

Crossing the Worldview Divide: Sharing Christ with Other Faiths

Christians need to introduce the gospel differently to people with different worldviews. Steve Cable provides ways to talk to Muslims, Hindus, Mormons and postmoderns.

Changing Worldview Landscape

Growing up in the sixties and seventies, I had very limited exposure to other worldviews significantly different from my own. Raised in a small town in New Mexico, I was exposed to a number of Hispanic Catholics, and I knew at least two families that were Mormons. Frankly, I never had either of those groups share their worldview with me. But, by and large, most people appeared to have a pretty conventional Christian worldview, answering the basic worldview questions as follows:

- *What about God? God is the creator and sustainer of this universe.*
- *What about man? Mankind is separated from God's provision by our sin nature.*
- *What about salvation? Jesus Christ is God's answer to our desperate need, offering redemption through faith in Him. When people die, those who have put their faith in Jesus will go to heaven while those who refuse will be relegated to hell.*
- *What about history? History is a linear progression culminating in the creation of a new heavens and new earth.*

Since leaving the college campus in 1977, I have lived in suburbs of major metropolitan cities. Over the last thirty-five years, the makeup of those suburbs has changed significantly. I worked as an electrical engineer with several Indian Hindus and Jains. I teach English as a Second Language to a group of Muslims, Hindus, Baha'is, atheists and Latin American Catholics. From 2000 to 2010, the Muslim population of my area grew by 220%. All of these groups have a worldview significantly different from my own. In sharing Christ with them, I cannot appeal to the Bible stories they learned in vacation Bible school as a child. I need to be aware that what I say is being processed through their worldview filter. So that what they hear may not be what I meant to say.



The apostle Paul was very much aware of the issue of worldview filters. While on his missionary journeys, he preached the gospel

- *in synagogues established by Jews living away from Israel, {1}*
- *in market places containing Gentiles with a common Greek worldview, {2} and*
- *in front of Greek philosophers at the forefront of creating new worldviews. {3}*

In each of these environments, he preached the same truth: Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected from the dead for our sins. But he entered that subject from a verbal starting point that made sense to the audience he was speaking to. For example, in Athens he began by drawing their attention to an idol dedicated to the unknown god and he quoted some of their poets. Was he doing this because the idol was really a Christian idol or because their poets were speaking a Christian message? Of course not. He was bridging the worldview divide between their thought patterns and those of

Judaism. Having done that, he finished by saying, "God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." [\[4\]](#)

In the same way, if we want to share effectively with those from different worldviews, we need to make the effort to know how to share in a way that makes sense from their worldview perspective. We want to shake up their worldview, but we have to be able to communicate first. In the remainder of this article, we will consider the differences with and ways to share the gospel with people from four different worldview perspectives: Islam, Hindu, Mormon, and popular postmodernism.

Bridging Across to a Muslim Worldview

Islam is the second largest religion in the world with about 1.5 billion adherents or over 20% of the world population. In America, there are over 2.6 million Muslims with most of them located in major metropolitan areas accounting for 3-4% of the population in those areas. If you live in a metropolitan area, you are probably aware of several mosques in your area.

How can I share Christ with my Muslim acquaintances in a way they can understand? To answer this question, we need to understand how their worldview differs from our own and what communication issues may come into play. Let's begin by considering the four worldview questions introduced earlier:

- *What about God? Christians believe that a transcendent, loving God created the universe and mankind. Muslims believe that a transcendent, unknowable Allah created the universe and mankind.*
- *What about man? A Christian believes man is created in the image of God, but mankind is now fallen and separated from God by our sin nature. Muslims believe that, although weak*

and prone to error, man is basically good and is fully capable of obeying Allah.

- *What about salvation? For a Christian, the answer to our problem is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who provided a way for us to reunite with God through grace. Muslims must focus on good works to earn their way into heaven. They have no instruction as to what level of goodness is required. Certainly, they must pay attention to the five pillars of Islam: reciting the creed (the shahada), daily prayers, giving 2.5% of one's income to the poor or to the spread of Islam, a pilgrimage to Mecca, and fasting during Ramadan.*

- *What about history? For a Christian, the world is moving through time, not repeating itself, to reach the end God has prepared for it. For a Muslim time is a linear progression as well and it is moving forward exactly as Allah has willed.*

The key difference between our worldviews lies in the way to redemption: by faith through God's grace or as a reward for our good works.

How can you share effectively with Muslim friends and acquaintances? First, there are some important issues and confusing terms that will sidetrack your discussion in their minds. These include:

- **The high cost:** *in most Muslim families and societies, converting from Islam is a terrible offense, resulting in expulsion and sometimes death. Most Muslims will not enter into a conversation if they know the intent of it is to convert them to another faith.*

- **The Trinity, including Jesus as God's Son:** *Muslims are told that Christians worship three gods when there is only one. This area is especially problematic in thinking that God could be born to a woman and be crucified.*

- *Belittling Mohammed* will offend most Muslims, causing them to cease listening to you.
- *Using corrupt Scripture* by quoting from the New Testament which they have been taught has been changed and corrupted. An interesting note on this argument for Islam and against Christianity: a study of recently discovered early copies of the Quran show that current Aramaic copies of the Quran are only consistent with the early copies 88% of the time; while similar studies of the New Testament show a 98% reliability between current translations and the earliest documents.

Let's be clear. We are not saying that you don't need at some time to address the Trinity, the role of Mohammed as a false prophet, and veracity of Scripture. But first, you need to be able to communicate the gospel to them in a way that they will hear it.

To share with a Muslim, you must begin with prayer for your Muslim acquaintances who are captive to powerful social ties and equally powerful demonic lies. Pray that God will work to prepare their hearts. God has been working in powerful ways preparing Muslims to listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ. [{5}](#)

Start your conversation with their most important need. Ask them, "How can you be sure that you have done enough to get into heaven?" Listen to their thoughts on this important question. Point out that the gospels say, "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." [{6}](#) Are they that good? God loves us and knows that we cannot do it on our own. For this reason Jesus came to pay our penalty through His death and bring us into God's household through His resurrection.

In some Islamic countries, a good way to begin the discussion is to look at what the Koran says about Jesus to draw their attention to the specialness of Jesus. If they show an interest, you move quickly to the Bible as the true source of information on Jesus and eternal life. For more information on

this approach, check out *The Camel Training Manual* by Kevin Greeson.

Bridging Across to a Hindu Worldview

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world with about 900 million adherents. However, there are only about 1.2 million Hindus in the United States, about 0.4% of the population. Since they are mostly located in high tech, urban and suburban areas, the percentages are much higher in those areas, closer to 2% and growing. If you live in a major metropolitan area, you have probably seen one or more temples in your area.

How does the Hindu worldview compare with a Christian worldview on the four worldview questions introduced earlier?

- *What about God? The Hindu believes that the universe is eternal and the concept of an impersonal god is contained in the universe.*
- *What about man? Hindus believe that our current state is a temporary illusion and our goal is to merge into the Brahman, the god nature of the universe.*
- *What about salvation? For a Christian the answer to our problem is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who provided a way for us to become reunited with God. This salvation can begin now and will be fully realized in heaven. For a Hindu, the answer to our problem is to live a life in such a way as to merge with Brahman at death. Unfortunately, the vast majority will be reincarnated to suffer again as another living creature.*
- *What about history? For a Hindu, the universe is eternal and history repeats itself cyclically.*

As you can see, the worldview of a Hindu varies significantly

from that of a Christian on almost every point. Salvation for a Hindu is to reach a state where they no longer exist. They are integrated into the universal god. Both Hindus and Christians believe that mankind faces the problem of being born into a world full of suffering and hardship. For Hindus, there are three paths that could lead one out of this situation into oneness: 1) performing appropriate good works, 2) reaching a state of knowledge that pierces through the deception of this existence, and 3) devoting oneself to service of one of the many gods.

Being aware of these worldview differences can sensitize us to some of the communication problems in sharing with a Hindu. First, when you share with them that Jesus is the Son of God who came to earth in the flesh, they will probably agree with you wholeheartedly. This is exactly the response I received when sharing with a Hindu couple at a Starbucks in an exclusive shopping area. After all, there are many forms of god in the Hindu pantheon. Just because someone is a god, doesn't mean I should leave off worshipping my current gods to worship this new god exclusively.

How can I share with a Hindu in a way that helps be clearly explain the gospel in the context of their worldview? I would suggest two important aspects.

First, you can begin by asking this question: What if there were only one God who transcended His creation? We are not created to be subsumed back into God, but rather we were created in His image to be able to exist with and to worship our Creator. Our Creator does not want us to worship other gods which we have made up to satisfy our desire to understand our world. If you cannot get a Hindu to understand this basic premise, then other things you tell them about the gospel will be misinterpreted because of their existing worldview filter.

Second, you can tell them that you agree that the problems of this world can be seen in the pain and suffering of life on

this planet. Man has tried for thousands of years and yet the pain and suffering continue. This state of despair is the direct result of man's rejection of the love of God. We can never do enough in this life through good works, special knowledge, or serving false gods to bridge the gap back to God. God was the only one who could fix this problem and it cost Him great anguish to achieve it through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. [\[7\]](#)

Bridging Across to a Mormon Worldview

There are only about 15 million Mormons worldwide, but almost 45% of them live in the United States. They make up about 2% of the population of the United States. Compared to Muslims and Hindus, their U.S. population has remained fairly constant as a percentage basis over the last few decades. Because of their young adult missionary teams, many Americans have had some exposure to the evangelistic message of Mormonism.

How do Mormons compare with Christians in answering the four worldview questions introduced on day one? First, we need to understand that not all Mormons believe the same things. The president of the Mormons can introduce new doctrine which may contradict prior doctrine. One prominent example is the Mormon doctrine on blacks which was changed in 1978. The statements below represent my understanding as to the current orthodox Mormon position:

- *What about God? Where a Christian believes that God is eternal and transcendent, Mormons believe God was once a man like us and ascended to godhood*
- *What about man? Where a Christian believes that man is born in sin and separated from God, Mormons believe men are born in sin, but have the potential to become gods in their own right*
- *What about salvation? Where Christians believe in*

salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone, Mormons believe salvation comes from putting our faith in Jesus and performing good works. The good works are intended to pay back Jesus for the price He paid for us. In addition, Jesus is not eternal but was born to God and one of His spirit wives.

- What about history? Both Christians and Mormons believe that history is linear, but Mormons believe it is leading to a day when they could be gods ruling their own planets.*

Even though some would like to consider Mormonism as a branch of Christianity, one can see there are significant differences between the beliefs of Mormons and Christians.

In sharing your faith with a Mormon, there are terms and concepts you need to watch out for as they will be misinterpreted. First, you are relying on the Bible as the complete and only direct revelation from God. When you do that, you need to be aware that they will assume anything you say that they don't agree with is countered in the Book of Mormon or the Pearl of Great Price. Point out to them that the clear meanings of the Bible don't need reinterpretation. Also, you can tell them that the Bible written between 2,000 and 4,000 years ago has been consistently supported by archaeological findings while the Book of Mormon written 175 years ago has no historical or archaeological support.

When talking about God the Father, Jesus, Satan, and man, be sure to make it clear that God and Jesus are one kind of being, the transcendent God of the universe, that Satan is a created angelic being, and that men are created different from the angels. A Mormon will use those terms, but will normally group all four of those beings as made basically the same.

Be leery of expecting to win over Mormon missionaries on mission. If they are sharing with you, of course, you should try to share with them. However, normally they are too focused

on fulfilling their mission to really listen to someone else. It is best to share with them when you introduce the topic.

In sharing with a Mormon, you may want to consider how good one would have to be to earn their way to eternal life. After all, Jesus said, "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." If you can admit you are not perfect, then the only way to redemption is through God's grace.

Some of them may feel that in the matters of the church, they are keeping the faith in a sinless manner. What if a future president changes some criteria of behavior and you find out that you have now been sinning for years? Does it make sense to you that God's criteria for righteousness should change?[{8}](#)

Bridging Across to a Postmodern Worldview

Postmoderns may not seem as exotic as some of the world religions we have considered to this point. But they have a distinctly different worldview than do Christians and are the largest segment of non-Christians in today's America. An actual postmodern believes that absolute truth, if it does exist at all, is impossible to find. A Christian believes that Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth and the life" and that "truth comes through Jesus Christ."[{9}](#) Jesus is truth applicable to every man in every situation. What do we need to understand about postmodernism to be better equipped to share the truth with them?

Popular postmodernity has a broadly defined identity, but they should resonate with this definition: postmodernity is "incredulity toward metanarratives."[{10}](#) In other words, they reject the possibility of anyone knowing truth about the basic questions of life; e.g., our worldview questions.

As before, we will begin with our four worldview questions. Keep in mind that we just said they don't think anyone can know the truth about these types of questions.

- *What about God?* Postmoderns believe that we can't really know where we came from but we probably evolved from nothing over millions of years.
- *What about man?* Postmoderns believe that humans are neither good nor bad and are shaped by the society around them which defines what is good and bad for them.
- *What about salvation?* For a Christian, the answer to our dilemma and hope for eternal life is the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's Son. For a postmodern, each group has their own answer that helps them get through the hard times of life, but none of the answers can be counted on as true. What is important is not their truth, but their helpfulness in coping with life's challenges.
- *What about history?* For a postmodern, history is linear moving forward to whatever happens next. Hopefully, the future will be better than the past, but there is not grand plan or purpose for mankind. In any case, if there is a grand plan, we can't know it with any certainty.

It is hard to present Jesus Christ as the source of all grace and truth to someone who denies the existence of truth or at least our ability to know it. As Dave Kinnaman writes in his book *UnChristian*, "Even if you are able to weave a compelling logical argument, young people will nod, smile, and ignore you."[\[11\]](#) Constructing a rational argument for Christ may not be the place to start. As Drew Dyck reported hearing from one postmodern, "I don't really believe in all that rationality. Reason and logic come from the Western philosophical tradition. I don't think that's the only way to find truth." Dyck concluded, "They're not interested in philosophical proofs for God's existence or in the case for the resurrection."[\[12\]](#)

To begin the process, we need to develop their trust; be their friend. Possibly, invite them to serve alongside you in

ministering to the needs of others, exposing them to the ministry of Christ to the world around them.

The postmodern should be interested in your personal story, the things you have found that work for you. But don't fall into the traditional testimony rut (i.e., I was bad, I was saved, now I am wonderful); make it real by sharing real issues you have dealt with. Then convey the gospel story in a winsome way, emphasizing Jesus concern for the marginalized around Him, realizing the gospel is a metanarrative providing a universal answer to a universal problem.

Share with them why you are compelled to commit to a universal truth. I cannot live my life without making a commitment to what I believe to be the Truth. Saying "it doesn't matter" is basically giving up on eternity. Admit that claiming to know the truth about God, creation, and eternity is crazy from man's perspective. It can only be true if it is truly revealed by God. From my perspective, Jesus is the Truth.[{13}](#)

We've taken a very brief look at four distinct worldviews, different from a Christian worldview and different from each other. A simple understanding of those worldviews helps us avoid confusing terminology. We can focus on bridging the gap from their fundamental misunderstanding to faith in Christ. Only God working through the Holy Spirit can bring them to true faith, but we can play an important role in making the gospel understandable when filtered through their worldview.[{14}](#)

Notes

1. Acts 17:1-2, 17 for example
2. Acts 17:17, 19:9ff for example.
3. Acts 17:18-32
4. Acts 17:30-31
5. See the web articles "[Breaching the Barriers to Islam](#)" by Steve Cable and "[Islam in the Modern World](#)" by Kerby Anderson.

Both can be found at www.probe.org.

6. Matthew 5:48

7. For more information on Hinduism, you can access the article "[Hinduism](#)" by Rick Rood at www.probe.org.

8. For more information on Mormonism, please access "[Understanding Our Mormon Neighbors](#)" by Don Closson and "[Examining the Book of Mormon](#)" by Patrick Zukeran. Both can be found at www.probe.org.

9. John 1:17

10. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans., Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

11. Dave Kinnaman, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan), 2007.

12. Drew Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults are Leaving the Faith . . . And How to Bring Them Back*, Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2010

13. See the article "[The Answer is the Resurrection](#)" by Steve Cable at www.probe.org

14. For more information on postmodernism, you can access "[Truth Decay](#)" by Kerby Anderson and "[Worldviews Part 2](#)" by Rick Wade at www.probe.org.

© 2013 Probe Ministries

Tactics for an Ambassador: Defending the Christian Faith

Most Christians equate evangelism with conflict: an all-out assault on the beliefs and values of others. In our relativistic, live-and-let-live culture, even the most

motivated believer feels like he's committing a crime by entering into a spiritual discussion. Are there ways to take the anxiety out of evangelism?

The idea of doing Christian apologetics, a fancy word for defending the Christian faith, has lost some luster among church goers. The word conjures up images of conflict, anxiety, and even anger. But most of all, it generates thoughts of inadequacy and lack of confidence among those called to "give an answer" (1 Pet. 3:15) for the hope we have in Christ. Most people are trying to avoid conflict and the emotional fatigue that comes with defending a controversial set of beliefs that are often ridiculed in our culture.

We live in an era that values diversity and tolerance above all other virtues. Anyone claiming to have true knowledge about important things like the nature of God, good and evil, or the purpose of human existence will be accused of intolerance and a mean spirited attempt to impose their beliefs on their neighbors. You are allowed to believe almost anything today, as long as you don't claim that it is true in any universal sense.



Part of the reason that Christians in American churches do so little evangelism is that they are convinced that it constitutes a spiritual invasion, an attack on the beliefs of a friend or neighbor who will resist this apologetic assault with everything he or she has to offer. They also believe that they will have failed miserably unless every encounter ends with someone trusting in Christ. It's either total victory or utter defeat, and there are no innocent bystanders.



Gregory Koukl's book *Tactics* helps to give Christians the right perspective on evangelism and apologetics.^[1] He argues that the D-day invasion model for evangelism is counterproductive, and that seeing oneself as an ambassador for Christ makes more sense. We need fewer frontal assaults and more embassy meetings. The skills necessary to be a successful ambassador are quite different from those of an infantryman. Persuasion rather than conquest motivate the ambassador, and

one's style of communication can be as important as the content being conveyed.

According to Koukl, an effective ambassador for Christ must master three skill-sets. First, a Christian ambassador should possess a clear understanding of the message being offered by his sovereign King. Second, he needs to exhibit a personal character that reinforces the message he's been charged with, not distract from it. Finally, an ambassador needs sufficient wisdom to know how to communicate his message in a manner that draws people into dialogue and then to keep the conversation going. This kind of wisdom translates into specific tactics for communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ to a culture that has been preconditioned against the message.

Why Do We Need Tactics?

In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul says that we are Christ's ambassadors and that God has entrusted us with a message of reconciliation to a lost world (2 Cor. 5:20). But, although we have good news to share, Christians often don't feel capable or confident to share it.

Being tactical has to do with the way one arranges his or her resources. The effective tactician knows when to be aggressive

and when to hold back and gather information. Commanders on a battlefield don't unleash every weapon available at the beginning of a conflict, nor do ambassadors immediately unveil all of their arguments.

Apologists know that one of their most important tactics is the well placed question. Picking up important personal information about someone's background and worldview provides critical insight into the best way to steer the conversation. The ability to ask good questions, combined with good listening skills, helps to avoid stereotyping people in ways that can cause the conversation to end suddenly. It also shows that you care about someone as an individual, not just as, for example, a Mormon or a Muslim. Even when someone labels oneself, let's say as a Hindu, it's important to discover what that term means to them. Hinduism contains a wide variety of possible beliefs and it would be counterproductive to argue against something that this person doesn't adhere to. As you can imagine, being a good listener and shaping your comments to fit the individual will most likely have a greater impact on them than just memorizing a tract and delivering it regardless of the setting.

Employing wise tactics implies a thoughtful rather than emotional approach to conversations. Emotions can quickly get the best of us, especially if we are unprepared to respond to the questions and challenges that we may encounter. Good planning helps us to accomplish our goal of guiding people to the truth about Jesus. It can also help us to avoid provoking someone to anger. Once people get angry they rarely hear our defense of the gospel. It's even worse if we get angry.

Some might respond to this call for wise tactics in sharing Christ by saying that you cannot argue someone into heaven. I would respond that you cannot love someone into heaven either. Neither arguments, or love, or a simple telling of the gospel alone will win someone to heaven. Only the Holy Spirit can change someone's heart, but it doesn't follow that God doesn't

use these methods to build His kingdom.

Becoming Sherlock Holmes

Sometimes we Christians are tempted to dump our entire theological systems on anyone willing stay put long enough to listen. This doctrinal dump might be a light load for some but a train load for others. The problem is that we are often trying to answer questions that people haven't even thought up yet and we can add confusion and distractions to the gospel message without even being aware of it. How can we avoid making this mistake?

When we sense that a conversation is headed toward spiritual territory, perhaps our first inclination should be to ask good questions so that we better understand the person we desire to share Christ with. Good questions protect us from jumping to conclusions and to deal with the actual beliefs a person holds rather than some straw man position that we might prefer to attack. They also have the tendency to naturally promote further dialogue and shape the discussion.

Once a person makes a statement regarding what they believe to be true, good questions can be particularly helpful. If someone tells you that it is irrational to believe in God because there is no proof that He exists, you now have an opportunity to ask key questions that will make your eventual responses far more effective. The first category of questions seeks further information and clarification. For instance, you might ask "What do you mean by God?" or "What evidence would you count as proof towards His existence?" You might ask if he knows anyone who believes in God and whether or not they might have good reasons for doing so. Asking someone how they arrived at a conclusion or how they know something to be the case helps to differentiate between simple assertions of belief and reasons for holding that belief. People often make statements of belief without much forethought, and when

challenged they find that they have little more than an emotional attachment to their view.

Don't panic if you run into someone who is prepared to defend his or her views. Even if they have an extensive argument supporting their position, good questions can get you out of the hot seat and provide time to build a stronger case for your next encounter. You might ask them to slow down and present their case in detail so that you can understand it better. You can also tell them that you want time to consider their position and will get back to them with a response. Giving someone the podium to clearly present their beliefs is usually well received. Listen carefully to what is said and then do your homework.

Suicidal Arguments

One of the more interesting parts of *Tactics* are Koukl's chapters on ideas that commit suicide. These are commonly called self-refuting ideas or ideas that defeat themselves. A fancier description is that they are self-referentially incoherent. It doesn't take long to encounter one of these arguments when talking to people about religion.

A simple example of a suicidal view is expressed by the comment, "There is no truth," or the more humble version, "It is impossible to know something that is true for everyone, everywhere." This statement fails its own criteria for validity by denying universal truth claims and then making a truth claim implied to be universal. If what the statement professes is true, then it is false. It commits suicide because it violates the law of non-contradiction which prohibits something from being both true and false at the same time.

Christians who are highly influenced by a postmodern view of truth often make self-defeating arguments as well. Koukl gives

the example of a teacher in a Christian college classroom asking her students if they are God. When no hands went up she proclaimed that since they are not God they only have access to truth with a small t; only God knows Truth with a capital T. The implication is that small t truth is personal and limited. A student might ask the teacher if what she just offered is truth with a small t; if so, why should the students accept the teacher's limited personal view of reality over the student's perceptions?

Another argument that's quite popular and self-defeating is, "People should never impose their values on someone else." A quick response might be, "Does that express your values?" Of course it does. Then ask the person why he is imposing his values on you. His statement violates the criteria of validity that it tries to establish.

Even comments that seem to make sense at first suffer from suicidal tendencies. For instance, some have argued that since men wrote the Bible, and given that people are imperfect, the Bible is flawed and not inspired by God. The problem is that although people are imperfect it does not follow that everything they say or write is flawed. In fact, if everything a human says or writes is flawed, then this comment about the Bible is flawed. Just because people are capable of error, it doesn't mean that they will always commit error.

Helping people to see that their truth claims might be contradictory must be done gently. The point is not to merely defeat their position, but to help them to become open to other ways of thinking about an issue. It is in this context of gentle persuasion that the Holy Spirit can change a heart.

Sharpening Your Skills

The list of self-defeating truth claims can get rather long. For instance, it is common to hear people say something like

“science is the only source for truth.” The problem with this statement is that it is not scientific. There are no scientific experiments that one can perform which establish that science is the only source of truth. It is a self-defeating statement.

It is also quite popular to assume that all religions are basically the same and equally true. If this is the case, then Christianity is true. However, a basic teaching of Christianity is that the core teachings of other religions are false and that Jesus is the only source of salvation. Again, the statement defeats itself.

Ideas that commit practical suicide include the notion that it's wrong to ever condemn someone, and that God doesn't take sides. The first comment is a condemnation of all who condemn others. The second assumes that God is on their side, even though God doesn't take sides. If you think through these ideas you can be ready to gently point out their self-contradictory nature and move on to subjects more profitable.

When dealing with difficult ethical issues like abortion or homosexuality, it is always helpful to have a preplanned set of tactics. Koukl gives the example of a Christian who is asked his views about homosexuality by a lesbian boss. He begins his response by asking if the boss is tolerant of diverse points of view. Does she respect convictions different from her own? Of course, true tolerance means putting up with someone you disagree with. Since very few people want to label themselves as intolerant, they will usually affirm their support of the practice, protecting you from being attacked for giving your viewpoint.

Gregory Koukl's book contains many more great ideas about responding to attacks on Christian belief. At the end of the book he leaves us with what he calls the ambassador's creed. An ambassador should be ready to represent Christ. He should be patient with those who disagree. He should be reasonable in

his defense. And, finally, he should be tactical, adapting his approach to each unique person that God brings into his path. Our wise use of tactics should improve the “acoustics” in a conversation so that people can hear the gospel well.

Note

1. Gregory Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

© 2011 Probe Ministries

Photoshopping Life

When Ray and I [visited the Galapagos Islands](#), one of my favorite pictures was the two of us with a gigantic tortoise. Unfortunately, my big ol’ red purse was on the ground in the picture too. So I photoshopped it out.



At our son’s wedding, one of the ushers wasn’t wearing his boutonniere when it was time for the formal pictures. “Not to worry,” the photographer said. “We can photoshop it in later.”

During my daughter-in-law's holiday family picture taking, someone suggested photoshopping in a beloved uncle, since they were missing him. "No! He's been dead for two years!" someone else responded. "You don't photoshop in a dead person who couldn't have been here with us!"

We just had fiber-optic TV and internet installed. We can now pause and rewind live TV. Whoa.

The ability to manipulate digital images and sounds has spoiled us, I'm afraid, into thinking we should be able to manipulate the rest of life. It's a technologically enhanced update of the enemy's lies in the garden, enticing Eve to think she and Adam were entitled to be like God, a thinly veiled offer to make themselves as gods, just as he had.

And so we end up with people redefining things like marriage to include any two people, including those of the same sex. And a couple of gay men who successfully got both their names put on the birth certificate of their adopted son. This is the fruit of people redefining truth and reality according to their whims and desires.

And it is so much more serious than subtracting a purse or adding a flower.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/photoshopping_life on
January 6, 2009.

“How Should I Respond to ‘It’s All Right to Do Anything as Long as It Doesn’t Hurt Anybody’?”

I have a question about some of the new age mentality that I have encountered in the more recent months. As apologetics is a bit of a hobby for me, I love learning what other people think and believe. It seems that as I ask around more and more, people are always saying the same thing. In more words they always seem to say “I can do whatever I want as long as it doesn’t hurt anybody.” I know that this is by no means a new or uncommon answer, but it seems to be growing to me. Usually I address this with a series of questions which will cause them to backtrack and correct themselves, something like this: It is not all right to hurt people? Do you count as a person? Are you allowed to hurt yourself? Is emotional harm all right? How did you determine that it was not all right to hurt people? Who enforces this rule? Are you making a connection between church and state? How did the world come into existence? And so on. My philosophy is that sooner or later they will be forced to acknowledge that their view is full of holes, yet it appears to me that this way doesn’t work. I actually should have realized this sooner, because I now realize that those people really do not know what they believe, and that their choices are based on emotions. Thus, I am asking you how you would suggest responding to the view that “It is all right to do anything as long as it doesn’t hurt anybody”?

I’m afraid you’ve hit the wall of the skeptical postmodern mentality. When a person doesn’t believe anyone can know what is true about anything, and adopts the “true for me” mentality, the results are an amazing batch of contradictory

ideas and no reason to try to make them consistent. People toss together beliefs according to what seems right at the moment, changing beliefs like changing outfits; ideas are subject to fashion just as clothes are. After trying to reason with people who think as you have described, you want to bang someone's head against the wall – theirs or your own (I don't suggest either!).

Because on the level of ideas contradictory beliefs can be held with such amazing ease, one typically cannot convince a person on that level. I say "typically" because some can be convinced at least that their ideas are inconsistent and that that is a problem. You just have to try drawing the person into a conversation and see what happens. For many it takes real life situations to drive home the point.

I recommend you find a copy of Francis Schaeffer's *The God Who Is There* and focus especially on the last section: "Speaking Historic Christianity Into the Twentieth-Century Climate." He deals with this issue there. One of his main points is that any religion or philosophy which isn't Christian must result in some kind of inconsistency in a person's life because we were made by God to live in God's universe. False beliefs put us at odds with the universe and with ourselves. So, for instance, a person who says there is no difference between good and evil will be quite upset if you pour boiling water on him. He might even say you were wrong! Of course, I don't recommend actually pulling off such stunts to prove a point! What one can do, however, is gently (I Pe. 3:15) question a person about an inconsistency between what the person says she believes and how she acts. It's like turning a light on and letting the other person see the problem for herself.

One thing we apologists easily forget is tact. One person defined it as "the ability to make a point without sticking someone with it." Work toward encouragement and very subtle enlightenment rather than conquering in your manner. Be committed to truth, but also be committed to people and to

showing the attractiveness of truth to them rather than whipping them with it.

If you have any questions after reading Schaeffer's book (or at least the above-mentioned segment of it) write to me directly.

Rick Wade

See Also:

[As Long As It Doesn't Hurt Anyone Else](#) by Rick Wade

Truth Decay

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).

© 2007 Probe Ministries

The Emerging Church

Introduction

The church, both local and universal, is always influenced by the culture in which it resides. As a result, churches in America have gone through changes that correspond to changes in the American culture. Some of the changes are innocuous and are seen as suitable by almost everyone; air conditioning and indoor plumbing come to mind. Other changes can be more controversial such as musical genre, the use of multimedia,

and especially preaching styles and content. The challenge for churches is to determine what changes are acceptable and what changes compromise the message of the gospel.

A growing list of influential thinkers and pastors argue that the postmodern era in which we live mandates a significant change in how believers do church. This movement has come to be known as the *emerging church* and has acquired a considerable following as evidenced both by the number of conferences held on the subject and by the numerous Web sites devoted to the issue. The leaders of this movement have written and spoken at length regarding the necessity for change and have enumerated the types of changes that the church needs to make to survive and thrive in the years to come.

The difficulty for outsiders trying to weigh their arguments begins with trying to define the changes that have occurred in our postmodern culture. Postmodernity is horribly difficult to define. Some see it as a loss of modernity's confidence in science and technology; others see it as something much deeper. One emerging church Web site uses a definition written by an English professor at a major university who writes that "Postmodernism . . . doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that. The world is meaningless? Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's just play with nonsense."[\[1\]](#)

Postmodernity is primarily an argument or protest against modernist attitudes and truth claims. The emerging church has picked up this protest by rejecting traditional ideas of authority, certainty, and rationality. Instead its emphasis is on what it calls *authenticity*. Feelings and affections matter more than logic and reason, one's experience more than propositional truth claims, and inclusion more than exclusion.

Brian McLaren is a leader among those who argue that radical change must come to the church or else our culture will deem

it irrelevant. He writes, "Either Christianity itself is flawed, failing, [and] untrue, or our modern, Western, commercialized, industrial-strength version of it is in need of a fresh look, a serious revision."[{2}](#)

In this article we will consider what is good, what is not so good, and what is dangerous to the gospel of Christ in this church reform movement known as the emerging church.

What's Good About the Emerging Church?

If the emerging church is anything, it's sensitive to the culture around it. Its leaders are thoughtfully engaged in responding to what they believe are dramatic changes in our society. These changes include the rapid increase in ethnic and religious diversity and the arrival of instant local and global communication. At the same time, Western civilization has experienced a dramatic decrease in biblical literacy.

The leadership of the emerging church argues against those who are tempted to respond to these changes by clinging to a narrowly defined church tradition. They believe that idealizing a past era and allowing nostalgia to replace the hard work of contextualizing Christianity for today's realities would be a mistake. Instead, we should discover how best to communicate the gospel to our increasingly postmodern world. In his book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, D. A. Carson writes that "this is far more commendable than a cultural conservatism that acts as if the culture with which we are most comfortable (usually the one in which we grew up) is the only culture acceptable to thinking Christians, and perhaps to God himself."[{3}](#)

As I noted earlier, a key emphasis of the emerging church is authenticity. It argues that modernity has brought the church an unnecessary and unhealthy desire for absolute theological certainty which has led to an unbalanced focus on the

theological propositions held by believers rather than on living an authentic Christian life. It has also led to a lack of humility regarding the limitations of language to communicate the mysteries of God's person and rule. The drive for theological precision has left the church divided and worn out, unable to offer the world a clear picture of the kingdom of God.

The emerging church is responding to what it perceives to be a lack of authenticity in our worship and Christian life in general. They would agree with Carson who writes, "Sermons are filled with clichés. There is little intensity in confession, little joy in absolution, little delight in the gospel, little passion for the truth, little compassion for others, little humility in our evaluations, [and] little love in our dealings with others."[{4}](#)

It has also rightly stressed the importance of community. Modernity offered a picture of human nature that highlighted the heroic individual. However, the Bible begins with a relational Trinity—God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and sets the New Testament believer within the community of the church including all the "one another" admonitions given by its inspired authors.

The world is watching to see this community in action. As Stanley Grenz writes, "Members of the next generation are often unimpressed by our verbal presentations of the gospel. What they want to see is a people who live out the gospel in wholesome, authentic, and healing relationships."[{5}](#)

Concerns About the Emerging Church

Among the many concerns that have been written about the emerging church, we will focus primarily on just two issues. The first is its one-dimensional portrayal of the modern era, usually seen as the time period between the Enlightenment and

the late 1900s, and the other is its teaching regarding what we can confidently know as believers.

Some argue that the emerging church uses an incomplete description of the modern era and its impact on the church to build its case. D. A. Carson writes that the movement's "distortion of modernism extends, in the case of some emerging church thinkers, to a distortion of confessional Christianity under modernism."⁶ Emerging church leaders paint a picture of the church in the modern era as having given in to the rationalistic excesses of the times. By doing so, they argue, it is guilty of committing the sin of absolutism, leading to an arrogance that resulted in a cold, emotionless orthodoxy. Drained of any passion, the church in the modern era became a shadow of what it should be. Although there are times where this in fact happened, the modern era is far too complex to reduce it, or the manifestation of the church in it, to such a simple portrayal.

Without going into too many of the names and ideas involved, it must be noted that the modern period has not been a monolith of science and reason. From Rousseau to Nietzsche, many have challenged the mechanistic model presented by Enlightenment thinkers and offered a different view of reality and human nature. These ideas also impacted the church during this so called "modern" era. While many sought a more scientific faith and utilized the new tools of science to justify Christianity, others followed the lead of Søren Kierkegaard towards a more existential Christian life.

In its attack against modernism, the emerging church has condemned confessional Christianity as too abstract and rationalistic. Carefully constructed theologies, and those who build them, are set against a faith comprised of stories, proverbs, and mystery. Often, it is presented as one or the other, no compromise being possible. But is this necessarily the case? C. S. Lewis is one example of a Christian who defended the faith in formal, rational debates, and yet

understood the power of story and the imagination.

The Problem of Knowing

This leads us into the second area of concern regarding the emerging church. How much knowledge about God, the human condition and salvation can we confidently possess? This question is directly tied to our concept of revelation. Do we have revealed propositional truth in Scripture, truth that can be understood and communicated, even cross-culturally, or are we limited to the emotions and relationships that only result from a personal encounter with God?

The most important criticism of the emerging church is its application of postmodern epistemology. Epistemology is the part of philosophy that asks, "How do you know that," or "How do we know anything at all?". Some in the emerging church movement have endorsed an extreme version of postmodern epistemology that creates an either/or view of knowledge that can be very manipulative.

First, they set the standard for knowing something to be true unreasonably high. They claim that either we know something exhaustively, even omnisciently as God knows it, or else our partial knowledge can only be personal knowledge, more like an opinion rather than something that can be binding on others as well. Even worse, they argue that we have no means of testing to see how close what we think is true actually corresponds with reality itself. Since few of us would claim to have God's perspective or knowledge on an issue, they argue that we must admit that everything we claim to know is only a very limited personal perspective on the truth. In addition, what little we think we know is highly impacted, some say completely constructed, by the social group we participate in as individuals.

What this viewpoint does is make it impossible for anyone to

claim that he or she knows something objectively, and that this objective knowledge is true or valid for everyone everywhere. If knowledge can only be personal knowledge, then the phrase “it might be true for you, but not for me” becomes reality for everyone and for every topic.

There are other ways of thinking about what we know that sets the standard for knowing lower and yet maintains the sense of postmodern humility that is attractive to many.

One suggestion is called the “fusion of horizons” model of knowledge. Just like everyone’s view of the horizon is slightly different, everyone’s understanding of an event or idea is slightly different because it’s filtered through a person’s experiences and perspective. For example, let’s consider the case of a twenty-first century biblically illiterate person trying to understand Paul’s message in Romans.^{7} At first, there will be little overlap in how she and Paul understand the world. But what if she read the rest of the Bible, learned Greek, attended Bible studies, and read books about the first century Roman culture? Her understanding will never be exactly the same as Paul’s, but slowly she will get closer and closer to his world and develop a clearer picture of what Paul was attempting to communicate. She may choose to disagree with Paul, but she will understand him.

If this were not true, it would make little sense when Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, “For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand.” The strong postmodern view of knowledge leaves us little hope that the knowledge of the gospel can be heard and understood.

Summary

Leaders of the emerging church argue that Christianity must focus more on authenticity and relationships and less on propositional truth or it will become irrelevant and

ineffective. But is the focus on relationships and authenticity necessarily antithetical to propositional truth? Other church reform movements in America have worked to renew the church's emphasis on building community and authentic worship without sacrificing truth along the way.

The Jesus People U.S.A. attracted a wide following in the 70's because of their emphasis on relationships, commitment to communal living, and the rejection of what they perceived to be an overly materialistic culture. Although the movement included some fringe ideas, it has become part of the evangelical mainstream over the years and given churches another example of how to impact the culture with biblical truth.

Another significant movement, also driven by the need for authenticity and community, is the Fellowship Bible church movement of the '80s and '90s. Gene Getz's 1975 book *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* gave an argument for grounding the activities of local congregations on the functions of the early church rather than on their forms. His thesis is that while the second chapter of Acts clearly communicates the critical functions of the church, the New Testament allows considerable freedom regarding how those functions are carried out. Getz's attempt to discover the purpose of the church through what he calls the threefold lens of Scripture, history, and culture resulted in a movement that has spanned the globe and helped to shift the focus of local worship towards intimacy within small groups and authentic worship. At the time, his use of various audio/visual tools for teaching from the pulpit and meeting in non-traditional facilities seemed quite radical. But his ultimate goal was for believers to break away from the calcified forms of doing church and to experience the fellowship and community that can be generated when we take all of the "one-another's" of Scripture seriously.

Another important contributor to this discussion was Francis

Schaeffer. His book *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* asked us to discern the difference between the functions of the church that are listed in Scripture and the forms that are used in different cultural settings. He wrote, "In a rapidly changing age like ours, an age of total upheaval like ours, to make non-absolutes absolute guarantees both isolation and the death of the institutional, organized church."^{8} Schaeffer had a huge impact on the baby boomer generation without sacrificing the truth claims of Scripture.

Hopefully, the emerging church will find a place next to these past reform movements as it gathers attention and matures. However, if it continues to de-emphasize sound doctrine, it will find itself to be irrelevant and ineffective.

Notes

1. Mary Klages, "Postmodernism," University of Colorado, www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html.
2. Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), xi.
3. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, 2005), 49.
4. Ibid., 50.
5. Ibid., 169.
6. Ibid., 60.
7. Ibid., 116.
8. Francis Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (InterVarsity Press, 1970), 67.

“Why Is There So Much Acceptance of the Idea That Truth is Relative?”

Thanks for your question about truth. The current pseudo-relativist mindset makes apologetics and evangelism difficult, for the non-Christian is often very happy for us to be Christians . . . as long as we don't insist or even suggest that what we believe is true for everyone. I call it pseudo-relativism because no one is a thoroughgoing relativist. We ALL have our absolutes. (For more on this you might want to look at William Watkins' book *The New Absolutes*. Or for a shorter treatment see [my article](#) with the same title on our web site.)

Why is it so widely accepted? There are a few reasons, I think.

1. The influx of Eastern religions in the '60s introduced a “both/and” mindset with respect to truth. In the West we have recognized the reality of the “either/or” nature of the universe: e.g., either the earth revolves around the sun or it doesn't. It can't be “both the earth revolves around the sun and it doesn't.” Which is it? This is simply how the universe is. This reality is represented in logic as the law of non-contradiction. We presuppose it in our speech constantly. When the doctor says, “Take this medicine; it will help you get well,” he doesn't also mean “Take this medicine; it will not help you get better.” Eastern philosophies and religions often have a pantheistic view of reality which means that everything is of one nature, and everything is divine. If all is one, then those things which appear to be opposites to us really aren't.

2. Social realities—Plurality of beliefs: How can all these

sincere people be wrong? we ask.

3. Democratic ideal—One person, one vote. Knowledge becomes democratic; everyone's opinion is equally valid.

4. Science—Quantum theory: Paul Davies said that "Uncertainty is the fundamental ingredient of the quantum theory" (this theory, by the way, is a very significant one in science today). Some people think that if scientists can't even be certain about empirical matters, why do we think we can know about spiritual matters with any certainty?

5. Religion—No one knows ultimate reality, people think, so one god is as good as another. Some tell us it's our responsibility to create reality; some say we are gods ourselves.

6. Philosophy—Rationalism has faded away; political power is our basic category of understanding rather than truth.

I think, then, that there are several factors which figure into our postmodern frame of mind. This is the hallmark of postmodernism: a loss of confidence in our ability to know objective truth. Our job is to restore confidence in it, grounded in Jesus, the creator of the universe.

Thanks again for writing.

Rick Wade
Probe Ministries

Is the Church Ready to Engage the World for Christ?

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



The Mission of the Church

The church is called to engage the world for Christ. Jesus commanded us to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . .”

Many churches and Christian organizations are doing a wonderful job in fulfilling this call. However, it appears that the majority of the church has responded in one of two ways. Some churches have chosen to retreat and protect themselves from the world by secluding themselves in their own isolated communities. We see huddles of Christian communities with their own sports leagues, schools, clubs, etc. There is nothing wrong with Christian programs, but if it is created with an isolationist mentality, we create a church that is withdrawn from the world, irrelevant, and unable to relate to the unbelieving world.

I saw a display of this at a funeral once. As an invited guest not knowing anyone, I sat with the non-believers in the audience and observed how the Christians at the funeral interacted with the non-believers. The pastor preached a message using terminology foreign to the non-Christian. After the funeral, at the lunch reception, I saw the Christians huddled together speaking “Christianese”—a language that sounded totally foreign. What a wasted opportunity! This moment was a small display of the danger that isolating ourselves from the world creates: Christians unable to relate with the lost world.

Another response has been that, instead of transforming the world, many churches have been transformed by the world. The popular thinking of the culture has dismantled the foundational truths upon which the church once stood. Major denominations are now in a battle or have given up their position on key tenets regarding truth, moral absolutes, and religious truth.

The result of these two responses has been devastating. George Barna writes, “[A]s we prepare to enter into a new century of ministry, we must address one inescapable conclusion: despite the activity and chutzpah emanating from thousands of congregations, the Church in America is losing influence and adherents faster than any other major institution in the nation.”^{1}

Charles Colson writes, “We live in a culture that is at best morally indifferent. A culture in which Judeo-Christian values are mocked and where immorality in high places is not only ignored but even rewarded in the voting booth. A culture in which violence, banality, meanness, and disintegrating personal behavior are destroying civility and endangering the very life of our communities. . . . Small wonder that many people have concluded that the ‘Culture war’ is over and we (the church) have lost.”^{2}

Let us study some of the key issues facing the church in the 21st century and see how they have affected our witness. And let’s see if we are indeed ready to engage our world.

The Church and Truth

Our current, postmodern culture adheres to the position that universal objective truth does not exist. Truth is relative to each individual and to each culture. Jim Leffel summarizes postmodern relativism this way,

Relativism says the truth isn’t fixed by outside reality, but

is decided by a group or individual for themselves. Truth isn't discovered but manufactured. Truth is ever changing not only in insignificant matters of taste or fashion, but in crucial matters of spirituality, morality and reality itself.[{3}](#)

Leading postmodern thinker John Caputo writes, "The cold, hermeneutic truth, is that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive."[{4}](#) Both men summarize the postmodern belief that objective truth does not exist and therefore, we conclude that all truth claims are equal even if they are contradictory.

This understanding of truth permeates every area of our culture. Public schools, government, and the media all promote the view that 'since there are multiple descriptions of reality, no one view can be true in an ultimate sense.

A survey of the American public revealed that 66 percent agreed with the statement, "There is no such thing as absolute truth."[{5}](#) Among the youth, 70 percent believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define "truth" in conflicting ways and both be correct."[{6}](#)

This popular notion stands in opposition to biblical teaching. Truth is rooted in God. It corresponds to the facts of reality. It is embodied in Christ and revealed in God's revelation, the Bible. Jesus states in John 14:6, "I am the way the truth and the life. . . ." God, who is truth, has revealed to us His word of the truth, the Bible. In John 17:17 Jesus prays for His disciples saying, "Sanctify them in truth; your word is truth." Absolute truth is knowable because God has revealed it to us in the Bible. Truth is not a social construct created by a culture, nor is it relative as some postmodernists claim. It is transmitted to us by the God of truth to His creatures who are expected to conform themselves to this truth.

For two millennia the church has been the guardian of truth. However, unbridled postmodern philosophy appears to have influenced the church in a frightful way. According to the latest studies the church could be in danger of surrendering her position. According to the latest research, 53 percent of adults in church believe there is no absolute truth. Among the youth in church, research shows that 57 percent do not believe an objective standard of truth exists{7}

Ephesians 6 exhorts us to engage in spiritual battle with the spiritual armor God provides. An essential component is the “belt of truth.” Without a clear understanding of truth, we cannot hope to successfully engage our culture for Christ. God’s truth is the foundation on which the church’s message stands.

The Church and Ethics

Most Americans reject the idea of absolute truth, so they naturally reject the idea of absolute moral truth. George Barna writes, “This transformation has done more to undermine the health and stability of American Society—and perhaps, of the world. . . .”{8}

The late Dr. Francis Schaeffer wrote,

If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By absolute we mean that which always applies (to all people), that which provides a final or ultimate standard. There must be an absolute if there are to be morals, and there must be an absolute if there are to be real values. If there is no absolute beyond man’s ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.{9}

Dr. Schaeffer’s conclusion is what we must inevitably come to if we hold to the belief that truth is relative. The danger of

rejecting moral absolutes is that we surrender our right to judge anyone's beliefs or behaviors as right or wrong. We then arrive at the unbiblical position of tolerating all beliefs and lifestyles, whether those involve homosexuality, abortion, misogyny, or other behaviors. The Bible, then, becomes a book of suggestions on how to live and is no longer God's universal law for mankind.

Barna's survey shows that most people in our country have come to this conclusion. He records that only 25 percent of adults and 10 percent of teens believe there is absolute moral truth.[{10}](#)

The biblical position is that there are revealed moral absolutes. God, who is truth, has revealed His truth through His word, the Bible. The moral law revealed in God's word is universal. In Romans 2, God is just to judge every person according to His law. His law is given in His word and also He has placed a witness to His law in the moral conscience of men (Romans 2:14-16).

According to Barna's survey, only 49 percent of born again Christians agreed with the proposition that moral truth is absolute and 51 percent either disagreed or did not know what to think about moral truth.[{11}](#) 57 percent of Christian teens believe that when it comes to morals and ethics, truth means different things to different people; no one can be absolutely positive they have the truth.[{12}](#)

If there are no moral absolutes, we cannot clearly define sin. Teaching on holy living is lost in the absence of clear standards of morality. Without a moral foundation, churches and their members are *influenced by* the culture more than they are *influencing* the culture for Christ. That is what we are seeing in churches today. Mainline denominations are adopting the values of the culture and abandoning the biblical stand on several moral issues. Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard warns, "Once the church comes to terms with the world,

Christianity is abolished.”[{13}](#)

The Church and Spiritual Truth

If absolute truth does not exist, then moral absolutes do not exist. The same then applies to religious truth. The religion of our culture would be syncretism. Syncretism combines complementary and often contradictory teachings from different religions to form a new system tailored to each individual’s preferences. Indeed, Barna’s research reveals that 62 percent of Americans agree that “it doesn’t matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths teach similar lessons about life.”[{14}](#)

Syncretism contradicts biblical teaching. The Bible teaches that the truth is found in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. In John 14:6 Jesus states, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me.” The Apostles repeat this claim. In Acts 4:12 Peter states, “And 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.”

The Bible teaches that the Bible itself is the source of spiritual truth and that salvation is found exclusively in Jesus. Not only does the biblical evidence argue against syncretism, logic does as well.

A brief study of the world’s religions reveals that they are contradictory on their basic truth claims, and therefore, mutually exclusive. Ravi Zacharias writes, “Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different. Just the opposite is true.”

However, if all religions are true, all religious practices are valid and cannot be judged good or evil. Then are we to tolerate cultures that burn living widows alive at their husband’s funerals because of their religious convictions? How

about religions that teach young men to execute acts of terrorism on innocent victims in the name of God? We would have to conclude that we couldn't say such practices are right or wrong.

Postmodern ideas have made their impact on the church regarding the belief of absolutes, regarding spiritual truth, and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. Jesus made it clear in John 14:6 that He is the source of spiritual truth and the only way to eternal life. However, among born again Christians, 31 percent believe that if a person is good enough they can earn a place in heaven. 26 percent believe it doesn't matter what faith you follow, because they all teach the same lessons. 24 percent believe that while He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people.[{15}](#) 30 percent believe Jesus died, but never had a physical resurrection.[{16}](#)

These surveys reveal that a growing number of Christians do not understand the basic teachings regarding the unique nature of Christ and His message. If Christianity is not true in its unique claims, the church is preaching a message of religious preference and not one of eternal truth. The power of the gospel is that spiritual truth and salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ.

The Church That Will Engage

Our postmodern culture brings some formidable challenges to the church of the 21st century. The church is struggling with foundational issues like the nature of truth, moral absolutes, and spiritual truth. What is required of us if we are to be successful in engaging the world for Christ? It is for Christians to have a courageous faith, committed hearts, a compelling defense, and a compassionate attitude.

1 Peter 3:14-16 states, "'Do not fear what they fear, do not be frightened.'" But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you

to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

The world is often hostile to the message of Christ, especially its message of salvation found only in Jesus and its teaching on moral absolutes. That is why courageous faith that overcomes fear is essential.

Second, we are called to engage the world with committed hearts. Peter writes that instead of fear, we are to, “set apart Christ as Lord.” Courageous faith comes from a heart committed to Jesus. When Jesus is Lord of a believer’s heart, he or she responds properly in any situation. The church is the greatest witness for Christ when Jesus is Lord of every member’s life.

Third, to engage the world for Christ, we must have a compelling defense of the faith. Peter writes, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have.” We are exhorted to never be caught unprepared; never unwilling, and never timid about our response. The word “answer” in the Greek is *apologia*, which was used in connection with a formal public defense often before magistrates and in judicial courts. Every Christian is called to defend the faith.

Unfortunately, much of the church is unable to do this. A recent survey by Josh McDowell showed that 84 percent of Christian college freshmen were unable to explain why they believed.^{17} We can’t expect a skeptical world to believe our message if we can’t give them a compelling reason why they should. For this reason, every Christian is called to the study of apologetics.

Fourth, we must engage with a compassionate attitude. Gentleness refers to the attitude that relies on God to change attitudes and minds. Respect is the same word used in the New Testament for reverence shown towards God. We are not to

witness with an arrogant or combative demeanor, but one of gentleness and respect. Without these two qualities, it is dangerous to attempt to evangelize.

Probe Ministries is committed to equipping the church to engage their world for Christ. Probe's ministries include our Web site, books, and conferences that will equip you to engage our world with insight and integrity, providing Christians a ready answer for their faith.

Notes

1. George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1998), 1.
2. Charles Colson, *How Shall We Now Live?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 1999), ix-x.
3. Dennis McCallum ed., *The Death of Truth*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), "Our New Challenge: Postmodernism," by Jim Leffel, 31.
4. John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 192.
5. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 16.
6. Barna, *Third Millenium Teens*, (Ventura, CA.: Barna Research Group, 1999), 44.
7. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance* (Wheaton, IL.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998) 172-173.
8. Barna, *Boiling Point*, (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 2001), 78.
9. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1976), 145.

10. Barna, *Boiling Point*, 78.
11. Ibid., 80.
12. McDowell and Hostetler, 21.
13. Quoted by Michael Horton, *Beyond Culture Wars* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 37.
14. Barna, *Absolute Confusion*, (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 1993), 79-80.
15. Barna, "Born Again Christians," *Barna Research Online*, 19 April 2001, 2.
16. Barna, "Americans' Bible Knowledge is in the Ballpark, But Often Off Base," *Barna Research Online*, 12 July 2000.
17. McDowell and Hostetler, 173.

Bibliography

1. Barna, George. *Absolute Confusion*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993.
2. _____. *Boiling Point*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001.
3. _____. *The Second Coming of the Church*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1998.
4. _____. "Born Again Christians," *Barna Research Online*, 19 April 2001.
5. _____. "Americans' Bible Knowledge is in the Ballpark, But Often Off Base," *Barna Research Online*, 12, July 2000.
6. _____. *Third Millenium Teens*, Ventura, CA: Barna Research Group, 1999.
7. Caputo, John. *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*. Indiana University Press, 1987.

8. Charles Colson. *How Shall We Now Live?* Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 1999.
9. Grootius, Douglas. *Truth Decay*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
10. McCallum, Dennis ed., *The Death of Truth*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996, "Our New Challenge: Postmodernism" by Jim Leffel, p. 31.
11. McDowell, Josh and Bob Hostetler. *The New Tolerance*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998.
12. McDowell, Josh and Bob Hostetler. *Right From Wrong*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994.
13. Schaeffer, Francis. *How Should We Then Live?* Old Tappan, N.J: Fleming Revell, 1976.
14. Veith, Gene Edward. *Postmodern Times*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994.

©2001 Probe Ministries.

Confident Belief

Introduction

It's hard to imagine how any Christian at any time in history could live life completely free from any doubts about the truth of the faith. Suffering, inconsistent behavior among Christians, the lure of the world, intellectual misgivings—these things and others can lead us to question whether it's all true.

Since the days of the early church there have been objections to the gospel which have given pause to Christians. Can I really believe this? *Should* I believe this? Doubt is part of human experience, and Christians experience it no less than non-Christians. Doubts about our faith are more momentous than many we deal with, however, because of their implications. I have my doubts about whether my favorite football team will be in the Super Bowl, but I can still hang in there with them as a fan. The claims of Christ are much more momentous, however. Our individual destinies and more are at stake.

We find ourselves today in the West beset by two different schools of thought which can cause us to doubt. On the one hand are the modernists, heirs of the Enlightenment, who believe that reason is sufficient for true knowledge and that Christianity just doesn't measure up to sound reason. On the other hand are postmodernists who don't believe anyone can know what is true, and are astonished that we dare lay claim to having *the* truth about ultimate reality.

I'd like to look at these two mindsets to see if they have legitimate claims. The goal is to see if either should be allowed to rob us of our confidence.

Modernism and Certain Knowledge

Modernists believe that our reason is sufficient to know truth, in fact the *only* reliable means of attaining knowledge. Only that which can be scientifically measured and quantified and reasoned through logically can constitute true knowledge.

What does this say, however, about things that *can't* be so measured, things such as beauty, morals, and matters of the spirit? Can we not have knowledge of such things? We have inherited the belief that such things are at best matters of opinion; they are subjective matters having to do only with the individual's experiences and tastes.

This way of thinking is disastrous for religious beliefs of

almost any kind. Christianity in particular makes claims that can't be weighed or counted or measured (although there *are* elements which *can* be empirically tested): the nature of God, justification by faith, the deity of Christ, and the reality of the Holy Spirit are a few examples. Since these elements are central but don't fit within our logical, scientific mindset, they are said to be matters of personal opinion at best, or figments of our imagination at worst.

The matter of the "knowability" of the faith is a problem for nonbelievers, but it can be a worse problem for believers. Those whom Daniel Taylor calls "reflective Christians" often find themselves betrayed by their own doubts; they feel the weight of providing for themselves the kind of evidences a nonbeliever might demand and feel guilty when they cannot produce in their own minds a logical certainty for their beliefs.[\[1\]](#) What such a believer typically does is continue to mount up evidence and arguments and think and talk and think some more and hope that one day either the missing link will come clear or he will be able to "call off thoughts awhile," in the words of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.[\[2\]](#)

Postmodern Skepticism

Times are changing, though, and the problem Christians face more and more is the challenge coming from the other end of the spectrum. If modernists demand indubitable knowledge, postmodernists deny the very possibility of true knowledge at all. While on the one hand modernists say there is not enough evidence to trust our beliefs, on the other hand postmodernists tell us our evidences mean nothing regarding the truth value of our faith.

Postmodernists believe that truth is a construct of our own imagination and desires. They believe there is no single, unifying account of reality that covers everything, one *metanarrative* as they call it. They believe one must leave everything an open question, that one shouldn't settle

anywhere since there is no way to know ultimate truths at all. Our own realities are created for us partly by our society and partly by our own exercise of power, often by the very words we use.

Is the Christian, then, now to think of her faith as just that? *Her* faith? Something that has validity for *her* and her *group* but not necessarily for everyone? This kind of thinking fosters religious pluralism, the belief that truth is found in many different religions. This is disastrous for Christianity for it leaves us wondering why we should hold to these beliefs when others might be more attractive.

Thus, there is on the one hand the modernist who thinks we can know everything we need to know using our reason, and on the other the postmodernist who thinks the search for knowledge is a waste of time. In the face of these mindsets, what should we do? Should we resign ourselves to feeling guilty and maybe a little intellectually perverse because we can't assign mathematical certainty to our beliefs? Or do we swallow the skepticism of postmodernists and just hold our beliefs as the creations of our own minds and wills? It is my contention that we needn't be bound by either position on truth and knowledge, but that we can have knowledgeable confidence in the truth of the faith.

Modernism: The Enlightenment Search for Knowledge

Modernity was the era which had its roots in the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, and which continued until recent years. Although postmodernism seems to be the order of the day, one worldview doesn't come to a screeching halt one day and another pick up the next. Thus, there are still many people who view life in modernist terms.

Modernists believe that reason is the only truly reliable source of knowledge. Revelation is set aside. Since reason is

the authority, only that which has logical or mathematical certainty can be accepted as true knowledge. Anything less can only have some level of probability. The attacks of empiricists such as David Hume apparently rendered Christianity highly *improbable*.

Lesslie Newbiggin argues that this demand for indubitable knowledge gave rise to the skepticism of our day. In fact, postmodern skepticism is a sharp rejection of Enlightenment thought.

Let's look briefly at the Enlightenment ideal of knowledge.

René Descartes and the Search for Certainty

In response to the skepticism of the 17th century, mathematician/philosopher René Descartes accepted the challenge of providing an argument for the existence of God which would be beyond doubt.[{3}](#) Descartes's approach was to use the tool of the skeptics—which is *doubt*—as his starting point. He threw out everything that couldn't be known indubitably, and was left with one idea which he couldn't doubt: I think, therefore I am. He developed his philosophy from this starting point.

Two important points are to be made about Descartes's method. First, he made the break from starting with God as the measure of all things to starting with the individual person. Human reason was now the supreme arbiter of truth.[{4}](#) Second, Descartes established doubt as a principle of knowledge.[{5}](#) In modern times, critical thinking doubts everything until it is proved true.

On this basis, Western man devoted himself to knowing as much as he could about his world without any reference to God, and with the idea that knowledge had to be logically or mathematically certain. Knowledge is quantifiable; one must strip away anything other than brute, objective facts which can be weighed, counted, or measured or deduced from facts

which can be so quantified. Knowledge was to be objective, certain, and dispassionate—not subject to personal feelings or values or faith commitments. As theologian Stanley Grenz says, “The new tools of research included precise methods of measurement and a dependence on mathematical logic. In turning to this method, Enlightenment investigators narrowed their focus of interest—and hence began to treat as real only those aspects of the universe that are measurable.”[\[6\]](#)

On the heels of Descartes came Isaac Newton who gave us a vision of the cosmos as being an orderly machine, an idea in keeping with the rationalism of Descartes. The universe could be understood once its laws were understood. Although Descartes and Newton believed their ideas gave support to their Christian beliefs, they were subsequently used for just the opposite. “The modern world turned out to be Newton’s mechanistic universe populated by Descartes’s autonomous, rational substance,” says Grenz. “In such a world, theology was forced to give place to the natural sciences, and the central role formerly enjoyed by the theologian became the prerogative of the natural scientist.”[\[7\]](#)

Was Descartes’s method significant in Western History? Grenz notes that “Descartes set the agenda for philosophy for the next three hundred years” by making human reason central.[\[8\]](#) In time, this approach was applied to other disciplines as well, from politics to ethics to theology. “In this way,” says Grenz, “all fields of the human endeavor became, in effect, branches of natural science.”[\[9\]](#)

Time has proved the value of scientific and mathematical reasoning. We all enjoy the benefits of technology. This being the case, however, why is it that we at the turn of the century find ourselves so skeptical? What has happened to the confidence modern man had in his ability to know?

Postmodernism: The Rejection of the Enlightenment Idea

With the acceptance of René Descartes's idea that truth was to be found ultimately in reason, and that the starting point for knowledge was doubt, the die was cast for the period of history we call modernity. Using just his reason, and denying anything which wasn't certain, the individual could come to true knowledge with no reference to God.

But skeptical attacks continued through such philosophers as David Hume. In response, Immanuel Kant formulated a new understanding of knowledge. He believed that knowledge came from data received by the senses which was then formed into understandable ideas by the workings of our own minds. Thus, the structure of our own minds became a crucial component of the known world. With Kant, the thinking individual was now firmly established as the final authority for truth. Even with this, however, Kant still believed there *is* a reality external to us, and that all our minds work the same way to understand it.

Although Kant believed that we could truly know the world around us, his ideas pushed us a significant step away from that reality. He believed that we are thus incapable of knowing things as they are *in themselves*; we only know things as they *appear* to us. Thus, since God doesn't appear to us empirically, we do not have real knowledge of Him. Philosophers following him began to pick away at his ideas. Johann Fichte, for example, accepted Kant's ideas for the most part, but denied the idea that there *are* things-in-themselves; in other words, that there is something to reality apart from our perceptions of it. What we perceive is what is there. Now the way was made clear to think in terms of "alternative conceptual frameworks." There could now be multiple ways of understanding and interpreting the world.

Nietzsche

Other philosophers picked away at Kant as well, but we'll only consider one more, the man who has been called the "patron saint of postmodern philosophy,"[{10}](#) Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was a true foe of modernism. He believed the whole project of building up these "great edifices of ideas"[{11}](#) was fundamentally flawed. Our attempts to abstract general knowledge from the particulars around us only results in distortion, he thought. He argued that "what we commonly accept as human knowledge is in fact merely a self-contained set of illusions. He essentially viewed 'truth' as a function of the language we employ and hence believed that truth 'exists' only within specific linguistic contexts."[{12}](#) Our world is only a construction of our own perspective, an aesthetic creation. And it has its roots in the will to power, "the desire to perfect and transcend the self through the exercise of personal creative power rather than dependence on anything external." Thus, "Motivated by the will to power," he thought, "we devise metaphysical concepts—conceptions of 'truth'—that advance the cause of a certain species or people."[{13}](#)

This is the heart of postmodern thought, and it surrounds us today. We cannot know the truth about reality; we only know our own constructions of it. We can hope to convince others to join us in our beliefs, but there is no room for rational argumentation, because one's views about the world are no better or worse than any others. As Stanley Grenz says, "all human interpretations—including the Christian worldview—are equally valid because all are equally invalid."[{14}](#) No one can really know, so believe what you want. But in attacking the possibility of knowing truth, postmodernism has cut off the limb upon which it sits. One writer has noted that postmodernism has destroyed itself. "It has deconstructed its entire universe. So all that are left are pieces. All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with

the pieces—that is postmodern.”[{15}](#)

These, then, are the primary choices our society offers for considering the truth value of Christianity. Either we can affirm the modernist attitude and be satisfied only with scientific or mathematical certainty, or with the postmodernist we can throw the whole truth thing out the window.

Impossible Demands, Groundless Limitations: A Critique

When challenged directly or indirectly by the world about the validity of our faith, what do we do? Do we continue to use modernistic ways of thinking to make a case for the faith, believing that we must provide logically certain proof? Or do we offer a postmodern, “true for me” argument relying on subjective matters which we use to persuade people to believe?[{16}](#) The answer lies in rejecting both the demands of modernism and the limitations of postmodernism.

Neither Mathematical Certainty . . .

In his book *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, Lesslie Newbigin argues that the modern approach was essentially wrong-headed, that it called for something which was unattainable.

With respect to the insistence on mathematical certainty, Newbigin notes first that this way of thinking takes us away from the real world rather than moving us closer to it. He says, “The certainty of mathematical propositions, as Einstein often observed, is strictly proportionate to their remoteness from reality.”[{17}](#) For example, there is no such thing as a point as understood mathematically. Certainty belongs to the world of pure forms, not that of material things. “Only statements that can be doubted make contact with reality,” he says.[{18}](#)

Second, thinkers in the Romantic period argued that “mathematical reason could not do justice to the fullness of human experience.” Such things as art and music and cultural traditions can’t be mapped out mathematically. [\[19\]](#)

Third, the ambition of dealing with facts apart from values or other non-factual biases is an impossible dream. We are never value-free in our thinking, even in the laboratory. As writers such as Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi have shown (both of whom were scientists turned philosophers), what one studies and for what purpose, how one acts ethically in the lab and in the reporting of studies, what ones overall goals are for particular scientific work—all these reflect unproved value commitments; no one gives indubitable evidence for their validity. For all practical purposes it is impossible to remove such values held by faith.

In addition, I suggest that it isn’t merely practically impossible to remove these faith/value commitments: it would be *wrong* to attempt to do so. One must always situate one’s work in a framework of values to give it any significant meaning at all. Otherwise we are just acting, just doing things with no purpose to give coherence and direction.

Someone might object here that ones value commitments *can* be verified so as to render them no longer just faith commitments. To this Newbigin responds that faith is fundamental, even to doubt! For even doubt must rest on beliefs which are not themselves doubted. This is because one doubts something because it conflicts with something else one already believes. If that prior belief is also subjected to the test of doubt, it, too, can only be doubted because of something else one believes, and so on. Further, if one’s doubt itself is based upon certain criteria of truth, then those criteria themselves must be believed. If they, too, are subjected to doubt, then the criteria for evaluating *them* must be believed to be true criteria, and so on again. Of course, one could simply doubt everything—in other words, become a

skeptic. But no one can live consistently as a skeptic. To get in a car and drive on the highway indicates that one believes the brakes will work. And we expect people to have a basic understanding of some normative moral values. Newbigin sums up: "One does not learn anything except by believing something, and—conversely—if one doubts everything one learns nothing. . . . Rational doubt always rests on faith and not vice versa."[{20}](#)

It's important to realize, too, that the mathematical model simply doesn't apply across the board. Few areas of our lives are governed by such a high standard. Christianity isn't just a set of ideas to be logically constructed and evaluated. It is a Person relating to persons in particular historical contexts. We can place no stricter demands on this relationship regarding the certainty of knowledge than we do on the relationships we experience with people on earth in particular historical contexts.

On the plus side, we *do* have a significant body of evidence supporting our belief including historical evidences, rational arguments, and matters of the human experience such as the question of meaning—things which can't be quantified and thus find no place in modernistic thought. We also have no reason to adopt the reductionistic naturalism of modernism just on modernists' say so, but rather recognize the reality of and intrusion of the supernatural into our world.

In addition, it must also be kept in mind that the truth of Christianity doesn't rest on the fragility of human reason, although it is through our minds that we recognize its truth. It rests on the faithfulness of God who has made Himself known to us.[{21}](#) Our assurance comes from the combination of knowing, believing, and following the One who is true, not just from working out logical arguments.

Thus, we conclude that beliefs do *not* have to be indubitable to be held as true—in fact, very little of what we know has

indubitable certainty—and unproved values form a necessary part of our knowledge. Modernists are not justified in requiring us to conform to their narrow standards for rationality.

. . . *Nor Postmodern Skepticism*

Although modernism was naïve in its expectations of reason, the reaction of postmodernism has been too severe.

In its reaction against modernism, postmodernism threw off the classical understanding of truth—namely, correspondence with reality. Having rejected the possibility of knowing what is real external to us, postmodernists have left us with only our own minds, wills, and words. Truth is the product of the creative activity of the individual.

But this clearly isn't the way we live. We assume that whenever we say something like, "It's raining outside," or even, "It's wrong to wantonly destroy the earth," we intend our words to reflect what really is the case.[{22}](#) Even the postmodernist will believe that injustice and oppression are wrong and shouldn't be tolerated. Otherwise, how would we know that one act is morally acceptable and another unacceptable, even across cultures?[{23}](#) Thus, we reveal that we believe truth is there and accessible. Is there any reason to think that spiritual beliefs can't also correspond with reality? I can't think of any, *unless* one simply presupposes that spiritual realities can't be known.

What's more, we typically act as if we believe truth is *objective*, by which we mean that something really is the case apart from whether we believe it or not.[{24}](#) How can we meaningfully interact with the world around us if we don't think we can truly know it and not simply our individual or group construction of it?

Postmoderns' belief that there can be multiple and conflicting truths must be rejected also, for if truth is that which

conforms to reality and reality itself cannot be contradictory, truth cannot be either. Either it is raining outside my window or it's not. It can't be doing both at the same time in the same location. Likewise, for example, either God exists or He doesn't. It can't be both.

Against postmodernism, we hold that there is no reason to think there *can't* be one explanation for all of reality *unless* one accepts a radical perspectivalism; i.e., that our beliefs are *only* our own perspectives and not reflections of reality itself. For the postmodernist to say this is to reveal that he assumes he has the inside scoop on ultimate reality which he claims no one has. This is therefore a faith commitment. Furthermore, there's no reason to think we can't know what the true explanation *is*, especially if the One who knows about it perfectly tells us.

Postmoderns also believe that truth is a construct of language. Because the meanings of words can vary, each linguistic group has its own truth. However, the fact that there are different words for the same thing doesn't change the fact that the referent is the same. We don't change the nature of something simply by changing the words we use for it. This is the weakness of what has been called "political correctness." It is thought, it seems, that by using different words for something we thereby change the thing itself. While a change of terminology might change our *attitude* about something, it doesn't change that something itself.

Thus, we reject the skepticism of postmodernity and confidently rest on the faith we hold as describing the way things really are.

We believe that there is no reason to accept postmodern skepticism. Skepticism is ultimately unlivable, and we needn't spend our lives "playing with the pieces." There is no reason in principle to assume we *can't* know ultimate realities just because of our human limitations. It is arbitrary to simply

decide God cannot reveal truth to us because of our limitations.

Further, there is no reason why there can't be one explanation of reality. The good news for postmodernists is that we *have* been met by the One who created the "story" of the world and is able to put the pieces together into a coherent whole. His is the one true explanation of reality. We deny that we are trapped behind our own perspectives, cut off from direct contact with reality, [{25}](#) and thus not able to "impose" truth on others. Truth is knowable and sharable.

Postmodernists believe that each person can only have his or her own "story" or life's situation, that each of us can only have his or her own little piece. We respond that we have a story that puts all the pieces together, a story which is coherent and consistent and which matches the nature of the needs of humanity. As we look around the world we see that we all are very much alike in our basic needs and aspirations. If there is such a thing as human nature and a human condition, it isn't unreasonable to think there could be one explanation of it.

Summary

Modernism served to produce doubts through its insistence upon certain knowledge, and postmodernism produces doubt through its insistence that no one can really know ultimate truths. Can we have confidence in the trustworthiness of our beliefs in the face of modernist and postmodernist ideas?

In response to doubts produced by modernism we look to Jesus, a historical Person who has revealed to us more than our reason is capable of discovering on its own. In response to doubts engendered by postmodernism, we look to Jesus the Creator of all and the final Word who has revealed to us ultimate truth. In him we find truth in its fullest sense, as the one who is real and trustworthy and who speaks. We can

have confidence in our beliefs.

Notes

1. Daniel Taylor, *The Myth of Certainty: The Reflective Christian and the Risk of Commitment* (Waco: Word Books, 1986), 18-19.

2. Ibid., 19.

3. Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 20.

4. Carl F.H. Henry, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 22-23, 227-28.

5. For this reason Descartes has been called the father of modern philosophy. Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. "Descartes, Ren," by St. Elmo Nauman, Jr.

6. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 66.

7. Ibid., 67. Grenz notes that "Descartes set the agenda for philosophy for the next three hundred years" by making human reason central.

8. Ibid., 64.

9. Ibid., 67.

10. Ibid., 88.

11. Ibid., 89.

12. Ibid., 90.

13. Ibid., 92.

14. Ibid., 164,

15. Jean Baudrillard, quoted in Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: 2000), 169.

16. There are some who believe we can put to use some of the perspectives of postmodernism, but it would take us too far afield of our subject to develop that now. For our purposes, I'm only concerned with the central skepticism of postmodernism.

17. Newbigin, 51.

18. Ibid., 52.

19. Ibid., 31.

20. Ibid., 24, 25.

21. Ibid., 67.

22. For a recent study on truth in relation to postmodernism, see Groothuis, *Truth Decay*.

23. Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 197-199.

24. Against modernism, however, we can affirm that believing in objective truth doesn't require that there be no non-provable elements involved in coming to know truth.

25. Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 63.

© 2001 Probe Ministries.

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

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

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



Introduction

A few years ago, former Probe staff member Jerry Solomon wrote an [article on worldviews](#) in which he provided a basic introduction to the subject, and then gave a sketch of three major worldviews: Christian theism, naturalism, and New Age pantheism.[{1}](#) In this article we'll look at four more worldviews: deism, nihilism, existentialism, and postmodernism. We frequently refer to these various philosophies in our articles, so it seems good to give a brief description for reference.[{2}](#)

Worldviews: Some Basics

What is a worldview? James Orr, the 19th century church historian, said that a worldview “[denotes] the widest view which the mind can take of things in the effort to grasp them

together as a whole from the standpoint of some particular philosophy or theology.”[{3}](#) A developed worldview supplies answers to the questions of origin, purpose, and destiny among other things, or as some put it, the “why, whence, and whither” of things.[{4}](#)

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

There are a couple of reasons for thinking of Christianity in worldview terms. Over a hundred years ago church historian James Orr called for such a perspective because first, Christianity *does* involve a lot of interconnected beliefs which cannot be picked and chosen in a cafeteria-style fashion. He says, “He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of Redemption, to a view of the purpose of God in creation and history, to a view of human destiny, found only in Christianity. This forms a ‘*Weltanschauung*,’ or ‘Christian view of the world,’ which stands in marked contrast with theories wrought out from a purely philosophical or scientific standpoint.”[{6}](#) Christianity, thus, by its nature forms a worldview.

Second, Orr says, since Christianity as a whole is under attack, it must be defended as a whole; not just as individual doctrines but the whole concept of supernatural, revealed

religion. "The opposition which Christianity has to encounter," says Orr, "is no longer confined to special doctrines or to points of supposed conflict with the natural sciences—for example, the relations of Genesis and geology—but extends to the whole manner of conceiving of the world and of man's place in it, the manner of conceiving of the entire system of things, natural and moral, of which we form a part." [\[7\]](#)

Evaluating Worldviews

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

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

Finally any truths revealed which couldn't be known otherwise—even though transcending what we can know on our own and being difficult to understand—should not conclusively contradict what we know in the range of human experience.

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

Deism

Historical background

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

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

Described

Deism, then, is the belief that "natural religion contains all that is true in revealed religion; where the latter differs, the differences are either morally insignificant or

superstitious.”{9} There is nothing higher than natural religion. Reason is capable of knowing God and His will, so there is no need for revelation. On the moral side, man’s duty is simply to do God’s will which is to seek the happiness of all men.

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

Contrasted with Christian Theism

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

Second, deists saw man as just a part of the clockwork universe, operating according to strict laws. While man was recognized as a creation of God and made in His image, he wasn’t seen as essentially a sinner. Gone was the sense of the drama of human interaction with God over concerns about sin and grace and judgment. Man was now in charge of himself. However, he was not truly free for man was locked in the natural system of cause and effect.{13}

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

Internal Weaknesses

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

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

Thus, one needed to either keep God in the picture and acknowledge His significance, or remove Him altogether. The latter was the response of naturalism. Since that worldview was considered in the previous article, we'll move next to nihilism, a frame of mind growing out of naturalism.

Nihilism

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

Historical Background

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

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

A name very often associated with nihilism is that of Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th century philosopher. Having decided that God was dead, Nietzsche saw that with God's death went the high values of Western man which were based upon belief in God. He also recognized the loss of freedom which this loss entailed. That we are just the natural products of evolution, just materialistic bodies and minds means that there is no real freedom at all. We are determined parts of a

determined universe.

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

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

Described

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

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

Nihilism, then, is a philosophy of loss; those who toy with it as a trendy worldview either don’t understand it or haven’t tried to. As one writer said, “Nietzsche replaces easy-going atheism with agonized atheism.”{18}

Contrasted with Christian Theism

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

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

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

How can we respond to nihilism? We can start out by pointing out the existential inconsistencies nihilists exhibit. For one thing, although they say there is no meaning to anything, they indicate what *they* think is meaningful by the time and effort they put into various activities. The art of nihilism, such as

Dada, for example, attempts to say something; it is purported to have *meaning*. If it doesn't mean anything, it can't convey the image of the world nihilism wants to reveal. Second, all their assertions about meaninglessness are supposed to be statements about the way the world *is*. But if there is no knowledge, nihilists can't know the way the world *is*. Third, it simply flies in the face of everything our being seems to require—meaning, value and dignity being three examples.

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

Existentialism

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

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

Existentialism has both philosophical and experiential roots. With respect to philosophy, naturalism had left man without God, and the radical individualism and autonomy endorsed by

modernistic thinking had left individuals standing alone. With respect to life's experience, technology had made us just another part of the machine; either be efficient or get out of the way, was the modernistic attitude. In addition, some by-products of technology such as pollution and the atomic bomb made life riskier. Then came two devastating World Wars conducted on the doorsteps of Europeans. The result was that man was thought to be in all alone and in danger. These factors provided the setting for a philosophy of despair.

Described

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

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

Existentialism, then, is first of all a theory of value. It

focuses on the human condition and what makes for a good life. This has made it popular with many who are sensitive to the plight of humanity living in a very impersonal world.

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

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

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

There's nothing wrong with taking note of our predicament, with noting the dangers to life, and with being resolved to stand firm in the face of a seemingly absurd world. The problems come with believing we are all alone, and that the

burden of our lives rests upon us. God has taken on the burden of our present and future lives. We aren't on our own.
Internal Weaknesses

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

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

Is that enough?

Postmodernism

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

What is postmodernism, anyway? In the 1970s, Jean-François

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

Historical Background

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

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

There were several problems with Enlightenment rationalism. First, newfound knowledge gained through science and the resulting development of technology led people to think that

man could solve the major difficulties of life without any transcendent help. It was found, however, that reason didn't have the potency it was thought to have. With all our learning and technology, we still didn't have the power we desired over our lives. Natural disasters and major wars such as the two World Wars in this century made people realize that we *aren't* able to fix everything that ailed us simply through reason.

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

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

Still another problem which resulted from the secularized nature of knowledge and from the loss of confidence in knowing truth in general was the loss of the knowledge of *ultimate* truths. There can be no "totalising metanarratives," that is, no big stories or explanations of the way things are which encompass everything. This can be both liberating and frightening: liberating in the sense that one needn't feel bound by any system of thought; frightening in the sense that we are in the dark about what is true. This is a bit like

eating in a cafeteria where one can choose from a variety of foods without having any confidence in the nourishing value of any of it.

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

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

Postmodernism, then, leaves us without knowledge of ultimate truths, with no basis for value judgement, and with no basis for confidence in the future. In general, then, the postmodern mood is pessimistic. How, then, do we know what we should believe and do? With no knowledge of why we're here or where we're going to guide us, and no grounds for determining value coming from some transcendent source, people have grown to

believe that we must simply choose for ourselves what will be true for us. The *will* is now introduced into knowledge.[{29}](#) The questions postmodernists ask are: "What do *I* choose to believe?" and "What do *I* choose to do?"

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

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

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

Earlier I spoke of the fact that even Christians espouse postmodern beliefs without realizing it. It is so much a part of the thinking of young people today that even some in the

church accept without even thinking about it a “true for you but not for me” mindset. A young woman who taught high school Sunday School at an evangelical Baptist church in Dallas told a newspaper reporter that *she* believed what the Bible taught, but that it wasn’t necessarily true for everyone.[\[31\]](#) Perhaps she doesn’t understand the claims of Scripture, but more likely she has fit Christianity into the framework of “my truth, your truth.” *Contrasted with Christian Theism*

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

Postmodernism cannot long survive. Besides being devoid of anything upon which to build a philosophy of life, it also reveals internal problems. While we might like to take an aesthetic approach to truth—in other words, judge by style rather than by substance—we want others to treat us in keeping with universal canons of truth and morality. Also, it is impossible, we now know, to make a clean break between fact and value. Even the most precise and objective scientists must make value decisions with respect to the very work they do. In other words, one project must be chosen over others, and such choices reflect certain values. Furthermore, postmodernism strips us of all stability beyond what our immediate culture can give us. But since even a cultural group can’t know ultimate truth but can only choose its values based on a pragmatic viewpoint, there is ultimately no stability in one’s cultural group either.

As I’ve noted, postmodernism is a mood rather than a full-

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

Notes

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

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

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

4. Orr, 6,7.

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

6. Orr, 4.

7. Ibid., 4.

8. Waring, v-viii.

9. Ibid., x.

10. Ibid., xiii.

11. Ibid., xiii.

12. Sire, 44.
13. Ibid., 46.
14. Quoted in Sire, 48.
15. Thielicke, 25.
16. Ibid., 29.
17. Sire, 76.
18. Bloom, quoted in Sire, 93.
19. Robert C. Solomon, ed., *Existentialism* (New York: The Modern Library, 1974), ix.
20. Published in English by the University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
21. Docherty, 1,2. One theologian of our day sees modernism as having ended on July 15, 1972 when a housing project based upon modernistic principles of functionality was demolished. Still another marks its demise with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Cf. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL; 1994), 27,39. Perhaps this wide time span points to the way philosophies can take years to come to fruition in the public sphere.
22. Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 5.
23. Docherty, 5.
24. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 14.
25. For more on this the reader might wish to consult my article "Where Did 'I' Go?: The Loss of the Self in Postmodern Times," available on our Web site at

www.probe.org/where-did-i-go-the-loss-of-self-in-postmodern-times/.

26. Docherty, 26.

27. Ibid., 12,13.

28. Ibid., 10.

29. Ibid., 6.

30. Veith, 114.

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

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

© 2000 Probe Ministries International