A Conversation with an Atheist

Rick Wade distills an in-depth e-mail dialog with an atheist in which he addresses her doubts and arguments concerning the existence of God.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

About Our Dialogue

The Conversation Begins

In the fall of 1999 I became involved in an e-mail conversation with an atheist who wrote in response to a program I'd written titled *The Relevance of Christianity*. In this program [Ed. note: The transcripts for our radio programs become the online articles such as the one you are reading.] I contrast Christianity and naturalism on the matters of meaning, morality, and hope.{1} She wrote to say that she was able to find these things in her own philosophy of life without God. If such things can be had without God, why bother bringing Him in, especially given all the trouble religion causes?

Stephanie has an undergraduate degree in philosophy, and is pursuing her doctorate in physics.{2} Our conversation has been quite cordial, and in our over two-month long conversation I've grown to respect her. She isn't just out to pick a fight. I try to keep in mind that, if her ideas seem grating on me, mine are just as grating on her.

Stephanie seems genuinely baffled by theistic belief. If God is there, He is outside the bounds of what we can know. While someone like Kierkegaard saw good reason to take a "leap of faith" into that which can't be proved, she sees no reason to

do that. “I think that if I had faith it would be like his,” she says, “but the leap seems, at this point, both futile and risky.”

Stephanie has three general objections to belief in God. First, she believes that the evidence is insufficient. The evidence of nature is all she has, and God is said to have attributes beyond the natural. There’s no way to know about such things. Second, she believes that theistic belief adds nothing of importance to our lives or to what we can know through science. I asked her, “What is it about Christianity that turns you off to it?” And she replied, “I imagine believing, and I am no more fulfilled and no less worried than I am when I am not believing. God just does not seem to be a useful, beneficial, or tenable idea.” Third, she believes that religion is morally bad for people. It grounds morality in fear, she believes, and it produces a dogmatism in adherents that prompts such behavior as killing abortion providers.

Stephanie began our correspondence not to be given proofs for the existence of God, but for me “to explain more personally His relevance.” What is called for, then, is defense and explication rather than persuasion.

Basic Elements of Stephanie’s Atheism

There are three main elements underlying Stephanie’s atheism. The first is *reason,* which she believes is sufficient for understanding our world, for morality, and for understanding and cultivating human qualities such as “aesthetic appreciation, compassion, and love.” It is, of course, the final authority on religion as well. Reason does not admit faith. Insofar as one has admitted faith into the equation, one has moved toward irrationalism. As George Smith wrote, “I will not accept the existence of God, or any doctrine, on faith because I reject faith as a valid cognitive procedure. . . . If theistic doctrines must be accepted on faith, theism is necessarily excluded.”{3}

The second element, *nature*, is reason's best source for information. Stephanie says, "I have no access to anything outside of the natural universe and my own mind."

The package is complete with Stephanie's commitment to *science,* which is the tool reason uses to understand nature. It alone is capable of giving us "objective, investigable knowledge," she says. In fact, I think it is fair to label Stephanie's approach to knowledge "scientistic." There seems to be no area of life which need not be submitted to science to be considered rational, and for which scientific investigation isn't sufficient.

The reason/nature/science triumvirate provides the structure for acquiring knowledge. To go beyond it is to move into irrationalism, Stephanie believes. There's certainly no reason to add God. She says, "As I understand it, the idea of God as a creator or guarantor adds nothing but unjustified mysticism to my knowledge."{4}

Theists have no problem with using reason to understand our world, or with the study of nature, or with using the tools of science. The problem comes when Stephanie concludes that nothing can be known beyond nature analyzed scientifically. She believes that nature is all that is there or at least all that is knowable. Stephanie says she doesn't consciously start with naturalism; she has no desire to "champion naturalism as a dogma," she says. However, since science "only permits investigation of natural, repeatable phenomena," and she is satisfied with that, her view is restricted to the scope of nature. She even goes so far as to say, "I equate rationality and naturalism."

It seems, then, that the deck is stacked from the beginning. Stephanie's emphasis on science doesn't necessarily prevent her from finding God, but her naturalism does.

Insufficient Evidences

The Evidentialist Objection

Let's look at Stephanie's three basic objections to theistic belief, beginning with the charge that there is insufficient evidence to believe. Rather than offer a defense for theistic belief, let's look at the objection itself.

Stephanie's argument is called the "evidentialist objection."

She quotes W. K. Clifford, a 19th century scholar who wrote, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."{5} Stephanie's objection is that there isn't enough evidence to believe in God. The first question, of course, is what constitutes good evidence. Another question is whether we should accept Clifford's maxim in the first place.

Some atheists believe they don't bear the same burden of adducing evidences for their beliefs as theists do. They say atheism is the "default" position. To believe in God is to *add* a belief; to *not* add that belief is to remain in atheism or perhaps agnosticism.{6} But atheism isn't a "zero belief" system. Western atheism is typically naturalistic. Atheists hold definite views about the nature of the universe; there's no reason to think that atheism is where we all automatically begin in our thinking, such that to move to theism is to add a belief while to *not* believe in God is to remain in atheism. It's hard not to agree with Alvin Plantinga that the presumption of atheism "looks like a piece of merely arbitrary intellectual imperialism."{7} If theists have to give evidences, so do atheists.

Stephanie, however, doesn't defend her atheism or naturalism this way. She believes that reason using the tools of science is the only reliable means of attaining knowledge. The result of her observations, she says, is naturalism. There simply aren't sufficient evidences for believing in God, at least the

kinds of evidences that are trustworthy. Which kind are trustworthy? Stephanie wants evidences in nature, because in nature one finds "objective, investigable knowledge." However, she doesn't believe evidences for God can be found there. God must be outside of nature if He exists. She said, "You may rightly ask what kind of naturalistic evidence I would ever accept for God, and I would have to answer, none.' Because once a naturalistic investigation turns to God with its hands up, it ceases to be naturalistic, and so it ceases to refer to anything that I can hope to investigate. I lack a sense for God and I have no access to anything outside of the natural universe and my own mind." She said in a later letter that the cause of the universe may have had an agent. But when we begin adding other attributes to this agent, attributes which can't be studied scientifically, we get into trouble. "As soon as you talk about God as having infinite attributes, those attributes actually begin to lose meaning," she says. "My view," she says, "is that it's just as well to call the unknown cause what it is—an unknown cause—until the means to investigate it are developed." And by this she means natural means. *A Naturalistic Twist*

The first problem here is obvious: Stephanie has biased the argument in her favor by her restrictions on knowledge to the realm of nature. She reduces our resources for knowledge to the scientifically verifiable. Such reductionism is arbitrary. By reducing all knowledge to that which can be discovered scientifically, Stephanie has cut out significant portions of our knowledge. Philosopher Huston Smith said this: "It is as if the scientist were inside a large plastic balloon; he can shine his torch anywhere on the balloon's interior but cannot climb outside the balloon to view it as a whole, see where it is situated, or determine why it was fabricated."{8} Science can't tell us what the final cause (or purpose or goal) of a thing is; in fact it can't tell whether there *are* ultimate purposes. It cannot determine ultimate or existential meaning. While it can describe the artist's paintbrush and pigments and

canvas, it can't measure beauty. *Clifford's Folly*

Beyond this difficulty is the fact that Clifford's maxim *itself* has problems.

First, the evidentialist approach is unreasonably restrictive. If we have to be able construct an argument for everything we believe¾and upon which we act—we will believe little and act little.

Second, this approach might have validity in science, but it leaves out other significant kinds of beliefs. Kelly Clark lists perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, belief in other minds, and truths of logic as other kinds of "properly basic" beliefs that we hold without inferring them from other beliefs.{9} Beliefs involved in personal relationships are another example. Relationships often require a willingness to believe in a friend apart from sufficient evidences. In fact, the willingness to do so can have a positive effect on developing a good relationship. Beliefs *about* persons are still another example. I accept without proof that my wife is a person, that she isn't an automaton, that she has intrinsic value, etc. These kinds of beliefs don't require amassing evidences to formulate an inductive or deductive proof. Clifford's maxim works well in scientific study, but not for beliefs about persons.

More to the point, religious beliefs don't fit so neatly within evidentialist restrictions. They are more like relational beliefs since, in confronting a Supreme Being, one is not confronting a hypothesis but a Person.

Fourth, Stephanie's use of Clifford's evidentialism is biased in her favor because, as we discussed above, her satisfaction with the deliverances of scientific investigation means she will only accept evidences in the natural order. *Do We Have Good Reasons for Believing?*

Some Christian scholars are saying that we don't *have* to have

evidences for belief, meaning that we don't have to be able to put together an argument whereby God's existence is inferred from other beliefs. Our direct experience of God is sufficient for rational belief (using "experience" in a broader sense than emotional experience).{10} Belief in God is therefore properly basic.

This is *not* to say there are no *grounds* for believing, however. Drawing from John Calvin, Alvin Plantinga says that we have an ingrained tendency to recognize God under appropriate circumstances. Of course, there *are* a number of reasons or grounds for believing. These include direct experience of God, the testimony of a people who claim to have known God, written revelation which makes sense (if one is open to the supernatural), philosophical and scientific corroboration, the historical reality of a man named Jesus who fulfilled prophecies and did miracles, etc. Am I reversing myself here? Do we need reasons or not? The point is this: while there are valid reasons for believing in God, what we do *not* need to do is submit our belief in God ultimately to Clifford's maxim, especially a version of it already committed to naturalism. We can recognize God in our experience, and this belief can be confirmed by various reasons or evidences. Rather than view our belief as guilty until proven innocent, as the evidentialist objection would have it, we can view it as innocent until proven guilty. Let the atheists prove we're wrong.

Theism Adds Nothing

The second general objection to belief in God Stephanie offers is that it adds nothing of value to life and to what we can know by reason alone. Is this true? *Meaning*

Consider the subject of *meaning*. Stephanie said she finds meaning in the everyday affairs of life without worrying about God. Let me quote an extended passage from Stephanie's first letter on the subject of meaning. Her reference in the first

line is to a quotation from a book by Albert Camus.

> Your quote from *The Stranger* ("I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe") expresses well a feeling that I have had often. The universe is not concerned with me, so I do not need to bow and cater to anything in it; I can merely be grateful (yes, actually grateful to nothing in particular) that I can walk along a path with trees and breathe in the crisp late autumn, that I can watch cotton motes fly into my face, facing the sun, that I can struggle and wrangle my way into knowing that Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is that which keeps atoms from collapsing (in nanoseconds!!). I find meaning in my relationship with my parents, brothers, and in my marriage; my husband is the most kind, capable, ethical, and wise person I've ever met. These things are sufficiently meaningful for me; I do not think that true meaning is necessarily eternal and I do not demand recognition from the universe or the human notion of its maker. I am convinced that belief in a personal god could do nothing but dilute these things by subordinating them to something as slippery as God.

Thus, Stephanie believes that God isn't necessary for her to find meaning in life.

I replied that her naturalism provides no meaning beyond what we impose on the universe. We can *pretend* there is purpose behind it all, but a universe that doesn't care about us doesn't care about our superimposed meanings either. What does she do when the meaning she has given the universe doesn't find support in the universe itself? I wrote:

> You might see this earth as a beautiful 'mother' of sorts which nourishes and sustains its inhabitants. Do people who suffer through hurricanes or earthquakes or tornadoes see it as such? Do people who live in almost lifeless deserts who have to spend their days walking many miles to get water and

> who struggle to eke out a meager existence from the land find beauty and meaning in it? Often people who live close to the land do indeed find a special meaning in nature itself, but by and large they also believe there is a higher power behind it who not only gives meaning to the universe but who gives meaning to the struggle to survive and to the effort to preserve nature.

When I said that all her efforts at accomplishing some good could come to naught, and thus be ultimately meaningless, her response was, "That's OK. . . . I'm not looking for universal or eternal meaning."

It's hard to know what to say to that. We might follow Francis Schaeffer's advice and "take the roof off;"{11} in other words, expose the implications of her beliefs. Stephanie says she isn't a nihilist (one who believes that everything is thoroughly meaningless and without value); perhaps she could be called an "optimistic humanist" to use J. P. Moreland's term.{12} She believes there are no ultimate values; rather, we give life whatever meaning we choose. However, this position has no rational edge on nihilism. It simply reflects a decision to *act* as if there is meaning. Such groundless optimism is no more rationally justifiable than nihilism. It is just intellectual make-believe designed to help us be content with our lot¾adult versions of children's fairy tales.

Since the loss of absolute or transcendent meaning undercuts all absolute value, each person must choose his or her own values, moral and otherwise. As I told Stephanie, others might not agree with her values. The Nazis thought there was valid meaning in purifying the race. What did the Jews think?

What can be seen as meaningful for the *moment* is just that—meaningful for the moment. Death comes and everything that has gone before it comes to nothing, at least for the individual. Sure, one can find meaning in, say, working to discover a cure for a terrible disease knowing that it will

benefit countless people for ages to come. But those people who benefit from it will die one day, too. And in the end, if atheists are correct, the whole race will die out and all that it has accomplished will come to naught.{13} Thus, while there may be *temporal* significance to what we do, there is no *ultimate* significance. Can the atheist really live with this?

By contrast, the eternal nature of God gives meaning beyond the temporal. What we do has eternal significance because it is done in the context of the creation of the eternal God who acts with purpose and does nothing capriciously. More specifically, belief in God locates our actions in the context of the building of His kingdom. There is a specific end toward which we are working that gives meaning to the specific things we do.

Strictly speaking, then, we might agree with Stephanie that it's true God doesn't *add* anything. Rather, He is the very *ground* of meaning. *Morality*

What about *morality*? Although Stephanie says that naturalistic morality is superior, when pressed to offer a standard she was only able to offer a basic impulse to kindness. In addition, she said, "I think that it is sufficient to have an internal sense of the golden rule, and I think that's a natural development." She used the metaphor of a child growing up to illustrate our growth in morality. Reason is all that is needed for good moral behavior. If biblical moral principles agree with reason they are unnecessary. If they don't, "they are absurd."

In response I noted that we can measure the growth of a child by looking at an adult; the adult we might call the *telos* or goal of the child. We know what the child is supposed to become. What is the goal or end, in her view, of morality? What is the standard of goodness to which we should attain? Stephanie accepts the golden rule but can give me no reason why *I* should. Reason by itself doesn't direct me to. The

golden rule assumes a basic equality between us all. Where does *this* idea come from? Even if it is employed only to safeguard the survival of the race, by what standard shall we say *that's* a good thing? Maybe we need to get out of the way for something else.

God, however, provides a standard grounded in His character and will to which we all are subject. He doesn't change on fundamental issues (although God has pressed certain moral demands on His people more at one time than another in keeping with the progress of revelation{14}), and His law is suited to our nature and our needs. The universe doesn't necessarily stand behind Stephanie's chosen morality, but God—and the universe¾stand behind His.

One final note. Showing the weaknesses of naturalism with respect to morality is *not* to say that all atheists are evil people. In her first letter, Stephanie wrote, "I take offense at your statement that the relativism of a godless morality permits things like the destruction of the weak and the development of a master race.' . . . I find this charge of atheist amorality from Christians to be horribly persistent and unfair." I noted that I never said in the *Relevance* radio program that all atheists are immoral or amoral. What I said was that "atheism itself makes no provision for fixed moral standards." I asked Stephanie to show me what kind of moral standard naturalism offers. In fact, it offers none. As I noted earlier, Stephanie doesn't want to "champion naturalism." She knows it has nothing to offer. In fact, in one of her latest posts, she admitted that her philosophy only leaves her with "a frail pragmatism" and even "a certain moral relativism" because she doesn't have "the absolute word of God to fall back upon." She only has her own moral standards that have no hold on anyone else. Until she can show me what universal standard naturalism offers, I'll stand behind what I said about what naturalism allows. *Hope*

Let's turn our attention now to *hope*. Stephanie says that when

she dies she will cease to exist. She thus has to be satisfied with the here and now. If there *is* nothing else, one must make do. Stephanie said, “I am satisfied with the time that I have here and now to think and feel and explore. You say, ‘an impersonal universe offers no rewards,’ but I am simply unable to comprehend the appeal of the vagaries of the Christian Heaven, especially with the heavy toll that they seem to of necessity take on intellectual honesty. If your notion of true hope requires a belief that one is promised eternal glory and fulfillment, then I cannot claim it. I am unable to comprehend what that could mean.” Maybe the reason she is unable to comprehend it is her scientistic approach. Heaven isn’t something one can analyze scientifically. P>In response I noted that she stands apart from the majority of people worldwide. There is something in us that yearns for immortality, I said. Of course, the various religions of the world have different ways of defining what the eternal state is and how to attain it. Christians believe we were created to desire it; it is a part of our make-up because we were created by an immortal God to live forever. If naturalism is true, I asked, how do you explain the desire for immortality?

If we had no good reason to believe in “the vagaries of the Christian Heaven,” I suppose it would be foolish to allow it to govern one’s life. However, we *do* have good reasons: the promise of God who doesn’t lie, and the resurrection of Jesus. We also have the witness of “eternity set in our hearts.” (Eccles. 3:11) Because of this hope—which isn’t a “cross your fingers” kind of hope, but is justified confidence in the future—our labors here for Christ’s kingdom will not die with us, but will have eternal significance. They are what is called “fruit that remains” (John 15:16), or the work which is “revealed with fire.” (1 Cor. 3:13-14) *Science*

We’re still thinking about what belief in God adds to our lives and our knowledge. One area in which even some theists don’t want to bring God is science itself. Does theistic

belief add anything to science, or is its admission a source of trouble?

Much ink has been spilled over this question. Aside from naturalistic evolutionists, some theistic scientists believe that to go beyond what is called "methodological naturalism" is risky.{15} That's the belief that, for the purposes of scientific investigation, the scientist should not fall back on God as an explanation, but should stay within the bounds of that which science can investigate. However, not everyone is of this opinion. As scholars active in the intelligent design movement are showing today, it isn't necessarily so that the supernatural has no place in science.

William Dembski, a leader in the intelligent design movement, says that, far from harming scientific inquiry, design *adds* to scientific discovery. For one thing, it fosters inquiry where a naturalistic view might see no need. Dembski names the issues of "junk DNA" and vestigial organs as examples. Is this DNA really "junk"? Did these vestigial organs have a purpose or do they have a purpose still? Openness to design also raises a new set of research questions. He says, "We will want to know how it was produced, to what extent the design is optimal, and what is its purpose." Finally, Dembski says, "An object that is designed functions within certain constraints." So, for example, "If humans are in fact designed, then we can expect psychosocial constraints to be hardwired into us. Transgress those constraints, and we as well as our society will suffer."{16}

In sum it simply isn't true that belief in God adds nothing of value to our lives and our knowledge. After all, whereas Stephanie is restricted to explanations arising from the natural order, we have the supernatural order in addition.

Moral Problems with Theism

It Doesn't Live up to Its Promises

A third general objection Stephanie has to theistic belief has to do with moral issues. Atheists say there are moral factors that count against believing in God. To show a contradiction between what the Bible teaches about God's character and what He actually does is to show either that He really doesn't exist or that He isn't worthy of our trust.

One argument says that the Bible doesn't live up to its promises. Stephanie pointed to the matter of unanswered prayer. She referred to a man who claimed to have been an evangelical who lost his faith primarily because of "the inefficacy of prayer." She has concluded that "hoping at God gives you the same results' that hoping at the indifferent universe does—none that are consistent enough to be useful!"

In response, I noted first that people often put God to the test as if He is the one who has to prove Himself. Do we have the right to expect Him to answer our prayers 1) just because we pray them, or 2) when we haven't done what He has called us to do? People can't live the way *they* want to and then expect God to 1jump when they pray. Second, God has promised *His* people that He will hear them and answer, but He doesn't always answer prayers the way we expect or when we expect. Answers might be a long time coming, or they might come in totally unexpected ways. Or it might be that over time our understanding of the situation or of God's desires changes so that we realize that we need to pray differently. *Evil*

The problem of evil is a significant moral issue in the atheist's arsenal. We talk about a God of goodness, but what we see around us is suffering, and a lot of it apparently unjustifiable. Stephanie said, "Disbelief in a personal, loving God as an explanation of the way the world works is reasonable—especially when one considers natural disasters that can't be blamed on free will and sin."{17}

One response to the problem of evil is that God sees our freedom to choose as a higher value than protecting people

from harm; this is the freewill defense. Stephanie said, however, that natural disasters can't be blamed on free will and sin. What about this? Is it true that natural disasters can't be blamed on sin? I replied that they *did* come into existence because of sin (Genesis 3). We're told in Romans 8 that creation will one day "be set free from its slavery to corruption," that it "groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." The Fall caused the problem, and, in the consummation of the ages, the problem will be fixed.

Second, I noted that on a naturalistic basis, it's hard to even know what evil *is.* But the reality of God explains it. As theologian Henri Blocher said,

> The sense of evil requires the God of the Bible. In a novel by Joseph Heller, "While rejecting belief in God, the characters in the story find themselves compelled to postulate his existence in order to have an adequate object for their moral indignation." . . . When you raise this standard objection against God, to whom do you say it, other than *this* God? Without this God who is sovereign and good, what is the rationale of our complaints? Can we even tell what is evil? Perhaps the late John Lennon understood: "God is a concept by which we measure our pain," he sang. Might we be coming to the point where the sense of evil is a proof of the existence of God?{18}

So, while it's true that no one (in my opinion) has really nailed down an answer to the problem of evil, if there is no God, there really is no problem of evil. Does the atheist ever find herself shaking her fist at the sky after some catastrophe and demanding an explanation? If there is no God, no one is listening.

Biblical Morality

Moral Character of God

Another direction atheistic objections run with respect to moral issues is in regard to the character of God. Is He good like the Bible says?

The "Old Testament God" is a favorite target of atheists for His supposed mean spirited and angry behavior, including stoning people for picking up sticks on Sunday, and having prophets call down bears on children.{19} The story of Abraham and Isaac is Stephanie's favorite biblical enigma. She asked if I would take a knife to my son's throat if God told me to. Clearly such a God isn't worthy of being called good.

Let's look more closely at the story of Abraham. Remember first of all that God did not let Abraham kill Isaac. The text says clearly that this was a test; God knew that He was going to stop Abraham.

But why such a difficult test? Consider Abraham's cultural background. As one scholar noted, "It must be ever remembered that God accommodates His instructions to the moral and spiritual standards of the people at any given time."{20} In Abraham's day, people offered their children as sacrifices to their gods. While the idea of losing his promised son must have shaken him deeply, the idea of sacrificing him wouldn't have been as unthinkable to him as to us. Think of an equivalent today, something God might call us to do that would stretch us almost to the breaking point. Whatever we think of might not have been an adequate test for Abraham. God needed to go to the extreme with Abraham and command him to do something very difficult that wasn't beyond his imagination given his cultural setting.

Next, notice that Abraham said to the men with him "*we* will worship and return to you." (Gen. 22:5) The book of Hebrews explains that "He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received [Isaac] back as a type" (11:17-19). Abraham believed what God had told him about building a great nation through Isaac. So, if Isaac died

by God's command, God would raise him from the dead.

Stephanie also objected to stories that told how God commanded the complete destruction of a town by the Israelites. The only way to understand this is to put it in the context of the nature of God and His opinion of sin, and the character of the people in question. God is absolutely holy, and He is a God of justice as well as mercy. To be true to His nature, He must deal with sin. Read too about the people He had the Israelites destroy. They were evil people. God drove them out because of their wickedness (Deut. 9:5). Walter Kaiser explains why the Canaanites were dealt with so severely.

> They were cut off to prevent Israel and the rest of the world from being corrupted (Deut. 20:16-18). When a people starts to burn their children in honor of their gods (Lev. 18:21), practice sodomy, bestiality, and all sorts of loathsome vices (Lev. 18:23,24; 20:3), the land itself begins to "vomit" them out as the body heaves under the load of internal poisons (Lev. 18:25, 27-30). . . . [William Benton] Greene likens this action on God's part, not to doing evil that good may come, but doing good in spite of certain evil consequences, just as a surgeon does not refrain from amputating a gangrenous limb even though in so doing he cannot help cutting off much healthy flesh.{21}

Kaiser goes on to note that when nations repent, God withholds judgment (Jer. 18:7,8). "Thus, Canaan had, as it were, a final forty-year countdown as they heard of the events in Egypt, at the crossing of the Red Sea, and what happened to the kings who opposed Israel along the way." They knew about the Israelites (Josh. 2:10-14). "Thus God waited for the 'cup of iniquity' to fill up—and fill up it did without any signs of change in spite of the marvelous signs given so that the nations, along with Pharaoh and the Egyptians, 'might know that He was the Lord.'"{22}

One more point. Stephanie seemed to think that God still does

things today as He did in Old Testament times. When I told her that God does not require all the same things of us today that He required of the Israelites, she said that “the advantage of the absoluteness of the biblical morality you wish to trumpet is negated by your softening of OT law and by your making local and relative the very commandments of God.” In other words, we say there are absolutes, but we give ourselves a way out. I simply noted that where it was commanded by God, for example, to put a rebellious son to death, we do not soften that command at all. But when in God’s own economy He brings about change, we go with the new way. God doesn’t change, but His requirements for His people have changed at times. This doesn’t leave everything open, however. The question is, What has God called us to do today?

Its Harmful Effects on Us

For Stephanie, biblical instruction on morality not only reveals a God she can’t trust, it also is harmful for us, too. So, for example, she says, “The desire not to harm can be overcome by the desire to do right by [one’s] idea of God (look at Abraham, my favorite enigma). That’s where the real harm to society can creep in.” She believes that the certainty of religious dogmatism regarding it own rightness encourages “excesses,” such as “holy wars and terrorism for possession of the holy land, and the killing of doctors and homosexuals for their own good.” She said that Christianity permits the kind of horrors we accuse atheists of perpetrating but with the endorsement of God. “Hitler was a very devout Catholic, as I understand it,” she said.

There is serious confusion here. Loaded words like “terrorism” bias the issue unfairly, and Stephanie takes some “excesses” to be rooted in Scripture when in fact they have nothing to do with biblical morality. It is unfair of her and other atheists to ignore the commands of Scripture that clearly reflect God’s goodness while ignoring sound interpretive methods for understanding the harder parts. It’s also wrong to let

religious fanaticism in general count against God. Just as some atheists aren't going to live up to Stephanie's high standards, some Christians don't live up to God's. Gene Edward Veith says that, while Hitler had a "perverse admiration for Catholicism," he "hated Christianity."{23} What is clear is that there is no biblical basis for Hitler's atrocities. To return to the point I tried to make earlier, if he looked, Hitler *could* have found moral injunctions in Christianity to oppose his actions. Naturalists, on the other hand, have no such standard by which to measure anyone's actions. Conclusion

We have attempted to respond to Stephanie's three main objections to believing in God: there's not enough evidence; it adds nothing to what we can know from science; and theism is bad for people. These are stock objections atheists present. I think they have good answers. The next step is to try to take the atheist to the place where she or he can "see" God. Removing the reasons for rejecting God is one step in the process. The next step is to show her God. I can think of no better way to do that than to take her to Jesus, who "is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Heb. 1:3). I recommended that Stephanie read one or more of the Gospels, and she said she would read John. This is the point of apologetics, to take people to the Lord in the presence of whom they must make a choice. Now we'll wait to see what happens.

Notes

1. Rick Wade, *The Relevance of Christianity* (Probe Ministries, 1998).

2. Stephanie is aware of this program, and has given me permission to use her name.

3. George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 98.

4. One is reminded of the time when the eighteenth century

mathematician and physicist the Marquis de Laplace was asked where God fit in his theory of celestial mechanics. He replied, “I have no need of that hypothesis.”

5. W. K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Baruch A. Brody (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 246.

6. Antony Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” in *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 337-38. See also George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 7-8.

7. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 28.

8. Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind,* rev. ed. (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1989), 85.

9. Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 126-28. I am indebted to this book for this portion of my discussion.

10. A good introduction to the evidentialist objection and this kind of response to it (what is being called Reformed epistemology) is found in Clark, *Return to Reason*. See also J.P. Moreland, S*caling the Secular City; A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 116-17. The seminal work is Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*.

11. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 128-130.

12. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 120ff.

13. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 59.

14. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand

Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 60-64.

15. Papers from the "Naturalism, Theism and the Scientific Enterprise" conference in Austin, Texas in 1997, which included several presentations on this subject can be accessed on the Web at www.dla.utexas.edu/depts/philosophy/faculty/koons/ntse/ntse.html.

16. William A. Dembski, "Science and Design," *First Things* 86 (October 1998): 26-27.

17. There is an article on Probe's web site about the problem of evil, so I'll only make a few comments here. See Rick Rood, The Problem of Evil: How Can A Good God Allow Evil? (Probe Ministries, 1996).

18. Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 102-03.

19. For a in-depth discussion of the moral difficulties in the Old Testament, the reader might want to refer to Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, in which he devotes three chapters to such difficulties.

20. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 197.

21. Kaiser, 267-68.

22. Kaiser, 268.

23. Gene Edward Veith, *Modern Fascism: Liquidating the Judeo-Christian Worldview* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 50.

Nietzsche: Master of Suspicion

Christianity: Religion of Hate?

In the last decade, it has become increasingly common to hear the accusation that Christians are hateful. In the United States, this type of comment has become the mantra of homosexual rights groups who are outraged that Christians would claim that homosexuality is a sin. With the murder of homosexual Matthew Shepherd in 1999, Christians were blamed for creating a hostile environment and provoking violence against homosexuals by claiming that homosexuality is immoral. Homosexuals often scoff at Christians who say, "Hate the sin, love the sinner," insinuating that the two cannot be separated. Consequently it has become increasingly difficult to dialogue with these individuals due to their suspicion that Christians, in spite of their expressions of love, actually *hate* homosexuals.

Of course, accusations of hatred against Christians are nothing new. This charge was leveled at the first century church as a preamble to the state sanctioned persecution that occurred off and on throughout the Roman Empire until the fourth century. But today many of those who accuse Christians of hate take their marching orders from their understanding of Friedrich Nietzsche, who called Christian priests "the truly great haters in world history . . . likewise the most ingenious haters."{1} Nietzsche was absolutely contemptuous of Christians and pulled no punches when it came to his polemic against them. He is infamous for his announcement of the death of God in his writings and was known to be Hitler's favorite

philosopher. Consequently, Christians typically distance themselves from Nietzsche due to his hostility to the Christian worldview.

But while Nietzsche's writings are often blasphemous, this does not mean that Christians should ignore his insights. Rather than dismissing his critique, we should ask ourselves if he may have something to say to the church. Perhaps we need to be reminded that Jesus' harshest words were directed toward those who put on an impressive outward show of religiosity, but whose hearts were not right with God. We need only read Jesus' letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three to see that some of His most severe rebuke is found there, directed towards His own. Unfortunately, one major school of interpretation has determined that the seven churches represent different ages of church history, of which the first five have already transpired. This interpretation tends to distance us from the Lord's rebuke, as if evangelicals are the praised church of Philadelphia, and the lukewarm Loadiceans are the apostate church of the end-times. It is no wonder that we reject the blistering critique of someone like Nietzsche when we comfort ourselves by assuming that the "gentle" Jesus would never speak harshly to us!

Just as Jesus spoke out against those who hid behind the façade of religion, Nietzsche's critique of Christianity is based on the assertion that Christianity is not motivated by love, but rather by a hateful envy, driven by the need for power over others. And since Nietzsche is the inspiration for many today who call Christianity hateful, it would seem that listening to Nietzsche's critique is especially important. By understanding Nietzsche, we can be better equipped to respond to the accusations of hatred against Christians that have become common today. Furthermore, we may find that Nietzsche, rather than being just a cranky despiser of religion, actually has a prophetic message for contemporary Christians.

The Good, the Bad, and the Evil

Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota made headlines by claiming that religion is for weak-minded people who are incapable of getting through life without some sort of crutch. The governor quickly apologized for any offense he may have caused, but his claim that religion is just a crutch for the weak is certainly not new. Karl Marx said essentially the same thing by calling religion the opiate of the masses. However, no one has been more creative than Nietzsche when it comes to a critique of Christianity. His contention is not just that Christians are weak, but that Christianity itself was the vehicle by which the weakest members of society were able to overcome the dominance of those more powerful than them. Thus the very basis of Christianity is said to be hatred for, and envy of, the rich and the powerful.

It is important to recognize that Nietzsche was a trained linguist with a deep interest in the history of words. In his book *On the Genealogy of Morals,* Nietzsche claims that the concept of *good* originally was a synonym for nobility and therefore referenced the noble aristocrats of ancient times. At the same time, those who belonged to the lower strata of society, those who were originally referred to as plain and simple, were designated as *bad*.{2} Nietzsche's point in all this is that when we look at the original sense of the words *good* and *bad* they were descriptive of one's social status, rather than being a moral evaluation.

However, it is Nietzsche's contention that this all changed when priestly religions such as Judaism and Christianity were able to attain power in society. He suggests that not only did they transform the conceptions of good and bad to include a moral dimension, but that they went even further by creating the concept of evil as well. Out of their hatred and envy for the ruling elite, and their desire for power, the priests transformed the word *good* to refer to the poor and lowly

members of society and had the audacity to refer to the rich and the powerful as evil! When we read the beatitudes in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we see how Nietzsche indicts Christianity for this reversal. It is not the rich and the powerful who are blessed, but the weak and the poor! Nietzsche believed that Christ's praise of the powerless was an act of subversion, an attempt by the weak to exact revenge against the elites of society for their natural superiority. As far as Nietzsche was concerned, there was no other way to account for how Christianity had become a major world religion than to suggest that Christianity created concepts such as sin and guilt to cut the rich and powerful down to size.

It was Nietzsche's suspicion that all human relationships are driven by the desire for power over others. He found Christianity to be especially insidious because, rather than admitting that it desires power over the minds of all humanity, it proclaims itself to be a religion of love. But in fact, Scripture tells us that Christ willingly became powerless so that human beings might know the power of God. Christ set aside the prerogatives of deity to become a servant; He became poor that we might become rich. Perhaps Nietzsche is correct in arguing that human relationships are often governed by the desire for power. However, it is clear that in the encounter between God and man, it is the infinite God who submits Himself to the limitations of humanity.

Sin and Guilt as Human Conventions

One of most disturbing aspects of contemporary culture is the nihilistic worldview of many of our youth. The horrible assault on Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999 revealed how deeply alienated many young people are from society. It is apparent that Harris and Kleybold felt entirely justified in killing their classmates out of a sense of outrage at how they had been treated by the more popular students at school. Incredibly, they were convinced that their

heinous act would be glorified in Hollywood and entertained themselves by asking who would portray them in the blockbuster movies that would follow their killing spree. What is especially disturbing is the question of how such sociopathic tendencies arise in a prosperous Colorado suburb.

According to Scripture, human beings are sinners in need of redemption. All of us stand guilty before a holy God and only the shed blood of the sinless Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, can cleanse us from the power and penalty of our sin. Therefore, a guilty conscience can be a positive thing in that it enables us to respond to the gospel message. But in contemporary culture, as Senator Daniel Moynahan has stated, there has been a tendency to "define deviancy down." Acts that were considered immoral or even criminal in the recent past have been accepted as normal, so that our threshold of what is morally acceptable continues to lower. Additionally, in our therapeutic society anything that makes a person feel better about herself is exalted, while feelings of guilt and shame are discouraged. In a certain sense, this thinking is part of the heritage of Nietzsche.

According to Nietzsche, human beings developed a sense of guilt out of the]financial relationship between a creditor and a debtor.{3} Nietzsche maintained that the similarity between the German words for *guilt* and *debt* were indications that financial obligations were the original source of a sense of obligation toward others. Of course, a debtor is obligated to his creditor, and in ancient times the debtor would pledge some form of collateral in case he were unable to repay the debt. This of course gave the creditor power over the debtor, even to the extent that he could inflict cruelty upon the debtor to extract his "pound of flesh." According to Nietzsche, this gave rise to the idea that suffering could balance out our debts and is the basis for the biblical account of Christ's work of the cross.{4} The problem arose when human beings somehow internalized the original sense of

financial obligation, so that what had previously been simply a matter of external punishment evolved into the guilty conscience.

Nietzsche's contention was that a feeling of guilt is destructive and prevents us from acting in accordance with our noble instincts. But the question is, How can human beings be noble without acknowledging their own limitations? The denial of a sense of guilt, the denial of conscience, inevitably leads to pride and the arrogant assumption that we are accountable to no one. While it would be unjust to suggest that Nietzsche encouraged acts such as the Columbine shootings, it is also clear that Nietzsche recognized that a sense of guilt leads us to conclude that we are accountable to someone else for our actions. Wanting to insure that human beings did not conclude that they were accountable to God for their actions, his only option was to conclude that the guilty conscience is a figment of our imaginations. Unfortunately, incidents such as Columbine are not.

God is Dead! Now We Can Really Live!

Who can forget the famous cover of *Time* magazine, which asked the question "Is God Dead?" Many people may have dismissed such an absurd question, as if it makes sense to say that the eternal God could pass away. But that is precisely the point. In Nietzsche, the announcement of God's death is simply to force people to acknowledge that they no longer care about God. He has been removed from His throne by the advancements of science and technology and has little to say to modern man. According to Nietzsche, God choked to death on pity.{5}

On the other hand, Nietzsche claims that *we* have killed God. It is not that these statements are contradictory, but that Nietzsche viewed "God" as a concept, not as a person. Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* begins with Zarathustra setting out to deliver the startling news that God is dead, but his first words are directed to the sun. While to the

casual reader this may seem absurd, this is actually a vivid reference to the philosophy of Plato. And according to Nietzsche, Christianity is nothing more than Plato's philosophy dressed up as a religion. The whole point of Nietzsche's philosophy is to deliver us from the teachings of Christianity, which he called the "Platonism of the people." Nietzsche believed that both Plato and Christianity overemphasized the distinction between human existence and the realm of eternity; in order to effectively demolish Christianity, he felt it necessary to destroy the foundations of Plato's philosophy as well.

Plato lived in an era that was concerned about the implications of change. Because Plato denied that we can truly know anything that is changeable, he conceived of an ideal world populated by what he called "forms." The forms were eternal and unchanging models for the objects that we experience every day, and Plato's concern was with how we can come to know these forms. Part of his answer to that question was his conception of the ultimate form, the form of the Good. The form of the Good is what illumines the soul's understanding, so Plato utilized the sun as the most fitting symbol for this form. Later, some Christian theologians baptized Plato's philosophy by claiming that the forms were ideas in the mind of God, but what critics like Nietzsche find so disturbing is that both Plato and Christianity seem to place more emphasis on an afterlife than on day-to-day existence. It was his desire that we recognize the value and pleasures of this life, but to do so he completely rejected a transcendent world. The question is whether he is justified in claiming that Christianity denies the validity of this life by focusing solely on a heavenly afterlife.

While it is true that a variety of movements within Christianity, such as the monastics, have devalued earthly existence as a mere prelude to the afterlife, this is a far cry from claiming that Christianity *itself* is the religious

equivalent of Plato's other-worldly philosophy. St. Augustine, who was a devoted student of Plato, claimed that Plato was a valuable tool that helped lead him to Christianity. But the one thing that he found lacking in the Platonists was the teaching of Scripture that in Jesus Christ the Word of God became flesh. God himself has come to live amongst us! The incarnation of God in Christ means that human existence is vitally important. God himself lived as a man. Rather than devaluing life, Christ came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly.

Nietzsche the Prophet?

As we close our examination of Friedrich Nietzsche's thinking and its consequences for Christian faith we should note his conviction that terms such as *sin, morality,* and *God* are simply human conventions with no reality supporting them. He hoped to overcome these concepts by taking us back in history to discover how we came to these "erroneous" beliefs. According to Nietzsche, the concept of a God who rewards believers with eternal life has devalued human existence. Consequently, he attempted to devalue any belief associated with a transcendent being or an afterlife and emphasized overcoming Christian standards for morality. His ideal was the *overman*, unique individuals who were not restrained by what society conceived as right or wrong. The problem is that, when taken to its extreme, his philosophy has been utilized to justify a wide variety of crimes. In 1924, two students at the University of Chicago justified their murder of a twelve-year-old boy by quoting from Nietzsche. And of course, Hitler assumed that Nietzsche's philosophy called for world domination by Germany and the ruthless elimination of all its enemies. Many therefore assume that Nietzsche was some type of proto-Nazi.

Nietzsche would have had little sympathy for Hitler and was not an anti-Semite as some have claimed. These accusations are

common, but cannot be the result of actually reading his works. What we can say is that Nietzsche attempted to replace the good news of Jesus Christ with a pseudo-gospel based on the assertion that Christianity was a fabrication that has hindered mankind for centuries. The Bible tells us that Christ has set us free through His atoning work on the cross; Nietzsche insists that such a story is what has placed us in bondage. Like many utopians, Nietzsche denied the inherent sinfulness of the human heart and insisted that the idea of God was what had prevented mankind from reaching its highest potential. Obviously, evangelical Christianity and Nietzsche are in severe disagreement on most subjects.

Still, Nietzsche does have a message for the Christian community. Considering Nietzsche's contempt for Christianity, that would seem to rule him out as a mouthpiece for God. However, we also note that pagan kings such as Cyrus of Persia (Ezra 1:1-4) and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:34-35) were spokesman for God in particular instances. So to paraphrase John 1:46, "Can anything good come out of Nietzsche?"

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of reading Nietzsche is his emphasis on our motives. Just as Jesus accused the Pharisees for disguising their hardened hearts with outward acts of service and sacrifice, Nietzsche demonstrates keen awareness of the subtle ways we can deceive even ourselves. One of Nietzsche's favorite accusations is that Christians can speak about loving their enemies, but they have also been known to comfort themselves with thoughts of those same enemies roasting in eternal hell-fire. Perhaps then one of the reasons Christians avoid reading Nietzsche is that he can make us feel so uncomfortable. Do we give to the Church out of love for God or perhaps simply for the tax deduction? What about our service in the church? Are we motivated by the applause of man, or by our love for God? The Christian cannot read Nietzsche without feeling challenged on these questions. Rather than simply dismissing his radical critique of

Christianity, the church would be well-served to understand how Nietzsche has influenced modern culture, and in turn to reflect on how we can demonstrate the love of God to a dying world.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books: New York, 1967), 33.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 27-28.
3. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 62.
4. Ibid., 65.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954).

Putting Beliefs Into Practice

Rick Wade uncovers and analyzes three major ingredients to help students produce a life of meaningful service in the kingdom of God: convictions, character, community.

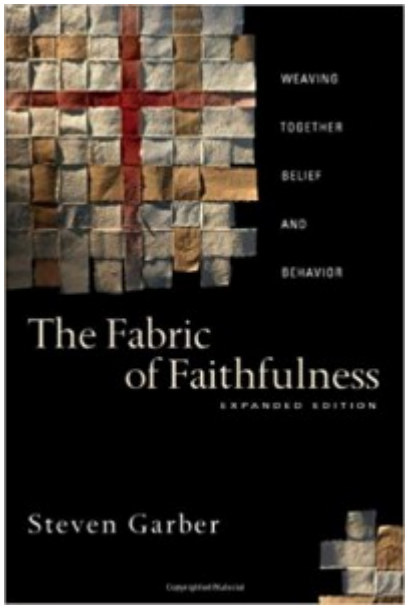
Why Do You Get Up in the Morning?

"Why do you get up in the morning?"

That's a question Steven Garber likes to ask college students. It might sound like a rather silly question at first. We get up in the morning because there are things to be done that won't get done if we lie in bed all day. But Garber wants to

know something more important. What are the things that lie ahead of us that make it worth getting out of bed? What do we intend to accomplish? Are our ambitions for the day worthy ones? More importantly, How do they fit with our view of life, or our worldview?

Wait a minute. This is getting rather heavy. Should the activities of our day—routine and non-routine—be tied somehow to a worldview? This implies that our basic beliefs are significant for the way we live, and, conversely, that what we do with our days reflects what we really believe.



Steven Garber believes both are true. Garber is on the faculty of the American Studies Program in Washington, D.C. In 1996 he published a book titled *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years.* {1} The purpose of this book is to help students in the critical task of establishing moral meaning in their lives. By *moral meaning* he is referring to the moral significance of the general direction of our lives and of the things we do with our days. What do our lives mean on a moral level? "How is it," he asks, "that someone decides which cares and commitments will give shape and substance to life, for life? This question and its answer are the heart of this book." {2}

In this article we will look at the three significant factors to which Garber draws attention, factors that form the foundations for making our lives fit our beliefs: convictions, character, and community. {3}

For many young people, college provides the context for what the late Erik Erikson referred to as a *turning point*, "a crucial period in which a decisive turn *one way or another* is unavoidable." {4} College students no longer have Mom and Dad

looking over their shoulders; their youth pastors are back home; their friends and other significant adults are not around to keep those boundaries in place that once defined their lives. They are on their own, for the most part. *In loco parentis* was the place the university once held in students' lives: "In the place of the parents." No more. One writer says tongue in cheek that the new philosophy is *non sum mater tua*: "I'm not your mama."{5}

Even worse for Christian students, when they are on campus they don't find themselves on their own in a perfectly innocuous environment that seeks to continue in the students' lives what their parents began. Professor J. Budziszewski, a faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin, says that "The modern university is profoundly alienated from God and hostile to Christian faith." {6} Thus it is that in the college environment Christian students are really put to the test. Given the loss of the support group at home, on the one hand, and the input of new ideas and activities that are antithetical to their faith, on the other, how will they not only stand firm in their faith, but actively move forward in developing a life that is consistent with what they believe?

Before considering what Garber says about convictions, character, and community, let's think about beliefs and practice in general.

Telos and *Praxis*

Many students think of the college years as their chance to finally break loose of the constraints of home and have a good time—a *really* good time—before settling down into the hum-drum routine of adult life. They see education simply as a means for getting good jobs. Thus, academics are too often governed by the marketplace. Students who try to discuss ideas and issues outside the classroom are often put down by their peers. The attitude seems to be to do just enough to get the grades, and let the party begin! {7}

Is this why we send our children to college? Just to get good grades to get good jobs? For the Christian student this question is ever so vital.

Hear how Jacques Ellul expands the message of Ecclesiastes chapter 12:

> Remember your Creator during your youth: when all possibilities lie open before you and you can offer all your strength intact for his service. The time to remember is not after you become senile and paralyzed! Then it is not too late for your salvation, but too late for you to serve as the presence of God in the midst of the world and the creation. You must take sides earlier—when you can actually make choices, when you have many paths opening at your feet, before the weight of necessity overwhelms you. {8}

Students don't understand the pressures that will come with career and marriage and family and all the other ingredients of adult life. The time to think, choose, and begin acting is when the possibilities still lie open before them.

Steven Garber uses two Greek words to identify the two aspects of life which must be united: *telos* and *praxis*. *Telos* is the Greek word for the end toward which something is moving or developing. It isn't just the end in the sense of the final moment in time; it is the goal, the culmination, the final form that gives meaning to all that goes before it. The goal that defines all human life is the time when Christ will return and reign forever and believers will be conformed to His image completely. This *telos* or goal should govern our actions. In fact, the adjectival form of the word, *teleios*, is the word Paul and James use when they call us to be perfect or complete (Col. 1:28; James 1:4).

Garber's second word, *praxis*, means action or deed. {9} In Matthew 16:27, for example, Jesus speaks of us being repaid according to our deeds or *praxis*.

The question we all need to ask ourselves is whether we are ordering our *praxis* in keeping with our *telos*. Does the end toward which we are heading as children of God define the activities of our lives?

While everyone engages in some kind of *praxis* or deeds, in the postmodern world there *is* no *telos*, no end toward which everything is moving. Westerners no longer even look for the perfection of man, as in modernism. College students are told in so many different ways that their lives are either completely open—the "freedom" of existentialism, or completely determined—in which case freedom is an illusion. So either there is nothing bigger than us to which we might aspire, or we're just being carried along by forces we can't control. In either case, how are students to make any sense of their lives in general or their studies in particular? Emotivism and pragmatism rule. We choose based upon our own feelings or desires—which can change frequentlyor in accordance with what works or both. And what "works" is what gives them the best chance in the marketplace. Is there anything bigger that should give students a focus for their studies and their lives?

Convictions—The Foundation of Basic Beliefs

Foundational to how we live is the body of basic beliefs we hold. I noted earlier Garber's use the words *telos* and *praxis* to refer to the end toward which we are moving and the practice or deeds of our lives. The matter of *telos* or end points to the content of our faith, or our worldview, which forms our basic convictions. Let's look more closely at the importance of convictions.

When we think of our end in Christ we're thinking of something much bigger and more substantive than just where we will spend eternity. We're thinking of the goal toward which history is

marching. In His eternal wisdom God chose to sum up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). Here's how J. B. Lightfoot puts it. It speaks of "the entire harmony of the universe, which shall no longer contain alien and discordant elements, but of which all the parts shall find their centre and bond of union in Christ." {10} It is the *telos* or end of Christians to be made perfect parts of the new creation.

This isn't mere philosophical or theological speculation, however, for we have the reality of the historical presence of God in Christ on earth which gave evidence of the truth of these beliefs of a sort we can grasp. This is so important in our day of religious pluralism, an approach to religion that abstracts ideas from various religions in the search for ultimate truth. Christianity isn't an abstract set of beliefs; it is true religion grounded in objective, historical events. Historical events and revealed meanings provide the objective ground for our convictions. And these convictions provide the ground and direction for the way we live.

It is critical, then, for students to understand Christian doctrine thoroughly and its meaning and application to the various facets of life.

This whole matter of doctrine grounded in historical fact is troublesome in itself today because there has been a rift created between fact and value. Facts are those things that can be measured scientifically. All else, especially religion and morality, is considered value; it is subjective and varies according to personal preference, culture, etc. Students are told that their most basic beliefs are "noncognitive emotional responses or private subjective preferences." {11} They are told that it doesn't matter whether what they believe is objectively true; all that matters is whether it is meaningful to them. But as Garber notes, "What is real?' informs What is true?' which informs What is right?'" {12} Our beliefs and actions find their ultimate meaning—apart from how we might feel about them—in the fact that they are based on reality.

Garber tells the story of Dan Heimbach who, among other things, served on President Bush's Domestic Policy Council. Heimbach was raised in a Christian home, but sensed a need while in high school to be truly authentic with respect to his beliefs. He wanted to know if Christianity was really true. When serving in Vietnam he began asking himself whether he could really live with his convictions. He says:

> Everyone had overwhelmingly different value systems. While there I once asked myself why I had to be so different. With a sense of tremendous internal challenge I could say that the one thing keeping me from being like the others was that deep down I was convinced of the truth of my faith; this moment highlighted what truth meant to me, and I couldn't turn my back on what I knew to be true. {13}

Likewise, when some of Jesus' disciples left Him, He asked those who remained if they would leave also. Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68). It was what Peter believed that kept him close to Jesus when circumstances called for retreat.

What we believe gives meaning to our existence; it provides an intellectual anchor in a world of multiple and conflicting beliefs, and it gives broad direction for our lives. For a student to live consistently as a Christian, he or she must know what Christianity is, and be convinced that it is "true truth" as Francis Schaeffer put it: the really true.

Character—Living One's Beliefs

So convictions grounded in reality are significant for the way we live. But convictions alone aren't enough in the Christian life. They need to be matched by character that is worthy of the One who redeemed us, the One whom we represent on earth. It can be hard for students, though, to feel encouraged to develop Christ-like character given the attitudes of people all around them.

Steven Garber sees the TV show *Beavis and . . .* (well, that other guy) as symptomatic of the attitude of many young people today. He quotes a Harvard student who described the show this way: “Two teenaged losers . . . mindlessly watch videos, and they snicker. . . . [They] help us understand what the next century will be like. The founding principle will be nihilism. Rampant disregard for other living things . . . will be in. Taking responsibility for one’s actions will be out. . . . It’s proof that there is a whole new generation out there that completely understands all of this society’s foibles. And can only snicker.” {14}

How shall we inspire our students to develop character in keeping with their convictions so they don’t end up “getting all A’s but flunking life,” in Walker Percy’s words? {15} How can we turn them away from the destructiveness of a nihilistic worldview in which nothing has meaning?

Having abandoned the Christian *telos* our society is characterized by “an ethic of emotivism, one which asserts that all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference.'” {16} This goes back to the split between fact and value I spoke of earlier. Values are person-centered; they have no force beyond the individual’s power to live them out and impose them on others. They aren’t grounded in anything more ultimate than an individual or at best a particular society.

What has this gotten us? We’re free to construct our reality any way we wish now that God is supposedly dead. But what have we done with our freedom? Henry Grunwald, former ambassador to Austria and editor-in-chief of Time, Inc., said this:

> Secular humanism . . . stubbornly insisted that morality need not be based on the supernatural. But it gradually became clear that ethics without the sanction of some higher authority simply were not compelling. The ultimate irony, or perhaps tragedy, is that secularism has not led to humanism.

> We have gradually dissolved—deconstructed¾the human being into a bundle of reflexes, impulses, neuroses, nerve endings. The great religious heresy used to be making man the measure of all things; but we have come close to making man the measure of nothing. {17}

Morality is inextricably wedded to the way the world is. A universe formed by matter and chance cannot provide moral meaning. The idea of a "cosmos without purpose," says Garber, "is at the heart of the challenge facing students in the modern world." {18} It provides no rules or structure for life. Christianity, on the other hand, provides a basis for responsible living for there is a God back of it all who is a moral being, who created the universe and the people in it to function certain ways, and who will call us to give an account in the end.

Bob Kramer was a campus leader for student protest at Harvard in the '60s. He wanted to bring about social change, but when he discovered in his classes that his basic beliefs about right and wrong, truth and justice were wrong, he dropped out. "There was no real foundation for what I believed," he says, "beyond that I believed it." {19}

If we accept that Christianity does indeed provide direction and firm foundations for the development of character in the individual, still we must ask how that development comes about. Can we expect students to just read the Bible and go out and live Christianly? For Steven Garber, this leads us to consider the importance of a mentor, a person under whom the student can learn how to live as a person of high moral character.

Garber tells the story of Grace Tazelaar who graduated from Wheaton College and then went into nursing. She then taught in the country of Uganda as it was being rebuilt following the reign of Idi Amin. At some point she asked a former teacher to be her spiritual mentor. Says Garber, "This woman, who had

spent years in South Africa, gave herself to Grace as she was beginning to explore her own place of responsible service. At the core of her teacher's life, Grace recalls, I saw much love amidst trauma.'" "Those lessons," says Garber, "cannot be taught from a textbook; they have to be learned from a life." {20}

The White Rose was a group of students in Germany who opposed Nazism. Brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl were strongly influenced in their work by Carl Muth, a theologian and editor of an anti-Nazi periodical. One writer noted that, "The Christian Gospel became the criterion of their thought and actions." {21} Their convictions carried them to the point of literally losing their heads for their opposition.

The development of moral character was once an integral part of education. Christians must once again seek the development of the whole person in education. That means, on the one hand, finding adults who are willing to become mentors for students, and, on the other, drawing students out and interesting them in forming significant relationships with adults, whether they be relatives, professors, pastors, or perhaps professionals in their fields of interest. This involves more than teaching students how to have quiet times. The kind of pietistic Christianity which pulls into itself to simply develop one's own spiritual experience won't do if we're to have an impact on our world. Students need to be shown how to apply the "do not's" in Scripture, but also how to find the "do's" and . . . well, do them. They need to see how Christianity is fleshed out in real life, and they need encouragement to extend themselves in Jesus' name to a world in need using their own gifts and personalities.

Community—Finding and Giving Support

If convictions provide our foundations and our instructions, mentors can be our guides as we see in them how those convictions take shape in someone's life. Community, the third

element, then provides a context within which to practice . . . our practice!

Garber notes that "community is the context for the growth of convictions and character. What we believe about life and the world becomes plausible as we see it lived out all around us. This is not an abstraction, though. Its reality is seen in time and space, in the histories and circumstances of real people living real lives." Working together with other believers "allows for young people to make stumbling and fumbling choices toward a *telos* whose character is not altogether known at the time; it also allows for grace, which is always a surprise." {22}

Christian doctrines can seem so abstract and distant. How does one truly hold to them in a world which thinks so differently? When Donald Guthrie, who has worked with the Coalition for Christian Outreach, was asked what makes it hard to connect beliefs with life's experience, he replied, "The cynical nature of our culture, as it permeates the lives of people around me—and me. And only community can stand against that." {23} "We discover who we are," he continued, "and who we are meant to be—face to face and side by side with others in work, love and learning." {24} Bob Kramer, whom we spoke of earlier, said he and his wife believed it was important to surround themselves with people who also wanted to connect *telos* with *praxis*. He says, "As I have gotten involved in politics and business, I am more and more convinced that the people you choose to have around you have more to do with how you act upon what you live than what you read or the ideas that influence you. The influence of ideas has to be there, but the application is something it's very hard to work out by yourself." {25} "My best friend's teachers were my best friends. We were all trying to figure this out together." {26}

The Christian community, if it's functioning properly, can provide a solid plausibility structure for those who are finding their way. To read about love and forgiveness and

kindness and self- sacrifice is one thing; to see it lived out within a body of people is quite another. It provides significant evidence that the convictions are valid.

During the university years, if they care about the course of their lives, students will have to make major decisions about what they believe and what those beliefs mean. “Choices about meaning, reality and truth, about God, human nature and history are being made which, more often than not, last for the rest of life. Learning to make sense of life, for life, is what the years between adolescence and adulthood are all about.” {27} Says the Preacher, “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth.”

Convictions, character, community. Three major ingredients for producing a life of meaningful service in the kingdom of God. Students who would put together *telos* and *praxis*, the goal of life and the practice of life, must know what they believe and determine to live in accordance with those beliefs. They should consider finding a mentor and learning from that person how one weaves faith and life. And they should embed themselves in a group of Christians equally committed to living the Christian life fully. “Somewhere, deep in the mysteries of how we learn to see and hear, and what we learn to care for and about, there is a place where presupposition meets practice, where belief becomes behavior,” says Steven Garber. {28}

Let me encourage you to get a copy of Steven Garber’s book, *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, both to read yourself and to give to your students. It’s published by InterVarsity Press. You might also want to consider how to apply what it says in your church. Let’s make it our common aim to help our young people be and live the way God intended.

Notes

1. Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together*

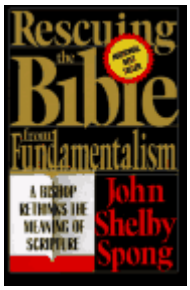
Belief and Behavior During the University Years (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).
2. Ibid., 27.
3. Ibid., 37.
4. Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), 138, quoted in Garber, 17.
5. David Hoekema, *Campus Rules and Moral Community: In Place of In Loco Parentis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Pub., 1994), 140, cited in William H. Willimon and Thomas H. Naylor, *The Abandoned Generation: Rethinking Higher Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 51.
6. J. Budziszewski, *How to Stay Christian in College: An Interactive Guide to Keeping the Faith* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1999), 25.
7. For an alarming look at the attitude of students and especially the importance of alcohol on campus, see Willimon and Naylor, chaps. 1 and 2.
8. Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 282-83, quoted in Garber, 39.
9. Colin Brown, s.v. "Work," by H.C. Hahn.
10. Colin Brown, s.v. "Head," by C. Brown.
11. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1983), 18, quoted in Garber, 53.
12. Garber, 56.
13. Ibid., 122.
14. Joe Matthews, "Beavis, Butthead & Budding Nihilists: Will Western Civilization Survive?" *Washington Post*, October 3, 1993, p. C1, quoted in Garber, 40-41.
15. Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 32, 93, quoted in Garber, 43.
16. Alister McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of
Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11-12, quoted in Garber, 50-51.
17. Henry Grunwald, "The Year 2000," *Time*, March 30, 1992, 75,

quoted in Garber, 54.
18. Garber, 59.
19. Ibid., 61.
20. Ibid., 130.
21. Inge Jens, ed. *At the Heart of the White Rose: Letters and Diaries of Hans and Sophie Scholl* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), xi, quoted in Garber, 167.
22. Garber, 146.
23. Ibid., 147.
24. Ibid., 147.
25. Ibid., 149.
26. Ibid., 152.
27. Ibid., 175.
28. Ibid., 174.

Rescuing the Gospel from Bishop Spong

Who is Bishop Spong?

Retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong is a man with a mission. He is out to save Christianity from the fundamentalists. He argues that while liberal, mainline churches have abandoned the Bible, which he claims to love, fundamentalists have made an idol of it. Fortunately, Bishop Spong has discovered the real meaning of the Bible, and not surprisingly, it ends up sounding more like Sigmund Freud than anything remotely familiar to historical Christianity.

	Spong reveals to us the real message of the Bible in his best selling book, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. For those who are curious about how a thoroughly postmodern bishop might view the Bible, this is a fascinating read. Bishop Spong's depiction of Christianity also gives us insight into the kind of theology that motivates gay rights activists, radical feminists, and Marxists to use the Bible in support of their various movements. For, according to Bishop Spong, the gospel of Christ is found in three words: love, life, and being. This gospel can be reduced to the idea that tolerance is the only absolute because humanity itself is divine, without need of redemption, or even much instruction.

Bishop Spong makes it quite clear that the words of the Bible are not the words of God.{1} The bulk of Spong's book attempts to separate the Bible from any notion of truth, except where the Bishop finds a saying or thought helpful to his gospel of tolerance. Although the Bible is not propositional truth, the Bishop claims to possess truth on many subjects, things that are true for all people everywhere. While denying truth and special revelation, he claims to have found universal truth in the Bible just the same. How does he accomplish this? By reading behind, between, and underneath the words. Only this way, he claims, can one discover what the writers really meant and what truth is relevant for all humanity.

Even though the Bible is unscientific and locked into the culture of the tribal primitives who wrote it, Spong is sure that the real truth of the Bible is that Christ called us to "be all that one can be."{2} Spong is very dogmatic about his view of truth. And his view is very popular today. It is a gospel that tells us to be spiritual without "religion." In other words, we are free to pick and choose spiritual ideas from a smorgasbord of "religious" sources.

Bishop Spong has every right to believe as he sees fit. What is irritating is that he insists he is saving Christianity from itself. He also insists that we accept his myth-making to be universally true, replacing what Christianity has taught as revealed truth for two thousand years. In this article we will consider some of the ideas that Bishop Spong would have us accept as a new gospel, the gospel according to Bishop Spong.

Bishop Spong's View of Scripture

We will begin by considering Bishop Spong's view of revelation and the Bible. Spong rejects the notion that God supernaturally used the Bible to reveal information about Himself, the human condition, or our need for salvation. In fact, Spong doubts that any objective information can be found in the Bible. Being a good postmodernist, he argues that there is "no such thing as 'objective history'."{3} The only thing that the ancient world can possibly communicate with us is a pre-scientific, narrow, limited view of reality shaped by national and tribal interests. He argues that the Bible is just as vulnerable to these limitations as any other book, maybe more so.

Spong sees Scripture as totally locked into the culture and lives of the authors. He says, "The Bible becomes not a literal road map to reality, but a historic narrative of the journey our religious forebears made in the eternal human quest to understand life, the world, themselves, and God."{4} In fact, God is wrapped up in culture as well since Spong believes that "We have come to the dawning realization that God might not be separate from us but rather deep within us."{5} He adds that "We look for and find meaning and divinity, not always so much in an external God as in the very depths of our humanity. . . ."{6}

The Bible then is only a book of religious experiences, not special revelation from God. However, even at this level it is a highly flawed work. A majority of the two hundred and forty-

nine pages of Spong's "rescuing" focuses on discrediting the authorship, the internal consistency, and the transmission of the biblical text. What is truly remarkable is that in the end, Spong claims to love the Bible, and decries the lack of biblical knowledge in our churches.

One response to Bishop Spong might be, "Why bother?" If the Bible is such a flawed product, hopelessly biased by its authors, filled with mistakes and inconsistencies, why be surprised or care that people no longer know what's in it?

Fortunately, Spong admits that his attack on the Scriptures contains nothing new. Most of it is the result of 19th century Enlightenment scholarship and rooted in the anti-supernaturalism of that age, in which miracles, prophecy, and virtually any form of God's supernatural interaction or intervention in the world was denied. What Spong is attempting to do is come up with a new Christianity loosely tied to the ancient text that founded orthodox belief. He has the right to do so, but this new gospel is not the good news given to us through the prophets and apostles by the God of the Bible.

A Sex Driven Gospel

Bishop Spong readily admits that one of the major factors that shapes his view of Scripture is its teaching on human sexuality. He begins his book with a preamble titled "Sex Drove Me to the Bible." Spong finds that the Bible's attitude on sex and gender is embarrassingly out of step with the times. What it says about everything from premarital living arrangements to homosexuality, according to Spong, is narrow-minded, misogynic, homophobic, and worst of all, pre-scientific. In contrast, Spong argues that God wants us to experience love, life, and to be all that we can be, to really be ourselves. Since he denies any notion of original sin, whatever we desire becomes a good thing as long as it allows everybody to do their thing.{7} Although he admits that the Bible is full of statements about sexual virtue, including

prohibitions against premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality, the authors of the Bible were hopelessly uninformed, lacking the benefits of modern research. One author in particular, the Apostle Paul, may have been driven by an inner struggle with his sexual identity.

According to Spong, Paul was a guilt-ridden homosexual. He claims that Paul's pre-conversion hostility towards Christians came from religious fundamentalism and self-loathing. These are the same emotions that cause modern Christians to be so angry about sexual sin today. However, salvation in Christ supposedly brought Paul peace with who he was and thus he was empowered to share this new gospel of freedom with the world. How does Bishop Spong know all this? He doesn't get it from reading the biblical text. As Spong bravely declares, "If a religious system requires that a literal Bible be embraced, I must walk away from that system."{8} Spong writes, "So enter with me into the realm of speculation as we probe the life of Paul, using his words not as literal objects but as doorways into his psyche, where alone truth that changes life can be processed." In other words, we are to ignore what Paul actually wrote and accept what the Bishop speculates.

This speculation has gotten the Bishop into trouble with his own church. Recently, Episcopalian bishops from Africa and Asia rejected Spong's liberal views on human sexuality at a conference in England. His response was to charge that "They've moved out of animism into a very superstitious kind of Christianity. They've yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we've had to face in the developing world."{9} When the bishops voiced their objections, Spong responded by declaring "I'm not going to cease being a twentieth-century person for fear of offending somebody in the Third World. . . ." Spong's reply doesn't seem very Christ-like to those who question his speculations and mythmaking.

Who Is Jesus?

Let's turn our focus to Spong's view of the person of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Spong denies virtually everything about Jesus that orthodox Christianity has believed for the last two millennia. The virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the atoning death on the cross, the resurrection, the miracles, everything that would verify the biblical claims of Christ's authority and uniqueness are discounted, and yet Spong refers to Jesus as Lord and God's only Son. How can this be? Spong argues that "the essence of Christ was confused with the form in which that essence was communicated."{10} All the biblical writers got it wrong. The first century mentality that they brought to the subject became universalized in the text of the Bible and eventually entered into the creeds of Christianity. According to Spong, Mark would never have understood or accepted the idea of an incarnation and Paul "quite obviously was not a trinitarian."{11} Christ is "the hero of a thousand faces" and "many things to many people."{12} "All of them are Christ and none of them is Christ."{13} He adds that, "A Christianity that is not changing is a Christianity that is dying."{14} What sense are we to make of all this?

Not surprisingly, Spong tells us that to get beyond these words and images we must use our imagination. The worldview that thinks in natural and supernatural categories must pass away. Spongs finds the answer in the project of Rudolf Bultmann, a theologian who attempted to demythologize Christianity in order to get to its core. However, Spong adds a twist. He calls us to demythologize Christianity so that we can create new myths that work for believers today. Unfortunately, our re-mythologizing of the Christ event will not last long either; every generation has to come up with new myths.

But what is the essence of Christianity for Spong? It is

remarkably predictable. He writes, ". . . Jesus means love-divine, penetrating, opening, life-giving, ecstatic love. Such love is the very essence of what we mean by God. God is love. Jesus is love. God was in Christ."{15} This is why he feels that the church should reject the ideas of original sin, God's wrath, and the atoning sacrifice of Christ. It should also be broken of its prejudices, particularly towards those who commit sexual sins. Spong appropriately calls this a "terrifying, barrier- free love."{16}

The problem with all this is that the Bible, the primary record we have of Jesus' life and teachings bears nothing similar to Spong's views. It seems that he would be much better off being a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi who believed that God is Supreme Good and that our goal in life is "self-realization."{17}

Christianity and Universalism

Bishop John Spong advocates a form of Christianity often called universalism. It teaches that everyone will experience salvation of some sort and that what you believe is irrelevant. All that really matters is that one act morally. In Bishop Spong's view, acting morally is tied to an all-inclusive, totally tolerant Christianity that rejects the notion of sin and atonement. He strips Christianity of its historical tenets fearing that all the details will alienate the modern mind. So how do modern minds respond to Spong's gospel?

Outspoken atheist Robert Price notes that although Spong classifies the biblical material as legend, he still thinks that Jesus must be something like the person the Gospels make of him.{18} Price charges that in creating his Jesus, Spong uses only biblical passages that fit his theological agenda. He adds that fundamentalist apologists have at least equal justification for their view of what Jesus said and did. Referring to Spong's gospel, Price observes that "for

Christianity to change on such a scale, and for it to die, are one and the same thing."{19} It would seem that if Spong is trying to save Christianity for the modern, scientific, rational mind, he has failed. At least in the case of Professor Price.

Again we ask, how does Bishop Spong know what he claims to know. How does he know that God is a form of super-tolerant love with few moral expectations for humanity? How does he know that all religions lead to this one God? He seems to recognize that when special revelation is rejected, all that is left is culturally based knowledge. Why assume then that God is love? Perhaps the Islamic view of God, represented by a stern, legalistic religious system is a more accurate view of reality. Or maybe the warlike gods of Norse mythology best portray the spiritual domain. How does he know which view is really true?

Much of Bishop Spong's argument against orthodox Christianity consists of Bible difficulties and the notion that if we are modern we must reject the idea of special revelation. Mr. Spong lumps all types of conservative Christians together into one straw man, one who happens to believe in a flat earth located at the center of the universe. He seems to be unaware that there are evangelicals who are astrophysicists, philosophers, or for that matter, even college educated. He has adopted the liberal views about Jesus from the Jesus Seminar and has failed to deal with the Christology of modern, conservative scholars.

What strikes me most about Bishop Spong is his arrogance. He belittles those who disagree with him and questions their sincerity, attributing orthodox views of morality to "irrational religious anger."{20} Unfortunately, Bishop Spong's rational Christianity would leave us with no Christianity at all.

Notes

1. John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFranscisco, 1992), 249.
2. Ibid., 242.
3. Ibid., 37.
4. Ibid., 33.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 236.
8. Ibid., 107.
9. www.thecrimson.harvard.edu/opinion/article.asp?ref=6329
10. Spong, 228.
11. Ibid., 229.
12. Ibid., 230.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 239.
16. Ibid., 238.
17. Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1999), 69.
18. Price, Robert, "The Afterlife of Christianity," *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1999/00, 31. Mr. Price is the Professor of Biblical Criticism at the Center for Inquiry Institute, part of the Council for Secular Humanism.
19. Ibid.
20. Spong, 4.

See Also *Probe Answers Our Email*:

"Bishop Spong is a Hero!"

Soren Kierkegaard and the Supremacy of Faith

Kierkegaard—The Radical Reformer

One of the most difficult barriers to evangelism today is the difficulty in defining what it *is* to be a Christian. Some consider attendance in a Christian church to be sufficient, while a vast number of people simply associate "Christian" with being a good, moral person. And in a country such as the U.S., there are even those who assume American citizenship is an adequate basis for being a Christian. This is what happens when people reject the Bible for its understanding of divine truth.

However, this predicament is not unique to the 21st century. In the mid-nineteenth century, one of the great defenders of Christianity confronted this very problem in his native Denmark. Disturbed by the culture's definition of Christianity, Sören Kierkegaard dedicated his life to a defense of Christianity that was truly a way of life rather than simply the acceptance of a church creed. Kierkegaard was especially disturbed that the Danish church had accepted its definition of Christianity from the famous German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. For Hegel, rationality was the supreme virtue, and Christianity was the ultimate religion because the doctrine of the Trinity was in accordance with his own understanding of logic: God the Father and Jesus Christ are identical since each is God, and yet they are different from one another since they are distinct individuals. This apparent "difference" is then reconciled by the fact that God has made Himself known through the Holy Spirit's birthing of the

church. Hegel found this definition of the Trinity to be the mirror image of his own understanding of logic, in which opposites are to be synthesized in order to come to a fuller understanding of reality.

Hegel's reference to Christianity as the ultimate religion led many to assume that he was a strong advocate of Christianity. However, for Hegel, "reality" was only what could be experienced in the here and now. He rejected any suggestion that there was an afterlife or otherworldly existence. And while he referred to Christianity as the ultimate religion, he also declared that religion was subordinate to his own philosophy. Because Christianity is based on faith, Hegel taught that to be rational we must go beyond religion and turn to Hegel's own philosophy if we are to understand ultimate reality.

It was Kierkegaard's self-appointed task to confront Hegel's thinking and to present the supremacy of the Christian faith to the Danish people. His brilliant apologetic effort was so ridiculed, however, that for years after his death Danish parents admonished their children "don't be a Sören" in order to warn them about foolish behavior. In order to understand why, it will be necessary first to examine Kierkegaard's life and strategy, after which we will discuss his well-known works.

Kierkegaard and His Pseudonyms

Few people today know the story of Morris Childs. Childs, who as a young man was a high ranking official in the American communist party, became an informant for the FBI against communism in the early fifties. Because of his background, Childs moved easily among communist leaders, both in the United States and abroad, for nearly thirty years. And yet, due to the highly secretive nature of his mission, very few of his fellow American citizens realized that Morris Childs was a true patriot. Instead, he was considered by many to be a

communist, a traitor. Far from being a traitor, Childs had risked his life in order to pass on highly sensitive information to his American spy-masters.

Like Childs in the political realm, Sören Kierkegaard has been misunderstood by many of his fellow Christians. Partly due to the influence of Francis Schaeffer, who blamed Kierkegaard for the modern trend toward irrationalism, there are those who assume that Kierkegaard was a secularist. However, part of the genius of Kierkegaard was his desire to present the truth of Christianity from the perspective of a non-Christian. Consequently, many of his books were written under various pseudonyms.

When reading Kierkegaard under one of these pseudonyms, you can never assume that everything Kierkegaard is writing is his own belief. Instead, he typically introduces himself to the reader as a non-believer who, for whatever reason, is interested in religious questions. It was Kierkegaard's belief that the most important religious and ethical questions could not be communicated directly. He therefore developed a method famously known as "indirect communication" in which he hoped to establish common ground with the non-believer. By not introducing himself as a Christian, he sought an audience for the gospel that he would not have gained otherwise.

Another aspect of Kierkegaard's life that must be taken into account is his tragic relationship with a young woman named Regina Olsen. Kierkegaard deeply loved Regina, and for a short period of time they were engaged to be married. But Kierkegaard forced himself to break off the engagement. And the fact that they never married was, for Kierkegaard, the true proof of his love for her. Much of his motivation for the break-up was based on the melancholy nature he had received from his father. Kierkegaard's father, Michael, had cursed God as a young boy due to his miserable working conditions and was haunted all his life by the suspicion that he had committed the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost. Not only did

Kierkegaard hope to spare Regina from his own depression, he also attempted to demonstrate in his writings that his rejection of Regina was motivated by love, just as God's love for us was revealed through His rejection of His own beloved Son.

Kierkegaard on the Incarnation

The Weigh-Down Workshop, a weight loss program developed by Gwen Shamblin, is based on the admirable thesis that those who would like to lose weight should replace their excessive hunger for food with hunger for God. But recently it became evident that Shamblin's Christian beliefs are unorthodox. According to Shamblin, the doctrine of the Trinity is a "man-made" formula that arose in a polytheistic society in order to "make sure no one mistakenly believed that Christians worshipped several gods." Shamblin is under the mistaken belief that trinitarian teaching suggests that Jesus and God are the same person, when in fact the biblical teaching is that Jesus (the Son) and God (the Father) are distinctive persons, identical in their divine essence.

In one of Kierkegaard's more famous works, *The Philosophical Fragments,* it is suggested that the doctrine of the Incarnation is indeed the ultimate paradox: How can it make sense that God became man? But Kierkegaard wrote this work under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus. Johannes Climacus does not claim to be a Christian, but he is at odds with the philosophy of Hegel, who sees faith as a stepping-stone to the ultimacy of reason. Climacus is intent on demonstrating that, if Hegel is right, then Christianity is completely wrong. But, if Hegel is wrong, then it is possible to understand that doctrines such as the Incarnation reveal the logical superiority of Christian faith.

Climacus begins by asking if the truth can be learned. He therefore questions what kind of teacher would be capable of bringing the truth to human beings who do not know the truth.

Since all people are created by God, it must have been God who made it possible for human beings to know the truth. But since people don't know the truth, then only a divine being could teach human beings the truth. And what is it that prevents people from knowing the truth? It is sin. And since the teacher must bring people out of this sinful condition in order for them to understand truth, this teacher should also be seen as a savior, a deliverer. But, to be a savior for humans, this divine being must also become human as well, which is illogical to those who have not received the truth. All this is to suggest, however, that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is perfectly consistent for the person of faith.

Yet, since Climacus is writing in response to the philosophy of Hegel, he points out that God becoming a man is absurd, a paradox beyond human comprehension. For this reason many readers assume that Kierkegaard *himself* thought that the Incarnation was absurd, when in fact he was emphasizing that mere human reason was insufficient to be a Christian. For Kierkegaard, biblical faith takes us beyond what human reason can possibly conceive.

Kierkegaard on Abraham

Mohammed Ali was one of the greatest fighters of all time. After he began calling himself "The Greatest," that title quickly became associated with Ali. We often debate about the greatness of athletes and politicians, but rarely in our pluralistic society do we present our position on the greatness of religious figures. And yet that is exactly what Kierkegaard did in his work, *Fear and Trembling,* written under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio. Johannes is fascinated by Abraham and desires to understand how anyone could be as great as Abraham.

Johannes is intrigued by a seeming paradox: How is it that Abraham is routinely recognized to be one of the greatest

figures in all of Scripture, the father of faith, and yet at the same time we must admit that he was a split-second away from murdering his own son? If anyone were to emulate Abraham in modern times, we would do our best to prevent such a heinous act. Yet, at the same time preachers routinely preach on the greatness of Abraham. Johannes concludes that what made Abraham so amazing was his belief that he would receive Isaac back in *this* life, rather than just in the life everlasting. Still, this leads to the conclusion that Abraham was willing to kill Isaac. How, then, can we exalt Abraham as a great man?

Johannes proceeds to examine the purpose behind Abraham's action. This is where, once again, Kierkegaard is intent on skewering the philosophy of Hegel. According to Hegel, the individual was to subordinate his own desires for the broader good of the institutions of family, civil society, and the state. Consequently, it would have been Hegel's position that Abraham's actions were both ludicrous and evil since they did not conform with the ethical standards of a civilized people. As a result, Johannes forces us to ask whether the philosophy of Hegel or the teaching of Scripture is to take priority.

Johannes' own unique answer is that, in order to understand Abraham's relationship to God, there must be what he calls the "teleological suspension of the ethical." *Teleology* is the idea that everything has a purpose. For Hegel, the ultimate purpose of ethics was for the members of a state to share the same moral virtue, under which circumstances a nation can be joined together with a common bond. But for Johannes, the individual takes priority over the state. Abraham's actions were guided by a higher purpose than simply conforming to the ethical norms of society. His faith enabled him to obey God to the point of becoming a murderer, while believing that God would raise his beloved son from the dead. Who then is greater? Hegel, or Abraham? Human reason gives one answer, but Christian faith another.

Kierkegaard and Truth

“What is truth?” The famous question of Pilate to Jesus has become even more pertinent today, as truth has become more a matter of pragmatic concerns rather than having any correlation with reality. Biblical Christianity is grounded on the truths of God’s Word, and the loss of truth in a postmodern society has had a devastating effect on the influence of the gospel. Thus, on first glance it can be disturbing that Kierkegaard claimed that all truth is subjectivity. To conclude this article, I want to explore exactly what he means by this phrase.

We must be very careful when reading someone as elusive as Kierkegaard. Once again, it is Johannes Climacus who is the spokesman for the claim that all truth is subjectivity. Climacus is again attacking the philosophy of Hegel, who claimed that it was possible for human beings to possess absolute knowledge through carefully analyzing human existence. Climacus questions how it is possible to have absolute certainty in this life, especially when we consider the wide variance between philosophers since ancient times. More importantly, the claim of absolute knowledge seems to mean that, for the Christian, knowing is more important than believing. Since faith, as in the case of Abraham, often times requires patience and endurance before reaching its fulfillment, there is a qualitative difference between faith and knowledge. According to Climacus, only God can have absolute knowledge. This is important to consider when pondering the assertion that all truth is subjective, for Climacus is making a major distinction between the human realm and the divine realm.

One of Kierkegaard’s major emphases in his writings was that the Christian life is more than simply believing in orthodox doctrine. He himself was passionate about his relationship with Christ, and was disgusted by the apathetic attitude of

many church-goers. Consequently, when Climacus claims that all truth is subjectivity he is claiming that human beings must appropriate the truth of whatever they believe if it is truly to take hold of their lives. There can be no such thing as a passive, disinterested Christian. Neither should the Christian confuse knowledge, which can never be complete in this life, with the life of faith. The Christian must make a leap of faith, in the sense that faith always involves risk. Climacus therefore hoped to contrast the willingness to believe and *live out* the truths of Christianity against the acceptance of philosophical systems that did not require any personal commitment. This, for Climacus, is the difference between subjective and objective truth.

As we have seen, it is very easy to construe Kierkegaard as a non-Christian if we do not take into consideration his strategy of indirect communication. Hopefully this brief introduction to Kierkegaard's thought will stimulate many to a fuller appreciation for this important Christian thinker.

St. Augustine

Former Probe intern Tim Garrett explains that St. Augustine's The City of God *and his* Confessions *reveal not only a brilliant mind, but demonstrate his abiding concern to announce God's righteousness in His dealings with man.*

Who Was St. Augustine?

One of the most remarkable things about a close reading of Church history is that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. In the New Testament we find that a man who called

himself “the chief of sinners” due to his murderous hatred toward Christians was saved when Christ Himself appeared to him on the road to Damascus. What is clear from the account in the ninth chapter of the Book of Acts is that it was not Saul who was seeking Christ: instead, it was Christ who was seeking Paul.

In modern times we see a similar situation in the life of C. S. Lewis. In *Surprised by Joy,* he recounts the night that he knelt to admit that God was God by calling himself “the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.” Like the Apostle Paul, we can see that Lewis was perfectly prepared to be an apologist for the faith, but that preparation occurred *before he ever became a Christian!* It is only after the fact that we see how God was actively seeking the sinner.

In this article we will examine another reluctant convert, a man whose life and ministry has been crucial to church history. His name was Aurelius Augustine: we know him as St. Augustine of Hippo. But until his conversion, Augustine was anything but a saint! Born in the year 354 in North Africa, Augustine was raised by a Christian mother and a pagan father. The father’s main desire was that his son get a good education, while his mother constantly worried about her son’s eternal destiny. Augustine indeed received a first class education, but his mother was tormented by his indulgent lifestyle. Augustine became involved with a concubine at the age of seventeen, a relationship which lasted thirteen years and produced one son. Recognizing that sexual lust was competing with Christ for his affections, Augustine uttered the famous prayer “Make me chaste Lord . . . but not yet.”

While sexual passion ruled his heart, Augustine sought wisdom with his mind. After suffering enormous internal conflicts, Augustine submitted himself to Christ at the age of thirty-two, and soon thereafter became Bishop of Hippo. Augustine became a tireless defender of the faith, diligent in his role as a shepherd to the flock as well as one of the greatest

intellects the Church has ever known.

In this look at the life of Augustine we will focus on two of his greatest books—the *Confessions*, and *The City of God*. As we will see, Augustine's life and work is a testimony to the boundless mercy and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Augustine's Youth

In a gripping television interview recently broadcast on *60 Minutes,* the man convicted of the Oklahoma City bombings spoke of his grievances against the federal government. During the interview, Timothy McVeigh revealed that his lawyers have filed an appeal that maintains that pre-trial publicity prevented him from getting a fair trial. Like many of us, McVeigh seems intent on avoiding the penalty of his actions; but rather than doing so by insisting upon his innocence, he is attempting to have the verdict thrown out due to a technicality.

It was truly disturbing to see an articulate young man such as McVeigh coldly dismiss the mass murder of innocents on the basis of a legal technicality. In many respects, his demeanor reflects the contemporary shift in attitude toward sin and guilt that has had devastating consequences for society. As a nation, America has seen a shift from a worldview primarily informed by biblical Christianity to one in which the individual is no longer responsible for his actions. Now it is either society or how one is raised that is given emphasis.

Against this cultural backdrop it is truly therapeutic to read Augustine's *Confessions.* Throughout this wonderful book, which is written in the form of a prayer, Augustine freely admits his willful disobedience to God. Augustine's intent is to reveal the perversity of the human heart, but specifically that of his own. But Augustine was not intent on just confessing his sinfulness: this book is also the confession of his faith in Christ as well. Augustine, as he is moved from a

state of carnality to one of redemption, marvels at the goodness of God.

One of the most telling incidents in the *Confessions* is Augustine's recollection of a decisive event in his youth. He and an assortment of friends knew of a pear tree not far from his house. Even though the pears on the tree didn't appeal to Augustine, he and his friends were intent on stealing the pears simply for the thrill of it. They had no need of the pears, and in fact ending up throwing them to some pigs. Augustine's account of this thievery reveals a penetrating insight into our dilemma as human beings. Whereas today many want to blame their parents or their environment for their problems, Augustine admits that his sole motive was a love of wickedness: he *enjoyed* his disobedience.

This reflects one of Augustine's major contributions to Christian theology: his emphasis on the perversity of the human will. We would all do well to read Augustine's *Confessions* if only to remind us that evil isn't simply a sickness but a condition of the heart that only Jesus Christ can heal.

Augustine's Search for Wisdom

In his fascinating book entitled *Degenerate Moderns,* author Michael Jones convincingly documents how many of the intellectual gurus of the modern era have conformed truth to their own desires. Jones research reveals how Margaret Mead, Alfred Kinsey, and other prominent trend-setters intentionally lied in their research in order to justify their own sexual immorality. Sadly, contemporary culture has swallowed their findings, leading many to conclude that sexual immorality is both normal and legitimate.

However, when we turn to Augustine's *Confessions,* we see someone who has subordinated his own desires to the truth. The *Confessions* is an account of how Augustine attempted to

satisfy the longings of his heart with professional ambition, entertainment, and sex, yet remained unfulfilled. One of Augustine's most famous prayers is therefore the theme of the whole book: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee, O God." Only by submitting his own desires to the Lordship of Christ did Augustine find the peace that he was seeking.

But that submission did not come easy. Throughout most of his adult life, Augustine had been seeking to discover wisdom. But two questions were especially disturbing for him: What is the source of evil, and How can a Being without physical properties exist? Obviously, this second question was a barrier to his belief in the God of the Bible. In his search for answers, Augustine became involved with a group known as the Manichees, who combined Christian teaching with the philosophy of Plato. Plato's philosophy helped convince Augustine that existence did not require physical properties, but he found their answer to the question of evil problematic, and after eight years as a seeker left the Manichees.

Still, the most difficult barrier for Augustine was not intellectual, but a matter of the heart. He eventually came to the point where he knew he should submit himself to Christ, but was reluctant to do so if it meant giving up his relationship with his concubine. One day, while strolling through a walled garden, Augustine heard from the other side of the wall what sounded like a child's voice, saying "pick up and read, pick up and read." At first he thought it was a children's game. Then, acknowledging what he took to be a command of the Lord, he picked up a nearby Bible, and upon opening it immediately came to Romans 13:13-14, words tailor made for Augustine: "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticisms and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts." Augustine's search for wisdom was complete, as he acknowledged that wisdom is ultimately a *person*: Jesus

Christ. The wisdom of God had satisfied his deepest longings.

Augustine's Philosophy of History: *The City of God*

The United States is currently going through what some call a "culture war." On the one hand there are those who believe in eternal truth and the importance of maintaining traditional morality. At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that the individual is autonomous and should be free to live as he pleases without anyone telling him what is right or wrong. Until thirty years ago the first group held sway. Today, that same group is considered divisive and extreme by the "politically correct" mainstream culture.

But culture wars are not unique to modern America. In the year 410, mighty Rome was sacked by an invading army of Goths. Soon thereafter, the search was on for a scapegoat. In the year 381 Christianity superceded the ancient religion of the Romans as *the* state religion. This enraged those who favored the old state religion, who claimed that Rome had gained world supremacy due to the favor of the ancient gods. When Rome officially accepted the Christian God and forsook the gods, the gods were said to have withdrawn their favor and allowed the invading armies to breach the walls of Rome in order to demonstrate their anger at being replaced by the Christian God. Educated Romans found such an argument silly, but an even more serious charge was that Christians were disloyal to the state, since their allegiance was ultimately to God. Therefore, Christianity was blamed for a loss of patriotism since Christians believed themselves to ultimately be citizens of another kingdom¾the Kingdom of God.

Augustine responded to these accusations by writing his philosophy of history in a book entitled *The City of God*. Augustine spent thirteen years researching and writing this work, which takes it title from Psalm 87:3: "Glorious things

are spoken of you, O City of God." Augustine's main thesis is that there are two cities that place demands on our allegiance. The City of Man is populated by those who love themselves and hold God in contempt, while the City of God is populated by those who love God and hold themselves in contempt. Augustine hoped to show that the citizens of the City of God were more beneficial to the interests of Rome than those who inhabit the City of Man.

For anyone interested in the current debate between secularists and the "Religious Right," Augustine's argument is a masterful combination of historical research and literary eloquence. Christians in particular would be well served by studying this important document, since believers are often accused of being divisive and extreme, characteristics considered by some as un-American.

In Augustine's time, it was asserted that the values of Christianity were not consistent with good Roman citizenship. But Augustine's historical investigation revealed that it is sin that is at the root of all our problems: starting with Cain's murder of Abel, the sin of Adam has borne terrible consequences.

Much of Augustine's task was to demonstrate the consequences of a society that loses its moral compass. Augustine took it upon himself to demonstrate the falsity of the assertion that the Christian worldview is incompatible with civic life. Those who maintained that the acceptance of Christian virtues had had a direct bearing on Rome's fall did so primarily from a very limited perspective. The clear implication was that Christianity, a religion that asks its adherents to love their neighbor and pray for their enemies, had fostered a society incapable of defending itself against its more vicious neighbors.

Augustine's response was to demonstrate that Rome had suffered through numerous catastrophes *long* before Christianity ever

became the religion of the Romans. Actually, it was due to the respect of the Goths for Christianity that their attack wasn't worse than it was: they relented after only three days. Against those who claimed that Christians could not be loyal citizens due to their higher allegiance to God, Augustine reminded them that the Old and New Testament Scriptures actually *command* obedience to the civil authorities. And any assertion that Christianity had weakened the defense of the empire failed to acknowledge the real cause of Rome's collapse, namely that Rome's moral degeneracy had created a society where justice was no longer valued. Augustine quotes the Roman historians as themselves recognizing the brutality at the very root of the nation, beginning with Romulus' murder of his brother Remus.

Augustine's analysis came to conclude that the virtues of Christianity are most consistent with good citizenship, and then went on to show the biblical distinction between the founding of Rome and that of the City of God. Just as Rome's origins date back to the dispute between Romulus and Remus, the City of God had its origin in the conflict between Cain and Abel. The City of Man and the City of God have intermingled ever since, and only at the final judgment of Christ will "the tares be separated from the wheat." For Augustine, the ultimate meaning of history will be borne out only when each one of us acknowledges who it was that we loved most: ourselves, or God.

Justin Martyr: Defender for

the Church

Justin's Conversion and Writings

In a previous article I talked about the persecutions Christians experienced in the early church.{1} One of the striking characteristics of persecuted Christians was the courage they exhibited on their way to execution. In fact, we're told by an adult convert of the early second century that this courage was a factor in making him open to the gospel. This convert was a philosopher named Justin, whom you might be familiar with as Justin Martyr. Justin was one of the church's earliest apologists or defenders. Church historian Robert Grant says Justin was "the most important second century apologist."{2} As we consider the work of Justin, along the way we'll see some similarities in the charges made against Christians in his day and ours. Maybe we can learn something from this second century Christian.

Justin's Life

It is believed that Justin was born shortly after 100 A.D. His birthplace was Flavia Neapolis, in Syria-Palestine, or Samaria.{3} Justin's childhood education included rhetoric, poetry, and history. As a young adult he took a special interest in philosophy, and studied primarily Stoicism and Platonism.{4} Justin was searching for God, which "is the goal of Plato's philosophy," he said.{5}

Justin was introduced to the faith directly by an old man who engaged him in discussion about philosophical issues and then told him about Jesus. He took Justin to the Hebrew prophets who were before the philosophers, he said, and who spoke "as reliable witnesses of the truth."{6} They prophesied of the coming of Christ, and their prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus. Justin said that afterward "my spirit was immediately

set on fire, and an affection for the prophets, and for those who are friends of Christ, took hold of me; while pondering on his words, I discovered that his was the only sure and useful philosophy. . . . it is my wish that everyone would be of the same sentiments as I, and never spurn the Savior's words."{7} Justin sought out Christians who taught him history and Christian doctrine, and then "devoted himself wholly to the spread and vindication of the Christian religion."{8}

Justin continued to wear the cloak which identified him as a philosopher, and he taught students in Ephesus and later in Rome. James Kiefer notes that "he engaged in debates and disputations with non-Christians of all varieties, pagans, Jews, and heretics."{9}

Justin's conviction of the truth of Christ was so complete, that he died a martyr's death somewhere around 165 A.D. Eusebius, the early church historian, said he was denounced by the Cynic Crescens with whom he engaged in debate shortly before his death.{10} Justin was beheaded along with six of his students.

Historian Philip Schaff sums up Justin's character and ministry this way:

> *He had acquired considerable classical and philosophical culture before his conversion, and then made it subservient to the defense of the faith. He was not a man of genius and accurate scholarship, but of respectable talent, extensive reading, and enormous memory. . . . He had the courage of a confessor in life and of a martyr in death. It is impossible not to admire his fearless devotion to the cause of truth and the defense of his persecuted brethren.{11}*

Justin's Writings

Several books have been attributed to Justin, but only three are universally accepted as genuine. They are what are now

called the *First Apology* and the *Second Apology,* and the *Dialogue With Trypho the Jew*. His *First Apology* was addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius, who reigned from 138-161 A.D., his sons, Lucius and Marcus Aurelius, and to the Roman Senate and "the whole Roman people."{12} The *Second Apology* was apparently addressed to the Roman Senate, although it originally might have been attached to the *First*. Both were written in response to persecution.

Justin and Greek Philosophy

Justin's understanding of Christianity was filtered through the philosophy he had learned. The Platonism of Justin's day had a strong theistic bent, and its high moral tone seemed to accord with Christianity. Justin (and others) connected the Logos of philosophy with the Logos of John chapter 1. Historian Philip Schaff describes the thinking this way:

> *The Logos is the pre-existent, absolute, personal Reason, and Christ is the embodiment of it, the Logos incarnate. Whatever is rational is Christian, and whatever is Christian is rational. The Logos endowed all men with reason and freedom, which are not lost by the fall. He scattered seeds of truth before his incarnation, not only among the Jews, but also among the Greeks and barbarians, especially among philosophers and poets, who are the prophets of the heathen. Those who lived reasonably and virtuously in obedience to this preparatory light were Christians in fact, though not in name; while those who lived unreasonably were Christless and enemies of Christ. Socrates was a Christian as well as Abraham, though he did not know it.{13}*

In addition to this source of truth, Justin (and others) believed that the teachings of Moses were handed down through the Egyptians to the Greeks.{14} God was not simply known through abstract reasoning; He made Himself known personally as well as He spoke to the prophets who in turn made Him known

to us.{15}

If Justin's idea about Christ and the Logos seems odd, we should keep in mind that we, too, typically understand Christianity through the categories of the philosophies of our day. We aren't completely neutral readers of Scripture.

For example, in modern times science has been considered to be the supreme source of truth. This fed the development of evidential apologetics. This is a method which emphasizes historical and natural facts as evidences for the faith. But scholars have come to see that facts aren't the completely value-free "truths" modernism taught. Other Christians who object to what they consider such an overly rationalistic approach have drawn from existentialist philosophers who are more concerned with the human condition. In other areas, too, we reveal the ideals of modernism in our Christian lives. How many "how-to" books are on the shelves of Christian bookstores? There is a tendency to take a "do this and such-and-such will result" attitude about our personal and spiritual development. Proper technique is a very modernistic notion.

Thus, we shouldn't be too harsh with Justin Martyr. He was a man of his times who did his best to explicate and defend Christian beliefs using the framework of thought with which he was familiar. In doing so, he was a significant force in the development of Christian theology and apologetics in the early church.

Justin's Apologetics

Christians Treated Unfairly

In his two Apologies, Justin's primary goal was to defend *Christians* rather than *Christianity per se*.{16} Christians were being treated unfairly; Justin's ambition was to get fair treatment for them. Persecution had advanced to the point

where Christians were worthy of judgment just for bearing the name *Christian*. Their odd worship habits, their refusal to participate in the civic cults and in emperor worship, and their strange beliefs were enough to create a general bias against them. Thus it was that under some emperors and local governors Christians could be brought to trial just for bearing the name.

Christians and Atheism

Part of the problem was a misrepresentation of Christian beliefs. Because Christians wouldn't worship the Greek and Roman gods, they were called atheists. Justin asked how they could be atheists since they worshipped "the Most True God." Christians worship the Father, Son, and Prophetic Spirit, he said, and "pay homage to them in reason and truth." Justin also pointed out the inconsistency of Roman rulers. Some of their own philosophers taught that there were no gods, but they weren't persecuted just for bearing the name *philosopher*. Even worse, some poets denounced Jupiter but were honored by governmental leaders. {17}

Christians and Citizenship

Another accusation against Christians was that they were enemies of the state. Their lack of participation in pagan religious rituals, which were a part of everyday public life during those days, and their talk about belonging to another kingdom led to charges that they weren't good citizens. Justin responded they weren't looking for an earthly kingdom, one that would threaten Rome. If they were, they wouldn't go to their deaths so calmly, but would run away and hide until the kingdom came on earth. Furthermore, he insisted that "we, more than all other men, are truly your helpers and allies in fostering peace," because Christians knew they would face God one day and give an account of their lives.{18} "Only God do we worship," he said, "but in other things we joyfully obey you, acknowledging you as the kings and rulers of men."{19} As

a specific example of being good citizens, Justin cited that Christians are faithful in paying taxes because Jesus said they should (Matt. 22:20-21). Justin's general argument was that by living virtuous lives, something highly regarded in Greek philosophy, Christians were by conviction good citizens.

The Situation Today

Does this kind of situation sound familiar to you? Today, bearing the name *fundamentalist* or being associated with a well-known Christian like Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson is enough to be convicted of being mean-spirited, bigoted, close-minded, and certainly harmful to society.{20} If we Christians would just keep our religion private while in public, agreeing with the sentiments of secular society, we would be acceptable. To this we must respond as Justin did, not by getting red in the face and sinking to the level of name-calling in response, but by setting forth what we really believe and by showing that we—and Christianity itself—really aren't harmful to a well-ordered society, but in fact are good for it. We might want to go further and show how the morality of our day is harmful to society. This might be persuasive to some, but certainly not on everyone, maybe not on most. But in clarifying what we believe and why we believe it, we will strengthen the church, and this is important if, as I think, believers are weakened more through name-calling and ostracism than through attacks on doctrine.

Christianity as Moral

In addition to being called enemies of the state and atheists, Christians in the early church were charged with engaging in gross immorality. For example, they were said to engage in orgies and in cannibalism in their worship services. In his apologies, Justin defended Christians as being instead people of high moral character.

For one thing, Justin said, Christians demonstrated their

honesty by not lying when brought to trial. Because they were people of truth, they would confess their faith even unto death. They loved truth more than life itself. Christians were patient in times of persecution, and showed love even to their enemies.

This attitude of living according to truth was one example of the change brought about in people's lives following their conversion. One writer notes that this change came to be known as "the triumphal song of the Apologists."{21} Justin said:

> *We who once reveled in impurities now cling to purity; we who devoted ourselves to the arts of magic now consecrate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who loved above all else the ways of acquiring riches and possessions now hand over to a community fund what we possess, and share it with every needy person; we who hated and killed one another and would not share our hearth with those of another tribe because of their [different] customs, now, after the coming of Christ, live together with them, and pray for our enemies, and try to convince those who hate us unjustly. . . .{22}*

Justin also emphasized the chaste behavior of Christians, in response to accusations of immoral behavior during worship. To show how far that was from the truth, he told the story of a young man who asked that a surgeon make him a eunuch to prove that Christians do not practice promiscuity. The request was denied, so the young man chose to remain unmarried and accountable to fellow believers.{23}

One of Justin's apologetical tactics was to contrast what the Christians were falsely charged with doing, and punished for it, with what the Romans did with impunity. For example, Christians were charged with killing babies in worship services and then consuming them. Justin countered that it was the worshipers of Saturn who engaged in homicide and in drinking blood, and other pagans who sprinkled the blood of

men and animals on their idols. Christians were accused of sexual immorality, but it was their critics, Justin said, who imitated "Jupiter and the other gods in sodomy and sinful relations with women."{24}

Today, Christians who oppose abortion are said to hate women. Those who believe that homosexuality is wrong are called hate-mongers. When we try to present our case as Justin did it can be hard to get a hearing. This isn't to say we shouldn't attempt to clarify our beliefs or even to show how critics can be as immoral as they accuse Christians of being.{25} What we need to remember is that a clarification of Christian teachings isn't enough. It wasn't in Justin's day. Consider the means he listed by which people were brought to Christ. He said that many were "turned from a life of violence and tyranny, because they were conquered either by the constancy of their neighbors' lives, or by the strange patience they noticed in their injured associates, or by experiencing their honesty in business matters."{26} Christians' high moral character, even though often maligned, is a powerful witness and apologetic for the faith.

Justin's Case for Christ

As part of his defense of Christians before the Emperor and Roman Senate, Justin also argued that Christianity was true. This was important because reason and the pursuit of truth were highly valued by the Roman intelligentsia. Since one of the charges against Christians was that they held superstitious beliefs, it had to be shown that their beliefs were reasonable. Let's consider Justin's central case for the truth of Christianity, namely, that the coming of Christ—the Logos of God—was foretold through the Prophetic Spirit thousands of years in advance.

Eternal Logos

Earlier I spoke of how Christ was identified with the

Logos—the locus of reason in the universe—of which the philosophers spoke. Speaking of Him in these terms would help gain a hearing from the cultured classes of his day. As one historian noted, "Whenever [the Logos] was mentioned the interest of all was at once secured."{27} It was important to show the reasonableness of the faith, and the Logos was the locus of reason in major schools of Greek philosophy. To quote Philip Schaff again, "Christianity is the highest reason," for Justin. "The Logos is the pre-existent, absolute, personal Reason, and Christ is the embodiment of it, the Logos incarnate. Whatever is rational is Christian, and whatever is Christian is rational."{28} In addition to guaranteeing the rationality of Christianity, identifying Jesus as the Logos indicated His antiquity, which was important to the Greek mind in establishing the truth of a belief. I should note here that this emphasis on reason should not leave us thinking that faith meant nothing for Justin. He repeatedly refers to faith in his apologies. He speaks of us being made whole "by faith through the blood and the death of Christ."{29} He even refers back to Abraham who "was justified and blessed by God because of his faith in Him."{30} However, even here the matter of knowledge is central because Justin put more weight on believing in the teachings of Christ than on believing in Christ himself. *Fulfilled Prophecies* But why should this claim about Jesus be believed? The reason was that He was the fulfillment of prophecies made thousands of years earlier which proved that He wasn't just a man who could do magic, but the promised Son of God. "We are actual eye-witnesses of events that have happened and are happening in the very manner in which they were fortold [sic]," he said.{31} Justin summarized the Old Testament prophecies about Christ this way:

> *In the books of the Prophets, indeed, we found Jesus our Christ foretold as coming to us born of a virgin, reaching manhood, curing every disease and ailment, raising the dead to life, being hated, unrecognized, and crucified, dying, rising from the dead, ascending into Heaven, and being called*

> *and actually being the Son of God. And that He would send certain persons to every nation to make known these things, and that the former Gentiles rather [than Jews] would believe in Him. He was foretold, in truth, before He actually appeared, first five thousand years before, then four thousand, then three thousand, then two thousand, then one thousand, and finally eight hundred. For, in succeeding generations new Prophets rose time and again.{32}*

Not only was the fulfillment of prophecy remarkable in itself, but it was also significant that such prophecies were made long before the Greek philosophers, for, unlike today, antiquity was important to the Greek mind in establishing the truth of a belief.

Conclusion

For all the weaknesses in his theology and apologetics, Justin Martyr provides an example of those who took their faith very seriously in the early church, and who sought to be a mouthpiece for the Lord and a defender of His people. Schaff says that "[Justin's writings] attest his honesty and earnestness, his enthusiastic love for Christianity, and his fearlessness in its defense against all assaults from without and perversions from within."{33} While it might seem to us that Christianity was really just philosophy to Justin, historian Jaroslav Pelikan notes that Justin's faith was fed more by what the church confessed about Christ than by his own philosophical speculation. "He was, after all, ready to lay down his life for Christ; and his martyrdom speaks louder, even doctrinally, than does his apologetics."{34}

Notes

1. Rick Wade, Persecution in the Early Church, Probe Ministries, Sept. 1999.

2. Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 50.

3. *Justin Martyr, First Apology, in Writings of Saint Justin Martyr,* trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 33.

4. James E. Kiefer, "Justin Martyr, Philosopher, Apologist, and Martyr," justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/175.html.

5. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr,* trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 151.

6. Ibid., 159.

7. Ibid., 160.

8. Philip Schaff, Ante-Nicene Christianity: A.D. 100-325, vol. II in *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 714.

9. Kiefer, "Justin Martyr."

10. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "St. Justin Martyr." www.newadvent.org/cathen/08580c.htm. See also Justin's own prediction of his betrayal in *The Second Apology*, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc.: 1948), 122-23.

11. Schaff, 715.

12. Justin, *First Apology*, 33.

13. Schaff, 723.

14. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., Macropaedia, s.v. "Platonism and Neoplatonism," by A. Hilary Armstrong. See also Justin, *First Apology*, 81.

15. *Catholic Encyclopedia.*

16. Robert Grant believes it was the martyrdom of Polycarp in Rome which prompted Justin to write to the emperor. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, 53.

17. Justin, *First Apology*, 37-39.

18. Ibid., 43-44.

19. Ibid., 52.

20. The reader might want to see my article *Not a Threat: The Contributions of Christianity to Western Society*.

21. Thomas B. Falls, in Justin, *First Apology*, 47, note 2.

22. Justin, *First Apology*, 47.

23. Ibid., 65.

24. Ibid., 133.

25. This kind of discussion can be difficult in general because of the moral relativism of our day. A good book to read which shows that Americans aren't as relativistic as they seem to think is William D. Watkins, *The New Absolutes* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996). For a summary presentation of Watkins' ideas, see my article *The New Absolutes*.

26. Justin, *First Apology*, 50.

27. Reinhold Seeberg, quoted in J.L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1946), 46.

28. Schaff, 723.

29. Justin, *Dialogue*, 166.

30. Ibid., 183.

31. Justin, *First Apology*, 66.

32. Ibid., 68.

33. Schaff, 719.

34. Pelikan, 143.

Worldviews, Part 2 – Comparing Postmodernism and Other Worldviews with a Christian View

Rick Wade adds to our understanding of worldviews by adding three classical and one very current life perspective to our worldview discussion. Understanding how deism, nihilism, existentialism, and postmodernism address the fundamental worldview questions helps us to deeply understand their similarities and differences with Christian theism.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Introduction

A few years ago, former Probe staff member Jerry Solomon wrote an article on worldviews in which he provided a basic introduction to the subject, and then gave a sketch of three major worldviews: Christian theism, naturalism, and New Age pantheism.{1} In this article we'll look at four more worldviews: deism, nihilism, existentialism, and postmodernism. We frequently refer to these various philosophies in our articles, so it seems good to give a brief

description for reference.{2}

Worldviews: Some Basics

What is a worldview? James Orr, the 19th century church historian, said that a worldview "[denotes] the widest view which the mind can take of things in the effort to grasp them together as a whole from the standpoint of some particular philosophy or theology."{3} A developed worldview supplies answers to the questions of origin, purpose, and destiny among other things, or as some put it, the "why, whence, and whither" of things.{4}

But some may object that such a view of Christianity is too intellectual or esoteric, or might say that Christianity by its very nature doesn't allow being forced into some set of philosophical ideas. It's true that one can present an overly philosophical picture of Christianity, one that makes it seem very remote from real life. But does that invalidate the cognitive element? Note that the apostle Paul had no problem with considering the rational aspect of the faith. There must be knowledge of Christianity in order to live it out. Read Eph. 1:17,18.{5} In Colossians we see how Paul gave his readers intellectual grounds for rejecting the philosophy of the day (cf. 1:9ff).

There are a couple of reasons for thinking of Christianity in worldview terms. Over a hundred years ago church historian James Orr called for such a perspective because first, Christianity *does* involve a lot of interconnected beliefs which cannot be picked and chosen in a cafeteria-style fashion. He says, "He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of Redemption, to a view of the purpose of God in creation and history, to a view of human destiny, found only in Christianity. This forms a '*Weltanschauung*,' or 'Christian view of the world,' which

stands in marked contrast with theories wrought out from a purely philosophical or scientific standpoint."{6} Christianity, thus, by its nature forms a worldview.

Second, Orr says, since Christianity as a whole is under attack, it must be defended as a whole; not just as individual doctrines but the whole concept of supernatural, revealed religion. "The opposition which Christianity has to encounter," says Orr, "is no longer confined to special doctrines or to points of supposed conflict with the natural sciences—for example, the relations of Genesis and geology—but extends to the whole manner of conceiving of the world and of man's place in it, the manner of conceiving of the entire system of things, natural and moral, of which we form a part."{7}

Evaluating Worldviews

How shall we evaluate a worldview? We have every right to expect that a true description of reality will be rational, be supported by evidence, provide the widest explanation for all of reality, and accord with human experience. Regarding its rational nature, it must both not contradict itself and be coherent as a system. Regarding evidence, it must not only be consistent with and explain the facts of nature and history, but it must give an adequate explanation for special occurrences in history (I'm thinking here specifically of the person and work of Jesus, including His life, death, and resurrection). A worldview answers the "why" question in its ability to explain what we see around and within ourselves. Regarding human experience, it must both explain what we know of ourselves *and* answer our deepest longings and aspirations.

Furthermore, we should not be surprised at supernatural elements such as miracles and prophecies, and reports of such should withstand investigation as far as we're able.

Finally any truths revealed which couldn't be known

otherwise—even though transcending what we can know on our own and being difficult to understand—should not conclusively contradict what we know in the range of human experience.

Let's turn now to a consideration of our four worldviews.

Deism

Historical background

The era called the Enlightenment, which spanned the 17th and 18th centuries, saw significant changes in the way Western man viewed his world. The flowering of knowledge in the Renaissance which broke through in the arts and sciences led to the restoration of a high view of man. Even in the Christian church there developed something called "Christian humanism." In the Enlightenment era which followed, though, the "Christian" part began to fall off, leaving man as the final authority on all that is true. But this change didn't occur overnight. There was a period of time when God was still recognized, although some believed He had lost touch, as it were, with His creation. He was pushed out and restricted to His heaven. Notions of God's providential care over the earth faded away. Thus was born deism, the first of four worldviews.

Several factors were involved in this transition. One was the flowering of science, specifically Newtonian physics, which supposedly gave a rational, orderly explanation of the world, thereby removing the mysterious, supernatural elements. Another factor was the religious wars a century or two before which had a souring effect on people's attitudes about organized religion. Finally, there was a growing awareness of other peoples and religions which made Christianity seem provincial rather than universal.{8} Divine law gave way to natural law. Now there was "revealed religion" coming from God, and "natural religion" discovered in nature. And "natural religion," believed to be neutral and universal, became the norm for what could be accepted as true "revealed religion."

Described

Deism, then, is the belief that "natural religion contains all that is true in revealed religion; where the latter differs, the differences are either morally insignificant or superstitious."{9} There is nothing higher than natural religion. Reason is capable of knowing God and His will, so there is no need for revelation. On the moral side, man's duty is simply to do God's will which is to seek the happiness of all men.

How was it that deists retained belief in God? According to one writer, the Newtonian view of the cosmos seemed to demand a God; the intricate order of the universe suggested an intelligent designer. In fact, this made God seem bigger than ever. However, God was removed from an active part in human affairs. His transcendence was emphasized at the expense of His immanence. Also, although God was the author of natural law, He "receded behind the battery of secondary causes with which men have daily to do."{10} God was seen as too big to be involved in the trivial experiences of man's life. There was no real concern on God's part for the details of our lives and no divine purpose in history. Knowledge of God was "emptied of most of its concrete religious connotations."{11}

Contrasted with Christian Theism

Three major factors separate deism from biblical Christianity. First, God was separated from the workings of real life due to His awesome transcendence. As Sire puts it, "God is distant, foreign, alien."{12} Scripture teaches, however, that God continues to be involved in His creation both in sustaining the natural order (Col. 1:17) and in relating to mankind.

Second, deists saw man as just a part of the clockwork universe, operating according to strict laws. While man was recognized as a creation of God and made in His image, he wasn't seen as essentially a sinner. Gone was the sense of the

drama of human interaction with God over concerns about sin and grace and judgment. Man was now in charge of himself. However, he was not truly free for man was locked in the natural system of cause and effect.{13}

Third, because the world was not seen as fallen, but rather as God created it to be, the natural order reflected what was good and right. As Pope said, "One truth is clear, whatever is, is right."{14} Not every deist went this far, however. Ethics was very important to deists; they didn't turn morality over to the subjective realm. But wrongdoing wasn't against God so much as against some abstract ethical principles discernible in nature.

Internal Weaknesses

Although few if any people would claim to be deists today, there are some aspects of deism which still reveal themselves in our beliefs. For example, some speak of one God who is all-powerful yet not directly concerned with the daily lives of human beings, who is known through the world of nature, but who hasn't revealed Himself authoritatively and finally in Scripture or through Jesus.

However, the halfway position of deism made it incapable of standing as a serious worldview for very long. Deists believed they knew things about God, but they were limited to empirical knowledge; that is, knowledge obtained through nature. If we only gain knowledge from nature, we cannot see the whole picture, and there are certainly things about God which can't be known unless He tells us (which is what revelation is). It would seem that they were presupposing certain things about God learned from special revelation without giving credit where it was due.

Thus, one needed to either keep God in the picture and acknowledge His significance, or remove Him altogether. The latter was the response of naturalism. Since that worldview

was considered in the previous article, we'll move next to nihilism, a frame of mind growing out of naturalism.

Nihilism

Now that God was pushed to the edge of human experience, why not remove Him altogether? He had lost all practical value; why believe in Him at all? Thus was ushered in naturalism, the belief that there is only one order of existence and that is nature; there is no supernatural order. This view was discussed in the earlier article, so I won't develop it here.

Historical Background

For many, naturalism was a breath of fresh air, for now one needn't look to religion to find answers. Modern man with his naturalistic beliefs tended to be optimistic about man's prospects for making a good life for himself. Being free from the confines of the supernatural, man was free to make of himself whatever he wanted

Many, however, didn't see the clear benefits of this "freedom." Naturalism produced an emptiness it couldn't fill. Are we really just another stage of evolutionary development? Is this present reality all there is? Is there no permanent, transcendent value in the universe? The worldview—or perhaps we should say, mindset— which emerged was *nihilism*. Nihilism isn't really a philosophy because it doesn't present any kind of a systematic conception of the world. It is more anti-philosophy than philosophy because it is essentially denial—denial of real value in anything. There is no real right and wrong, no beauty, no knowledge, etc.

A name very often associated with nihilism is that of Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th century philosopher. Having decided that God was dead, Nietzsche saw that with God's death went the high values of Western man which were based upon belief in God. He also recognized the loss of freedom which

this loss entailed. That we are just the natural products of evolution, just materialistic bodies and minds means that there is no real freedom at all. We are determined parts of a determined universe.

Another explanation for the rise of nihilism brings in the social and political elements. After going through many "isms" this century, many people have decided that one simply cannot put one's confidence in any of them, so they simply adopt a basic pragmatism, the idea that workability is all that matters. German theologian Helmut Thielicke made this comment:

> In a world that is saturated and infested with pragmatism, the question inevitably arises whether everything is not "pseudo," whether everything is not—at best—a productive lie, and thus whether at the tail end of this parade of idols there is *Nothing*, a *Nothing* which is always dressed up in some new ideology, but still nothing but nothingness."{15}

Described

Thielicke continues, "Nihilism is not a program but rather a value judgment. It is the last of all conceivable value judgments—at least in any logical series—and to that extent a judgment of death. Nihilism has no other will or purpose; it is content to draw a line and call it quits."{16}

James Sire mentions *Breath*, a play by Samuel Beckett, as a prime example of nihilism in theater. There are no actors, just a pile of rubbish on the stage. The light on the stage dims, then brightens, then dims again. "There are no words, only a 'recorded' cry opening the play, an inhaled breath, an exhaled breath and an identical 'recorded' cry closing the play. For Beckett life is such a 'breath.'"{17}

Nihilism, then, is a philosophy of loss; those who toy with it as a trendy worldview either don't understand it or haven't tried to. As one writer said, "Nietzsche replaces easy-going

atheism with agonized atheism."{18}

Contrasted with Christian Theism

Nihilism is obviously out of accord with Christian doctrine. God is *not* dead, and His nature and will provide a structure for value and meaning which transcend us. Because God is active in the world and is working to bring about His plans, there is real basis for hope. *Internal Weaknesses*

Nihilism also has its own internal weaknesses. Because it is fundamentally naturalistic, it carries naturalism's weaknesses. It robs us of any real freedom since the natural order is believed to operate either on a strictly causal basis or by chance (or both). Yet nihilists, like everyone else, act as if they have significant freedom. We are all daily confronted with the responsibility of making right choices and of facing the consequences if we don't. Also, the strict naturalism of nihilists makes their claims to knowledge suspect. If the chemicals and electrical charges in our brains are simply following the physical laws of cause and effect, why should we believe our ideas reflect any reality outside ourselves and aren't just the results of the random activity of our brain cells? Finally, morality can't be simply a matter of "what is, is what ought to be" or else there would be no room for reform. Any charge that another person or culture *ought* to do something—not just because it would work better but because it is *right*—would be illegitimate. Nihilism thus leaves us empty with respect to our being, our knowledge, and our morality. With all of these goes a loss of meaning.

But all this is to say what the nihilist already knows! Sincere nihilists haven't just adopted this worldview because they like to be trendy. They are simply reflecting back in their words the way they see the world, and they grieve over it.

How can we respond to nihilism? We can start out by pointing

out the existential inconsistencies nihilists exhibit. For one thing, although they say there is no meaning to anything, they indicate what *they* think is meaningful by the time and effort they put into various activities. The art of nihilism, such as *Dada*, for example, attempts to say something; it is purported to have *meaning*. If it doesn't mean anything, it can't convey the image of the world nihilism wants to reveal. Second, all their assertions about meaninglessness are supposed to be statements about the way the world *is*. But if there is no knowledge, nihilists can't know the way the world is. Third, it simply flies in the face of everything our being seems to require—meaning, value and dignity being three examples.

Very few people can live out a completely nihilistic worldview. The most thoroughgoing cynics will apply themselves to *something*—even if it's small—which they consider meaningful, even if it is crying out against the meaninglessness of life. To feel the despair of the loss of meaning and value indicates that one really *wants* such things. What can the nihilist do? He can take his life so he doesn't have to face such an absurd world. He can keep on living but keep his philosophy of no value and his life of value-seeking separate. Or he can look for something to give life value and meaning. In existentialism we find a worldview which seeks to find meaning in an absurd universe. To that we now turn.

Existentialism

Existentialism is a worldview (or really a collection of worldviews) which holds, in essence, that our choices determine what we are. We create our *own* meaning and value. "Existence precedes essence," it is said. What we do, the choices we make, determine our essence. Existentialists, thus, seek to create their own meaning in a meaningless world.

(I should note here that there are theistic and atheistic forms of existentialism. Here we will only consider the atheistic variety.) *Historical background*

Existentialism has both philosophical and experiential roots. With respect to philosophy, naturalism had left man without God, and the radical individualism and autonomy endorsed by modernistic thinking had left individuals standing alone. With respect to life's experience, technology had made us just another part of the machine; either be efficient or get out of the way, was the modernistic attitude. In addition, some by-products of technology such as pollution and the atomic bomb made life riskier. Then came two devastating World Wars conducted on the doorsteps of Europeans. The result was that man was thought to be in all alone and in danger. These factors provided the setting for a philosophy of despair.
Described

Despair is at the foundation of existentialism. We are said to live in "a 'broken world,' an 'ambiguous world,' a 'dislocated world,' a world into which we are 'thrown' and 'condemned' yet 'abandoned' and 'free,' a world which appears to be indifferent or even 'absurd.'"{19} Existentialists refused to accept the solutions coming from reason or nation or tradition. They saw that the usual means of happiness failed people, means such as money, physical pleasure, and fame. Of course, atheistic existentialists refused to look to God. God was dead, not only in the halls of philosophy, but also in the city streets, and man was left on his own.

The real problem, they thought, was a false understanding of the human condition itself which kept people from true happiness. We are alone in a vast and scary universe that doesn't care a whit about us. This realization produces anguish, an interplay between a sense of dread on one hand and the exhilaration of complete freedom on the other. We don't know why we exist or what our destiny is; we aren't told where we come from or given the value of anything. It is all up to us—to *me*—to decide. Even though I can have no confidence that the universe will suit itself to my ideas and desires, I must do something—I must act. I am condemned to make of myself

whatever I can. And to be authentic I must be true to myself and my own chosen values above all.

Existentialism, then, is first of all a theory of value. It focuses on the human condition and what makes for a good life. This has made it popular with many who are sensitive to the plight of humanity living in a very impersonal world.

Existentialism proved to be very attractive in this country in the ’60s. It gave individuals the “freedom” to toss aside convention and tradition and make their own rules. We see traces of it in the prevalent notion that we, individually, are the final authorities for value in our own lives, in our emphasis on experience over reason, in our live-for-the moment attitude.

The theme of turning one’s back on traditional morality in favor of determining one’s own life was seen in the movie *Pleasantville,* the story of two young people who are transported into the world of *Pleasantville,* a black and white TV show. Their lives only turn into color when they begin to express their sexuality. The girl eventually finds herself in the healthy area of academics, but this is a choice *she* alone makes; she is in charge of her own existence. *Contrasted with Christian Theism*

The contrasts between atheistic existentialism and Christianity are obvious. The Bible teaches that we *do* know where we came from; the universe isn’t just some vast wasteland but the setting in which the true and living God is working out His plans of which we are part. We *do* have a source for truth, morality, and values which stands above us. We *do* (or *can*) know where we’re going. On the other hand, however, while we do have significant freedom, we don’t have absolute freedom to make of ourselves what we will. Neither are we all alone; we have the resources of God to experience rich and meaningful lives.

There’s nothing wrong with taking note of our predicament, with noting the dangers to life, and with being resolved to stand firm in the face of a seemingly absurd world. The problems come with believing we are all alone, and that the burden of our lives rests upon us. God has taken on the burden of our present and future lives. We aren’t on our own. *Internal Weaknesses*

There are internal problems with existentialism as well. For one thing, one wonders why we should even care if we are in the condition existentialists say we are. Why care about being authentic, about operating in good faith, as we create our own existence? Why bother about bothering at all? Why not just eat, drink and be merry? Regarding standards of value, how can one avoid the notion that there are some values that everyone should accept, universal standards of good and evil, beauty and ugliness? We can’t help believing some things are worth preserving while others are unworthy of our efforts.

With existentialism there is no basis for judging actions or for making the major decisions of life beyond the simple affirmation, “I choose it.”

Is that enough?

Postmodernism

It is rather easy for us to consider the worldviews already discussed from a distance. Probably few who read this article are deists or nihilists or even existentialists. These can be safely tucked away in the cupboard of tried and forgotten worldviews by most of us (even though many of us can find elements of one or another in our own thinking). The situation is quite different with respect to postmodernism, the last worldview we’ll consider, because it describes the basic mindset of turn-of-the-century Western mankind. We are all immersed in the sea of postmodernism whether we know it or not, and its presuppositions are rooted so deeply in our

thinking that even those who are Christians often reveal postmodern attitudes. *Described*

What is postmodernism, anyway? In the 1970s, Jean-François Lyotard presented "a report on knowledge in the most highly developed societies" to the Council on Universities of the government of Quebec. This report was published as *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.*{20} This book, a standard text in understanding postmodernism, gives a clue as to the nature of this worldview in its very title. Postmodernism isn't really a philosophy, for philosophy traditionally has been a tool used to understand the reality in which we live. Postmodernists believe that can't be done. So postmodernism is more a condition or mood than a philosophy. In short, postmodernism is a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism. But it's also an era, a historical time period which began somewhere between the late 19th and late 20th centuries.{21} In this article we'll concentrate on postmodernism as a mood rather than as a time period. *Historical Background*

By "Enlightenment rationalism" we're referring to the ideal of knowledge which was developed in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe. It formed the intellectual basis of what we call *modernity*. Two issues were important in the Enlightenment: criticism and power (*criticism* referring here to close analysis). The object was, as one writer says, to free people from "myth, superstition and enthralled enchantment to mysterious powers and forces of nature."{22} Truth wasn't found through revelation but through scientific investigation and reason. Knowledge now had to be dispassionate, objective, and certain. Everything now had to conform to the rules of computation and utility; it had to be measurable, and it had to be functional. Reason was in effect reduced to one *kind* of reason, that of mathematics or scientific precision.{23}

Postmodernists believe that when knowledge was reduced to computation, something was lost.

There were several problems with Enlightenment rationalism. First, newfound knowledge gained through science and the resulting development of technology led people to think that man could solve the major difficulties of life without any transcendent help. It was found, however, that reason didn't have the potency it was thought to have. With all our learning and technology, we still didn't have the power we desired over our lives. Natural disasters and major wars such as the two World Wars in this century made people realize that we *aren't* able to fix everything that ailed us simply through reason.

These and other factors such as new mysteries discovered by science served to undermine our ability to really know what is true. In fact, postmodernists veer away from the classical understanding of truth, that is, the correspondence of propositions with external reality. Some very influential postmodernists now espouse pragmatism, the belief that workability is all that can be hoped for. This, I would venture to say, is how many if not most Americans think today.

Another postmodern characteristic regarding truth is this. In keeping with its rejection of the individualistic attitude characteristic of modernism, postmodernism holds that truth isn't found in the workings of the individual mind, but in the group. As one writer noted, "Truth consists in the ground rules that facilitate personal well-being in community and the well-being of the community as a whole."{24} Our thinking like all other aspects of our being is shaped by our community.{25} Politically and sociologically this means, for example, that the individual is expected to conform in his or her thinking to that of the larger group.

Still another problem which resulted from the secularized nature of knowledge and from the loss of confidence in knowing truth in general was the loss of the knowledge of *ultimate* truths. There can be no "totalising metanarratives," that is, no big stories or explanations of the way things are which encompass everything. This can be both liberating and

frightening: liberating in the sense that one needn't feel bound by any system of thought; frightening in the sense that we are in the dark about what is true. This is a bit like eating in a cafeteria where one can choose from a variety of foods without having any confidence in the nourishing value of any of it.

A second problem with Enlightenment rationalism was the separation of fact from value. The mathematical mindset of Enlightenment didn't permit the intrusion of judgments about value; that was something separate. What grounds were left, then, upon which to make judgments? Thus the ethical dilemma of postmodernism: How does one make judgments without having any grounds for judgment?{26} One writer argues that the Holocaust itself was a model of Enlightenment thinking. "In the world of the death camps," says author Thomas Docherty, "everything was rationalized." There was the desire to master nature seen in determining which races and kinds of people should survive and which shouldn't. The process was very orderly and efficient. The tools of technology, also, were used efficiently to advance the Nazi cause.{27} They even used reason as their greatest ally in accomplishing their goals. Thus, the ideals of Enlightenment rationalism could be put to fundamentally evil purposes.

Third, with the secularization of reason in the Enlightenment there developed a growing pessimism about the future. With no transcendent Being to consult, who was to know where history was going? And who was to say whether the direction being taken was truly *progress*? "No longer do we know with any certainty the point towards which history is supposedly progressing," says Docherty. "Humanity has embarked upon a secular movement whose teleology is uncertain."{28}

Postmodernism, then, leaves us without knowledge of ultimate truths, with no basis for value judgement, and with no basis for confidence in the future. In general, then, the postmodern mood is pessimistic. How, then, do we know what we should

believe and do? With no knowledge of why we're here or where we're going to guide us, and no grounds for determining value coming from some transcendent source, people have grown to believe that we must simply choose for ourselves what will be true for us. The *will* is now introduced into knowledge.{29} The questions postmodernists ask are: "What do *I* choose to believe?" and "What do *I* choose to do?"

The postmodern mindset has shown itself in several areas of life. One is a change in understanding language. Language is now thought to be socially constructed; it conveys what the group says it does. Literature, then, is understood as reflecting the biases of a writer and his cultural group: the writer was obviously saying what would benefit himself or his group. It's up to the reader, then to *deconstruct* the text to find the *real* meaning. Since the writer is trying to perpetuate his will on the reader, the reader adopts a suspicious mindset and looks for political demons behind every tree. Since the meaning of a text is determined by the reader, a text can have as many interpretations as readers.

In art, there was a move to the abstract, because it was thought that we couldn't accurately represent the essence of whatever the object is being painted, for instance. Those things which couldn't be represented accurately had to be presented abstractly. Also, since there are no rules anymore in general, there are none which define or delimit good art. The artist discovers what she's doing as she does it.

Architecture was one of the first areas in which postmodernism showed its face. With the demise of a modernism which always looked to the future, and, again, the loss of any rules, architecture moved from a functionalistic, forward-looking style to an eclectic style. Old buildings are restored, since the past can be appreciated, too. Several different styles can be mixed together. As one writer said, "postmodern design is historically and stylistically pluralistic."{30}

Earlier I spoke of the fact that even Christians espouse postmodern beliefs without realizing it. It is so much a part of the thinking of young people today that even some in the church accept without even thinking about it a “true for you but not for me” mindset. A young woman who taught high school Sunday School at an evangelical Baptist church in Dallas told a newspaper reporter that *she* believed what the Bible taught, but that it wasn’t necessarily true for everyone.{31} Perhaps she doesn’t understand the claims of Scripture, but more likely she has fit Christianity into the framework of “my truth, your truth.” *Contrasted with Christian Theism*

Although Christians can learn from postmodernists (especially with respect to the excesses of the Enlightenment), it’s important to see the fundamental differences between postmodernism and Christianity. Most importantly, we *can* know ultimate reality because “it” is a “He” who has revealed Himself and His will. The result is that we *can* know truth even though not the exhaustive truth which the Enlightenment thought possible. We *do* have an idea of where history is going, and we *do* have a basis for moral judgment.{32} *Internal Weaknesses*

Postmodernism cannot long survive. Besides being devoid of anything upon which to build a philosophy of life, it also reveals internal problems. While we might like to take an aesthetic approach to truth—in other words, judge by style rather than by substance—we want others to treat us in keeping with universal canons of truth and morality. Also, it is impossible, we now know, to make a clean break between fact and value. Even the most precise and objective scientists must make value decisions with respect to the very work they do. In other words, one project must be chosen over others, and such choices reflect certain values. Furthermore, postmodernism strips us of all stability beyond what our immediate culture can give us. But since even a cultural group can’t know ultimate truth but can only choose its values based on a

pragmatic viewpoint, there is ultimately no stability in one's cultural group either.

As I've noted, postmodernism is a mood rather than a full-fledged worldview. Something must fill the vacuum created by the demise of modernism. This is what excites some Christian thinkers. For now the door blocking out the supernatural has been thrown open, providing an avenue for Christians to announce the good news that in Christ is found truth, value, and hope for the future, indeed, for all the human race.

Notes

1. Jerry Solomon, "Worldviews," Probe Ministries International, 1996. Available on our Web site at www.probe.org/worldviews/.

2. James W. Sire's *The Universe Next Door* (3rd ed., InterVarsity Press, 1997), has provided an almost indispensable guide in understanding worldviews. The choice of views considered in this program were taken from this text.

3. James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 3.

4. Orr, 6,7.

5. "[I pray] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints."

6. Orr, 4.

7. Ibid., 4.

8. Waring, v-viii.

9. Ibid., x.

10. Ibid., xiii.

11. Ibid., xiii.

12. Sire, 44.

13. Ibid., 46.

14. Quoted in Sire, 48.

15. Thielicke, 25.

16. Ibid., 29.

17. Sire, 76.

18. Bloom, quoted in Sire, 93.

19. Robert C. Solomon, ed., *Existentialism* (New York: The Modern Library, 1974), ix.

20. Published in English by the University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

21. Docherty, 1,2. One theologian of our day sees modernism as having ended on July 15, 1972 when a housing project based upon modernistic principles of functionality was demolished. Still another marks its demise with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Cf. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL; 1994), 27,39. Perhaps this wide time span points to the way philosophies can take years to come to fruition in the public sphere.

22. Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 5.

23. Docherty, 5.

24. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids:

Eerdmans, 1996), 14.

25. For more on this the reader might wish to consult my article “Where Did ‘I’ Go?: The Loss of the Self in Postmodern Times,” available on our Web site at www.probe.org/where-did-i-go-the-loss-of-self-in-postmodern-times/.

26. Docherty, 26.

27. Ibid., 12,13.

28. Ibid., 10.

29. Ibid., 6.

30. Veith, 114.

31. Mary A. Jacobs, “Truths Under Construction,” *Dallas Morning News*, 31 May, 1997.

32. Another major difference is over the matter of human nature and identity. In postmodern thought, the self is lost, whereas Christian theology sees us as distinct individuals with permanent identities (even though we might experience changes in our personalities, vocations, lifestyles, etc.). See my article “Where Did ‘I’ Go?: The Loss of the Self in Postmodern Times” available on our Web site at www.probe.org/where-did-i-go-the-loss-of-self-in-postmodern-times/.

Where Did “I” Go? The Loss of Self in Postmodern Times

One of the problems with postmodern thought is the loss of personal identity. Rick Wade analyzes the situation and offers biblical remedies for our postmodern malaise.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Who are you, anyway? Do you have an identity? What constitutes your identity? Who your parents are? Where you were born? What you do for a living?

Christians will rightly locate their identity ultimately in the God who created us in His image. We are His creation made for His purposes and glory. But are we important as individuals before God? Are we just a small part of the mass of humanity? Or are we unique individual selves with some characteristics shared by all people but also with a set of characteristics unique to ourselves?

According to the mindset overtaking the Western world called *postmodernism*, you arent really a self at all. You have no unique identity that is identifiable from birth to death; theres no real “you” which remains constant throughout all of lifes changes.

In a previous article my colleague, Don Closson, explored the views of human nature held by theists, pantheists, and naturalists. In this article I want to examine the postmodern view of human nature and consider a possible direction for a Christian response.

Postmodernism: The End of Modernism

What is postmodernism? It is generally acknowledged that postmodernism isnt a philosophy as we typically think of

philosophies. It isnt a single, well thought out philosophical system which seeks to define and answer the big questions of life. Postmodernism is more of a report on the mindset of Western culture in the latter half of the twentieth century. Some call it a mood. We might say it is a report on the failures of modernism along with a hodgepodge of suggestions for a new direction of thought and life.

Modernism is the name given to a way of thinking born in the Enlightenment era. It was a very optimistic outlook buoyed up by the successes of the sciences which produced some truly wonderful technology. We could understand ourselves and our world, and working together we could fix what was broken in nature and in human life.

Unfortunately the chickens have come home to roost; weve discovered that our optimism was misguided. We obviously haven't fixed all our problems, and the more we learn, the more we realize how little we know. Reason hasn't lived up to its Enlightenment reputation.

Not only have we not been able to fix everything, the technology we do have has had some bad side effects. For example, the mobility which has resulted from modern transportation has removed us from stable communities which provided standards of conduct, protection, and a sense of continuity between ones home, work, and other activities of life. Add to that the globalization of our lives which brings us into contact with people from many different backgrounds with many different beliefs and ways of life, and we can see why we struggle to maintain some continuity in our own lives. We feel ourselves becoming fractured as we run this way and that; and at each destination we encounter different sets of values and expectations. As theologian Anthony Thiselton says, the resulting "loss of stability, loss of stable identity, and loss of confidence in global norms or goals breed deep uncertainty, insecurity, and anxiety."{1} We no longer take our cues from tradition or from our own inner "gyroscope"—an

internalized set of values which guides our lives. Rather we are "other-directed." We take our cues from other people who are supposedly "in the know" and can tell us what we are supposed to do and be in each different compartment of our lives. We find ourselves "eager to conform, yet always in some doubt as to what exactly it [is] that [we are] to conform to."{2} We are "at home everywhere and nowhere, capable of a superficial intimacy with and response to everyone."{3}

All this produces in us a sense of constantly being in flux. The debate over which was fundamental in our universe—change or stability—occupied the thought of Greek philosophers long before Christ. This debate continues in our day. In fact, one writer noted that "postmodernism can be viewed as a debate about reality."{4} The search in modern times to find what is really real—what is true and stable—has given way. In postmodern times, change is fundamental; flux is normal.

In all of this we seem to lose our sense of identity. In fact, as we will see, avant garde postmodern thinkers say we have no self at all.

Basic Issues: Truth, Language, and Power

I noted earlier that postmodernism is more a report on the failures of modernism than a philosophy itself. One of the key issues which divides the two eras is that of truth. Whereas modernism was quite optimistic about our ability to know truth not only about ourselves and our world but also about how to make life better, postmodernism says we cant really know truth at all. To mention one way our lack of confidence in reason to get at truth shows itself, consider how often disputes are settled with name- calling or a resort to the ever ready "Well, that's your opinion," as if that settles the issue, or even to force. As one scholar noted, "Argument becomes transposed into rhetoric. Rhetoric then comes to rely on force, seduction, or manipulation."{5}

Since we cant really know truth¾if there is truth to be known¾we can't answer questions about ultimate reality. There is no one "story," as it's called, which explains everything. So, for example, the message of the Bible cannot be taken as true because it purports to give final answers for the nature of God, man, and the world. In the jargon of postmodernism, it is a *metanarrative,* a story covering all stories. Any metanarrative is rejected out of hand. We simply cant have that kind of knowledge according to postmodernists.{6}

One of the basic problems in knowing truth is the problem of language. Knowledge is mediated by language, but postmodernists believe that language can't adequately relate truth. Why? Because there is a disjunction between our words and the realities they purport to reflect. Words don't accurately represent objective reality, it is thought; they are just human conventions. But if language is what we use to convey ideas, and words don't accurately reflect objective reality, then we can't know objective reality. What we do with words is not to *reflect* reality, but rather to *create* it. This is called *constructivism*,{7} the power to construct reality with our words.

What this means for human nature in particular is that we cant really make universal statements about human beings. We can't know if there *is* such a thing as human nature. Those who hold to constructivism say that there is no human nature *per se*; we are what we say we are.

There is a second problem with language. Postmodernists are very sensitive to what they call the *will-to-power*. People exercise power and control over others, and language is one tool used for doing so.{8} For instance, we define roles for people, we make claims about God and what He requires of us, and so forth. In doing so, we define expectations and limits. Thus, with our words we control people.

As a result of this idea about language and its power to

control, postmodernists are almost by definition suspicious. What people say and even more so what they write is suspected of being a tool for control over others.

What does this mean for human nature? It means that if we try to define human nature, we are seen as attempting to exercise control over people. As one person said, to make a person a *sub*ject—a topic of study and analysis—is to sub*ject* that person; in other words, to put him in a box and define his limits.

Thus, human nature cant be defined, so for all practical purposes there is no human nature. There is more, though. Not only is there no human nature generally, but there are no individual selves either.

Postmodernism and the Self

Lets look more closely at the postmodern view of the self.

Writer Walter Truett Anderson gives four terms postmodernists use to speak of the self which address the issues of change and multiple identities. The first is *multiphrenia*. This refers to the many different voices in our culture telling us who we are and what we are. As Kenneth Gergen, a professor of psychology, says, "For everything that we 'know to be true' about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision."{9} Our lives are multi-dimensional. The various relationships we have in our lives pull us in different directions. We play "such a variety of roles that the very concept of an 'authentic self' with knowable characteristics recedes from view."{10} And these roles neednt overlap or be congruent in any significant way. As Anderson says, "In the postmodern world, you just dont get to be a single and consistent somebody."{11}

The second term used is *protean*. The protean self is capable of changing constantly to suit the present circumstances. "It

may include changing political opinions and sexual behavior, changing ideas and ways of expressing them, changing ways of organizing ones life."{12} Some see this as the process of finding one's true self. But others see it as a manifestation of the idea that there *is* no true, stable self.{13}

Thirdly, Anderson speaks of the *de-centered* self. This term focuses on the belief that there is no self at all. The self is constantly redefined, constantly undergoing change. As one philosopher taught, "The subject is not the speaker of language but its creation."{14} Thus, there is no enduring "I". We are what we are described to be.

Anderson's fourth term is *self-in-relation*. This concept is often encountered in feminist studies. It simply means that we live our lives not as islands unto ourselves but in relation to people and to certain cultural contexts. To rightly understand ourselves we must understand the contexts of our lives.{15}

If we put these four terms together, we have the image of a person who has no center, but who is drawn in many directions and is constantly changing and being defined externally by the various relations he or she has with others. All these ideas clearly go in a different direction than that taken by modern society. It was formerly believed that our goal should be to achieve wholeness, to find the integrated self, to pull all the seemingly different parts of ourselves together into one cohesive whole. Postmodernism says no; that can't happen because we aren't by nature one cohesive self.

So there is no "I", no inner self to wrestle with all these different roles and determine which I will accept and which I won't and, ultimately, who I really am. How, then, do changes come about? Who decides what I am like or who I am? According to postmodern thought, we are shaped by outside forces. We are *socially constructed*.

The Socially Constructed Life

What does it mean to be socially constructed? It means simply that one's society's values, languages, arts, entertainment, all that we grow up surrounded by, define who we are. We do not have fixed identities which are separable from our surroundings and which remain the same even though certain characteristics and circumstances may change.

It was once believed that what we do externally reflects what we are on the inside. But if there is no "inside," we must rely on that which is outside to define us. We are products of external forces over which we have varying levels of control. The suspicious postmodernist sees us as having little control at all over the forces impinging upon us.

Thus, we are created from the outside in, rather than from the inside out. If in traditional societies one's status was determined by one's role, and in modern societies one's status was determined by achievement, in postmodern times ones status is determined by fashion or style.{16} As styles change, we must change with them or be left with our identity in question. It's one thing to want to fit in with one's peers. It's another altogether to believe that ones true identity is bound up with the fashions of the day. But that's life in the postmodern world.

Being bound up with the fashions of the day, however, means that there is no eternal context for our lives. We are "historically situated."{17} That means that our lives can only be understood in the context of the present historical moment. All that matters is now. What I was yesterday is irrelevant; what I will be tomorrow is open.

Let's sum up our discussion to this point. In postmodern times there is no confidence in our ability to know truth. There is no metanarrative which serves to define and give a context to everything. Change is fundamental, and changes come often and

do not always form a coherent pattern. There is no real human nature, nor are there real selves; there is no real "me" that is identifiable throughout my life. Whatever I am, I am because I have been "created", so to speak, by outside forces. One of the most potent forces is language with its ability to define and control. My life is like a story or text which is being written and rewritten constantly. How I am defined is what I am. What I am today is means nothing for tomorrow. To empower myself, I must take charge of defining myself, of writing my own story my way, not letting others write it for me.

But for many postmodernists this isn't really an individual exercise at all. I am a part of a group, and I'm expected to remain a part of my group and be defined in keeping with my group. Furthermore, no one outside the group is permitted to participate in the defining process. So, for example, men have nothing to say to women about how they are to act or what roles they are to fill.

Results

The bottom line in all this is what you already know. Life in the postmodern world is one of instability. To quote Thiselton again, the losses of stability and identity and confidence "breed deep uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety. . . . [T]he postmodern self lives daily with fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust" of all claims to ultimate truth or universal moral standards. This results in defensiveness and "an increasing preoccupation with self-protection, self-interest, and desire for power and the recovery of control. *The postmodern self is thus predisposed to assume a stance of readiness for conflict.*"{18} Our fragmentation, our lack of an internal "gyroscope" to give direction and balance, the pressures of external forces to conform, the lack of continuity in our lives, together work to strip us of a sense of who we are, or that we are a single somebody at all.

Some people might despair over this. But many believe we should embrace this rather than fight it. If we aren't happy with our own individual "story", we should rewrite it. We need to simply accept our inner multiplicity and devise a story that accounts for it. "If meaning is constructed in language," says one writer, we must learn to tell "better, richer, more spacious stories" about our lives.{19}

But if the forces surrounding us are so strong, how shall we stand against them? If we find ourselves resisting others who try to define us or set standards for us, indicating that we believe they're strong enough to have an influence over us, how are we ever going to be able to avoid being a pawn for those who are more powerful? How can we avoid get sucked up into "group- think", where we're always expected to toe the party line? What happens to our own individuality? Is there no place for our individual unique sets of gifts and abilities, needs and desires, loves and concerns?

Consider also the potential for loss for the individual in favor of the group. What if the group's standards or goals diminish the individuals in the group? Prof. Ed Veith has spoken of the similarities between this mentality and that of Fascism with its suppression of the individual in favor of the group. With or without realizing it, postmodernists aren't establishing a basis for empowering the oppressed, but are "resurrecting ways of thinking that gave us world war and the Holocaust."{20} Veith quotes writer David Hirsch who said, "Purveyors of postmodern ideologies must consider whether it is possible to diminish human beings in theory, without, at the same time, making individual human lives worthless in the real world."{21}

A Christian Response

Is there an answer in Christ for the fragmented, suspicious, "non-selves" of the postmodern world?

In this writer's opinion, it is simple common sense that we are individual selves with an identity which we carry throughout our years despite the various changes we experience. "I" can be held accountable for the things "I" did five years ago. The individual brought to the witness stand is believed to be the same "self" who witnessed the particular events in the past. The worker is promised a pension when she retires with the understanding that the retiree will be the same self as the one who worked for many years.{22} Furthermore, we know that we have a set of abilities, great or small, that are our own and that we can use for good or for ill. We naturally resent being molded in the image of other people and prevented from expressing our own true nature.

Does Christ have anything to say to the postmodern individual who cant shake the common sense view that he is the same person today that he was yesterday? Or to the person who wants to affirm or regain her own identity and chart a course for life that she as an individual can experience and learn from and within which to develop as an individual self?

Indeed He does. The call of God in Christ is to individuals within the larger story of God's work in this world.{23} For one thing, having been created by Him we see ourselves as ones who can be addressed as Jeremiah was with the news that God knew him before he was born. It was the same Jeremiah being formed in his mothers womb to whom God spoke as an adult (Jer. 1:5). Furthermore, in Christ we recognize ourselves as responsible individuals who must give an account for our actions without pointing the finger of blame at "society" (Rev. 20:12).

In Christ we can acknowledge that we are shaped to a great extent by our surroundings, and that we are historically situated to an extent. But we aren't trapped. Redemption "promises deliverance from all the cause-effect chains of forces which hold the self to its past."{24}

There is more. In Christ the suspicion which marks postmodern man who is ever on guard against being redefined and controlled by others dissolves into a love which gives itself to the interests of God and other men.{25} The will-to-power of postmodern man which is self-defeating gives way to the will-to-love which reaches out to build up rather than to control.{26} We can indeed find common ground with people of other groups. "The cross of Christ in principle shatters the boundaries and conflicts between Jew and Gentile, female and male, free person and slave" (Gal. 3:28).{27} Recognizing our relative historical situatedness should help us to understand the importance of the local church as the social context within which barriers are destroyed.{28} In Christ, then, we have love rather than conflict, service rather than power, trust rather than suspicion.{29}

In Christ we recognize that sometimes life seems chaotic, that there are places of darkness in which we feel overwhelmed by outside forces that dont behave the way we think they should. Consider the experiences of Job and of the writer of Ecclesiastes. But we are called to "set our minds on things above" (Col. 3:2), to put our confidence in "the fear of the Lord" (Prov. 9:10; Job. 28:28; Eccl. 12:13) rather than give in to despair or try to find a solution in simply rewriting our story with our own set of preferred "realities."{30}

Thiselton emphasizes the importance of the resurrection for postmodern man. "The resurrection holds out the promise of hope from beyond the boundaries of the historical situatedness of the postmodern self in its predicament of constraint.".{31} In addition, "Promise beckons 'from ahead' to invite the postmodern self to discover a reconstituted identity." It "constitutes 'a sure and steadfast anchor' (Heb. 6:19) which *re-centres* the self. It bestows on the self an *identity of worth* and provides *purposive meaning* for the present." The work of Christ promises a restoration of the individual self which will "once again [come] to bear fully the image of God

in Christ (Heb. 1:3; Gen. 1:26) as a self defined by giving and receiving, by loving and being loved unconditionally."{32} As Steven Sandage writes, "The core absolute in life is not change but faith in our unchanging God, the 'anchor of the soul' that reminds us we are strangers longing for a better country " (Heb. 6:19; 11:1-16).{33}

The message of hope is the one postmodern men and women need to hear. That message, delivered two millennia ago, still speaks today. "The word of our God stands forever" (Isa. 40:8). Some things never change.

Notes

1. Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 130.

2. Walter Truett Anderson, *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1997), 26.

3. David Reisman, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 26; quoted in Anderson, 26.

4. Steven J. Sandage, "Power, Knowledge, and the Hermeneutics of Selfhood: Postmodern Wisdom for Christian Therapists," *Mars Hill Review 12* (Fall 1998): 66.

5. Thiselton, 13.

6. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 49. Note Lyotard's brief definition: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives." Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans., Geoff Bennington and

Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv).

7.Ibid., 47-51.

8. For a Christian's recognition of this in his own life, cf. Sandage, 68-69.

9. Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 228. Quoted in Anderson, 38.

10. Gergen quoted in Anderson, 38.

11. Anderson, 38.

12. Ibid., 41.

13. Ibid., 42.

14. Ibid., 42-43.

15. Ibid., 51-56.

16. Veith, 85.

17. Thiselton, 42, 148-150.

18. Ibid., 130-31.

19. Anderson, 56.

20. Veith, 80.

21. David H. Hirsch, *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism After Auschwitz* (Hanover, NH: Brown University Press, 1991), 165; quoted in Veith, 80.

22. Thiselton, 74.

23. I am greatly indebted to Thiselton for this portion of the discussion. See chaps. 23 and 24.

24. Thiselton, 155.

25. Ibid., 160.

26. Ibid., 161.

27. Ibid., 43.

28. Cf. Sandage, 72.

29. Thiselton, 43.

30. Sandage, 71-72.

31. Thiselton, 43.

32. Ibid., 163.

33. Sandage, 73.

The Need to Read Francis Schaeffer

Todd Kappelman provides us with a compelling introduction to the thought and writings of Francis Schaeffer, one of the great Christian thinkers of the 20th century. As a Christian scholar and a visionary worldview thinker, Schaeffer applied Scriptural truth to the issues people are dealing with in the modern world. He demonstrated that Christ's truth is universal both across time and cultures.

The *Need to Read* series began several months ago with a program on C.S. Lewis . The rationale for this series is that

many of the great writers who have helped many Christians mature are now either unknown or neglected by many who could use these authors insights into the faith.

This installment focuses on Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984), one of the most recognized and respected Christian authors of the twentieth century. He saw so much more in what he was looking at and agonized over it much more that the rest of us. He was one of the truly great Christians of our time.{1} If this is the case, and I and many others believe that it is, then this question follows: What was Schaeffer looking at? The remarkable answer to this question is all of human history and the long chain of events which have led to modern man as we see him today.

In a time when true scholarship is often equated with specialization in a particular period, people, or subject, Schaeffer was a grand generalist. He was a true Renaissance man who knew something about everything, as opposed to everything about something. In addition to his remarkable and encyclopedic knowledge of human history, he was able to connect important events together such that Christians can see what has happened in human history, what is happening now, and what will happen if man continues on his present course. Schaeffer was a visionary who had an uncanny understanding of the times we live in and what mankind can expect in the near future.

Schaeffers greatest gift, like that of C.S. Lewis, was his concern for the average Christian. He believed philosophy, theology, and ethics should not be reserved for the conversation of learned academics; rather they should be the daily concern of the man on the street. The price for ignorance of the subjects could be our life, or more importantly, our very souls. The Scriptures are very clear concerning the price of ignorance. The prophet Hosea said that Gods people perish for lack of knowledge.{2} In light of this observation, Schaeffers genius was his ability to communicate

extremely difficult philosophical and theological issues on a non- technical level. His writings provide Christians with access to some of the most pressing concerns of our times.

Several aspects of Schaeffers style and sweeping concerns will be discussed in this essay. First, he perceived the wholeness of the created order. There is a basic need in all human beings to know the answers to the great questions of life, and Schaeffer believed that God has given man the answers in the form of natural and specific revelation.

Second, Schaeffer believed that man has a natural inclination to desire the reasonable. Schaeffer argued that the Christian faith is not only true, but that it is the most plausible account for the existence of man and his place in the universe. He contended that an irrational faith is not what God intended to communicate to man.

Third, Schaeffer was one of the original cultural critics of the twentieth century. He believed that mankind, both Christians and non-Christians, was adrift on a sea of irrationality. He further believed that this drift was intensifying to the point that true, orthodox Christianity was being lost.

Schaeffer and *The God Who Is There*

Francis Schaeffer developed some important themes in three of his books: *The God Who Is There, Escape from Reason,* and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent.*

Lets consider *The God Who Is There* first. The major thesis in this book is that modern man has abandoned the idea of truth, and that has had widespread consequences in every area of life.

In his argumentation, Schaeffer summarizes the last half of the twentieth century, tracing the development of the intellectual climate in Western society. Previous generations

had grown up with a basic operational belief that the law of non-contradiction was true. What Schaeffer would have us understand about the law of non- contradiction is this: a statement cannot be both true and false in the same way at the same time. For example, you are either reading this essay or you are not. You cannot be both reading this and not reading it at the same time. Either you are or you are not—choose one.

When we hear something like this, our first reaction is of course we believe in this law of non-contradiction. We believe in it and live by it, even if we did not know what it was called until just a few moments ago. But Schaeffer points out that there has been a gradual decline of belief in this basic principle beginning with philosophy in the late eighteenth century. This first step in the movement away from reason is followed by second and third steps in the areas of art and music. These are, in turn, followed by the fourth steps of general culture and theology. There is much debate about which step came first and who followed whom. The important thing to realize is that after the seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment in Europe, and certainly before the height of the Industrial age, men in the highest positions of academic and artistic life began to think very differently.

In the first half of this century, Western man began to think in terms of mutually exclusive truths. In other words, we began to believe that two people could believe mutually exclusive truths simultaneously and both of them could be correct. This would be like two people seeing an object and one claiming that it existed and the other claiming that it did not exist. The two men shake hands and say that they are both right in their conclusions. Objective reality is completely undermined and nothing is true. The result of this thinking is that man begins to despair of his condition.{3} He doesnt know what is ultimately true.

Schaeffers ambition was to help Christians be salt and light in our world. And to do that, we have to understand how people

think. Schaeffer also cautions Christians against capitulation to irrationality themselves.{4} In the spirit of cooperation, many Christians are choosing to remain silent when they hear people say that all religions are the same, or that Christianity may be true for one person, but not true for another. Christians cannot afford to remain silent in a world that is embracing irrationality. The unity of orthodox Christianity should be centered and grounded on truth. This is not always easy, but it is absolutely necessary.

Escape from Reason

In *The God Who Is There,* Schaeffers main thesis is that modern man is characterized by his willingness to live a life of contradictions. In the book *Escape from Reason,* he shows how we arrived at this position, and what can be done about it.

Francis Schaeffer believed that one of the great watershed periods of human history occurred in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Reformation was a fifteenth and sixteenth century movement, but it was religious in nature and ultimately resulted in the formation of the Protestant churches. The Renaissance, argues Schaeffer, largely emphasized human reason and the achievements of man. In sharp contrast, the Reformation emphasized the will of God and the authority of the Holy Scriptures. It must be remembered that Schaeffer is generalizing in much of what is said here and that both movements had good and bad aspects.

Schaeffer maintains that men in the Renaissance believed they were great because of the wonderful art, literature, and architecture they produced. The Reformation man believed he was great because of the God who had made him. Man was made to have a relationship with his creator, but the Renaissance man found himself more and more concerned with the things of this world.{5}

As the emphasis on man increased, the importance of God

decreased. This movement was further facilitated by discoveries in the sciences which allowed man to understand the universe on purely naturalistic principles. The result of mans success in explaining some aspects of the universe through reason alone was that he began to try to explain every aspect of the universe through reason alone.

Men found that they were able to explain much through reason, but the larger philosophical questions proved to be too great. In addition, they discovered that there were many questions that could not be answered by reason alone. Some of these questions were: How did everything begin? Why is there something rather than nothing? What happens to us after we die? These questions are traditionally answered by theology, and the answers usually included an appeal to a divine being called God.

Modern man, thus, was faced with two possibilities. Either he could return to the answers found in the Scriptures, or he could live as though life had meaning even though he did not believe that it really did.{6} Schaeffer argued that men in the Western philosophical tradition largely opted for irrational existence, escaping the requirements of reason, hence the title *Escape from Reason.* Schaeffers conclusion to this problem is that Christians must return to a serious belief in the Scriptures and their ability to answer the big philosophical problems, and that we must live our faith consistently in front of the world.{7} In addition, Schaeffer believed that the days are gone when the average man on the street would respond to the Gospel. The language has changed, and we must learn to speak in this new language.{8} We must educate ourselves and be ready to give an account of how modern man got into his present state of affairs.

He Is There and He Is Not Silent

In the analysis of the previous two books, we have seen that Schaeffer explains the development of modern history and how

mankind has largely embraced non-reason in the area of morals. In *He Is There and He Is Not Silent,* Schaeffer outlines a solution for the predicament that faces modern man. He argues that there are three areas in which modern mankind has an absolute necessity for God: metaphysics, morals, and epistemology.{9} These are three areas of philosophy which have to do with, respectively, the problem of existence, the problem of mans moral behavior, and how man can come to a true knowledge of anything at all.

Prior to the seventeenth century, philosophy and theology recognized that they were dealing with the same basic questions. The only difference between the two disciplines was that the former appealed largely to reason and natural revelation, while the latter appealed mostly to reason and special revelation. In the middle ages, philosophy was said to be the handmaiden to theology. Theology was understood to be the queen of the sciences. When philosophy took the lead, it soon became apparent that it was not up to the task of answering the big questions. The reality of God known through His revelation, however, does provide the answers for such questions.

Lets consider the areas of metaphysics, moral, and epistemology. The metaphysical need for the existence of God implies that there must be something or someone who is big enough, powerful enough, wise enough, and willing enough to create and maintain the universe we live in. If these requirements are not met, then man is forced to admit that he is here by chance occurrence and has no special destiny.{10}

The moral necessity of Gods existence centers on man as a personal being and a being who distinguishes between right and wrong. There are only two options. Either man was created from an impersonal beginning and his moral system is a product of his culture, or man had a personal beginning and was given laws to follow and an internal sense of right and wrong.{11} The moral necessity of God is founded on the philosophical

need to account for why man is both cruel and wonderful at the same time. This can only be explained in terms of the biblical account of the Fall.

The epistemological necessity of Gods existence addresses our ability to know what is ultimately real. Much of the modern problem in the area of knowledge began in the seventeenth century. As the scientific revolution developed, the criteria for truth became that which could be demonstrated in a laboratory. The result was that belief in God and the miraculous, which cannot be demonstrated in a laboratory, came into doubt and were eventually dismissed by many. The final result was pessimism regarding theological truths and, more recently, any truth at all. We have all encountered the individual who asks, How do you know that? And often this question is repeated for every subsequent answer.

The only answer to these three dilemmas is an appeal to the God who is there, and to His natural and special revelation. The basis of Christianity is the belief that God is there and that man can communicate with Him. If this is not true, then we are without a foundation.

Francis Schaeffer and "The Man Without a Bible"

The purpose of this discussion of the works of Francis Schaeffer is that we hope Christians will once again turn to this great apologist for the Christian faith and learn from him. In closing, we will address one of his lesser known works titled *Death In The City.* In chapter seven, The Man Without a Bible, Schaeffer offers some advice for Christians living in a post-Christian world. He argues very convincingly that the church in America has largely turned away from God and the knowledge of the things of God. This occurred in just a few short decades, from the 1920s to the 1960s.{12}

We must always bear in mind that many people do not believe

that the Bible is inspired or authoritative. For these people the Bible is just another book. The dismantling of biblical authority has been very efficient in the last 150 years. Very few of our major secular universities treat the Bible as authoritative anymore. Yet many of these universities were founded at a time when no one would have doubted the importance of the Holy Scriptures. The majority of men at the end of this century hold vastly different views about the Bible than did their ancestors at the close of the previous century. So, how do we share the Christian message with the man without the Bible?

Schaeffer cites three instances where Paul spoke to non-Christians and did not appeal to the Scriptures. These are found in Acts 14:15-17; 17:16-32, and Romans 1:18-2:16. The reason that Paul did not use the Scriptures on these three occasions is that the people he was addressing did not recognize the claims that the Holy Scriptures made on their lives. In approaching these individuals, Paul appealed to the moral knowledge that men possess as a feature of their created being. Schaeffer refers to this as the manishness of man.

In Romans 1:18 we have the description of Gods wrath being poured out on man. Schaeffer believes that this is an ideal place to approach modern man. We may tell the modern non-believer that he knows that God exists and that he has suppressed this knowledge. (The knowledge of God must be understood here as natural revelation, and not the gospel.) Paul means that each and every man, regardless of what he says, knows that God exists. This knowledge of God that the non-believer possesses is supplemented by the moral argument for Gods existence. The fact that men hold beliefs about right and wrong betrays the fact that they know that God necessarily exists. Men willingly suppress this knowledge of God and this brings His wrath.

The man without the Bible has suppressed the natural revelation of God, not the special revelation found in the

Scriptures. The man without the Bible has not followed his initial knowledge of God to the proper conclusions and therefore remains lost. The many men without the Bible present both an opportunity and a challenge for the Christian. The opportunity is that this man is lost and Christians can share their faith with him. The challenge is in showing these lost people how the world around them and the human nature within them point toward the existence of God.

Francis Schaeffer was wonderful at discussing Christian truths with non-believers without appealing to the Scriptures. It is our loss if we do not familiarize ourselves with, and use, the works of one of this countrys greatest Christian thinkers.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, forward to *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy,* by Francis Schaeffer (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), xiv.

2. Hosea 4:6.

3. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 109-114.

4. Ibid., 196.

5. Ibid., 217-224.

6. Ibid., 225-236.

7. Ibid., 261-270.

8. Ibid., 207-208.

9. Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 277.

10. Ibid., 275-290.

11. Ibid., 291-302.

12. Ibid., 211.