Rethinking Religious Tradition and Authority in the Postmodern World

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It has been widely accepted that the “secularization thesis”, which suggests the decline and privatization of religion in the modern world where rational values and capitalist and individualist ethos reign, is no longer valid. The thesis had undergone resistance, revision and refutation as reality shows that religion remains a significant and vital social and political force in the contemporary world. In certain parts of the world, Islam, Pentecostal Christianity and other religious and spiritual practices have experienced massive resurgence with new conversions of the unbelievers and re-conversion of believers. Such renaissance notwithstanding, the expressions of religion and the modes of religiosity have changed significantly. In the so-called postmodern time, where exclusive truth claims are challenged and institutionalized practices are desisted, religion has become more “individualized and everyday”². Some religions, especially those of institutionalized variety and those who hold to a singular truth, consider postmodernity and the philosophy it espouses (postmodernism) as their foremost enemy and threat, thus deserving to be demonized. This essay is an invitation for us to rethink the relevance of religious tradition and authority in the postmodern world. It is divided into three parts: Part One examines the notion of tradition, and interrogates how traditional traditions are; Part Two attempts to deconstruct postmodernism, or at least the versions of it that were explicated by some religious people; and Part Three suggests some ways for religious tradition and authority to move forward so as to take on the challenge of living and engaging “in the postmodern world, but not of it”.

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When discussing about “religious tradition and authority in the postmodern world”, religious people often tend to problematicize the latter half, i.e. “the postmodern world”, and assume that “religious tradition and authority” are *a priori* unproblematic, stable, unchanging and coherent. Some people even assume “religious tradition and authority” to be mandated from heaven. I wish to interrogate the notion of religious tradition and authority using concepts of identity politics and Eric Hobsbawm’s notion of “invented tradition”, which outlines the following:

- Traditions are often presumed to be ancient, unalterable, and deeply important, although they may sometimes be far less “natural” than is presumed.
- Traditions may be changed to suit the needs of the day, and these changes can become accepted as a part of an ancient tradition.
- Often these later inventions were based on some form of tradition, but were grossly exaggerated, distorted, or biased toward a particular interpretation.

Indeed, we see “traditions” being invented all the time. A case in point can be seen in the Asian Values argument, championed by several Asian political leaders in the 1990s, which attributed the Asian economic growth to a set of “uniquely Asian” values (such as Confucian ethics). In advocating these values, traditions were being invented in many new Asian nations to support a paternalistic type of authority, and state fatherhood was hailed as the norm in Asian governance. The Asian Values discourse was abandoned after the 1998 Asian financial crisis as many such “values” were considered to be a source of the crony capitalism at the heart of the crisis. Postcolonial states, with a relatively short history, often found the need to invent traditions in order to create the myth of the nation so that unrelated and diverse people could be united and imagine themselves to be a community.

Religion has become more “individualized and everyday”

Perhaps the real concern is not whether certain traditions are real or invented, but who has the “authority” to legitimize such practices and behaviour as authentic “tradition”. This has to do with the power to define. In other words, religious traditions may be less dependent on whether certain practices are true or have a heavenly mandate, but be more influenced by who has the power to define and establish those practices as the practices or the religious traditions. For example, the authority of teaching is of vital importance within
its own community. Religious tradition, in the form of Creeds were subsequently established to define the boundary between Us and Them, Self and Other, Christians and pagans, those who were persecuted and the persecutor(s), and between orthodoxy and heresy. This shows that religious tradition served (and continues to serve) the functional purpose of defining one’s identity versus the other. They are not mandated as received from God, but are social constructs that fulfill a practical and significant purpose, which depends on who had the power to define them at a particular time and under particular circumstances. Hence, it can be dangerous if religious tradition and authority are elevated to an absolute status. The British theologian, Peter Vardy, the Catholic tradition as Father Gareth Moore writes: “In religion, what is said and done is not to be in conformity with what is established by impartial inquiry, by going and looking at how things are, by experimenting. Rather it is to be conformable to what is authoritatively said”. In other words, within Catholicism, truth can be understood to be what is authoritatively established within the tradition, in coherence with other principles established within the Catholic faith, and established by the leaders of the church as orthodoxy.

Tradition played an important role in the early church when the church was plagued with a variety of challenges, including persecution by the ruling authority, attacks from pagan writers, and the rise of heresies within
argues that “when a single text is given absolute status, the door is readily open for fundamentalism to emerge because such people will not need to seek for truth – they are sure they have already found it”. He argues that real truth is “likely to be found among those who agonize and doubt, who search and seek and who may be in confusion. Where it is unlikely to be found is in the religious fundamentalists who are so sure that they know”.

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Some Christians lament the fact that religious traditions have, to a large extent, lost relevance in contemporary churches. I share some of this concern as I, for one, thoroughly enjoy going to a “traditional” church service with a full liturgy. However, just how “traditional” such services are, is questionable. Did the apostles in the early church sit on wooden pews in a Gothic building; sing hymns composed in the 17th and 18th century, accompanied by a pipe organ? Were they dressed in the preaching gown which inspired our academic gown? Did Jesus say the Apostle’s Creed? Did He proclaim Calvinism or Methodism? Just how traditional are these traditions?

Traditions, like culture, are ever changing. The contemporary practice of today may become the tradition of tomorrow. I am careful not to trivialize the importance of traditions as I see a lot of value in them. Yet, I am wary of the risk of traditions being essentialised, romanticized, politicized and even religionized. The transmission of traditions has to be organic; the changing nature of traditions has to be acknowledged; and the relevance of traditions has to be maintained, so that traditions can continue to give meaning to current and future generations.

Deconstructing the Postmodern

It is difficult, if not impossible, to define what postmodernism entails. Some people define postmodernity as the period after (or extended from) modernity, encompassing social phenomena such as globalization, the internet age, and the rise of consumerism. If so, we are living in a postmodern world, although access to such phenomena may not be equal across the board. For example, some parts of the world have yet to experience modernity, let alone postmodernity. In this sense, postmodernity is defined based on a Western-centric, rather than a universal notion of progress.

Postmodernism describes the adoption of a philosophy which rejects the
Postmodernism forces ethnographers critically to rethink our positions, especially the power that we have when we go into the field. In the very process of objectifying, classifying and studying other cultures, we are assuming a position of power over them. This is exactly what Edward Said’s monumental work, *Orientalism*, discusses – that Western knowledge about the non-West always comes with the objective of subjugating and controlling, for such knowledge is never neutral. So, researchers have to come clean and acknowledge that their position is never neutral; it is always partial, always distorted and always biased.

If reality is culturally constructed, then truth (small letter) is specific to particular historical periods and particular cultures. This means that grand theories that attempt to generalize the human condition, or to characterize the global system or structure, must be soundly rejected.

Postmodernism is particularly critical of the Western, European cultural imposition which is heavily based on a privileged male, patriarchal, science- and reason-based, construction of reality. Being critical of these modernist assumptions does not mean that it is dismissive of modernism itself. It means that knowledge established through such
lenses is, at best, partial – as there are other stories untold and unheard of. For example, history, as formulated within the Western tradition, imposes order on the past to make sense of it. It is never objective, even if it claims that it is subject to rigorous scientific validation. For one thing, history has for a very long time been patriarchal. It has been seen through the lenses of men; while women have been rendered either voiceless or insignificant. So too are the voices of the subaltern, the marginalized, slaves, the coloured and the colonized.

In the realm of religion, this pluralism of voices can only be captured through “a kind of ‘de-centring’ of standard theological and ethnical thinking”, which requires the humble recognition that all knowledge is infused with the fallibility of experience, and knowledge constructed through privileged lenses and positions, needs to be unpacked and redefined. To attain such recognition requires the practice of self-reflexivity, and a constant re-evaluation of our subjective position. This approach is uncommon, if not unattainable, in the modernist paradigm, which assumes that certain knowledge is infallible, and that the subjective position of (religious) authority is unproblematic. David Lyon pleads that “sociology should embrace reflexivity without relativism, reject the legislative mode, but not basic commitments, focus on Otherness, but seek commonalities, and seek appropriate transformative purposes for the discipline”. The same plea can be made for the field of theology.

Jacques Derrida has been associated with postmodernism because of his work on deconstruction. Derrida claims that every reading of a text is as much a mis-
interpretation as it is an interpretation, because all terms are devoid of meaning except the meaning constructed for them. For Derrida, one fails to do justice to texts if one sees them as fixed and rigid, as he objects to an unqualified or unopposed truth. Whatever our interpretation of any text (legal, historical, philosophical, religious) there is “more” which we cannot capture. In his writing, Derrida draws attention to what is not being said, which he sees as more important than what is being said. Sometimes we tend to hold on to the text, and to a singular interpretation of the text, too tightly, so that we miss the beauty of what has not been interpreted, and what has not been said in the text. Theology, a discipline that I highly respect, unfortunately, sometimes tries to say too much, leaving too little room for a mystical experience of the Ultimate Truth.

Millard J. Erickson contends that the biblical story constitutes the one genuine metanarrative. This appears to suggest that postmodernism’s denial of the metanarrative stands in stark contradiction to historic Christianity. This is debateable as one can similarly argue that the Bible is constituted by many different narratives, some of which may even seem contradictory to each other. Reading of the life of Jesus, he frequently challenges and denies various metanarratives that the Jews and Romans have established. He is a radical, a rebel who challenges traditions and authority, and destabilises the very comfort that these traditions provides. It is unclear what makes metanarratives that historic Christianity has promoted seem so vulnerable to the challenges of postmodernism – are they sexism, racism, homophobia, slavery, colonialism, intolerance and bigotry? If that is the case, the church desperately needs a postmodern introspection.

It is essential for religious people to engage emerging questions in order to revitalise, reform and re-imagine ancient traditions in ways that make sense to contemporary congregations.

With all earnestness I invite us to reconsider why religious people find the need to demonize postmodernism, interpreting it as a moral panic and as the foremost enemy of religion. While I do not suggest that postmodernism is flawless, neutral or innocent, I don’t think, as an ideology, postmodernism is any more dangerous than communism, fascism, authoritarianism, fundamen-
Diana Butler Bass, in her book, *Christianity After Religion*, argues that religious affiliation has plummeted across Christian denominations in the United States, but an interest in spirituality is on the rise.¹⁸ Her book explores why Americans increasingly prefer to be “spiritual but not religious”. Nevertheless, Bass contends that “no matter how fractious, wounded, irksome, hypocritical, or potentially destructive it can be, religion makes a difference, especially in the lives of the disadvantaged, oppressed and the poor.... What the world needs is better religion, new forms of old faiths, religion reborn on the basis of deep spiritual connection.... We need religion imbued with the spirit of shared humanity and hope, not religions that divide and further fracture the future”.¹⁹

Modernism attempts to give answers to all questions, while postmodernism endeavours to question all answers.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith informs us that the term “religion” is a modern concept which has a Latin root, “religio”.²⁰ The word “religion” was popularized by Christian writers during the 17th century to signify a system of ideas or beliefs about God. In the contemporary world, “religion became indistinguishable from systematizing ideas about God, religious institutions, and human beings; it categorized, organized, objectified, and divided people into exclusive worlds of right versus wrong, true versus false, “us”

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¹⁸ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*.
¹⁹ Ibid.
versus “them”. Unlike the word “religion”, Smith maintains that the original meaning of “religio” did not mean a system of belief, but meant faith.

Diana Bass argues that the only thing that needs to end is the modern Western definition of religion. She maintains that it is already ending: “For a generation or more, more people in the West have been reaching toward religio – only they call it ‘spirituality’”. People realize that the modern conceptualization of religion as an ideology, or an institution, is unsatisfactory, and they are searching for something new. That something new, according to Smith and Bass, is actually something quite old: namely faith or religio. Instead of being satisfied with old answers, codified dogmas, institutionalized practices, or invested power, Bass argues that religio invites people to return to the basic questions of believing, behaving, and belonging, and to experience God. As postmodernity has brought about new dynamics and has contributed new layers into culture, the ecclesiastical inertia of the institutionalized religion is forced to give way to a more individualized and flexible spirituality, which seem void of religion’s liturgical overtones.

Finally, to be “in the postmodern world but not of it” does not mean

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a wholesale denunciation of religious tradition and authority, or an uncritical acceptance of the postmodern fad. The key is to chart a path between the rocks of
endeavours to question all answers. The means to experiencing religio, is not to shun or condemn this uncertain postmodern world in which we are living, but to engage with it and live in it, while remaining not of it.

POSTSCRIPT

A few days before the presentation of this paper I returned from attending my sister’s wedding in my hometown, Brunei. Weddings, like funerals, are sites of religious and cultural contestation. Coming from an ethnic Chinese Christian family means there will be at least some tension in such ceremonies between Chinese traditions and the Christian faith. To reconcile the two proves to be an insurmountable exercise, for such conflicts have remained even

CONCLUSION

In my own journey of faith as a Christian, I have come to realize that by engaging in interfaith dialogue, by seeing others as fellow human beings, and by loving them as my neighbour, I have deepened my own faith, and am closer to religio. To be self reflexive and to critically examine one’s own faith position, including its religious tradition and authority, does not mean that one will lose faith or venture into the treacherous waters of relativism. On the contrary, through all these processes, and through meditating on what has not been said or interpreted by our theology, one is able to rediscover the religio, the old time faith.

Modernism attempts to give answers to all questions, while postmodernism
after hundreds of years of attempted reconciliation. A more fruitful alternative is to negotiate – between the sacred and the profane, between modernity and tradition, between religion and culture, and between freedom and authority. Such negotiation has always been taking place, and will continue to take place as long as differences exist. To fight about what constitute an authentic religious tradition, and who holds the authority, is to totally miss the point of what a wedding (or, religion) is all about. Ultimately religion, like a wedding, is a celebration of love.

NOTES

1 This paper was first presented at the Building Bridges Seminar entitled “Religious Tradition and Authority in a Postmodern World”, organized by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore and National Council of Churches of Singapore on 6 April 2013. The author was invited to deliver a commentary to papers presented by Christian and Muslim theologians on the aforementioned topic at the Building Bridges engagement sessions in 2012.


6 Vardy, What is Truth?, 177.

7 Vardy, What is Truth?, 178. In the same vein, Tariq Ramadan writes, “Coming to terms with the very essence of the relativity of our gaze does not imply that we have to doubt everything and can be sure of nothing. It might mean quite the opposite, and the outcome might be a non-arrogant confidence, and a healthy, energetic and creative curiosity about the infinite number of windows from which we all observe the same world”. See Tariq Ramadan, The Quest for Meaning: Developing a Philosophy of Pluralism, (London: Allen Lane, 2010), x.


12 Lyon, Jesus in Disneyland, 143.

13 Vardy, What is Truth?


15 Ibid, Chapter 14.

16 Such spirit has inspired new Christian
movements in North America such as the New Monasticism movement and the Emerging Church movement. See Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervans, 2006), and Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2010).


19 Ibid, 96.


21 Ibid, 97.

22 Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 97-8. The same argument has been illustrated by Hunt, *Religion and Everyday Life*, and Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*.

23 Ibid, 99.