

# Christianity in a Postmodern, Relativistic World

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Athens, Georgia

2010 – Minor updates 2011

# Preliminaries

This is not a Bible study.

This is a study of your mission field.

(You are part of your own mission field, because you are not only a Christian, you are also an educated American.)

# Preliminaries

*This is also not the most well-organized presentation I've ever given.*

*Please bear with me...*

# Preliminaries

Anti-intellectualism does not glorify God.

The Bible says plenty about using your talents; it does not say to refrain from using them!

It is true that an uneducated person can be a good Christian. But you are not one.

# Preliminaries

Many Christians are needlessly afraid of learning.

People want me to tell them they need not and should not study evolutionary biology, modern psychology, etc.

I won't do that.

# Preliminaries

**“Truth does not conflict with truth.”**

– Aquinas

It is silly to think that  
true knowledge in any field  
will impair your relationship with God  
or your true knowledge in other fields.

# Key questions

In this talk, I want to address two things.

(1) Why is there such widespread feeling that scientifically-educated people should not or cannot believe in God, *even though there is no scientific evidence against God?*

# Key questions

*Aside:* Why do people think Darwinian evolution disproves Christianity?

(I am genuinely curious. I have never found the reason.)

Do they think we only believe in God because we can't think of any other way for biological species to diversify, or for complexity to arise?

*I think it's a cultural prejudice, and we'll get to that.*



# Key questions

The other thing I want to address:

(2) Why is it so widely felt that “you have no right to impose your beliefs on anyone else” and that we should be “tolerant” of absolutely everything?

# Three cultures

Answer:

the modern educated world has

**three rival intellectual cultures**

(ways of thinking)

and most educated people are

**caught between all three**

without clearly understanding the difference.

# Three cultures

PREMODERN

MODERNIST

POSTMODERN

# Three cultures

## PREMODERN

Authority and tradition

Preserve the wisdom of the past

## MODERNIST

## POSTMODERN

# Three cultures

## PREMODERN

Authority and tradition

Preserve the wisdom of the past

## MODERNIST

Scientific

Reject the “superstitions” of the past

## POSTMODERN

# Three cultures

## PREMODERN

Authority and tradition

Preserve the wisdom of the past

## MODERNIST

Scientific

Reject the “superstitions” of the past

## POSTMODERN

Opinions and tastes, not facts

No objective truth

# Three cultures

Technical note:

“Modernism” is also the name of a kind of 20<sup>th</sup>-century liberal theology.

That is not what I mean here.

# Three cultures

Where did these 3  
cultures come from?



# Origins

## PREMODERN

Centuries old

Nostalgia and fear during fall of Roman Empire

## MODERNIST

French Enlightenment

Rise of science in the 1850s-1900s

## POSTMODERN

Awareness of human fallibility

Late 20<sup>th</sup> century reaction against the  
arrogance of modernism

# Three cultures

How do the 3 different cultures handle various things?

# Morality

## PREMODERN

Objective, Biblical and Aristotelian

## MODERNIST

Morality should be replaced by science  
(Is premarital sex “scientific”?)

## POSTMODERN

Relativism (you get to choose your own values)  
“Whatever works for you”

# Religion

## PREMODERN

Search for the truth about God,  
backed up by authoritative tradition

## MODERNIST

Obsolete, replaced by science  
(Tolerated as a social institution fading away)

## POSTMODERN

Believe what “works for you” but don’t  
“impose” it on others

# Law and justice

## PREMODERN

Fortunately, law and jurisprudence  
are still mostly premodern!

## MODERNIST

Less morality, more sociology

## POSTMODERN

Only opinions, not objective facts  
(like the eBay feedback system)

# Politics

## PREMODERN

All authorities are morally accountable to a higher authority

## MODERNIST

“Scientific” government and economy  
(whatever that may be)

## POSTMODERN

“Pluralism” with extreme emphasis  
on “tolerance”

# Art, architecture, and music

## PREMODERN

Convey beauty to the audience  
(It is not necessary to be original)

## MODERNIST

Be original, even if nobody likes it  
(they'll eventually come around)

## POSTMODERN

OK to do traditional as well as innovative things  
(if nobody likes it, it's not art)

# The study of literature

## PREMODERN

Judge things in the light of classical traditions,  
the best that has gone before

## MODERNIST

Study how literature affects people  
(bringing in psychology, anthropology, etc.)

## POSTMODERN

No specific “correct interpretation” of any text  
“Deconstruction” – internal contradictions



# Knowledge as a whole

## PREMODERN

A growing body of knowledge,  
much of it ancient

## MODERNIST

Reject whatever isn't "scientific"  
(Assumption that people in the past were fools)

## POSTMODERN

Knowledge is divided into compartments  
that don't interact

# Characteristic mistakes or fallacies

## PREMODERN

“Whatever the ancients say is right”

## MODERNIST

“Now we know it all”

(“Everybody in earlier times  
was foolish or ignorant”)

## POSTMODERN

“It’s unfair to say that anything  
is truly better than anything else”

Three cultures

Which one is right?

# Three cultures

It's tempting to say **Christians should just be premodernists, rejecting everything else.**

But that won't do.

# Three cultures

On many points,  
premodernism comes out  
looking better  
because there's been more time  
for mistakes to be weeded out.

# Three cultures

Premodernism isn't perfect.

(1) Tendency to ignore modern discoveries

(Is smoking “wrong” even if it wasn't “wrong” 100 years ago?)

# Three cultures

Premodernism isn't perfect.

**(2) All truth is God's truth.**

Real knowledge glorifies God  
even if we haven't had it  
very long.

# Three cultures

Premodernism isn't perfect.

(3) Inability to communicate  
with the modern world

(We can't just retreat into a shell.)



# Three cultures

Premodernism isn't perfect.

(4) Premodernists often have a **false memory of a past golden age.**

Was everybody a better Christian 50 years ago?

Or are we just remembering good ones and forgetting bad ones?

# Three cultures

Premodernism isn't perfect.

(5) Some premodernists want to use Christianity to justify *anything old-fashioned that they like*.

Reactionary politics...

a “bah humbug” attitude...

even racism or other injustice.

# Three cultures

Nonetheless, we often find ourselves needing to **defend premodern wisdom** against modernist and postmodernist prejudices.

# Modernism

The trouble with **modernism**:

(1) Arrogance

(2) “Chronological snobbery”  
(thinking people in the past  
didn’t have brains)

(3) Atheism (or narrow specialization?)  
No room for God.

# Modernism

Example of modernist propaganda:

“Christopher Columbus was opposed by people who thought the earth was flat.”

Truth: All educated people knew the earth was round. They had qualms about the length of the voyage...

# Modernism

Why aren't scientists supposed to believe in God?

**Because God doesn't fit into the modernist cultural system.**

Not because of any kind of proof that God doesn't exist.

# Three cultures

Modernism may grate on us, but it doesn't puzzle us. It's nice and clear.

Not so **postmodernism...**

# Three cultures

Any real postmodernist will probably say I've been mis-defining postmodernism.

They will say anyone is mis-defining postmodernism.



# Postmodernism

What's **right** about postmodernism:

- (a) Knocks down the arrogance of modernism
- (b) Admits that we don't know everything
- (c) Rejects what is bad about modern art

# Postmodernism

What's **wrong** with postmodernism:

Absence of objective facts and values.

(Too *much* fallibility.)

# Postmodernism

In the 1970s, many students were taught “ethical relativism” –  
“There is no objective right or wrong.

People and societies get to make up their own moral values.”

# Postmodernism

That's a handy thing to believe if  
you want to lower your own  
moral standards.

But consider...

# Postmodernism

## Problems with ethical relativism:

(1) Moral problem:

Do we have to let tyrants be tyrants?

If a whole society chooses to do something that disgusts us, do we have to say that's their right?

# Postmodernism

**Problems with ethical relativism:**

(2) Logical problem:

Is it **objectively wrong**  
to say that anything is **objectively wrong**?

(Many variations on this paradox...  
You see where it leads.)

# Postmodernism

## Problems with ethical relativism:

(3) Practical problem:

Will you still be an ethical relativist  
if I steal your wallet?

Will you say I've done wrong  
or can you only say, "I'll fight you for it"?

# Postmodernism

Today's postmodernism goes beyond ethical relativism.

Not only claims of morality, but also claims of fact are relative.



# Postmodernism

No matter what you say, people can reply, “You say that because of your culture.”

(C. S. Lewis on “Bulverism”...)

# Postmodernism

A key postmodernist insight is that **everybody has a point of view** — **there is no neutral vantage point from which to survey facts.**  
Everybody has preconceptions.

# Postmodernism

I reply:

Yes, but

**objective facts can**

**overcome your preconceptions.**

That's why we call them facts!

# Postmodernism

Relativism is often couched in an absolute demand for **tolerance**.

# Postmodernism

There are 2 possible arguments for tolerating dissenting opinions:

- (1) The truth is out there**, and we want people to be able to discover it by debating it.  
(Premodern/modernist position)
- (2) There is no objective truth**, so nobody's opinion is objectively false.  
(Postmodernist position)

# Postmodernism

If there is no objective truth,  
then all debates are merely power struggles.

And if all debates are merely power struggles,  
why should you tolerate people  
who want to fight against you?

So why is relativism  
supposed to lead to tolerance?

# Postmodernism

“You have no right to impose  
your values on me...”

# Postmodernism

“You have no right to impose  
your values on me...  
while I’m imposing mine on  
you!”



# Postmodernism

The notion that “all value systems are equally good” is believed only by a tiny fraction of the earth’s population.

Why should we be the tiny elite group that has realized that there are no elite groups?

# Postmodernism

How has postmodernism  
influenced modern evangelical  
Christianity?

# Postmodernism

## (1) (Good)

Interest in the practice and experience of religion, not just doctrine.

(But this can go too far... all “experiential” and no theology.)

# Postmodernism

(2) (Bad)

Excessively seeker-friendly churches, catering to tastes rather than the glory of God and the accumulated wisdom of Christendom.

# Postmodernism

## (3) (Bad)

“Christianity-in-a-bubble” or  
“Bible-in-a-bubble”

– Putting everything in a mental compartment that doesn't interact with what's outside it.

# Postmodernism

“Christianity in a bubble” was one of the first manifestations of postmodernism (75 years ago) and is deeply entrenched in Baptist practice.

“Just ignore everything in the outside world and ‘tell the Bible story.’ ”

# Postmodernism

**How do we  
communicate with the  
postmodernist world?**

# Postmodernism

**Postmodernists listen sympathetically but fail to grasp that we're talking about objective facts.**

When we say "Jesus is the Saviour" we don't just mean "this is a religion I happen to like."

It's not like "I like broccoli."



# Postmodernism

Important points to get across:

(1) We want to know how you think – we don't just want to tell you how we think.

# Postmodernism

Important points to get across:

(2) We appreciate what is good about postmodernism (especially rejection of arrogant modernism).

# Postmodernism

Important points to get across:

(3) We are talking about objective facts, not just tastes or subjective experiences.

# Postmodernism

Important points to get across:

(4) We are not aiming to be unfair or contemptuous toward people with whom we disagree.

# Postmodernism

Important points to get across:

(5) We have considered  
postmodernist ways of thinking  
and have found them flawed.

# Postmodernism

Important points to get across:

(6) We are not simply  
premodernists.

# Three cultures

It does not make sense to ask which one of the three cultures is “true” because they are mostly styles, not sets of beliefs.

Particular beliefs can be true or false, regardless of which package they arrive in.

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