

Truth Decay

We live in a world that has dramatically changed its view of truth. What is the impact of the worldview of postmodernism and the ethical system of relativism in our society and inside the church?

Three Views of Truth

We live in a world that has dramatically changed its view of truth, and thus have inherited an ethical system that denies the existence of truth. The worldview of the twenty-first century is postmodernism, and the dominant ethical system of the last two centuries has been relativism.

To understand this changed view of truth, we need to consider the story of three baseball umpires.^{1} One said, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way they are." Another said, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way I see 'em." And the third umpire said, "There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't nothing until I call them."



Their three different views of balls and strikes correspond with three different views of truth. The first is what we might call *premodernism*. This is a God-centered view of the universe that believes in divine revelation. Most of the ancient world had this view of true and believed that truth is absolute ("I call 'em the way they are"). By the time of the Enlightenment, Western culture was moving into a time of *modernism*. This view was influenced by the scientific revolution, and began to reject a belief in God. In this period, truth is relative ("I call 'em the way I see 'em"). Today we live in what many call *postmodernism*. In this view, there is a complete loss of hope for truth. Truth is not discovered; truth is created ("they ain't nothing until I call them").

Postmodernism is built upon the belief that truth doesn't exist except as the individual wants it to exist. Truth isn't objective or absolute. Truth is personal and relative. Postmodernism isn't really a set of doctrines or truth claims. It is a completely new way of dealing with the world of ideas. It has had a profound influence in nearly every academic area: literature, history, politics, education, law, sociology, linguistics, even the sciences.

Postmodernism, however, is based upon a set of self-defeating propositions. What is a self-defeating proposition? If I said that my brother is an only child, you would say that my statement is self-refuting. An only child would not have a brother. Likewise, postmodernism is self-refuting.

Postmodernists assert that all worldviews have an equal claim to the truth. In other words, they deny absolute truth. But the denial of absolute truth is self-defeating. The claim that all worldviews are relative is true for everyone, everywhere, at all times. But that claim itself is an absolute truth.

It's like the student who said there was no absolute truth. When asked if his statement was an absolute truth. He said, "Absolutely." So he essentially said that he absolutely believed there was no absolute truth, except the absolute truth that there is no absolute truth!

Postmodernism

Postmodernism may seem tolerant, but in many ways it is not. For example, postmodernists tend to be skeptical of people (e.g., Christians) who claim to know truth. Now that doesn't mean that it is hostile to religion or spirituality. Postmodernists have no problem with religion unless it makes certain claims about its religion.

Postmodernists tolerate religion as long as it makes no claim to universal truth and has no authority. But they are very

critical of those who believe there is one truth or an absolute truth. They are also critical of Christian missionaries because they believe they are "destroyers of culture." This is reminiscent of the TV show "Star Trek" that had "The Prime Directive" which prohibited those on the star ship from interfering with any culture. The assumption was that each culture must decide what is true for itself.

Related to this idea of cultural relativism is the belief in religious pluralism. This is the belief that every religion is true. While it is proper to show respect for people of different religious faiths, it is incorrect to assume that all religions are true.

Various religions and religious groups make competing truth claims, so they cannot all be true. For example, God is either personal or God is impersonal. If God is personal then Judaism, Christianity, and Islam could be true. But the eastern religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) are false. Either Jesus is the Messiah or He is not. If He is the Messiah then Christianity is true, and Judaism is false.

Religious pluralism essentially violates the "Law of Non-contradiction." This law states that A and the opposite of A cannot both be true (at the same time in the same way). You cannot have square circles. And you cannot have competing and contradictory religious truth claims all be true at the same time.

Jesus made this very clear in John 14:6 when He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Jesus taught that salvation was through Him and no one else. This contradicts other religions.

Postmodernism has also changed the highest value in society. We used to live in a society that believed in "Truth" (with a capital T). This has now been replaced by a new word with a capital T. And that is the word "Tolerance." We are told to

tolerate every view and value. Essentially, all moral questions can be summed up with the phrase: Who are you to say?

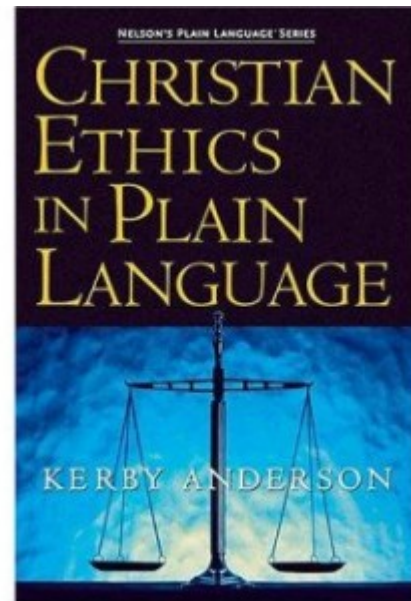
Moral Relativism

The worldview of postmodernism provides the foundation for moral relativism. Although a view of ethics as relative began in the era of modernism, it has reached full bloom in the era of postmodernism. If there is no absolute truth, then there is no absolute standard for ethical behavior. And if truth is merely personal preference, then certainly ethics is personal and situational.

Moral relativism is the belief that morality is relative to the person. In other words, there is no set of rules that universally applies to everyone. In a sense, moral relativism can be summed up with the phrase: "It all depends." Is murder always wrong? Relativists would say, "It depends on the circumstances." Is adultery wrong? They would say, "It just depends on whether you are caught."

Moral relativism is also self-defeating. People who say they believe in relativism cannot live consistently within their ethical system. Moral relativists make moral judgments all the time. They speak out against racism, exploitation, genocide, and much more. Christians have a consistent foundation to speak out against these social evils based upon God's revelation. Moral relativists do not.

There are two other problems with moral relativism. First, one cannot critique morality from the outside. In my book *Christian Ethics in Plain Language*, I point out the problem with cultural relativism.^{2} If ethics are relative to each culture, then anyone outside the culture loses the right to critique it. Essentially that was the



argument of the Nazi leaders during the Nuremberg Trials. What right do you have to criticize what we did within Nazi Germany? We had our own system of morality. Fortunately, the judges and Western society rejected such a notion.

Second, one cannot critique morality from the inside. Cultural relativism leaves no place for social reformers. The abolition movement, the suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement are all examples of social movements that ran counter to the social circumstances of the culture. Reformers like William Wilberforce or Martin Luther King Jr. stood up in the midst of society and pointed out immoral practices and called society to a moral solution. Abolishing slavery and fighting for civil rights were good things even if they were opposed by many people within society.

Not only is moral relativism self-defeating; it is dangerous. Moral relativism leads to moral anarchy. It is based upon the assumption that every person should be allowed to live according to his or her own moral standards. Consider how dangerous that would be in a society with such vastly different moral standards.

Some people think stealing is perfectly moral, at least in certain circumstances. Some people think murder can be justified. Society simply cannot allow everyone to do what

they think is right in their own eyes.

Obviously, society allows a certain amount of moral anarchy when there is no threat to life, liberty, or property. Each year when I go to the state fair, I see lots of anarchy when I watch the people using the bumper cars. In that situation, we allow people to “do their own thing.” But if those same people started acting like that on the highway, we simply could not allow them to “do their own thing.” There is a threat to life, liberty, and property.

Moral relativism may sound nice and tolerant and liberating. But if ever implemented at a societal level, it would be dangerous. We simply cannot allow total moral anarchy without reverting to barbarism. That is the consequence of living in a world that has changed its view of truth and established an ethical system that denies the existence of truth.

Impact of Truth Decay

What has been the impact of a loss of truth in society? There are many ways to measure this, and many ministries and organizations have done just that.

Each year the Nehemiah Institute gives the PEERS test to thousands of teenagers and adults. They have administered this test since 1988. The PEERS test measures understanding in five categories: Politics, Economics, Education, Religion, and Social Issues.^{3} It consists of a series of statements carefully structured to identify a person’s worldview in those five categories.

Based upon the answers, the respondent is then classified under one of four major worldview categories: Christian Theism, Moderate Christian, Secular Humanism, or Socialism. In the mid-1980s, it was common for Christian youth to score in the Moderate Christian worldview category. Not anymore.

Currently, Christian students at public schools score in the lower half of secular humanism, headed toward a socialistic worldview. And seventy-five percent of students in Christian schools score as secular humanists.

Take this question from the PEERS test as an example: "Moral values are subjective and personal. They are the right of each individual. Individuals should be allowed to conduct life as they choose as long as it does not interfere with the lives of others." The Nehemiah Institute found that seventy-five percent of youth agreed with this statement.

Let's also consider the work of George Barna. He conducted a national survey of adults and concluded that only four percent of adults have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision-making. The survey also discovered that nine percent of born again Christians have such a perspective on life.[{4}](#) And when you look at the questions, you can see that what is defined as a biblical worldview is really just basic Christian doctrine.

George Barna has also found that a minority of born again adults (forty-four percent) and an even smaller proportion of born again teenagers (nine percent) are certain of the existence of absolute moral truth.[{5}](#)

By a three-to-one margin, adults say truth is always relative to the person and their situation. This perspective is even more lopsided among teenagers who overwhelmingly believe moral truth depends on the circumstances.[{6}](#)

Back in 1994, the Barna Research Group conducted a survey of church youth for Josh McDowell. Now remember, we are talking about young people who regularly attend church. They found that of these church youth, fifty-seven percent could not say that an objective standard of truth exists. They also found that eighty-five percent of these same church youth reason that "just because it's wrong for you doesn't mean its

wrong for me.”

George Barna says that the younger generation tends to be composed of non-linear thinkers. In other words, they often cut and paste their beliefs and values from a variety of sources, even if they are contradictory.

More to the point, they hold these contradictory ideas because they do not have a firm belief in absolute truth. If truth is personal and not objective, then there is no right decision and each person should do what is right for him or her.

Biblical Perspective

What is a biblical perspective on postmodernism? One of the problems with the postmodern worldview is that it affects the way we read the Bible.

Because of the popularity of postmodernism, people are reading literature (including the Bible) differently than before. Literary interpretation uses what is called “postmodern deconstruction.” Not only is this used in English classes on high school and college campuses, it is being applied to biblical interpretation.

Many Christians no longer interpret the Bible by what it says. Instead, they interpret the Bible by asking what the passage means to them. While biblical application is important, we must first begin by understanding the intent of the author. Once that principle goes out the window, proper biblical interpretation is in jeopardy.

So what should we do? First we must be prepared for the intellectual and philosophical battle we face in the twenty-first century. Colossians 2:8 says, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”

We must also be studying the Scriptures on a daily basis. Paul says the Bereans were “noble-minded” because “they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Studies of born again Christians say that they are not reading their Bibles on a regular basis. An important antidote to postmodernism and relativism is daily Scripture study so that we make sure that we are not being conformed to the culture (Romans 12:2).

We should also develop discernment, especially when we are considering the worldviews that are promoted in the media. Philippians 4:8 says, “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”

The average student in America watches 22,000 hours of television before graduation. That same student also listens to 11,000 hours of music during their teenage years. Add to this time spent on a computer, on the Internet, and absorbing the culture through books and magazines.

Postmodernism is having a profound impact on our society. This erosion of truth is affecting the way we view the world. And the rejection of absolutes leads naturally to a rejection of absolute moral standards and the promotion of moral relativism.

Christians must wisely discern these trends and apply proper biblical instruction to combat these views.

Notes

1. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 31.

2. Kerby Anderson, *Christian Ethics in Plain Language* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 11-15.
3. www.nehemiahinstitute.com/peers.php.
4. "A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person's Life," *The Barna Update* (Ventura, CA), 1 Dec. 2003.
5. "The Year's Most Intriguing Findings, From Barna Research Studies," *The Barna Update* (Ventura, CA), 12 Dec. 2000.
6. "Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings," *The Barna Update* (Ventura, CA), 12 Feb. 2002.

Suggested Reading:

Francis Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998).

Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).

Dennis McCallum, *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1996).

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Christianity and Religious Pluralism – Are There Multiple Ways to Heaven?

Rick Wade takes a hard look at the inconsistencies of religious pluralism. He concludes that if Christ is a way to heaven there cannot be other ways to heaven. Whether Christianity is true or not, pluralism does not make rational sense as it considers all religious traditions to be essentially the same.

Aren't All Religions Basically the Same?

In a humorous short article in which he highlighted some of the silly beliefs people hold today, Steve Turner wrote, "We believe that all religions are basically the same, at least the one we read was. They all believe in love and goodness. They only differ on matters of creation sin heaven hell God and salvation."[\[1\]](#)

It is the common belief today that all religions are basically the same. They may *look* different—they may differ with respect to holy books or forms of worship or specific ideas about God—but at the root they're pretty much the same. That idea has become so deeply rooted that it is considered common knowledge. To express doubt about it draws an incredulous stare. Obviously, anyone who thinks one religion is the true one is close-minded and benighted! More than that, the person is clearly a bigot who probably even hates people of other religions (or people with no religion at all). Now, this way of thinking is very seldom formed by serious consideration of the issues, I believe (although there are knowledgeable scholars who hold to it), but that doesn't matter. It is part of our cultural currency and is held with the same conviction as the belief that planets in the solar system revolve around the Sun and not Earth.

On the surface at least, it's clear enough that the various religions of the world are different. Theists believe in one personal God; Hindus believe in many gods; atheists deny any God exists. Just on that issue alone, the differences are obvious. Add to that the many beliefs about the dilemma of the human race and how it is to be solved. Why don't people understand the significance of these differences? On the scholarly level, the fundamental objection is this. It is believed that, if there is a God, he (or she or it) is too different from us for us to know him (or her or it). Because of our limitations, he couldn't possibly reveal himself to us.

Religious writings, then, are merely human attempts at explaining religious experience without actually being objectively true.

Philosopher John Hick wrote that this is really a problem of language. Statements about God don't have the same truth value as ones about, say, the weather, because "there is no . . . agreement about how to determine the truth value of statements about God."[\[2\]](#) We use religious language because it is meaningful to us, but there is really no way to confirm the truth of such talk. Because we can't really know what the truth is about God, we do our best to guess at it. For this reason, we are not to suggest that our beliefs are true and others false.

On the more popular level, the loss of confidence in being able to know religious and moral truths which comes from academia and filters through the media, is teamed up with an inclusivist attitude that doesn't want anyone left out—that is, if there are any truths to be known.

I want to take a look at the issue of religious pluralism, the belief that there are many valid ways to God. We'll start with some definitions and a reminder of what historical Christianity teaches about God and us and how we can be reconciled to Him.

Starting Points

There are three basic positions on the question of the relation of Christianity to other religions. The historic view is called *exclusivism*. That word can be a real turn-off to people because we live in an inclusivistic era. What it means in this context is that the claim of Christianity that Jesus is the only way means that all other ways to God are excluded. If Jesus is the only way to the one true God, then no other claims can be true.

Another view on the matter is *inclusivism*. This is the belief that, while salvation is made possible only by the cross of Christ, it can be obtained without hearing the gospel. Even people who are externally part of other religions traditions can be saved. This is a temptation for Christians who are convinced that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, but don't like the idea that there are people who haven't heard the gospel who thus cannot be saved.

By religious *pluralism*, we mean the belief that all religions (at least the major, enduring ones) are valid as ways to relate to God. There is nothing unique about Christ; He was one of many influential religious teachers and leaders. This is the position I'll be considering in this article.

Before looking at pluralism, it would be good to review the historic Christian understanding of salvation to bring the contrast into bold relief.

One God

The Bible is clear that there is one God. Through Isaiah the prophet God said, "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God" (Is. 45:5a; see also 43:10; 44:6).

Beyond this, it's important to note that, philosophically speaking, it is impossible that there could be two (or more) "Gods" like the God of the Bible. Scripture is clear that God is everywhere present at once, so there can't be a truly competing presence (Ps. 139:7-12). God is capable of doing whatever He wills. There can be no ultimate interference by another deity. "The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths," says the Psalmist (135:6). Or more succinctly, "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Ps. 115:3; see also Dan. 4:35). How could there be two Gods like this? They would have to be absolutely identical, since neither one could be interfered with. And if so, they would be the same God!

One Savior

The Bible is also clear that there is only one Savior. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (Jn. 14:6). To the rulers and elders and scribes in Jerusalem, Peter declared, "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Theological necessity

In addition, it was theologically necessary for salvation to come through Christ alone. In Hebrews chapter 9 we read that the death of the sacrifice was necessary. According to Hebrews chapter 7, the Savior had to be divine (see also 2 Cor. 5:21). And Hebrews 2:17 says the Savior had to be human. Jesus is the only one who fulfills those requirements.

One more consideration

To this we can add the fact that the apostles never even hinted that people could be saved any other way than through Christ. It is this belief that has fueled evangelistic endeavors all over the world.

Religious Pluralism Can't Accomplish Its Goal

Even on the surface of it, the notion of religious pluralism is contradictory. If we can't know that particular religions are true, how can we know that *any* are valid ways to God? The pluralist has to know that we can't know (which is an interesting idea in itself!), while also having confidence that somehow we'll be able to reach our goal through our particular beliefs and practices.

But that brings serious questions to the surface. Do all

religions even *have* the same goal? That's an important issue. In fact, it's the first of three problems with religious pluralism I'd like to consider.

Can religious pluralism accomplish its goal? What do I mean by that? Two ideas are at work here. First, it is believed that we can't really know what is true about God; our religions are only approximations of truth. Second, if that is so, aren't we being high-handed if we tell a people that their religion isn't true? How can any religion claim to have *the* truth? To be intellectually honest, we need to consider all religions (at least the major, enduring ones) as equally valid. There is a personal element here, too. The pluralist wants to take the *people* of all religions seriously. Telling anyone his or her religion is false doesn't seem to signal that kind of respect. So the goal of which I speak is taking people seriously with respect to their religious beliefs.

I can explain this best by introducing a British scholar named John Hick and tell a little of his story.^{3} Hick was once a self-declared evangelical who says he underwent a genuine conversion experience as a college student. He immediately began to associate with members of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in England. Over time, however, his philosophical training and reading of certain New Testament scholars made him begin to have doubts about doctrinal matters. He also saw that, on the one hand, there were adherents of other religions who were good people, while, on the other, there were some Christians who were not very nice people but were sure of their seat in heaven. How could it be, he thought, that God would send these good Sikhs and Muslims and Buddhists to hell while saving those not-so-good Christians just because they believed in Jesus? Hick went on to develop his own understanding of religious pluralism and became probably the best-known pluralist in the scholarly world.

I relate all this to you to point out that, at least as far as the eye of man can see, Hick's motivation was a good one: he

wanted to believe that all people, no matter what religious stripe, can be saved. Harold Netland, who studied under Hick and wrote a book on his pluralism, speaks very highly of Hick's personal character.^{4} And isn't there something appealing about his view (again, from our standpoint)? Wouldn't we like everyone to be saved? And having heard about (or experienced directly) the violence fueled by religious fanaticism, it's easy to see why many people recoil against the idea that only one religion has the truth. We want everyone included! We want everyone to feel like his or her religious beliefs are respected and even affirmed!

The problem is that we are supposed to view our beliefs as *approximations* of truth, as somehow meaningful to us but not really true. All people are to be welcomed into the universal family of faith—but they are to leave at the door the belief that what they believe is true. It's as though the pluralist is saying, "It is really noble of you to be so committed to your faith. Of course, we know that little of what you believe can be taken as truth, but that's okay. It gives meaning to your life." Or in other words, "We want you to feel validated in your religion, even though your religious doctrines aren't literally true."

To be quite honest, I don't feel affirmed by that. My religious belief is completely undermined by this idea. If Jesus isn't the only way to God, Christianity is a complete lie, and I am believing in vain.

My belief is that salvation—the reconciliation of persons to the one, true trinitarian God—has been made possible by Jesus, *and* that I *know* this to be the case. In his first epistle, John wrote: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jn. 5:13). If I can't know this to be true, the promises of Scripture are only wishes. In that case, my hope for eternity is no more secure than crossing my fingers and saying I hope it won't rain this weekend. We are all, in

short, forced to abandon our notions of the validity of our religious beliefs and accept the skepticism of the pluralist. And I don't feel affirmed by that.

For my money, to be told I might be very sincere but sincerely wrong if I take my beliefs as true in any literal sense is like being condescendingly patted on the head. To be honest, I take such a notion as arrogance.

So my first objection to religious pluralism is that it does not accomplish its goal of making me feel affirmed with respect to my religious beliefs beyond whatever emotional fulfillment I might get from pretending the beliefs are true.

Religious Pluralism Doesn't Make Sense

My second objection to religious pluralism is that it doesn't make sense in light of what the various religions claim. Let me explain.

Christianity is a confessional religion. In other words, there are particular beliefs we confess to be true, and it is partly through confessing them that we are saved. Is that surprising? Aren't we saved by faith, by putting our trust in Christ? Yes, but there are specific things we are supposed to believe. It isn't just believing *in*; it's also believing *that*. For example, Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe *that I am he* you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:23-24). And then there's Paul's clear statement that "if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). So what we believe is very important despite what some are saying now about how Christianity is a relationship and how doctrine isn't all that important.

Back to my point. Christians who know what the Bible teaches

and the basics of other religions find themselves staring open-mouthed at people who say that all religions are basically the same. How could anyone who knows anything about the major religions of the world even think such a thing? I suspect that most people who say this do *not* know the teachings of the various religions. They have some vague notions about religion in general, so they reduce these great bodies of belief to a few essentials. Don't all religions believe in a higher power or powers? Isn't their function just to give meaning to our lives? Don't they all typically include such things as prayer, rituals of one kind or another in public and private worship, standards for moral living, holy books, and the like?

Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias has said something like this: Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different, but just the opposite is true. People believe there are some core beliefs and practices such as those I just named which are common to all religions, and that religions are different only on the surface. Muslims have the Koran; Christians have the Bible; Jews have the Torah; Hindus have the Bhagavad Gita. Muslims pray five times a day; Christians pray at church on Sundays and most anytime they want during the week. Buddhists have their shrines; Jews their synagogues; Hindus their temples; Muslims their mosques; and Christians their churches. So at the core, the same; on the surface, different.

But just the opposite is true! It is on the *surface* that there is similarity; that is why we can immediately look at certain bodies of beliefs and practices and label them "religion." They aren't identical, but they are similar enough to be under the same category, "religion." On the surface we see prayers, rituals, holy books, etc. It's when we dig down to the *essential* beliefs that we find contradictory differences!

For example, Islam is theistic but is unitarian while Christianity is trinitarian. Hindus believe we are not true

individual selves but are parts of the All, while orthodox Jews believe we are individuals created in the image of God. Muslims believe salvation comes through obedience to Allah, while Buddhists believe “salvation” consists of spinning out of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth into nirvana.

No, religions are *not* essentially the same and only superficially different. At their very core they are drastically different. So while pluralists might take the religious person seriously, they don't take his or her *beliefs* seriously. How can all these different beliefs be true in any meaningful sense? How can the end of human existence be *both* nirvana *and* heaven or hell? Pluralists have to reduce all these beliefs to some vague possibility of an afterlife of some kind; they have to empty them of any significant content.

So what we believe to be true, pluralists know isn't. Isn't it interesting that the pluralist is insightful enough to know what millions of religious adherents don't! That's a strange position to take given that the heart of pluralism is the belief that we can't know what is ultimately true about God!

It is for this reason that my second objection to religious pluralism is that it doesn't make sense in light of what the various religions claim. It claims that our different beliefs are essentially the same, which is false on the surface of it. And it claims that the differences result from the fact that we can't know what is true, while the pluralist acts like he or she *can* know what is true.

Pluralism Is Incompatible with Christianity

Religious pluralism may well be *the* most common attitude about religion in America. You might be wondering, Aren't there a lot of Christians in America? According to the polls, one would think so. But I dare say that if you polled people in

your church, especially young people, you would find more than a few who are religious pluralists. They believe that, while Christianity is true for them, it isn't necessarily true for other people. Is pluralism a legitimate option for Christians? In short, no.

This, then, is my third objection to religious pluralism, namely, that religious pluralism is incompatible with Christianity because it demands that Christians deny the central truths of Scripture. If religious pluralism is true, Jesus' claims to deity and biblical teaching about His atoning death and resurrection cannot be true.

The Bible is clear that salvation comes through accepting by faith the finished work of Jesus who is the only way to salvation. Paul told the Ephesians that at one time they "were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (2:12). Without Christ they were without God. He told the Romans that righteousness came through Jesus and the atoning sacrifice He made (5:6-10, 17). Jesus said plainly that "no one comes to the Father but by me" (Jn. 14:6). Because pluralism denies these specifics about salvation, it is clearly at odds with Christianity.

There is a more general truth that separates Christianity and pluralism, namely, that Christianity is grounded in specific historical events, not abstract religious ideas. Pluralists, as it were, line up all the major, enduring religions in front of them and look for similarities such as those we have already noted: prayers, rituals, holy books, and so on. They *abstract* these characteristics and say, "Look. They're all really the same because they do and have the same kinds of things." But that won't do for Christianity. It is not just some set of abstract "religious" beliefs and practices. It is grounded in specific historical events.

This is a crucial point. The historicity of Christianity is

critical to its truth or falsity. God's project of salvation is inextricably connected with particular historical events such as the fall, the flood, the obedience of Abraham, the Exodus, the giving of the Law, the fall of Israel and Judah, the return to Israel—all events leading to Jesus, a historical person who accomplished our salvation through a historical event. It is through these events that God declared and carried out His plans, and nowhere do we read that He would do so with other people through other events and teachings. The truth of Christianity stands or falls with the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ and their meaning revealed by God. If the resurrection is historically false, "we are to be pitied more than all men," Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:19). If this was God's way, and Jesus declared Himself to be the *only* way, then no other way is available.

One thing the church must *not* do is let any of its members think that their way is only one way. This isn't to condone elitism or condescension or discrimination against others, even though that's what a lot of people believe today. That believing in the exclusivity of Christ does *not* necessarily result in an attitude of elitism is seen in Jesus Himself. His belief that He was and is the only way to the Father is clear, but few people will criticize Him for having the attitudes just mentioned. It is a strange thing, isn't it? Christians who say Jesus is the only way are condemned as self-righteous bigots, while the One who boldly declared not His religion but *Himself* as the only way is considered a good man!

To sum up, then. Pluralism falls under its own weight, for it cannot affirm all religious beliefs as it seems to desire, and its belief that religions are all pretty much the same, even though their core teachings are contradictory, doesn't make sense. It also is certainly incompatible with Christianity which declares that the truth of its teachings stand or fall with specific historical events. And frankly, its claim to know that no religion really has the truth because such truth

can't be known, comes off as a rather hollow declaration in light of the knowledge pluralists think they possess.

Notes

1. Steve Turner, *Nice and Nasty* (Marshall and Scott, 1980).
2. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, rev. ed. (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977), 3.
3. See John Hick, "A Pluralist View," in Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralist World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), chap. 1.
4. Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1991), ix.

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A Brief Overview of the Gospel of Judas

Dr. Patrick Zukeran explains why the Gospel of Judas poses no threat to the Bible or to Christianity; it only provides insight into early Gnosticism.

Newspaper headlines all over the world reported that the lost *Gospel of Judas* has been recovered and translated. Reporters state that this gospel sheds new light on the life of Christ and His relationship with Judas who may not be the traitor portrayed in the New Testament Gospels. In fact he may be the hero! He is cast as the most senior and trusted of Jesus' disciples who betrayed Jesus at the Lord's request! This gospel further states that Jesus revealed secret knowledge to Judas instructing him to turn Jesus over to the Roman authorities. So rather than acting out of greed or Satanic

influence, Judas was faithfully following the orders given to him by Christ. Does the *Gospel of Judas* reveal a new twist to the passion story of Christ? Are there new historic insights that should have Christians concerned?

The *Gospel of Judas* was discovered in 1978 by a farmer in a cave near El Minya in central Egypt. Scholars date this Coptic text to have been written between A.D. 300 and 400.^{1} Most scholars believe the original text was written in Greek and that the original manuscript was written in middle second century.^{2}

The authorship of this gospel is unknown but it is unlikely that Judas or a disciple of Christ wrote it. It represents Gnostic thought that began to flourish around that time. The earliest mention of it is from Irenaeus writing in 180 A.D. who condemned this work as heretical.

The *Gospel of Judas* is similar to the Gnostic literature found in other areas along the Nile, including the Nag Hammadi library that contained nearly forty-five Gnostic texts, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Peter* and other texts.

What is Gnosticism?

Gnosticism flourished from the second to the fourth century A.D. What is Gnosticism? Gnosticism derives its title from the Greek word *gnosis* which means knowledge and refers to the mystical or secret knowledge of God and the oneness of self with God. Here is a basic summary of Gnostic philosophy.^{3}

First, Gnosticism taught the secret knowledge of dualism that the material world was evil and the spiritual realm was pure. Second, God is not distinct from man but mankind is, in essence, divine. God is the spirit and light within the individual. When one understood self, one understood all. Third, the fundamental problem in Gnosticism was not sin but ignorance. The way to attain oneness with the divine was by

attaining mystical knowledge. Fourth, salvation was reached by gaining secret knowledge, or *gnosis* of the real nature of the world and of the self. Fifth, the goal in Gnosticism was unity with God. This came through escaping the prison of the impure body in order for the soul of the individual to travel through space avoiding hostile demons, and uniting with God.

In reference to Jesus, Gnosticism taught that Jesus was not distinct from His disciples. Those who attained Gnostic insight became a Christ like Jesus. Princeton University professor of religion Dr. Elaine Pagels writes, "Whoever achieves *gnosis* becomes no longer a Christian but a Christ."[\[4\]](#) So Jesus was not the unique Son of God and a savior who would die for the sins of the world, but a teacher who revealed secret knowledge to worthy followers.

Gnostic philosophy is contrary to Old and New Testament teachings. The Bible is in opposition to Gnostic teaching on fundamental doctrines such as the nature of God, Christ, the material world, sin, salvation, and eternity. Jews and Christians rejected Gnostic teaching as heretical, and the Gnostics rejected Christianity. Gnostic philosophy is what is taught throughout the *Gospel of Judas*. Like other Gnostic literature, there is very little similarity between the *Gospel of Judas* and the New Testament writings. This gospel contradicts the New Testament in major ways.

Contents of the Gospel of Judas

Gnostic philosophy is contrary to biblical Christianity, and the *Gospel of Judas* reflects Gnostic thought rather than biblical theology. An example of Gnostic philosophy is reflected in the mission of Jesus as portrayed in this gospel.

Dr. Marvin Meyer, professor of Bible at Chapman College, summarizes the goal of Jesus' mission according this gospel.

"For Jesus in the *Gospel of Judas*, death is no tragedy, nor

is it a necessary evil to bring about forgiveness of sins.... Death, as the exit from this absurd physical existence, is not to be feared or dreaded. Far from being an occasion of sadness, death is the means by which Jesus is liberated from the flesh in order that he might return to his heavenly home, and by betraying Jesus, Judas helps his friend discard his body and free his inner self, the divine self.”{5}

In the New Testament, Jesus’ mission is clearly stated. He came to die an atoning death for the sins of the world and conquer the grave with His bodily resurrection. This contradicts the Gospel of Judas that teaches Christ sought death to free himself from the imprisonment of his body.

Another Gnostic fundamental teaching is that the problem of man is not sin but ignorance. Jesus is not a savior but a teacher who reveals this secret knowledge only to those worthy of this insight. Judas is considered worthy of this knowledge. Dr. Meyer writes,

“For Gnostics, the fundamental problem in human life is not sin but ignorance, and the best way to address this problem is not through faith but through knowledge. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus imparts to Judas – and to the readers of the gospel – the knowledge that can eradicate ignorance and lead to an awareness of oneself and God.”{6}

Another Gnostic teaching is that since the physical world is evil, God did not create the physical world. Instead, He creates aeons and angels who in turn create, bring order to, and rule over the physical world. Since matter is impure, God does not enter directly into physical creation. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus asks His disciples, “How do you know me?” They are unable to answer correctly. However, Judas answers saying, “I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo.”

Barbelo in Gnosticism is the first emanation of God, often

described as a mother-father figure. Since God does not enter into the material world because it is impure, Barbelo is an intermediary realm from which the material world can be created without contaminating God.[{7}](#)

Barbelo is clearly a Gnostic term and foreign to Christianity. Jesus stated in John 3:13 that He is from heaven. The Greek word is *houranos*. Other times, the New Testament writers see Jesus as sitting at the right hand of the Father. Jesus is from heaven with His Father with whom He dwells eternally.

Reasons the Gospel of Judas is Not Part of the New Testament

There are several reasons we should not consider the *Gospel of Judas* inspired scripture. First, it is written too late to have any apostolic connection. The Apostles of Christ were given the authority to write inspired scripture. One of the requirements for inclusion in the New Testament canon was that the book had to be written by an apostle or a close associate. Since an apostolic connection was necessary, it would have to have been written within the first century. There is compelling evidence that the four New Testament Gospels are written in the first century A.D. (See my article [“Historical Reliability of the Gospels.”](#)) The *Gospel of Judas* is written in mid-second century A.D. so it is too late to be apostolic.

Second, inspired literature must be consistent with previous revelation. God is not a God of error but of truth, and His word would not present contradictory truth claims. The Gnostic philosophy in Judas is inconsistent with Old and New Testament teachings.

The Old Testament teaches that God created the physical universe and Adam and Eve (Genesis 1-3). In the Genesis creation account, God created all things good. So contrary to Gnosticism, God created the physical world and He declared it good.

Gnosticism teaches that God would not create a physical universe because the material world is impure, so God creates aeons and angels. These beings in turn create the physical realm. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus reveals to Judas the creation of the world, humanity, and numerous aeons and angels. The angels bring order to the chaos. One of the angels, Saklas, fashioned Adam and Eve. The Gospel reads:

“Let twelve angels come into the being to rule over chaos and the [underworld]. And look, from the cloud there appeared an [angel] whose face flashed with fire and whose appearance was defiled with blood. His name was Nebro, which means rebel; others call him Yaldabaoth. Another angel, Saklas, also came from the cloud. So Nebro created six angels – as well as Saklas – to be assistants, and these produced twelve angels in the heavens, with each one receiving a portion in the heavens.”

It further states,

“Then Saklas said to his angels, ‘Let us create a human being after the likeness and after the image. They fashioned Adam and his wife Eve, who is called, in the cloud, Zoe.’”

This contradicts the teaching in the Old Testament that God Himself created the universe. Then God created Adam from the earth, and his wife Eve from Adam.

The *Gospel of Judas* contradicts New Testament teaching as well. The Gospel teaches that the body is evil and that Jesus wished to escape His physical body. Jesus instructs Judas saying, “But you (Judas) will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.” Jesus’ death through the assistance of Judas would liberate His spirit to unite with God. [\[8\]](#)

However, the New Testament teaches that Jesus did not wish to escape His body. In fact, Jesus taught that His resurrection would be a physical resurrection (John 2:19-22). In Luke

24:39, Jesus makes clear to His disciples that He has a physical body. "See my hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." In John 20 and 21, Jesus reveals it was a physical resurrection of the body that was on the cross. He invites Thomas in chapter 20 to touch His scars. If Jesus rose as a spirit, He would have been guilty of deceiving His disciples.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul teaches a physical resurrection. He explains that Christ rose from the dead and over five hundred witnesses attested to the fact. He then explains that the resurrection body is a physical body but different from our earthly bodies. At the resurrection, Christians will have glorified physical bodies, a clear contradiction to Gnosticism that seeks to escape the impure physical body. Paul did not teach Christians to escape the body, but look forward to the resurrection of the body (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Conclusion

Despite the hype in the media, the *Gospel of Judas* does not affect the historical reliability of the Gospels nor does it pose any threat to the deity of Christ. This gospel cannot be considered inspired scripture like the New Testament books. It was written in the late second century and therefore, not written by an Apostle of Christ or a close associate. Its teachings contradict previous revelation of the Old and New Testament. It presents very little information that could be considered historical. The *Gospel of Judas* gives us more insight into early Gnosticism, that is all. It presents no historic facts of Jesus that affect the New Testament in any way.

Notes

1. Dan Vergano and Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Long-lost gospel of Judas casts 'traitor' in new light," *USA Today*, 7 April 2006.

2. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington D.C.: *National Geographic*, 2006), 5.
3. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 119-141.
4. Pagels, 134.
5. Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, 4-5.

6. Ibid., 7.
7. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbelo
Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, 43.

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The Gospel of Judas [Michael Gleghorn]

According to Wilford and Goodstein, in an article for the *New York Times* (April 7, 2006), "The 26-page Judas text is believed to be a copy in the Coptic language, made around A.D. 300, of the original Gospel of Judas, written in Greek the century before." *If* this is the same text referred to by the second century church father Irenaeus, then it probably dates to the second half of the second century. This would put it a full hundred years or so after the New Testament gospels all of which were authored in the second half of the first century A.D.

The evidence seems to indicate that the Gospel of Judas is a Gnostic document. These documents were universally rejected by the early church fathers and for good reasons. In the first place, unlike the New Testament documents (which date to the first century A.D.), the Gnostic texts are late, dating to the second to fourth centuries A.D. Because of this, the Gnostic

documents, unlike the New Testament documents, were definitely not written by apostles or companions of the apostles. In other words, the Gospel of Judas is *not* an eyewitness account written by one of Jesus' original followers. Finally, the Gospel of Judas, like all Gnostic texts, contains teaching and elements which are clearly unorthodox and heretical, at least when judged by the standard of the New Testament gospels. It's for reasons such as these that the church fathers (very wisely, in my opinion) rejected these books as unfit for inclusion in the New Testament.

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This is a very quick and short response to the news announcement about this "gospel." For more in-depth analysis of why the Gnostic documents are not trustworthy accounts of the life of Jesus or His disciples, please see the Nag Hammadi section of "Redeeming The Da Vinci Code" [here](#). My colleague Patrick Zukeran has since written a longer assessment of this document [here](#).

Making Distinctions: A Warning Against Mixing Beliefs

Cafeteria-Style Religion

You've probably heard the term "cafeteria-style" religion. This is the religion of "a little of this and a little of that." Beliefs are chosen from a variety of theologies or religions or philosophies because they seem right or appeal to

us. Rituals or practices are chosen because we like them, they suit our tastes.

Sometimes this is a matter of Christians mixing the doctrines of various Christian theological traditions that results in an odd fit. But we won't be talking about that this week. More often, and what is of more concern to us, is the way Christians sometimes mix non-Christian beliefs with Christian beliefs.

I saw this illustrated in a story published a few years ago about a young woman who had been a Methodist but became a Baptist after studying Baptist theology. She'd clearly put some thought into her decision which I applauded. However, it turned out that, along with her Baptist doctrines, she also held the belief that Christianity isn't necessarily true for everyone. She was mixing Christian doctrine with a postmodern attitude about the nature of truth. Christians mix in a variety of false beliefs with true doctrine. Some Christians read horoscopes and take them somewhat seriously. Some base their ethical decision-making on what works. Some believe in reincarnation. And some, like the woman I mentioned, believe Jesus isn't the only way to God.

This isn't a new phenomenon. The apostle Paul faced the same kind of situation. Some Christians in his day were trying to mix Jewish and pagan beliefs into their Christianity. Paul discussed this issue in his letter to the church in Colossae. The second chapter of that letter will be the focus of our consideration (you might want to grab your Bible). In fact, may I be so bold as to ask you to read the chapter before you continue reading this? It's really more than a chapter: chapter 2, verse 1, through chapter 3, verse 4. If you have more time, go ahead and read chapter 1 also.

Paul starts chapter 2 by expressing his desire for the Colossians, that they "may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God,

namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (v. 3). The believers needed to be clear on this so they would be able to spot "fine-sounding" but deceptive arguments that led away from Christ.

Greek Philosophy

What were the false doctrines being taught in Colossae? What was being taught was a mixture of elements of Jewish beliefs and Greek philosophy with Christianity. The net result was that Christ was diminished in His person and His work on our behalf. This is clear from the corrections Paul makes in chapter 2 of Colossians and from the strong Christological statement in chapter 1, verses 15-20.

Let's look first at the ideas imported from Greek thought.

From chapter 2, verses 21 to 23, we can deduce that people were being taught the pagan or Greek belief that physical matter is evil. "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" People were taught to restrict themselves from certain pleasures that God didn't forbid. More importantly, if matter is evil, how could God come as a man in a physical body like yours and mine? If God couldn't become man, then Jesus couldn't be the divine Son of God. You see how that would be a problem!

The Colossians were also engaging in angel worship. Look at verse 18: "Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize." Some Greek philosophers had taught that the One, or the ultimate being, was too pure to get close to evil matter. So there were many levels of lesser beings between the One and the material universe. It was a simple step to associate angels with these beings. If people couldn't approach God, maybe they could these intermediate beings. Hence, angel worship.

Lastly, false teachers were promoting a special knowledge that

apparently only a few had. Paul speaks of people puffed up with idle notions, in verse 18. He also mentions the “appearance of wisdom” in verse 23. He responds that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (v. 3). This knowledge is available to all who are in Christ, and provides no reason for our being puffed up (1 Cor. 2:16).

These three beliefs developed into what is called Gnosticism.^{1} Paul saw this as a very grave danger. Why? Just because Christians might be deprived of some rightful pleasures? Well, that was a problem. But something much more important was at stake. Because of these beliefs, the person and work of Christ was diminished.

Jewish Beliefs

What was being imported from Judaism?

In chapter 2, verses 16 and 20 through 22, Paul cautions against a wrong emphasis on traditions carried over from Judaism including dietary restrictions, and the observance of religious festivals and the Sabbath. From this we can deduce that these things were being promoted by the false teachers. Apparently, from what Paul says in verse 11, they were also requiring circumcision.

Does this mean it is wrong to have traditions or to restrict our diet in any way? No, not at all. The point is that our standing before God is not related to such things. Christians are no longer under a legal code because Christ has taken it away and nailed it to the cross (v. 14). Paul wanted the Christians to know they were free from such things. Why? Well, the most important reason is that such works *don't work* for getting us to God. There's no reason to carry that burden on our shoulders; God put it on Christ's who has done all that needs to be done.

Not only were such things incapable of getting the Colossians

to God, they couldn't even accomplish the goal of reforming people. Look at chapter 2, verse 23: "Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence." Paul doesn't just say that these things don't stand us in good stead with God; they can't even make us good people. Why? Because our root problem is our fallen nature. We can observe all the practices and rituals we want, but that won't change what we are inside. And what is inside will show itself as we sin again . . . and again . . . and again.

No, our problem isn't met by observing rituals or by putting our hopes in the wrong places such as in heavenly beings or in our special knowledge. It is met in Christ in whom we have all we need. Verses 9 and 10 read: "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete . . ." Literally, "you have been filled up." It is a passive verb. We have been given what we need in Christ.

The only way to God, given our fallen nature, is through Christ. The Colossians had turned back to worthless things. And these things weren't neutral in value; they served to turn the focus off of Jesus where it belonged.

Being Thinking Christians

What was and is to be done in response to this mixing of false with true? The solution lies in first knowing what is true. Speaking of Colossians 2 verse 2, nineteenth century biblical scholar John Eadie wrote this: "'The full assurance of understanding,' [or "full riches of complete understanding" in the NIV] is the fixed persuasion that you comprehend the truth, and that it is the truth which you comprehend."² Why is that so important? He goes on to say that if we *don't* have the full assurance that comes from understanding, we will be more likely to abandon what we believe today for something new

tomorrow; new ideas will chase away previously held convictions. If we are “‘ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth,’” he says, ‘then such [doubtfulness] and fluctuation present a soil most propitious to the growth and progress of error.”[\[3\]](#)

The apostles wanted the members of the churches to understand Christian beliefs. “The fixed knowledge of these things,” Eadie writes, “would fortify their minds against the seductive insinuations of false teachers,” who mix just enough truth with falsehood to make their teachings believable.

Imagine Paul setting on his left side the false beliefs and practices being taught in Colossae and on his right, Jesus and His finished work. Pointing to his left he says, “You think matter is evil? Then [pointing to his right now] you might as well abandon Christ altogether, because it was His deity that made it possible for Him to obtain our salvation. You believe [pointing to his left] that worshipping angels will help? [Pointing to his right] Jesus, who is the exact image of God, God in flesh, to whom we have direct access, *created* the angels! [Pointing to his left] You think keeping all these rules will make you a good person? They don’t! You just keep sinning. It is in Christ [pointing to the right] that your sin can be dealt with at the root.”

We can believe in all manner of things in the current “true for me” way of thinking. But if something isn’t true (in the classical sense), believing won’t make it so.

Things to Be Aware of Today

The Christians in Colossae were guilty of folding in false beliefs with true ones. To avoid doing that ourselves, we need to be thinking Christians. We need to think *biblically*. The Bible is our final authority for faith and practice. Does the particular idea or activity find support in Scripture? We need

to think *theologically*. If the Bible doesn't directly address a given idea, does it fit with what we *do* know about God, Christ, human nature, etc.,? We also need to think *logically*. We need to be able to think well, to spot contradictions between beliefs.

What false notions are we susceptible to today? I'll name just a few.

A major issue today is *religious pluralism*. We are tempted to follow along with our culture and think that Jesus is just one of several valid ways to God.

Subjectivism is a big problem that grows out of the skepticism of our age. If I can't know what's really "out there," I'll just have to form my own beliefs based on my own thinking, feelings, desires, and circumstances. But our knowledge is too limited and our sin nature biases us in ways that lead us astray.

Pragmatic religion is also a temptation. "Does it work?" we want to know. If so, it's right. We treat our lives like we would a machine: if what comes out at the end is good, then clearly the machine must be working correctly. This becomes an end-justifies-the-means way of living.

Therapeutic religion is also an issue today. It's God's job to make us happy. We think it's more important for pastors to be counselors than theologians. We want them to fix our problems and make us happy again.

Then there's *materialism*—a greater desire for wealth and material possessions than for the kingdom of God and His righteousness. There's the temptation in an advertising age to *market* the gospel—fitting it to the sensibilities of the market rather than bringing those sensibilities under the scrutiny of the gospel.

Then there's *style over substance*—we're more concerned with

being *hip* than with being *good*.

I could go on. Instead I'll invite you to look for a copy of Os Guinness's book *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*[\[4\]](#) for a more extended discussion of these problems.

Even if you don't read that book, let me encourage you to become conscious of your beliefs, and to become settled in your mind about at least the very basic Christian teaching, namely, that in Christ dwells the fullness of Deity, that in Him we have been made complete, that we are made alive with him through faith. And be on your guard so that "no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy."

Notes

1. Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978. (Software; 166 in hard copy)
2. John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 111.
3. Ibid.
4. Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

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C.S. Lewis and the Riddle of Joy

Dr. Michael Gleghorn asks, What if nothing in this world can satisfy our desire because the object of our desire is other-worldly?

The Riddle of Joy

Over forty years after his death, the writings of C. S. Lewis continue to be read, discussed, and studied by millions of adoring fans. There seems to be something in Lewis that appeals to almost everyone. He is read by men and women, adults and children, Protestants and Catholics, scholars and laymen. A new movie, based on his best-selling children's classic *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, is expected to be a mega-hit in theatres.^{1} It's difficult to think of another writer who is read (and appreciated) by such a broad spectrum of humanity as C. S. Lewis.

But what accounts for this broad, popular appeal? Doubtless many reasons could be given. Lewis wrote on such a wide variety of topics, in such a diversity of literary genres and styles, that almost anyone can find pleasure in something he wrote. Further, he wrote for a general audience. Even when he's discussing very heady philosophical and theological topics, he remains quite accessible to the intelligent layman who wants to understand. Nevertheless, I tend to agree with Peter Kreeft, who notes that while "many virtues grace Lewis's work . . . the one that lifts him above any other apologetical writer . . . is how powerfully he writes about Joy."^{2}

Now it's important to understand that when Lewis writes of Joy, he's using this term in a very particular way. He's not just speaking about a general sort of happiness, or joyful thoughts or feelings. Rather, he's speaking about a desire, but a very unique and special kind of desire. In *Surprised by Joy*, his spiritual autobiography, Lewis describes it as "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction."^{3}

But *what* did he desire? The question haunted Lewis for years. What *was* it that he wanted? Through trial and error he came to realize that he didn't simply want a *feeling*, a subjective, inner experience of some kind. Indeed, he later said that "all

images and sensations, if idolatrously mistaken for Joy itself, soon confessed themselves inadequate. . . . Inexorably Joy proclaimed, 'You want—I myself am your want of—something other, outside, not you or any state of you.'" {4}

In an attempt to find the mysterious object of his desire, Lewis plunged himself into various pursuits and pleasures. But *nothing* in his experience could satisfy this desire. Ironically, these failures suggested a possible solution to Lewis. What if nothing in this world could satisfy his desire because the *object* of his desire was *other-worldly*? A radical proposal, and we turn to it now.

The Argument from Desire

What was Lewis to make of this rather mysterious, intense, and recurrent desire that nothing in the world could satisfy? Did the desire have any *real* significance? Did anything *actually* exist that could satisfy this desire? Or was the whole thing just a lot of moonshine? Although this question haunted Lewis for years and took him down many dead-end streets in pursuit of the mysterious object of his desire, he eventually came to believe that he had discovered the answer.

In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, he wrote of his remarkable solution to the riddle of Joy—the desire we are now considering—as follows:

It appeared to me . . . that if a man diligently followed this desire, pursuing the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come out at last into the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given—nay, cannot even be imagined as given—in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience. This Desire was, in the soul, as the Siege Perilous in Arthur's castle—the chair in which only one could sit. And if nature makes nothing in vain, the One who can sit in this chair must

exist.[{5}](#)

In other words, Lewis reasoned from this intense desire, which nothing in the world could satisfy, to an object of desire that transcended the world. He gradually became convinced that this Supreme Object of human desire is God and heaven!

Following Peter Kreeft, we can formulate the argument as follows:[{6}](#)

- 1. Every natural or innate desire we experience has a corresponding real object that can satisfy the desire.*
- 2. We experience an innate desire which nothing in this world can satisfy.*
- 3. Therefore, there must be a real object that transcends the world which can satisfy this desire.*

Now this is a valid argument in which the conclusion follows logically from the premises. So if someone wants to challenge the argument's conclusion, they must first challenge one of its premises. And, as I'm sure you can imagine, the argument has certainly had its detractors. But what sort of objections have they raised? Have they shown the argument to be unsound? And how have Lewis's defenders responded to their objections? We'll now turn to consider some of these questions.

Thus, it's important to understand that Lewis is *not* arguing that *all* our desires have real objects of satisfaction. He's claiming only that all our *natural* and *innate* desires do. Having clarified this issue, we'll return to consider objections to this first premise in a moment.

But first, what if someone objects to Lewis's second premise, namely, that *we have an innate desire which nothing in the world can satisfy?*[{10}](#) For example, what if someone admitted that they were not perfectly satisfied now, but believed they would be if only they had the best of everything money can

buy? Well, unfortunately this experiment has already been tried—and has repeatedly failed. Just think of all the people who are very wealthy, but still not perfectly satisfied. Indeed, some of them are downright miserable!

But what if one of them isn't? What if someone claimed that he is perfectly satisfied right now? Admittedly, we can't really argue with such a person. We can only ask him to be honest—if not with us, at least with himself. Even so, however, this would not necessarily show that Lewis's argument is false. It may only show that the person who makes such a claim is somehow defective, like a colorblind person claiming that there is no such thing as color. If most people *experience an innate desire which nothing in the world can satisfy*, then Lewis's conclusion may still follow. But before we can be sure, we must first revisit that problematic first premise.

You'll remember that Lewis argued that *every natural or innate desire* (like our desire for food, drink, or friendship) *has a corresponding object that can satisfy the desire*. Thus, there really *are* such things as food, drink, and friends. There seems to be a correlation between our *natural* desires and objects that can satisfy them.

But there's a problem. As John Beversluis observed:

How could Lewis have known that every natural desire has a real object before knowing that Joy has one? I can legitimately claim that every student in the class has failed the test only if I first know that each of them has individually failed it. The same is true of natural desires. [{11}](#)

In other words, why think that every natural desire has an object that can satisfy it? Such questions appear to raise difficulties for Lewis's argument. So how have Lewis's supporters responded?

Peter Kreeft has written:

[T]he proposition “every natural, innate desire has a real object” is understood to be true because nature does nothing in vain, and this . . . is seen to be true by understanding the concept expressed in . . . the word “nature.” Nature is meaningful . . . full of design and purpose . . . arranging a fit between organism and environment . . . desire and satisfaction . . . [{12}](#)

The Value of the Argument

In order to effectively reason from a deep, unsatisfied natural desire that nothing in the world can satisfy, to something beyond the world which can satisfy it, one must first know, or at least have good reason to believe, that *all* our natural desires *have* real objects of satisfaction. If they don't, then maybe there's just *not* any object that can satisfy the desire we're considering.

Now, of course, someone might well say, “Look, if all the natural desires we can check on, like our desires for food, drink, sex, and knowledge, have real sources of satisfaction, then wouldn't it be reasonable to infer that in the case of this one mysterious desire, which nothing in the world can satisfy, that there's also a real source of satisfaction?” Well, yes, I think this would be quite reasonable. Of course, the conclusion is only *probable*, not *necessary*. But in some places this is all Lewis himself claimed. In *Mere Christianity* he wrote:

The Christian says: Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists . . . If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. [{13}](#)

Now this is an interesting argument and it may suggest an

additional premise which has been assumed, but not directly stated. For *why* does the Christian say that creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists? Isn't it because we believe that there's a benevolent Creator and Designer of the natural world and its creatures? And if this is true, then it seems quite plausible that things have been intentionally *designed* so that there's a match between our natural desires and sources of satisfaction. And actually, there are very good reasons, completely independent of Lewis's argument, for believing that a Creator and Designer of nature *does* exist!

So it seems that the primary value of Lewis's argument may lie in showing us that it's reasonable to believe that our Creator and Designer is also the Supreme Object of our desire. And this resonates quite well with the oft-quoted words of Augustine, "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."[\[14\]](#)

Notes

1. The film is scheduled to be released December 9, 2005.
2. Peter J. Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," in *G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis: The Riddle of Joy*, eds. Michael H. MacDonald and Andrew A. Tadie (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 256.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1955), 17-18, cited in Kreeft, 253.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 220-21, cited in Kreeft, 253.
5. C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, (U.S.A.: Eerdmans, 1992), 204-05.
6. Kreeft, 250.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. For Kreeft's discussion see "C. S. Lewis's Argument from

Desire," 267.

11. John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1985), 19, cited in Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," 267.

12. Kreeft, 269.

13. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 105, cited in Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," 254 (emphasis mine).

14. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1:1, cited in Kreeft, "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," 263.

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The Meaning and Practice of Tolerance

Don Closson investigates the ideas surrounding the tolerance controversy and offer principles to communicate to the culture around us why absolute tolerance, or what some call hyper-tolerance, might not be a wise choice.

Introduction

One of the most damaging charges aimed at Christians today is that we and our religion are intolerant. This is an effective insult, not because some Christians are indeed intolerant, but because Christianity itself is judged to be an intolerant (meaning lacking in virtue) faith system. The weight of this accusation is compounded by the fact that few things are looked down upon more in our culture than a person or group of people who are perceived to be intolerant. Unfortunately, it is also true that there are few words or ideas that are less well defined or understood in our society than the meaning of

the word *tolerance*.



Critics of Christianity, especially of conservative Christians, often equate tolerance with moral virtue and intolerance as an unqualified evil. One admittedly liberal Christian commentator writes, “Conservative Christians have adopted the warrior mentality of Onward Christian Soldiers, and intolerance is nothing to be hidden under a white robe and pointed white hood: it’s to be waved proudly as a flag demonstrating Christian rigor and personal rightness.”^{1} This author argues that conservative Christians have changed the meaning of the word *tolerance* from that of a virtue to that of a sin. She seems to imply that failure to tolerate any and every behavior or idea is a moral evil and that all intolerance is absolutely wrong, or at least that all conservative Christian intolerance is wrong. Since she is obviously intolerant of conservative right-wing Christian intolerance, we might surmise that some intolerance is morally acceptable some of the time, at least in some cases.

If all this is a little confusing, it might be because of the fog in our culture surrounding the meaning of the terms used when discussing the topic. In this article we will investigate the ideas surrounding the tolerance controversy and try to find principles that might help us to communicate to the culture around us why absolute tolerance, or what some call hyper-tolerance, might not be a wise choice.

You might be thinking that this issue doesn’t really matter. Who cares if our culture thinks that Christians are intolerant? It matters because we are Christ’s ambassadors, and the way that we are perceived by our neighbors can distort the message of reconciliation with God that we offer. There is no reason to add offense to the message of the Bible. Besides,

there is an opportunity to help people to better understand the concept of tolerance and thus help to make a better society for all of us to live in.

We shall see that there are good arguments for promoting true tolerance, and that a better society can be built upon a common understanding of the concept.

The Meaning of Tolerance

In his book *True Tolerance*, J. Budziszewski writes, “The specific virtue of true tolerance has to do with the fact that sometimes we put up with things we rightly consider mistaken, wrong, harmful, offensive, or in some other way not worth approval.”^{2} The word tolerance comes from the Latin *tolerare* which means “to bear” and carries with it the idea of a prudent, long-suffering silence. So what are we to make of a U.N. statement issued during its 1995 “Year of Tolerance” which declared tolerance to be “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human?”^{3} Do you notice what is missing? People think that tolerance includes affirmation. But affirmation is not tolerance. When you affirm or accept something, you do not need to tolerate it. Tolerance can only occur when you disagree with something.

Our current confusion has occurred because tolerance has been elevated to a place above all other virtues. Again, Budziszewski writes,

Our most gifted thinkers no longer treat tolerance as a queenly virtue to be guarded among many others equally precious, but as a shrewish virtue that excludes all the rest. For now we are told that the meaning of tolerance is *ethical neutrality* neutrality about which things are worth the love of human beings and which traits of character are worth praising.^{4}

Because many in our culture have become skeptical about knowing the difference between what is good and what is evil, they argue that we are left with only two options when it comes to tolerance. We can either be ethically neutral, choosing to value equally all ideas and actions, or be a religious fanatic who claims to have perfect moral knowledge and who tries to impose absolute moral virtues on everyone else.

Actually, ethical neutrality is an impossible and irrational position to defend. Holding the position assumes that one has answered the question, "Why should I be ethically neutral?" Yet the construction of any answer violates the very neutrality being defended.

Another problem with moral skepticism is that the act of tolerance is dependent on some concept of what is morally good. One tolerates behavior or beliefs he or she disagrees with because of a higher or more important good. For instance, even though we believe that Christianity is true and that Christ is the only answer to mankind's problems, we encourage freedom of religion because it is only by freely choosing to believe, and not by force or coercion, that someone comes to true faith. Religious intolerance and coercion can actually cause someone to claim faith in Christ when none exists.

We argue that there is a third option, what we will call "true tolerance." How does this traditional view of tolerance work?

True Tolerance

Budziszewski argues that ethical neutrality based on moral skepticism is not a reasonable option. He writes, "If a skeptic finds reasons for tolerance, he finds it not by reason of the things he is skeptical about, but by reasons of the things he is not skeptical about."[5](#) In other words, one is tolerant because one is not ethically neutral. Someone cannot

be neutral about everything and still have a reason to be tolerant because they would be neutral about tolerance as well.

Is there another alternative? There is, what might be called the *traditional* view of tolerance, or what we will call *true tolerance*. Rather than ethical neutrality or a blind appeal to religious authority, true tolerance has to do with making judgments based on a concept of what is “good.”

Again Budziszewski writes,

True tolerance is not the art of tolerating; it is the art of knowing when and how to tolerate. It is not the forbearance from judgment, but the fruit of judgment. We may disapprove something for the love of some moral good—yet we may be moved to put up with it from still deeper intuitions about the same moral good or other moral goods, and on such deeper intuitions the discipline of tolerance is based.[{6}](#)

His point is that real tolerance always depends on judgment regarding what one values. It is never the result of moral skepticism. The act of tolerating something is not the heart of the issue. The key to understanding tolerance is to appreciate the process of weighing the different goals or moral ends that might be involved. These moral ends are often separated into three groups. The lowest order of ends includes health, happiness in the generic sense, good repute, peace, beauty and companionship. Next comes what can be called intrinsic goods like virtue and truth. Finally, the highest order good is the unconditional commitment to one’s ultimate concerns or worldview. The confusion surrounding this topic today might be so acute because we have turned this list of moral goods on its head; our society seems to value personal happiness and peace over virtue, truth, and commitment to a faith or worldview.

Even when we do decide to put up with behavior that we

disapprove of, we can do so for good or bad reasons. At worst, we might tolerate boorish behavior due to cowardice, at best because of concern for an individual's eternal well-being.

The Tolerant Society

What are some benefits that a society that has learned the virtue of true tolerance enjoys?

First, true tolerance understands that there are always limits to what should be tolerated, and that moral judgment is involved in setting these limits. Even those who endorse moral skepticism, arguing that there is no such thing as moral truth, seem to agree that society must not tolerate everything. They are quick to note their intolerance of slavery, genocide, and other violations of human rights. It is common sense that if tolerance is in fact unlimited, it becomes self-defeating. It would fail to limit the actions of those who are devoted to the destruction of tolerance itself. Muslims who insist on using the tolerance of Western nations to impose Sharia or Islamic law are an example. The defense of a tolerant society requires that it not tolerate certain behaviors, that it learns when to be intolerant.

It has become commonplace in America to label people as intolerant for simply having strongly held beliefs and for defending them against those who hold to contrary opinions. Actually, the "person [who] never disagrees with anyone about anything even when they know that the other person is being incoherent or dishonest or simply false is not being tolerant but instead is a coward." [\[7\]](#) When we confront people who are dishonest or merely wrong, especially when we do so with gentleness and respect, it shows that we take them and their ideas seriously. It also recognizes that they have real moral agency and that individuals should be held responsible for reasonable moral behavior and for the ideas that they endorse. In their book *The Truth About Tolerance*, Stetson and Conti

write, "Confronting people with their own destructive behavior is not a sign of intolerance but is the sign of true compassion."[\[8\]](#) The same can be said for confronting ideas that are false and perhaps even dangerous to society.

While true tolerance encourages open debate, it expects people to defend their views within certain guidelines. Each person is encouraged to defend his or her beliefs about what is good for humanity by using rational arguments; true tolerance expects people to try to persuade others that their views are true. However, that doesn't mean that others are expected to accept their understandings as true prior to being convinced by their arguments.

Finally, democratic governments allow or tolerate a broad spectrum of behaviors and self-determination rather than imposing totalitarian control. They tend to encourage the open debate of public policy issues like abortion and euthanasia, even by those who hold deep religious convictions about the topic. However, democratic governments are also clear about the behaviors that they do not tolerate by establishing clear legal codes and punishments that correspond with illegal behavior.

Is There a Christian Foundation for True Tolerance?

True tolerance is built into the very fabric of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although it is popular to believe that tolerance is a modern secular concept, perhaps original to the Enlightenment thinker John Locke, political philosopher J. Budziszewski argues that it is a Christian innovation. Even though Christians are not always obedient or even aware of their heritage, the Christian tradition represents "the source of the very standard by which their intolerant acts could be judged wrong."[\[9\]](#)

As we mentioned above, true tolerance depends on positive beliefs, not moral skepticism in order to function and make sense. Does Christianity provide a foundation for true tolerance? Actually, it provides the necessary beliefs on a number of levels.

First, Christians are called to imitate the model that Christ Himself gave us. God incarnate came to earth as a humble child giving us the perfect picture of love and tolerance on God's behalf. The perfect and holy God who created the universe stepped into time and space among sinful and rebellious humans to show His love and to win theirs. Both believers and unbelievers have been moved by the humility and mercy Jesus displayed towards others. His instruction to love your neighbor as yourself and the fact that He offered God's love to those considered sinful and not worthy of forgiveness sets Him apart from other religious teachers. Jesus didn't demand moral perfection to gain God's approval; He offered reconciliation based on His perfect sacrifice. Biblical Christianity recognizes the persistent human aptitude for self-centered behavior, and calls mature believers to battle against it. Paul writes, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."[10](#)

Secondly, Christianity offers a universal message to every tribe and nation. No distinction is made based on gender, race, or ethnicity. God is calling all people to accept His gift of salvation, and the church should reflect that multicultural reality. The Judeo-Christian tradition teaches that all people are made in the image of God and are not only important to Him but are redeemable through Christ's blood.

Finally, Christians can be tolerant of both the actions and beliefs of their neighbors because of their worldview or ultimate concerns. The task given to us by God is not to enforce a set of laws or style of worship, but to offer the

message of reconciliation in Christ. Instead of separating from the sinful and dangerous culture that God has placed us into, we are sent into the world by Christ to be salt and light so that many might hear the good news and respond to the offer of grace and forgiveness by trusting in Christ's payment for sin.

Notes

1. Teresa Whitehurst, "The Intolerance of Christian Conservatives," *CounterPunch*, www.counterpunch.org/whitehurst01252005.html.
2. *True Tolerance: Liberalism and the Necessity of Judgment*, J. Budziszewski (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 7.
3. *The Truth About Tolerance*, Brad Stetson and Joseph G. Conti (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 141.
4. Budziszewski, xi.
5. *Ibid.*, 10.
6. *Ibid.*, 7.
7. Stetson and Conti, 144.
8. *Ibid.*, 145.
9. *Ibid.*, 39.
10. Philippians 2:3-4

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**Will Winter Ever End?
Groundhog Day and Modern**

Thought

Rick Wade takes us on a journey through the movie Groundhog Day to see what light it sheds on a modernist worldview. The protagonist's self-centered, materialistic, career-driven view of life exemplifies the modernist thinking applies to actual life. As Christians, Rick points out a number of good examples from the movie that will help us better understand this view of the world.

Its All About Me

Did you see the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*? In this film, we meet Phil Connors, an arrogant and self-obsessed weatherman on a local TV station who is sent to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to report on the events surrounding Groundhog Day. Phil, played by Bill Murray, is rude to his co-workers, Rita the producer (played by Andie MacDowell) and Larry the cameraman (played by Chris Elliott). He has a condescending attitude toward the people of Punxsutawney who he calls hicks. Phil is very taken with himself. He tells his coworkers that a major network is interested in him, and at one point calls himself the talent. But now Phil is stuck in this awful assignment (too insignificant for someone of his stature) and only wants to finish up and get back to Pittsburgh. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately as things turn out), the team is trapped by a blizzard and forced to stay in Punxsutawney. The next day, however, something bizarre happens: Phil awakens to the same music on the radio and the DJs saying the same things as the morning before. Its February 2nd, Groundhog Day, all over again.

And thus begins Phil Connors nightmare. Every morning Phil awakens to February the second again . . . and again and again. We arent told how many times this happens, but it

happens often enough that he is able to go from not being able to play the piano at all to being an excellent jazz pianist. What does Phil do with this strange situation?

Phil's responses to his circumstances illustrate some modern ways of thinking and one distinctly *unmodern* way. I'd like to use this film to focus on these philosophies. This won't be a film review or an exercise in film criticism. *Groundhog Day* will simply serve as a mirror to hold up to modern thought.

In Phil Connors we see what Michael Foley, professor of early Christian thought at Baylor, calls a typical modern.^{1} He is self-centered, materialistic, egotistical, and career-driven. He exemplifies what sociologist Craig Gay calls modern man's desire for *autonomy* and . . . what might be called the *will-to-self-definition*.^{2} Gay quotes Daniel Bell who says that self-realization and even self-gratification have become the master principles of modern culture.^{3}

This describes Phil, but not only Phil. What is more obviously true to moderns than the idea that one must look out for number one? Modernists want to define themselves. Were the captains of our own lives, and were our own number one concern.

But with this strange turn of events, Phil, the one who likes to think of himself as on the rise, finds himself stuck in one place. Every day he faces the same routine. Nothing he does seems to matter, for time is no longer progressing. The past doesn't matter, for yesterday was like today. And as far as he knows, tomorrow will be the same.

What Goes Around . . . Goes Around

When Phil finally accepts his predicament, he asks his new drinking pals, Gus and Ralph, a question: What would *you* do, he asks, if you were stuck in one place, and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered? This

question sets the stage for what follows in the film as Phil discovers over and over that nothing he did yesterday matters; nothing carries over.

But one can see something deeper going on here than simply an illustration of a boring, repetitive life. Perhaps not incidentally it also serves on the larger scale to describe the situation many people face. The situation of Phil going nowhere is a subtle illustration of a major philosophical shift in modern times, namely, the abandonment of a *teleological* view of the world.

What do I mean by that? *Teleology* is the theory of purpose, ends, goals, final causes. [{4}](#) Before Christ, Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle taught that there was design behind the universe; its forming wasn't just an accidental occurrence. In the West, with the rise of Christian theology, there came the understanding of the universe as made by God for a purpose. That is what *teleology* is: the idea of design with a goal in mind.

In modern times, however, that understanding is gone. We are taught that the universe is an accident of nature, and hence that we are, too. We weren't put here for a purpose; there is no goal to life beyond what we choose. Any meaning we have in life is meaning we supply ourselves. When this idea really sinks in, the ramifications are truly alarming. We want to have purpose; people with no sense of purpose have nothing to move toward. This idea was the root of the despair of existential philosophy. It drove thinkers such as Jean Paul Sartre to teach that the burden is on us to form our own lives, that to *not* do so is to live inauthentic lives. Although the existentialists tried to transcend this sense of meaninglessness, they weren't successful. The sense of loss that comes with thinking we have no purpose reflects what we know deep down because of being made in God's image: we were made by Someone for some purpose. To not have purpose necessarily diminishes our lives.

Phil Connors life no longer has purpose. He is stuck in one place going nowhere, and it isnt a happy situation.

So what does he do? He looks to Rita for help. You're a producer, he says. Think of something. Rita advises him to see a doctor. In modern times we typically look to science for the answer, in this case medical science. First, a medical doctor is unable to find anything wrong with Phil. Then a psychiatrist finds Phils problem to be beyond his abilities. Science is supposed to be modern mans savior, but here medical science fails. Technology fails Phil, too. The highways are closed because Phils own weather forecast is wrong he predicted the blizzard wouldnt hit Punxsutawneyso he cant drive back to Pittsburgh. Long distance phone service is down so he is unable to call home. So Phil is stuck. This modern man cannot be rescued by modern means.

What is Phils next move? He simply takes his hedonistic self-preoccupation to new levels. Its Feb. 2nd yet again, and Phil is out drinking with Gus and Ralph and reflecting on his predicament. After imbibing quite a bit, they get in a car to leave. As they drive away, Phil asks Gus and Ralph, What if there were no tomorrow? Gus responds that there would be no consequencesno hangovers! They could do anything they wanted! Phils eyes brighten. He can do whatever he wants! It's the same things your whole life, he says. Clean up your room. Stand up straight. Pick up your feet. Take it like a man. Be nice to your sister. . . . Im not going to live by their rules anymore!

And thus begins Phils hedonistic binge.

Its All About Me . . . With a Vengeance

What does he do with this newfound freedom? When Phil realizes that there are no consequences to his actionssince there is no tomorrowhe indulges his every whim in a sort of hedonistic

binge. He eats like a glutton, seduces a woman, robs an armored car and buys a fancy car with the money.

Then he sets his eyes on the real prize: Rita, the producer. Day after day (or Feb. 2nd after Feb. 2nd!) he collects tidbits of information from Rita about herself and about what her ideal man would be like. He then tries to fit the image himself in order to ingratiate himself to her with the hope of seducing her.

Michael Foley says that in this Phil becomes Machiavelli's prince.[{5}](#) In his book on political philosophy called *The Prince*, Machiavelli said a prince should always *appear* to be virtuous because that is what people expect. However, he said, the prince shouldn't actually concern himself with *being* virtuous, for that would often work against his own interests.

A prince should not necessarily avoid vices such as cruelty or dishonesty if employing them will benefit the state. Cruelty and other vices should not be pursued for their own sake, just as virtue should not be pursued for its own sake: virtues and vices should be conceived as means to an end. Every action the prince takes must be considered in light of its effect on the state, not in terms of its intrinsic moral value.[{6}](#)

This is Phil's attitude. He wants Rita, so he pretends to be the good man she desires. The end justifies the means, right?

As a society we have lost any sense of going somewhere. In the West, we've been taught to live for the moment, to savor the experiences of today. Yesterday is gone, and there is no ultimate tomorrow before us which will draw together the pieces of our lives into a meaningful conclusion. The world

came about by accident and is going nowhere. In fact, were told its winding down to some cosmic death. The utopian vision of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was crushed by World War I. Following the devastation of the next World War, existentialist philosophers said we should create our own sets of values. Increasing or at least maintaining our personal peace and prosperity now seems to be our highest ambition because, quite frankly, we have nothing else to hope for. What is left to do but enjoy ourselves as much as we can while here? Our national moral consensus goes little further than don't hurt other people unnecessarily, and we are left to our own ideas about what constitutes necessity. If there is nothing to hope for, today is all we have, so we pad our own nest and enjoy what we can out of life. I am the center of my universe, and it's your duty to not interfere.

To be honest, there is nothing wrong with enjoying the experiences life offers (given the limits of biblical morality and wisdom, of course). I recently read Francis Meyer's book *Under the Tuscan Sun* made into a movie starring Diane Lane. The movie barely scratches the surface of the pleasures of life in Tuscany described in the book: preparing and enjoying wonderful food; preparing the olive trees for next year's harvest, and at harvest time discerning when and how quickly to pick to avoid mildew; picking herbs like sage and rosemary from plants growing in front of the house for seasoning the evening's dinner; choosing the best local wine for the main course at dinner; taking in the smells and sights of a small Italian town; discovering a portion of an ancient Roman road or a wall built by the Etruscans; enjoying the company of friends and loved ones outdoors in warm weather, or gathered around the hearth in winter. The riches of such experiences have been lost to many in modern times.

Problems come, however, when *I* become the center of my ultimately purposeless world, when other people become objects to enjoy or reject as I might a certain food. It's bad enough

when we become the centers of our own worlds. We go further than that and expect to be the centers of *others* worlds as well! For some reason, we expect the lives of others to revolve around ours. But while we are crafting our own worlds, others are crafting theirs. What if my plans dont fit theirs or vice versa?

Phil tried repeatedly to win Ritas affection to satisfy his own desires. Night after night Phil tries to woo her, and night after night she slaps him in the face when she realizes what hes up to. Phil cant manipulate Rita the way he wants to.

Phil is so much the center of his world that, at one point in the film, Phil the weatherman said he creates the weather! But of course he doesnt. He cant even predict it perfectly. If Phil cant control the weather which has no will of its own, how can he possibly control Rita who does? He could have learned something from Jim Careys character, Bruce Arnold, in *Bruce Almighty* who could not manipulate the free will of his girlfriend Grace to regain her love.

It Has to Stop

So Phil cannot have what he really wants. What happens when one realizes that there is nothing lasting to hold onto? That is, if one can get hold of it at all? In the mid-twentieth century, beginning with the despair that comes from believing that there are no fixed and eternal values, existentialists tried to infuse individual lives with value by saying we create values ourselves. Other people, however, simply fell into despair and stayed there. Thats what happened to Phil Connors. First he tried to solve his problem through medical science. Then he accepted the situation and tried to find fulfillment in the pursuit of pleasure. When that failed, he was lost.

A life with no tomorrow, and where yesterday and today dont

matter, has no meaning because it has no explanation. But an explanation is what we crave. The discovery that there is no explanation is at the heart of what the existentialists called the *absurd*. Albert Camus said that a world that has no reason leaves a person feeling like a stranger. His exile is without remedy, wrote Camus, since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.[\[7\]](#) As a result, for some people or perhaps for many the question that arises is, Why live at all? There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, said Camus, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.[\[8\]](#)

Even before Feb. 2nd, Phil's life was absurd; he just didn't know it. His past wasn't forming his future, and he had no sure promised land before him anyway. He would be what he made of himself (a very modern idea), but he didn't seem to be doing a very good job. One of the key characteristics of the modern mind is the idea that the past is to be discarded in favor of the future because things just have to get better over time. There were such high hopes in modernity! But while Phil had hopes for tomorrow, he really was going nowhere. The repetition of Feb. 2nd only mirrored his real life.

The absurdity of Phil's situation descended upon him on one of his many Feb. 2nds. Having tried to enjoy a life of no consequences, and having been rejected by Rita, Phil falls into despair. In his umpteenth report on Groundhog Day festivities he expresses his despair clearly. You want a prediction about the weather, you're asking the wrong Phil, he says referring to the groundhog. I'll give you a winter prediction: It's gonna be cold, it's gonna be grey, and it's gonna last you for the rest of your life.

Phil could only think of one thing to do. Remember that if the groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, sees its shadow, winter will

last another forty days. Phil reasons that, if winter is to end, the groundhog cant be allowed see its shadow again. So Phil the weatherman decides that Phil the groundhog must die. There is no way this winter is ever going to end, Phil tells Rita, as long as that groundhog keeps seeing his shadow. I don't see any way out of it. He's got to be stopped. And I have to stop him. Here the parallel between the two Phils is made clear. To bring an end to winter, both the season and his own personal winter, Phil kidnaps the groundhog and drives off a cliff, killing them both. Neither Phil will now awaken to see his shadow again.

Or so he thought. The next morning, promptly at 6 AM, Phil awakens yet again to another Groundhog Day. A look of despair crosses his face. He gets out of bed, climbs into the bathtub with an electric toaster and electrocutes himself. But Feb. 2nd comes yet again. Phil tries many different ways to end it all. Later he tells Rita I've been stabbed, shocked, poisoned, frozen, hung, electrocuted, and burned. He keep trying to end his winter but he cant.

Although Camus raised the question of suicide, he didnt argue for it. He tried to persuade readers that there can be good reasons for living even though life as a whole has no meaning. But Phil, and many people in real life, have decided there is no reason to go on. Some dont go as far as suicide, but their nihilistic lives reflect the same idea: there is no meaning, nothing matters, nothing is of any value.

Is there any way out of this mess?

Phil's Redemption

Phil Connors first two responses to his predicamenthedonism and despairwere failures. Once more he turns to Rita for help. He tries to prove to her he really is repeating the same day over and over. After seeing several convincing evidences that

something strange really is going on, she offers to spend a day with him just to observe. Near the end of an enjoyable day, Rita takes a positive view and tells Phil that maybe what he's experiencing isn't a curse at all. It depends on how you look at it, she says.

With that little bit of encouragement, Phil's whole attitude changes. He now sees Rita not as an object to possess, but as a person of intrinsic value. Before, he wanted to use her; now he appreciates her. As she sleeps he whispers to her that he doesn't deserve someone like her. Now Phil has a purpose. Before he bettered himself to fool Rita; now his ambition is to be worthy of her.

So Phil sets about improving himself. He bettered himself morally; Michael Foley sees here a turn toward an ethics of virtue. Phil begins doing good things for other people such as giving money and food to an old man who lives on the streets, changing a tire for a woman, saving a man's life, giving tickets to *Wrestlemania* to a pair of young newlyweds, catching a boy who falls out of the tree (who never thanks him, Phil notes!). Because he keeps repeating Feb. 2nd, Phil performs these good acts again and again. He also bettered himself intellectually and artistically. And in the end, Phil wins Rita's affections.

Conclusion

In this simple film about a weatherman from Pittsburgh, we can see illustrated a few modernistic approaches to life. Having found himself in a purposeless existence, Phil looked for his salvation in science and in hedonistic pleasure seeking. Not finding it there, he fell into despair. With the encouragement of an upbeat lady as he called Rita, Phil decided to make himself a better man.

Several different religions have tried to claim the message of *Groundhog Day* as their own. Buddhists see Phil as the

bodhisattva who must return to help others better themselves so they may all escape the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Jews see Phil as being returned to earth to do good works to help bring the world to perfection.

For evangelical Protestants this might sound suspiciously like works salvation. But *Groundhog Day* isn't a Christian film; we shouldn't look for more in it than it offers. As I said at the beginning, it holds up a mirror to modern thought, and shows the failure of some contemporary beliefs.

Nonetheless, the film still offers us a reminder. In our zeal to proclaim salvation by faith alone, it's possible that we relegate the biblical admonitions to live good lives to too low a level. Our tickets are punched; we have our seats in heaven. As for now . . . well, you know how some say It's easier to receive forgiveness than permission. Maybe we just don't concern ourselves enough with living virtuous lives.

Groundhog Day illustrates the vacuousness of some modern ideas. But it also reminds us that living a good life *does* have its rewards: we are better people for the effort, and we become more attractive to people around us.

Notes

1. Michael P. Foley, "Phil's Shadow," *Touchstone* 17, no. 2 (April, 2004): 12.
2. Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As If God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 184.
3. Daniel Bell "The Return of the Sacred: The Argument on the Future of Religion," in *British Journal of Sociology* 28, no. 4 (1977): 424, quoted in Gay, 192.
4. Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. "Teleology," by Wilbur Long.
5. Foley, 13.

6. Sparknotes, "The Prince," www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/prince/themes.html.
7. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 5.
8. *Ibid.*, 3.

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Why We Shouldn't Hate Philosophy: A Biblical Perspective

Michael Gleghorn examines the role of philosophy in a Christian worldview. Does philosophy help us flesh out our biblical perspective or does it just confuse our understanding?

A Walk on the Slippery Rocks

For many people in our culture today, Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians got it right: "Philosophy is a walk on the slippery rocks." But for some in the Christian community, they didn't go far enough. Philosophy, they say, is far more dangerous than a walk on slippery rocks. It's an enemy of orthodoxy and a friend of heresy. It's typically a product of wild, rash, and uncontrolled human speculation. Its doctrines are empty and deceptive. Worse still, they may even come from demons!

Such attitudes are hardly new. The early church father Tertullian famously wrote:

What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the

Academy, the Christian with the heretic? . . . I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic . . . Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research. {1}

Should Christians, then, hate and reject all philosophy? Should we shun it, despise it, and trample it underfoot? Doesn't the Bible warn us about the dangers of philosophy and urge us to avoid it? In thinking through such questions, it's important that we be careful. Before we possibly injure ourselves with any violent, knee-jerk reactions, we may first want to settle down a bit and ask ourselves a few questions. First, what exactly is philosophy anyway? What, if anything, does the Bible have to say about it? Might it have any value for the Christian faith? Could it possibly help strengthen or support the ministry of the church? Are there any potential benefits that Christians might gain from studying philosophy? And if so, what are they? These are just a few of the questions that we want to consider.

But let's begin with that first question: Just what *is* philosophy anyway? Defining this term can be difficult. It gets tossed around by different people in a variety of ways. But we can get a rough idea of its meaning by observing that it comes from two Greek words: *philein*, which means "to love," and *sophia*, which means "wisdom." So at one level, *philosophy* is just the love of wisdom. There's nothing wrong with that!

But let's go further. Socrates claimed that the unexamined life was not worth living. And throughout its history, philosophy has gained a reputation for the careful, rational, and critical examination of life's biggest questions. "Accordingly," write Christian philosophers J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, "philosophy may be defined as the attempt to think rationally and critically about life's most important questions in order to obtain knowledge and wisdom about them." {2} So while philosophy may *sometimes* be a walk on

slippery rocks, it may also be a potentially powerful resource for thinking through some of life's most important issues.

Beware of Hollow and Deceptive Philosophy

In their recent philosophy textbook, Moreland and Craig make the following statement:

For many years we have each been involved, not just in scholarly work, but in speaking evangelistically on university campuses with groups like . . . Campus Crusade for Christ . . . Again and again, we have seen the practical value of philosophical studies in reaching students for Christ. . . The fact is that there is tremendous interest among unbelieving students in hearing a rational presentation and defense of the gospel, and some will be ready to respond with trust in Christ. To speak frankly, we do not know how one could minister effectively in a public way on our university campuses without training in philosophy. [\[3\]](#)

This is a strong endorsement of the value of philosophy in doing university evangelism on today's campuses. But some might be thinking, "What a minute! Doesn't the Bible warn us about the dangers of philosophy? And aren't we urged to avoid such dangers?"

In Colossians 2:8 (NIV), the apostle Paul wrote, "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." What does this verse mean? Is Paul saying that Christians shouldn't study philosophy? Let's take a closer look.

First, "the Greek grammar indicates that 'hollow and deceptive' go together with 'philosophy.'" [\[4\]](#) So Paul is not condemning *all* philosophy here. Instead, he's warning the Colossians about being taken captive by a particular "hollow

and deceptive” philosophy that was making inroads into their church. Many scholars believe that the philosophy Paul had in mind was a Gnostic-like philosophy that promoted legalism, mysticism, and asceticism.[\[5\]](#)

Second, Paul doesn’t forbid the *study* of philosophy in this verse. Rather, he warns the Colossian believers not to be *taken captive* by empty and deceptive human speculation. This distinction is important. One can *study* philosophy, even “empty and deceptive” philosophy, without being *taken captive* by it.

What does it mean to be “taken captive”? When men are taken captive in war, they are forced to go where their captors lead them. They may only be permitted to see and hear certain things, or to eat and sleep at certain times. In short, captives are under the *control* of their captors. This is what Paul is warning the Colossians about. He’s urging them to not let their beliefs and attitudes be *controlled* by an alien, non-Christian philosophy. He’s not saying that philosophy in general is bad or that it’s wrong to study philosophy as an academic discipline.

But doesn’t Paul also say that God has made foolish the wisdom of the world? And doesn’t *this* count against the study of philosophy?

Is Worldly Wisdom Worthless?

In 1 Corinthians 1:20 (NIV) the apostle Paul wrote, “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” Some Christians think this passage teaches that the study of philosophy and human wisdom is both foolish and a waste of time. But is this correct? Is that really what Paul was saying in this passage? I personally don’t think so.

We must remember that Paul himself had at least some knowledge

of both pagan philosophy and literature – and he made much use of reasoning in personal evangelism. In Acts 17 we learn that while Paul was in Athens “he *reasoned* in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there” (v. 17; NIV). On one occasion he spent time conversing and disputing with some of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers (v. 18). Further, when it suited his purposes, Paul could quote freely (and accurately) from the writings of pagan poets. In Acts 17:28 he cites with approval both the Cretan poet Epimenides and the Cilician poet Aratus, using them to make a *valid theological point about the nature of God and man* to the educated members of the Athenian Areopagus. Thus, we should at least be cautious before asserting that Paul was opposed to *all* philosophy and human wisdom. He obviously wasn’t.

But if this is so, then in what sense has God made foolish the wisdom of the world? What did Paul mean when he wrote this? The answer, I think, can be found (at least in part) in the very next verse: “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come* to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21; NASB). In other words, as Craig and Moreland observe, “the gospel of salvation could never have been discovered by philosophy, but had to be revealed by the biblical God who acts in history.”[\[6\]](#) This clearly indicates the *limitations* of philosophy and human wisdom. But the fact that these disciplines have very real *limitations* in no way implies that they are utterly *worthless*. We need to appreciate something for what it is, recognizing its limitations, but appreciating its value all the same. Philosophy by itself could never have discovered the gospel. But this doesn’t mean that it’s not still a valuable ally in the search for truth and a valuable resource for carefully thinking through some of life’s greatest mysteries.

In the remainder of this article, we'll explore some of the ways in which philosophy *is* valuable, both for the individual Christian and for the ministry of the church.

The Value of Philosophy (Part 1)

Moreland and Craig observe that “throughout the history of Christianity, philosophy has played an important role in the life of the church and the spread and defense of the gospel of Christ.”[{7}](#)

John Wesley, the famous revivalist and theologian, seemed well-aware of this fact. In 1756 he delivered “An Address to the Clergy”. Among the various qualifications that Wesley thought a good minister should have, one was a basic knowledge of philosophy. He challenged his fellow clergymen with these questions: “Am I a tolerable master of the sciences? Have I gone through the very gate of them, logic? . . . Do I understand metaphysics; if not the . . . subtleties of . . . Aquinas, yet the first rudiments, the general principles, of that useful science?”[{8}](#) It’s interesting to note that Wesley’s passion for preaching and evangelism didn’t cause him to denigrate the importance of basic philosophical knowledge. Indeed, he rather insists on its importance for anyone involved in the teaching and preaching ministries of the church.

But *why* is philosophy valuable? What practical benefits does it offer those involved in regular Christian service? And how has it contributed to the health and well-being of the church throughout history? Drs. Moreland and Craig list many reasons why philosophy is (and has been) such an important part of a thriving Christian community.[{9}](#)

In the first place, philosophy is of tremendous value in the tasks of Christian apologetics and polemics. Whereas the goal of apologetics is to provide a reasoned defense of the truth

of Christianity, “polemics is the task of criticizing and refuting alternative views of the world.”[{10}](#) Both tasks are important, and both are biblical. The apostle Peter tells us to always be ready “to make a defense” for the hope that we have in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15; NASB). Jude exhorts us to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (v. 3; NASB). And Paul says that elders in the church should “be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Tit. 1:9; NASB). The proper use of philosophy can be a great help in fulfilling each of these biblical injunctions.

Additionally, philosophy serves as the handmaid of theology by bringing clarity and precision to the formulation of Christian doctrine. “For example, philosophers help to clarify the different attributes of God; they can show that the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are not contradictory; they can shed light on the nature of human freedom, and so on.”[{11}](#) In other words, the task of the theologian is made easier with the help of his friends in the philosophy department!

The Value of Philosophy (Part 2)

Let’s consider a few more ways in which philosophy can help strengthen and support both the individual believer and the universal church.

First, careful philosophical reflection is one of the ways in which human beings uniquely express that they are made in the image and likeness of God. As Drs. Craig and Moreland observe, “God . . . is a rational being, and humans are made like him in this respect.”[{12}](#) One of the ways in which we can honor God’s commandment to love him with our minds (Matt. 22:37) is to give serious philosophical consideration to what God has revealed about himself in creation, conscience, history, and the Bible. As we reverently reflect on the attributes of God, or His work in creation and redemption, we aren’t merely

engaged in a useless academic exercise. On the contrary, we are loving God with our minds—and our hearts are often led to worship and adore the One “who alone is immortal and . . . lives in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16; NIV).

But philosophy isn't only of value for the individual believer; it's also of value for the universal church. Commenting on John Gager's book, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity*, Drs. Moreland and Craig write:

The early church faced intellectual and cultural ridicule from Romans and Greeks. This ridicule threatened internal cohesion within the church and its evangelistic boldness toward unbelievers. Gager argues that it was primarily the presence of philosophers and apologists within the church that enhanced the self-image of the Christian community because these early scholars showed that the Christian community was just as rich intellectually and culturally as was the pagan culture surrounding it.[\[13\]](#)

Christian philosophers and apologists in our own day continue to serve a similar function. By carefully explaining and defending the Christian faith, they help enhance the self-image of the church, increase the confidence and boldness of believers in evangelism, and help keep Christianity a viable option among sincere seekers in the intellectual marketplace of ideas.

Of course, not all philosophy is friendly to Christianity. Indeed, some of it is downright hostile. But this shouldn't cause Christians to abandon the task and (for some) even calling of philosophy. The church has always needed, and still needs today, talented men and women who can use philosophy to rationally declare and defend the Christian faith to everyone who asks for a reason for the hope that we have in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15). As C.S. Lewis once said, “Good philosophy must

exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.”^{14} These are just a few of the reasons why we shouldn't hate philosophy.

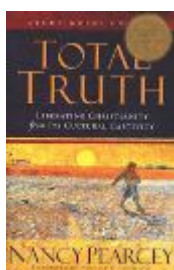
Notes

1. Tertullian, “The Prescriptions Against the Heretics,” trans. S.L. Greenslade, in *Early Latin Theology* (Vol. V in “The Library of Christian Classics”; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 31-32; cited in Hugh T. Kerr, ed., *Readings in Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 39.
2. William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 13.
3. *Ibid.*, 4-5.
4. *Ibid.*, 18.
5. Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 487.
6. Craig and Moreland, 19.
7. *Ibid.*, 12.
8. John Wesley, “An Address to the Clergy,” delivered February 6, 1756. Reprinted in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3d ed., 7 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996), 6:217-31; cited in Craig and Moreland, 4.
9. See Craig and Moreland, 14-17. I have relied heavily on their observations in this, and the following, section of this article.
10. *Ibid.*, 15.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 16.
14. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1949), 50; cited in Craig and Moreland, 17.

Total Truth – The Importance of a Christian Worldview

Total Truth is a book about worldview, its place in every Christian's life, and its prominent role in determining our impact on a culture that has hooked itself to the runaway locomotive of materialism and is headed for the inevitable cliff of despair and destruction.

Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity



“This is a book of unusual importance by an author of unusual ability.”[\[1\]](#) This is a strong recommendation from any reviewer, but when the reviewer is best-selling author and Darwinian critic, Phillip Johnson, people pay attention. As well they should. Nancy Pearcey's *Total Truth* is probably the most significant book of 2004. I pray its influence and impact will be felt for decades.

This is a book about worldview, its place in every Christian's life, and its prominent role in determining our impact on a culture that has hooked itself to the runaway locomotive of materialism and is headed for the inevitable cliff of despair and destruction.

While the concept of worldview has wiggled its way into the consciousness of some in the Christian community, it remains largely a buzzword used in the context of political

discussions and fundraising for Christian parachurch organizations. But politics only reflects the culture, so working to change the political landscape without changing the way we think is not as productive as some thought it would be.

One of the extreme threats to Christianity in this country is the effect of the culture on our youth and, consequently, on the future of the church in America. Pearcey says, "As Christian parents, pastors, teachers, and youth group leaders, we constantly see young people pulled down by the undertow of powerful cultural trends. If all we give them is a 'heart' religion, it will not be strong enough to counter the lure of attractive but dangerous ideas.... Training young people to develop a Christian mind is no longer an option; it is part of their necessary survival equipment." [\[2\]](#)

Here at Probe Ministries we have recognized this threat for all of our thirty-two years of ministry. We continue the fight with our Mind Games conferences, Web site, and radio ministries. We address young people particularly in our week-long summer [Mind Games Camp](#). Students are exposed to the competing worldviews and challenged to think critically about their own faith, to be able to give a reason for the hope that they have with gentleness and respect.

In the rest of this article we will look at the four parts of Pearcey's *Total Truth*. In Part 1, she documents the attempts to restrict the influence of Christianity by instituting the current prisons of the split between sacred and secular, private and public, and fact and value. In Part 2 she deftly shows the importance of Creation to any worldview and summarizes the new findings of science which strongly support Intelligent Design. In Part 3, she peels back the shroud of history to discover how evangelicalism got itself into this mess. And in Part 4, she revisits Francis Schaeffer's admonition that the heart of worldview thinking lies in its personal application, putting all of life under the Lordship of Christ.

The Sacred/Secular Split

In the first part of the book, Pearcey explores what has become known as the sacred/secular split. That is to say that things of religion, or the sacred, have no intersection with the secular. Another way of putting it is to refer to the split as a private/public split. We all make personal choices in our lives, but these should remain private, such as our religious or moral choices. One should never allow personal or private choices to intersect with your public life. That would be shoving your religion down someone else's throat, as the popular saying goes.

One more phrase of expressing the same dichotomy is the fact/value split. We all have values that we are entitled to, but our values are personal and unverifiable choices among many options. These values should not try to intersect with the facts, that is, things everyone knows to be true. The creation/evolution discussion is a case in point. We are told repeatedly that evolution is science or fact and creation is based on a religious preference or value. The two cannot intersect.

The late Christopher Reeve made this split quite evident in a speech to a group of students at Yale University on the topic of embryonic stem cell research. He said, "When matters of public policy are debated, no religions should have a place at the table."^{3} In other words keep your sacred, private values to yourself. In the public square, we can only discuss the facts in a secular context.

Far too many Christians have bought into this line of thinking or have been covered into it. Pearcey tells of a man who was a deacon in his church, taught Sunday School, tithed generously and was looked upon as a model Christian. Yet his job at the law firm was to investigate the contracts with clients no longer wanted by the firm to see what loopholes were available to get them out of the contract. He saw no link between his

Christian faith and his work.[{4}](#)

We fall into these thinking traps because we don't understand worldviews in general and the Christian worldview in particular. Pearcey outlines a threefold test of any worldview to help get a grasp on what they mean for thought and life: Creation, Fall, and Redemption. Every worldview has some story of where everything came from – Creation. Then each worldview proceeds to tell us that something is wrong with human society – the Fall – and then each worldview offers a solution – Redemption. Using this tool you will be better able to diagnose a worldview and whether it speaks the truth.

The Importance of Beginnings

The second part of Pearcey's book discusses the vitally important controversy over evolution and how it is taught in our schools. There is a clear philosophical filibuster masquerading as science in classrooms around the country.

In the opening chapter of this section, she tells the all too familiar story of a religious young man who is confronted with evolution in the seventh grade. Seeing the immediate contradiction between this theory and the Bible, the young man receives no help from teachers or clergy. He is left thinking that his "faith" has no answers to his questions. By the time he finishes school in Harvard, he is a committed atheist.[{5}](#)

The same story is repeated thousands of times every year. The faith of many young people has been wrecked on the shoals of Darwinism. Whoever has the power to define the story of creation in a culture is the *de facto* priesthood and largely determines what the dominant worldview will be.

On *Probe* we have discussed the problems of evolution and the evidence for Intelligent Design numerous times. Now Pearcey makes the case that this is far more than a scientific discussion. It is at the heart of the culture war we are

immersed in. Darwinism has had a far reaching impact on American thought, and we need a better grasp of the issue to better fight the battle we are in.

To show the prevalence of naturalistic Darwinian thinking Pearcey quotes from a Berenstain Bears book on nature titled *The Bears Nature Guide*. "As the book opens, the Bear family invites us to go on a nature walk; after turning a few pages, we come to a two-page spread with a dazzling sunrise and the words spelled out in capital letters: Nature... is all that IS, or WAS, or EVER WILL BE." [\[6\]](#) Clearly this is presented as scientific fact and should not be doubted.

Pearcey guides the reader through a well presented description of the major problems with the evidence concerning Darwinism. But more importantly, she clearly shows that the problem is not just the evidence. Most Darwinists accept the meager evidence because their worldview demands it. Naturalism requires a naturalistic story of creation, and since they are convinced of naturalism, some form of evolution must be true. She quotes a Kansas State University professor as saying, "Even if all the data point to an intelligent designer, such an hypothesis is excluded from science because it is not naturalistic." [\[7\]](#)

Pearcey goes on to show that Darwinism has continued to progressively influence nearly all realms of intellectual endeavor. From biology to anthropology to ethics to law to philosophy to even theology, Darwinism shows its muscle. Darwinism is indeed a universal acid that systematically cuts through all branches of human thought. We ignore it at our peril.

How Did We Get in This Mess?

Nancy Pearcey titles the third section of her book, "How We Lost Our Minds." She begins with a typical story of conversion

from sin of a young man named Denzel. As Denzel seeks to grow and understand his newfound faith, he is stymied by leaders who can't answer his questions and is told to just have faith in the simple things.

When Denzel gets a job, he is confused by those from other religions and cults who all seem to have answers for people's questions. Only the Christians are unable to defend themselves from skeptics and believers of other stripes. Eventually he finds work at a Christian bookstore and finds the nectar he has been hungry for. But he had to look and look hard. Denzel has learned that many in the evangelical movement have a largely anti-intellectual bias.

Where did that come from? Today one can still hear preachers of various stripes make fun of those of higher learning whether philosophers, scientists, or even theologians. The root of this anti-intellectualism is found in the early days of our country. America was founded by idealists and individualists. Many had suffered religious persecution and were looking for someplace to practice their faith apart from ecclesiastical authority. The democratic ideals of the original colonies and the newly independent United States of America seemed like just the right place.

When the early American seminaries became infected with the theological liberalism spawned by the Enlightenment, many rebelled against any form of church hierarchy, believing it couldn't be trusted. With the opening of the great frontiers, great opportunities for evangelism sprouted at the same time. Out of this came the First Great Awakening. The early revivalists directed their message to individuals, exhorting them to make independent decisions, Jonathan Edwards being a notable exception. Emotional and experiential conversions brought bigger crowds. Some began to even see a formula that brought about large numbers of conversions.

There arose a suspicion that Christianity had become

hopelessly corrupted sometime after the apostolic age. The task at hand was to leapfrog back 1,800 years to restore the original purity of the church. Suddenly, the great works of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and others were seen as unnecessary. [\[8\]](#) Evangelicals were cut off from their historical and theological roots. The evangelical movement as a whole became focused on rugged American self-interest and self-assertion, a strong principle of Darwinian naturalism.

This is still evident today in the prevalence of church-hoppers. Many view their church through an individualistic grid which says if the church leadership doesn't do things the way I would prefer and doesn't listen to me, I will take my family and go elsewhere.

The roots of anti-intellectualism run deep and find surprisingly fresh support from Darwinian naturalism. So how do we recover?

Living It Out

In the final chapter of *Total Truth*, Pearcey rings out a call to authenticity, not just with respect to the intellectual underpinnings of the Christian worldview, but also to how we live it out.

On the final page she cites a Zogby/Forbes poll that asked respondents what they would most like to be known for. Intelligence? Good looks? Sense of humor? Unexpectedly, fully one half of all respondents said they would most like to be known for being authentic.

Pearcey concludes: "In a world of spin and hype, the postmodern generation is searching desperately for something real and authentic. They will not take Christians seriously unless our churches and parachurch organizations demonstrate an authentic way of life – unless they are communities that exhibit the character of God in their relationships and mode

of living.”[9](#)

For most of the chapter Pearcey highlights examples of both sides of this call, people and ministries who claim Christ but use the world’s naturalistic methods, particularly in fundraising, marketing, and focusing on a personality rather than the message. She also points to people such as Richard Wurmbrand and Francis Schaeffer who lived out their Christian worldview without flashy results and hyped conferences and campaigns.

Most of us at Probe Ministries were heavily influenced by Francis Schaeffer, his ministry at L’Abri Switzerland, and his books. Many Christians whose youth spanned the turbulent ‘60s and ‘70s found Schaeffer a glowing beacon of truth and relevance in a world turned upside down by protests, drugs, war, crime, racism, and skepticism. Essentially, Schaeffer believed the gospel to be total truth. If that was the case, then living by a Christian worldview ought to be able to give real answers to real questions from real people.

We believe that what the postmodern world is searching for, what will most satisfy its craving for authenticity, is the person of Jesus Christ. They can only see Him in our lives and our answers to real questions. Our Web site at Probe.org is filled with the total truth of the Christian worldview. In our [“Answers to E-Mail” section](#) you can see authenticity lived out as we answer real questions and attacks with truth, respect, and gentleness.

We’re certainly not perfect. We have much to learn and correct as we search out the answers to today’s questions. We struggle with the funding and marketing of our ministry using methods that work but do not manipulate, coerce, or misrepresent who we are and what we do. Nancy Pearcey has challenged all of us in ministry, no less those of us at Probe Ministries, to always put Jesus first, people second, and ministry third.

Notes

1. Phillip Johnson, in the Foreword to Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004), 11.
2. Pearcey, 19.
3. Christopher Reeve quoted by Pearcey, 22.
4. Pearcey, 97-98.
5. Ibid., 153-154.
6. Ibid., 157.
7. Ibid, 168.
8. Ibid., 280-281.
9. Ibid., 378.

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