

THE SELFIE SYNDROME: THE POSTMODERN DOWNGRADE OF THEOLOGY

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DANIEL PRATT MORRIS-CHAPMAN PICTURES THE ELUSIVE DANGERS OF POSTMODERNISM AS A SELFIE GONE TOO FAR!

Last year I had the opportunity to visit Venice. While it's a beautiful city, it is really overcrowded. I could hardly walk anywhere without stumbling into someone's selfie (one man nearly fell off a boat taking one). All this got me thinking - why are we so obsessed with taking selfies?



I don't suppose it is an exaggeration to say that we live in a narcissistic age. Our postmodern culture encourages us to believe that we are the centre and measure of everything. Truth consists in meeting human standards and since those standards differ in different times and places, truth and morality become nothing more than a cultural projection. Put simply, life, the universe and everything are nothing more than a great big selfie framed according to our opinions and preferences.

Before going any further I should confess that I also take a lot of selfies (I was raised postmodern). However, in Venice, I couldn't send them to my friends because my phone is very old and the signal was terrible. Postmodernism is a bit like

this. According to this (anti-realist) way of thinking, human knowledge is disconnected from the real world. Thus, just as my phone disengaged from the mobile network, these thinkers have argued that our beliefs about reality have no connection with the way things actually are (imagine that all these philosophers have failed to pay their mobile phone bills and that we have all been [ontologically] cut off).

Postmodern theology is like a mobile phone in 'Flight-mode' (Stobart 2016). It is switched on but it does not want to interfere with reality. Writers like Dewi Phillips, Stanley Hauerwas and George Lindbeck, who have promoted this malnourished (postmodern) form of religion, have suggested that Christian doctrine does not need to correspond to the way God really is. This has huge implications for the Church's central teaching on the Trinity, the Divinity of Christ and the interpretation of the scriptures generally.

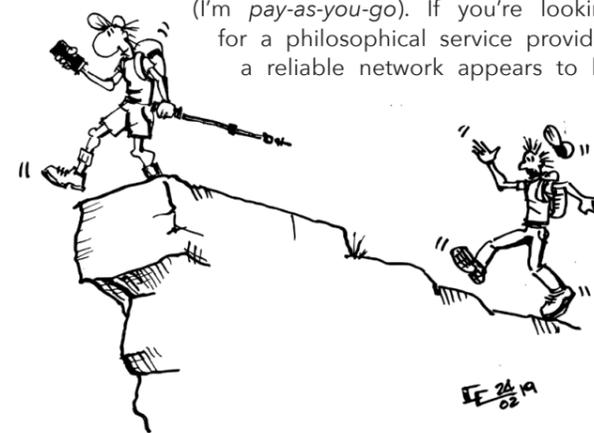
On this way of thinking, the moral teaching of the Bible becomes little more than an outdated cultural projection with no real bearing upon how we should live today. If he were alive, Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) - who criticised those who made light of the scriptures - would view this postmodern approach as a 'downgrade' from the way the Bible has been primarily regarded. The last thing we need now is a downgrade. What we need is to upgrade to a new (philosophical) phone contract so that we can dump all this outdated postmodern junk.

The Church in every age needs an upgrade - one with better network coverage. Sadly, many Christian theologians (sociologists and philosophers) behave as though postmodernism is the only philosophical service provider available. This is quite simply untrue - there are a number of networks available if they would only enter a good phone (I mean book) shop.

In *Analytic Theology* (2009), Oliver Crisp cautions against postmodern (epistemic) understandings of truth (p.47) and insists that, over the centuries, when theologians have spoken and written about God they have generally understood themselves to be saying what God is really like. Accordingly,

they have followed what has been called a (realist) correspondence theory of truth - believing that a statement is true if it describes reality.

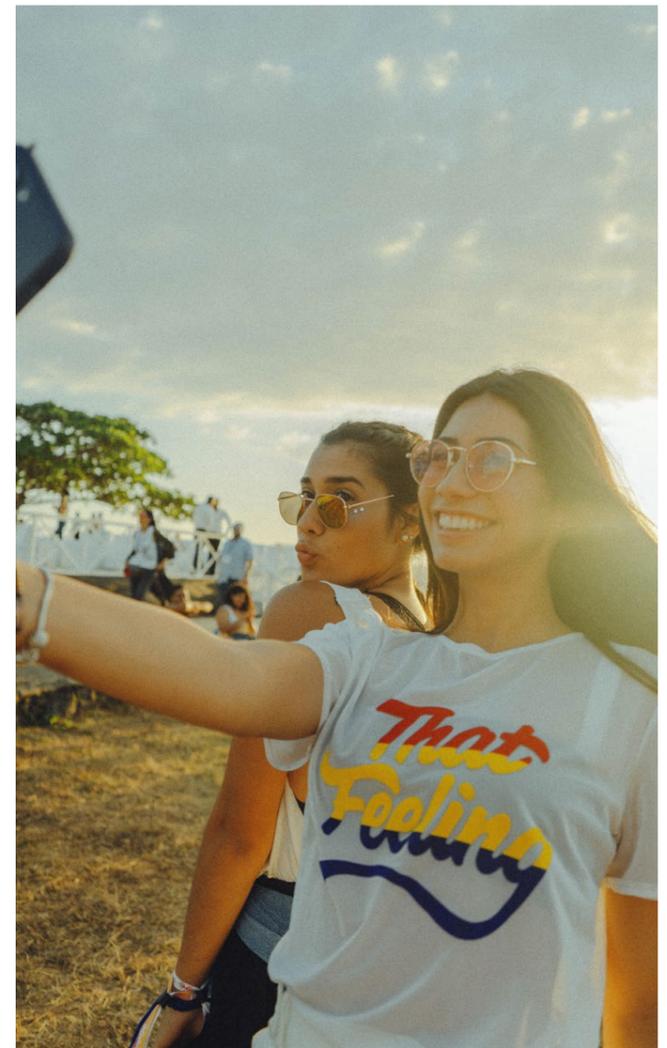
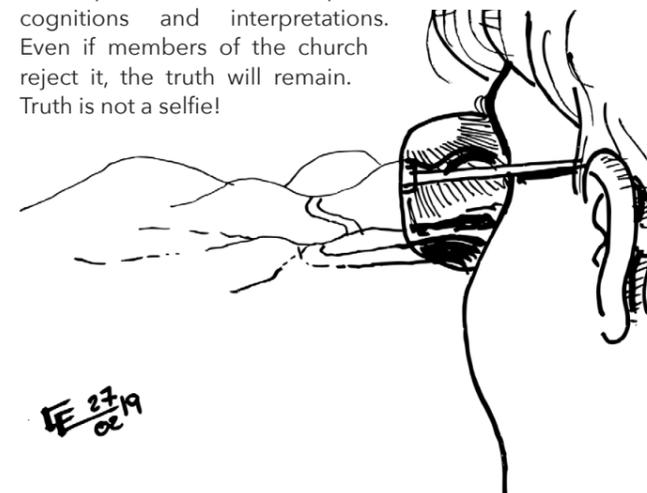
Of course this (realist) understanding of truth has undergone a number of upgrades. Earlier models mistakenly thought that the structure of language mirrored reality (ontologically). Today no one should sign up to this epistemological contract (I'm *pay-as-you-go*). If you're looking for a philosophical service provider, a reliable network appears to be



that of 'critical realism.' If we sign up to this critical realist network provider (epistemology of theology) we can say that a statement is true or false independently of our human opinions or preferences (Vermurlen 2013).

In 'Taking the Curse off Language Games' (1995) the late William Alston explained that 'even if our ways of determining what is true differ from one [culture] to another' the belief that 'God made the heavens and the earth' will only be true if in fact 'God did make the heavens and the earth' (p.23). Thus, regardless of our culture and language, our theological statements will be true if they correspond to God and false if they do not.

If all this is so, then it has implications for the Church. First: even if the Church makes a theological decision, that decision can be wrong - even if we follow all due process. The truth or falsity of the matter is not determined by our standards or procedures since God exists independently of them. Second: it is misleading to presuppose debates about things that matter with the idea that, 'whatever we decide,' it 'doesn't really matter as long as everybody remains friends.' Truth does matter. It is not merely a cultural projection or personal preference. Truth is independent of human opinions, cognitions and interpretations. Even if members of the church reject it, the truth will remain. Truth is not a selfie!



HELPFUL FURTHER READING

- Alston, W., 1991, *Perceiving God* (Cornell University)
- Crisp, O., 2009, *Analytic Theology* (Oxford University)
- Hauerwas, S., 1994, *Theology Without Foundations* (Abingdon)
- Highfield, R., 2013, *God, Freedom and Human Dignity* (IVP)
- Lindbeck, G., 1984, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Yale University)
- Phillips, D., 1965, *The Concept of Prayer* (Routledge)
- Pratt Morris-Chapman, D., 2007, *Nonfoundationalism* (Wathes & Sons)
- Smith, C., 2010, *What Is a Person?* (Chicago University)
- Smith, R., 2005, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian* (Crossway)
- Stobart, A., 2016, 'Theology in Flight Mode' (Durham)
- Vermurlen, B., 2013, 'Postmodernism Vs. Critical Realism' (Online)
- Wright, A., 2012, *Christianity and Critical Realism* (Routledge)

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Illustration: Cesare Casiraghi