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Postmodernism and the New Church

Revd David Gaffney writes:

The Advantages and Disadvantages of 'Postmodernism' within the New Church (2)

I. Introduction: Defining Postmodernism and the New Church. To analyse the implications of 'Postmodernism' for the New Church, it is essential to clarify both terms.

Postmodernism is an intellectual movement that emerged in the late 20th century, defined by scepticism toward absolute truths and grand

narratives, and characterized by a focus on subjectivity, pluralism, and culturally constructed meaning. In contrast, the New Church—rooted in Emanuel Swedenborg's theological writings—teaches that spiritual truth comes through revelation, especially via the internal sense of the Bible made accessible by Swedenborg's works. Core New Church convictions include the objectivity of spiritual realities such as God, the afterlife, and divine order, along with a strong focus on truth, charity, and individual spiritual freedom.

II. Advantages of Postmodernism in the New Church

1. **Fostering Openness and Dialogue.** Postmodernism's resistance to dogmatism can aid the New Church in cultivating respectful dialogue with other faiths and perspectives. This encourages humility and awareness that human understanding is always limited and growing ([Heaven and Hell 267](#), [Divine Providence 322](#)).
2. **Affirming Individual Spiritual Experience.** By emphasising subjectivity, postmodernism can complement the New Church's value of unique individual journeys. Swedenborg affirms that each person's spiritual path is distinct and guided by the Lord ([Divine Providence 71](#), [Arcana Coelestia 3854](#)).
3. **Prompting Critical Re-Examination of Tradition.** Postmodernism invites church members to discern between essential spiritual doctrines and merely human customs or traditions. This process can help align the faith more closely with genuine New Church teachings derived from the Word ([True Christian Religion 508](#)).

III. Disadvantages of Postmodernism in the New Church

1. **Risk of Relativism and Erosion of Objective Truth.** Postmodernism's denial of universal or absolute truths directly challenges New Church doctrine, which asserts the reality of God, the authority of the Word, and the existence of spiritual law and order. Relativism could foster confusion and diminish the distinctiveness of the New Church's message ([Heaven and Hell 455](#), [Divine Love and Wisdom 28](#)).
2. **Dilution of Doctrine.** The pluralism championed by postmodern thought can undermine the conviction that Swedenborg's revelations clarify the Bible's interior, divinely originated meaning. Treating all interpretations as equally valid can blur the Church's unique doctrinal identity ([The Doctrine of the New Jerusalem Regarding the Sacred Scripture 97](#)).
3. **Potential for Fragmentation.** Emphases on diversity and suspicion of 'meta-narratives' may lead to fragmentation within the New Church community, threatening unity and shared direction ([Divine Providence 322](#)).

IV. Doctrinal Foundations: Swedenborg's Relevant Teachings

A. **On Truth and Pluralism.** Swedenborg stresses that spiritual truth is essential for the existence of a church. Truth is found where the Word is present and actively joined to goodness and charity ([True Christian Religion 619](#), [349](#); [Arcana Coelestia 7759](#)). While truths can appear pluralistic, the Lord alone unites them.

B. **On the Central Role of Doctrine.** Doctrine must be grounded in the literal sense of the Word and verified by enlightenment from the Lord. Such doctrine serves as a lampstand to make the Word comprehensible and spiritually powerful, but detached from this source,

doctrine loses stability and authority ([The Doctrine of the New Jerusalem Regarding the Sacred Scripture 50, 53, 54](#)).

C. Faith and Charity. Swedenborg underlines that faith, charity, and truth must be conjoined for spiritual life to flourish—separated, none can be genuine ([The Doctrine of the New Jerusalem Regarding Faith 70](#)).

D. Authority of the Word Above Custom or Tradition. Councils, traditions, and personal speculation are not ultimate standards for truth—the Word itself, received with enlightenment from the Lord, is the final authority ([True Christian Religion 634](#)).

V. Application to the Postmodern Context. In light of Swedenborg's teachings, the New Church can benefit from postmodern virtues such as openness, dialogue, and a willingness to re-examine inherited customs. However, these must be pursued without conceding the centrality and objectivity of spiritual truth as revealed through the Word and illuminated by divinely-guided doctrine.

Unity in the New Church is not achieved by agreement on every detail or tradition, but through shared understanding of doctrine from the Word, as lived out in both faith and charity.

VI. Summary. Postmodernism can help the New Church engage more humbly and inclusively with the world, drawing value from pluralism and personal experience. But it must be engaged critically, ensuring that revealed truth and doctrinal distinctions remain central and secure. The challenge is to balance humility and openness with an unwavering anchoring in spiritual truth as revealed to the New Church.

Key Readings for Further Study:

- [True Christian Religion 349, 508, 619, 634](#)
- [Arcana Coelestia 3854, 7759](#)
- [The Doctrine of the New Jerusalem Regarding the Sacred Scripture 50–54, 97](#)
- [Divine Providence 71, 322](#)
- [Heaven and Hell 267, 455](#)
- [Divine Love and Wisdom 28](#)
- [The Doctrine of the New Jerusalem Regarding Faith 70](#)
- [The White Horse 8](#)

Revd D Gaffney