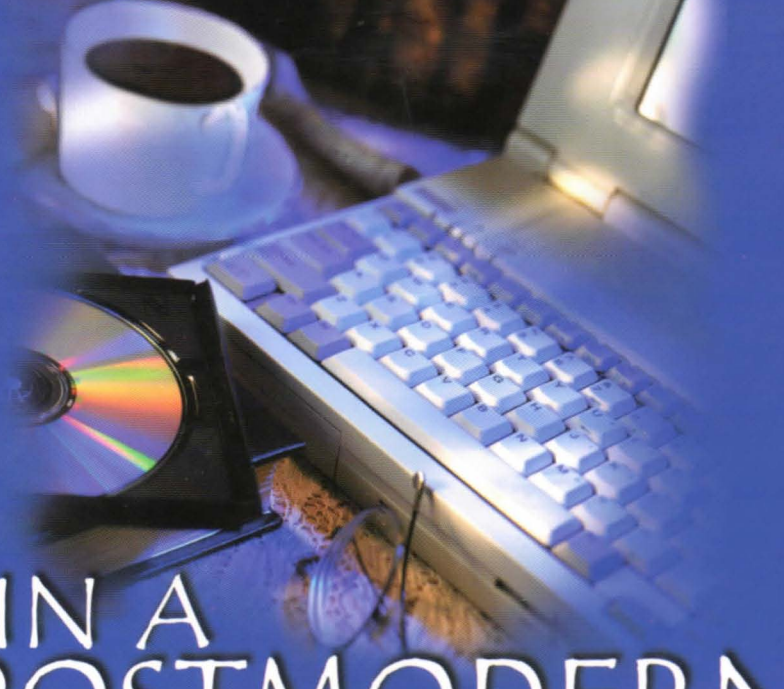


HARRY LEE POE

CHRISTIAN
WITNESS

A photograph of a desk setup with a laptop, a cup of coffee, a CD-ROM, and glasses. The scene is lit with a blue glow, suggesting a late evening or night setting. The laptop is open, and the keyboard is visible. A white cup of coffee sits on a saucer to the left of the laptop. A CD-ROM is in the foreground, and a pair of glasses is on the desk near the laptop.

IN A
POSTMODERN
WORLD

CHRISTIAN
WITNESS
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WORLD

HARRY LEE POE

ABINGDON PRESS / NASHVILLE

CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO
CHAPLAIN JAMES H. DENT
MENTOR, COLLEAGUE, FRIEND

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PREFACE

In the late 1970s I read all the novels of Walker Percy, through whom I first learned the expression “postmodernism.” Throughout the late-1960s and 1970s I had monitored the cultural changes taking place in my world, but Percy was the first one to give the changes a label. Not until the early 1990s, however, did I hear anyone within the theological community paying attention to this phenomenon.

Most of what people write about postmodernism seems to fall within two basic groups. Either they think postmodernism is “the best thing since sliced bread” and everyone should throw care to the wind, or they think that postmodernism needs to be beaten down with a stick never to rise again. I think this book takes a third approach, which recognizes how postmodernism could arise, recognizes its dangers, but also recognizes opportunities it creates for the advance of the gospel. This book does not argue that we should abandon rationality and truth, on the other hand it recognizes that we can never go back to the prevailing cultural norms of the past.

Some people see their task as destroying old cultural forms while others see their task as preserving the tradition at all costs. I am concerned that people who are different from me have a clear and simple opportunity to meet Jesus Christ through the gospel. It is not necessary that they become rationalists in order to have faith. At least, our experience in the modern mission movement suggests this and the Bible seems to place no such barrier to faith. Evangelism has been so easy for so long in the West that we have gotten lazy about it. The advent of postmodern thinking will force Christians to erase all the cultural assumptions from their practice of religion and recapture the vitality of simple New Testament faith, which arose in a pluralistic culture.

In many ways, we have returned to a first-century context in the West in

which the church has no special status. The new custodians of the popular culture may be hostile to the Christian faith, but the general population no longer knows much about it. As Bishop Lesslie Newbigin has suggested, the United States now constitutes a mission field as though the gospel had never been preached here before. The old assumptions of Christendom no longer hold. The church has lost North America and Europe as she once lost North Africa and the Middle East. The question to be answered is whether or not she will regain these lands.

Postmodernity looms for many as the great challenge, as though postmodernity will cause us to lose the West. The church lost the West a generation ago. The culture wars are long over. If anything, postmodernity represents a rattling of the old modern biases against Christ contained in modern Western culture. With each dreadful aspect of postmodernity, which frightens all true modernists to the bone, we will see the possibility of a bridge or doorway for the gospel. Postmodernity, while leaving the assumptions of the West far behind, may actually provide the context for the re-evangelization of the West. To succeed, we must travel to a different place and culture: our own home as it moves into the future. As we move into this new world, we can do so with the comfort of knowing that Christians have faced this same challenge over and over for two thousand years.

I first stepped out of my culture when, at the age of sixteen, I moved to Washington to serve as a page in the United States Senate. I lived on my own in a boarding house a few blocks from the Capitol. While there I gained an education in cultural values. In the past, race relations had always been a black and white issue! In Washington, however, I learned about a vast array of people I should hate. People quizzed me on why I was friends with the Puerto Rican, the Jew, the Pole, and the Italian. Years would pass before I took a course in cultural anthropology, which first stirred my interest in understanding culture. I continue to owe a debt to Bryant Hicks, who taught that course and later became my colleague when I joined the faculty of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Another experience in seminary that sealed my interest in the issue of culture came when Willis Bennett took ten students to New York City for a week in July. On a hot sidewalk he bought me my first frozen yogurt. He exposed me to a world of other experiences that week that had a profound effect on my thinking. We stood on another street corner and he said to me, "Twenty thousand people live on this block." At the front of each building stood a doorman to restrict entrance. Old-fashioned visitation would not work here. I began to ask a question I continue to ask: How can they hear the gospel?

During my doctoral studies, my major professor, Lewis A. Drummond, encouraged me to spend part of a year at Oxford University to gain a broader

intellectual foundation. There I made friends with people from all over the world who were the heirs of the British Empire. The experience put American ways of doing things in perspective.

When I finished seminary, I served four years as a prison chaplain in the medium-security Kentucky State Reformatory near Louisville while I pursued my doctoral studies. In the prison I learned what it meant to cross cultural boundaries and minister to people of different cultures. I first learned to relate to people who had entirely different belief systems. I am indebted to the principal chaplain, James H. Dent, and to our colleagues Darrell Rollins and Larry Vance for helping me understand prison culture. Chaplain Rollins also helped me understand black culture. My first book, *The Fruit of Christ's Presence*, came out of a Bible study I led with Chaplain Rollins, which I later developed into a sermon series as pastor of Simpsonville Baptist Church. My second book, *The Gospel and Its Meaning*, crystallized for me when Chaplain Rollins was asked to lead a chaplains retreat after I had become a seminary professor of evangelism. This book came about as the result of an invitation by Chaplain Dent to lead another chaplains retreat.

The bulk of this material formed the basis of the retreat. I am indebted to the chaplains who participated in the retreat sponsored by the generous support of Prison Fellowship of Kentucky under the leadership of Rick Drewitz. Contributing to the conversation that helped me refine the material were Fred Coburn, Larry Franklin, Bishop Carter, John Lentz, Suzanne McElwain, Tim O'Dell, John Ramsey, Peter Houck, Jim Dent, and Darrell Rollins.

The material further developed when I was asked to lead a seminar on "Apologetics in a Postmodern World" for the C. S. Lewis Institute in Oxford and Cambridge in the summer of 1998. I deeply appreciate Stan Mattson, president of the C. S. Lewis Foundation, and Karen Mulder, director of the arts track for the Institute, for their invitation to participate and their encouragement to develop this material as a book. Those who took part in the seminar further helped to clarify my thought. While they do not necessarily agree with my analysis, conclusions, or strategy, I appreciate their willingness to take part in the discussion. I particularly want to thank those who made presentations in the seminar: James I. Packer, Peter Kreeft, Dallas Willard, Bill Dembski, and Kelly Monroe. I owe MariAnne Van Eerden my deepest thanks for her tireless efforts in arranging the logistics that allowed such a notable collection of participants in the seminar.

My colleagues in the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education have always provided a sounding board for ideas and a rich source of

insight. Ron Johnson, professor of evangelism at the McAfee School of Theology of Mercer University, has been in a conversation with me about these issues for fifteen years. We hope we have stimulated one another's thought a little. *The Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* also published the germ of this book as an article entitled "Making the Most of Postmodernity."

I could not have completed this work without the support of those closest to me. Great portions of the manuscript were carefully and patiently put together by the tireless efforts of my secretary, Suzanne Nadaskay. The president, David Dockery, has allowed me both the time and the resources necessary to participate in the conferences, retreats, and annual meetings that made this book possible. My colleague Jimmy Davis with whom I have collaborated on other books related to science and religion is always helpful in thinking through any issue and asking the right question to make me think things further. I have also relied for many years on the insight and knowledge of L. Joseph Rosas III with whom I sat in philosophy seminars more than twenty years ago, and with whom I have discussed issues of post-modernity innumerable times since.

My wife, Mary Anne Poe, has been my greatest encouragement and friend in ministry. She has served on the pastoral staffs of several churches and now directs the social work program at Union University. I could not begin to credit all of her help, though she compelled me to accept the invitation to participate in the C. S. Lewis Institute when it would mean being away from the family for two weeks in the summer. Her most recent contribution came this morning when she asked, "Didn't you mean to say something about the 'whiteness' of the counterculture?" I did, but I forgot.

Harry Lee Poe
Jackson, Tennessee
June 3, 2000