly, greater skill in the use of reason, inspired by the achievements of modern science, has also helped religion to mature. Looking at how things are related to each other, not only to us, has helped to give us a more critical, intelligent and responsible approach to religion, and has helped to strengthen the confidence that faith is not irrational but intelligible and intelligent.

In the light of postmodern challenges to reductionistic modern uses of reason, religious people who appreciate the achievements of modernity and of scientific approaches are beginning to recognize that the differentiation of religion from other dimensions of human social life need not mean its privatization and marginalization. Differentiation and marginalization need not go together. Post-secular religion, as the contemporary Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor suggests⁴, accepts differentiation but not the marginalization of religion.

Modernity’s privatization of religion has not been helpful to religion, especially when people assume that rationality and the privatization of religion are connected. Postmodern philosophy often criticizes modern uses of reason for its tendencies to reductionism and objectification. But if postmodernity criticizes modernity for such things, then is it religion’s friend? Not necessarily. The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend.

⁴ See James L. Heft (Ed), *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture*, Oxford University Press 1999, and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Belknap Press 2007.

Postmodernity and Globalization as Threat

Perhaps the defining characteristic of postmodernity is the loss of confidence in reason's ability to ensure human progress, accompanied by criticism of anything that seems to assert such confidence. Furthermore, the narrow forms of reason asserted by modernity have been criticized by postmodernity for reducing people to objects and therefore being unjust. The postmodern critique of the modern centrality of reason has had consequences: a loss of confidence in "grand narratives", stories or theories that seem to explain or give meaning to the whole of life; a presupposition that truth is relative to the perceiver; and the fragmentation in cultural, social and personal lives that can come with such changes. While loss of confidence in reason was caused mainly by the shock of the bloody wars of the twentieth century even while science continued to progress, the more recent phenomenon of globalization has amplified many cultural characteristics of postmodernity. Globalization reinforces the view that the dominant culture is normative, that there is only one culture that is universal and permanent. However, it creates at the same time the conditions for local cultures to be able to experience themselves and other cultures as empirical, that is, as a set of meanings and values that informs a legitimate way of life.

As the world becomes more and more interconnected into one unit, cultures with their identities, values and truths also interact more intensely with each other than before. This puts them all into question by making them seem relative to each other. Identity, meaning and values are no longer "givens" to be lived unconsciously; instead they are becoming more intentional human choices. What does this mean for identity and truth? Is a shared judgment of truth and identity arbitrary and "subjective"? Postmodern culture does not explicitly say so, but the suggestion is implicit. Even though reason is part of the structure of the human subject - no matter how narrowly reason is understood - postmodernity often seems to replace confidence in reason with an emphasis on subjectivity. Communities of people become fragmented in a postmodern world. Fragmented human subjectivity, and loss of confidence in reason, truth, value and meaning, threaten the ability of religion and justice to contribute to human life.

Yet, in all this there is an opportunity for the Society of Jesus to carry out its faith and justice mission. Postmodernity and globalization open up new ways in which God is present in our post-secular world.

Postmodernity and Globalization as Opportunity

Just as the reason upheld by modernity and rightly criticized by postmodernity was too narrow, so too the subjectivity embraced by postmodernity is too narrow. Nevertheless, postmodernity has drawn attention to the human

subject and appreciates what goes on in the interior of the subject. A narrow emphasis on instrumental forms of reason governed by seemingly external or objective criteria offered little ground for faith or for values, offering, as it did, little ground for taking the human subject seriously as a subject. But attention to experience and to what goes on within the human subject does offer a ground for taking faith and values seriously, and is therefore a ground for the link between faith and justice. Furthermore, attention to human interiority offers a new ground for a use of reason that is broader than understood by modernity. For example: How can there be justice without taking seriously the human subject as subject? How can there be faith without treating consolations and desolations as essential data for making all decisions, in addition to the data that come from the rest of the world, all of which needs to be evaluated and judged in a critical and responsible fashion? Finally, how can there be justice without seeking and attending to the data of consolations and desolations, that is, without treating seriously the interiority of human subjects?

Postmodernity's shift to the subject need not replace modernity's focus on reason. Instead, the shift to the subject can broaden and contextualize the use of reason. In the *Spiritual Exercises* we treat human subjectivity critically but seriously, and the *Exercises* provide guidelines for doing so. Why can we not do the same in all other disciplines? If we exclude the data of human interiority from our serious considerations, then we similarly exclude both faith and justice, and we secularize reason.

How can we take advantage of these postmodern opportunities in order better to serve faith and promote justice? GC35 points the way.

GC35 and the Faith-Justice Mission

All the General Congregations since GC32 in 1975 have stressed that the promotion of justice is not simply one ministry among others but rather an essential dimension of the Jesuit mission. At the same time, they have also carefully asserted that within the inseparable link that must always bind the service of faith and the promotion of justice together in one integrated mission, the service of faith has priority over the promotion of justice. For example, GC32 in its famous Decree 4, "Our Mission Today", carefully speaks of "... the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement"⁵. This statement asserts the inseparable link between the two elements, which was GC32's achievement, but within that link it also asserts an order. As GC34 in "Servants of Christ's Mission"⁶ and GC35 in "Challenges to Our Mission Today"⁷ assert with more precision, the service of faith is

⁵ GC32, D. 2, n. 2.

⁶ GC34, D. 2, n. 14.

⁷ GC35, D. 3, n. 2.

the aim of our mission, and the link between faith and justice integrates our ministries into one mission. This order within the relationship between faith and justice does not weaken their relationship. While one cannot and should not exist without the other, the promotion of justice should be understood from a basis in the service of faith. It is as though there were a scale of values, with the service of faith or the ultimate aim of our mission at the very top, and at the level just below it, the promotion of justice, of fidelity to covenant relationships with God, one another, and creation, where the promotion of justice is an essential component of the service of faith above but the service of faith depends on and completes the promotion of justice below and helps to solve problems that might be raised by the promotion of justice, but which cannot be solved at that level alone.

In Decree 3, "Challenges to Our Mission Today", GC35 explicitly reiterates that the aim of our mission is the service of faith⁸. But GC35 also makes this point in a different, postmodern way. It models what it means by placing the identity decree, "A Fire that Kindles Other Fires", before the mission decree, suggesting perhaps that the latter be read in the light of the former. In fact both decrees deal with mission, but Decree 2 deals with mission from an inspirational and spiritual point of view, while Decree 3 deals with it from the more typical explanatory point of view that we are used to reading in post-conciliar general congregation decrees about mission. Furthermore, Decree 2 is written in spiritual language, the language of interiority, and is meant not to be read in a discursive fashion, but rather to be prayed with. "A Fire that Kindles Other Fires" basically directs Jesuits to their experience of Christ, and to what is Ignatian and Jesuitical about that experience. The decree's content, form, and its placement among the other decrees reminds Jesuits that everything we do, all elements of our service of faith and promotion of justice, are motivated by our encounter with Christ, and are directed toward helping others have and interpret their own experience of Christ, whether or not that experience is Ignatian in character. In this way, by getting Jesuits to focus on and use their religious experience, GC35's Decree 2 tries to get Jesuits to look at our mission in general and each of our specific activities from the point of view of the aim of Jesuit mission, that is, the service of faith. This is the first time that a General Congregation has written an entire decree that tries to get Jesuits to focus on and to engage explicitly their religious experience. While this attention to Jesuit subjectivity is not entirely new in a General Congregation⁹, it is the first time that an entire decree has

⁸ GC35, D. 3, nn. 2-3.

⁹ GC33's Decree 1 had a section devoted to our religious experience. In GC34, each of the mission decrees (Decrees 2, 3, 4 and 5) began with a summary of the Society's corporate religious experience as relevant to our whole mission (D. 2, "Servants of Christ's Mission"), to the justice dimension of our mission (D. 3, "Our Mission and Justice"), to the cultural dimension of our mission (D. 4, "Our Mission and Culture"), or to the interreligious dimension of our mission (D. 5, "Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue"). In each case, the chief discussions of the decree were based on the meaning of our experience of Christ active in the world.

been devoted to such a purpose. Such a focus is very postmodern. It profoundly affects the way we carry out our mission in the postmodern world.

Attention to Jesuit interiority is not only present in GC35's "A Fire that Kindles Other Fires". The first decree, "With Renewed Fervour and Dynamism", while full of clear explanation, is also written in the language of the heart. Since it is designed to respond to the Holy Father affectively as well as intellectually, and designed to evoke fervour and dynamism in the Jesuit reader, it appeals to religious experience. In other words, it appeals to the Jesuit as subject. Finally, the third decree, "Challenges to Our Mission Today", frames its discussion of the service of faith and promotion of justice in terms of relationships, that is, our covenant relationships with God, with one another, with creation. Thus the relationships with creation and with one another are presented as aspects of our relationship with God. While this decree is not written in affective or experiential language, it is nevertheless written to get Jesuits to think about mission in terms of relationships. Thus, in many ways GC35 seeks to get Jesuits to turn to, and to use their religious experience, and to do so, we must also turn to and engage our interiorities (our subjectivities).

If our religious experience is to be transformed into practice in a more explicit and deliberate way than before, then not only our justice but also our faith must, in some way, become public. To do so, we must become intentionally aware of our interiority or subjectivity, of how it works authentically, and then we must use it deliberately as data that we treat as seriously and as critically as other data that we can measure more quantitatively. As our feminist theologians and philosophers have taught us, "the personal is political". To put this in the more philosophical terms of the twentieth century Jesuit philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan – objectivity is the free operation of authentic subjectivity. Objectivity makes things public because then they can be shared. The *Exercises* seek to make our subjectivity authentic by freeing us from disordered desires, that is, from biases, prejudices and other kinds of 'unfreedom'. Such developments will help us appropriate more deeply the distinctive character of Ignatian spirituality, which is to be concerned and engaged in an intentional manner, not only with the fact of our engagement in the divine activity in the world, but also with the quality of that engagement.

The promotion of justice in the service of faith has already made our faith public, and done so in a way that is open to difference and dialogue, and to partnering with people of good will who are of different faiths and ideologies. The intentionality about religious experience to which GC35 seems to invite us takes us a step further. This might be the "second naiveté" of religion in the world that Paul Ricœur spoke about. Such intentionality will enable a post-secular presence and action of religious people in the world in a way that accepts the differentiation of religion from other areas of life, that

is aware of what faith has to offer the world, that is open to difference, but that refuses to be marginalized or privatized because it believes that faith is necessary for the life of the world. When religion has such a new public presence, the sense of God's active and loving presence in the world might once again become vivid, consoling people with hope.

Conclusion

What skills or practices can help us use our religious experience more explicitly in our service of faith and promotion of justice? Three come to mind. Firstly, we must simply become aware of our experience, including our religious experience of God, of others, especially the marginalized, and of creation, and use it as data for our theological reflection. For example, for some years now, *Promotio Iustitiae* has included narratives of experience as part of its theological discussion and analysis of major social questions. We need however, to go one step further and be present to others' experiences in new ways. The data will include not only our consolations and desolations, but also those of other actors in the narratives. From these we might be able to infer how God is inviting us to participate in the Spirit's work in the world, and what God is trying to do there. The *Examen* is a key spiritual exercise for this purpose. Secondly, we must appropriate our Ignatian and Jesuit identities in a consciously aware manner. In today's globalized and postmodern world, it is no longer good enough simply to receive a culture or identity passively and unconsciously if we are to respond to "The Challenges to Our Mission Today". Indeed GC35's decree on governance, "Governance at the Service of Universal Mission", makes as one of its three basic principles the need to become more explicit about our Ignatian values: "Changing circumstances require a better articulation of Ignatian values and ways of proceeding in our contemporary life and work."¹⁰ Thirdly, communal apostolic discernment provides a way of becoming aware of our own religious experience, of making it public at least among ourselves, and of discussing and deciding from a position in faith. With a regular practice of communal apostolic discernment, or at least of spiritual conversation in groups, we will not ask first "What is the problem and what should we do about it?" but rather "What is the Spirit of Christ doing in our world, and how are we being invited to participate in that activity?" Then the question about problems can be raised.

Postmodernity, together with the encounter of, and challenge to, identities provoked by globalization, makes it clearer than before that we live in a human world of meaning and values. In such a world, it is more important than before to be able to engage meaning and value critically as we reflect on our selves and all the other actors in the narratives of our lives. To do so

¹⁰ GC35, D. 5, n. 1c.

requires awareness of our interiority and using the operations and content of our subjectivity with intention and skill. The *Exercises* demand this for our personal, inner life, so that we can discern what God is 'up to'. The post-modern, globalized context now demands this for our communal, social and public lives.