Postmodernism and religious reflection

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The French philosophers who come most readily to mind when the term ‘postmodernism’ is mentioned are not conspicuously pious. By this I do not mean that they follow the admonition of Jesus to do their praying behind closed doors (Matt, 6:5–6). They are a pretty secular lot and seem to be the spiritual grandchildren of Sartre and Camus, whose atheism they presuppose, often without bothering even to assert it, much less argue for it.

But it does not follow that they are only of negative significance for religious faith, for theology, and for the philosophy of religion. If Sartre’s analysis of the Look and of love as the demand to be loved, developed against the background of his account of bad faith and the desire to be God, is one of the great treatises on original sin in the history of theology, it is possible that the writings of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Lacan, Baudrillard, Deleuze, and others will also turn out to have more to contribute to the life of faith and to reflection on it than we might at first suspect. In fact, I shall argue that postmodern philosophical theology can serve the life of faith as theology in general aspires to do when it understands itself as faith seeking understanding (which is not the same as faith seeking security by going beyond itself to absolute knowledge).

This is not to deny the negative thrust of a thinking that sees itself as standing with Nietzsche in the twilight of the idols, has deep roots in Heidegger’s destruction of the history of ontology, and in perhaps its most widely influential form goes under the name of deconstruction. What postmodernism rejects about modernity is its dalliance with the quest for absolute clarity (meaning) and certainty (truth) that, since Plato, has often been seen as the very heart of philosophy itself; more specifically, it is the rejection of the two dominant modern strategies for achieving absolute knowledge, Cartesian immediacy and Hegelian totality.

If we understand by immediacy the mutually naked presence of thought and its object to each other, the paradigm will be the Platonic rendezvous of the soul with the forms in which we approach each object ‘as far as possible, with the unaided intellect…applying [our] pure and unadulterated
thought to the pure and unadulterated object’. In this way we ‘contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself’.\textsuperscript{1} Neither inference nor interpretation separates us from immaculate, infallible intuition. Meister Eckhart reaffirms this mystical mission for philosophy when he says it is the intellect that ‘pulls off the coat from God and perceives him bare, as he is stripped of goodness and being and of all names’. When we free ourselves from images ‘then the soul’s naked being finds the naked, form-less being of the divine unity, which is there a being above being… how noble is that acceptance, when the soul’s being can accept nothing else than the naked unity of God!’\textsuperscript{2}

This beatific vision (or is it voyeurism?) is pure presence, spatial and temporal. The object is totally here and at no distance that might dim or distort our view of it; and that view occurs in a now that needs no reference to a past to which it is essentially indebted or to a future in which it will be completed. This view, in its many variations, is what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence.

Since French postmodernism is also poststructuralism, it often speaks the language of signifier and signified. This requires us to be a bit more specific by taking into account Frege’s distinction between \textit{Sinn} and \textit{Bedeutung}. If we think of the signified, these ‘unadulterated objects’ or ‘things by themselves’ as the referents of our thoughts, postmodernism is the Nietzschean perspectivism that says ‘there are no facts, only interpretations’.\textsuperscript{3} If we think of them as the meanings with whose help we refer, postmodernism is the denial that we have any clear and distinct ideas; it becomes the move from the Russell/Whitehead/(early)Wittgenstein dream of a totally unambiguous, univocal language to the later Wittgenstein’s claim that our meanings are always muddy, mediated by usages embedded in language games that express whole forms of life, themselves in constant flux.

As the denial of unmediated presence to either meanings or facts postmodernism is a critique of the metaphysics of presence. Classical foundationalism, as an epistemological strategy, is a paradigm of this posture. It is not just the simple claim that some beliefs rest upon or are derived from other beliefs, while other, foundational beliefs, do not have this dependence. It is the stronger claim that (at least some of) our foundational beliefs must be and can be a \textit{fundamentum inconcussum}, must and can stand on their own in absolute, self-supporting certainty, whether this be by being self-evident, by being evident to the senses, or by being incorrigible.\textsuperscript{4} (Unfortunately, for most of us it is our kids or our colleagues who are incorrigible, not our beliefs.) Each of these three kinds of belief or judgment is held by those who give it a foundational role to be epistemically immediate, standing alone in a clarity and certainty dependent upon no other.