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# POSTMODERN ASPECTS OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

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## **Abstract**

The aim of the study is to analyse new religious movements and look for a potential forming-up-place of their origin in postmodern thinking. To achieve this goal, we will first have to analyse chosen attributes of postmodern thinking, which we will then apply to the new religious movements, using religious reflection as a methodological instrument. The study shows that the way to an authentic belief does not lead via fragmentation and isolation, but through a quest for unity while preserving internal diversity.

*Keywords:* postmodernism, traditional, religion, Christianity, metanarrative

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## **1. Introduction**

The second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century can be labelled as an era in which many religious movements or societies that are still active in the present originated. This era is simultaneously a time when the II Vatican council was held (1962-1965). One of its mottoes was *aggiornamento*, that is, retrieving religion for present conditions and opening the Church to authentic encounters with the outside world. This approach can be perceived at the same time as an attempt to create a space for an authentic experience of faith for Christians. This same era, however, is also a time when basic ideas as well as principles of postmodern thinking are formulated [1]. It is a time when Lyotard speaks about the end of big stories, elevating instead to importance what is perceived as marginal. Postmodern thinkers emphasize plurality and freedom of people.

Our goal is to research into what extent these important moments of the last century take part in the creation of new religious movements and in what way they influenced their experience of faith. Our methodological approach borrows primarily from the fields of Philosophy of religion and Ethics. The scope of our research is, however, necessarily limited. We have chosen to analyse three movements in order to examine possible connections and

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interrelations between postmodernism as a culture and the way of thinking, and between the rise of new religious movements at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which, as we have found out, exhibit clear signs of adopting the postmodern paradigm (or a substantial part of it).

One of the key reasons why we chose to delve into this topic is the recent increase in numbers and influence of the members of new religious movements in the Central European geographical region. This can be clearly seen in the recent statistical surveys and the corresponding studies in values and development of religious beliefs, practices and attitudes. In the case of Slovakia, more specifically, we are referring to J. Bunčák's *Changes in Value System of Slovak Citizens after 1989* [2] and the latest nation-wide census and its section titled 'Slovak Population According to Religion' – Census of Population, Houses and Dwellings (2011) [<http://www.scitanie2011.sk/wp-content/uploads/Tab.-15.pdf>]. The census data provides the following picture of the religious affiliation of the Slovak citizens (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Religious affiliation of the Slovak citizens 1991–2011.

Main Churches/Religious Groups	1991 (%)	2001 (%)	2011 (%)
Roman Catholic Church	60.4	68.9	62.0
Lutheran Church	6.2	6.9	5.9
Greek Catholic Church	3.4	4.1	3.8
Reformed (Calvinist) Church	1.6	2.0	1.8
Russian Orthodox Church	0.7	0.9	0.9
Jehovah Witnesses	0.2	0.4	0.3
Methodist Church	0.1	0.1	0.2
No religious affiliation	9.8	13.0	13.4
Undetected/Undeclared	17.4	3.0	10.6

Far more revealing than mere numbers, however, are accompanying studies conducted by researchers from the Social and Behavioural sciences as well as Humanities, such as T. Luckmann: 'Náboženství a Morálka V Každodenním Životě (Religion and Morality in Everyday Life)' (2010) [3], V. Krivý, 'Hodnotové Orientácie a Náboženské Prejavy Slovenskej Verejnosti V 90. Rokoch (Value Orientation and Religious Praxis of the Slovak Society in the 90-Ties)' (2001) [4], B. Búzik, M. Tižík, & Z. Kusá, 'Evs (European Value Study)', Slovenský archív sociálnych dát (Slovak Archive of Social Data) (2008) [<http://sasd.sav.sk/sk/>].

According to Bunčák [2, p. 17], 55% of Slovaks think that Church gives adequate answers to moral needs of people and 53% of Slovaks believe that Church gives reliable answers to family problems. Overall, religionists see a tendency among the majority population to downplay the importance of traditional, institutional religion on their lives and to turn instead to new forms of spirituality, offered by the newly emerging, alternative religious movements and sects. Another tendency is that of secularization and loss of any connection with institutional religions. These new trends are not only interesting from the

sociological and religionist viewpoints, but correspond to changes in value orientations and life patterns among people, as is documented by the on-going European Values Study [5, <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu>].

## **2. From modernism to postmodernism**

To observe and more adequately appreciate the relation of postmodernism to new religious movements, we must first introduce basic traits of postmodernism, which we will then apply to new religious movements. The primary work serving us as fundamental for our analysis is that of Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998), *The Postmodern Condition* [6]. As we indicated one of the characteristic signs of the end of the modernism is the end of big stories. Believing in a big story of this world (i.e., all existing reality) is what Christians and Modernism have in common. In religious thinking, a big story tells about the creation of the world and human beings, about first sin, forgiveness, and hope in salvation. Modern theological thinking in general often tried to “historicize some basic teaching of Christianity in order to defend it” [7].

The big story is forming an outline of history, giving one’s life an ultimate definition and meaning to its existence. Similarly, Modernism, which bloomed after the age of reason, offers its own alternative to the big story. It tells the story of the human species that evolved in the process of evolution, conquered nature, created instruments by which it improves its quality of life. Humanity’s standard of living is rising, its wealth is growing and people enjoy living in a modern, fair society where they can think and act freely, making their own decisions. The main thought of history here is not the salvation of the human soul, but rather the idea of progress which moves individuals and societies constantly forward without taking into account “the power of culture and religion [...] as a major driving force, motivating the wills and the hearts of individuals and communities” [8, p. 134].

Through their creative activities, humans produce values which will last even after their death, thus becoming immortal. The linearity of history is what Modernism and Christianity have in common in their definition of a ‘big story’, even if the ending and chief elements of the story are different. Forces and agents (i.e., self-aware subjects) that actively make history are central, dominant and truthful. Phenomena that only have a marginal effect on history are not relevant, hence we can ignore them as insignificant. This is a very important principle: the phenomena and agents that shape history are truthful while the events and subjects that are on the edge are inconsequential. The big story as such is not questionable. Therefore, persons who are self-consciously involved in the big story aspire to bring others to the truth and connect them to the historical stream of truth. This enables them to forsake their deceptive existence on the edge and join the central stream. Christianity as a world religion has carried this out through missions, offering the rite of christening as a gate through which one can join the big story of salvation into the central stream of the only authentic history. Ever since the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century,

Modernism also brings people into the stream of history but with the help of the process of 'enlightenment' that frees people from darkness [9].

We can see a clear narrative framework in both cases. Also important to notice is the polarity that is apparent (and intrinsically existing) in both cases. There is truth on one side. Whether this truth is revealed or known by the mind is a different matter but we can see a firm conviction that there is truth and that this truth is accessible to humans. On the other hand, there is deception and rejection of faith. It is thus simultaneously true that truth and faith are in the centre, while deception along with faith rejection are on the edge and are marginal. There is a belief that one day everyone will be believers (from the perspective of the religious metanarrative) or rationally thinking and acting subjects (from the perspective of secular Modernist metanarrative). This split has a significant moral dimension. The enlightened individuals and the believers are good, those who are irrational or the unbelievers, are bad. Those who are bad must naturally become good, that is how it is right. The transformation of the bad to good can either be voluntary or forced, in either case being legitimate and unavoidable. This is exactly where we find fateful ruptures in the big story approach.

### **3. The end of the big story**

There are ruptures which question the legitimacy of the big story. From the moment when the Church started to dispose of political power, Christianity was confronted with formalism and moral dilemmas [10-12]. For example, it was the forced conversion to Christian religion under a death threat, war campaigns, or the lure of wealth, which conflicted with the original spirit of poverty, free choice, and honesty. The quality of priests and of the Church's ministry decreased with time, allowing the spread of new superstitions and ingenious forms of idolatry. In a similar fashion, the light of human reason brought humanity to several historical ruptures in the linearity of the anticipated progress. The culture produced by the enlightened reason created a colonial system, slavery, unfair division of estates and ultimately two terrible world wars and the corresponding totalitarian regimes (Fascism and Communism). Humanity's historical experience of practically applying the big stories as constitutive social, political, cultural and moral narratives caused (unexpectedly!) their destruction at the end.

It is not surprising, therefore, that their destruction continues, engendering fragmentation which spawns new cultural and intellectual forces that have resigned at the idea of one universal, objective truth. This new approach to reality rejects objective knowledge as a dangerous ideological tool ready to be abused by the powerful of this world. This is exactly where we can find reasons for the inception of new religious movements [6, p. 75]. Their characteristic sign is a diversion from the central stream, the straying away from the direction of the big story, and choosing instead their own direction and values. On the other hand, we must realize that old religions, which are established and perceived as

traditional in Europe, were created the same way long time ago. The historical phenomenon of the Church reformation (as a continuous renewal movement within the Church), however, should not be perceived as a consequence of postmodernism, even if we could find some common points. Reformation does not create ruptures; it is more an outcome of self-reflection. After all, Christianity itself was at the beginning just a peculiar sect that went against the majority of social and cultural norms of the Roman society.

#### **4. Religion as patchwork**

Besides the destruction of the big story or, more precisely, the destruction of humanity's faith in a big story, we can name and characterize other signs of postmodernism which we can then see in new religious movements. We can mention the fragmentariness of one's vision of reality and value judgments; the idea of pluralism of truth, affecting also the aesthetic category of beauty; the phenomenon of reversed marginalization in which marginal becomes important; the eclectic process of taking over and combining elements of other cultures and religions, producing thereby a mix of incommensurable elements; the replacement of what was once considered ethical by the aesthetic (or what is considered experientially more exciting) which becomes the new criteria for making choices. Our aim is to show and to analyse these elements within two particular, historically relevant religious movements. We will take a critical look at the so-called Pentecostal movement, which has its direct roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century Holiness Movements (primarily in the American Methodist churches) and at the Unification Church, which was founded in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Especially the historical phenomenon of Pentecostalism can be seen as an avant-garde crisis of the traditional values of Modernism.

The object of criticism from the perspective of the two mentioned religious movements has been ecclesiastical (institutional) formalism and the absence of direct proximity of spirituality, i.e. direct proximity in one's relation to God. The new movements, therefore, wanted to leave the mainstream and wished to develop their own story. Theirs were supposed to be authentic stories exemplifying believers who are led by the Holy Spirit. Openness to the call of the Holy Spirit should have been an alternative to the formal practice of rituals and pointing out the external signs of faith. The Pentecostal movement can be perceived as a leading cause in the destruction of a big system but simultaneously we cannot identify it with principles on which postmodernism stands. Pentecostalism wants to embody the true reformation of the Church that had centuries ago become arid and spiritless. It wants to be a revitalization of the mainstream, an inside alternative, rather than a new, eclectic movement that combines various (often disparate) foreign features [13]. Nevertheless, movements founded in the 20<sup>th</sup> century typically have postmodern signs.

One of these more typically postmodern movements is the Unification Church, also known as the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity. Founded by Reverend Sun Myung Moon in Korea in 1954, the

movement belongs to the era, when basic postulates of postmodernism were being formed and the Vatican II council was held. The Unification Church is a classic example of a shifted paradigm in the sense of the loss of the big story. Its founder concentrates history of salvation into his very person, creating strong emotional attachments between its members and its leader [14]. At the same time, this Church is an example when marginal becomes central due to its practice of globalized, Church-arranged and orchestrated marriages throughout the world. Even though it cannot be compared to other traditional religions when it comes to quantity of its members, we can talk about its global character.

In contrast to the Pentecostal movement, the Unification Church combines in its teaching elements of different religions into a syncretic mix. Its goal is to pick the best ideas of available historical religions, or rather more conveniently, best ideas and practices from Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and complement these with elements from the Eastern religions, such as the idea of the unity of contradictions, which is attained in God. In his concept of religion, Moon combines what is useable, potentially attractive, and what allows him to reach his personal saviour ambitions. The Unification Church's approach is typical for the whole chain of sects that aim to finish the task of atonement. In the process of achieving this goal, however, they rip it out from the context of the former metanarrative, posing themselves instead as the new 'big story'. Marginal thus becomes central [9, p. 89]. They use a 'patchwork' methodology – combining various fragments of different religions into one, new whole.

A good example of this kind of patchwork is the so-called Jediism, inspired by the movie Star Wars several decades ago. The Jedi is perceived as a new role model, not as a god, but rather a bearer and defender of the truth. The originators of this movement were inspired by Eastern teachings about some kind of ancient power. This movement looks more like a society with its own moral codex with the help of which it leads its members to do good [15]. Members of the movement believe that people came from this ancient power into which the souls of the deceased people return. The peculiarity as well as particularity of this movement lays in the fact that it is inspired by a movie which is called a cult movie. Indeed, the movie truly became an impulse for a cult. Possibilities of combinations are almost limitless. Creators of new movements are inspired by traditional religions, philosophy, mythology, ethics, culture, occultism, conspiracies. It is a new type of creative industry with a significant power to establish psychological attachments between the cult leaders and its founder(s).

The last characteristic of postmodernism on which we will focus is the dominance of aesthetical over ethical [16]. Moral principles are no longer the departing points for human decision making. It means that what we like or what makes us feel happy, excited, aesthetically fulfilled, is good. This pragmatism exhibits itself, for example, in the manipulation of believers who hand over their private property into the hands of sects that end up using it as their own, presumably (or rather allegedly) to everyone's benefit. But everyone's benefit is in most cases merely the benefit of a charismatic leader. The absence of moral

principles shows itself also in cases of various sexual activities which some of the sect leaders practice, whereby they definitely give up on the traditional concept of religion that should make people better in terms of virtuous living. The guru and his followers, of course, instil the belief that their practices and rituals make their adherents better and more perfect. Their vision of truth and inner belief are hidden from the eyes of the society. These people function in an enclosed system, living their own story and feeling no need of verification from the side of the societal majority. Furthermore, the belief that there is one truth is in this postmodern context crumbling into a plurality of many competing truths without any possibility of their legitimization [17-19].

## **5. Conclusions**

Based on the above presented analysis of the new religious movements, we can confirm that their origin as well as many of their characteristic traits relate to postmodern thinking and its principles. But at the same time, our analysis shows that the rejection of traditional religious authorities brought about the creation of new authorities. The empty space resulting from the loss of old certainties was filled with the alleged infallibility of new gurus and charismatic leaders. Postmodern scepticism, as we showed above, was a reaction to totalitarian regimes and their catastrophic consequences on the lives of individuals and societies. Its goal was to create or reconstruct space for free self-realization of human beings as free persons. In a similar fashion, the on-going attempts at reformation and revival of Christianity from the inside have wanted to offer the possibility of an authentic experience of faith. New movements, however, rarely fulfil this requirement; it is more an exception. Instead of freedom, in most cases, they bring about local totality. In addition, they isolate themselves from their surroundings and social reality. Their teaching is designated just for the chosen ones, and in their interactions with their adherents they use mental manipulation and intimidation. We cannot meaningfully talk about authentic belief in sects, where cultic (sometimes even occult) practices and rituals are designed to bring people to an ecstatic state of mind or to strip people from their ability to freely choose and think [20]. Some rituals and ceremonies deny the principles of commonly accepted morals. From the religionist point of view, we can establish that renaissance of authentic religion is not possible via fragmentation, isolation, and the creation of alternative alternatives [21]. The way forward can instead be seen in a humble and yet competent search for unity while appreciating diversity. This is the approach assumed by Habermas or Küng [22, 23]. As such, it reflects some of the basic tenets of postmodernism, while keeping its constructive and unifying function.

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