

Resisting the “Ism’s” of Our Day by S. Michael Craven

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians he warns, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition, according to the *elemental spirits* of the world, and not according to Christ.” (Col 2:8)

On a spring afternoon in 1929, theologian and defender of the Christian faith, J. Gresham Machen shared these words with the graduating class of Hampden-Sydney College.

“It is a serious step, in these days, even from the worldly point of view, to become a Christian. There was a time, not so very long ago, when the faithful Christian was supported by public opinion or at least by the united opinion of the visible church. But that time has gone by. The man who today enters upon the Christian life is enlisting in a warfare against the whole current of the age.”

One of those “currents of the age” or *elemental spirits* of the world is modernism.

Modernism is this most pernicious form of thinking that came forth from the 18th century Enlightenment and continues as the principal basis for Western cultural thought to this very day.

At its core is the ascent of human reason. In other words, the Enlightenment elevated human reason to the place of pre-eminence in Western epistemology. Whereas prior to the Enlightenment, men understood faith as a pathway to knowledge – as expressed in Augustine’s famous assertion: “I *believe* in order to understand” – after the Enlightenment, men now said “I must *understand* in order to believe.”

The age of scientific materialism was born and with it, there was created two categories of knowledge, with one being superior to the other -- knowledge from “facts” and knowledge from “values,” with knowledge derived from values always being subordinate. So science was, in effect, separated from philosophy of any kind, including theology and the question of “what works” replaced the question of “what is right.”

These two worlds of thought are now seen as being distinct from one another. In the world of values we are free to choose what we cherish and what we neglect. In other words, there are no absolutes. Values are relative – merely a matter of personal preference.

The only absolutes, according to the modernist, occur within the realm of “facts,” those things that can be demonstrated empirically by observation, experimentation, etc., likewise those things that cannot meet the empirical test are excluded from the discussion. This greatly limits the field of information from which we can defend traditional moral positions.

I think this would explain the increasing disregard for the “intent” of the founding fathers in our Constitution. You see these principles cannot be separated from their philosophical foundations and maintain the same meaning.

In the wake of Modernism, Christian truth and experience are now relegated to the world of values and are therefore seen as a matter of personal preference and never to be considered as a source of facts that accurately inform us about reality, humanity, public policy and the like.

Former Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich articulated this perspective quite clearly in an article he wrote in *The American Prospect* in which he says:

“The great conflict of the 21st century may be between the West and terrorism but terrorism is a tactic and not a belief. The underlying battle will be between modern civilization and anti-modernist fanatics; between those who believe in the primacy of the individual and those who believe that beings owe blind allegiance to a higher authority; between those who give priority to life in this world and those who believe that human life is no more than preparation for an existence beyond life; between those who believe that truth is revealed solely through scripture and religious dogma, and those who rely primarily on science, reason, and logic.”

You can see the distinction; any attempt to derive truth from a religious worldview is openly regarded as irrational – a conception that has, in effect, rendered the Gospel implausible in the minds of many modern people.

Lesslie Newbigin states it this way, “From the point of view of contemporary culture, the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead is irrational. It cannot be incorporated into the existing plausibility structure.” Meaning, those things that are plausible must have some basis in empirical fact.

Among many professing Christians, this modernistic mode of thinking has surreptitiously encouraged a “privatized” faith -- that has little or no expression in the public world of ideas. There is, in their minds, the category of religion (knowledge from values) and there is the “real world,” (knowledge from facts) which they too elevate to epistemological superiority, albeit unwittingly.

Within the Church, modernism and its attendant force of modernity have placed God at a very great distance. We, like the world have rendered Him an irrelevant being whose influence in our daily lives and personal decisions is marginalized at best, or worse, ignored altogether. We rely first on the tools of modernity.

Honestly, don't we really trust *first* in our jobs, the power company, modern medicine, the expectation of order insured by government, technology, (the tools of modernity) etc. and this is what produces such great fear in us when these fail us?

When was the last time we responded to a call upon our hearts to do something so irrational and contrary to “normalcy” in obedience to God?

I am not suggesting that God no longer calls us to the same level of obedience described in Hebrews chapter 11; I am saying that we no longer expect, or more accurately *want*, this “kind” of call and thus we no longer listen.

Modernity appears to have met all of our physical needs for security and in doing so it has produced a standard by which we then measure everything including God’s expectations of us.

We think, for example, that He works exclusively through what we perceive to be the “normal” channels: jobs, medicine, housing, modern conveniences, etc. We simply no longer expect the supernatural and therefore we find ourselves mostly independent of God until something goes wrong (i.e., practical deists).

I think Os Guinness is helpful in helping us define modernity,

“Modernity...refers to the character and system of the world produced by the forces of modernization and development, centered above all on the premise that the "top down" causation of God and the supernatural has been decisively replaced by the "bottom up" causation of human designs and products.”

One of the inevitable results of modernism is that reason devoid of values ultimately fails, and thus the only arbiter of truth becomes power – a situation anticipated by Nietzsche ironically.

This is precisely the situation we see unfolding today in so many of our cultural and social conflicts. In the absence of “reasonable” truth, those who seek to redefine morality and ethics must necessarily resort to coercive power – political, judicial, and economic.

There has been a reaction to Modernism that rightly exposes the futility of elevating human reason to a position of preeminence – and that is postmodernism, which is the next *elemental spirit* of the world, which we must understand.

Postmodernism is perhaps one of the most misunderstood and often misapplied concepts in Western culture today. It is generally reduced to nothing more than “moral relativism,” which is certainly reinforced by postmodernism, however as I pointed out earlier, the scientific age, or modernism, had long ago advanced moral relativism in the form of utilitarianism or pragmatism; again: the question of “what works?” rather than “what is right?”

At its best, postmodernism topples the modernistic reliance upon human reason, science, and ingenuity as savior and thus offers an opportunity for the recovery of a near-Christian epistemology, in which the categories of values and facts are once again united.

Lenin, in his defense of totalitarianism as a necessary tool for the implementation of communism, which was, after all, the ultimate expression of humanism in government,

said: “you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet.” Postmodernism reacts correctly to this claim by saying, “But you never made an omelet.”

In other words, postmodernism correctly observes that reliance upon human reason, the tools of modernity and all of its modernistic assumptions about the nature of man and his alleged ability to perfect himself have ultimately and utterly failed.

A brief survey of the 20th century alone would quickly and thoroughly confirm this. Simply consider that World Wars I and II were responsible for than 70 million deaths. The Soviet Union under Josef Stalin is estimated to have killed between 34 and 49 million of their own citizens. Mao Zedong is estimated to have killed or starved to death more than 63 million human beings during his 26-year reign over communist China.

Four times as many people were killed in the 20th century by their own governments than killed in all the wars with other nations during the same period. Ironically, these governments were founded upon these very same modernistic assumptions. According to *The Black Book of Communism*, published in 1999, the number of dead directly resulting from communism in the 20th century alone adds up to more than 100 million.

Clearly the 20th century was the bloodiest in all of human history, an ironic fact, given the humanistic hope, which initiated the 20th century.

What about the hope offered by 20th century science in addressing humanity’s personal and societal ills such as disease and poverty?

Ironically, one of the most devastating plagues in all of human history occurred in modern times -- the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19 in which as many as 40 million people died worldwide.

The “Spanish Flu,” as it was known, killed four times as many people in a single year than the Bubonic Plague that occurred in the Middle Ages (1347-1351). The Spanish Flu epidemic is cited as the most devastating epidemic in all of recorded history.

While we have indeed succeeded in wiping out many diseases many more continue to appear such as AIDS, West Nile Virus, SARS as well as highly resilient varieties of age-old ailments such as cholera, pneumonia, malaria, and dysentery. In fact, in the latter half of the 20th century, almost 30 new human diseases were identified.

Regarding poverty, the news is no better there, a fact often hidden by the unparalleled prosperity of American society. It has been estimated that in 2001, 1.1 billion people worldwide lived on less than \$1 a day and 2.7 billion on less than \$2 a day. That is more than half the world’s population living in abject poverty!

Very clearly the postmodern criticism and rejection of modernism is overwhelmingly accurate. Postmodernism challenges, on legitimate grounds, the promise of perpetual

human development and social progress into a “utopian” state -- that is implied in modernism.

As an “organized” philosophical ideology, “postmodernism is primarily a reinterpretation of what knowledge is and what counts as knowledge.” Again, we are living through, what is potentially, the next great epistemological shift. This is where we, as Christians, should be concerned. Similar to the Enlightenment, there is an effort (if not opportunity) to once again redefine knowledge, what we can know and how we know.

While postmodernism challenges the categories of knowledge, true/false, right and wrong that were established during the Enlightenment – postmodernism offers nothing in its place.

The fact is, postmodernism as a philosophy offers no positive agenda or any coherent solution to humanity’s dilemma.

Essentially, postmodernism argues, consistent with Nietzsche, that in the wake of reason’s failure – it is power and the will to power that becomes the only arbiter of truth. This then makes *all* claims to truth suspect, because the postmodernist believes that any attempt to establish one truth, or one way in which the world really is – is nothing more than an attempt to establish power and exercise control by means of that explanation.

This is best applied to religion, which according to the postmodernist was created by some men to control other men.

In the matter of history, this too is irrelevant within a postmodern epistemology. History, they argue, is “written by the winners” to conceal their self-serving and malicious motives. Thus, the postmodern disdain for all things emanating from Western culture including Christianity.

Postmodernism says that nothing can be objectively true because your categories of true and false, right and wrong, are all merely products of cultural bias or social construction. Therefore, since each of us experience differing degrees of influence from these external forces, postmodernism assumes, and it is only an assumption, that there is no over-arching universal truth available for discovery.

In a bit of irony, postmodernism actually destroys pluralism. Pluralism allows for different ideas, views and perspectives and ultimately the concept of conversion. Where pluralism exists, conversion remains possible. One can, through reason and logic, make their case, so to speak, and thus convert a person to embrace his or her way of seeing the matter in question. Postmodernism destroys this by suggesting that no particular perspective is right and others wrong, which ultimately renders every perspective meaningless.

In contrast, a healthy pluralism maintains its respect for the varied perspectives thereby encouraging a diverse marketplace of ideas in which they can compete for supremacy.

The result of all this philosophical wrangling is a generation that is increasingly “disconnected” from any tangible sense of hope, meaning or purpose, and I would add, meaningful relationships. They are being raised in a world where all of these categories have been stripped of their original content and substance. Life for them is without hope, meaning or purpose.

However, herein lies the great opportunity for the Church today -- because life without hope, meaning, or purpose is simply untenable for human beings made in the image of God. The escalating destruction of the personal, psychological, and spiritual well-being of our nation’s young people, as revealed in numerous studies, bears this out.

I would suggest that postmodernism, as a philosophy, exists in a very fragile state because it conflicts with the yearnings of the human heart. We are born with a God-given desire to make sense out of life and to attempt to know our purpose and the meaning of this present reality. We simply cannot survive psychologically in a state devoid of any meaning, try as we might. And this innate desire on our part is why I think postmodernism, as a legitimate philosophy, is waning so soon after its appearance in the marketplace of ideas.

I will say however that traditional ways of speaking and reaching the postmodern generation are likely to fail. This generation is among the most cynical in history and thus trying to reason through argumentation and logic will not suffice. This generation needs authenticity and that can only come through relationships. In essence, the Church must live out the commandment to “love they neighbor.” This is where we begin and then be prepared to *follow* with substantive answers -- demonstrating that Christianity is not simply religion; it is reality.

Finally, one of the most destructive *elemental spirits* of our age is that of Consumerism. Pernicious consumerism is undermining individuals, disintegrating families and communities, and sapping the Church of its influence and relevance.

Consumerism is more than materialism, it is an ideology of which materialism is merely a component; more accurately, it is a way of *thinking* that has become the principle basis for how many Americans have come to see reality and themselves.

By definition, consumerism is a cultural phenomenon resulting from the systematic creation and fostering of the *desire* to possess material goods and personal success in ever-greater amounts. The net result is a mindset, which seeks after an artificially constructed and idealized “lifestyle” that promises a “better life” to all who work hard enough, possess the “right” things, and/or assumes a particular appearance.

The 24-hour media culture is continuously encouraging you and me to be discontent with what we currently possess or lack. And the solution to this artificially contrived discontentment, with which we are bombarded is to upgrade, acquire what we don’t have, and/or change our style. This is the gospel of consumerism.

It has produced the “celebrity-obsessed” culture that has redefined heroism away from those whose real accomplishments inspire us on to higher *moral* aspirations -- to people who are famous for being famous. Why? Because they embody the values of our day: fame, fortune, and beauty. Values that are constantly reinforced by Madison Ave. – the lords of consumerism.

Consumerism has produced suburban sprawl, mega-stores, and the nomadic quest for economic security – all of which have grossly undermined authentic community in America –producing the loneliest and most disconnected generation in our history.

Consumerism is at the root of our increasing emphasis on performance over and above principles and character, the epidemic of consumer debt, and the tyranny of the urgent where people are propelled along by this frenetic pace – all in the name of productivity and excellence.

Consumerism is also at the heart of many movements within the church that emphasize Christ as a *means to end* whose only *real* purpose is to help you live a better life and be happy. Friends, Jesus did not die on the cross and rise again to make you and me “happy” – he atoned for our rebellion and rose again to set us free from sin, so that we might enjoy him forever and that the Father would receive glory through the Son.

It is a perversion of the Gospel to suggest that Jesus’ primary concern is to bless his children with material wealth, health, and happiness.

The result of all this is a nation of people overwhelmed by the tyranny of the urgent; watching in disbelief as one week goes into the next, then one month, then two, then three until years have passed and that promised lifestyle still eludes them.

In the end many are left with the realization that their life amounts to nothing more than work; they have drifted apart in their relationships; their children are grown and gone, and they have waited for that elusive goal of “everything accomplished” so they could start “enjoying life” only to realize that life has passed them by.

The *American Journal of Sociology* states that “since 1969 the time American parents spend with their children has declined by 22 hours per week”! We talk of family values but we evidently do not value family. We value success and comfort – we are slaves to consumerism!

Reflecting on the post-Christian landscape of the late 20th century, Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer observed that after the “death of God” and the resulting loss of absolute truth and moral values, modern society would be left with only the two terrible “values” of “personal peace and personal prosperity.”

He went on to say that once these values became accepted; Americans would sacrifice everything to protect their personal peace and affluence including their children and their grandchildren.

Again it is this idealized “lifestyle” that is desperately sought and must be preserved at all costs and everything revolves around this aim – when this is not the biblical object of life.

Consumerism shifts the object of human life from cultivating virtue and character, knowing truth and being content to this artificially constructed and idealized “lifestyle” that is continually reinforced through the media, entertainment, and advertising.

“Things” take priority over persons and “having” supersedes being and in so doing, we become a superficial culture filled with distractions that inhibit contemplation and meaningful relationships.

In commenting on the lack of introspection by men, Blaise Pascal, the 17th century mathematician and Christian apologist wrote:

“All they [unbelieving men] know is that when [they] leave this world [they] shall fall forever into oblivion, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of the two will be [their] lot for eternity. ...The only conclusion [they] can draw from all this is that [they] must pass [their] days without a thought of trying to find out what is going to happen. ... The only good thing for [such men], therefore, is to be diverted so that [they] will stop thinking about [their] circumstances”

We live in a world ripe with distraction especially when one considers that every American is bombarded with an average of 3,000 product ads per day.

Finally, there is no question that Christianity teaches personal responsibility and the idea of doing our very best in everything we do. However, this does not exclude our responsibilities as husbands, wives and parents either. Nor does this preclude our responsibilities as “prophets, priests and kings” on the earth.

And I don’t want to condemn healthy Christian ambition. I think Christians should be ambitious as long as their ambitions are kingdom minded and not simply for personal glory and gain. In other words we see our position, success, material goods, etc. as resources entrusted to us for the advance of the Kingdom.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” In the case of consumerism the Christian ideal is indeed difficult especially when the whole spirit of our age combines to press us in the never-ending quest to desire, acquire, and accomplish. In such an age it is difficult to “be still and know that He is God.”

I have briefly surveyed some of the more formidable, yet less examined, “isms” common in our culture today. What I hope you have gained is an understanding that the time and culture, in which you live, carry with it unique philosophical influences that oppose both kingdom living and the gospel of the kingdom.

These influences must be understood and their associated ideas taken captive and made obedient to Christ if we are to live faithfully in this generation.