

Review Article

From Postmodern to Post-Christian: Gene Veith's Cultural-Ideological Analysis

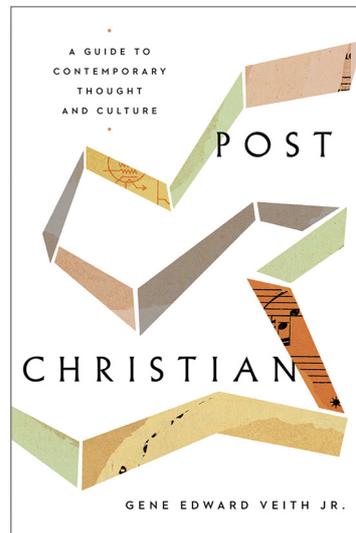
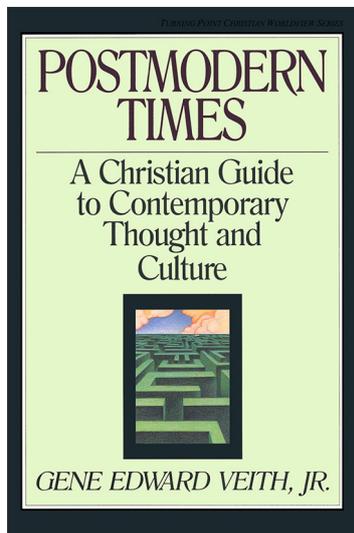
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Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Series edited by Marvin Olasky). Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994. pp 256. ISBN-10 0-89107-768-5

Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Post-Christian: A Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020. pp.320. ISBN-10 1-4335-6578-1

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| Postmodernism | Postsecularism | Post-Christian | Apologetics | Worldview | Culture |



1. INTRODUCTION

The last several decades have brought seismic shifts in culture and ideology, particularly in the west. There are many contributors for this, from the advent of internet and computer-based technologies to increased globalization and political change. For Christians, comprehending the widescale moral and religious change that has accompanied these shifts can be overwhelming, as processing such shifts and respond in a manner faithful to historic orthodoxy has become increasingly complex.

In both of these books analyzing recent cultural movements, Gene Veith seeks to thoughtfully inform and edify Christians who feel a sense of confusion and displacement in an era that has moved into and beyond being postmodern to what some have called “postsecular”, or what Veith coins as “Post-Christian”.

Veith is very much a student of culture and philosophy, being the author of nearly two dozen books in addition to scores of articles at the academic and popular level.

Veith is also a popular and active blogger, has received numerous honorary doctorates, and has most recently served as dean, provost and professor of literature at Patrick Henry College in Purcellville, Virginia. His background in literature and established record as a writer only serves to benefit his readers, as he writes in a flowing and easy-to-follow manner, having both a penchant for colorful examples and a unique ability to break down complex ideas into an organized and understandable form.

Veith's work is timely in its confrontation of a culture trying to redefine itself now that its previous foundations have been removed. Veith originally wrote the first book in this series in 1994, and his analysis was very much necessary then. However, given the vast epochal shifts that have taken place in the last twenty-six years in such areas as sexuality, gender, epistemology, language, technology, as well as in the political and religious climate, a sequel to the first book was certainly in order. Even so, this review will begin with an analysis of Veith's 1994 book to set the stage for his 2020 book, and in order to explain and examine Veith's overall contribution to the study and critique of the broader arc of cultural change.

2. AN ANALYSIS OF POSTMODERN CULTURE

Both books are divided into four parts, each examining a facet of culture along with its ideological assumptions, precedents, and implications, followed by a Christian response and evaluation at the end. In each book, the author follows a method of surveying the history and development of certain ideas or expressions, describing the consequences of those ideas now and in the future, and suggesting a Christian response. He defines his purpose in writing as

being to encourage the church not to capitulate to the postmodern *Zeitgeist* but rather to "recover and apply its spiritual heritage" (24). He rightly notes from the introduction that it is always necessary for the church to confront its culture and exist "in tension with the world", not courting irrelevance by ignoring the culture or risking unfaithfulness by embracing it. Thus, Veith intends for his evaluation to point to the inadequacies and points of need within culture in order to display the sufficiency of the gospel as an alternative.

2.1 Postmodern Thought

Veith contends that in the postmodern system of thought, reason is replaced by emotion, morality is replaced by relativism, and reality itself becomes a social construct. Regarding relativism, by the mid-1990s postmodernism had rendered as prevailing orthodoxy an aversion to absolutes, paired with an emphasis on the tolerance of different (and even contradictory) beliefs. Following the thought of philosophers like Lyotard (many of which, in Veith's view, follow in the spirit of the Enlightenment), the claim that one belief system is true was recast as an attempt to gain power over others, and thus postmodernism proposed that all belief systems be relativized.

To Veith, one of the most significant aspects of postmodern thought is deconstructionism, which assumes that meaning is not objective or independent, but is created by and thus dependent upon a social group and its language. In this view, one's own thoughts and identity are considered purely social constructions, with freedom being construed as rebellion against the oppression of absolute structures or metanarratives. Language, in postmodern parlance, has no objective meaning but is a cultural creation that is part of its own system,

formed by its own group.

Veith argues that this view renders language as not independently viable, meaningful, or applicable, and when applied to texts like the Bible, produces analytical paradigms like the "hermeneutics of suspicion". Such a paradigm, for the postmodern thinker, does not seek to find the meaning of a text but rather seeks to liberate the text from its biases, power-relationships and historical-cultural origin. In taking apart the meaning of a text in this way, it is deconstructed.

In his evaluation, Veith suggests that the danger of deconstructionism and relativism is that "when the objective realm is swallowed up by subjectivity, moral principles evaporate" (58). This becomes precarious for developing any reference point for inherent human rights or dignity, since human beings cannot be deemed valuable in an absolute sense, but rather because of what they contribute to the person determining their value. This "repudiation of humanness", says Veith, is also supported by the postmodern idea that human beings are not only not superior to any other species, but are actually a drain on the environment and are an ecological danger to other (ontologically equal) species. Therefore, Veith surmises, while modernism sought human control over nature, postmodernism "exalts nature at the expense of human beings" (74).

2.2 Postmodern Art

Art is included in the discussion of postmodernism because Veith sees it as a way of concretely expressing postmodern beliefs, "making clear the implications of their worldview and dramatizing what it means for human life" (93). The arts (whether television, music or traditional artwork) are the major vehicle of expressing worldviews through

culture, and he follows Francis Schaeffer in seeing postmodern art as reflecting a political rather than a moral or a philosophical aim. In contrast with modernist art, postmodernist art capitalizes on the experience and reception of the art by the audience, minimizing the intention or role of the artist. Television and movies also reflect a postmodern shift in that they tend to blur the lines between what is real and what is not real, communicating an underlying ideological flexibility surrounding meaning and appearance.

Veith's discussion of these tendencies is balanced in that it is not entirely polemic; he is sure to applaud the advances, creativity and positive aspects of postmodern expressions where they arise (whether in ideas or architecture). When discussing the relationship of postmodernism to Christianity, he is sure to note the opportunities and possibilities for Christians in terms of how the gospel can be contextualized to the postmodern person. For example, he writes, "the postmodern age has room for Christianity in ways that modernism did not. Its openness to the past, its rejection of narrow rationalism, its insistence that art refers to meanings and contexts beyond itself – these insights are all useful to the recovery of a Christian worldview" (119).

2.3 Postmodern Society

Some of Veith's strongest language of critique and lament is reserved for this section, as he argues that postmodernism, in its abandonment of overarching cultural identity, has fragmented society "into contending and mutually unintelligible subcultures", creating a new form of subculture-oriented tribalism (144). This tribalism spills over into the political arena, which manifests in culture wars and widening polarization due to a focus on special interests

rather than traditional systems. A reader can again see the relevance of Veith's insight even in 1994, as the past twenty-six years have confirmed that his warnings about these trends were apt.

In an interesting excursus on the political effects of postmodernism, Veith warns that

... nearly every assumption that gave rise to democracy is under attack, from the freedom of the individual to the existence of a transcendent God whose Law is above all cultures and who endows human beings with inalienable rights. Not only do postmodernist theories undermine the notion of a free, self-governing society; the practice of contemporary politics seems to be following their lead in moving governmental structures in a sinister, anti-democratic direction (157).

The "anti-democratic" part of postmodernism in his view is that it denies that individuals are free or can govern themselves. Political postmodernism is generally aligned with post-Marxism, and as a result is collectivistic and suggests that morality should be imposed by the state. This, to Veith, can lead to "the imposition of terror", because a postmodern person cannot appeal to authority but instead must wage political battles to protect his or her preferences and oppose those with other preferences.

2.4 Postmodern Religion

In postmodernism, spirituality becomes increasingly aesthetic, with people attending gatherings or taking positions because of how it makes them feel. By the mid-1990s, Veith noted a rise in individualized, personal spirituality as over against organized or institutional practice. He noted that this appeared to coincide with a Christianity that had numbers but lacked substance. He contends that this

spiritual limpness comes from believers who seem to want to be at peace with the culture and thus lack the staying power and spiritual commitment to be faithful to biblical standards. Part of the problem, he suggests, is a preference for "therapeutic approaches to well-being" over truth, and an embrace of consumerism for the sake of numbers. Thus, he argues that for the church to thrive in the postmodern era, it must emphasize doctrine, stand on the reality of truth and morality, and not capitulate to cultural relevance.

3. AN ANALYSIS OF POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURE

In a sense, Veith wrote *Postmodern Times* at a turning point in western culture, following the fall of the Soviet Union, amidst the rise of relativistic epistemologies and during the internet's infancy. *Post-Christian* then follows it in view of the disorienting morning-after experience of more than two and a half decades of the postmodern experiment, as that which was nascent in postmodern thought has been taken to its furthest conclusions. Just as *Postmodern Times* recognized that western culture was at a crucial turning point in the mid-1990s, so also *Post-Christian* considers today's culture to be a crucial turning point.

In the introductory portion of the book, Veith muses about the transformation of postmodernism since 1994, explaining how it "did not end...(but) rather, it hardened, becoming more political and less playful, more dogmatic and less tolerant" (15). While he had previously discussed the deconstruction of texts, this has now become the deconstruction of marriage, the body, gender, and identity. Pluralism has transformed into identity politics, relativism into speech codes, and

humanism into transhumanism. In this way, postmodernism has “mutated” into what Veith calls “exaggerations” of prior postmodern thought or else something entirely different. Therefore, he labels this era as “Post-Christian” or “what we are left with when we try to abandon the Christian worldview” (18).

3.1 A Post-Christian View of Reality

All of culture in a post-Christian world, Veith says, is reduced to groups exercising power over other groups, with “every dimension of life (being) politicized and critiqued as part of a system of oppression” (19). While this was present in a lesser form in postmodern thought, it has expanded in a post-Christian system, with oppression being construed not economically but rather as related to social and cultural groups based on their will to power. Intersectionality unites oppressed and disparate groups against their oppressors, and the post-Christian concept of the power relationships that propagate these notions of oppression is as localized in systems and structures. Thus, this era is one of an increasing disconnect between a person (or group) and other people (or groups).

A post-Christian understanding of the relationship of people to nature casts individuals as lonely selves in a subjectively defined and ultimately meaningless world. He argues that regardless of how much is known about a phenomenon, science is heralded as “an overarching, all-encompassing authority”, bifurcating reality into the purely naturalistic or material and the subjective and moral. Beyond this, the post-Christian era has continued in the footsteps of the postmodern environmentalist contention that humans are a menace to nature.

In the years since his previous book, perhaps the most significant cultural shift has been in technological advancement. Veith

notes that technology has amplified the human creative ability and has provided opportunities for people to attempt to transcend or extend themselves, creating ways to compensate for their limitations. While there are many benefits to recent technological advances, Veith notes that these advances also continue in the postmodern trend of blurring the line between the real and the construct. In a world where technology provides endless opportunities for alternative virtual realities, a person can create different identities online where unacceptable behavior becomes allowable and anonymous.

A post-Christian view of meaning is also distinct from the postmodern view, in that the assumption today is that the will is what gives meaning. This often manifests in the idea that it is morally wrong for someone to oppose another person fulfilling his or her desires, or that it is a virtue for a person to behave in a certain way simply because he or she wills to do so. Such a perspective further cements the postmodern virtue of individualism which has so come to define western thought, and places individual preference above the needs of the larger community.

In contrast with *Postmodern Times*, Veith's tone in *Post-Christian* is less optimistic related to the place of Christianity within culture. Even so, he hints that at the end of the post-Christian era there may indeed be some sort of “cultural rebirth”, in which many of the more negative aspects of modern culture correct themselves. He argues that the beginnings of this can be seen in things like the #metoo movement, which functioned as a corrective against the sexual permissiveness of the previous decades. However, rather than seeing this era as providing a unique opportunity for Christian witness (as he did in the previous book), he simply advocates for persistence, writing, “Christians

should be undaunted at the post-Christian onslaughts, knowing that such onslaughts are ultimately doomed, in the world as well as in the next” (21).

3.2 A Post-Christian View of the Body

To Veith, the “characteristic infirmity of our time” is the “repudiation of the creation and creatureliness”, which separates sex from its meaning related to the family. Beyond this, through technology, sex is separated from the body itself. He argues that the unique aspect of the post-Christian era is an obsession with sex, suggesting that the desire for sexual liberty and the fear that religion threatens this liberty is “a major cause of contemporary secularism” (99). Given the explosion of internet pornography, Veith’s contention is that sexual pleasure has become the culture’s *summum bonum*. In his view, changes in conceptions of sex which began with the advent of birth control and abortion have steadily led to more unprecedented results, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage.

He argues that today’s cultural mindset sees people as distinct from their bodies, which in turn has led to transgenderism and a growing incredulity toward the idea of a gender binary. Transgenderism, in Veith’s words, is “the most extreme example of today’s repudiation of the body”, carrying with it an ideology that has immense influence among the general public (128). While in a previous generation, feminism had sought to separate sex from social or gender roles, now it is believed that one’s body actually makes no difference. In light of this, Veith declares that “the self is standing over and against the physical world”, and what matters most is how a person identifies (129).

Since language shapes thought, these shifts have resulted in the creation of new pronouns based on such identities, and legislation has

tended to follow these ideas in influencing societal systems. As a result, Veith calls for a return to a view of the goodness of creation in light of the unsustainability of the current sexual revolution. He proposes a “counterrevolution”, in which the church returns to a high view of the body and marriage as a counter to the primary association of such things with self-fulfillment.

3.3 Post-Christian Society

Veith suggests that one of today’s most significant societal problems is an increased polarization with and separation from others, causing people not to interact with those of different views and thereby cutting off normal community. While in 1994 Veith may have assumed that the legacy of postmodernism would be cultural relativism, now he argues that its legacy is “undoing communities and the sense of community. This dissolution was reinforced and enabled by a technological revolution that has refashioned society, while cutting it off further from reality” (172). The result of this, in his words, is that “our culture has become an anticulture”, and since “there are no longer any truths or moral obligations of religious awareness to bind us together”, each person withdraws into his or her own “unreality” (189).

In such a milieu, all aspects of everyday life are politicized, with what were opinions in the postmodern era hardening into contending ideologies. This is one of the most interesting shifts from postmodernism, namely that the previously-held “easygoing relativism” has been supplanted by a sense that there are actually right and wrong beliefs, and these are enforced not by an appeal to moral absolutes but by an appeal to social norms which are enforced through social shaming, ostracism and the intimidation of cancel-culture.

Over time, today’s culture has seen this

infiltrate every area of life and lead to the bitterness of identity politics and tribalism. Veith's response to such trends is to advocate that Christians should and must engage with the culture and help rebuild society, but simultaneously note that aligning too closely with political leaders can hinder and not help this effort. While he notes that some Christians have argued for a withdrawal from cultural involvement, he contends that faithfulness to calling requires that we remain in, speak into, contribute to and exist as a transformative influence within society.

3.4 Post-Christian Religion

In a more developed form than that of *Postmodern Times*, Veith begins his analysis of religion with a detailed discussion of the rise of the "nones", or those who identify as having "no religious affiliation", or who are "spiritual but not religious". In his evaluation of this spirituality, he notes that it is not typically equivalent to atheism or agnosticism, but more often involves a conglomeration of various syncretistic beliefs which align to various degrees with eastern spirituality. As he suggested in the previous book, the "nones" based their beliefs not on reason or revelation but likes and dislikes, and their inward, internalized spirituality is one that makes no moral demands but is about personal fulfillment.

Veith observes that hidden within the worldly, materialistic façade of post-Christian ideologies is an "interior spirituality" that represents a cry for more than these ideologies have to offer. His exhortation to the church in the post-Christian era is that it must be "desecularized" and loosed from the vice-grip of its capitulation to culture, and he hypothesizes that this loosing will come about from the influences of churches outside the west. "The

postsecular church", Veith writes,

... will need to recover not just its spirituality but also its materiality. Though the postsecular public will be most interested in personal, inner spirituality... they are also in need of a Christianity that can take them outside of themselves. They need to recover objective reality, that is, God's creation. And they need to recover what it means to belong to a community, that is, Christ's church (300).

For the church to be a voice in the post-Christian era, Veith writes, it will need a robust theology of the body that undoes the harm caused by the sexual revolution, a robust sense of community that can reach today's isolated individuals, and a robust conviction in the truth of scripture which offers an alternative understanding of meaning and purpose as well as a deep and profound alternative to the spurious spiritualities common in our time.

4. MERITS AND SHORTCOMINGS OF VEITH'S APPROACH TO CULTURAL CRITICISM

Veith's keen analysis makes his work commendable. The best contribution of both books individually is in their way of breaking cultural movements down into parts and pinpointing the precursors, assumptions and implications of each part, so that the whole makes more sense in light of the parts. The best contribution of both books together is to show the arc of progression that postmodernism has taken over the course of a few decades, which is exceptionally helpful for examining the trends and tendencies of cultural change more confidently in the future.

Given the fact that many Christians are misinformed, uninformed or unaware of how to respond to today's culture, what Veith has

provided is a useful tool for developing a basis from which to understand, dialogue, and build bridges with people today. While some of his stronger language of warning about aspects of technology or politics may put off some readers, it seems he is simply being consistent with the rapid pace of our times, assuming the current state of things will continue in the same direction. For example, what was discussed about sexuality or transhumanism in *Post-Christian* would have been inconceivable in *Postmodern Times*.

In terms of the shortcomings of his work, Veith occasionally comes to seemingly excessive conclusions, sometimes more supported by his own assumptions than the clear indications of the evidence. This could have been avoided with more robust source-work and citations, and in some places Veith's citations were woefully scant, weakening his conclusions and making some claims sound like sweeping generalizations. For example, in his discussion of advances in genetic engineering, he warns of the perils of applying genetic alteration to humans, and prognosticates that it could conceivably lead to the government being involved in the reproduction process and the family becoming "technologically obsolete" (124). However, he does not include references to people or initiatives genuinely trying to make that happen.

While Veith exposes assumptions and diagnoses problems, the reader is left asking how to respond practically and concretely, and this may be the book's biggest drawback. Readers need a feasible solution as a goal; they need clear next steps envisioning a what a Christian presence in or resistance to post-Christian culture will look like. He emphasizes a commitment to desecularization and strong doctrine within the church, stronger marriages and closer communities, a persistence in the



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face of ideological-spiritual resistance rather than capitulation or societal withdrawal, and faithfulness within vocations, but the daily particulars of applying this remain obscure.

Lastly, the book is limited in terms of the audience that would benefit from reading it. First, it is only concerned with western culture and focuses on western movements, and as a result his conclusions are only applicable in certain contexts. Therefore, readers who would find the book most helpful would be Christians living in western nations. The book struck a balance between readability and technicality, and although Veith discusses some esoteric aspects of philosophical trends and movements, these are clarified so that a reader without a background or understanding of philosophy would still be able to understand. Even so, it

is best suited for a reader familiar with basic philosophy and apologetics.

5. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHRISTIANITY TO CULTURE

G.K. Chesterton is quoted as saying, “whenever you remove any fence, always pause long enough to ask why it was put there in the first place”.¹ If the postmodern era was one that dismissed the fences that had long defined the way people saw the world, the post-Christian era is a fenceless one. And the church will need to adapt to its environment.

Such adaptation will require not only an awareness and understanding of the currents underlying our cultural moment but also an optimism and confidence that the Christian message has a profoundly timeless and practically helpful response to these times. This optimism and confidence clings to the unique promise of the gospel to offer life in the midst of death, community in a time of isolation, healing in a time of brokenness, meaning in a world of triviality and a true Savior among a long list of enticing but insufficient alternatives.

To begin to see Christianity in this light and to stand firmly as the church when it feels that the foundations are being removed, one must first understand the culture. Understanding the culture is a necessary prerequisite of engaging with the culture and having an active role in being a different voice and a different way, not absconding but living faithfully and intentionally among those who are different. Veith would agree with Francis Schaeffer that ‘the fundamental tragedy of today is that men and women are being fundamentally affected’

by the changes in culture around them, “yet they have never even analyzed the drift”.² Despite its limitations, Veith’s meticulous and insightful work is a helpful step toward developing a more aware church, able to understand its changing environment.

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William B. Bowes is a PhD candidate in New Testament and Christian Origins at the University of Edinburgh. His research focuses on the concept of authority of the gospels of Mark and John and how the authors conceptualized authority distinctly from their Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural contexts. In addition to his interests in both New Testament theology and the relationship of Christianity to culture, he has graduate level training in mental health treatment and works as a counsellor in Boston, Massachusetts.

1 As quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *Recapture the Wonder*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005: 36.

2 Schaeffer, Francis. *The God Who Is There*. InterVarsity Press, 2020: 21.

