

OUR NEW MILLENNIUM
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INTRODUCTION

There has never been a time like this! One could make that claim at any moment in history, for there is a uniqueness to every time. Our time, however, stands apart in several especially relevant ways.

Never before has the planet hosted so many people. The demand for food, shelter, transportation, and energy is at unprecedented levels. People today travel vast distances in short time spans. Life today bears little resemblance to that of any previous generation. For example, and in many ways this is an essential mark of the contemporary era, the collection and distribution of information is no longer controlled by the print media. Electronic information is a swirling mass of light and sound coded to human consciousness, and it assaults our senses almost constantly throughout the day and night.

We have electronic encyclopedias, electronic Bible concordances and reference tools, virtually instantaneous communication world-wide, and seemingly an international mania for elaborate fantasy in the form of multi-media entertainment (whether on the big screen or the small). Yet other than for a few Web pages here and there, the contemporary Evangelical church remains isolated as a haven of tradition. People normally come out of their world in order to attend church. To the extent that “their world” is one of fantasy and illusion, materialism and secularism, relativism and new age spiritualism, it is probably a good thing that they come out of it and encounter the real world at church.

Once in a while a pastor will decide to “bring the church up-to-date,” and he will inaugurate a new style of church, one supposedly designed to reach modern people. For example, our “new church” will be less confrontational, less structured, more flexible, more sensitive, and especially more contemporary.

Contemporary worship is less liturgical but more dramatic. Contemporary preaching is less oratorical and more conversational. Contemporary singing is less the harmonious recitation of theological poetry and more the musical repetition of simple praises.

So is this good or bad? Probably it is some of both, but that is not the point of this address. Whether we worship in contemporary or traditional styles is not the focus of this address. The fact that this massive cultural change is real, however, must strike us as worthy of some

attention. Those who are graduating from the Seminary today, whether here or elsewhere, are soon to find that the world into which we go to minister is experiencing a global transformation.

I have been to Moscow and Beijing, and I have seen the McDonald's hamburger stores there. Last January (1998) in Chaing Mai Thailand I ate Baskin Robbins ice cream and Burger King hamburgers, and bought cokes from the local 7-11 store. These economic changes are only the tip of the iceberg, however. Across the street from my hotel in Chaing Mai was an Internet Cafe and for a few dollars I could rent an Internet connection and send e-mail to my office staff or to family and friends here at home. We had CNN news on the hotel TV. I watched X-Files one evening and heard Mulder and Scully solve a mystery while speaking in Thai.

One Saturday Cindy and I took the typical tourist trip to ride elephants through a jungle trail. Our guide also wanted to show us the Buddhist Temple of the White Elephant on a nearby mountain top. After the visit, we were walking down the long stairway of several hundred steps to go back to our little van, and she was telling us about Buddhist beliefs. At one point, she said "I think the teachings of Buddhism and Christianity are very similar. Perhaps they are two different versions of the same religion."

Immediately I began to explain the differences to her, and the reality of the incarnation and the historicity of the resurrection were the points I pressed most strongly. Her reaction was one of sincere curiosity. No one had ever explained to her that Christians had a living Lord and a personal relationship with the Creator by grace through faith. We saw her later and gave her a New Testament which she promised to read.

The incident reminded me, however, of the task we all face in the modern world. Not only will many of us have the opportunity to witness cross-culturally (whether in short term or long term settings), but the word of testimony we give will face new challenges. To explain this more fully, let me review briefly a few things I am sure you graduates already know but that must be a part of our common understanding as apologists for the truth in today's world.

THREE WORLD VIEWS

As I seek to conceptualize the world of the human mind, I find three basic patterns of thought: three world views. First there is Theism; second, Naturalism; and third, Pantheistic Idealism (or New Age thought).

Theism

Christianity is the correct and only comprehensively viable version of the Theistic worldview.¹ By Theism I mean the conceptual model that recognizes two distinct and unique kinds of reality.

¹ Cf. William Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994).

One kind of reality is perceived directly by the human senses. It is contingent, temporal, spatial, and changeable. It is a combination of matter and energy formed into various configurations that can be structurally grasped and understood.

The other kind of reality is normally not directly perceived. It is an absolute, originating source of the reality that we normally perceive. It is the kind of being that is necessary in order to provide the structure and the fixed reference point for human understanding. It is the kind of being upon which a contingent universe could depend.

What makes this Theism rather than Classical Idealism? The essential difference is that the “necessary kind of being” in Theism is a single and unified reality that is known as a personal Being who is responsible for the origin, order, and continuation of the finite universe (which is the name we give to the first kind of being mentioned above). Classical Idealism may have mind (or ideas) as one kind of being over against the finite material world, but the Idealist does not posit a single, unified, personal, necessary Being who is solely responsible for the origin, and continuation of the material reality.

Christians claim that we know of the existence and nature of this Necessary Personal Being in two ways: (1) by inference from the perceived reality of the universe and (2) by special revelation. First we can recognize and grasp the contingent nature of orderliness in the physical universe, and we infer the necessity of an Orderer, an Intelligent Designer. We can observe the cause and effect system of the physical universe, and we infer the necessity of an original and a sustaining Cause. We encounter the existence of moral law within ourselves, and we see it in others, and we infer a moral character within the Intelligent Designer. Our intelligence seeks a greatest idea; our emotions react to religious experiences; and our will struggles with the requirements of conscience.

We may suppress each and/or all of these aspects of reality, but without deliberate suppression, each of these would lead the mind to a knowledge of the existence and nature of God.² Special revelation from that God also enables us to recognize instances of the suppression of truth (in ourselves and/or in others) and beyond that reveals new truths about God's definition and judgment of sin, His love for us, His plan of salvation, His provision of atonement, and His plan for the future. Christianity is verifiable, coherent, consistent, and relevant. It is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Naturalism

For much of our past, in the Western world at least, our alternative World View, the one Christians have struggled so mightily against, has been Naturalism.³ According to Naturalism there is only one kind of reality, not two; namely the finite universe of matter and energy. This

² Romans 1:20 says: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities--His eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” (NIV)

³ See Henry M. Morris, *The Long War Against God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

materialism is structured, but only by inherent principles. Natural laws are descriptions of physical and/or chemical interactions between particles of matter or aspects of energy, and these natural principles supposedly account for everything. There is no Designer or Intelligent Mind involved.

Naturalism has been the most successful of all philosophies in the modern world in terms of producing goods and services for people. Scientific technology has given us kitchen appliances; unprecedented means of mass transportation; information systems such as a radio, movies, television, and now computers; and incredible medical breakthroughs. Living off the inherited intellectual capital of Christian theism, Naturalism has propounded the theory that the truth is out there, and that it is found in scientific study alone, understood as a strictly naturalistic epistemology.⁴ The kicker has been that human life itself has been drawn into the fray.

If Naturalism is true, then human life must have evolved from non-personal matter, and reason itself must be a product of non-reason. Thus for strict Naturalism there is no ultimate basis for meaning, much less for truth claims. Phillip E. Johnson wisely named his second book *Reason in the Balance*⁵ as he presses home the case against Naturalism.⁶

Johnson is not only right (as was C. S. Lewis⁷ and a host of other Christian apologists) on this issue, but it seems as if Johnson and the many others who stand in this tradition are actually winning the battle. According to the Princeton Religion Research Center, their November 1997 survey showed that only 10% of the U.S. population thought God had no part in the process of evolution, and 44% held to a strict Creationist point of view. Naturalism is not only self-defeating as an intellectual exercise, but the empirical evidence continues to support the concept of Intelligent Design⁸ whether one is willing to adopt a full-blown Special Creationism or not.

New Age Pantheism

This, however, brings me to the real point of this address. What if Naturalism crumbles, as surely it must? Will we have only Christians on the one hand and confused people on the other hand to which to minister in the century ahead? Oh that such might be the case! The truth, however, is that as Naturalism falls, and pray that it might be soon in the providence of God, there is yet another World View alternative that seems poised to overwhelm the West. This so-

⁴ See David C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

⁵ *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law, and Education* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

⁶ See also Jon Buell and Virginia Hearn, eds., *Darwinism: Science or Philosophy?* Proceedings of a symposium entitled: "Darwinism: Scientific Inference or Philosophical Preference?" Held on the Southern Methodist University campus in Dallas, Texas, March 26-28, 1992. (Richardson, TX: Foundation for Thought and Ethics, 1994).

⁷ *Miracles* (New York: MacMillan, 1947).

⁸ See J. P. Moreland, ed. *The Creation Hypothesis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

called “New Age” spirituality is, in my view, the new and far more subtle enemy of biblical theism.⁹

I say “new” but it is only in the West that it is new. The new is actually the old. The opening scene of the Star Wars movie trilogy begins with the words: “Long, long ago in a far away galaxy . . .” This variation on “Once upon a time . . .” has a clear significance, however. The Pantheistic Idealism of the Star Wars movies¹⁰ is set forth as the ancient religion from which all others have come. Here in this ancient universe we have a powerful explanation of life, a technology that is not impersonal (even the Droids have ideas, feelings, and a form of consciousness), and a vibrant spirituality. In its corrupted form it could lead to paganism with its worship of idols. Pagan idolaters supposedly do not know that the spirituality they feel in the idol is simply a spiritual force that pervades all things in the Universe. In its ideal form it is a deeply mystical and powerful philosophy, one that roots itself in a natural life-force that gives Spiritual intensity to every aspect of life. The universe itself is divine. All life is divine life. All of us are one. All of us are God.

This “spiritual” world view is the basis of Eastern Religion in general but is most noticeable in the West as the common thread behind the New Age movement.¹¹ Virtually every major corporation in the USA requires their employees to take seminars on stress reduction, management training, personal relationships, leadership, or whatever, that are led by and are developed under the rubric of a mystical spiritualism that claims to be linking us to our inner selves and to one another.

So powerful is this transformation of consciousness that we find U. S. Presidents speaking of a “new world order.” The global economy has brought as many Eastern ideas to the West as it has taken from the West into the East. American movies now constantly portray angels or space aliens as people like us. They look different, but all life has life in common, and thus all life deserves respect. We are without exception told that we must learn tolerance of other views, other lifestyles, other cultures, for after all, our views (including our religious views) are merely cultural biases, and everyone is supposedly on equal ground at this point.

No longer is it “politically correct” to speak of distinctions between men and women or between ethnic groups. No longer are religious denominations relevant distinctions. Even the Protestant Reformation is seen only as a historical case of religious divisiveness. Most people today don't know or want to know what the issues were. The pressure today is to join everything together as one.

⁹ See John P. Newport, *The New Age Movement and the Biblical Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹⁰ George Lucas, Director, *Star Wars*. 121 min. 20th Century Fox, 1977; Ivan Kershner, Director, *The Empire Strikes Back*, 124 min. LucasFilm, 1980; Richard Marquand, Director, *Return of the Jedi*, 133 min. LucasFilm, 1983.

¹¹ Cf. Elliot Miller, *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989); see also David K. Clark and Norman L. Geisler, *Apologetics in the New Age: A Christian Critique of Pantheism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

In this new/old World View, there is no distinction between God and the World. They are one and the same. God is the world. The Universe is itself a divine being. Thus we can expect life to arise whenever conditions warrant and/or permit it. The “powers that be” have authorized and spent millions of our tax dollars establishing radio telescopes, listening to wide-band cosmic static in the hope that some pattern might be heard.¹²

We should realize, say the new age thinkers, that the divine is within each of us. We need a major ecumenical union, they say, not only among the Christian denominations but between Christianity and Buddhism. We are moving toward World Government through the United Nations. Evangelical Christians today face many in our modern world who hear the claims of the gospel of Christ as simply one more good part of the mix that all together will make up what they believe will be the truth, the whole truth.

There is, however, another option. There is a message unknown to most that we as Christians have been commissioned to proclaim.

ONE FINAL WAY

Jesus once said to His disciples, “I am the way.” His words were in response to a question by Thomas, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” The place to which Jesus had said He was going was the Father’s house, where He said He was going to prepare a place for the disciples. Thomas’ question, however, is not, in this case, one of doubt but rather one of sincere confusion. Where is this place of which Jesus spoke, and how would one get there.

To the Naturalist the question is one of geography, or at least one of navigation. To the New Age thinker the place is an intellectual or mental state where enlightenment might occur. To the Christian Theist, however, the place is in God’s presence. Through Jesus and through Him alone can we get to that place. We will not achieve it by our navigational skills or meditative techniques, but rather Jesus says He will come back for us and take us with Him to be where He is.

Salvation is all of grace; it is not achieved through human works. Salvation is not finally here in our current place, but it is in a place already being prepared for us. We will get there as Christ becomes our way.

Naturalists have no place except this current “energy condition” in which to live. They have no reason to believe except the “reason” of cause and effect chemical brain processes. Naturalists have no hope, because the energy flow from warm to cool is directional and finite. The end is inevitably coming, and it will be an absolute end. When the energy dissipates, all is lost. There is nothing here to offer anyone except meaningless death.

¹² As an aside, I cannot help but smile to realize that even the simplest static pattern would, in this case, persuasively lead some to the belief that intelligence produced it, thus confirming their belief in the existence of an alien civilization on some other planet; while the incredibly complex patterns found in nature here on earth (for example, in the cells of a human body) prove nothing to the modern evolutionists about intelligent design.

Our task as Christian leaders for the future, however, is to offer hope as a generation of naturalists face death. At the same time, the supposed “hope” that a new age mystical spiritualism brings must also be exposed for what it is: counterfeit.

Every pagan idea of the ancient world is being revised today. Goddess worship has appeared in the feminist movement. Fertility religions parade as alternative life styles. Idols today sit in temples all over the world receiving the adoration of millions. We in North America are an advanced society, yet every daily newspaper carries a Horoscope based on Ancient Babylonian Astrology. Moreover, the subjective philosophy of Descartes and Kant has reached its peak of influence in our day when even Evangelicals claim that all interpretation of Scripture is ruled by the subjective point of view of the interpreter.

Yet there is one final way. When Christ returns there will be a fair and absolute judgment. The truth will be known. Not every view will prove itself to be viable. Only Christ will be Lord, and He will be Lord over all.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I want to say three things. First, the issues of our new millennium seemingly will not be the issues of the Post-Reformation era. Our apologetic task up to now has been primarily directed toward the World View of Naturalism, and rightfully so; but Naturalism has no foundation except an increasingly mystical sub-atomic physics. It has reached an unexpectedly absolute beginning in time at the necessarily implicated moment of the impersonal, non-rational (and thus incredible) Big Bang. It has failed to substantiate a purely naturalistic psychology (through Freud made a gallant effort). William H. Calvin¹³ and Roger Penrose¹⁴ have added quite a bit more expertise to the subject than Freud had, yet their proposals also fail to account fully for the nature and existence of the human mind. Evolutionary theories simply do not match all of the evidence any longer. Naturalism is dying; but New Age Pantheism is well on its way to capturing the minds of movie-makers; and thus the inevitable impact on culture this will bring is going to be even stronger in the future.

Second, Christian Theism remains as the most consistent, most coherent, most verifiable, and most relevant of all the alternatives.¹⁵ Jesus is who He said He was. His life and teachings remain a standard of trustworthiness. His death continues to call attention to His life, and His sacrificial atonement remains a compelling story with the inherent ring of truth. His resurrection from the grave demonstrates the victory He achieved and offers over death.

Third, and finally, this gospel message remains as the only message that truly brings hope, that offers a real basis for meaning, that remains focused on the truth, and that offers a moral standard that is based on the true God's actual character.

¹³ *The Cerebral Code: Thinking a Thought in the Mosaics of the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

¹⁴ *The Emperor's New Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ Cf. Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976).

As Paul urged young Timothy (in 2 Timothy 4), I urge you graduates, young and old alike: Preach the Word of God. Do this when it is easy and when it is hard, when people want to hear it and when they don't. For the Word of God will correct, rebuke, and encourage us. Do this with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men may no longer put up with sound doctrine but instead will gather around them many teachers, many sources of information, saying what they want to hear. Nevertheless, dear brothers and sisters, keep your head in every situation. Endure whatever hardship comes. Do the work of an evangelist, and fully discharge all the duties of your ministry.

In this way must we all live in our new millennium.