



The Critical Zone: Speculations on a Conceptual Space for Postmodern Seekers

by Dr. R. Wesley Hurd

Jake was having a hard time. Life had begun to force his foundational ideas into question. He had been raised in a “good Christian family” and had imbibed Bible-based teaching all his life. All this felt safe and secure to Jake until certain conversations, events, readings, and observations of others’ lives and beliefs raised questions and proposed new perspectives he had never considered. He found himself reconsidering his concept of “truth.”

While Jake’s experience was grounded in his Christian religious environment, Mary’s was not. She grew up in a secular, intellectual family whose interests and commitments precluded any kind of spiritual or transcendent reality. Mary’s sense of personal identity and meaning for life had been nurtured in an environment of ethical and philosophical relativism. However, like Jake, Mary’s experiences in life were leading her to a place where she began to doubt some fundamental “truths” she had grown up with. She recognized that at a practical level of living she had never embraced and tried to live the full implications of the dogma of relativism. Mary realized that she actually believed that “big truths” might be found and that to live her life pursuing them was vital.

These two young lives existed in profoundly different environments and spiritual/philosophical circumstances. Yet Jake and Mary, one Christian and the other profoundly not, found themselves sharing a common “intellectual space” where the pursuit of what is true became an ethical and human necessity—in spite of the fact that each of their respective

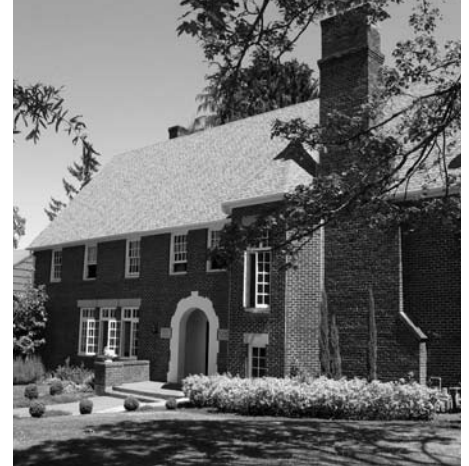
home worlds was indifferent, if not hostile, to their questions and pursuit of a wider horizon for truth. Jake and Mary had entered what I refer to as the “Critical Zone”—a mental, intellectual, and, ultimately, spiritual space. This conceptual space shared by both religious and non-religious people exists between the church and the world. The persons who inhabit this Critical Zone are those within whose souls and minds has arisen a set of intellectual, psychological, and spiritual conditions—conditions prompted by a lack of authentic intellectual freedom and permission to ask questions in either religious or secular cultures.

The Critical Zone I am conceiving is what I believe Kierkegaard had in mind when he described the inwardness of the person seeking the “Good in truth”:

*For in a spiritual sense, place is not something external, to which a slave might come against his will when the overseer uses his scourge. And the path is not something that does not matter whether one rides forwards or backwards. But the place and the path are **within a man** and just as the place is the blessed state of the striving soul, so the path is the striving soul’s continual transformation. [Emphasis mine.] (*Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, p. 84; Harper & Row Edition, 1956.)*

Our Historical, Intellectual Situation

The Critical Zone exists in many respects because of the unique cultural and intellectual



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characteristics of our emerging postmodern intellectual climate. Enlightenment-based modernism is now widely perceived as a dismal failure. Dead are the pretenses of modernist truth—the belief in universal answers obtained through autonomous, self-reliant thought. In its place, postmodernism now assumes that “being human” and all other social and mental realities are merely products of the forces and languages in culture. We construct reality subjectively, from linguistic materials that have no objective reference to a “real” reality that stands outside or beyond them. [For a concise treatment of postmodernism, see my article “Postmodernism” (*News & Views*, June 1998) available at mckenziestudycenter.org.]

So then, at the beginning of this new millennium, our civilization is experiencing a deep moral malaise and profound spiritual confusion. The fabric of our society is under terrible stress, showing signs of serious breakdown and disintegration. At the core of this disintegration, I believe, is a loss of agreed upon social mores, ethics, and shared ideals for personal character. We have no cultural and intellectual consensus of what is good, true, and valuable. (continued on page 2)



Critical Zone, cont.

To complicate matters, our culture has no consensus on how we arrive at truth. In fact, our society seems overcome by the notion that to arrive at truth is philosophically impossible. Postmodernity appears infatuated with the condition of epistemological nihilism and seems willing not only to settle for that but to idealize this condition. What remains are philosophical “games” and a severe hedonism built on an ethically bankrupt version of unfettered consumerism with all of its image and glitz. Os Guinness describes the effects of postmodernity this way:

Under postmodern conditions, words lose their authority and become accessory to images. The past is no longer a heritage, but a debris-strewn ruin to be ransacked for bric-a-brac of beliefs that is as incoherent as it is inconsequential.... The grand flirtation with the meaninglessness of modernity goes on, but in a party mood. Religion is no longer transcendent, but a recreational pursuit for the connoisseurs of ‘spirituality’. Art, homes, life-styles, ideas, character, self-renewal, and even belief in God all become auxiliary to sales and the ceaseless consumption of styles. (The American Hour, pp. 129-30.)

People have responded to these postmodern conditions in one of two ways: Either they agree and accept the postmodern view of truth and the definition of the “de-centered” human self. Or they are skeptical regarding postmodernism’s dogmatic claim that finding truth is a hopeless pursuit; after all, postmodernism’s truth-claim is itself an ironic counterevidence to its proposal that since all “truths” are “fictions,” no truth stands more truly above others.

The Church in the Postmodern Climate

Postmodern conditions have impacted the church as well, most notably by exacerbating a deeply entrenched anti-intellectualism within the church and by influencing church culture and practices. Let me explain.

Skepticism toward intellectual activity and the cultivation of the mind has been emerging in evangelical Christian culture for over two hundred years. Historians have pointed out that the church’s brand of anti-intellectual-

ism was fostered by the denigration of need for education and theological study for the ministry during the first and especially the second great revivals in this country. [See *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, by Richard Hofstadter.] During these revivals, true piety or spirituality became understood more in terms of activism or “enthusiasm” than in terms of theological knowledge or “book-learning.” This dichotomy between learning and action-demonstrated piety in Christian spirituality deepened during the fundamentalist-modernist culture wars of 1860 to 1930, the period in which the Bible-believing church eventually cocooned itself in a protection-from-the-world mode, effectively cutting itself off from dialogue with and involvement in the surrounding secular culture.

But while the church has sought to protect itself from the surrounding culture by not engaging it, cultural influences have seeped in nevertheless. The late twentieth century development of postmodernism has fostered a cultural atmosphere of relativism in which intellectual pursuits are perceived as futile; they do not get a person to “truth.” Thus, while postmodernism did not cause the church’s anti-intellectualism, the cultural atmosphere of postmodernity has reinforced the church’s skepticism toward intellectual activity.

Furthermore, the church’s anti-intellectual, anti-cultural posture has created an evangelical subculture poorly equipped to dialogue with the world. To do so would require an ability to engage non-Christian culture in its own languages and assumptions; yet, the evangelical subculture cannot speak in the languages and thought-forms of the contemporary world. The result is that Christianity “works” within its own subculture, but it appears irrelevant to people in the surrounding non-Christian culture.

How deeply ironic it is that this anti-intellectualism in the church tends to blind its people to several critical problems:

1) The church is ill prepared and has little or no desire to engage in the critical issues raised by studying culture and how it works—at a time when the very effects of postmodernism that presently blind the church to unbiblical aspects of its life and faith are based in theories of culture.

2) The church’s commitment to communicating the gospel to the world is deeply

compromised by an inability to engage with the wide variety of critical ideas and beliefs that presently dominate the world.

3) The church is unable to address the postmodernists’ questions and radical skepticism toward the Bible’s nature and authority; it does not even know how these questions might be addressed in our contemporary philosophical environment.

4) The church seems clueless about the nature and character of its own subculture and how completely irrelevant and ironically worldly it appears to the non-Christian world.

In the postmodern evangelical church, the complexity and subtlety of our humanness—psychological, intellectual, spiritual, and physical—is forced into pragmatic molds, categories, and techniques that “work” for those within it. Our human and spiritual beings are submitted to “techniques” for everything from reading the Bible to solving interpersonal, vocational, and marital problems. The result of all this is a church life that is unable to make the vital link between use of the mind and real faith. We do not reflect on deeper, subtler, more complex realities in and around our lives because the church does not value, teach, or nurture that depth.

More profoundly, the postmodern evangelical church is blind to its own postmodern, worldly ways. While the conservative, Bible-believing church rejects postmodern philosophy *per se*, “street version” or “atmospheric” postmodernism has greatly affected its cultures. As postmodernism can subvert the motivation for critical thought in the world (after all, critical thought cannot get a person any closer to the truth because truth as such does not exist), it has a similar effect in the church through cultural osmosis. Much of the church has appropriated the dictates of image, style, celebrity, numerical success, and mass/sound-bite marketing—all of which are manifestations of postmodernity—into its outreach strategies and organizational culture.

Inhabitants of the Critical Zone

The Critical Zone, about which my observations have led me to speculate, is likely a response to the historically unique character of postmodern conditions acting within and on *both* religious believers and non-religious people in the world. A rigid “orthodoxy of

skepticism” about searching for what is true now exists in both the world *and* the church, leaving no genuine encouragement and freedom for thoughtful and hopeful inquiry, dialogue, and debate.

If I am right in my critique of the church’s present culture, Christians who do desire to understand and more honestly come to terms with the depth and breadth of their human experience are suffering in the needlessly narrow and stifling cultural atmosphere of the church. It is these Christians—deeply dissatisfied within their own subculture—who find themselves “forced” to the Critical Zone in search of a truer, more authentic, perhaps an even “more human” faith. They seek a place where they can search for truth beyond the cloistered boundaries and truncated cultural vocabulary of postmodern evangelical culture.

Christians in the Critical Zone have grown weary of a religious piety that substitutes for and excludes open, thoughtful pursuit of what is true. Many of them feel alienated from the church’s culture because they can see that certain callings in life somehow do not fit the definitions of piety. These callings are not considered useful to the church, which has superficially defined spirituality and reduced spiritually useful callings to prescribed mission work, worship, and Bible teaching.

What drives Christians to the Critical Zone is the quest for an understanding of their faith that embraces and comes to terms with the wholeness of their humanity. Pietistic sloganeering will not cut it. They ask their faith for the explanatory power to make sense of the full breadth of their experience of themselves and of the world around them.

Non-Christians, on the other hand, are driven to the Critical Zone because the world and human experience just have a certain “givenness” or “fixity” about them that all humans, regardless of life circumstance and worldview, experience and to which they must respond by seeking explanations and ways to navigate and survive life’s crucibles.

Non-religious Zoners are individuals who long for weight in a world that is increasingly weightless. They long for something solid in a world where the most influential theorists are telling them everything is flux. In short, they are captured by a tenacious necessity to feel their way toward boundaries within which the humanness we all long for is a

hopeful possibility. They intuitively “know” true explanations must be out there because, as theologian Walter Brueggemann put it,

[There are] *orders, limits, and boundaries within which humanness is possible and beyond these there can only be trouble.* (Quoted in *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* by Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, p. 162.)

Life has a certain evocative quality, a certain connectedness about it, a dynamic, an intention, a direction, a presence, a meaning. And we are creatures who are an integral part of that life, and we respond instinctively to it even if we rebel at its qualities. (Ibid., p. 169.)

Individuals in the Critical Zone, then, are those who, for at least a time in their lives, do not simplistically accept nor reject the messages, truths, and culture of either the church or the world. They are individuals distinguished by the following characteristics:

1) They are looking for what is true in answer to critical questions of life and human-

ness. They “awakened” in Nietzsche’s sense: “. . . sleep we, whose duty is wakefulness itself” (Preface, x, *Beyond Good and Evil*).

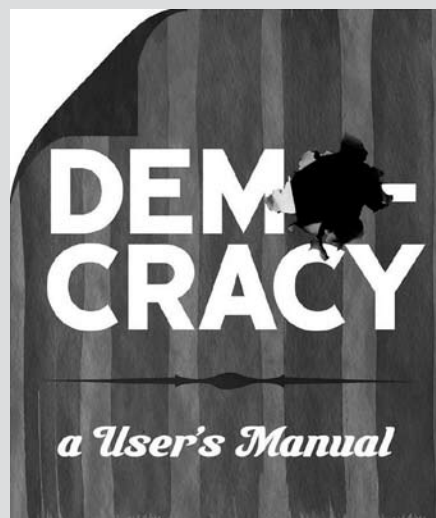
2) They are looking for these answers with open, but critical, eyes and minds.

3) If Christians, they are not finding in the sub-culture of the church the encouragement to seek what is true in a genuinely open-minded, reasonable way.

4) If non-Christians or non-religious people, they find their search for truth severely discouraged by their secular, postmodern peers for whom “truth” is a myth.

The Critical Zone is a place of openness and intellectual freedom, where people face full-on the complexity of reality. Therefore, explanations that appeal to the Zone’s inhabitants must come to terms with complicated, often vexing human experience with courageous precision and comprehensiveness. Simplistic, trite answers—be they religious, spiritual, or secularly humanistic—that do not take into account the depth and breadth of human experience will not suffice.

(continued on page 4)



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Critical Zone, continued

Being in the Critical Zone is not about being or becoming an intellectual. Those in this critical space are driven by a need for answers to complex questions about reality. Although answers to those questions may require a certain kind of intellectual curiosity and tenacity, the object of this curiosity is not about becoming intellectual for its own sake. What drives and motivates critical thinking in this conceptual space is the necessity for adequate explanations of real life, not just philosophical gamesmanship.

“Critical Zoners” are people who are sensitive to and suffer from both the beauty and pain in the world. As the late French intellectual and Christian believer Simone Weil has said, “Beauty is a providential dispensation by which truth and justice, while still unrecognized, call silently for our attention” (“The Human Experience of this World”: *The Simone Weil Reader*, p. xxxii; George A. Panichas, ed.). Zoners find themselves unable to hide from this beauty and pain by living hedonistic lives, by uncritically embracing dogma or ideology, or by adopting irrational ways of interpreting the world. Zoners have not given up on the commonsense use of their critical reasoning capacities. They have not given up on the possibility that something about the world and being human is objectively true. In principle, they believe truth should be sought, found, and submitted to. They hold out hope of finding what is true.

To engage the difficult, sometimes agonizing questions that arise from rejecting academically or politically correct and taken-for-granted “truths” requires a particular kind of courage. Zoners are courageous people. But the courage they exhibit may well be born of desperation reaching critical levels. For some, answers to life and its meaning are worth the cost of alienation from their respective religious or non-religious life-worlds.

Concluding Remarks, Lingering Questions

Is this idea of a Critical Zone only a piece of speculative fiction? Perhaps. It may only be a way of talking about conditions that are profoundly affecting people’s search for ways to ground their lives in something they believe with sufficient reasons to be true and valuable. I have speculated such a Critical Zone not based on statistical evidence, but rather on conversations, observations, and listening to individuals talk about their lives.

I have a hunch, however, that the postmodern conditions I have attempted to outline rather simply here are reasonably accurate and, perhaps, historically unique. I believe we have never had truth and the pursuit of

truth so disturbingly disregarded in both the world and in the church at the same historical moment.

Finally, speaking as a Christian, I can only hope that we in the church find ways to courageously emulate what I think is the risky, but biblical, perspective embodied in this statement by Simone Weil:

For it seems to me certain . . . that one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer the truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. Even if one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms. (The Simone Weil Reader, p. xxxii; George A. Panichas, ed.)

May we all fall into His arms as we commit ourselves to finding what is true, good, and eternally valuable.

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