

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 foretold [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.

©2000 Probe Ministries.

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/.

© 2000 Probe Ministries International

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 aren't really a self at all. You have no unique identity that is identifiable from birth to death; there's no real “you” which remains constant throughout all of life's 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 isn't a philosophy as we typically think of

philosophies. It isn't 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; we've 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 one's 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 can't 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 can't really know truth³/₄ if there is truth to be known³/₄ we 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 can't 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 can't 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 *subject*—a topic of study and analysis—is to *subject* that person; in other words, to put him in a box and define his limits.

Thus, human nature can't 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 needn't overlap or be congruent in any significant way. As Anderson says, "In the postmodern world, you just don't 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 one's 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 one's 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 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 can't 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 mother's 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 don't 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.

© 1999 Probe Ministries International

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 than 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.

Schaeffer's 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 God's people perish for lack of knowledge.[\[2\]](#) In light of this observation, Schaeffer's 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 doesn't know what is ultimately true.

Schaeffer's 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*, Schaeffer's 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 God's 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.

©1999 Probe Ministries.

What Do I Say Now?

“True for You, But Not For Me”

Since the church began, objections have been raised to the faith. They have varied according to the beliefs and mindset of the day. To be effective in taking a stand for the truth, Christians have had to know the current questions and objections. Maybe youve heard some of the more common objections today such as “Jesus never claimed to be God,” or, “What gives *you* the right to say other peoples morals are wrong?” Or how about, “That might be true for you, but its not true for me.” Sometimes these objections are well thought out, but often they sound more like slogans, catch-phrases the non-believer has heard but to which he or she probably hasnt given much thought.

If objections such as these have brought an abrupt end to any of your conversations because you werent sure how to respond, a book published last year might be just what you need. The title is *“True For You, But Not For Me”: Deflating the Slogans That Leave Christians Speechless*, and it was written by Paul Copan, an associate with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries. Copans goal in this book is to provide responses for Christians who find themselves stumped by the objections of critics. To that end he deals with objections in such areas as knowledge of truth, morality, the uniqueness of Christ, and

the hope of those who have never heard the Gospel.

In this article, I'll pull out a few of these objections and give brief answers, some from Copan, and some of my own.

Before doing that, however, I need to make an important point. If non-believers are doing nothing more than sloganeering by hurling objections that they really don't understand, rattling off memorized answers that we don't understand, Christians can be guilty of the same behavior of our opponents. Even though the objections might sound recorded, our answers needn't. Thus, I strongly suggest that you get a copy of Copan's book or obtain some other books on apologetics which will fill in the gaps left by our discussion.

Relativism

Let's begin with a brief look at the issue of relativism and what it means for discussions about Christianity.

Relativism shows itself primarily in matters of truth and morality. When we say that truth is relative, we mean that it differs according to the times, or to particular circumstances, or to differing tastes and interests. It is the denial that objective truth exists; that is, truth that applies to all people and for all time. Now, most people will probably agree that there is truth in matters of scientific fact, but with respect to religion and morality, each person is said to have his or her own truth. Such things are matters of opinion at best, and are true only relative to particular individuals.

The implications of this are enormous. Evangelism, or the effort to persuade people to believe that the Gospel is true, is prohibited.^{1} The claim to have *the* truth about a person's relationship with God is considered arrogant or elitist. Tolerance becomes the "cardinal virtue."^{2} The rule seems to be this: Follow your own heart, and don't interfere with anyone

following his or hers.

These are problems which relativism produces in dealing with others. But what about our own Christianity? If truth isn't fixed, maybe I should just drop all this Christian business when it becomes inconvenient.

Relativism with Respect to Knowledge

Let's consider the objection represented in the title of Copan's book: that is, "Well, that may be true for *you*, but it's not for *me*." Here the non-believer is essentially saying that it's okay for you to adopt Christianity if you choose— that it can be *your* truth. But as far as he's concerned, he has not chosen to believe it— for whatever reasons— so it isn't true for him.

This objection would make better sense if the critic said, "Christianity is *meaningful* for you, but it isn't for me." Or, "Christianity might *work* for you, but it doesn't for me." These are reasonable objections and invite serious discussion about the meaning of Christ for every individual and how Christianity "works" in our lives. But the objection voiced is that Christianity is *true* for some people, but not for others. How can that be? Truth is that which is real or statements about what is really the case. "True for you, but not for me" can only be a valid idea if truth is relative to persons, times, circumstances, or places.

The Christian should question the person about this. Does he believe that truth is relative? If so, then he's actually undercutting his own claims. You see, the statement, "It may be true for you, but it's not for me," becomes relative as well. No statement the person makes can be considered a fixed truth that everyone— even the relativist— should believe. So, our first response might be to point out that, based upon his own relativistic views, anything *he* says is relative; its truth-status might change tomorrow. So there's no reason for anyone to take it seriously. [\[3\]](#)

On a deeper level we can point out that if there's no objective, fixed truth, all meaningful conversation will grind to a halt. If nothing a person says can be taken as true or false in the normal sense, the listener won't know if the speaker really means what he says. What would be the value, for example, of reading the cautions on a bottle of pills if the meaning and truth of the words aren't set? Trying to communicate ideas when truth and meaning fluctuate like the stock market is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. There's no way to get hold of any idea with which to agree or disagree.

The non-believer might object that not all matters are relative, only matters of religion and morality. However, the burden is on the *relativist* to prove that matters of religion and morality *are* relative, for it isn't obvious that this is so. Why should these matters be treated differently with respect to truth than others? The fact that one can't debate morality on the basis of evidences as one would, say, a scientific issue doesn't mean that the truth about it can't be known. More important, however, is the fact that Christianity in particular is tied very tightly to historical events which *are* matters of fact.

Christianity can't be true for one person but not for another. Either it is true— and all should believe— or it isn't— and it should be discarded.

Moral Relativism

Let's turn our attention to objections regarding morality. One objection we hear is similar to one we've already discussed about truth. Non-believers will say, "Your values might be right for you, but they aren't for me."[\[4\]](#)

First, we need to understand the historic Christian view of morality. According to Scripture, morals are grounded in God. As God is unchanging, so also is His morality. As Paul Copan

notes, such morals are discovered, not invented.[{5}](#) They are objective; they do not come from within you or me, but are true completely apart from us.

Having abandoned God as the standard for morality and replaced Him with ourselves, some say there is no objective morality. When told that a certain individual believed that morality is a sham, Samuel Johnson responded, "Why sir, if he really believes there is no distinction between virtue and vice, let us count our spoons before he leaves."[{6}](#) Johnsons quip doesnt prove that morals are objective, but it indicates how well have to live if they arent. If matters of morality are relative, how can we trust anything another person says about moral issues? For example, if a person says that you can trust him to hold your money for you because he is honest, how do you know whether what he means by "honest" is what *you* mean by it? And how can you be sure he wont decide once he has your money that honesty isnt such a good policy after all? Such a situation would be "existentially (or practically) unworkable."[{7}](#)

Paul Copan argues that we know intuitively that some things are wrong for everyone. Ask the non-believer if torture, slave labor, and rape are okay for some people. Ask him if there is a moral distinction between the labors of the late Mother Teresa and Adolph Hitler. Or press him even further and ask how he would respond if he were arrested and beaten for no reason, or if someone pounded his car with a sledgehammer.[{8}](#) Would he feel better knowing that the perpetrators found personal fulfillment in such activities? Or would he cry "Unfair!"?

Some non-believers are willing to concede that within a given society there must be moral standards in order for people to live together in peace. However, theyll say, differences between *cultures* are legitimate. Thus, theyll complain, "Who are *you* to say another cultures values are wrong?"[{9}](#) One culture has no right to force its morality on another.

But is it true that moral standards are culturally relative? Or perhaps the better question should be, Is it really likely that the non-believer believes this himself? You might recall the Womens Conference in Beijing several years ago. Representatives from all over the world gathered to plan strategies for gaining rights for women who were being oppressed. Could a cultural relativist support such a conference? Its hard to see how. Cultural relativism leaves a society with its hands tied in the face of atrocities committed by people of other cultures. But as we have noted before, we know intuitively that some things are wrong, not just for me or my culture but for all peoples and all cultures. To take a firm stand against the immoral acts of individuals or cultures one needs the foundation of moral absolutes.

Religious Pluralism

Christians today, especially on college campuses, are free to believe as they please and practice their Christianity as they wish . . . as long as they arent foolish enough to actually say out loud that they believe that Jesus is the only way to God. Nothing brings on the wrath of non-believers and invites insults and name- calling like claims for the exclusivity of Christ.

Religious pluralism is in vogue today. Many people believe either that religions are truly different but equally valid since no one really knows the truth about ultimate realities. Others believe that the adherents of at least all the major religions are really worshipping the same "Higher Being;" they just call him (or it) by different names. Religions are superficially different, they believe, but essentially the same.

Lets look at a couple of objections stemming from a pluralistic mindset.

One objection is that “Christianity is arrogant and imperialistic”[{10}](#) for presenting itself as the only way. Of course, Christians can act in an arrogant and imperialistic manner, and in such cases they deserve to be called down. But this objection often arises simply as a response to the claim of exclusivity regardless of the Christians manner. The only way this claim could be arrogant, however, is if there are indeed competing religions or philosophies which are equally valid. So, to make a valid point, the critic needs to prove that Christianity isnt what it claims to be.

As Copan notes, it can just as easily be the *critic* who is arrogant. Pluralists who reinterpret religious beliefs to suit their pluralism are in effect telling Christians, Muslims, Hindus, etc., what it is they *really* believe. Like the king of Benares who knows that the blind men are really touching an elephant when they *think* they are touching a wall or a rope or something else, the pluralist believes he or she knows what all the adherents of the major world religions dont. The pluralist must have a view of truth that others dont. *That* is arrogance.[{11}](#)

Youve probably heard this objection to the exclusive claims of Christ: “If you grew up in India, youd be a Hindu.”[{12}](#) The assertion is that we only believe what we do because thats the way we were brought up. This argument commits what is called the genetic fallacy. It tries to explain away a belief or idea based upon its source. But as Copan says, “What if we tell a Marxist or a conservative Republican that if he had been raised in Nazi Germany, he would have belonged to the Hitler Youth? He will probably agree but ask what your point is.”[{13}](#) The same argument, in fact, could be turned back on the pluralist to explain *his* belief in pluralism! Copan quotes Alvin Plantinga who says, “Pluralism isnt and hasnt been widely popular in the world at large; if the pluralist had been born in Madagascar, or medieval France, he probably wouldnt have been a pluralist. Does it follow that he shouldnt

be a pluralist. . . ?”[{14}](#) The pluralist, in today's relativistic climate, is just as apt to be going along with the beliefs of *his* culture. So why should we believe *him*?

The Uniqueness of Christ

The idea that Jesus is the only way to God has always been a stumbling block for non-Christians. Let's consider two specific objections stemming from this claim.

Even people who have made no commitment to Christ as Lord hold Him in very high regard. Jesus is usually at or near the top of lists of the greatest people who ever lived. But as odd as it seems, people find a way to categorize Jesus so that they can regard Him as one of the greatest humans ever to have lived while rejecting His central teachings! Thus, one way to deflect the Christian message isn't so much an outright rejection of the faith as it is a reduction of it. Thus, a slogan often heard is “Jesus is just like any other great religious leader.”[{15}](#)

One has to wonder, however, how a man can be considered only a great religious teacher (or to have a high level of “God-consciousness”, as some say) who made the kinds of claims Jesus did, or who did the works that He did. Consider the claims He made for Himself: that He could forgive sins, that He would judge the world, that He and the Father are one. None of the other great religious teachers made such claims. Furthermore, none of the others rose from the dead to give credence to what He taught.

A favorite objection to arguments for the deity of Christ is that Jesus never said, “I am God”.[{16}](#) But does the fact that there is no record of Him saying those exact words mean that He didn't see Himself as such?

What reasons do we have for believing Jesus was divine? Here are a few.[{17}](#) He claimed to have a unique relationship to the

Father (John 20:17). He accepted the title "The Christ, the Son of the Blessed One" (Mark 14:61-62). He identified Himself with the Son of Man in Daniels prophecies who was understood to be the Messiah, the special one sent from God (Matt. 26:64, Dan. 7:13). He spoke on His own authority as though Gods commands were His own (Mark 1:27). He claimed to forgive sins which is something only God can do (Mark 2:1-12). He called for devotion to *Himself*, not just to God (Matt. 10:34-39). He identified Himself with the "I Am" of the Old Testament (John 8:57-59). As Copan notes, "Jesus didnt need to explicitly assert his divinity because his words and deeds and self-understanding assumed his divine status."[\[18\]](#)

If this is so, why didnt Jesus plainly say, "I am God"? There are several possible reasons. First, He came to minister to the Jews first. Being so strongly monotheistic, they would have killed Jesus the first time He referred to Himself as God. Second, "God" is a term mostly reserved for the Father. It serves to highlight His authority even over the second Person of the Trinity. Third, Jesus humanity was just as important as His deity. To refer to Himself as God would have caused His deity to overshadow His humanity. Remember that the Incarnation was a new and strange thing. It was something that most people had to be eased into. Conclusion

Although Christians cant be expected to have satisfactory answers to all the possible objections people can throw our way, with a little study we can learn some sound responses to some of the clichéd objections of our day. Phrases little understood and tossed out in a knee-jerk fashion can still have a profound influence upon us. We need to recognize them and defuse them.

If you still think youd like more ammunition, get a copy of Paul Copans book. Youll be glad you did.

Notes

Paul Copan, *“True For You, But Not For Me”*: Deflating the Slogans That Leave Christians Speechless (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998), 21.

1. Ibid., 21.

2. Ibid., 24.

3. Ibid., 44.

4. Ibid., 46.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 47.

8. Ibid., 48.

9. Ibid., 78.

10. Ibid., 80.

11. Ibid., 82.

12. Ibid., 83.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 107-09.

15. Ibid., 115.

16. Ibid., 115-118.

17. Ibid., 119.

Campus Christianity

Spiritual Wastelands 101

In the fall of my junior year in college, I had been a Christian for only a year. Since I had been involved in a Christian group on campus, however, I felt I had learned a great deal about my faith. As a science major I had completed most of my requirements for my degree, and I was looking forward to taking electives in my major of animal ecology. However, I still had a couple of hours in humanities to fulfill, not my most favorite subject. While I was looking for a humanities elective, I came across an English course entitled "Spiritual Wastelands." I remember thinking to myself, "That looks interesting. I wonder what spiritual wastelands this course is about?" With my newfound interest in spiritual things, I decided to enroll.

On the first day of class, I was horrified the minute the instructor walked into the room. He wore an old Army fatigue jacket, a blue work shirt open to the middle of his hairy chest, ratty blue jeans, sandals, long tangled hair, and a beard. He punctuated his appearance with a leather necklace containing what looked like sharks' teeth. To make it worse, he proceeded to go around the room and ask every student why he or she took this course. I don't really remember what the other students said but when he got around to me, I sheepishly replied that I was a Christian and that I was interested in knowing what kind of spiritual wastelands he was going to talk about. Immediately, with a look of malevolent glee, he exploded: "You're a *Christian*? I want to *hear* from you!"

Needless to say, if there had been a place to hide, I would

have found it. As you may guess, the only spiritual wasteland he wanted to talk about was Christianity. I was like a babe who had been thrown to the wolves. Our class discussions, more often than not, were two-sided: the instructor versus me. Hardly anyone else ever spoke up. To say that I found myself floundering like a fish out of water would be an understatement. Occasionally my questions and comments would hit the mark. But I am convinced, as I look back, that even that degree of success was purely the grace of God.

Since that time, I have spent twelve more years in the university environment as both an undergraduate and graduate student. I have learned a great deal about how a Christian student should relate to the academic community, and I would like to share with you four principles for effective Christian witnessing in that setting. I think you will also find that these principles will prove to be an effective guide in any sphere of life.

Approach your studies from a Christian worldview. We need to think Christianly. The only way to accomplish this is to be continually involved in the process of knowing God.

Realize that the job of the student is to learn—not to preach. A teachable spirit is highly valued. This may seem obvious to you, but believe me, it isn't obvious to everyone.

Pursue excellence. Every exam, every paper, every assignment must be pursued to the best of our ability, as unto the Lord.

Be faithful to the task—leave the results (grades) to God. Do not get hung up on the world's definition of success.

Think Christianly

All of our thoughts are to be Christ-centered, including those expressed in a university classroom. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 10:5 that “we are taking every thought captive to

the obedience of Christ." All knowledge is to be encompassed by a Christian worldview. In other words, we should try to see all knowledge through the eyes of Jesus. This all sounds well and good, but how do we do that?

The only way to think and see as Jesus does is to know Him. This brings us to the basics of the Christian life. There are numerous demands on the time of a student. There are always experiments to do, books to read, papers to write, exams to study for, assignments to turn in, classes to attend. This is doubly true for graduate students, who spend their entire time seemingly three steps behind where they are supposed to be. Let's not forget the demands of a girlfriend or boyfriend, family, exercise, and just plain having fun. How is one supposed to find time for regular personal devotions, worship on Sunday mornings, fellowship with other believers, and the study of God's Word? These activities can all take a serious bite out of the time the university demands from a student. But this is the only way to draw closer to God and to understand His ways.

By being faithful in spiritual things, we trust God to honor the time spent and to bring about His desired results in our academic pursuits despite our having less free time than most non-Christians. Christian campus groups can be of tremendous help in these matters through training, Bible studies, and fellowship with believers who are going through the same struggles you are.

For those times when trouble does arise in the classroom, and you feel that your faith is being challenged and you are confused, an enormous amount of assistance is available to you. The manager of your local Christian bookstore can be a great help in finding books that deal with your problem. Organizations such as Probe Ministries can also help steer you in the right direction with short essays, position papers, and bibliographies. Dedicated and highly educated Christians have addressed just about every intellectual attack on

Christianity. There is no reason to feel like you have to do it on your own. That was my mistake in the "Spiritual Wastelands" course. It never even occurred to me to seek help. I could have represented my Lord in a much more credible way if I had only asked.

There are no shortcuts to living the Christian life. We cannot expect to emerge from the university with a truly Christian view of the world if we put our walk with the Lord on hold while we fill our heads with the knowledge of the world. Remember! We are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. In order to do that, we must know Him; in order to know Him, we must spend time with Him. There were many times in my college career when higher priorities prevented me from spending the amount of time I felt necessary to prepare for an exam, paper, or presentation, but I always found God to be faithful.

During my doctoral studies, we moved into a new house and the boys were ages 4 and 2. The room they were going to share desperately needed repainting and we were having new bunk beds delivered on Monday, the same day of an important cell biology exam. The professor writing this exam was the one in whose lab I had hopes of working for my doctoral project. So I needed to do well.

The room was small and the beds were large, so they needed to be constructed inside the room. This meant the room had to be painted before the beds arrived. If I paint, I lose critical study time for an important exam. If I study, the room goes unpainted and I have an unhappy wife and a difficult task getting to it later. I chose to paint the room. I had a total of three hours of study time for the exam! I entered the exam free of tension knowing I did my best and it was in God's hands. I had no idea how I did on the exam, but when the grades came out, I received the second highest grade in the class and the best exam score in my tenure as a graduate student! The professor was impressed enough to allow me to

begin working in her lab.

Cultivate a Teachable Spirit

I have run across numerous professors whose only encounters with Christians were students who simply told them that they were wrong and the Bible was right. Most professors do not have much patience with this kind of approach. It is a great way to gain enemies and demonstrate how much you think you know, but it does not win anybody to Christ.

Some Christian students have the impression that when they hear error being presented in university classroom, it is their duty to call out the heavy artillery and blast away. This is not necessarily so. As a student, your job is to learn, not to teach. In my education, I reasoned that in order to be a *critic* of evolution, I needed to first be a *student* of evolution and demonstrate that I knew what I was talking about. Once professors realized I was serious about wanting to understand evolution, when I began to ask questions, they listened. In the end my professors and I often had to agree to disagree, but we all learned something in the process, and I built relationships that could grow and develop in the future.

The most effective tactic in the classroom is the art of asking questions. This approach accomplishes three things. First, you demonstrate that you are paying attention, which is somewhat of a rarity today. Second, you demonstrate that you are truly interested in what the instructor is talking about. All good teachers love students with teachable spirits, but not students who are so gullible as to believe unquestioningly everything they say. Third, as you become adept at asking just the right question that exposes the error of what is being taught, you allow the professor and other students to see for themselves the lack of wisdom or truth in the idea being discussed. Truth is truth, whether expressed by a believer or a pagan. However, non-Christians will believe other non-Christians much more readily than they will a fanatical

Christian waving a Bible in his hand.

As a graduate student, I was in a class with faculty and other graduate students discussing a new discipline called sociobiology, the study of the biological basis for all social behaviors. One day we were discussing the purpose and meaning of life. In an evolutionary worldview, this can only mean survival and reproduction. Disturbed at how everyone was accepting this, I said, "We have just said that the only purpose in life is to survive and reproduce. If that is true, let me pose this hypothetical situation to you. Let's suppose I am dead and in the ground and the decomposers are doing their thing. Since you say there is no afterlife, this is it. It's over! What difference does it make to me now, whether I have reproduced or not?" After a long silence, a professor spoke up and said, "Well, I guess that ultimately, it doesn't matter at all." "But wait," I responded. "If the only purpose in life is to survive and reproduce, and ultimately—now you tell me—that doesn't matter either, then what's the point? Why go on living? Why stop at red lights? Who cares?!" After another long silence, the same professor spoke up and said, "*Well, I suppose that in the future, those that will be selected for will be those who know there is no purpose in life, but will live as if there is.*" What an amazing and depressing admission of the need to live a lie! That's exactly the point I wanted to make, but it sank in deeper when, through my **questions**, the **professor** said it and not me. When Jesus was found by His parents in the temple with the priests, He was listening and asking them questions—probably not for His benefit, but for theirs (Luke 2:46).

We are all familiar with 1 Peter 3:15, which says, "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." This verse is a double-edged sword that most of us sharpen only on one side or the other. Many are prepared to make a defense,

but they leave destruction in their wakes, never exhibiting gentleness or reverence. Others are the most gentle and reverent people you know, but are intimidated by tough questions and leave the impression that Christianity is for the weak and feeble-minded. The latter need to go back and read a few important passages:

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Acts 17

(The story of what happened when Paul boldly proclaimed the gospel in Thessalonica, Berea, and the Areopagus in Athens.)

Paul was a firm believer in the intellectual integrity of the gospel. The "staunch defender" needs to remember that Jesus told His disciples that the world would know that we are Christians by the love we have for one another (John 13:34-35) and that we are to love our enemies (Matt. 5:43-47). Paul exhorted the Romans not to repay evil with evil, but to repay evil with good and to leave vengeance to the Lord (Rom. 12:17-21). Finally, the writer of Proverbs tells us that a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up wrath (Prov. 15:1), and that the foolish man rages and laughs and always loses his temper, but a wise man

holds it back (Prov. 29:9,11).

Pursue Excellence

Nothing attracts the attention of those in the academic community as much as a job well done. There is no argument against excellence. In Colossians 3:17 Paul tells us, "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." If we are to do everything in Jesus' name, He deserves nothing less than the best that we can do. How many of our papers and exams would we be comfortable stamping with the words, "Performed by a disciple of Jesus Christ"? I think I would want to ask if I could have a little more time before I actually handed it in! Yet Paul admonishes us to hold to that standard in all that we do. This does not mean that every grade must be an A. Sometimes your best is a B or a C or even just getting the assignment done on time. The important thing is to try. It's important to be able to tell yourself that, with the time, resources, and energy you had available to you, you did your best. The road to excellence is tough, exhausting, and even frightening. It is hard going. But our Lord deserves nothing less.

Ted Engstrom, in his book *The Pursuit of Excellence*, tells the story of a pastor who spent his spare time and weekends for months repairing and rebuilding a dilapidated small farm in a rural community. When he was nearly finished, a neighbor happened by who remarked, "Well, preacher, it looks like you and God really did some work here!" The pastor replied, "It's interesting you should say that, Mr. Brown. But I've got to tell you—you should have seen this place when God had it all to Himself!"

It is certainly true that God is the source of all our strength, and all glory and honor for what we may accomplish is His. But, it is no less true that God has always chosen

people to be His instruments—frail, mistake-prone, imperfect people. His servants have not exactly enjoyed a life of ease while in His service. Striving for excellence is a basic form of Christian witness. We pay attention to people who always strive to do their best. In the classroom, people may not always agree with what you say, but if they know you as a person who works diligently and knows what you are talking about, they will give your words great respect. And, if there is enough of the Savior shining through you, your listeners will come back and want to know more.

I am reminded of the impact of four Hebrew youths in the Babylonian culture during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (whom you may recognize by their Babylonian names: Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego). They entered the prestigious secular institution, “Babylon University,” and were immersed into an inherently hostile atmosphere. But Scripture says that

And as for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams . . . And as for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm (Daniel 1:17, 20).

You can be sure they were instructed in Babylonian literature and wisdom, not Hebrew, yet they excelled. If our God is indeed the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, then He can not only protect us as we enter the university, but He can also prosper us. Imagine the testimony for Jesus Christ if the best philosophers, the best doctors, the best poets and novelists, the best musicians, the best astrophysicists, and on and on, were all Christians. That would be a powerful witness!

As you pursue excellence, do not be deterred by mistakes. They

are going to come, guaranteed. The pursuit of excellence is an attitude in the face of failure. Thomas Edison, the creator of many inventions including the light bulb and the phonograph, was never discouraged by failed experiments. He simply reasoned that he now knew of one more way that his experiment was not going to work. Mistakes were his education. The wise man admits and learns from his mistakes, but the fool ignores them or covers them up. We all admire someone who freely admits a mistake and then works hard not to repeat it.

Strive for Faithfulness, Not Success

As students in the university learn to approach their studies from a Christian worldview, as they grow to appreciate their place as people who are there to learn and not necessarily to confront, and as they begin to pursue excellence in everything they do, it is tempting for them to believe that God will bless whatever they set out to accomplish. Their primary focus becomes whether or not all of their efforts are successful. It can become depressing if they do not see the kind of results they expected God to bring about.

Soon after Mother Teresa received the Nobel Peace Prize for her work among the poor in Calcutta, she was asked by a reporter in New York City how she could dedicate herself so completely to her work when there was no real hope of success. It was obvious she was not going to eliminate hunger, poverty, disease, and all the other ills of that densely populated city in India. In other words, he asked, if you can't really make a dent in the conditions these people live in, why bother? Her reply was simple, yet profound; she said, "God has not called us to success, but to faithfulness." How many times have we heard in witnessing seminars that our job is to share the gospel and leave the results to God? What I hear Mother Teresa saying is that our responsibility is the same in everything we do.

Oswald Chambers, in his timeless devotional book *My Utmost for*

His Highest, caused me to recall Mother Teresa and reflect on my own expectations. He said,

Notice God's unutterable waste of saints, according to the judgment of the world. God plants His saints in the most useless places. We say—God intends me to be here because I am so useful. Jesus never estimated His life along the line of the greatest use. God puts His saints where they will glorify Him, and we are no judges at all of where that is. (August 10)

The main point here is that we should be faithful to the task God has given to us rather than worry about whether or not we are achieving the results we think God should be interested in. When we begin thinking that “God is wasting my time and His,” we have probably stepped over the line. I spent five and a half years in the laboratory on doctoral experiments in molecular biology, experiments that never accomplished what I had planned. The most frustrating aspect was that these experiments did not result in work that was publishable in the scientific literature, which is the ultimate goal of any scientist. I had a great deal of confidence when I started this difficult research problem that the Lord and I would work it out. Well, we didn't. I never dreamed how much Mother Teresa's words concerning the value of faithfulness over success would be lived out in my own life. It has been a hard, hard lesson. And I don't believe I have a complete answer as to why God chose to deal with me in this way. Scientific publications seemed not just desirable but necessary in my future career; yet God is sovereign and He apparently has other plans. During those years, I learned a great deal about living the Christian life in the midst of difficult circumstances. I can only pray that I will not forget what was so painful to learn.

Conclusion

In summary, orient your studies according to a Christian world view. Your main job as a student is to learn and to develop the skill of asking questions, and to keep the boxing gloves at home. Pursue excellence and remain faithful to the task to which God has called you, and leave the results to Him.

Suggested Reading

Oswald Chambers. *My Utmost for His Highest*. Westwood, NJ: Barbour and Company, 1963.

Ted Engstrom. *The Pursuit of Excellence*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982.

© 1999 Probe Ministries International

Not a Threat: The Contributions of Christianity to Western Society

Rick Wade provides a solid argument for the beneficial contributions of Christianity to Western culture in the areas of science, human freedom, morality, and healthcare.

What If You'd Never Been Born?

Do you remember this scene in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*?

GEORGE (cont'd): Look, who are you?

CLARENCE (patiently): I told you, George. I'm your guardian angel. [George, still looking at him, goes up to him and pokes his arm. It's flesh.]

GEORGE: Yeah, yeah, I know. You told me that. What else are you? What . . . are you a hypnotist?

CLARENCE: No, of course not.

GEORGE: Well then, why am I seeing all these strange things?

CLARENCE: Don't you understand, George? It's because you were not born.

GEORGE: Then if I wasn't born, who am I?

CLARENCE: You're nobody. You have no identity. [George rapidly searches his pockets for identification, but without success.]

GEORGE: What do you mean, no identity? My name's George Bailey.

CLARENCE: There is no George Bailey. You have no papers, no cards, no driver's license, no 4-F card, no insurance policy . . . (he says these things as George searches for them) [George looks in his watch pocket.]

CLARENCE (cont'd): They're not there, either.

GEORGE: What?

CLARENCE: Zuzu's petals. [George feverishly continues to turn his pockets inside out.]

CLARENCE (cont'd): You've been given a great gift, George. A

chance to see what the world would be like without you.[{1}](#)

Do you remember George Bailey's encounter with Clarence the angel? George didn't think life was worth living, and it was Clarence's job to show him he was wrong. To do so, he showed George what Bedford Falls would have been like if George had never been born.

In desperation, George races through town looking for something familiar. After observing him for a little while, Clarence utters this bit of wisdom: "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives, and when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"[{2}](#) Inspired by the plot of *It's a Wonderful Life*, in 1994 D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe wrote a book titled *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?*[{3}](#) The authors determined to show what the world would be like if, like George Bailey, Jesus had never been born.

Christianity has come under attack from many different directions. It is often derided as the great boogeyman of human civilization. It is presented as an oppressive force with no regard for the higher aspirations of humankind. To throw off its shackles is the way of wisdom.

Kennedy quotes Friederich Nietzsche, a nineteenth century philosopher whose ideas continue to have a profound effect on our society. Said Nietzsche: "I condemn Christianity; I bring against the Christian Church the most terrible of all the accusations that an accuser has ever had in his mouth. It is, to me, the greatest of all imaginable corruptions; it seeks to work the ultimate corruption, the worst possible corruption. The Christian Church has left nothing untouched by its depravity; it has turned every value into worthlessness, and every truth into a lie, and every integrity into baseness of soul."[{4}](#)

This article will—we hope³/₄ show just how beneficial

Christianity has been, even for its critics. Drawing from Kennedy and Newcombe's book in addition to other literature, we will examine the impact of Christian beliefs on society. The four areas we'll consider are science, human freedom, morality, and healthcare. A theme which will run throughout this discussion is the high value Christianity places on human beings. Far from being a source of oppression, the message of Christ serves to heal, set free, and provide protective boundaries.

Contributions to Science

Perhaps the area in which Christianity has been the most vociferously attacked in this century has been the area of science. Religion and science are thought by many to be like oil and water; the two simply don't mix. Religion is thought to offer superstition while science offers facts.

It would seem, however, that those who make such a charge haven't given much attention to the history of science. In their book, *The Soul of Science*,[{5}](#) authors Nancy Pearcey and Charles Thaxton make a case for the essential role Christianity played in the development of science. The authors point out four general ways Christianity has positively influenced its development.[{6}](#)

First, Christianity provided important presuppositions of science. The Bible teaches that nature is real, not an illusion. It teaches that it has value and that it is good to work with nature. Historically this was an advance over pagan superstitions because the latter saw nature as something to be worshipped or as something filled with spirits which weren't to be angered. As one theologian wrote, "Nature was thus abruptly desacralized, stripped of many of its arbitrary, unpredictable, and doubtless terrifying aspects."[{7}](#)

Also, because it was created by God in an orderly fashion, nature is lawful and can be understood. That is, it follows

discernible patterns which can be trusted not to change. “As the creation of a trustworthy God, nature exhibited regularity, dependability, and orderliness. It was intelligible and could be studied. It displayed a knowable order.”[{8}](#)

Second, Christianity sanctioned science. Science “was justified as a means of alleviating toil and suffering.”[{9}](#) With animistic and pantheistic cultures, God and nature were so closely related that man, being a part of nature, was incapable of transcending it, that is, of gaining any real control over it. A Christian worldview, however, gave man the freedom to subject nature to his needs-with limitations, of course-because man relates primarily to God who is over nature. Technology-or science applied-was developed to meet human needs as an expression of our God-given duty to one another. As one historian put it, “the Christian concept of moral obligation played an important role in attracting people to the study of nature.”[{10}](#)

Third, Christianity provided motives for pursuing scientific knowledge. As scientists learned more about the wonders of the universe, they saw God’s glory being displayed.

Fourth, Christianity “played a role in regulating scientific methodology.”[{11}](#) Previously, the world was thought to work in perfectly rational ways which could be known primarily through logical deduction. But this approach to science didn’t work. Planets don’t have to orbit in circular patterns as some people concluded using deductive logic; of course, it was discovered by investigation that they didn’t. A newer way of understanding God’s creation put the emphasis on God’s will. Since God’s will couldn’t be simply deduced through logical reasoning, experimentation and investigation were necessary. This provided a particular theological grounding for empirical science.

The fact is that it was distinctly Christian beliefs which

provided the intellectual and moral foundations for the study of nature and for its application through technology. Thus, although Christianity and some scientists or scientific theories might be in opposition, Christianity and science are not.

Contributions to Human Freedom

One of the favorite criticisms of Christianity is that it inhibits freedom. When Christians oppose funding pornography masquerading as art, for example, we're said to be unfairly restricting freedom of expression. When Christians oppose the radical, gender feminism which exalts personal fulfillment over all other social obligations, and which calls for the tearing down of God-given moral structures in favor of "choice" as a moral guide, we're accused of oppression.

The problem is that people now see freedom not as self-determination, but as self-determination unhindered by any outside standard of morality. Some go so far in their zeal for self-expression that they expect others to assist them in the process, such as pornographic artists who expect government funding.

There are at least two general factors which limit or define freedom. One we might call the "rules of the game." The other is our nature.

The concert violinist is able to play a concerto because she knows the "rules of the game." In other words, she knows what the musical notation means. She knows how to produce the right sounds from the violin and when to produce them. She might want the "freedom" to make whatever sounds she wishes in whatever key and whatever beat, but who would want to listen? Similarly, as part of God's universe, we need to operate according to the rules of the game. He knows how life on earth is best lived, so we need to live according to His will and design.

Our nature also structures our freedom. A fish can try to express its freedom by living on dry land, but it won't be free long; it won't be alive long! We, too, are truly free only in so far as we live according to our nature-not our fallen nature, but our nature as created by God. This is really another way of looking at the "rules of the game" idea. But it's necessary to give it special focus because some of the "freedoms" we desire go against our nature, such as the freedom some want to engage in homosexual activity.

Some people see Christianity as a force which tries to inhibit proper expression of who we are. But it is the idea of helping people attain the freedom to be and do as God intended that has fueled much Christian activity over the years. For example, Christians were actively engaged in the battle against slavery because of their high view of man as made in God's image.[{12}](#)

Another example is feminism. Radical feminists complain that Christianity has been an oppressive force over women. But it seems to have escaped their notice that Christianity made significant steps in elevating women above the place they held before Christ came.[{13}](#)

While it is true that women have often been truly oppressed throughout history, even by Christian men, it is false that Christianity itself is oppressive toward them. In fact, in an article titled "Women of Renewal: A Statement" published in *First Things*,[{14}](#) such noted female scholars as Elizabeth Achtemeier, Roberta Hestenes, Frederica Mathewes-Green, and May Stewart Van Leeuwen stated unequivocally their acceptance of historic Christianity. And it's a sure thing that any of the signatories of this statement would be quite vocal in her opposition to real oppression!

The problem isn't that Christianity is opposed to freedom, but that it acknowledges the laws of our Creator who knows better than we do what is good for us. The doctrines of creation and

redemption define for us our nature and our responsibilities to God. His “rules of the game” will always be oppressive to those who seek absolute self-determination. But as we’ll see, it is by submitting to God that we make life worth living.

Contributions to Morality

Let’s turn our attention to the issue of morality. Christians are often accused of trying to ram their morality down people’s throats. In some instances this might accurately describe what some Christians have done. But for the most part, I believe, the criticism follows our simple declaration of what we believe is right and wrong and our participation in the political and social arenas to see such standards codified and enforced.

The question that needs to be answered is whether the high standards of morality taught in Scripture have served society well. Has Christianity served to make individuals and societies better and to provide a better way of life?

In a [previous article](#) I wrote briefly about the brutality that characterized Greco-Roman society in Jesus’ day.^{15} We often hear about the wondrous advances of that society; but do you know about the cruelty? The Roman games, in which “beasts fought men, men fought men; and the vast audience waited hopefully for the sight of death,”^{16} reveal the lust for blood. The practice of child exposure shows the low regard for human life the Romans had. Unwanted babies were left to die on trash heaps. Some of these were taken to be slaves or prostitutes.^{17} It was distinctly Christian beliefs that brought these practices to an end.

In the era following “the disruption of Charlemagne’s great empire”, it was the Latin Christian Church which “patiently and persistently labored to combat the forces of disintegration and decay,” and “succeeded little by little in restraining violence and in restoring order, justice, and

decency.”[{18}](#)

The Vikings provide an example of how the gospel can positively affect a people group. Vikings were fierce plunderers who terrorized the coastlands of Europe. James Kennedy says that our word *berserk* comes from their fighting men who were called “berserkers.”[{19}](#) Gradually the teachings of Christ contributed to major changes in these people. In 1020 A.D., Christianity became law under King Olav. Practices “such as blood sacrifice, black magic, the ‘setting out’ of infants, slavery and polygamy” became illegal.[{20}](#)

In modern times, it was Christians who led the fight in England against slavery.[{21}](#) Also, it was the teaching of the Wesleys that was largely responsible for the social changes which prevented the social unrest which might have been expected in the Industrial Revolution.[{22}](#)

In an editorial published in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1986 titled “Religious Right Deserves Respect,”[{23}](#) Reo Christenson argues that conservative Christians have been vindicated with respect to their concerns about such things as drinking, the sexual revolution, and discipline in schools. He says that “if anybody’s values have been vindicated over the last 20 years, it is theirs.” He concludes with this comment: “The Religious Right is not always wrong.”

To go against God’s moral standards is destructive to individuals and societies. In a column which ran in the *Dallas Morning News* following the shootings at Columbine High School,[{24}](#) a junior at Texas A&M University asks hard questions of her parents’ generation including these: “Why have you neglected to teach us values and morals? Why haven’t you lived moral lives that we could model our own after?”[{25}](#)

Why indeed! In time, our society will see the folly of its ways by the destruction it is bringing on itself. Let’s pray that it happens sooner rather than later.

Contributions to Healthcare

Healthcare is another area where Christianity has made a positive impact on society. Christians have not only been involved in healthcare; they've often been at the forefront in serving the physical health of people.

Although some early Christians believed that disease came from God, so that trying to cure the sick would be going against God's will, the opposite impulse was also seen in those who saw the practice of medicine as an exercise of Christian charity.[{26}](#)

God had already shown His concern for the health of His people through the laws given through Moses. In his book, *The Story of Medicine*, Roberto Margotta says that the Hebrews made an important contribution to medicine by their knowledge of personal hygiene given in the book of Leviticus. In fact, he says, "the steps taken in mediaeval Europe to counteract the spread of 'leprosy' were straight out of the Bible."[{27}](#)

Of course, it was Jesus' concern for suffering that provided the primary motivation for Christians to engage in healthcare. In the Middle Ages, for examples, monks provided physical relief to the people around them. Some monasteries became infirmaries. "The best-known of these," says Margotta, "belonged to the Swiss monastery of St Gall which had been founded in 720 by an Irish monk; . . . medicines were made up by the monks themselves from plants grown in the herb garden. Help was always readily available for the sick who came to the doors of the monastery. In time, the monks who devoted themselves to medicine emerged from their retreats and started visiting the sick in their own homes." Monks were often better doctors than their lay counterparts and were in great demand.[{28}](#)

Christians played a significant role in the establishment of hospitals. In 325 A.D., the Council of Nicea "decreed that

hospitals were to be duly established wherever the Church was established," says James Kennedy.[{29}](#) He notes that the hospital built by St. Basil of Caesarea in 370 even treated lepers who previously had been isolated.[{30}](#)

In the United States, the early hospitals were "framed and motivated by the responsibilities of Christian stewardship."[{31}](#) They were originally established to help the poor sick, but weren't intended to provide long-term care lest they become like the germ-infested almshouses.

A key factor in making long-term medical care possible was the "professionalization of nursing" because of higher standards of sanitation.[{32}](#) Before the 16th century, religious motivations were key in providing nursing for the sick. Anne Summers says that the willingness to fracture family ties to serve others, a disciplined lifestyle, and "a sense of heavenly justification," all of which came from Christian beliefs, undergirded ministry to the sick.[{33}](#) Even if the early nursing orders didn't achieve their own sanitation goals, "they were, nevertheless, often reaching higher sanitary standards than those previously known to the sick poor."[{34}](#)

There is much more that could be told about the contributions of Christianity to society, including the stories of Florence Nightingale, whose nursing school in London began modern nursing, and who saw herself as being in the service of God; or of the establishment of the Red Cross through the zeal of an evangelical Christian; or of the modern missions movement which continues to see Christian medical professionals devote their lives to the needs of the suffering in some of the darkest parts of the world.[{35}](#) It is obvious that in the area of medicine, as in a number of others, Christians have made a major contribution. Thus, those who deride Christianity as being detrimental are either tremendously biased in their thinking or are ignorant of history.

Notes

1. Downloaded from the Internet at http://www.clarence.com/iawl/script/script_19.html on May 11, 1999.
2. Downloaded from the Internet at http://www.clarence.com/iawl/script/script_20.html on May 11, 1999.
3. D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994).
4. Ibid., 5.
5. Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994).
6. Pearcey and Thaxton, 36-37. Taken from John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19-33.
7. Pearcey and Thaxton, 25.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 36.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 36-37.
12. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "Christianity."
13. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 376.
14. "Women of Renewal: A Statement," *First Things* No. 80 (February 1998): 36-40.
15. Rick Wade, ["The World of the Apostle Paul."](#)
16. Will Durant, *The History of Civilization: Part III, Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1944), 133-34.
17. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 72.
18. Joseph Reither, *World History at a Glance* (New York: The New Home Library, 1942), 144; quoted in Kennedy, 165.
19. Kennedy and Newcombe, 164.

20. Sverre Steen, *Langsomt ble Landet vaart Eget* (Oslo, Norway: J.W. Cappelens Forlag, 1967), 52-53, quoted in Kennedy, 164-65. See also *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Scandinavia, History of."
21. Earl Cairns, *The Christian in Society: Biblical and Historical Precepts for Involvement Today* (Chicago; Moody Press, 1973), 78-91.
22. *Ibid.*, 67.
23. Reo M. Christenson, "Religious Right Deserves Respect," *Chicago Tribune*, September 1986.
24. Littleton, Colorado. Two young men killed 12 students and a teacher, and then killed themselves.
25. Marcy Musgrave, "Generation has some questions," *Dallas Morning News*, 2 May 1999.
26. Irvine Loudon, ed., *Western Medicine: An Illustrated History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 55.
27. Roberto Margotta, *The Story of Medicine*, ed. Paul Lewis (New York: Golden Press, 1968), 36. Referenced in Kennedy, 142.
28. Margotta, 117-18.
29. Kennedy, 145.
30. *Ibid.*, 146. From Margotta, 102.
31. Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America's Hospital System* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 8. From Kennedy, 147.
32. Kennedy, 148. Quote is from Rosenberg, 8.
33. Anne Summers, "Nurses and Ancillaries in the Christian Era," chap. 12 in *Western Medicine: An Illustrated History*, 134.
34. *Ibid.*
35. See Kennedy, 149-154.

Rousseau: An Interesting Madman

Popular song lyrics often have a way of reflecting what many people think, but rarely articulate. Recently, a song with a catchy tune and lots of airtime verbalized a way of thinking about God that is quite popular. The song, *What God Said* by a group called the Uninvited begins with the lyrics, "I talked to God and God said 'Hey! I've got a lot of things to say; write it down this very day and spread the word in every way.'" This is a remarkably evangelistic idea in this day of absolute tolerance for other people's beliefs. However, this god who has revealed himself to the songwriter doesn't expect much from the listener. According to the first verse we are to floss between each meal, drive with both hands on the wheel, and not be too sexually aggressive on the first date. In the second verse god wants us to ride bikes more, feed the birds, and clean up after our pets.

The third verse gets a little more interesting. God supposedly reveals that humans killed his only son and that his creation is undone, but that he can't help everyone. These obvious references to the incarnation of Christ and the Fall of Adam set up the listener for the solution to mankind's situation which, according to the song, is to "start with the basics—just be nice and see if that makes things all right." The chorus drives home this theology by repeating often that "I talked to God and God said nothing special, I talked to God and God said nothing that we shouldn't already know, shouldn't already know."

This idea, namely that any revelation from God would consist primarily of common sense notions, is a product of the

Enlightenment and found an extraordinary voice in the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau argued that all one needs to know about God has been revealed in nature or in one's own conscience. Rousseau is often called the father of the French revolution, a movement that exalted the worship of reason and attempted to purge the clergy and Christianity from French culture. Although Rousseau wasn't around for the bloodshed of the revolution itself, his idea of a natural theology helped to provide a framework for rejecting special revelation and the organized church.

Few people in history have caused such a wide spectrum of responses to their ideas. At his death, Rousseau's burial site became a place of pilgrimage. George Sand referred to him as "Saint Rousseau," Shelly called him a "sublime genius," and Schiller, a "Christ-like soul for whom only Heaven's angels are fit company." [\[1\]](#) However, others had a different perspective. His one and only true love, Sophie d'Houdetot, referred to him as an "interesting madman." Diderot, a long time acquaintance, summed him up as "deceitful, vain as Satan, ungrateful, cruel, hypocritical and full of malice." [\[2\]](#) In addition to anything else that might be said about Rousseau, he was at least an expert at being a celebrity. He was a masterful self-promoter who knew how to violate public norms just enough to stay in the public eye.

Interestingly enough, Rousseau's ideas have actually had greater and longer impact outside of France. Two centuries later, his natural theology plays a significant role in determining our society's view of human nature as well as how we educate our children. Thus it is important to consider the thoughts of Rousseau and see how they impact our culture today, especially in the realm of education.

Rousseau's Natural Theology

To begin our examination of the thoughts of Jean-Jacques

Rousseau and his impact on our view of human nature and education, we will turn our attention to the foundational thoughts of his natural theology.

Rousseau often claims in his writings that all he seeks is the truth, and he is very confident that he knows it when he sees it. Being a child of the Enlightenment, Rousseau begins with the Cartesian assumption that he exists and that the universe is real. He then decides that the first cause of all activity is a will, rather than matter itself. He states, "I believe therefore that a will moves the universe and animates nature. This is my first dogma, or my first article of faith."[{3}](#) He then argues that this "will" that moves matter is also intelligent. Finally, Rousseau writes that "This 'being' which wills and is powerful, this being active in itself, this being, whatever it may be, which moves the universe and orders all things, I call *God*."[{4}](#) So far, so good, but according to Rousseau, to guess the purpose of this being or to ask questions beyond immediate necessity would be foolish and harmful. Rousseau writes "But as soon as I want to contemplate Him in Himself, as soon as I want to find out where He is, what He is, what His substance is, He escapes me, and my clouded mind no longer perceives anything."[{5}](#)

The problem with Rousseau's view of God is that we can know so little of Him. Rousseau rejects special revelation and argues that it is only by observing nature and looking inward that we can perceive anything at all about the Creator. Rousseau perceives from nature that the earth was made for humans and that humanity is to have dominion over it. He also argues that humanity will naturally worship the Creator, stating, "I do not need to be taught this worship; it is dictated to me by nature itself."[{6}](#) In Rousseau's opinion, to seek any other source than nature for how to worship God would be to seek man's opinion and authority, both of which are rejected as destructive.

Rousseau believes that humans are autonomous creatures, and

that humanity is free to do evil, but that doing evil detracts from satisfaction with oneself. Rousseau thanks God for making him in His image so that he can be free, good, and happy like God.[{7}](#) Death is merely the remedy of the evils that we do. As he puts it, “nature did not want you to suffer forever.”[{8}](#)

Rousseau is clear about the source of evil. He writes, “Man, seek the author of evil no longer. It is yourself. No evil exists other than that which you do or suffer, and both come to you from yourself. . . .Take away the work of man, and everything is good.”[{9}](#) It is reason that will lead us to the “good.” A divine instinct has been placed in our conscience that allows us to judge what is good and bad. The question remains that if each person possesses this divine instinct to know the good, why do so many not follow it? Rousseau’s answer is that our conscience speaks to us in “nature’s voice” and that our education in civil man’s prejudices causes us to forget how to hear it.[{10}](#) So the battle against evil is not a spiritual one, but one of educational methods and content.

Although Rousseau thought he was saving God from the rationalists, mankind is left to discern good and evil with only nature as its measuring rod, and education as its savior.

A Philosophy of Education

Whether you agree with his ideas or not, Rousseau was an intellectual force of such magnitude that his ideas still impact our thinking about human nature and the educational process two centuries later. His work *Emile* compares to Plato’s *Republic* in its remarkable breadth. Not only does the book describe a pedagogical method for training children to become practically perfect adults, but he also builds in it an impressive philosophical foundation for his educational goals. *Emile* is a very detailed account of how Rousseau would raise a young lad (Emile) to adulthood, as well as a description of the perfect wife for his charge. Along the way, Rousseau

proposes his natural theology which finds ardent followers all over the world today.

Although *Emile* was written in the suburbs of Paris, Rousseau's greatest impact on educational practice has actually been outside of France.[{11}](#) French educators have been decidedly non-Romantic when it comes to early childhood education. Rousseau had a great deal of influence on the inventor of the Kindergarten, Friedrich Froebel, as well as the educational Romantics Johann Pestalozzi and Johann Herbart. These three educators' names are engraved on the Horace Mann building on the campus of Teachers College, Columbia University. Columbia has been, and continues to be, at the center of educational reform in America, and happens to have been the home of John Dewey, America's premier progressive thinker and educational philosopher. Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick further secularized and applied the thinking of Froebel, Pestalozzi, and Herbart, and thus Rousseau.

The common bond that connects these educators is a Romantic view of human nature. Besides a general faith in the goodness of all humanity, there are two other Romantic fallacies that are particularly dangerous when carried to extremes. The first is what is called the doctrine of developmentalism, or natural tempo, which states that bookish knowledge should not be introduced at an early age.[{12}](#) Second is the notion of holistic learning, which holds that natural or lifelike, thematic methods of instruction are always superior.[{13}](#) Both ideas tend to be anti-fact oriented and regard the systematic instruction of any material at an early age harmful. This has had a profound effect on how we teach reading in this country. The ongoing battle between whole- language methods and the use of systematic phonics centers on this issue. When the Romantic view prevails, which it often does in our elementary schools, systematic phonics disappears.

Rousseau's theology and educational methods are tightly bound together. He argues against the biblical view that humanity is

fallen and needs a redeemer. He believes that our reason and intellect are fully capable of discerning what is right and wrong without the need of special revelation or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As a result, Rousseau argues that a proper education is man's only hope for knowing what limited truth is available.

Rousseau and Childhood Education

An interesting aspect of Rousseau's child-raising techniques is his reliance on *things* to constrain and train a child rather than people. Rousseau rightfully asserts that education begins at birth, a very modern concept. However, in his mind early education should consist mainly of allowing as much freedom as possible for the child. Rebellion against people is to be avoided at all costs because it could cause an early end to a student's education and result in a wicked child. He puts it this way: "As long as children find resistance only in things and never in wills, they will become neither rebellious nor irascible and will preserve their health better."[{14}](#) Rousseau believed that a teacher or parent should never lecture or sermonize. Experience, interaction with things, is a far more effective teacher. This dependence on experience is at the core of modern progressive education as well.

As a result, Rousseau was remarkably hostile towards books and traditional education's dependency on them. From the very beginning of *Emile*, he is adamant that books should play little or no part in the young man's education. He claims that, "I take away the instruments of their greatest misery—that is books. Reading is the plague of childhood and almost the only occupation we know how to give it. At twelve, Emile will hardly know what a book is."[{15}](#) At one point Rousseau simply says, "I hate books. They only teach one to talk about what one does not know."[{16}](#)

A corollary aspect of this negative view of books is

Rousseau's belief that children should never be forced to memorize anything. He even suggests that an effort be made to keep their vocabulary simple prior to their ability to read. This antagonism towards books and facts fits well with Rousseau's notion that people "always try to teach children what they would learn much better by themselves."[\[17\]](#)

He also believed that children should never memorize what they can not put to immediate use. Rousseau acknowledged that children memorize easily, but felt that they are incapable of judgment and do not have what he calls true memory. He argued that children are unable to learn two languages prior to the age of twelve, a belief that has been refuted by recent research.

Prior to that age, Emile is allowed to read only one book, *Robinson Crusoe*. Why *Crusoe*? Because Rousseau wants Emile to see himself as Crusoe, totally dependent upon himself for all of his needs. Emile is to imitate Crusoe's experience, allowing necessity to determine what needs to be learned and accomplished. Rousseau's hostility towards books and facts continues to impact educational theory today. There is a strong and growing sentiment in our elementary schools to remove the shackles of book knowledge and memorization and to replace them with something called the "tool" model of learning.

Rousseau's Philosophy and Modern "Tools"

Rousseau argued against too much bookish knowledge and for natural experiences to inform young minds. Today, something called the "tool" model carries on this tradition. It is argued that knowledge is increasing so rapidly that spending time to stockpile it or to study it in books results in information that is soon outdated. We need to give our students the "tools" of learning, and then they can find the requisite facts, as they become necessary to their experience.

Two important assumptions are foundational to this argument. First, that the “tools” of learning can be acquired in a content neutral environment without referring to specific information or facts. And secondly, that an extremely child-centered, experience driven curriculum is always superior to a direct instruction, content oriented approach.

The “tool” model argues that “love of learning” and “critical thinking skills” are more important to understanding, let’s say chemistry, than are the facts about chemistry itself. Some argue that facts would only slow them down. Unfortunately, research in the real world does not support this view of learning. Citing numerous studies, E.D. Hirsch contends that learning new ideas is built upon previously acquired knowledge. He calls this database of information “intellectual capital” and just as it takes money to make money, a knowledge framework is necessary to incorporate new knowledge. To stress “critical thinking” prior to the acquisition of knowledge actually reduces a child’s capacity to think critically.[\[18\]](#) Students who lack intellectual capital must go through a strenuous process just to catch up with what well-educated children already know. If children attempt to do algebra without knowing their multiplication tables, they spend a large amount of time and energy doing simple calculations. This distracts and frustrates children and makes learning higher math much more difficult. The same could be said for history students who never learn names and dates.

The second idea is that students should learn via natural experience within a distinctly passive curriculum. While there is wisdom in letting nature set as many of the limits as possible for a child—experience is probably the most powerful teaching method—Rousseau and progressive educational theory go too far in asserting that a teacher should never preach or sermonize to a child. At an early age, children can learn from verbal instruction, especially if it occurs along with significant learning experiences. In fact, certain kinds of

learning often contradict one's experience. The teaching of morality and democratic behavior involves teaching principles that cannot be experienced immediately, and virtually everything that parents or teachers tell children about sexual behavior has religious foundations based on assumptions about human nature.

The bottom line seems to be that if higher math, morality, and civilized behavior could be learned from simply interacting with nature, Rousseau's system would be more appealing. However, his version of the naturalistic fallacy—assuming that everything that is natural is right—would not serve our students well. Rousseau's observations about the student-teacher relationship fall short first because of his overly optimistic view of human nature and because we believe that there is truth to convey to the next generation that cannot be experienced within nature alone.

Notes

1. Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 27.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 273.
4. Ibid., 277.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 278.
7. Ibid., 281.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 282.
10. Ibid., 291.
11. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need & Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 81.
12. Ibid., 84.
13. Ibid.
14. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Alan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979), 66.
15. Ibid., 116.

16. Ibid., 184.
17. Ibid., 78.
18. Hirsch, 66.

© 1999 Probe Ministries International

Faith and Reason

Are faith and reason friends or foes? Does faith in Christ require checking your brain at the door? This essay presents 3 positions on faith and reason, from Tertullian, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

Friends or Foes?

One of the more intriguing aspects of the *Indiana Jones* film trilogy is its focus on religious themes. In the third installment, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy is involved in a search for the Holy Grail, the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper. As the film reaches its climax, Indy must go through three tests in order to reach the Grail. After overcoming the first two obstacles, the final test required Indy to “step out” in faith, even though he was on one side of a cavern that appeared to be thirty feet across, without any visible way to reach the other side. Following the instructions from his father’s diary, Indy stepped into the void, and to his amazement, his foot came down on solid ground. It turned out that there was a bridge across the cavern but because the rocky texture of the bridge perfectly matched the facing wall of the cavern, the bridge was invisible from Indy’s perspective.

According to this scene, and enforced by general opinion, religious faith and human reason are opposites. Indiana Jones

simply could not understand how it was possible to reach the Grail without any visible means to do so; the implication is that his decision to step out was a forfeiture of his intellect. This idea that Christian faith is a surrender of our reasoning abilities is a common one in contemporary culture.

For many Christians, the scene that we've been discussing is a disturbing one. On the one hand, it is a moment of triumph. It seems to lend credence to the importance of religious faith. Then again, it portrays faith as being a mindless exercise. Indiana Jones is an intellectual college professor who is interested in the Grail primarily as an historical artifact. His leap of faith goes against everything he stands for. This reveals a tension that has existed in the church for centuries. Is faith in Christ a surrender of the intellect? Is godly wisdom in complete opposition to what Scripture calls "worldly wisdom"? There are many who question whether the Christian should even expose himself to teaching that is not consistent with the Word of God. For example, it is a frightening prospect for many Christian parents to consider sending their children off to a secular college where the Christian faith is often ridiculed or condemned. Still others want their children to be challenged by a secular education. They consider it part of the Christian's missionary mandate to confront secular culture with their very presence. In their mind, the tendency of Christians to separate themselves from secular environments leads to an isolationist mentality that fails to reach the lost for Christ.

As we examine the relationship of faith and reason for the Christian in this discussion, there are several questions to keep in mind. Is there such a thing as Christian philosophy, or is philosophy primarily opposed to theology? Should believers read literature that is not explicitly religious, or should we only read Christian literature? What about secular music or films? How we view the relationship between faith and

reason will reveal itself in how we answer these questions. We will try to shed light on these issues as we examine three distinctive positions that have been prominent throughout church history.

Earlier, we mentioned that in the popular film, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy had to make a literal leap of faith. When he stepped into the “void” in order to reach the Grail, he was unable to see the pathway to the Grail, but his “blind faith” was rewarded when it turned out that the pathway was hidden by an optical illusion. He did what most people would consider suicidal. But is this a true picture of religious faith? Is faith or religious belief irrational? In the next section we will look at the answer of Tertullian, a Christian apologist from the early church who has been accused of saying this very thing.

Tertullian's Dilemma

Tertullian was a lawyer who converted to Christ sometime around the year A.D. 197. It was he who asked the famous questions, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What have heretics to do with Christians?” Tertullian's major distinction was to create a metaphorical contrast between Athens, the home of pagan Greek philosophy, and Jerusalem, the central locale of divine revelation. Tertullian was convinced that the Christian faith and human wisdom were polar opposites. It was his conviction that God had revealed His plan of salvation in Scripture alone; to mix Scripture with the philosophy of pagans could only distort God's message. But does this mean that Tertullian believed that human wisdom is irrational? Let's look at the evidence.

Contemporary theologians who deny the rationality of Christian belief often quote Tertullian's statement that the crucifixion should be believed because it is absurd. He also said the fact of the Resurrection is certain because it is impossible. But these statements must be understood from the context of

Tertullian's own life and work. He himself utilized elements of Greek philosophy and logic that he believed to be compatible with Christian belief. The major emphasis in his writings was to contrast the coherence of Christianity with the inconsistency of his heretical opponents. When he does speak of the absurdity of Christian belief, he is actually referring to the unlikelihood that any human mind could conceive of God's redemptive plan. Like C. S. Lewis, he was convinced of the truth of the gospel by the very fact that no human being could possibly concoct such a story as is presented in Scripture. Certainly the Jews could not; the claim of Christ that He was God in the flesh was blasphemous to many of them. Nor could the Greeks create such a story; for them, the material world was inferior to the divine realm. God could not possibly assume human flesh in their philosophical reasoning. But for Tertullian, this was compelling evidence that the gospel is true! The religious and philosophical systems contemporary with the advent of Christianity would have prevented any human from simply making up such a fantastic tale. He concluded that the gospel had to originate in the mind of God himself.

To conclude, let's put Tertullian in the shoes of Indiana Jones. What would Tertullian do if faced with the prospect of crossing over the invisible bridge? My guess is that he would see such a step as consistent with God's way of directing His people. The key to understanding Tertullian's view of faith and reason is to consider what the unbeliever would think. Since most unbelievers would consider what Indiana Jones did as unreasonable, he would probably consider such an attitude as compelling proof that the person of faith must take such a step.

Tertullian, the early church apologist, was convinced that belief in the Scripture was the basis for the Christian life. He also considered Greek philosophy to be the basis for heresy in the Church. Unfortunately, he seemed to assume that all

Christians intuitively understood Scripture in the same way. His motto might have been “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” But it is one thing to believe; it is another thing to understand what we believe. Next, we will consider the ideas of Augustine, who is known by the phrase “faith seeking understanding.”

Augustine’s Solution

Augustine, who died in the year A.D. 430, recounts in his famous *Confessions* how as a young man he was constantly seeking for a philosophy that would be consistent and guide him to truth. At one point he abandoned any hope in his search and became a skeptic. But at the age of 33, Augustine came to accept the truth of the gospel. He recognized that the speculation of Greek philosophy was incapable in itself of bringing him to salvation. But, on the other hand, he could see that it had prepared him to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and laid the groundwork by which he came to accept the claims of Christ. Augustine believed that the Scripture was the authoritative Word of God, but in interpreting difficult scriptural concepts such as the Trinity, he found it necessary to utilize his own philosophical training to explain the teaching of Scripture.

Whereas Tertullian considered faith in Christ’s revelation of himself to be the only thing worth knowing, Augustine emphasized both the priority of faith and its incompleteness without the help of reason. One of his great insights is that faith is the foundation for all knowledge. Christians are often ridiculed for their faith, as if “faith” and “gullibility” were synonyms. But Augustine reminds us that each of us must trust some authority when making any truth claim, and that “faith” and “trust” are synonyms.

Consider a few examples: Christians and non-Christians alike agree that water freezes at zero degrees centigrade. However, I myself have never performed that experiment; I simply trust

what reliable scientific studies have confirmed. Likewise, no one living today was present at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, but all Americans celebrate that day as having been July 4, 1776. We trust the witness of those who were actually there. In other words, our knowledge *begins* with faith in some authority, just as Augustine emphasized.

But Augustine distinguished himself from Tertullian by acknowledging that philosophy does have a role in how the Christian understands God's revelation. Because humanity is made in the image of God, we are all capable of knowing truth. Augustine found in pagan philosophy helpful ideas that enabled him to elaborate God's Word. But it must be emphasized that his interest in pagan philosophy was not an end in itself, but rather a tool by which to grasp more deeply the meaning of Scripture.

What would Augustine have done if he had faced the choice of Indiana Jones? First, he would have needed scriptural support for such a choice. Secondly, he would have considered the logic of such a decision. Whereas Tertullian considered God's mind to be contrary to the philosophies of man, Augustine believed God created us to think His thoughts after Him. His was a reasonable faith. This is why his motto has been described as "faith seeking understanding."

The Synthesis of Thomas Aquinas

Now we turn to look at the teaching of the twelfth-century scholar Thomas Aquinas, whose own slogan has been called, "I understand in order to believe."

A good way to get a handle on Thomas's position is to recognize that his own motto is a reversal of Augustine's *faith seeking understanding*. It was Augustine who first explained the concept of *original sin*, which states that we are alienated from God at birth because we have inherited a sin nature from Adam. Thomas agreed that our moral conformity

to God had been lost, but he believed that sin had not completely corrupted our intellect. Thomas believed, therefore, that we could come to a basic knowledge of God without any special revelation. This is not to say that Thomas did not hold a high view of Scripture. Scripture was authoritative for Thomas. But he seemed to believe that divine revelation is a fuller explanation of what we are able to know about God on our own. For example, his attempts to prove the existence of God were based on the aftereffects of God's action in the world, such as the creation, rather than in the sure Word of Scripture. In contrast to Tertullian and Augustine, who placed faith in God's revelation of Christ as the foundation for knowledge, Thomas started with human reason and philosophy. His hope was to show that even people who reject the Scripture could come to believe in God through the use of their intellects. But the Scriptures were necessary since the human mind cannot even conceive of concepts such as the Trinity.

Thomas lived at a time when most of Aristotle's philosophy was first being introduced into the Latin language. This created quite a stir in the universities of the day. Up until that time, Augustine's emphasis on an education centered on Scripture was the dominant view. Thomas himself was educated in the tradition of Augustine, but he appreciated the philosophy of Aristotle as a witness to the truth. He found Aristotle to be more balanced in his approach to philosophy than Augustine had been. Whereas Augustine emphasized the eternal realm in his own philosophy, Aristotle's philosophy confirmed the importance of the natural world as well and assisted Thomas in his effort to create a comprehensive Christian philosophy which recognized that the material world was important because it had been created by God and was the arena in which His redemptive plan was to be fulfilled. Prior to Thomas, the tendency had been to downplay the physical world as greatly inferior to the spiritual world.

If we were to place Thomas in the shoes of Indiana Jones, it is likely that he would have stepped out as well. But he would have arrived at the decision for different reasons than Tertullian or Augustine. Because of his emphasis on the thinking ability of the human race and his emphasis on physical reality, he might have knelt down on the ground and felt for the hidden pathway before actually stepping out. Since he leaned toward utilizing reason and his own understanding to discover the bridge, he would not have depended solely on revelation to cross over like the others.

We will conclude our series as we evaluate the implications of the three different views of faith and reason that we have been examining in this discussion.

Implications

We have been examining three distinctive positions on the question of faith and reason. Basically, we have been attempting to discern whether or not human reason, as expressed in pagan philosophy, is a help or a hindrance to Christian theology.

The first position we addressed was that of Tertullian, who viewed the combination of divine revelation and Greek philosophy as the root of all false teaching in the church. We then showed that even though Augustine agreed with Tertullian that faith in divine revelation is primary for the Christian, they differed in that Tertullian emphasized *belief in* the Scriptures, while Augustine focused on the *understanding* of what one believes. That is why he was willing to incorporate pagan philosophy to help further his understanding of Christian theology. He was delighted to find pagans whose philosophy, though not Christian in and of itself, was in some way compatible with Christianity.

The third and final position we examined was that of Thomas Aquinas, who believed that all people could have a basic

knowledge of God purely through natural reason. He did not agree with Augustine that the human mind had been totally corrupted by sin at the Fall. This belief led to his elevation of the power of the mind and his appreciation of philosophy. Theology is the higher form of wisdom, but it needs the tools of science and philosophy in order to practice its own trade. Theology learns from philosophy, because ultimately theology is a human task.

How we view the relationship between faith and reason can have powerful implications for how the Christian engages society with the gospel. One of the problems with the apologetics of Tertullian is that he seemed to view all that opposed him to be enemies of the gospel, rather than as potential converts. This is in stark contrast to the behavior of the Apostle Paul in Acts 17, when he proclaimed the gospel among the Greeks at Mars Hill. He did not condemn them for their initial failure to accept the Resurrection. Instead, he attempted to reach common ground with them by quoting some of their own philosophers, picking out isolated statements from pagan thinkers which were consistent with Scripture, while still maintaining the absolute truth of Scripture as his foundation. In this way, he was able to gain a hearing with some of his listeners. But this presupposes some familiarity with pagan thought. This familiarity made Paul a more effective witness to his audience.

Paul's attitude toward pagan philosophy seems to be consistent with those of Augustine and Aquinas. All three felt it was beneficial to know what the non-believer thought in order to communicate the gospel. How then can believers apply this attitude today without compromising their values? Perhaps it involves Christian parents listening with their children to the music they enjoy, and then constructively discussing its message. After all, many contemporary musicians utilize their music to proclaim their own philosophies of life. Or maybe it will mean watching a popular movie that has taken the country

by storm, with the goal of discerning its importance to the average viewer. Rather than criticizing literature, philosophy, film, or music that is not explicitly Christian, we may find that by attempting to appreciate their value or worth, no matter how meager, we may be better able to dialogue with, and confront, our post-Christian culture with the claims of Christ.

© 1998 Probe Ministries.

Blaise Pascal: An Apologist for Our Times – A Defense of Christianity Ringing True Today

Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

One of the tasks of Christian apologetics is to serve as a tool for evangelism. It is very easy, however, to stay in the realm of ideas and never confront unbelievers with the necessity of putting their faith in Christ.

One apologist who was not guilty of this was Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth-century mathematician, scientist, inventor and Christian apologist. Christ and the need for redemption through Him were central to Pascal's apologetics.

There was another feature of Pascal's thought that was, and

remains, rare in apologetics: his understanding of the human condition as both created and fallen, and his use of that understanding as a point of contact with unbelievers.

Peter Kreeft, a modern day Christian philosopher and apologist, says that Pascal is a man for *our* day. "Pascal," he says, "is three centuries ahead of his time. He addresses his apologetic to modern pagans, sophisticated skeptics, comfortable members of the new secular intelligentsia. He is the first to realize the new dechristianized, desacramentalized world and to address it. He belongs to us. . . . Pascal is our prophet. No one after this seventeenth-century man has so accurately described our twentieth-century mind." [\[1\]](#)

Pascal was born June 19, 1623 in Clermont, France, and moved to Paris in 1631. His mother died when he was three, and he was raised by his father, a respected mathematician, who personally directed his education.

Young Blaise took after his father in mathematics. In 1640, at age 16, he published an essay on the sections of a cone which was much praised. [\[2\]](#) Between 1642 and 1644 Pascal developed a calculating machine for his father to use in his tax computations. Later, he "invented the syringe, refined Torricelli's barometer, and created the hydraulic press, an instrument based upon the principles which came to be known as Pascal's law" of pressure. [\[3\]](#) He did important work on the problem of the vacuum, and he is also known for his work on the calculus of probabilities.

Although a Catholic in belief and practice, after the death of his father and the entrance of his younger sister into a convent, Pascal entered a very worldly phase of his life. Things changed, however, on the night of November 23, 1654, when he underwent a remarkable conversion experience which changed the course of his life. He joined a community of scholars in Port-Royal, France, who were known as Jansenists.

Although he participated in the prayers and work of the group, he didn't become a full-fledged member himself. However, he assisted them in a serious controversy with the Jesuits, and some of his writings on their behalf are considered "a monument in the evolution of French prose" by historians of the language.[{4}](#)

In 1657 and 1658 Pascal wrote notes on apologetics which he intended to organize into a book. These notes were published after his death as the *Pensees*, which means "thoughts" in French. It is this collection of writings which has established Pascal in Christian apologetics. This book is still available today in several different versions.[{5}](#)

Pascal was a rather sickly young man, and in the latter part of his short life he suffered from severe pain. On August 19, 1662, at the age of 39, Pascal died. His last words were "May God never abandon me!"[{6}](#)

The Human Condition

To properly understand Pascal's apologetics, it's important to recognize his motive. Pascal wasn't interested in defending Christianity as a system of belief; his interest was evangelistic. He wanted to persuade people to believe in Jesus. When apologetics has evangelism as its primary goal, it has to take into account the condition of the people being addressed. For Pascal the human condition was the starting point and point of contact for apologetics.

In his analysis of man, Pascal focuses on two very contradictory sides of fallen human nature. Man is both noble and wretched. Noble, because he is created in God's image; wretched, because he is fallen and alienated from God. In one of his more passionate notes, Pascal says this:

What kind of freak is man! What a novelty he is, how absurd he is, how chaotic and what a mass of contradictions, and

yet what a prodigy! He is judge of all things, yet a feeble worm. He is repository of truth, and yet sinks into such doubt and error. He is the glory and the scum of the universe!{7}

Furthermore, Pascal says, we know that we are wretched. But it is this very knowledge that shows our greatness.

Pascal says it's important to have a right understanding of ourselves. He says "it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it." Thus, our message must be that "there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature which renders them unworthy of Him." {8} This prepares the unbeliever to hear about the Redeemer who reconciles the sinner with the Creator.

Pascal says that people know deep down that there is a problem, but we resist slowing down long enough to think about it. He says:

Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist. Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he faces his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair. {9}

Pascal says there are two ways people avoid thinking about such matters: diversion and indifference. Regarding diversion, he says we fill up our time with relatively useless activities simply to avoid facing the truth of our wretchedness. "The natural misfortune of our mortality and weakness is so miserable," he says, "that nothing can console us when we really think about it. . . . The only good thing for man,

therefore, is to be diverted so that he will stop thinking about his circumstances.” Business, gambling, and entertainment are examples of things which keep us busy in this way.[{10}](#)

The other response to our condition is indifference. The most important question we can ask is What happens after death? Life is but a few short years, and death is forever. Our state after death should be of paramount importance, shouldn't it? But the attitude people take is this:

Just as I do Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist. not know where I came from, so I do not know where I am going. All I know is that when I leave this world I shall fall forever into oblivion, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of the two will be my lot for eternity. Such is my state of mind, full of weakness and uncertainty. The only conclusion I can draw from all this is that I must pass my days without a thought of trying to find out what is going to happen to me.[{11}](#)

Pascal is appalled that people think this way, and he wants to shake people out of their stupor and make them think about eternity. Thus, the condition of man is his starting point for moving people toward a genuine knowledge of God.

Knowledge of the Heart

Pascal lived in the age of the rise of rationalism. Revelation had fallen on hard times; man's reason was now the final source for truth. In the realm of religious belief many people exalted reason and adopted a deistic view of God. Some, however, became skeptics. They doubted the competence of both revelation and reason.

Although Pascal couldn't side with the skeptics, neither would he go the way of the rationalists. Instead of arguing that

revelation was a better source of truth than reason, he focused on the limitations of reason itself. (I should stop here to note that by *reason* Pascal meant the reasoning process. He did not deny the true powers of reason; he was, after all, a scientist and mathematician.) Although the advances in science increased man's knowledge, it also made people aware of how little they knew. Thus, through our reason we realize that reason itself has limits. "Reason's last step," Pascal said, "is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it."[{12}](#) Our knowledge is somewhere between certainty and complete ignorance, Pascal believed.[{13}](#) The bottom line is that we need to know when to affirm something as true, when to doubt, and when to submit to authority.[{14}](#)

Besides the problem of our limited knowledge, Pascal also noted how our reason is easily distracted by our senses and hindered by our passions.[{15}](#) "The two so-called principles of truth*reason and the senses*are not only not genuine but are engaged in mutual deception. Through false appearances the senses deceive reason. And just as they trick the soul, they are in turn tricked by it. It takes its revenge. The senses are influenced by the passions which produce false impressions."[{16}](#) Things sometimes appear to our senses other than they really are, such as the way a stick appears bent when put in water. Our emotions or passions also influence how we think about things. And our imagination, which Pascal says is our dominant faculty[{17}](#), often has precedence over our reason. A bridge suspended high over a ravine might be wide enough and sturdy enough, but our imagination sees us surely falling off.

So, our finiteness, our senses, our passions, and our imagination can adversely influence our powers of reason. But Pascal believed that people really *do* know some things to be true even if they cannot account for it rationally. Such knowledge comes through another channel, namely, the heart.

This brings us to what is perhaps the best known quotation of Pascal: “The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.”[{18}](#) In other words, there are times that we know something is true but we did not come to that knowledge through logical reasoning, neither can we give a logical argument to support that belief.

For Pascal, the heart is “the ‘intuitive’ mind” rather than “the ‘geometrical’ (calculating, reasoning) mind.”[{19}](#) For example, we know when we aren’t dreaming. But we can’t prove it rationally. However, this only proves that our reason has weaknesses; it does not prove that our knowledge is completely uncertain. Furthermore, our knowledge of such first principles as space, time, motion, and number is certain even though known by the heart and not arrived at by reason. In fact, reason bases its arguments on such knowledge.[{20}](#) Knowledge of the heart and knowledge of reason might be arrived at in different ways, but they are both valid. And neither can demand that knowledge coming through the other should submit to its own dictates.

The Knowledge of God

If reason is limited in its understanding of the natural order, knowledge of God can be especially troublesome. “If natural things are beyond [reason],” Pascal said, “what are we to say about supernatural things?”[{21}](#)

There are several factors which hinder our knowledge of God. As noted before, we are limited by our finitude. How can the finite understand the infinite?[{22}](#) Another problem is that we cannot see clearly because we are in the darkness of sin. Our will is turned away from God, and our reasoning abilities are also adversely affected.

There is another significant limitation on our knowledge of God. Referring to Isaiah 8:17 and 45:15[{23}](#), Pascal says that as a result of our sin God deliberately hides Himself (“hides”

in the sense that He doesn't speak}. One reason He does this is to test our will. Pascal says, "God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will." God wants to "humble [our] pride."[{24}](#)

But God doesn't remain completely hidden; He is both hidden and revealed. "If there were no obscurity," Pascal says, "man would not feel his corruption: if there were no light man could not hope for a cure."[{25}](#)

God not only hides Himself to test our will; He also does it so that we can only come to Him through Christ, not by working through some logical proofs. "God is a hidden God," says Pascal, " and . . . since nature was corrupted [God] has left men to their blindness, from which they can escape only through Jesus Christ, without whom all communication with God is broken off. *Neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whosoever the Son will reveal him.*"[{26}](#)

Pascal's apologetic is decidedly Christocentric. True knowledge of God isn't mere intellectual assent to the reality of a divine being. It *must* include a knowledge of Christ through whom God revealed Himself. He says:

All who have claimed to know God and to prove his existence without Jesus Christ have done so ineffectively. . . . Apart from him, and without Scripture, without original sin, without the necessary Mediator who was promised and who came, it is impossible to prove absolutely that God exists, or to teach sound doctrine and sound morality. But through and in Jesus Christ we can prove God's existence, and teach both doctrine and morality.[{27}](#)

If we do not know Christ, we cannot understand God as the judge and the redeemer of sinners. It is a limited knowledge that doesn't do any good. As Pascal says, "That is why I am not trying to prove naturally the existence of God, or indeed the Trinity, or the immortality of the soul or anything of that kind. This is not just because I do not feel competent to

find natural arguments that will convince obdurate atheists, but because such knowledge, without Christ, is useless and empty." A person with this knowledge has not "made much progress toward his salvation."[{28}](#) What Pascal wants to avoid is proclaiming a deistic God who stands remote and expects from us only that we live good, moral lives. Deism needs no redeemer.

But even in Christ, God has not revealed Himself so overwhelmingly that people cannot refuse to believe. In the last days God will be revealed in a way that everyone will have to acknowledge Him. In Christ, however, God was still hidden enough that people who didn't want what was good would not have it forced upon them. Thus, "there is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition."[{29}](#)

There is still one more issue which is central to Pascal's thinking about the knowledge of God. He says that no one can come to know God apart from faith. This is a theme of central importance for Pascal; it clearly sets him apart from other apologists of his day. Faith is the knowledge of the heart that only God gives. "It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason," says Pascal. "That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason."[{30}](#) "By faith we know he exists," he says.[{31}](#) "Faith is different from proof. One is human and the other a gift of God. . . . This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts. . . ."[{32}](#) Pascal continues, "We shall never believe with an effective belief and faith unless God inclines our hearts. Then we shall believe as soon as he inclines them."[{33}](#)

To emphasize the centrality of heart knowledge in Pascal's thinking, I deliberately left off the end of one of the sentences above. Describing the faith God gives, Pascal said, "This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts, often using proof as the instrument."[{34}](#)

This is rather confusing. Pascal says non-believers are in darkness, so proofs will only find obscurity.[{35}](#) He notes that “no writer within the canon [of Scripture] has ever used nature to prove the existence of God. They all try to help people believe in him.”[{36}](#) He also expresses astonishment at Christians who begin their defense by making a case for the existence of God.

Their enterprise would cause me no surprise if they were addressing the arguments to the faithful, for those with living faith in their hearts can certainly see at once that everything which exists is entirely the work of the God they worship. But for those in whom this light has gone out and in who we are trying to rekindle it, people deprived of faith and grace, . . . to tell them, I say, that they have only to look at the least thing around them and they will see in it God plainly revealed; to give them no other proof of this great and weighty matter than the course of the moon and the planets; to claim to have completed the proof with such an argument; this is giving them cause to think that the proofs of our religion are indeed feeble. . . . This is not how Scripture speaks, with its better knowledge of the things of God.[{37}](#)

But now Pascal says that God often uses proofs as the instrument of faith. He also says in one place, “The way of God, who disposes all things with gentleness, is to instil [*sic*] religion into our minds with reasoned arguments and into our hearts with grace. . . .”[{38}](#)

The explanation for this tension can perhaps be seen in the *types* of proofs Pascal uses. Pascal won't argue from nature. Rather he'll point to evidences such as the marks of divinity within man, and those which affirm Christ's claims, such as prophecies and miracles, the most important being prophecies.[{39}](#) He also speaks of Christian doctrine “which gives a reason for everything,” the establishment of Christianity despite its being so contrary to nature, and the

testimony of the apostles who could have been neither deceivers nor deceived.[{40}](#) So Pascal *does* believe there are positive evidences for belief. Although he does not intend to give reasons for everything, neither does he expect people to agree without having a reason.[{41}](#)

Nonetheless, even evidences such as these do not produce saving faith. He says, “The prophecies of Scripture, even the miracles and proofs of our faith, are not the kind of evidence that are absolutely convincing. . . . There is . . . enough evidence to condemn and yet not enough to convince. . . .” People who believe do so by grace; those who reject the faith do so because of their lusts. Reason isn’t the key.[{42}](#)

Pascal says that, while our faith has the strongest of evidences in favor of it, “it is not for these reasons that people adhere to it. . . . What makes them believe,” he says, “is the cross.” At which point he quotes 1 Corinthians 1:17: “Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”[{43}](#)

The Wager

The question that demands to be answered, of course, is this: If our reason is inadequate to find God, even through valid evidences, how *does* one find God? Says Pascal:

Let us then examine the point and say: “Either God exists, or he does not.” But which of the alternatives shall we choose? Reason cannot decide anything. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you bet? Reason cannot determine how you will choose, nor can reason defend your position of choice.[{44}](#)

At this point Pascal challenges us to accept his wager. Simply put, the wager says we should bet on Christianity because the rewards are infinite if it’s true, while the losses will be insignificant if it’s false.[{45}](#) If it’s true and you have

rejected it, you've lost everything. However, if it's false but you have believed it, at least you've led a good life and you haven't lost anything. Of course, the best outcome is if one believes Christianity to be true and it turns out that it is!

But the unbeliever might say it's better not to choose at all. Not so, says Pascal. You're going to live one way or the other, believing in God or not believing in God; you can't remain in suspended animation. You must choose.

In response the unbeliever might say that everything in him works against belief. "I am being forced to gamble and I am not free," he says, "for they will not let me go. I have been made in such a way that I cannot help disbelieving. So what do you expect me to do?"[{46}](#) After all, Pascal has said that faith comes from God, not from us.

Pascal says our inability to believe is a problem of the emotions or passions. Don't try to convince yourself by examining more proofs and evidences, he says, "but by controlling your emotions." You want to believe but don't know how. So follow the examples of those who "were once in bondage but who now are prepared to risk their whole life. . . . Follow the way by which they began. They simply behaved as though they believed" by participating in various Christian rituals. And what can be the harm? "You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a true and genuine friend. . . . I assure you that you will gain in this life, and that with every step you take along this way, you will realize you have bet on something sure and infinite which has cost you nothing."[{47}](#)

Remember that Pascal sees faith as a gift from God, and he believes that God will show Himself to whomever sincerely seeks Him.[{48}](#) By taking him up on the wager and putting yourself in a place where you are open to God, God will give you faith. He will give you sufficient light to know what is

really true.

Scholars have argued over the validity of Pascal's wager for centuries. In this writer's opinion, it has significant weaknesses. What about all the other religions, one of which could (in the opinion of the unbeliever) be true?

However, the idea is an intriguing one. Pascal's assertion that one must choose seems reasonable. Even if such a wager cannot have the kind of mathematical force Pascal seemed to think, it could work to startle the unbeliever into thinking more seriously about the issue. The important thing here is to challenge people to choose, and to choose the right course.

Summary

Pascal began his apologetics with an analysis of the human condition drawn from the experience of the new, modern man. He showed what a terrible position man is in, and he argued that man is not capable of finding all the answers through reason. He insisted that the deistic approach to God was inadequate, and proclaimed Christ whose claims found support in valid evidences such as prophecies and miracles. He then called people to press through the emotional bonds which kept them separate from God and put themselves in a place where they could find God, or rather be found by Him.

Is Blaise Pascal a man for our times? Whether or not you agree with the validity of Pascal's wager or some other aspect of his apologetics, I think we can gain some valuable insights from his ideas. His description of man as caught between his own nobility and baseness while trying to avoid looking closely at his condition certainly rings true of twentieth-century man. His insistence on keeping the concrete truth of Christ at the center keeps his apologetics tied to the central theme of Christianity, namely, that our identity is found in Jesus, where there is room for neither pride nor despair, and that in Jesus we can come to a true knowledge of God. For

apart from the knowledge of Christ, all the speculation in the world about God will do little good.

Notes

1. Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensees Edited, Outlined and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 13, 189.
2. Hugh M. Davidson, *Blaise Pascal* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 4.
3. The New Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia, 15th ed., s.v. "Pascal, Blaise."
4. Davidson, 18.
5. James Houston's translation, *Mind On First: A Faith for the Skeptical and Indifferent* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), will be quoted extensively in these notes. This version was edited to retain only the individual pensees which are pertinent for apologetics. *Mind On Fire* also includes edited versions of some of Pascal's Provincial Letters, the ones he wrote against the Jesuits. The reader might also want to refer to Peter Kreeft's version (cf. note 1 above) which includes Kreeft's comments on individual pensees.
6. Davidson, 22.
7. Houston, 91.
8. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. W.F. Trotter, 97.
9. Kreeft, 187.
10. Houston, 96.
11. *Ibid.*, 122.
12. Kreeft, 238.
13. *Ibid.*, 124.
14. *Ibid.*, 236.
15. Houston, 58.
16. *Ibid.*, 58.
17. *Ibid.*, 53.
18. Trotter, 50.
19. Kreeft, 228.

20. Ibid., 229.
21. Ibid., 238.
22. Ibid., 120-26, 293.
23. Trotter, 178; see also 130.
24. Kreeft, 247.
25. Ibid., 249.
26. Ibid., 251.
27. Houston, 147.
28. Ibid., 149.
29. Kreeft, 69.
30. Ibid., 232.
31. Houston, 130.
32. Kreeft, 240.
33. Houston, 223.
34. Kreeft, 240.
35. Houston, 151.
36. Ibid., 152.
37. Kreeft, 250-51.
38. Ibid., 240.
39. Houston, 205; Trotter, 52.
40. Trotter, 52; Kreeft, 266.
41. Houston, 116-17.
42. Ibid., 221-22.
43. Ibid., 223.
44. Ibid., 130-31.
45. Kreeft, 292.
46. Houston, 133.
47. Ibid., 133.
48. Kreeft, 251, 255.