
“ANYTHING GOES?”
THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE IN A CULTURE MARKED
BY POSTMODERN THINKING

Guy M. Clicqué *

University of Bayreuth, Protestant Theology I, D – 95440 Bayreuth, Germany

(Received 21 February 2005)

Abstract

Our contemporary culture is marked by a predominance of postmodern thinking that claims an end of the great narratives and strongly supports a plurality and relativity of opinions and convictions about which no rational decision can be made in principle; even rational discourses between these opinions and convictions seem to be impossible, or at least, very difficult.

If such a view is correct, any meaningful dialogue between theology and science would be practically impossible, and even more, the claims made by theology or science would be valid only in a very restricted area of applicability. But is it not an essential part of the endeavour of theology *and* science each to make truth claims which are universally valid, and are not theology *and* science each based on great narratives, theology, for example, on the great narrative of the relationship between God and his beloved people, science, for example, on the great narrative of the process of evolution? (And, furthermore, could not postmodern thinking itself be regarded as a “great narrative”?)

Hence, a careful reflection of the arguments of postmodern plurality and relativity is necessary, especially with regard to the possibility and the validity of truth claims. Such a critical reflection of postmodern thinking will open up ways to discuss the problem of truth claims and their scope within both theology and science. From this, an argument on how a serious dialogue between theology and science is possible will begin to take shape in a culture marked by postmodern thinking.

Keywords: Theology and Science, Culture, Postmodernism, Jean Francois Lyotard, Charles Taylor, truth claims, scope of truth claims, reality

1. Introduction

There are words that are very fashionable in our present culture, in public discussions as in academic discourses. “Postmodernism” – and/or “postmodern” – fall into this category. “Postmodernism” has almost completely positive connotations, seemingly implying being “up-to-date”, literally “more modern”

* e-mail: guy-marcel.clicque@uni-bayreuth.de, Phone: ++49 (0)921 55 4153, Fax: ++49 (0)921 55 84 4153

than “modern”. But the actual meaning of the term is not as clear as it sounds at first. One of its most basic connotations is the high esteem for plurality in a general sense, e.g. the plurality of opinions, convictions and values. Such an understanding of postmodernism is in itself problematic insofar as it is common to regard such a high esteem for plurality as a key characteristic of the “modern age” which postmodernism presumes to have overcome.

But leaving this problem aside, it is not possible to deny that today our contemporary western culture is very much influenced and characterized by postmodern thinking, thinking which emphasizes the plurality of opinions, convictions and values, the plurality of different discourses in the world being one of its key aspects. The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard [1], one of the leading thinkers of postmodernism, observes quite right that this plurality of discourses between a communication and/or translation seems to be an impossibility. Lyotard explains this postmodern speechlessness between the discourses by describing the end of the great narratives (*grand récit*), the great traditions that functioned as meta-discourses to which the discourses in the modern age could refer. He takes up the theory of language games from the later Wittgenstein, but goes beyond this, understanding language as a struggle in the sense of a game. The aim of this “game” is now no longer the search for truth, but achieving power. This also applies to science: it is seen no longer as a quest for truth, but a means for acquiring more power.

If Lyotard were right, this would have far-ranging consequences, and not only for the relationship between theology and science. For example, for humanity’s common life it would mean the practical end of politics, because if the game and/or struggle to achieve power lies at the root of human endeavour, then any criticism of rule, power or ideology becomes impossible. Politics would be reduced to praising the great variety of positions and views. For the relationship of theology and science it would mean the pointlessness of any attempts of a dialogue between them, because both would be regarded as totally different language games, and no meaningful conversation between them would be possible in principle (apart from the struggle to decide which discipline has more power). These consequences make more than clear the necessity for a thorough and careful criticism of postmodern thinking, not only to open up ways for a meaningful dialogue between theology and science. The following considerations seek to help with the first steps on this theme.

2. Criticism of postmodern thinking

There is a fundamental problem with regard to postmodern thinking as represented by Lyotard’s approach, although insofar as the term “postmodernism” is understood as a simple *description* of the plurality which can be discerned nowadays it can be a useful term. But a serious problem arises when the emphasis shifts from the descriptive to the normative aspect (which seems to be what Lyotard is aiming for), and postmodernism becomes like a programme to be pursued, or at least to be accepted: then, postmodernism

becomes an attitude, a jumping movement between discourses that are untranslatable in principle, the play of interchangeable citations and allusions because there is no reliable common ground to refer them to.

But if postmodernism becomes normative, like a programme, then the fundamental problem of postmodern thinking arises: In how far does this moment of plurality and "just as you like" hold true of the concept of postmodern thinking itself? Do postmodern thinkers themselves really regard their own thinking simply as one more or less important "drop of thought" in the big "ocean of postmodern thinking"? Or stated differently: In how far is the idea or the concept of postmodern thinking itself to be regarded as a "great narrative" (or fundamental basis) that postmodern thinking, strictly speaking, has presumed to have left far behind?

This fundamental logical difficulty is reflected, too, in the common misunderstanding of Paul Feyerabend's famous "anything goes" [2] as one of the main slogans of postmodern plurality and especially the "do just as you like" approach. Feyerabend's phrase, originally formulated in the context of his "anarchistic philosophy of science", his criticism against a methodology of science that put too much emphasis on its rationality (cf. the English title of [2]: "against method"), does not at all mean the absence of any rules: the violation of standards and rules of rationality inevitably requires such standards and rules to exist. As Feyerabend made clear afterwards, his phrase "anything goes" never meant a total lack of any rational criteria of science, but a pointed criticism and warning regarding the tendency to make scientific rationalism absolute [2, p. 11f; 3].

The common misunderstanding of Feyerabend's "anything goes" clearly highlights the problem, and even the danger of postmodern thinking: By reducing claims of truth to a general ascertainment of plurality, the philosophy of postmodernism makes criticism much more difficult – if not even impossible – because the real forces and paradigms behind the developments are disguised and can hardly be discovered and discussed adequately.

In the discourse with postmodern thinking the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has voiced his "feeling of unease about modernity" (this is the translation of the German title of [4]). In his book Taylor identifies three areas of concern for his unease: modern individualism and the rule of economic reason, both of which result in an atomisation on the political level. He proposes a middle way between the defence and the rejection of modernity by stressing the importance of community; modern individualism is not simply bad, but is based, among other factors, on the principle of mutual respect. Hence, authenticity has to be regained in a positive sense: what is required is a sort of a common ground in the form of valid ideals about which discussions are possible.

With the term "authenticity" Taylor tries to achieve a balance between the individual and the community: creation, originality and nonconformity on the one side, and the openness for the horizon of meaning and a dialogical self-definition on the other. Postmodern thinking overemphasizes the former, the side of the individual, and opposes the second, the side of the community. But if, for

example, one overemphasizes the individual side, then self-definition loses its meaning. In fact, human life has a dialogical character. One cannot think about identity without language, but language inevitably presupposes community. I argue that man cannot even be a moral subject ... outside of a community of language and mutual discourse about the good and bad, just and unjust ...". [5]

The modern culture of authenticity has a somehow paradoxical character: in a sense of a mild relativism one should define the meaning for oneself, but any meaning necessarily presupposes a context since one cannot define or decide a meaning for oneself (to feel the meaning for oneself is not enough). The principle of subjectivity levels all alternatives and denies any horizon of meaning; but from this it follows that the equivalence becomes irrelevant.

3. Postmodern thinking and the relationship between theology and science

What are the consequences of this reflection of postmodern thinking for the relationship between theology and science? If a postmodern view as outlined above were correct, any meaningful dialogue between theology and science would be practically impossible. Even more, any claims made by theology or science would be valid only in a very restricted area of applicability (of either theology or science). In Ian Barbour's fourfold model of relating theology and science this would correspond to "independence" – or to "conflict" if you take into consideration that both struggle for power [6].

To be sure, on closer inspection announcing the end of the great narratives, though it is a key argument of postmodern thinking, does not really seem to be a correct description with regard to either theology or science. In fact, both have great narratives to tell, which still have important functions within the realms of knowledge, theology in the form of the great narrative of the story of God with his chosen and beloved people, Israel and the Christians, science in the form of the great narrative of the story of the universe from the big bang to its end; indeed the scientific story of the process of evolution is quite probably one of the most important stories, and has gained the function of a very important paradigm in contemporary culture.

Postmodern thinking is certainly right in emphasizing that any claim to truth is always restricted by pointing to the individual character of truth. But it is an essential part of the endeavour of both theology and science to make truth claims which are universally valid. And although in principle there is no possibility of direct access to reality with only indirect conclusions possible, proposing the existence of reality as the horizon of statements is nevertheless inevitable. The notion of truth in itself requires that it applies for all persons. In other words: every person has her own view and understanding on truth, but to relate or refer to truth means to claim a truth that is valid for all persons in principle.

One difficulty in accepting the fundamental validity of truth claims arises when the scope of truth claims is not reflected to an essential degree. There is an important difference between the distinction of scope (*Reichweite*) of truth

claims and the way such truth claims are implemented (Durchsetzbarkeit) in confrontation with other competing truth claims [7]. It is an inevitable consequence of the concept of truth claims that they apply for all persons – it simply does not make sense to formulate, for example (reducing the scope of the claim): “this truth is only true in this area or in this time”. However, this does not at all mean that the question of truth necessarily has to be decided by aggression or brute force.

For the dialogue between theology and science postmodern thinking can be helpful in emphasizing the role of the individual and pointing to the plurality of discourses with different truths that cannot be solved by the human mind on the basis of principles. But this postmodern (over-)emphasis on individualism (or “fragmentation” to use a different common term) has to be balanced by the realisation that communities are of equal importance (one might even consider the side of community to be more important, thinking, for example, of language or ethics). In fact, theology and science are ways of perceiving reality which are based first of all on communities, the communities which are grounded and maintained by the connection of the personal stories of their single members with the single great story, the communities into which the single members are normally introduced by a longer process of learning and indwelling [8, 9].

Charles Taylor’s reflections on authenticity are very helpful in showing the serious problems in postmodern thinking. The tension between the side of the individual and the side of the community are inevitable in principle; modern communities have continually to look for their equilibrium. Taylor emphasizes the importance of discussions about the foundations and shared values and ideals of communities. For the political realm he proposes to take joint successful actions that strengthen the sense of power and identification with the political community.

For the dialogue between theology and science this gives some important impulses. First of all, it follows that one must be aware of the traps of postmodern thinking, both with regard to theology and with regard to science, as totally different language games with no point of contact and/or struggling against each other, reducing them to largely senseless speculations of single individuals. Instead, the dialogue that – at the very least – correctly presupposes a common ground makes sense, because living together as human beings in community always means to communicate about the different ways of perceiving knowledge that theology and science represent. As Taylor showed for the relationship between the individual and the community, this can, of course, mean tensions and difficulties in translating between different languages, but this is not necessarily the case. Furthermore, as genuine plurality presupposes the common ground of shared values and ideals, to reflect on the relationship of theology and science above all in terms of difference represents a serious reduction of reality. Instead, as different ways of perceiving knowledge, both show the same world in different ways. The different competing truth claims connected with these different ways of perceiving reality might be problematic and sometimes they might even compete for truth, but – here postmodern

thinking is right – the plurality of discourses cannot be solved by the human mind in principle. And furthermore, beyond the sometimes problematic side, this plurality shows the richness and fullness of human life that is characterised by movement and variety.

From the colourfulness of human life, it follows that the dialogue between theology and science should emphasize the practical side: direct intensive talks between theologians and scientists (some people even represent both disciplines), on interdisciplinary conversations and research work. Against the postmodern “do as you like” mentality (which, in the end, results only in power struggles of the “survival of the fittest”), it is important, at the very least, to discuss the anticipated common ground, the values and ideals that lies at the bottom of our living together. For example, is it permissible to lie, in theology or in science: how does it change the attitudes and convictions if supposing a genetic predisposition for lying were detected? How is love to be described in the view of science, theology (or philosophy, or psychology, or ...), and in the personal view of scientists, theologians (and philosophers, psychologists, ...)? If – and if so, then to what extent – can big bang theory give our life a sense of origin and meaning, as many people seem to give it today?

The only prerequisite of such talks is an open mind of the participants, which includes the realisation that human reason is always limited and that there is neither direct nor single access to truth. Any cognition of truth presupposes a personal relationship with it and different ways and understandings of perceiving truth have to be discussed in an open way. Genuine human reason knows its limits and reflects upon it, as it also knows the necessity of a serious dialogue. First of all, the richness, fullness and colourfulness of human life is not to be seen as the cause of difficulties, but as a possibility to learn more about the world and the wonders of the reality of its existence. And in the end, the strongest argument is: one can never be sure whether one’s fellow human being is not somehow a good stretch nearer to the truth than oneself.

Acknowledgement

I want to express my genuine thanks to Michael Marten of London for his help in making the English of this text more readable.

References

- [1] J.F. Lyotard, *Das postmoderne Wissen. Ein Bericht*, P. Engelmann (ed.), translated from French by O. Pfersmann (*La condition postmoderne*), Edition Passagen 7, Böhlau, Graz/Wien, 1986.
- [2] P. Feyerabend, *Wider den Methodenzwang*; 3rd edn., Suhrkamp Frankfurt/Main, 1983, 32.
- [3] P. Feyerabend, *Erkenntnis für freie Menschen*; 2nd edn., Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1979, 13, 86.
- [4] C. Taylor, *Das Unbehagen an der Moderne*, translated by J. Schulte (*The Malaise of Modernity*), 3rd edn., Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1997.

- [5] C. Taylor, *The Nature and Scope of Distributive Justice*, in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Philosophical Papers Vol.2*, C. Taylor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York/Melbourne, 1985, 292.
- [6] I.G. Barbour, *Religion and Science. Historical and Contemporary Issues*, revised and extended edition of *Religion in an Age of Science. The Gifford Lectures 1989–1991 (Aberdeen)*, SCM Press, London, 1998, 77.
- [7] G.M. Clicqué, *Differenz und Parallelität. Zum Verständnis des Zusammenhangs von Theologie und Naturwissenschaft am Beispiel der Überlegungen Günter Howes [Difference and parallelism. On the understanding of the connection between Theology and Science using Günter Howe's reflections]*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt/Main, 2001, 73.
- [8] M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London/Melbourne/Henley, 1958, 53, 55, 163, 171, 195, 203.
- [9] D. Ritschl, *The Logic of Theology. A Brief Account of the Relationship Between Basic Concepts in Theology*, SCM Press, London, 1986, xxii, 19, 28, 252.