

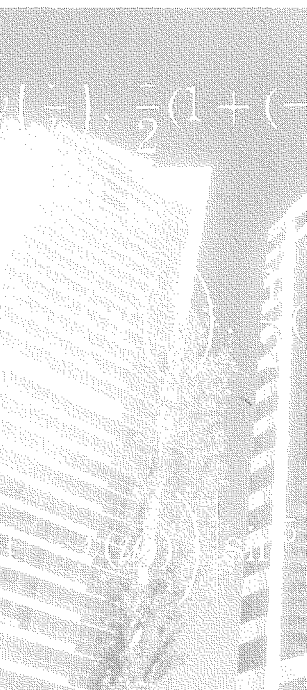
therefore I am. He then 'proved' the existence of God, and God became the guarantor of all other certain knowledge that could be discovered. From these certain principles he deduced physical laws and so on. Descartes still did experiments; it was not all in his head, but he was determined to make sure that his thoughts were absolutely beyond doubt.⁶

As it turned out, a lot of the physics that Descartes did wasn't all that successful. He concluded, for instance, that it was impossible for there to be a vacuum in space. So the method was not entirely reliable as a practical tool for things like science.

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The basic idea of modernism was that people believed science could solve most problems, and that with that tool humanity could understand all of reality.⁷ The modern era was an immensely optimistic time. Intellectually, people could be sure about what was true; scientifically, knowledge would grow all the time; socially, technology would conquer illness, there would be growing prosperity; in all, humanity was progressing triumphantly. The world was expanding; more exploration was taking place, and new countries and civilisations were being discovered all the time. This was seen as a triumph for the countries that 'discovered' them. These countries, by right of discovery, belonged to the colonial power, and increased its wealth and prestige. It was not such good news for those being conquered and subjugated—something postmodernists rightly remind us of. Western man was dominating the world and there was no reason to think that he would not continue to do so.

It was an optimism based on a strong feeling of *certainty*. The use of reason and experiment, the two main systems about how to reach certain knowledge, were both *foundationalist*. That is, they both started from certain knowledge, whether it was empirical fact or self-evident truths. There were things you could know for sure, through the experimental



method of science and the exercise of your own reason. These foundational truths were certain for everyone and for all time, and would give mankind a great deal of power.

Human reason and naturalistic principles began to triumph over the old, archaic systems of power. Revolutionaries such as Voltaire and Rousseau in France, and Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin in America, wrote treatises about the rights of man (women would come later) with a confidence in the future, and in the ability of political reform to solve problems. The title of Thomas Paine's book, *The Age of Reason*, sums it all up.⁸

What did modernism mean for religion?

In the early modern period, during the scientific revolution, God was definitely part of the picture. The Royal Society stated that it wished to demonstrate the 'power and wisdom, and goodness of the Creator, as it is displayed in the admirable order, and workmanship of the Creatures.' Indeed this kind of statement is very common in scientific writing of the time. Robert Boyle, for instance, seems to have been entirely genuine that his motivation for doing science was the glory of God. Isaac Newton included God in his cosmology.

What is frequently overlooked is the contribution that the Christian worldview played in the development of modern science. Professor Rodney Stark argues that the origin of science lay in monotheism and concluded 'science could only arise in a culture dominated by belief in a conscious, rational, all-powerful creator.'¹⁰ Stark's argument is that medieval scholars laid down a base of belief in an orderly universe created by an orderly God—a system of thought that provided the impetus for the search for physical theories of an ordered universe; the quest to describe it mathematically and strive

I had no idea that the men whose science I used day by day – Newton, Pascal, Leibnitz, and Boyle for example ... were among a galaxy of scientists who had a conviction of God's existence that resulted in a dedication of their lives to him.¹⁰

PROFESSOR ROY E. PEACOCK

to map these laws of the physical world.¹¹ Stark points out that of 52 noted scientific pioneers of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, more than half were strong believers in Christian faith, and less than four percent were religious sceptics. It is ironic that today many people believe that science and religion are naturally opposed to one another.

Gradually, however, in the story of modernism a problem began to appear. Part of demonstrating God's power in nature was showing what a perfect machine it all was; but if the machine runs perfectly well on its own, where is the need for God? Also as the eighteenth century went on, the social issues, such as resentment of clerical power (especially in France), coloured the debate. The intellectuals resented the political power that the church had, and wanted to see it cut down. It was no accident that the French Revolution was against the church as well as the aristocracy.

Pirates of the Caribbean (Motion picture) 2006

The swashbuckling adventure demonstrates our frustration with modernism. The 'point' of the movie is to demonstrate that modernism was wrong; that magic and superstition were real, and also much more exciting and valuable than nasty moneymaking modernism.

But in history, most would agree humans actually were much better off doing away with magic and superstition; the Enlightenment was actually a good thing. It's just that in doing away with everything supernatural it went too far, and removed a vital aspect of humanity and life—our spiritual realities.

So philosophically, a new kind of religion known as deism became more popular. In this system, God was gradually pushed away from his world. He was still there, as creator, but distant. He was not necessarily knowable. He did not intervene directly. Doubt was cast on miracles; they seemed a bit superstitious, a bit too supernatural. Since human reason and rationality were so important—and so demonstrably successful up to that stage—they became the criteria for religion. It was thought irrational to depend on revelation, with its supernaturalism. The best religion, it was thought, is that which can be deduced from nature alone. It was a natural religion, which consisted mainly of morality.¹²

Another development of modernism was the advances in historical criticism of the Bible. The philosopher David Hume had argued against the authenticity of miracles fairly early on. He said that a miracle was a very improbable event, by any standards of rationality. But since we know that humans are gullible and likely to be deceived, it is always more probable to assume that the witnesses were wrong, than that a miracle really happened. (This means that you don't actually have to examine the evidence at all; whatever it is, it's probably wrong).¹³

Around the middle of the eighteenth century publications began to appear which questioned the reliability of scripture. On the whole it was a sceptical movement, aiming to discredit the notion of scripture as inspired by God. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries historians became more self-consciously critical about their methods for reconstructing the past. This is not in itself a bad thing, but it was applied particularly ruthlessly to the Bible. The New Testament documents began to be described as 'myth'. This was not to say they were false, for people still believed that important religious truths were expressed, but thought that the gospels had to be divested of their 'mythical'

5. Modernism is characterised by a striving for control over the world through rational-technical means.¹⁵
6. It focuses on ascertaining appropriate methods. Knowing how to go about understanding the world is the key to getting that understanding right. Modernism champions science and the experimental method.
7. It is committed to the idea that what is true here and now is true everywhere, at every time.¹⁶
8. Through an inflated sense of the potential for human agents to control the world, many aspects of modern political, social and cultural life are thoroughly secularised (not regarded as religious, spiritual or sacred).¹⁷

SCEPTICS

'It's hard for me to believe that everything out there is just an accident ... [Yet] I don't have any religious belief. I don't believe that there is a God. I don't believe in Christianity, or Judaism or anything like that, OK? I'm not an atheist ... I'm not an agnostic. ... I'm just in a simple state. I don't know what there is or might be ... But on the other hand, what I can say is that it seems likely to me that this particular universe we have is the consequence of something which I would call intelligent.'

PHYSICIST EDWARD FRIEDKIN¹⁸

S > IMPACT

Modernism changed the Western world, and basically created the world of science and technology. People were hugely enthusiastic, and optimistic about the future. Think about what came out of the 'Age of Reason'—steam engines, industrial machines, factories, fast travel, instant

international communication, trains, cars, air travel, penicillin, anaesthetics—and that only takes us to the early twentieth century! It's no wonder that people thought human ingenuity could solve all the world's problems. It must have seemed as if suddenly all the old barriers to human progress were being overcome.

One of the most significant ways in which this affected society was the power it gave to science. Science was solving problems; science was giving the answers. It was a long time before people became aware that science and the technology it produced were also creating major problems (pollution, extinction of species, overuse of non-renewable resources, world-threatening weapons and so on). These are late twentieth-century realisations, for the most part. Until then, people were overwhelmed at the positive power of science, and it seemed that science was the answer to everything.

In many ways, people are wary of science these days. There is not the same respect for scientific pronouncements that there was, say, fifty years ago, when a man in a white coat could state that a washing powder worked and everyone believed it. It would appear that as a society we are more sceptical about the scientific endeavour. The devastation of two world wars, genocide in Germany and Rwanda, the atomic bomb and threat of nuclear devastation, and environmental degradation, have placed a huge dent in the confidence we once had in science and the modern project. Very significantly the failure of science and rationalism, on their own, to come up with compelling answers to the biggest questions of life such as where we find meaning and hope, has left us more cynical and questioning.

However we can still see the huge impact belief in science has on our society, particularly when it comes to God. Scientists are still seen in movies, on television documentaries and dramas, and in

The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.

CARL SAGAN
ASTROPHYSICIST¹⁰



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newspaper articles, as the rational, intelligent people who are most likely to be right. When it comes down to it, we still believe that science has the answers, in police work, in discovering aliens, in politics.

Modernism in action

Police dramas now focus on modern scientific methods of crime detection, tending to give much weight to the ability of evidence to get to the truth. Grissom on *CSI* is a thorough modernist. He thinks evidence never lies, and science can tell us the truth, always. In an episode of *CSI* the team of forensic police are on the case of a gang who have been responsible for attacking tourists just for the fun of it. Eventually a victim of these random assaults is beaten so badly, he dies. After solving the crime with their usual mix of scientific acumen and police instincts, Catherine explains that apart from the leader, the rest of the gang are all teenagers, apparently 'without a conscience'. Grissom believes that a culture of shamelessness is a contributing factor. 'A moral compass can only point you in the right direction, it can't make you go there', he says.

For a modernist like Grissom, what is it that would make someone follow a moral compass, pointing him or her 'in the right direction'?

CONTACT AND DEPARTURE FROM CHRISTIANITY

Christians agree with modernists in some ways, such as the belief that we *can* know truth about the world. The Bible says God wants us to know the truth, and he has created us capable of finding out truth—not just my view or your view, or some cultural perspective, but the real, objective truth. It's out there, and if we use our brains and senses and work at it, we can know something of reality.

Christians also agree with the scientific way of thinking. It's important to have reasons for what you believe. It's not good enough to accept a statement

RESPONSE

QUESTION



1. What would be a good slogan to sum up the underlying beliefs of modernism?
2. What is the significance of the fall of the Bastille and the fall of the Berlin Wall in measuring the age of modernism? Is the age of modernism truly over?
3. Which ten words would best characterise and describe the modern worldview?

DISCUSSION



- A. Why might modernism be described as being naively optimistic?
- B. In what ways might modernism and science be detrimental to a Christian worldview?
- C. In what ways might modernism and science be supportive of a Christian worldview?
- D. Is modernist scepticism regarding revelation and the supernatural still dominant in contemporary Western society? What does your experience tell you about this?