COUNSELLING IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

Since the publication of the first edition of *Counselling in Context* in 1994, the twin concepts of postmodernity and postmodernism have become intellectual flavours of the month. In every area of intellectual endeavour, discussion from a postmodern perspective has become *de rigueur*. As Philip Endean has written, 'The idea of the postmodern is now a commonplace in any serious reflection on contemporary culture.'[1]

Moreover, the language of postmodernism has begun to pass into everyday usage. A few months ago, I came across a discussion of a well-known television comedian whose woolly jumper was even described as 'postmodern'. Slowly, the discourse of academics is seeping (as it always does) into popular discussion.

Pastoral care and counselling are no exception. A recent handbook for counsellors contains two chapters in which the writers explore both the sociological context in which counselling is currently developing and its possible future developments. Both chapters assume that society is in transition from modernity to postmodernity and that counselling will reflect this. Thus, Sheelagh Strawbridge and Ray Woolfe write: 'When we consider the approaches to practice and inquiry developed in counselling psychology we can find some strikingly postmodernist characteristics.'[2] Douglas Hooper, on the other hand, acknowledges the onset of postmodernity but predicts that 'The fundamental human problems of a post-industrial, postmodern, post-divided world will be substantially the same as in today's world.'[3] Whether one accepts these analyses or not, the point remains that the ideas and discourse

associated with academic discussion of postmodernity are making their way into the counselling movement both at the level of theoretical discussion and at the level of clinical practice.

But what do we mean by postmodernism and postmodernity? Needless to say, the literature is as enormous as the ideas are complex.[4] And, as we might expect, there is considerable debate (to put it mildly) as to the meaning of either term. Some, like Ernest Gellner, Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge, are dismissive. He states: 'Postmodernism is a contemporary movement. It is strong and fashionable. Over and above this, it is not clear what the devil it is.'[5] More moderately, Max Charlesworth puts it thus: 'Postmodernism is more a diffuse mood than a unified movement, more a climate of thought than a philosophical system.'[6]

Perhaps the most useful analysis is provided by David Lyon who draws a distinction between postmodernism on one hand and postmodernity on the other: 'As a rough analytic device it is worth distinguishing between postmodern*ism*, when the accent is on the cultural, and postmodern*ity*, when the emphasis is on the social.'[7] Put another way, we might (at the risk of oversimplification) say that postmodernism is the cultural philosophy, postmodernity is its societal context. Having said this, though, we should further heed Lyon's warning as to 'the impossibility of *separating* the cultural from the social, however desirable the *distinction* might be.'[8] Postmodernism and postmodernity are inextricably intertwined.

This essay is concerned more with the former than the latter. This is not because social context is unimportant – far from it. As Chapters 5 and 6 above suggest, counselling is so firmly embedded within contemporary social structures and beliefs that to treat its ideas as if they were somehow free-floating or independent from social realities would be absurd. Rather, the limitations of space require that we narrow the focus of our discussion. What follows, therefore, is an analysis

of the central ideas of postmodernism in the sense used by Max Charlesworth. The notion of postmodernity as such is explored further elsewhere.[9]

What themes lie at the heart of postmodernism? For our purposes, we may note four: narrative, truth, power and the self. At once it can be seen that the central concerns of postmodernist thinking are shared by the counselling movement. For what are we doing in counselling if not enabling people to reflect upon their personal *narratives*, discern *truth* in the midst of pain, take *power* over their lives and discover the true nature of them*selves* with the aim of change?

1 Narrative

Narrative is *the* primary category both in postmodernist analysis[10] and in counselling. Helen Sterk makes an essential point when she remarks that, 'Because it can give coherent shape to human events and make human actions understandable, narrative form helps people to feel that they understand their world.' She goes on to add, 'Human beings call upon the narrative form when they need to present a meaningful account of experience to themselves and others.'[11]

In two sentences, Sterk expresses what we all do as we begin the counselling process with troubled individuals: we take their story. Why? Not just because we want to find out more about them; but because we need to discern how a person's telling of their story reveals the thread of meaning and purpose they see as binding their life together. 'Narrative form knits events together, connecting them from beginning to middle and end, creating a seamless sense of purpose and coherence.'[12]

Sterk further quotes Stephen Crites as saying, 'Narrative alone can contain the full temporality of experience in narrative form'. And she goes on to add that such experience 'is captured in narrative form because it moves the reader or hearer through

time, ordering events in time . . . Knitting events together in time effectively unites past to present and future.'[13]

Charles Gerkin makes the point that pastoral counsellors relate to narratives in three ways.[14]

Firstly, they are *listeners* to stories. 'Persons seek out a pastoral counsellor because they need someone to listen to their story.'[15] Secondly, they are *interpreters* of stories. Those in search of counselling are desperately seeking someone who can offer a new interpretation of the seeker's story which has become too painful to bear. 'The search is for a listener who is an expert at interpretation, one who can make sense out of what has threatened to become senseless, one whose interpretation of the story can reduce the pain and make the powerful feelings more manageable.'[16] Thirdly – and this is a point directly relevant to the postmodernist challenge – the counsellor is a *bearer* of stories:

> The pastoral counsellor does not come empty-handed to the task of understanding the other's story and offering the possibility of a new interpretation. The pastoral counsellor brings his or her own interpretation of life experience with its use of both commonly held symbols, images and themes from the cultural milieu of the counsellor, and the private, nuanced meanings that have been shaped by the pastoral counsellor's own life experience and its private interpretation. Not only that, the pastoral counsellor brings to the task whatever he or she has collected from the images, concepts, theories, and methodologies of the disciplines that undergird pastoral counselling – theology, psychology, communications or systems theory, and the like.[17]

Here Gerkin is making it clear that counselling is far from being a purely one-to-one experience. Both counsellor and counsellee are bearers of community stories. The stock of images, symbols and language that counsellees use to narrate experience or that counsellors use to interpret it, is a community stock. As Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed out more than half a century ago, there is no such thing as private language.[18] Echoing Helen Sterk once more, we can say with her that 'stories can thus be powerful social tools.'[19]

Implicit within any individual or communal narrative, however, is an appeal to some kind of universal, overarching truth or set of organizing values and principles by which a particular narrative can be given meaning and sense. It is this overarching, organizing principle which postmodernist writers term 'metanarrative': a narrative that stands over and above all other narratives, whether individual or communal.

Up to the eighteenth century, this took a religious form. The universe had been created by God and was ordered by God. It was sustained by his Providential hand. Such a cosmos could be deemed to have purpose and meaning because God had established it. The primary task in human life was to discover the divine purpose and follow it. Both the Bible as a written record of special revelation (climaxing in the supreme revelation of Jesus Christ) and the so-called book of Nature served as twin guides to the operations of Providence. Thus, Western culture went through its religious period with what Peter Berger calls 'the sacred canopy' stretched over it.[20]

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the authority of Christianity as a revealed religion had given way to the rise of human reason. The canopy began to shrink or rather to be remade using new cloth. To begin with, religion and reason were not of necessity opposing sources of authority: in principle, at least, it was possible to see reason as a gift from God for the discovery of truth in the book of nature, while leaving the rest to faith and Scripture.[21] The problem was, of course, that as reason began to account increasingly for the operation of the natural order, the space left for faith reduced until all that was left was a God-of-the-gaps. Finally, even this view collapsed and only reason remained (except, that is, for the persistent but diminishing minority who continued to believe in the God of classical Christian theology).

The metanarrative furnished by religion was consequently superseded by a new metanarrative based on reason. The test of particular individual or communal narratives became human rationality. Providence was transmuted into its secular version – Progress; and history, it was assumed, contained its own inner purposes and meanings which were destined to lead to *unending* Progress.[22] All human beings had to do was to unlock and appropriate them using the tools supplied by reason.

Such tools could be found perfectly in the burgeoning disciplines of science. As the mysteries of nature – including the human mind – turned into mere puzzles to be resolved by human investigation, there seemed nothing that would lie beyond the relentless march of the new metanarrative.[23]

Until the end of the twentieth century, that is. The arrival of postmodernism slashed at religion and reason alike[24] as it set about demonstrating that there are now no metanarratives of any kind. All that is left is a collection of so-called 'local' narratives; that is, narratives confined to the particular lives of individuals or societies. What is missing – never to be replaced – is any overarching narrative by which to measure and interpret them. To quote Jean-Francois Lyotard's seminal discussion *The Postmodern Condition* published in 1979, 'I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives.'[25]

Behind Lyotard's reaction lies an important point. The postmodernist refusal to accept metanarratives must be seen in part as an historical reaction against the devastating effects of what Jacques Ellul calls *techne*[26] and what philosophers more usually term operational or instrumental reason. Surveying the last hundred years, postmodern writers find themselves disillusioned with the alleged triumph of science and view its promises of emancipation and progress as illusions at best and as lies at worst. The mass destruction of two world wars, the horrors of Hitler's 'Final Solution', the nuclear arms race, the universal destruction of the world's environment – to mention but a few – are all the outcomes (so the argument

runs) of rationalism pursued to its scientific ends. Moreover, when we look at the great ideologies of the century – Nazism and Communism – what do we see but the deification of what Lyotard describes as 'totalizing' scientific reason?[27] The holocaust and the gulags are part of the same disease: worship of the rationalist metanarrative. Not for nothing did both Hitler and Stalin seek to legitimate their regimes by appeals to science as the ultimate arbiter.

But what are the implications of all this for counselling?

The first is that while counselling may legitimately focus upon personal or even collective narratives, on postmodernist premises it has no way of assessing them against any overarching principle, any metanarrative. The practical effects of this somewhat abstract issue can be seen as soon as we ask the question: 'What would it mean for this person in pain to become whole or fully human?' At this point we would expect our metanarratives about human nature and the goals of humanity to come into play. Hence Windy Dryden's comment that: 'All approaches to psychotherapy are based on either explicit or implicit images of human beings. Such images do have a direct influence on the pattern of therapy.'[28]

But, according to postmodernism, there *is* no such thing as human nature: the very idea is no more than a metanarrative myth. All we have are individual or perhaps cultural or societal images of human nature which by definition cannot be made universal. There simply is no template of humanness or wholeness which transcends cultures.

So what is the counsellor to do? Answer: play the pragmatist and opt for what works.[29] In the absence of any metanarrative about human nature or human wholeness, we must choose what seems to fit any given individual at any given time. Any thought of bringing about wholeness according to a notion of what it means to be properly human must be jettisoned. The most we can do is to articulate a view of humanness which will fit our own culture. Indeed, it is questionable whether we could, on the postmodernist line of argument, correctly speak

of human nature at all. Culturally-determined nature, yes; a human nature that cuts across cultures, no.

2 Truth

If universal conceptions are the first casualty of postmodernism, truth is the second. When we think of truth we usually mean that it refers to a state of affairs which actually happened – the 'facts of the matter'. This is sometimes called the correspondence view of truth because it assumes that it is possible to describe events in such a way that what is said about them corresponds to what took place.[30]

For postmodern writers, though, no such truth can exist. It is impossible to get at what actually happened. Why is this so?

The answer can be found partly in the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who has rightly been viewed as the philosophical precursor of postmodernism.[31] Nietzsche profoundly distrusted all claims to universal truths. He simply did not believe it possible to make truth claims. If he had known of the correspondence view of truth as such he would have rejected it. In his *Notebooks* of 1873, he wrote: 'What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms.'[32] This is the language of extreme distrust. Truth is not fixed but shifting. It can be mobilized and deployed according to the interests and purposes of its claimants who turn out to be manipulators. Truth is entirely mutable and offers no foundation at all. 'All that exists consists of *interpretations*', he contends; and elsewhere goes on to declare: 'Truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions.'[33]

Nietzsche's suspicion has been picked up across a range of disciplines – literature, philosophy, even science – usually under the banner of 'deconstructionism'. Although too great a subject for us to deal with here, it is worth noting that for decontructionists as for postmodernists in general, the possibility of being able to get at a true account of reality or events is ruled out from the start. It is not that the venture will fail halfway down the track: it cannot get started at all.[34]

From a philosophical perspective, there are two fundamental reasons for this. In the first place, on the postmodernist account, reality *as it appears to us* is socially constructed.[35] That is to say, whatever we encounter in our experience has to be interpreted according to the framework given us by the society in which we live. Suppose, for example, you or I were counselling someone from another culture who told us, in the course of the interview, that they *blip kerchumph*. Our initial reaction would be to check whether our hearing had been correct. Supposing it had, we would be faced with a larger problem: what on earth does *blip kerchumph* mean? Is it a noun, a verb or what? Does it refer to an animal, an experience, a bad dream, a disease, a relationship? Until we could conceptualize *blip kerchumph*, we would be at a loss as to how to proceed. In other words, the notion of *blip kerchumph* is a socially-constructed reality: real to the counsellee in their culture but without meaning in ours. Extend this line of argument to cover all statements about reality and it becomes easy to see why postmodernism is so plausible. We are back to Nietzsche's statement that all that exists is a matter of interpretation. Facts are no more than illusions.

The second philosophical reason advanced by postmodernists for their suspicion lies in the nature of language. Reality, so the argument runs, is mediated by language: if we see something, we can only conceptualize and communicate it by the use of language. But languages are artificial – created by human societies, not given from heaven or by nature. They are social constructions. When we seek to describe an experience or event, therefore, we necessarily employ socially-constructed concepts and language to do so. But this merely locks us into a circle of illusions: we cannot know we have described it as it really is because there is no way of knowing what counts as 'really is'. All we can do is employ conceptualizations and

language which take their meaning from within the linguistic circle. There is nothing outside it.

An example from the world of counselling may serve to illustrate. Suppose we are prepared only to use Transactional Analysis (TA) both as a theory and as a clinical method. No other approach will do. TA is the only conceptual system we are willing to recognize. Every experience presented to us by counsellees is interpreted entirely in the language of TA. Only TA concepts are acceptable and everything must be regarded as explicable in TA terms.

We would indeed be caught in a circle with no obvious way to break out. No matter how much other professionals tried to convince us that other approaches and languages needed to be taken into account, we would not be willing to break free of the TA trap. Reality for us would be defined by the TA language system alone. Everything would have to be filtered through its grid.

This is how postmodernists would have us view all language: not as referring to an objective reality which somehow can be found by the use of neutral, objective language; but as a pointer to fundamentally unknowable reality which can only be expressed in relative language systems which take their meaning entirely from within themselves. Reality is fundamentally what we make it, nothing more.

The implications of such a view are enormous. The first and most obvious is that we have to abandon any hope of getting at truth in the conventional correspondence sense. We simply can never know what reality is apart from the language system in which we are stuck. We may be horrified to think that truth is unknowable and without objective foundations; but, says the postmodernist, that's just the way things are. We find ourselves echoing Yeats' great poem *The Second Coming*: 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.'[36]

The problem for us, however, is that as counsellors, we find ourselves to some extent echoing Nietzsche: 'All that exists

consists of interpretations.' For if there is one thing that we know from both the theory and practice of counselling it is that when clients offer us 'the truth' they are in reality presenting us with their interpretations, their perceptions. They have already organized and filtered their version of events and feelings probably without knowing it.

And so, sitting in the counsellor's chair, we find ourselves ambivalent towards postmodernism. On one hand we recoil from the thought that there is no such thing as objective truth; while on the other, we recognize that it is hard to discern. What are we to do?

In the end, I believe we have no choice: we must reject the extreme scepticism of postmodernist thought. If we are to serve our clients, we must work with them to seek the truth and enable them to face it, however painful that might be. The kind of therapeutic change which is the goal of all counselling can never succeed by denying that truth exists. That is a counsel of despair. Only by being determined to discover truth can we enable our clients to find the change they desperately seek. The challenge that postmodernism presents to us is to hang on to that conviction and to make it work.

3 Power

If there are no metanarratives and truth is but an illusion, what are human beings doing when they speak about their past or make claims to know the truth? From the point of view of postmodernist writers, the answer is that they are seeking to exercise power over others and to manipulate them. Postmodernists thus lie at the end of a long line of suspicion stretching back to Nietzsche, drawing upon the works of Feuerbach, Marx and Freud through to Foucault and Derrida, all of whom are united in one contention: that the primary use of claims to knowledge and truth is for an individual, group or culture to exercise control.[37]

In his book *The Will to Power*, for example, Nietzsche wrote, 'Knowledge works as an instrument of power'. Taken with his views on truth we have already noted, it is clear that he sees power as the driving force behind all human behaviours and motivations.[38] More recently, Michel Foucault, taking his cue from Nietzsche, makes the connection between truth and power explicit: 'Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A regime of truth.'[39] J. R. Snyder sums up the issue as follows: 'All thought that pretends to discern truth is but an expression of the will-to-power – even to domination – of those making the truth claims over those who are being addressed by them.'[40]

Foucault is significant because he formulated his theories of truth and power as he examined the concept of madness in French society. What his studies show is that, to quote Anthony Thiselton, 'what madness seemed to consist in has largely depended on shifts in social assumptions between the ancient world, the nineteenth century and today.'[41] By taking advantage of – or even initiating – these shifts, societies have been able to exercise power over their dissenters. Thus Foucault goes on to show that it has constantly been in the interests of the powerful to manipulate the vulnerable in order to reinforce the power held by themselves: this is Nietzsche's will-to-power in action.

A moment's reflection will lead us to concede much of Foucault's case. We have only to think, for example, of the way in which the Soviet State used the concept of madness to lock up or execute political opponents on the grounds that to oppose the state was self-evidently and by definition a sign of madness. By manipulating a supposedly objective medical term, the State was able to portray dissenters as anti-social and dangerous.

We would, of course, recoil at such a policy. But again, is there not a prophetic insight contained within this piece of postmodernist iconoclasm? Behind the obsession with power

and wall-to-wall suspicion, there lies an important warning: those of us who offer care and support to the distressed need to be alert both to our motives and to the dynamics of the situation. We are all familiar with the possibilities of transference, counter-transference, projection and the rest; but are we also sufficiently attuned to the possibility that *we* might be the manipulators and power-seekers?[42]

The problem is that we might not recognize these things in ourselves simply because like every other human being we are frequently influenced or controlled by our subconscious desires, of which the desire-to-power is one. It might equally be, however, that it is not power we desire but merely personal affirmation, fulfilment or satisfaction. We might think we don't need to be needed; but why is it that we offer ourselves as counsellors or clergy in the first place? However much we might resist postmodernism's thoroughgoing scepticism, we need to listen carefully to its proponents on this point.

4 The Self

The self is probably the central concept in all counselling theories. Space forbids lengthy philosophical debate about the nature of the self[43] but we need to be critical of the assumption that the self is some kind of entity which can be viewed as separate from the body or the network of relationships and material circumstances that make up the totality of an individual's existence. Uncritical use of the language of inner self and outer self, mask-wearing and so on that self theories take for granted can easily lead to a version of Cartesian dualism with all the perils that entails. Rather, we must turn to the challenge posed by postmodern conceptions of the self. And to understand this we need to begin with modernity.

To all intents and purpose, we can identify modernity with the Enlightenment and its mode of thinking which persisted from the mid-seventeenth century to the late twentieth. At its

core – as we have seen – lay a faith in human progress based on scientific reason. Within this worldview, it becomes possible to identify four aspects of the self.

Firstly, the self is *individual*. Descartes' famous dictum, 'cogito ergo sum' (I think therefore I am) established the priority of individual selfhood over and above medieval notions of collectivity. For Descartes, it is the individual 'I' who thinks and therefore is: the individual reigns supreme.

Secondly, the self is *rational*. Enlightenment believers were committed to universal Reason as the only alternative to religion. Ironically, their view of the self took as its foundation the definition of the sixth-century theologian Boethius, namely that it could be thought of as 'an individual substance of a rational nature.'[44]

Thirdly, the self is an *active agent*. It seeks to take control of its destiny, it shapes its own world, it observes, deliberates and decides. Moreover, in doing so it acts autonomously: it does not need the permission of others to make up its mind; neither, ultimately, can they rightfully coerce it. What the self decides, it freely chooses.

Fourthly – and in many ways this is the crucial characteristic of the modern self – it is the *seat of moral value* and is the *ultimate moral arbiter*. It is no longer constrained by pre-modern religious morality or institutions. The modern self must make up its own mind according to the dictates of reason and rational conscience. Morality has to be chosen, not imposed.

Taken together, we get a picture of the modern self as an autonomous, coherent, confident seat of knowledge, value and decision. When we compare this with the postmodern self[45] we find that each of the characteristics of the modern self is denied. Individuals are no longer in control since they are buffeted by inner and outer forces beyond their power. On one hand Freud has enabled us to recognize the force of drives from within, irrational by nature and buried deep within our

subconscious; while Marx reminds us that correspondingly uncontrollable forces of economics and politics assail us from without. In both cases, the self is at the mercy of that which lies outside its domain.

Neither are there grounds for optimism based on rationality. If the postmodern critique is correct, rationality is but an illusion, lacking universal authority and valid only in cultures which accept it. Such a view immediately subverts any attempt to build hope for the future on faith in the universal power of reason. In the absence of universally valid knowledge or truth, all the individual self can do is hope to ride out the storm without knowing where it is going.

It follows from this that postmodern morality is equally fragmented, provisional and temporary.[46] If there is no universal reason, there can be no universal right or wrong – merely a constellation of moral beliefs which cultures and individuals dip in and out of as they choose. But this is no basis for moral agreement across cultures. In such disputes, on postmodernist grounds who can tell which is right? Answer: no one. Sheer power and force of arms is the deciding factor. We are back to Yeats again: anarchy is loosed upon the world.[47]

What kind of self are we therefore faced with in postmodernity? I would once more suggest four characteristics:

1 It is highly *unstable*. The instability of the postmodern self has to do with its lack of assured identity and fixedness. If the confident optimism of modernity no longer holds, the self is left without hope or anchors. If there is no such thing as truth, if Nietzsche is right, then the self can be sure of nothing.
2 It is *lost*. The postmodern self is directionless. It does not know what its goals should be, for reason and religion as final authorities have been removed from the scene. There are no metanarratives: the self has nothing by which to take compass bearings. The only thing it can do is carry on with

purposes imposed upon it by the contingencies of survival or the force of others.

3 It is *manipulable*. If all systems of thought are no more than instruments for domination then everything is up for grabs. The denial of even the possibility of truth claims results in the collapse of persuasion by reasonable argument and leaves the individual subject merely to persuasion by pressure or even violence. In the words of Anthony Thiselton, 'Where truth has largely become absorbed into structures and spheres of power, argument and reason collapse into a rhetoric of force . . .'[48]

Thiselton goes on to make the point that what he calls 'the devaluation of the currency of rational dialogue'[49] has sinister effects. In a world where there can be little agreement on moral criteria, decisions end up being made on the basis of which competing group is strongest. Decisions become a matter of who can apply the most pressure. Terrorism is the ultimate outcome of postmodernity.

4 It is *alone*. The modern self was alone too, for if the individual was the seat of value and the locus of morality, then it was also self-contained. However, modernity retained something of the pre-modern emphasis on community. The sovereignty of the atomistic, individual self was, to some extent, balanced by the recognition that human beings need – and will engage in – communal activities. The self in practice was not quite so alone after all.

But the forces within postmodernity act to bring about the opposite effect. The self is no longer part of a cohesive whole but is cast adrift, surrounded by others who are intent on absorbing, coercing or even destroying it. The breakdown of faith in shared values leaves individuals exposed and vulnerable. The loneliness of the postmodern self is truly despairing.

The challenge to the Christian counselling movement at this point becomes evident. If postmodernity offers only fragmentation and despair, the Christian faith holds out a radically different vision. This is where a distinctive Christian worldview becomes imperative. For it is this that contains the ingredients of a counter to the bleakness of postmodernity.

An Alternative Worldview

What would such a worldview look like? In Parts II and III above, we have explored this question in theological categories suggested by the formula: 'The *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ, the *love* of God and the *fellowship* of the Holy Spirit'. In what follows, however, the insights afforded by these categories have been summarily re-presented in terms of the categories of postmodernism.

1 A Belief In and Experience of Transcendence

For postmodernity there is no transcendence. Robbed of any metanarratives that might enable us to reach beyond ourselves, we are trapped in worlds of our own making, subject to inner and outer forces over which we have no control. Ultimately, this is all there is to reality. We cannot transcend either ourselves or our situation. All is without meaning or purpose other than survival and domination. As the American deconstructionist John D. Caputo puts it, 'the saving message is that there is no saving message.'[50]

Over and against this, a Christian worldview not only asserts that transcendence is possible but offers a way of discovering it. There *is* a saving message and it is real. But where is it to be found? This brings us to:

2 A Christ-shaped Metanarrative

For a postmodern person seeking change through counselling, the only metanarrative which can be held up as originating from outside the human frame of reference is that of Jesus Christ.[51] The Bible presents Him as the paradigmatic human

being. If we want to know what kind of people God has created us to become and what it would mean to be fully human then we have to look at Him. Our human narrative finds its fulfilment – its completion and its healing according to God's purpose – in the incarnate Son of God, fully God and fully human.

That Jesus Christ offers us a metanarrative 'from the outside' is crucial. Only by positing a metanarrative which originates from *beyond* humanity can we escape the postmodernist charge that because only human narratives exist we are doomed to remain trapped inside a cage of our own making.

The doctrines of the pre-existence, incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ enable us to present a worldview that liberates us from this trap. For what they affirm is both that human beings are valuable to God (i.e. worth saving) and that He has acted in His Son to give us a new metanarrative which is capable of saving us and changing our lives. In this the Christian counsellor has a powerful message which goes far beyond the nihilism of postmodernity.

3 The Jesus of Truth

The denial of even the possibility of truth by Nietzsche, picked up by his latter-day followers, presumes that truth claims are metaphysical and that because metaphysics is merely another disguise for power-bids, truth dissolves into manipulation. It is significant, however, that in Christ we find truth to be relational, not metaphysical. His words to the disciples in John 14 are pertinent to the postmodern denial of truth: 'I am the Truth . . .' Here we see that far from being a tool for domination or a manipulative system, truth is related to the God-man whose own integrity and transparency guarantee the possibility of genuine truth. What is more, it is non-manipulative since the One who *is* the Truth, far from acting as manipulator, gives Himself freely to the manipulations of others for their salvation.

In Christ, then, we are confronted by what Allen Verhey has called 'the great reversal'.[52] Truth is incarnated in One

who suffers for who He is – the God-man. He does not, as the logic of postmodernist views of truth would imply, use His status as the True One to control or coerce others. Rather He submits Himself to their control and coercion. Using Jesus Christ as the paradigm, truth is equated with suffering love.

4 Power and Love

Fundamental to Christianity, of course, is the Cross of Christ. We are all familiar with presentations of the Cross which major upon forgiveness of sins and eternal life for those who repent and believe. There is, however, a further aspect which bears directly on our theme. For the Cross was a demonstration both of love and power at the same time. In contrast to the model of controlling power presented by postmodernism, the death of Christ offers an alternative: the power of self-sacrificial suffering love.

We have thereby returned to Verhey's 'great reversal'. The kind of dominating force, even violence, presupposed as the foundation of power in postmodernist writings is subverted by the authentic power of the One on the Cross: 'This is not the way of superior and coercing power; it is the way of self-giving love . . . The power of God *is* the power of love because, according to the Christian understanding of God that is formulated in the light of Good Friday and Easter, *God is love*.'[53]

5 Self and Trinity

The love which is made evident at Calvary, however, is not solitary, individualistic love. It is the expression of the deep love of the Father, Son and Spirit together acting for the salvation of the world. This in turn is grounded in the mutual and reciprocal love they have for one another. As Leonardo Boff remarks of the Trinity, 'the essential characteristic of each person is to be *for* the others, *through* the others, *with* the others and *in* the others. They do not exist in themselves, for themselves: the "in themselves" is "for the others".'[54]

The German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg goes further.

Just as the selfhood of the members of the Trinity is constituted by self-giving, mutual love, the same is true for human beings made in the image of God. 'In the mutual love of the Trinitarian persons,' he says, 'love does not simply denote activities in their mutual relations . . . Their selfhood . . . manifests itself through the reciprocal relation of those who are bound together in love.'[55] In other words, individuals do not exist in isolation: rather, they only become truly human in relationship to others. To quote the Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware, 'As a person, I am what I am only in relation to other persons. My human being is a relational being. My personal unity is fulfilled in community.'[56]

Conclusion

In a Christian worldview, we have a decisive answer to postmodernism's portrayal of the isolated individual. Christian faith and theology present a radically different picture of humanity – lost and directionless, often lonely and despairing, even trapped. But at the same time, valuable to God, invited into the divine love of the Trinity through the suffering yet triumphant love of the Cross. It is here, at the heart of Christian belief, that we find the most powerful resource of all for counsellor and counsellee alike – that profound hope discussed earlier in Chapter 12. This, in the end, must be the key to the response of Christian counsellors to the challenges of postmodernism.

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