Christianity in a Postmodern, Relativistic World

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Preliminaries

This is not a Bible study.

This is a study of your mission field.

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

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

Please bear with me...
Preliminaries

Anti-intellectualism does not glorify God.

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

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

Many Christians are needlessly afraid of learning.

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

I won’t do that.
Preliminaries

“Truth does not conflict with truth.”
– Aquinas

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

In this talk, I want to address two things.

(1) Why is there such widespread feeling that scientifically-educated people should not or cannot believe in God, even though there is no scientific evidence against God?
Aside: Why do people think Darwinian evolution disproves Christianity?

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

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

I think it’s a cultural prejudice, and we’ll get to that.
Key questions

The other thing I want to address:

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

Answer:
the modern educated world has
three rival intellectual cultures
(ways of thinking)

and most educated people are
catche between all three
without clearly understanding the difference.
Three cultures

PREMODERN

MODERNIST

POSTMODERN
Three cultures

PREMODERN
Authority and tradition
Preserve the wisdom of the past

MODERNIST

POSTMODERN
Three cultures

PREMODERN
Authority and tradition
Preserve the wisdom of the past

MODERNIST
Scientific
Reject the “superstitions” of the past

POSTMODERN
Three cultures

PREMODERN
Authority and tradition
Preserve the wisdom of the past

MODERNIST
Scientific
Reject the “superstitions” of the past

POSTMODERN
Opinions and tastes, not facts
No objective truth
Three cultures

Technical note:

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

That is not what I mean here.
Three cultures

Where did these 3 cultures come from?
Origins

PREMODERN
Centuries old
Nostalgia and fear during fall of Roman Empire

MODERNIST
French Enlightenment
Rise of science in the 1850s-1900s

POSTMODERN
Awareness of human fallibility
Late 20th century reaction against the arrogance of modernism
Three cultures

How do the 3 different cultures handle various things?
Morality

PREMODERN

Objective, Biblical and Aristotelian

MODERNIST

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

POSTMODERN

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

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

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

POSTMODERN
Believe what “works for you” but don’t
“impose” it on others
Law and justice

PREMODERN
Fortunately, law and jurisprudence are still mostly premodern!

MODERNIST
Less morality, more sociology

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

PREMODERN
All authorities are morally accountable to a higher authority

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

POSTMODERN
“Pluralism” with extreme emphasis on “tolerance”
Art, architecture, and music

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

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

POSTMODERN
OK to do traditional as well as innovative things
(if nobody likes it, it’s not art)
The study of literature

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

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

POSTMODERN
No specific “correct interpretation” of any text “Deconstruction” – internal contradictions
Knowledge as a whole

PREMODERN
A growing body of knowledge, much of it ancient

MODERNIST
Reject whatever isn’t “scientific”
(Assumption that people in the past were fools)

POSTMODERN
Knowledge is divided into compartments that don’t interact
Characteristic mistakes or fallacies

PREMODERN
“Whatever the ancients say is right”

MODERNIST
“Now we know it all”
(“Everybody in earlier times was foolish or ignorant”)

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

Which one is right?
Three cultures

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

But that won’t do.
Three cultures

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

Premodernism isn’t perfect.

(1) Tendency to ignore modern discoveries

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

Premodernism isn’t perfect.

(2) All truth is God’s truth.

Real knowledge glorifies God even if we haven’t had it very long.
Three cultures

Premodernism isn’t perfect.

(3) Inability to communicate with the modern world

(We can’t just retreat into a shell.)
Three cultures

Premodernism isn’t perfect.

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

Was everybody a better Christian 50 years ago?

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

Premodernism isn’t perfect.

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

Reactionary politics...
a “bah humbug” attitude...
even racism or other injustice.
Three cultures

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

The trouble with modernism:

(1) Arrogance

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

(3) Atheism (or narrow specialization?)

No room for God.
Modernism

Example of modernist propaganda:

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

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

Why aren’t scientists supposed to believe in God?

Because God doesn’t fit into the modernist cultural system.

Not because of any kind of proof that God doesn’t exist.
Three cultures

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

Not so postmodernism...
Three cultures

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

They will say anyone is mis-defining postmodernism.
Postmodernism

What’s right about postmodernism:

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

What’s **wrong** with postmodernism:

Absence of objective facts and values.

(Too *much* fallibility.)
Postmodernism

In the 1970s, many students were taught “ethical relativism” – “There is no objective right or wrong. People and societies get to make up their own moral values.”
Postmodernism

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

But consider...
Postmodernism

Problems with ethical relativism:

(1) Moral problem:

Do we have to let tyrants be tyrants?

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

Problems with ethical relativism:

(2) Logical problem:

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

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

Problems with ethical relativism:

(3) Practical problem:

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

Will you say I’ve done wrong or can you only say, “I’ll fight you for it”? 
Postmodernism

Today’s postmodernism goes beyond ethical relativism.

Not only claims of morality, but also claims of fact are relative.
No matter what you say, people can reply, “You say that because of your culture.”

(C. S. Lewis on “Bulverism”...)
Postmodernism

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

I reply:
Yes, but
objective facts can
overcome your preconceptions.

That’s why we call them facts!
Postmodernism

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

There are 2 possible arguments for tolerating dissenting opinions:

(1) **The truth is out there**, and we want people to be able to discover it by debating it. (Premodern/modernist position)

(2) **There is no objective truth**, so nobody’s opinion is objectively false. (Postmodernist position)
Postmodernism

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

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

So why is relativism supposed to lead to tolerance?
Postmodernism

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

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

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

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

How has postmodernism influenced modern evangelical Christianity?
Postmodernism

(1) (Good)

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

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

(2) (Bad)

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

(3) (Bad)

“Christianity-in-a-bubble” or “Bible-in-a-bubble”
– Putting everything in a mental compartment that doesn’t interact with what’s outside it.
Postmodernism

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

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

How do we communicate with the postmodernist world?
Postmodernism

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

When we say “Jesus is the Saviour” we don’t just mean “this is a religion I happen to like.”

It’s not like “I like broccoli.”
Postmodernism

Important points to get across:

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

Important points to get across:

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

Important points to get across:

(3) We are talking about objective facts, not just tastes or subjective experiences.
Important points to get across:

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

Important points to get across:

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

Important points to get across:

(6) We are not simply premodernists.
Three cultures

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

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