

# Does the Current Emphasis on Postmodernism Help or Hinder Evangelical Engagement with Society?

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ABSTRACT

While postmodernism can be – and often is – regarded as antithetical to evangelical Christianity, many of the objections arise from evaluating it from a modern standpoint, rather than on its own terms. By clarifying a number of ambiguous terms many of the perceived issues vanish. Some remaining issues are problematic not because Christians have taken on too much postmodernist thinking, but because they have taken it on only partially and inconsistently. Taking the example of the challenge raised by new atheism, this article argues that evangelical engagement would be helped by more completely and more consistently embracing postmodernism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism presents a very different outlook on the world to that of traditional, conservative Christian thought, which is typically grounded in modernism. Ostensibly it questions that which should be certain and relativises that which should be absolute. In doing so it is claimed that postmodernism is not only “hermeneutically and spiritually wrong-headed”<sup>1</sup> but that, “Evangelical Postmoderns have abandoned propositional truth found in the Bible and with it they have abandoned the promise of everlasting life.”<sup>2</sup> Such a stark appraisal naturally – even necessarily – follows from evaluating postmodernism in modern terms. To understand postmodernism, however, it must be evaluated on its own terms. Proper understanding of postmodernism can then pave the way to understanding how discussions work, and opens many new avenues to engage with people and the issues which concern them. A willingness to engage with postmodernism on its own terms is thus not only helpful but a necessary condition for engagement with 21st century western society.

1 Hafeman *et al.* 2001.

2 Wilkin 2007.

Section 2 of this article defines and clarifies some contentious terms. Notably, it lays out what I mean by “postmodernism,” specifically picking up on Anglo-American aspects in contrast to continental-European philosophy. It will also define the terms “reality,” “truth,” “knowledge” and “worldview” as used in this paper. These definitions form essential groundwork for understanding postmodern claims. Section 3 addresses some of the causes of misunderstandings which can arise between worldviews, specifically between modernism and postmodernism. In each case it outlines ways to mitigate – if not always resolve – conflict. Section 4 gives a case study, considering the engagement of evangelicals with new atheism. This provides a concrete example where the ability (or inability) to understand the underlying modern and postmodern philosophies is critically important for meaningful discussion. Finally, Section 5 proposes a way forward, claiming that – properly understood – the problem that evangelicals face is not so much that they have taken on board too much postmodern thinking, but that they have not taken on board enough! I suggest that postmodernism, consistently applied, provides a reasonable evangelical position and a way to meaningfully present the Truth of Christianity.

## 2. DEFINING TERMS

There are three epistemological positions which are of import for the discussion at hand. I shall define them in terms of their claims regarding the existence of absolute Truth, and regarding man’s ability to Know absolute Truth with certainty. Before discussing them, however, there are a number of terms which are not used consistently across these epistemological positions; failure to clarify the meanings of these words can cause significant and unnecessary confusion. I will therefore highlight these, and give the definitions which will be used throughout this paper.

### **2.1 Reality**

Reality is viewed by some as being absolute, irrespective of what people perceive or understand of the world. Obviously, it is hard to reconcile such a view with the claim that we each make up our own reality within our minds.

I propose that the problem is, more than anything, semantic: there are two entirely different concepts being described by the same word. For clarity, and following the convention of Kraft,<sup>3</sup> “Reality” (capital R) will be used for the way the universe is, objectively. This definition makes no presuppositions on whether Reality exists, whether one can perceive it, or what one can say about it. An individual’s perception of the universe, subjectively, is denoted “reality” (small r). This latter definition makes no presuppositions regarding whether, or how closely, such perceptions relate to Reality.

## **2.2 Truth**

Murphy,<sup>4</sup> following MacIntyre,<sup>5</sup> defines a view as True if and only if “in its central contention it will never be shown to be inadequate in any future situation, no matter what development of rational enquiry may occur.” Murphy is careful to distance this “unsurpassability criterion” from “modern correspondence theory with an associated modern realism.” However, I believe that (without adopting modern realism) it is appropriate to give a parallel definition that “a statement is True if it corresponds to Reality.” Assuming that an appeal to Reality is meaningful, the latter is simply a special case of the former. Following a similar convention to the Reality/reality distinction above, “Truth” (capital T) describes the way the universe is. Again, this makes no assumption regarding the existence of Truth or our ability to perceive it. An individual person’s belief about, or best guess at, the Truth is denoted “truth” (small t). This latter definition makes no presuppositions regarding whether, or how closely, such belief relates to Truth.

## **2.3 Knowledge**

If a person holds a belief which certainly reflects Truth, and they are aware that there is no possibly way it could not reflect Truth, that person may be said to have “Knowledge” (capital K). A belief which one justifiably expects to reflect Truth, but which may not, will be termed “knowledge” (small k).<sup>6</sup>

3 Kraft 1996, 18.

4 Murphy 1997, 125.

5 MacIntyre 1994.

6 The distinction between Knowledge and knowledge was highlighted, though not using this terminology, by Gettier (1963).

It is important to note from this definition that it may be possible for a person to believe something, and for that belief to coincidentally reflect the Truth, but for that knowledge to not be Knowledge. For example, Alice has a particularly lucid dream in which Bob said he wanted to meet for lunch. As it happens, Bob really does want to meet, but never mentioned it. As Alice is unaware that it was only a dream, she has a justified belief that Bob wants to meet her, and that belief happens to reflect Truth. Nonetheless, random thoughts generated by a brain in a dream state, even if they are coincidentally True, cannot be considered Knowledge: Alice is no more Knowledgeable than the person who dreamt they were a carrot; she is just luckier.

## 2.4 Modernism and Postmodernism

Give the definitions outlined above, there are three epistemological views which should be considered.

- The first view holds that Truth exists, and that it can be Known. I shall term this view “modernism.” This view is often foundationalist inasmuch as it asserts that any claim to Knowledge can be grounded on some more fundamental claim or on basic Truths which are universally self-evident.<sup>7</sup>
- The second view holds that it is not possible to Know the Truth, and as such it is either not possible or not meaningful to claim that Truth exists. I shall term this view “continental postmodernism.”<sup>8</sup> Much of such thinking stemmed from a reaction against modernism; rejecting some, but not all, modernist premises. For example, it agrees with modernism that Knowledge comes down to an all-or-nothing dichotomy: either full certainty or unsubstantiated speculation. Where it *disagrees* is regarding the possibility of full certainty. In this respect it is “simply the dark side of positivism.”<sup>9</sup>
- The third view holds that Truth does exist, but that it is not possible to Know it. I shall term this view “Anglo-American postmodernism.”<sup>10</sup> This view is often coherentist inasmuch as it holds that truths are not universally self-evident; rather they are reasonable within a given framework of ideas. Anglo-American postmodernism takes on board

7 There are obviously a good many other distinctives of modernism to which three sentences cannot do justice. Murphy (1997) provides a fuller discussion of this topic, specifically considering not only foundationalism in epistemology, but referentialism in meaning and reductionism in relations.

8 Following Murphy 1997.

9 Wright 1992, 33.

10 Following Murphy 1997.

the continental critique of modernism, but takes it *further*. For example, like continental postmodernism it rejects the possibility of Knowledge, but goes further in that it also rejects the all-or-nothing dichotomy of full certainty versus unsubstantiated speculation. In salvaging knowledge, however, it has relinquished the gold standard of Knowledge, saying it is unattainable. This paper will primarily consider Anglo-American postmodernism. For brevity, “postmodernism” will be used to denote the Anglo-American variety, unless otherwise stated.

It must be noted that these three terms are by no means uniformly used in the literature. Considering for a moment only the third view, the term “Anglo-American postmodernism” is taken from Nancy Murphy.<sup>11</sup> John Taylor<sup>12</sup> has also espoused this view, but terms it “partial postmodernism.”<sup>13</sup> Although the cause of the limit to Knowledge is different, one of the first champions of such thinking was the presuppositionalism of Van Til.<sup>14</sup> In connection with discussions of science and theology Thomas F. Torrance<sup>15</sup> coined the term “critical realism,” which has been further championed in the realm of biblical theology by N.T. Wright.<sup>16</sup> Imre Lakatos,<sup>17</sup> as a philosopher of science, uses the term “sophisticated falsificationism.” In the social sciences, such views have attracted a variety of names, such as “constructivist realism.”<sup>18</sup> Despite their different names, all of these systems fall essentially under the view which I term Anglo-American postmodernism. Given the wide range of ideas which come under this umbrella, I will consider mainly the views of Murphy, Wright and Lakatos.

11 Murphy 1997.

12 Taylor 1998.

13 Taylor argues one should “accept a [continental] postmodern openness to religion, without lapsing into [continental] postmodern relativism” (1998, 178). He thus calls for “Postmodernism, but only in moderation!” (1998, 178). This contrasts with Murphy’s claim that the view under consideration is not “postmodernism in moderation,” but rather that it is “truly postmodern” (1997, 210) in that it is prepared to sever the ties with modernism which continental postmodernism was not. As such it reveals that continental postmodernism is really only “frustrated modernism” (1997, 209).

14 Van Til 1969.

15 Torrance 1969.

16 Wright 1992.

17 Lakatos 1978.

18 Cupchik 2001.

## 2.5 Worldview

Having clarified the epistemological positions of interest for this article, it should be noted how evangelical Christianity fits into this schema. While ‘postmodernism’ and ‘Christianity’ can both be termed “worldviews” there is an important category difference often overlooked. Christianity (like Hinduism or feminism) provides a particular framework of answers to understanding the world. By contrast, postmodernism (like modernism) provides a particular framework of questions which are meaningful to ask. It is thus possible to compare the relative merits of Christianity and Hinduism, or of postmodernism and modernism. It is a category mistake to compare or contrast postmodernism and Christianity.

## 2.6 Putting Definitions in Context

Having carefully defined a number of otherwise contentious terms, it is instructive to consider how Reality/reality, Truth/truth and Knowledge/knowledge are used by modernists and postmodernists. The examples given here are, to some extent, caricatures but serve to illustrate the point.

For a modernist, Knowledge is about being certain.<sup>19</sup> If one is not absolutely certain, then it is not Knowledge but a guess. The modernist accepts that guesses exist, but would not deign to call them Knowledge; he would call them “not-Knowledge” or “guesses.” If the modernist were to go so far as to accept that what we believe is always tentative he would still not accept that beliefs should therefore be ennobled with the title Knowledge. By contrast, the postmodernist holds that, given that everything we believe is tentative, Knowledge is some Platonic ideal which we never obtain. Rather than having a word that can never be used, he downgrades it to speak of knowledge. This is, in fact, the sense in which the word is used in everyday speech: I can never Know that my wife loves me because, for a start, I can never Know that my wife really exists. To keep conversations short, however, I say, “I know you love me,” as shorthand for, “I have a hunch you love me,

19 Of course, by definition (at least by the definition given here) Knowledge is about being certain. Unfortunately, once the distinctions between terms such as “Knowledge” and “knowledge” have been made, it becomes very difficult to explain why there was ever an argument in the first place: the explanation seems to be lacking explanandum. If the discussion in this section seems trivial, please ignore all capitalisation conventions, or imagine I am speaking of “(K/k)nowledge,” and try to appreciate the ambiguity that arises.

which I accept given a number of unproven and unprovable assumptions including, but not limited to, the belief that I am not really just a brain in a jar being sent spurious sensory data.”

For a modernist, Truth is absolute and independent of the people considering the situation. A person’s perception of Reality falls into two categories: their perception is True or it is not-True. Modernists have no issue with the idea that different people may perceive Reality differently; they take issue with saying that an imperfect perception is true, simply because someone perceives it as such.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, the postmodernist holds that, given everything we perceive is perceived imperfectly, we may as well talk about our best (but probably incorrect) guess at Truth as being true. This, again, is the sense in which the word is used in everyday speech: a person says, “It is true that I am a woman,” when what they really means is, “I believe, based on an essentially unverifiable trust of my own sensory data and a rudimentary knowledge of biology, that it is True that I am a woman, though there is always the possibility that I am mistaken.” Olympic medals have been contested this way.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, assume there exists some external world, independent of observers. Now assume that any observer interacts imperfectly with this world. A modernist is interested in absolutes: you may have your perception, and I may have mine, but the thing that we must both go to as the source is the external Reality itself. The modernist accepts that imperfect perceptions exist, but would not call them Real; he would call them “not-Real” or “fantasy.” By contrast, the postmodernist holds that Reality is some Platonic ideal to which we have no direct access. The only thing we have direct access to is what is inside our own head, and this is therefore, from the individual’s point of view, as real as it gets.

It can thus be seen that in each case the modernist and postmodernist use words in a way which is reasonable, but which will cause strong disagreement if the two sides assume they are talking about the same things. Nonetheless,

20 Again, please excuse the lack of ambiguity. Just think, “(T/t)rue”.

21 Ritchie *et al.*, 2008.

some rudimentary translation between worldviews has been attempted here.<sup>22</sup> There *are* reasons why modern and postmodern views come into conflict (and these are discussed in Section 3) but objections to the claim, “That is true for you but not for me,” should not be one of them.

### 3. THE NATURE OF MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Given the possible confusion associated with words such as “(K/k)nowledge” and “(T/t)ruth” outlined above, it should probably not be surprising that different language communities (such as evangelicals working from within a modern worldview and those working within a postmodern worldview) should appear to disagree strongly and fundamentally with one another on certain matters. There are a number of reasons underlying this. One reason is that apparent disagreements arise from confusion due to the communities’ differing uses or definitions of particular terms. A second reason is that the two worldviews set out from different starting assumptions, and apparent disagreements arise from these different starting points. Thirdly, it may be that there are genuine disagreements. If evangelicals are to effectively engage with (postmodern) spheres of society, and with each other, it is important to identify and understand each of the sources of confusion or disagreement. The three areas listed above are discussed in turn below.

#### 3.1 Different Definitions

To show that agnosticism is untenable and that one can Know at least some (if not all) Truths, Geisler considers the classic agnostic statement, “All knowledge about reality (i.e. truth) is impossible.” He then rebuts the claim,

<sup>22</sup> Arguably, the modernist should expect translation to be possible. Continental postmodernists would expect translation to be impossible. Anglo-American postmodernists would expect perfect translation to be impossible, but would attempt it anyway, as imperfect translation is better than no translation at all. That said, it is ironic that – because modernists assume that the Truth is self-evident – they may also assume that their way is the only right way, and thus fail in any attempt at translation. This is illustrated by Taylor who, in Anglo-American postmodernist (or, in his terms, ‘partial postmodernist’) mood argues in favour of translation (1998). However in Modernist (or, in his terms, ‘critical realist’) mood he claims that “The relativist means by ‘is true for me’ something like ‘is believed by me’. But if this is what the claim really amounts to, then it would seem better if it were in fact expressed in this way... The confusion of truth and belief leads us to conceptual difficulty.” (2002, 100). Having correctly identified the relativist’s meaning of the word “true” he proceeds to ignore it in favour of the ‘correct’ meaning of (T/t)ruth.

saying “But this itself is offered as a truth about reality, in which case it defeats itself.”<sup>23</sup> The rebuttal is neat and pithy. It allows the apologist to chalk up a mark for being clever. (Whether it convinces the would-be convert and/or moves them closer to knowledge of God is a different discussion.) However, the apologist may not be being clever enough.

The problem occurs because the first statement is made by a postmodern thinker and the rebuttal by a modern thinker. Using the conventions of this essay, it becomes clear that the rebuttal is not relevant to the original problem: “All Knowledge about Reality (i.e. Truth) is impossible. But this itself is offered as a truth about reality.” In this case it clearly *does not* defeat itself: the statement claiming one cannot Know the Truth does not claim, itself, to be True; it claims to be true. Given that the truth is a best guess about Reality, but not Knowledge of Reality, there is no contradiction.

It thus becomes clear that pithy arguments which defend our pet definitions of Truth may make us look smart to a certain set of other Christians, but they show we have not understood the question being put to us. Hendrik Kraemer<sup>24</sup> states, “There is an obligation to strive for the presentation of the Christian faith in terms and modes of expression that makes its challenge intelligible and related to the peculiar quality of reality in which [people] live.” To be unaware of the peculiar definitions of truth and reality used within the postmodern worldview is to fail in our obligation to strive for adequate presentation of the faith. To be aware of them and refuse to accommodate them is to wilfully sow confusion, harming both ourselves and the hearers of our message. We must understand and – as necessary to our audience – embrace postmodern terminology if we are to be intelligible to postmodern spheres.

### **3.2 Different Assumptions**

Beyond simple definitions, further misunderstandings can occur when the wider assumptions underlying entire structures of thought differ. The following section illustrates one such example: telling the time. While the example is admittedly trivial it demonstrates that – objectively speaking –

23 Geisler 1998, 133-136. The capitalisation convention here is Geisler’s, not mine.

24 Kraemer 1938, 303, cited in McGrath 1992, 45.

postmodernity offers a better understanding in this case than modernity.

Both those promoting a universal notion of Truth<sup>25</sup> and those conceding that there are at least some things which can be Known with certainty<sup>26</sup> cite mathematics:  $2+2=4$ ; always. If one can Know that a particular claim is not only true, but True, then modernism would seem to find support, and MacIntyre's claim that, "No one at any stage can ever rule out the future possibility of their present beliefs and judgements being shown to be inadequate,"<sup>27</sup> would seem fatally flawed. The idea that 'two plus two always equals four' must therefore be considered. It is important, firstly because it is wrong and secondly because it sheds light on the nature of convention in communication, including communication of the gospel.

Mathematics is a formal system based on various axioms.<sup>28</sup> Such axioms cannot meaningfully be *proven* to be true as they are *defined* to be true. Using different axioms gives different answers, which are no less right or wrong, provided one works consistently within a given system. For example,  $2+2=1$  (using modulo 3). Alternatively,  $2+2=11$  (using base 3). By this simple disproof, it is clear that two plus two does not always equal four, and the correct answer depends upon socially agreed conventions. This is not merely an academic exercise, but goes to the heart of communication.

Imagine I plan to take a flight from Rome to Berlin, leaving at 11 o'clock on Saturday morning and arriving two hours later. In finalising my plans I send a message to my host: "I'll arrive on Saturday at 1 o'clock." This is true (for me), as  $11+2 \pmod{12} = 1$ . Unfortunately my host is German, and tells the time in modulo 24, where  $11+2=13$ . He will thus be standing in Berlin airport at 1 a.m. and not be pleased to find I will only arrive at lunch time. Hopefully, when I finally arrive, my host and I will simply laugh at the misunderstanding. However, if I insist that  $11+2=1$ , and that he (and all Germans like him) are either wrong or stupid for thinking otherwise, then I will probably lose my accommodation, and possibly my friend.

However sincerely I believe that  $11+2=1$ , if I am to communicate with Germans I must get into their worldview and accept that (given their

25 Geisler 1998, 42; Wilkin 2007, 4.

26 McGrath 1992, 115; Lewis 1995, 17-18.

27 MacIntyre 1994, 12.

28 Smullyan 1995 gives a good introduction to mathematical logic.

assumptions)  $11+2=13$ . This is true for them (and true for anyone who would adopt their assumptions). Moreover, needing to accommodate my communication to make statements which are true for my audience does not rely on my audience holding a postmodern view. My German host may be intransigent and absolutist, holding that the 24 hour clock is the *only* correct way to tell the time. This is more reason, not less, for me to hold on to 'my truth' lightly. If such a problem can arise in a topic as (ostensibly) absolutely certain as mathematics, how much more must one be aware of the potential difficulties in discussing 'goodness,' or 'justice,' or 'hope'? Granted, I can tell someone that their understanding of the word "goodness" is wrong, and that they should adopt my assumptions, but I need to be sure that this insistence is less arbitrary than telling Germans to use a 12-hour clock. From this example it becomes clear that in at least some instances it is not only helpful but absolutely necessary that evangelicals adopt postmodern thinking in order to engage with the world.

Having considered socially constructed aspects of mathematics, it is worth noting the related issue of what constitutes a 'rational argument.' If I wish to convince another person of my point of view, it is not most effective to use arguments which *I* would find convincing; I must use arguments that *they* would find convincing. If our paradigms differ, then our very assumptions regarding rationality may be incommensurate.<sup>29</sup> A statement which is rational in one paradigm may be rendered fallacious or meaningless in another. (In addition to the mathematics of German clocks given above, Section 3.3 considers this mismatch of rationality in general terms, and Section 4.1 considers the validity of circular reasoning). It may be that our claims – such as the message of the gospel – can be convincingly and coherently conveyed within our hearer's paradigm, even though we, ourselves, would find such a presentation neither convincing nor reasonable. It should not be necessary to first convert our hearers to our rationality so that we can convince ourselves, along with them, of our message. Irrespective of how fallacious I may find circular reasoning, if it is 'rational' and convincing within the paradigm of my audience, and allows faithful and effective communication of the gospel message, that is the reasoning I must use. My own assumptions regarding

29 See, for example, discussions in Kuhn 1970; Lakatos 1978; MacIntyre 1988.

what *should* be convincing (along with my assumptions of how to tell the time) must take second place.

### 3.3 Actual Disagreements

Some apparent disagreements can be solved by carefully assessing what the different parties mean (e.g. Truth/truth distinctions, discussed in Section 3.1). Some disagreements can be resolved by realising that there are different but equally valid ways to see the same situation (e.g. the 12 versus 24 hour clock, discussed in Section 3.2). Some disagreements can be resolved by all parties realising that one or other party is objectively wrong in their assertions (e.g. It is wrong that two plus two always equals four, as discussed Section 3.2). However, there are some differences which are rooted so deeply within systems of thought that they are very much harder to solve. The discussion of 'rationality' in Section 3.2 touched on this, and we consider it in greater depth here.

While various disputes may arise between worldviews, provided there is some common ground between these worldviews, there may at least be some considerable point of agreement on how to resolve such disputes. While a Pentecostal and a Methodist may not agree on an answer to a particular question, they might at least see what would constitute a meaningful answer, and how one might carry on a discussion about it. What, however, when one must decide between a rationalist worldview (such as enlightenment atheism, in which the law of non-contradiction is god, and enlightenment is achieved through reason) and an irrationalist worldview (such as Zen Buddhism, where paradox is key and enlightenment is achieved through rejection of reason)? It becomes difficult to agree on a meaningful question, let alone an acceptable answer.

A major rift between modern and postmodern viewpoints has already been alluded to, concerning the existence of Truth and the possibility of Knowledge: modernism accepts both, continental postmodernism rejects both, and Anglo-American postmodernism accepts the existence of Truth while rejecting the possibility of Knowledge. To some extent, disagreements of a fundamental nature are thus unavoidable. Without facing up to such fundamental differences, the two communities simply talk past each other, and meaningful discussion becomes almost impossible. Rhetoric and polemic

become the easier course, such that “Disputed questions are... thus treated... not as a matter for rational enquiry, but rather for the assertion and counter assertion of incompatible sets of premises.”<sup>30</sup>

However, even given such fundamental differences, there is still hope for engagement because in *most* cases the message a Christian wishes to convey does not hinge on such differences. In order to see this, it is imperative to understand (even if we do not agree with) the worldview of the person to whom we are talking. We can then attempt to see if their thinking is actually wrong, by which I mean, if it is directly counter-biblical. To answer this question, one must consider the entire worldview as the context for the claim, not simply the claim itself interpreted through our own worldview. The latter instance could only show that *our understanding* of the claim was counter-biblical, not that the claim itself was counter-biblical. Having considered their claim in context, it may well turn out that their view is not counter-biblical, but simply unpalatable to our way of thinking. If this is the case, it may be that the gospel can nonetheless be faithfully expressed within the worldview’s own terms.

To illustrate this situation (of wrong vs. unpalatable), there are those who not only hold modern paradigms, but claim that modern paradigms are prerequisites to becoming a Christian. Consider the view that, “evangelical methods must establish the existence and nature of Truth prior to declaring that Christianity is in fact True.”<sup>31</sup> One may ask, why? To evangelise a postmodern thinker one need not convince them that Christianity is universally True. One need only show that it is true for them! This may be unpalatable to modern thinkers, though – biblically – eternal life is “to know you, the only True God.” (John 17:3.) It is not “to Know *that* you *are* the only True God.”

Similarly, when John claimed, “I write these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life,” the modernist may interpret this to mean ‘Know’: a brute, propositional fact, rationally and logically sure.<sup>32</sup> A postmodernist’s knowledge, however, is not absolutely certainty. He may be certain enough to bet his life on it, indeed, to bet his eternal soul on it. He

30 MacIntyre 1988, 6.

31 Russell 2007. Capitalisation convention mine; that this reflects what Russell meant can be inferred from the rest of his article.

32 See, for example, McCune 2003; Wilkin 2007.

might even bet the lives of his children and grandchildren as he raises them to hold a belief that is worth living and dying for. But that is still not Knowing. The critical question is this: is such a view, such a confidence, such a faith, directly counter-biblical, or merely unpalatable to modern sensibilities?

#### 4. WORKED EXAMPLE: EVANGELICALISM AND NEW ATHEISM

So far, various barriers to communication have been highlighted. Section 2 clarified the meanings of certain potentially confusing terms and Section 3 considered potential causes of misunderstanding which arise from discussions between worldviews. I shall now consider a concrete situation with which evangelicals seek to engage: the refutation of new atheism, with particular reference to the relationship between science and Christianity. The underlying epistemologies form an important aspect of this debate. Various evangelicals are prepared to go some short distance towards postmodernism, though often the cry still goes up, “Postmodernism, but in moderation!”<sup>33</sup> In this section I shall argue that the problem evangelicals face in refuting new atheism is not that we have gone too far in embracing postmodernism, but that we have not gone far enough!

The failure to understand and differentiate between modern and postmodern arguments causes confusion and renders evangelicals incapable of meaningfully engaging with new atheism. Evangelicals must understand both modern and postmodern reasoning, and should consistently embrace postmodern reasoning.

##### **4.1 Foundationalism and Coherentism**

Although they were alluded to in Section 2.4, the discussion at this point requires a closer consideration of foundationalism (which is often adopted in modernist thought) and coherentism (which is often adopted in postmodernist thought). This will provide some of the background required to understand the present state of the science/religion discussion.

33 Taylor 1998, 178.

Foundationalism asserts that any claim to Knowledge is only justified when it can be grounded on some more fundamental claim or on basic Truths which are either self-justifying, or universally self-evident. Consequently these basic Truths do not, themselves, need to be justified; they are where the buck stops. On this view it is fallacious to have a train of reasoning which is either circular or which leads to an infinite regress; such arguments would be *unfounded* or *baseless*. (It is simple to see how foundational assumptions have crept into language.) By contrast, coherentism asserts that claims are justified if they are consistent and reasonable within a given framework of ideas. No claim need be particularly indubitable in and of itself, though as the network of claims grows it is deemed increasingly unlikely that a complex interlinking of ideas would be wrong, and yet coincidentally consistent. To illustrate the differences between these two systems in practice, let us consider deduction.

A deductive argument is valid if it is impossible for its premises to be True while its conclusion is False. Consider the argument of Ravi Zacharias:

- Premise 1: There can be no moral law without a moral-law giver.
- Premise 2: There is a moral law.
- Conclusion: Therefore there is a moral-law giver.

This is valid: it is *certain* that the conclusion is True *provided* the premises are True. We have demonstrated the existence of a moral-law giver (whom Zacharias equates with God) *provided* we can demonstrate the existence of a moral law, and the requirement by a law of a law giver. If Zacharias were to argue foundationally (as a modernist) he would say that the existence of a law giver (Conclusion) rests on more fundamental claims (Premises 1 and 2) which are self-evident. This, however, runs into problems when faced with the reasoning of Richard Dawkins:

- Premise 1: There is a moral law.
- Premise 2: There is no moral-law giver.
- Conclusion: Therefore there can be a moral law without a moral-law giver.

Equally troublesome is the argument of Thomas Hobbes:

Premise 1: There can be no moral law without a moral-law giver.

Premise 2: There is no moral-law giver.

Conclusion: Therefore there is no moral law.

There are several points which flow from this example. Firstly, we note that foundationalism (and with it, modernism) is in trouble; the foundations of Zacharias' argument are not as universally self-evident as one might hope. In general there is no way to frame an argument in a manner which does not, at some point, beg the question. Secondly, given that begging the question is necessary, and one can do no better than to produce a coherent (or circular) argument, a postmodernist is OK with circular arguments. Thirdly, on the foundationalist view, Zacharias' argument is watertight: there is no point discussing or even considering Dawkins' argument as it is simply wrong. By contrast, the postmodernist sees that it is possible for rational people to hold any one of these views; that does not make all three views True, but it does suggest that the best way of finding agreement may not be to repeat oneself loudly and call dissenters irrational.

Given the problems inherent in foundationalism (and by extension, modernism), difficulties should be expected if both new atheists (like Dawkins) and evangelicals (like Zacharias) attempt to argue from an essentially modernist position: they believe the facts they are presenting are universally self-evident, and are baffled when the other side cannot see the simple truth of their argument. This problem is not, however, immediately solved if evangelicals adopt a postmodern view: new atheists are likely to object to evangelical arguments both on grounds of content (as occurred when both sides were modernists) but also on grounds of style: coherentist arguments are simply not acceptable to foundationalists.<sup>34</sup> The worst possible scenario is that both evangelicals and new atheists walk into such a mine field using an ad hoc mixture of modern and postmodern thinking, blissfully unaware that a mine field even exists. Unfortunately, it appears that this is exactly what is happening.

34 MacIntyre 1988, 7.

## 4.2 New Atheism

The present protagonists of new atheism started with Richard Dawkins' *The Blind Watchmaker*.<sup>35</sup> The debate greatly intensified in 2007 when Sam Harris,<sup>36</sup> Daniel Dennett,<sup>37</sup> Christopher Hitchens,<sup>38</sup> and Richard Dawkins<sup>39</sup> each brought out major books on the subject. Of these, it was Dawkins' *The God Delusion* which most caught the public attention. New atheism sees science and religion as antithetical and necessarily so: science is the pinnacle of rationality; religion is the pinnacle of superstition. However, given that many theologians and scientists (both Christian and non-Christian) do not agree with the conflict model<sup>40</sup> it is important to ask, as Alister McGrath does, "how Dawkins and I could draw such totally different conclusions on the basis of reflecting long and hard on substantially the same world."<sup>41</sup> The answer is found not in science or religion per se, but in the philosophies that undergird their epistemologies.

The conflict model is predicated on a modernist philosophy of knowledge, as excellently articulated by Rodney Stark writing *On the Incompatibility of Religion and Science*:

"From [a religious] view, reason is at best unreliable, and at worst, sinful pride. Science, on the other hand, defines truth as that which may be demonstrated either logically or empirically." Thus "Clearly, the canons of Logical Positivism leave little room for religion to constitute anything more than humanistic ethics."<sup>42</sup>

Of course, the philosophy of science and of religion has moved a long way since logical positivism.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, given how neatly modernism lends itself to the conflict model it is no surprise that new atheists are (or try to be)

35 Dawkins 1986.

36 Harris 2007: *Letter to a Christian Nation*.

37 Dennett 2007: *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*.

38 Hitchens 2007: *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

39 Dawkins 2007: *The God Delusion*.

40 For a review of the history of the conflict model, and a careful analysis of how science and Christianity actually interact, see Brooke 1991. For a study of how scientists themselves view the interaction of science and religion, see Ecklund 2009.

41 McGrath and McGrath 2007, ix.

42 Stark 1963, 3.

43 For an overview of Logical Positivism and its current standing in the philosophy of science see Okasha 2002, particularly pp.7-94.

modernist in their reasoning. Despite this, the way science actually seems to work follows a more postmodern model.<sup>44</sup> In practice, then, new atheism performs a strange balancing act between modern and postmodern. This can be illustrated by comparing two arguments from Dawkins.

Dawkins proudly declares that he has no interest in engaging with, or even reading, the relevant (or to his mind, irrelevant) theological literature.<sup>45</sup> This apparently strange approach to argumentation – to actively ignore what the other side has to say – is not at all strange once one understands Dawkins' appeal to a modernist model. A modernist epistemology holds that its arguments are watertight. The shortest route to refute the infinite number of wrong ideas is to demonstrate the *right* one. Trying to understand why someone holds the wrong idea simply wastes time and detracts from the matter at hand, namely convincing them of the Truth. In this regard Dawkins consciously reasons as a modernist.

While he derides coherentism saying, “This seriously is an example of what passes for reasoning in the theological mind,”<sup>46</sup> he reasons (possibly unknowingly) in exactly this fashion. Thus, when discussing a Godless origin of life, he can say, “I will not be surprised if, in the next few years, chemists report that they have successfully midwived a new origin of life in the laboratory. It has not happened yet... although it did happen once!”<sup>47</sup> Put another way: God was not needed to make life because we can make life in the lab. And we must be able to make it without God because it originated without God. Which begs the question. Dawkins' reasoning is coherent (or circular) and there is no shame in that for a scientist: the problem comes when a coherentist conclusion (which is not unique) is mistaken for a foundationalist conclusion (which would be).

In response, evangelicals point out (and criticise) both sides of Dawkins apparently split personality, though generally without drawing attention to

44 There is, naturally, much debate and little agreement on exactly how science works. Influentially, Kuhn (1962) espoused continental postmodernism, while in later work (1970) he tended towards Anglo-American postmodernism. Lakatos (1978) lays out an archetypical view of Anglo-American postmodernism in science, while his friend and strongest detractor, Paul Feyerabend (2010), championed continental postmodernism. In any event, despite much lively debate, the discussion has broadly left modernism behind.

45 Dawkins 2007, 14-15.

46 *Ibid.*, 403.

47 *Ibid.*, 164-165.

the inherent contradiction. Thus McGrath<sup>48</sup> writes that Dawkins sees his own certainties as being “luminously true, requiring no defence” (which is modern), while he also “treats evidence as something to shoehorn into his preconceived theoretical framework” (which is postmodern).

### **4.3 Evangelical Response to New Atheism**

Following the publication of *The God Delusion*, the evangelical response was swift and wide-ranging.<sup>49</sup> However, many of the responses became caught in the same epistemological no-man’s-land as the new atheists they were trying to refute.

Like new atheists, evangelicals would dearly love to Know the Truth, and therefore see the attraction of the certainty that modernism offers. However, like new atheists, they swim in a postmodern sea. They therefore shift back and forth, one moment claiming that the coherentist arguments they use are acceptable, the next moment attacking new atheism for using exactly such reasoning. Alister McGrath,<sup>50</sup> for example, takes a postmodern view when he states, “Every worldview – religious or secular – ends up falling into the category of ‘belief systems’ precisely because it cannot be proved. That is simply the nature of worldviews and everyone knows it. It prevents nobody from holding a worldview in the first place, and doing so with complete intellectual integrity in the second.” However, he reverts to modernist mode when he objects that, “In the end, [Dawkins’ argument against God] is a circular argument, which presupposes its conclusions. It begins from the assumption that there is not God, and then proceeds to show that an explanation of God can be offered which is entirely consistent with this.”<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, John Lennox<sup>52</sup> at times embraces postmodernism: “At some point in the validation of every truth claim or hypothesis a leap of faith is an inescapable ingredient.” He even states<sup>53</sup> that, “science is faith-like in resting upon creedal presuppositions.” Nonetheless, he objects that “New

48 McGrath and McGrath 2007, xii.

49 The most high-profile responses include McGrath and McGrath 2007; Ward 2008; Gumbel 2008; Lennox 2009; Lennox 2011; McGrath 2011.

50 McGrath and McGrath 2007, 41.

51 Ibid., 31.

52 Lennox 2009, 62, quoting Haught 2008, 47.

53 Ibid., 63, quoting Smart and Haldane 1996, 92.

atheists' conclusion that there is no God and no design is forced upon them by their presuppositions."<sup>54</sup> This is true of new atheism, as it is of every other worldview.

If evangelical apologists are inconsistent in their adherence to modern or postmodern views, they sow only confusion. They tickle the ears of those who would agree with them already, while being accused of inconsistency (arguably correctly) by those who wish to reject their conclusions. Nonetheless, evangelicals often seem to flip flop between modernist and postmodernist camps: wary on the one hand of modernism's short comings, while longing for its certainty; wary of postmodernism's apparently shifting sands, while conceding that does fit well with how life really works. Lennox touches on a possible reason for this 'dual citizenship' when, despite his appeals to postmodern thinking such as those given above, he explicitly criticises postmodernism saying, "For my part I confess to finding it curious that those who claim there is no such thing as truth expect me to believe that what they are saying is true! Perhaps I misunderstand them."<sup>55</sup>

I would argue strongly that he *has* misunderstood them. The resolution of the 'paradox of relativism' has been outlined in Section 3.1, but bears repetition: there is no contradiction in the claim, "I know it to be true that one cannot Know Truth." Phrased alternatively, the claim amounts to saying "I am pretty sure that you cannot be absolutely certain what the universe is really like; on any given claim, including the one above, I may turn out to be wrong, but in the mean time I shall accept it as a good working hypothesis." In some cases that working hypothesis may be good enough to be prepared to bet your (eternal) life on it.

Given our "obligation to strive for the presentation of the Christian faith in terms and modes of expression that makes its challenge intelligible"<sup>56</sup> we cannot simply shrug our shoulders and be content with saying, "Perhaps I misunderstand them." If we do not understand them, they will surely not understand us.

54 Ibid., 64.

55 Lennox 2009, 13. Capitalisation convention his.

56 Kraemer 1938, 303

## 5. THE WAY FORWARD

There is already sufficient misunderstanding between modern and postmodern worldviews. Evangelicals cannot simply close their ears to the confusion and continue reciting the same pithy answers that were appropriate – that actually constituted meaningful answers – in another context, but miss the point of the argument now.

In the first instance we must strive to understand the discussion at hand: It is conceivable that all people who accept postmodernism, and all Germans who use a 24 hour clock, are idiots who speak all and only nonsense; It is also conceivable that we need to think a little harder, to learn how to put the message we need to communicate in a way that relates “to the peculiar quality of reality in which [people] live.”<sup>57</sup> God’s original message was successfully accommodated to the original hearers in Israel.<sup>58</sup> With God’s help it may just be possible to accommodate it to 21st century hearers. If it is possible, it is our responsibility to do so. We cannot shrug our shoulders and claim, “We didn’t understand.” This, however, will require more than simply cherry picking parts of postmodernism and bolting them bolt onto an essentially modernist picture. Rather it will require the coherent and consistent understanding of what postmodernism means within its own context.

Having done this, it may be that there are aspects of postmodernism which, rather than simply being “hermeneutically and spiritually wrong-headed,”<sup>59</sup> in fact illuminate the Truths of Christianity effectively. For example, far from an impersonal, rationalistic conception of Knowledge that modernism had hoped for, we find that, “At the foundation of every search for understanding and truth, including the scientific [and religious!] search, an ineradicable element of trust is present.”<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, postmodernism requires that we take a step of faith: reasoned, certainly; justified, possibly; but nonetheless, a leap into the dark. It may seem strange that it is postmodern science which is challenging evangelical Christians to accept that we know God exists, as we know everything else exists, by *faith*.

57 Ibid.

58 See Balsarak 2000 on accommodation.

59 Hafeman *et al.* 2001.

60 Lenox 2009, 62, quoting Haught 2008, 47.

Embracing a consistent postmodernism, however, will not solve all of the problems. As stated in Section 4.1, coherentist or postmodernist explanations are rationally unacceptable from a foundationalist or modernist view point. To make matters worse, in addition to the possibility of holding modern or postmodern positions, people may hold any inconsistent combination of views (as is done by new atheists and, to be fair, a good number of evangelicals). Fortunately, a consistent application of postmodernism is not weakened by such a mix: it does not require people to agree with it. As was seen with an intransigent German, we can hold on to our truth lightly, so as to best communicate the gospel to people wherever they find themselves.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Postmodernism is often viewed as standing opposed to, and being incompatible with, traditional evangelical Christian faith. It has been resisted by some evangelicals, or only inconsistently applied, as it weakens our claim to Knowledge of the Truth: while absolute Truth may exist we cannot Know it with certainty. However, many of the perceived problems arising from postmodernity stem from attempting to understand it piecewise and from a modern stand point. In order to meaningfully engage with people who hold a postmodern view, we must understand and evaluate their worldview from the inside. In doing so it becomes clear that aspects of postmodern thinking appear to reflect Reality more closely than modern thinking; postmodernism is thus worth adopting, not simply as a means to reach others, but on its own merits. Taking the specific example of an evangelical refutation of new atheism, engagement with the issues has been hampered by a failure to understand the philosophical underpinnings of the discussion. An unwillingness to consistently adopt a postmodern view has only aggravated the confusion. If we are to point towards the unique Truth (yes, Truth!) of Christianity in a way which people can understand, we are compelled to not only engage with, but accept, emphasise, and expound postmodern ideas.

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