

# **Greenfield Group Fall of 2003**

## **(Dec. 1-3, 2003)**

*Program Committee: Tom Chulak, Kendra Ford, Josh Pawelek, Bill Gardiner, Martha Niebanck, and Gail Seavey*

### **Theme: The Postmodern Challenge to Liberal Theology**

**Special Presenter: Paul Rasor**

#### **Anchor Report**

Anchor: Anita Farber-Robertson

Forgive me. This anchor report will be neither short, whimsical, witty nor clever. Written late, it is a product of my tired and therefore more familiar modern, linear, rational mind. It is, in essence, minutes...whatever....

I was not happy with being asked to take on this task. I'd done it before when I was a relative newcomer to the group. It seemed to me that there were folks who had never done it, who were recruitable candidates. But, as one who holds modernist rule-governed values, I honored the discipline and said 'yes.' Nowhere in my readings have I heard it suggested that modernists or postmodernists can't complain.

The convocation began with check-in at 3:00 PM. Your anchor was picking up Nina Grey from the airport. The flight came in an hour late, so we did not arrive until 3:30. My apologies to those folks who checked-in before I arrived.

#### **Anchor**

Our check-in included the usual reports of children's development, family life and professional transitions.

In particular we celebrated Nannene Gowdy's marriage in October to her long time partner Carl. Sue Suchocki officiated. We were happy to learn that Josh Pawelek's son Mason who was born with a heart defect is now a year and a half old and doing very well. Josh even brought pictures to delight us. We learned that Paul Mueller sustained a heart attack and then coronary by-pass surgery from which he is recovering.

Reports of those absent: Marta Flanagan and Paul Mueller have excused absences because of illness. Martha Niebanck and Gregg Chute are on sabbatical

Richard Earhardt and Cynthia Ward have resigned. As far as we can tell Lucinda Duncan is AWOL

Nat Lauriet called to our awareness that Duncan Howlett, the last of the founders of Greenfield Group, died this year at the age of 94.

I note then that we as the Greenfield Group have made a generational transition. All of us who gather here do so on the shoulders of those founders who went before us.

Attitude adjustment began at 5PM

After dinner our guest Paul Razor joined the gathering and we began our opening session.

**Tracy Spoerls** was the first designated pre-sponder. This is a newly invented role for which there were no clear guidelines. As Paul had a lot of material he wished to cover, and Tracy was ambivalent about the focus and role of her paper, she shortened her presentation, thereby offering Paul some more time in which to work. Reflecting on her recently completed ministry in Montgomery, AL she came up with 4 points of significant difference between the predominant religious perspective of the Montgomery community and the religious perspective of Unitarian Universalism. Many of these points of difference were regarding sources of authority.

**Paul Razor** then began the first of his three-part presentation, Modernity and Liberal Theology

Liberal religion is a child of modernity

If liberalism is linked to modernism:

Is it possible to have a post modern liberal theology or is it an oxymoron?

Five characteristics of modernity:

*Subjectivism.*

*Reason*

*Optimism and Progress*

*Universals*

## Criticism

### Social Characteristics of Modernity

#### *-Capitalism*

*unlimited growth and progress*

#### *-Differentiation*

*e.g. tasks once done by family and church taken over by schools, hospitals, etc. Work life and home life separated.*

#### *-Rationalization*

### The Character of Liberal Theology

Central Theological Categories

In biblical monotheism, God is the central category

Shift, in liberalism, category of human gets way bigger; Humans are not dependent on God autonomous, rational, self-determining

In process theology. God gets real thin

#### Characteristic Traits of liberal theology

##### **1-Adaptation to culture**

credible to this generation, this situation, culture

Tended to blur the distinction between religion and culture (criticism of accommodation to culture)

##### Continuity

Emphasis on continuity over discontinuity

Liberalism tends to erase hard boundaries, avoid dualism

p.19, tendency to hold ideas tentatively, not so troubled with doctrinal disputes but can lead to avoiding deep commitments

autonomy of the self  
tensions, we can create and invent ourselves, yet come from some where, some context, is continuous.

Prophetic voice

tension with:  
tend to be part of the power /establishment they seek to critique  
liberal rel. adaptation to culture

### Critiques of modernity

- 1) alienation
- 2) racism

### Morning Session, Tuesday

**Kendra Ford** provided a lovely morning chapel which included a touching piece she read from her journal.

### Part II: Post modernity and Liberal Theology

**Gail Seavey** offered a brilliant presponse, using her wisdom as an artist, speaking specifically and powerfully about the shifting of the eye and discernment of the viewer in understanding and appreciating art. Traditional male modernist art valued work that moved the eye from the ground to focusing on a central figure. Indigenous people, those labeled folk artists, women doing art in textiles often use whole field of vision composition in which there is no central figure, but a harmonized whole that incorporates and values both figure and ground. As an artist and as a religious leader Gail appreciates those who have taught her to see the beauty in the figure/ground compositions and those who have taught her to see the beauty in the unified field of vision compositions.

Gail says, “When any of us succeed as congregations who have the guts to love, I suspect it is because some selected traditional liberal values helped us explore new ways to live in an emerging and therefore unknowable world.”

**Paul Rasor:**

## “The Postmodern Challenge to Liberal Theology”

The world looks different from postmodern glasses than it does from modern perspective

We are shifting the “normative gaze” (C. West)

5 characteristics of post modernity:

- 1) disorientation or fragmentation ... no center, Celebrate pluralism, diversity, nobody expects everything to be in a unified whole
- 2) Collapse of meta-narratives Large scale theories and interpretive frameworks no longer credible. No grand theory that might have explained things

Homemade authority

Kendra noted that growing up she was read Bible stories and Greek myths as interesting and equally important stories- was a growing up into postmodernist thinking

Frank Carpenter suggested that capitalism has become an operating meta-narrative

Fred Gillis warned against the danger of nominalizing, of making nouns of phenomenon that are not things.

Brian – We tend to be meaning makers. We want to make order. Is Al-Quaide a response to postmodernism to create order, fight the destruction of meaning and meta-narrative?

- 3) the loss of foundations in epistemology

What we used to think of as truth is now seen as interpretation

Understanding of single reality with different perspectives is modern. (blind en feeling the elephant)

Post modern can propose that there are multiple realities,

- 4) The linguistic turn in philosophy

Lakeland: “What can be said lays down the boundaries of what can be thought”

Schussler Fiorenza “experience is primarily an act of interpretation”

## 5) Breakdown of boundaries

E.g. Gail, high art/low art boundaries break down

Good and bad/ Right and wrong

E.g.: female circumcision- is it right/wrong issue or cultural imperialism to stop it, to call it one or the other

### **Theological Responses – p. 15**

Radical, post modern or deconstructionist Theologies

Late modern or Pragmatic Theologies

Premodern or counter modern Theologies Back to tradition or community grounded

Liberation Theologies

### **Post Modern Critique**

Issue of identity

Do we have to start over all the time?

Liberation theol. Can open up class critique and opens up how we can critique culture in which we are located

#### **Critique from Right**

UU's, cut off from tradition, make larger claims, we make it too grand and universal, losing our specificity and location. Everything reduced to pop-psych and lowest common denominator

Anta observed: We mix up Universalism and universalizing

Rosemarie remembers Conrad Wright teaching that UU theology is its history,

#### **Critique from Left**

To base religious understanding on a rationality is a class move – only people from certain privilege class can do that

Liberation theology would have a different starting point

Frank Carpenter gathered us in for evening chapel. We were happy to sing of our saints and our tradition – *Rank by Rank*, and *For All the Saints* being the hymns. It felt good to be together.

## **Tuesday Morning's second session**

### **Brian's preponse**

Essentially a personal response, or as Tom Chulak observed – a good promo for Paul's paper

In that light we were all eager for the paper, and Paul agreed to read it.

### **Part III Living in the Spirit of the Age: Post modernity and Liberal Religious Faith**

1-Finding a basis for Social critique

2- Religious Community

3- A More Holistic Theology

“I think it is in the emotional and spiritual dimensions that we begin to move from simply naming to truly *owning* our theologies.” Razor p.20

claiming a theology, start with naming move to owning

Wintle:

‘Claiming my theology involved for me, first claiming my community. For years I stayed in the vestibule, looking in on the Christian community. At some point I decided to enter the sanctuary, then it became my own.’

Tom Chulak asked that we find the time to read fully Paul's first two papers since they were kind of talked through rather than read.

Broke or lunch – returning at 3 o'clock back for small groups.

### **Small Groups**

What's come up for you?

How do you see the shifts from modern to post modern in your own theology.?

Articulate your own faith journey in intellectual, emotional and spiritual praxis ways.

Articulate your theology in terms of movement between Modern ↔ Postmodern

back in circle at 4:30

### **Small Group Report backs:**

Bellybutton theology, e.g. connections

Mini-me the autonomous individual who makes their own decisions, runs rampant. Is mini-me the evil twin of post modernity?

Is what we are doing here an example of discussing "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin"

Nannene reported on a conversation she and Susan had with a store clerk this afternoon. Clerk asked them what they were doing here. "We're at conference."

"what kind of conference?"

"A religious conference."

" Oh. Really. What are you studying?"

"Post modernity."

End of conversation

As a church how would we be better in issues of classism and racism in post modernity vs. modernity

GE went from "progress is our most important product" to "We bring good things to life"

An example of progress losing its credibility

Worship, what we need to be preaching about. Should we be preaching at all. Is preaching still appropriate form? What is your content if you don't have a meta-narrative.

What if any foundation is possible to preach from?

What makes for a foundation?

Are we articulating a foundation anyway, without knowing it.

Is post modernity's assertion that there is not meta-narrative actually a meta-narrative itself.

Back to Kant, that there are the "pure theological positing of ultimates" and the lived theology which is done by finite people living finite lives.

The place in which meaning emerges is in the community/ congregation

A reality TV show, "real house" a rape happened. In this constructed, safe reality, evil intruded. Similar to what happens in church...when reality intrudes on reality. In modernism there is this thought of progress toward perfection. In post modernism there is not.

Surprise, not being in control, making mistakes, freed people to connect more in a spiritual/emotional way. Having saying "I might be wrong" as a way to speak being okay. This opens people to understanding spiritual concepts they may not have understood before.

End of modernism allows m to go back to the stone age for insights, since there actually is no such thing as progress.

"If you want to know if God exists, act as if it were so," a paraphrase of Pascal's wager. Does that offer a way to create a ground within a postmodern world.

There may not be meta-narratives that hold us together religiously, but do have one as a nation, which is continuously rewritten and reconstructed, a national meta-narrative.

Sub text: Bob Thayer, the constitution is my meta-narrative. It is my god.

Discussion ended with Frank Hall's recitation of the poem *White Heron* which Huston Smith uses to end his series on post modernism

**Change of pace**

Was a fantastic fun filled session provided by Nannene in which we divided into 5 groups with the assignment of making tableaux representing images given on cards to each group. The remaining group members would guess the subject (book, movie, moment in history, etc represented). Costumes, creativity and laughter were in good supply.

Chapel by Josh found him unable to stay clear of the subject of modernism, which generated good humor. The group was treated to chapel music on the trombone by our guest Paul Razor, a special treat for Josh in whose Pennsylvania German family Christmas is always celebrated with the playing of the trombone.

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**Wednesday morning**

Chapel by Rosemarie drew from the wisdom and challenges she found in the book The Secret Life of Bees... We were reminded by a reading from the book that it isn't that people do not know what is important, but that we do not chose it. She closed us with a honey communion

Paul, wrap up response to questions raised.  
Does it matter, who cares? Angels dancing on the head of a pin.  
The stuff we are discussing is out there, it is real, it is happening. Something in the culture is happening however we talk about it. As religious professionals it is important to know about it.

What does it suggest about the nature of worship, the style of worship and preaching? What foundation do we stand on when we preach?

The claim is that we can never get to the foundation. What are we left with?

Have to repair the boat while you are on the river. There is no dry dock.

The alternatives are what we create.

Might the local congregation be a place for meaning making? Yes. A place where we can tell our stories and construct our larger story.

“Mini-me” issue in its own right. Safety  
Fuzzy boundary issues→clergy misconduct

At what point does our opening to the tolerance of mistakes, open us to tolerate evil? What do we do without foundation and a narrative to which we are accountable?

Carpenter: radical implications of Post modernism

Are they listening as consumers? If sermon was to interpret the meta-narratives, and if we don't have meta-narratives, what are we doing there? On high holidays don't want preacher talking, want music, drama, children.

Hall: I have a meta-narrative. I am reflecting on my people and giving expression to their lives.

Rosemarie: When astronauts went into space and brought back pictures of the earth as a blue green ball floating in space, and it was there a profound shift happened, and a new meta-narrative was born.

Fred: Preacher wrestling with the issues of preacher's life, is also wrestling with issues of parishioners lives.

Will: Did a “body” pastoral prayer, felt his leap into postmodern.

Rosemary: I am not doing preaching alone- I am a believer. The spirit is working with me.

We closed with a lively morning discussion.

Respectfully, Anita