

*I read this address to junior college students by their former JC principal on the occasion of their College Day and it really set me thinking. I have made an extract of it :*

Postmodernism is here, whether you are aware of or not. Some scholars call it “The Accidental Revolution” because it just quietly flowed into our society like the tide in the night.

Postmodernism is not driven either by a self-conscious ideology or by self-conscious revolutionaries. The guerrillas are, in fact, very ordinary people, most of whom would be shocked if they could see themselves for what they are: provocateurs and agents of revolutionary change. Indeed, even the most average of Singaporeans – the consumers of Colgate and Coca-Cola, Lux Soap and Listerine, Kraft Cheese and Kleenex – are at the heart of this secular transfiguration. These people look sane and normal, harmless and predictable. They are not wild-eyed and incendiary. They do not spew out verbal acid that is so typical of revolutionaries. Yet they have succeeded in throwing overboard the values that many previous generations cherished. Old beliefs and conventions have ended up on many modern trash heaps. But we are neither perturbed nor vengeful. In fact, we are quite innocent about what we are doing. Change has actually intruded on the core of our being, the place where values are wrought, expectations arise and meaning is constructed. Our world has changed and so have we. But we are without anger against postmodernism.

The term Postmodernism literally means “after Modernism” and is used to describe the current era which came after the age of Modernism. What are its characteristics?

First. There is a shift from scientific rationalism to an experiential and intuitive base of understanding. Our culture is shifting from once clinging to certainty, to now valuing relativistic thinking and a lack of absolute truth. That is a frightening shift, subtle and subversive.

Postmodernism tells us that all you can believe is what is in your own heart, that rests on intuition, that values the experience instead of looking for the truth. This shift affects the way we perceive the world, think of ourselves and how we understand reality. Postmodern thinking creeps into our lives not necessarily through conscious choices but through a steady stream of bombardment through songs, novels, magazines, movies, advertisements and television.

Second. Postmodernity is a consumer age, where people relish options. Plurality demands these options in which all choices share equal footing. When I was a young boy, I understood that the best car was a Rolls Royce, the best camera was a Leica and the best watch as a Rolex. Nowadays, because there is no centre, no clear target, there exists a need for a variety of possibilities. We are flooded with choices because people want to experiment with the new. They want plenty of options. I respect what according to you is the best. In return, I expect you to respect what according to me is the best. After all, who knows what is the best? So do not ram your views and opinions down my throat and vice versa. The standard markers are being ignored and the parameters are not permanent anymore.

Third. Postmodernity brings in the blurring of morality. Each person has the right to construct his or her own moral code, the single most detestable act is to impose one’s own morality upon another person. What I want and what I choose is not only true (for me) but right (for me). I have a right to my desires. So conversely, no one has the right to criticize my desires and my choices. No one can claim to be right or possess truth.

Another reason postmodernity favours options is that something may work for a while, then in time be discarded as obsolete. This is why people may prove reluctant to make long-term commitments. They want to keep their options open in case something better should turn up. Loyalty as a value? No longer cherished. On the contrary, the person who remains in an unhappy marriage out of allegiance or for the sake of the children will be regarded as a coward for failing to live life fully for himself or herself alone.

The full address can be found in

[http://www.standrewsjc.moe.edu.sg/files/attachments/speech\\_by\\_goh\\_2011\\_college\\_day.pdf](http://www.standrewsjc.moe.edu.sg/files/attachments/speech_by_goh_2011_college_day.pdf)