

Understanding the Times: A Pre-Modern Reflection on the Modernist Roots of Postmodernism

Romans 12:2 says: 'Be not conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, for your proving the will of God – the good, and acceptable, and perfect.' Culture is the expression of a shared spirituality grounded in a worldview. How can we understand the spiritual dynamics of contemporary western culture and its internal clash of cultures? How can understanding the times help us in our discipleship, apologetics, and evangelism? This seminar will engage with art, music, song lyrics, film and architecture, as well as philosophy, as we trace the logical and historic line of descent from a pre-modern Christian culture through scientific modernism to nihilistic postmodernism. We will explore the ways in which the modernist rejection of God creates an inherently unstable and disintegrative form of spirituality and see that the more consistent with this spirituality one tries to be the further one sinks into the mire of postmodernism. The session will include times for reflection and group discussion.

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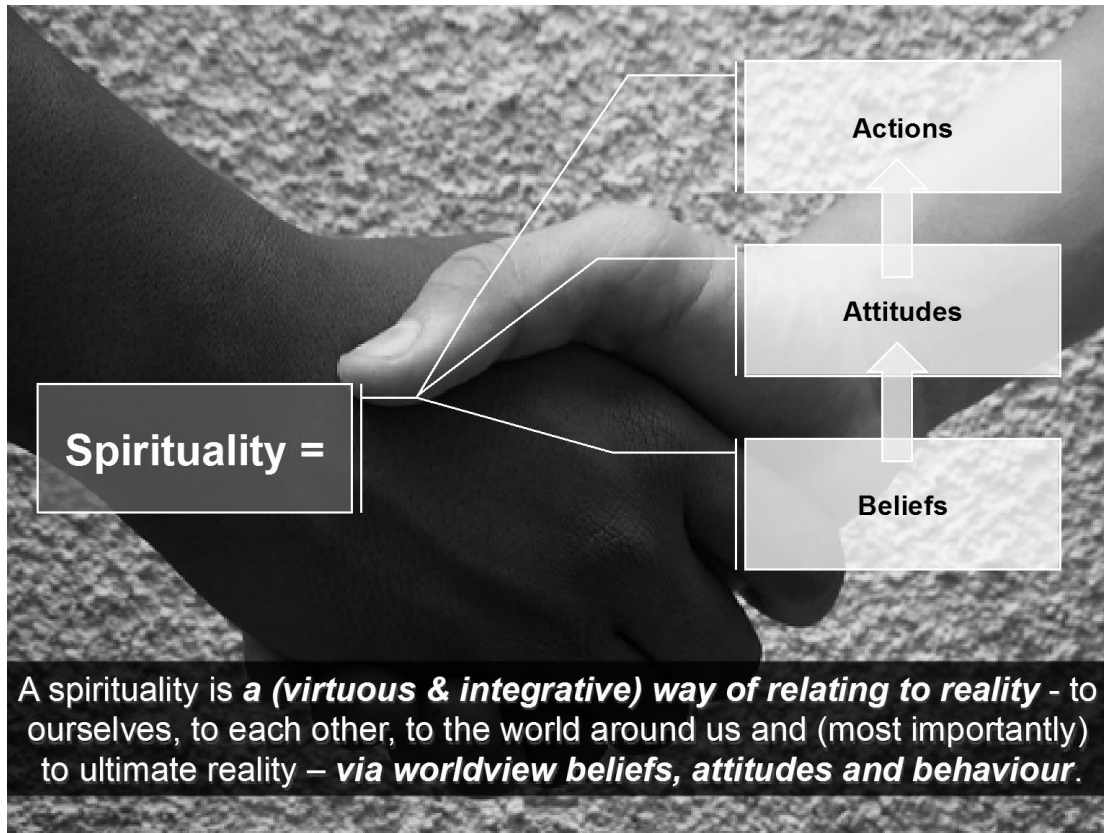
Augustine of Hippo: 'two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former... glories in itself, the latter in the Lord... And therefore the wise men of the one city, living according to man, have sought for profit to their own bodies or souls, or both, and those who have known God "glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened; professing themselves to be wise," - that is, glorying in their own wisdom, and being possessed by pride - "they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things." For they were either leaders or followers of the people in adoring images, "and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever." But in the other city there is no human wisdom, but only godliness, which offers due worship to the true God, and looks for its reward in the society of the saints, of holy angels as well as holy men, "that God may be all in all."' - *The City of God*, Book XIV Chap. 28.

Nicholas Wolterstorff: 'There is a dispute raging today between those who see the Enlightenment project of governing our existence by reason as an unfinished project, promising liberation, on which we should all continue to work; and those who see in that project little but the tyranny of Reason. The first party says that if we do not continue to govern our lives by Reason we can only expect more of the terrors of irrationalism. The second party says that if we do continue to govern our lives by Reason we can only expect more of the terrors of rationalism. That, in brief, is the dispute between the defenders of

modernism and the defenders of postmodernism – intense and confused.’ – *Educating for Shalom*

Augustine: ‘my sin was this, that I looked for pleasure, beauty, and truth not in him but in myself and his other creatures, and the search led me instead to pain, confusion, and error.’ - *Confessions*

I. Spirituality



II. Scientism

A. **Nancy Pearcey:** ‘The strict separation of facts from values is *the* key to unlocking the history of the modern Western mind... people have always known that there is a distinction between *is* and *ought*... between descriptive statements and normative statements. In earlier ages, however, people thought both types of statement dealt with questions of truth. If you made a moral statement about what someone *ought* to do, it was either true or false.’ – *Saving Leonardo* (B&H, 2010), p. 25 & 27.

- B. The scientific demand that *every rational belief must be justified by evidence* is self-contradictory because:
 - a) It can't be justified by evidence
 - b) It entails an infinite regress that can't be satisfied
- C. It's also open to obvious counter-examples (e.g. logical or moral knowledge).

III. Three Mirrors

- A. Pre-Modern Christian Spirituality says: 'God is the fairest of them all, the maximally beautiful being who created the cosmos and made humanity in his image, only a little lower than the angels, yet "fallen" and in need of redemption.'
- B. Modernism says: 'According to science (which is the only way to know anything) man is the fairest of them all (although an un-verifiable value term like "fair" is merely an expression of emotion), the most rational being to have arisen via the blind watchmaker of Neo-Darwinian evolution, a child of Mother Nature who will soon come of age and reject the childish superstitions of religion.'
- C. Postmodernism says: 'Although words only mean whatever they mean to you, I'd say that if I can get my colleagues to let me get away with saying that I'm the fairest of them all, then I am the fairest of them all! After all, values are merely subjective concepts programmed into the human animal by the blind watchmaker of evolution, which only cares about what works, and which doesn't care about truth any more than it cares about goodness or beauty. Why should we care about truth? We must keep faith with Darwin and admit we know that all we can know is the subjective meaning of our own words.'
- D. **Douglas Groothuis:** 'Postmodernism is so often presented as a radical departure from modernism that it is easy to miss the insight that postmodernism is, in many ways, modernism gone to seed, carried to its logical conclusion and inevitable demise.' – *Truth Decay*, p. 40.

IV. Modernism

A. Detail 1: 'Unsustainable' by Muse

All natural and technological
Processes proceed in such
a way that the availability of the
remaining energy decreases

In all energy exchanges, if no energy
enters or leaves an isolated system
the entropy of that system increases

Energy continuously flows from being
concentrated to becoming dispersed
spread out, wasted and useless

New energy cannot be
created and high-grade
energy is being destroyed

An economy based on endless
growth is unsustainable

Unsu...
Unsustainable

The fundamental laws of
thermodynamics will place fixed
limits on technological innovation
and human advancement

In an isolated system, the entropy
can only increase
A species set on endless
growth is unsustainable

Unsu...
Unsustainable

B. Detail II: **The Fact – Value Divide**

Nancy Pearcey: ‘The strict separation of facts from values is *the* key to unlocking the history of the modern Western mind... people have always known that there is a distinction between *is* and *ought*... between descriptive statements and normative statements. In earlier ages, however, people thought both types of statement dealt with questions of truth. If you made a moral statement about what someone *ought* to do, it was either true or false.’ – *Saving Leonardo* (B & H, 2010), p. 25, 27.

C. Detail III: **‘Machines for living in’ – de-humanizing architecture**



D. Detail IV: **Stuart John ‘Woolly’ Wolstenholme (1947-2010), ‘Blood and Bones’**

Standing on the Bridge of Sighs
And looking down, the water's out
We've had our run, there is no doubt
We're all washed up with the tide

Still standing on the Bridge of Sighs
Our cash is blown, its all been spent
In every way we own the rent
We're all washed up with the tide

Seems to me there's more to this than meets the eye
Something more than just the life we're living
Without a soul, we're nothing more than Blood and Bones.

Hanging from the Bridge of Sighs
The whole thing's gone and can't be had
From 'Don't Look Now' that something bad
Is all washed out with the tide

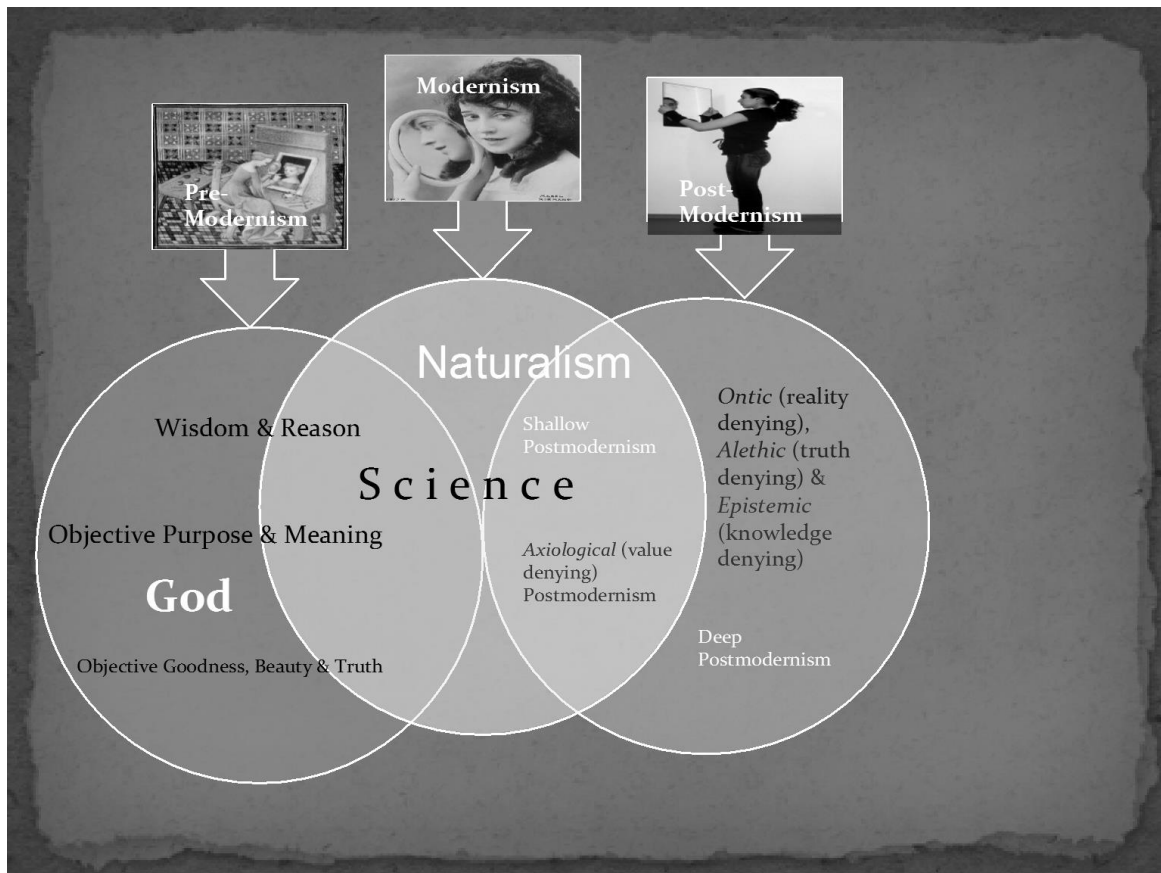
Requiem Aeternam. Requiem, Requiem.

V. Postmodernism

- A. Ravi Zacharias:** 'Postmodernism tells us there's no such thing as truth; no such thing as meaning; no such thing as certainty. I remember lecturing at Ohio State University, one of the largest universities in this country. I was minutes away from beginning my lecture, and my host was driving me past a new building called the Wexner Center for the Performing Arts. He said, "This is America's first postmodern building." I was startled for a moment and I said, "What is a postmodern building?" He said, "Well, the architect said that he designed this building with no design in mind. When the architect was asked, 'Why?' he said, 'If life itself is capricious, why should our buildings have any design and any meaning?' So he has pillars that have no purpose. He has stairways that go nowhere. He has a senseless building built and somebody has paid for it." I said, "So his argument was that if life has no purpose and design, why should the building have any design?" He said, "That is correct." I said, "Did he do the same with the foundation?" All of a sudden there was silence. You see, you and I can fool with the infrastructure as much as we would like, but we dare not fool with the foundation because it will call our bluff in a hurry.'
- B. Nietzsche:** 'The greatest recent event – that "God is dead," that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable – is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe... For the few at least, whose eyes – the *suspicion* in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle, some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned to doubt... how much must collapse now that this faith has been under-mined because it was built on this faith... for example, the whole of our European morality.' – *The Gay Science*

VI. Conclusion

Modernism is an inherently unstable and disintegrative spirituality, and the more consistently one rejects a pre-modern, theistic spirituality, the more one sinks into the disintegrative spirituality of post-modernism.



Suggested Resources:

Peter S. Williams, 'Understanding Culture' YouTube Playlist:

www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWj7PBYa-iiIdysNgwMz9E5O

Peter S. Williams, 'Understanding the Times: A pre-modern meditation on the modernist roots of postmodernism' http://peterswilliams.podbean.com/mf/feed/ypcd5n/care_two.mp3

- 'Spirituality & Culture: Part 1 of 2'

http://peterswilliams.podbean.com/mf/feed/a78mez/PreModern_Gimlekollen_2015.mp3

- 'Spirituality & Culture: Part 2 of 2'

http://peterswilliams.podbean.com/mf/feed/tdy9sa/Modernism_Gimlekollen_2015.mp3

Makoto Fujimura's Christian art, including 'Grace Foretold'

www.makotofujimura.com/works/images-of-grace/

Iona www.iona.uk.com/

Salisbury Cathedral www.salisburycathedral.org.uk/

A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth And Logic* (Penguin, 1990)

Terry Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know* (Baker, 2015)

Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against The Challenges of Postmodernism* (IVP, 2000)

Anthony O'Hear, *After Progress: Finding the old way forward* (Bloomsbury, 1999)

Nancy Pearcey, *Saving Leonardo: A Call to Resist the Secular Assault on Mind, Morals, and Meaning* (B&H, 2010)

Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford, 2009)

Peter S. Williams, 'Apologetics in 3D: Persuading Across Spiritualities with the Apostle Paul'

www.bethinking.org/apologetics/apologetics-in-3d

- 'Ghost in the Shell 2: In Search of Innocence' www.peterswilliams.com/2016/02/09/in-search-of-innocence/