

Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds:*
Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What To Do About It

Part Two: An Idiot Culture

Introduction: the rise of the mass mind, the creation of an idiot culture, and the process of “dumbing-down in our time. Note several important facts behind this:

1. Modernity
2. In terms of content, a trend toward specialization, and in terms of communication, a trend toward universalization. Because of universalization, everyday knowledge is at an all-time low; because of specialization, elite knowledge is at an all time high.
3. George Steiner: semi- or sub- literacy due to mass education
4. Highbrow (the clique of the cultivated and learned”-M. Arnold), lowbrow (someone who is not or does not claim to be educated or refined), middlebrow (a style of thought capable of a higher way, yet reduces things to the low way in the end).
5. Regarding elite, highbrow Christian thinkers, there are two problems: their secularization (pride and compromise of the faith), and the specialization (none but other specialists understand or profit from them).
6. Hence, there is a need for reform of both high and lowbrow Christian thinking, including a “bridging of the brows.”

9. Amusing Ourselves To Death

Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* captures the essence of TV and its impact on thinking and discourse. It's patron city is Las Vegas. In this work, he documents the shift from an age of exposition (printed word and speech, lengthy attention span, remarkable comprehension level, sophistication re. world and history, rigorous style of argument, etc) to an age of entertainment. The telegraph's “instancy” and the photograph's “imagery”, TV has combined the two-instancy and imagery-such that this blending entertainment becomes the master style of TV. The problem is not that there is too much entertainment on TV, but that EVERYTHING on TV is presented as entertainment. Is George Will (or Ted Coppel) a journalist or an entertainer? Several problems with TV are noted. One, TV discourse has a bias against understanding via disinformation. Two, TV discourse has a bias against responsibility via negating the consequences of what is experienced. . . after a murder, “now . . . this.” Three, TV discourse has a bias against memory and history via its ceaseless, breathless focus on the NOW. Four, TV discourse has a bias against

rationality as theatre rather than a forum for true thinking. Five, TV discourse has a bias against truth and accuracy in favor of what is compelling, sincere, entertaining, charismatic. Six, TV discourse destroys the possibility of enjoying personal solitude. The impact of TV discourses on Christian learning, thought, and discourse has been devastating.

10. People Of Plenty

Advertising is central to American life like no other country in the world; it is an institution. Before age 20, the average person has seen 800,000 commercials. Life in America is life in adland. America is no longer a society of producers but consumers. Advertising affects everything from standards to lifestyles, to politics. Advertising has no ideals except the bottom line. It affects work satisfaction, the hedonistic revolution, the dominance of the consumption ethic. We have no fundamental ideologies, only “shopping-center theory,” market totalitarianism, and the commodification of everything, including human beings. How has advertising affected Christian thinking and learning? One, advertising is biased toward secular, materialistic, amoral view of life (all you love is need; in terms of the SDS, avarice). Two, advertising is biased against the independent thinker and audience as magazines and periodical court advertisers, not readers. Three, advertising is biased against substantive content as a means to the end of selling. Four, advertising is biased against thinking and discernment via symbols, images in which there is intensification of feeling and degrading of significance. Five, advertising is biased against the advanced and the controversial because substantive content doesn't appeal to the mass audience. To what extent do evangelicals mimic the culture of mass advertising on tee shirts, and in seeker friendly and audience driven churches?

11. All Consuming Images

“Nautilus” men who work out assiduously are a perfect reflection of modernity: a slavish, self absorbed dedication to the middle class of precisely defined, powerfully engineered body machines that we call masculine. What drives these and others is STYLE, STYLE, STYLE (from stylus = the distinctive manner in which one wrote, now the distinctive manner of expression used by everyone). Substance is who and what one is; style is how substance is communicated. Style is outer expression of inner character. But today, style is an end in itself, self-advertising that says I'm like this. Image is everything! Style, enhanced by the invention of photography, is promoted via advertising and fashion, esp. the latter. In America, led by Diana Vreeland (Fake it, fake it), but forerunners include Jean Baptiste Colbert, financial adviser of Louis XIV, who paved the way for Christian Dior, Pierre Cardin, Ralph Lauren, and Calvin Klein. How has this preoccupation with style affected Christian thought and discourse?

One, by suggesting that style, not substance is most important. The mining of surfaces is crucial. Two, preoccupation with style reinforces the trend toward trendiness, requiring change and choice, neomania, leading to superficiality, anxiety, burnout, and compromise. Three, preoccupation with style undermines Christian speech of all kinds. Four, preoccupation with style contributes greatly to the emptiness of modern culture, increasing boredom, and leading to sex and violence.

12. The Humiliation of the Word

The incessant battery of words, words, words has weakened their power to communicate, create understanding, establish community, etc. We live amid towers of Babel (hence, the need for silence and solitude--H. Nouwen). Jacques Ellul has written *The Humiliation of the Word*, which speaks of the reverse side of the triumph of the image as a defining feature of modernity. The image has triumphed over the word: visual over verbal, entertainment over exposition, artificial over the real or natural. Modernity as a universe of images has blotted out nature; it is nonstop cultural bombardment via images from everywhere on everything. Should Christians side with words or images? Who are some heroes of the word? (1) Atheist Isaac Asimov ("One picture is worth a 1000 words." Don't believe it!), (2) the Jewish community, esp. the prophet, "the hero of the moral word," (3) the Puritans who linked words and the Word, and who listened to some 7000 sermons in a lifetime, (4) Jacques Ellul and Søren Kierkegaard who plead for the recovery of words, and (5) God Himself who is the Word, who creates by the word, deals with us by his word, made us in his image as word speaking beings who require words for wholeness (see Barry Sanders, *A is for Ox*), who has revealed himself and salvation via words. The effects of the humiliation of the word on the Christian mind? One, our word deficient culture is heavily biased toward image dominated expression and perception with discernment or criticism. Two, our word deficient culture is biased against understanding, appealing to pathos, not logos. Hearing and reading and analyzing are hard work which is bypassed via the image. Intellectual sloth results.

13. Cannibals of Pomo

The cross as a fashion statement? Yes, an example of the devouring character of late 20th century postmodernism (pomo) at its most banal and insidious! Or is it? Now we delight in the unreal--the craze for using objects for something more or other than what they really are, for example in Victorian whimsy. Madonna is the clear high priestess of pomo exploitation. What is modernism, modernity, and postmodernism. Postmodernism is very difficult to define, at its lowest common denominator, it is simply after the modern. First it was used as a reaction against high modernism in art, literature, and architecture. More later.

Modernism is equal to the Enlightenment project of the 18th century as it worked out its schemes in philosophy, art, literature, religion, etc. on the premise that God is dead, man supreme, reason and science infallible, and progress inevitable, and thus self-confidence reigned. The twentieth century has obliterated modernity and the Enlightenment project: WWI & II, countless other wars, pollution everywhere, alienating and dehumanizing world and cities (houses = human filing cabinets; does this include dorms?), psychological breakdowns, substance abuse, loss of marriage and family, etc. Hence, postmodernism is the response to these crises. Pomo is modest to the point of despair in the loss of reason, truth, principles and the resulting cultures, beliefs, styles, periods, etc. There is no superior culture, no meta narrative, real reality, true truth, etc. Pomo is extreme or “absolute” relativism. Two fallacies regarding modernism and its passing. One, we have described postmodernism by believing that modernity itself, along with modernism, is fading away. Wrong. Modernism as a set of ideas may have collapsed, but modernity--monolithic cultural realities created by capitalism, industrialized technology, and telecommunications, etc--is far from over, indeed, it may be at its high noon. Two, we have assessed postmodernism wrongly, thinking it opens the door for Christian proclamation when in fact postmodernism with its irrationalism and radical relativism is a strong opponent to Christianity which finds some affinity with old school modernism in its belief in reason and truth. Two more metaphors for postmodernism are “hopping” (channels that is), and shopping (at the malls, the “mall” of America). In Pomo, everything is a game of surfaces; serious interest in truth and issues is wasteful nostalgia. “I do everything with a wink”--Madonna. We live in a second gilded age; we are cannibals of culture rather than its custodians or stewards. Pomo is a challenge to the church in terms of pietism as a form of private person relative religious life, and in terms of pluralism in its discounting of truth. Overall the impact is this: how to follow Christ and make him known in a postmodern environment?

14. Tabloid Truth

We live in an age of tabloid or talk-show truth, “the emergence of a talk-show nation in which public discourse is reduced to ranting and raving and posturing”--Carl Bernstein. It is a prime shaper of American thinking and discourse. It focuses on selling, sensationalism, and voyeurism. The goal of the interview is primarily to take away one’s name or reputation, to bring them down to our level as an incredible display of envy. There is a crisis of truth associated with this phenomenon where everything is up for sale (\$100,000 to interview parents of the child allegedly molested by Michael Jackson). Also, truth is presented as power-play, the will to power over others (esp. on campus) as seen in Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern (sexist, racist, indecent, yet he is profitable!). The power of tabloid truth and talk shows is that it corresponds with the creation of “virtual

communities” that cater to private interests and language games. These days, truth in America is anything but “marching on.” What is the impact on Christian thinking? One, many Christians are consumers of the same popular talk shows with the same entertainment-minded unconcern for truth (devotees of Rush Limbaugh, etc). Two, Christian discourse is beginning to take on some of the characteristics of tabloid and TV talk shows. Three, Christians have their own version of truth as power play in protests, picketing, pronouncements, etc., anything but persuasion, and it seems we hate our enemies more (enemy bashing) than we love God, people, or truth. Four, Christian TV is frequently much more violent in its rhetoric than its secular counterpart (Holy Ghost Machine Gun!). Five, heresy hunting (well and good for it is needed), but there is a malignant mutation of the tabloid truth trend in the emergence of a techno populist form of evangelical witch hunting.

15. Generation Hex

There has emerged a new sense of tribalism: only those within a group can know what it is like to be a member of the group such that those outside have no right to comment or criticize, and to do so would be to show disrespect and be insensitive. A most prominent form of neo-tribalism is generation, age egocentrism and generational apartheid, and this serves as a sixth important challenge to Christian thinking. Four things in the 1920 arose to give us present day generational tribalism. One, an awareness of greatly accelerating change and preoccupation with a sense of progress such that advances produced a chasm between one generation and the next, the earlier one of innocence before the change and of lost innocence afterward. Two, an awareness of nostalgia as the flipside of progress, a homesickness for a lost age and innocence (restaurants so capitalize). Three, a new fascination with decades called decadology (roaring twenties, etc.) Four, a growing sense of generational wars in which each generation is constituted by shared generational experiences, events, etc. The results: shortening historical attention span, new solidarity in identity and style, tensions between generations, acceleration of turn over between generations, etc. Final observations. Some generational differences is inevitable. The notion of generation is profoundly biblical (Genesis, etc), and there is a need to think in biblical terms about generations and their responsibilities. Generational labels mask self interest, especially in the market. Generationalism leads to a splintering effect, and yet there is resistance to being so categorized. ReGeneration Quarterly mag.

16. Real, Reel, or Virtually Rea?

People who develop into the ultimate game boy for whom being on line was a lifeline to existence itself. Cyber communication is person to person,

but not face to face, giving license for free expression of imagination and emotion while preserving privacy. Cyberspace and the new information super highway reveal starry eyed utopians and dark Luddite premonitions, optimists and pessimists. Reality will be somewhere in between. There are deep challenges from this domain on the issues of understanding truth and what it means to be human. TV promised great things, but hasn't delivered, and cyberspace probably won't either. It may decrease leisure, produce complexity anxiety, and create the explosion of cultural trash. Virtual Reality (VR) may become the global language of the day, a new form of human experience, the verisimilitude of the simulation, all embracing immersion in the environment, the near omniscience of hypertext potential for interpreting any text. It's reality reduced to information processing: all at once instant, total information and godlike simulation. What is the real nature of our fascination with computers, a bane or boon to our humanness. What about its impact on the issues of truth and reality? VR signifies an event or experience that is real in effect but not in fact combining two things, (1) a high degree of simulation and (2) a high degree of interaction that amounts to total immersion. It possesses total metaphysical promise, of a kind. Like R. Wagner's Bayreuth Festivals, for example. Yet, an unrestrained proliferation of virtual worlds (even Christian ones) cries out for sanity, for a connection with reality, for metaphysical grounding. We must keep virtual reality virtual. Esp. in Christian terms which glorifies the real world of the earth, flesh and blood, history, and human experience, etc. Christian reality will be the last best reality check on virtual reality systems.

Summary:

1. "I feel a bit like the man who turns in a fire alarm only to be charged with arson" (setting the fire himself). Guinness has written about the negative side of modernity, but it also has many positives.
2. A critic of modernity has as difficult of a time resisting the trends as anyone.
3. These pressures are too abstract and inconsequential. NOT. Beware of Christian thinking growing into speculation, heresy, blasphemy, and just plain weirdness (and we love it so!).
4. Remember Romans 12: 2--do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.