

MODERNISM

A Key Verse: *“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”* (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

Introduction

When we say something is “modern,” we generally mean it is something current, of the present or very recent times and reflects contemporary ideas and technology. The word comes from the Latin *modernus* from *modo*, “just now,” “in a certain manner,” from *modus* “measure.” By definition, everything has been, is or will be modern in its day. Horse-drawn chariots, for example, were once a modern means of military transportation but are now are considered part of antiquity. Rotary dial telephones were once a modern improvement over hand-cranked magneto phones but both are now considered antiques compared to digital mobile phones.

History Writing and the Worldview of Modernism

In history writing (historiography) the term “modern” has come to be used to define specific periods of time. This is unusual because every generation should be able to use the term “modern” of its own time. Historians, scientists, musicians, architects, artists and educators, however, have used the term “modern,” particularly in the past 100 years, to distinguish themselves and their work from all previous times as if to say they have finally arrived at the pinnacle of history once and for all. Artists made and referred to what they and critics called “modern art” to distinguish it from classical, romantic, Renaissance art, etc. Modern thus took on dimensions of substance and fixed meaning of a kind beyond its description of simply being contemporary in time.

History writers speak of the early modern period (ca. 1500-1750), the classic modern era (1750-1914/WWI) and late modern period (1914-1990). Some mark 1450 or 1453 for the start of the early modern period with Guttenberg’s printing press going into mass production and the publication of the *Mainz Psalter* (the Psalms).

In Study 22 on nominalism (theory there are no universals), we saw how the increasingly empirical focus on concrete and observable particulars and the abandonment of the wisdom of universal truth contributed to the rise of a worldview that is materialistic, man-centred and secular. The key nominalist thinker in the 1300’s was William of Ockham. His hard-edged nominalism opened the doors to the rise of reason as the ultimate “modern” criterion for meaning which came to the forefront in “The Enlightenment” or “Age of Reason” (ca. 1650-1800). Philosophy and science increasingly focused on material observation and intellectual reason as the only grounds and criteria for objective truth. Some considered the Bible beyond reason because its miracles could not be observed or proven in the present. John Locke was an English doctor and philosopher who defended the objectivity of the Bible in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and believed the cosmos was evidence of God’s existence (the cosmological argument). Many later philosophers like David Hume, however, continued to deny the existence of anything that can’t be physically observed and proven in the present, a nominalist view that has prevailed in modernism.

A 1789 end to the early modern period is suggested based on the beginning of the French Revolution and the upheaval it caused in western culture. It is credited with changing the power balances politically and religiously from monarchies and the church to popular democracy.

World War I marked the end of an era of great humanistic optimism in classic modernism during which many thought that people could solve all their problems by progress in physical and social sciences. Clearly, a world war is not the ideal solution to all human problems. WWI reopened deep questions about the state of the human race. How could people who were continuously improving themselves toward perfection through their own discoveries and efforts resort to their own mass destruction? The hideous thought of perfection through human engineering was a major factor causing WWII. The second war showed WWI was not “the war to end all wars.”

The 20th century saw the acceleration of developments in science, technology, transportation, literature and art that are in many ways the culmination of thought and research over the previous 500 years.

The Big Picture

In the big picture it is fascinating and ironic that the Bible opened the way to advanced learning and discovery for people who in turn rejected their roots in the Bible. The fear of the Lord *is* the beginning of wisdom and knowledge (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7). Compassionate caring and improving the lot of others are central to Jesus’ life and teaching. Where the Bible has gone in the west positive discoveries and benefits have followed. Many of the great discoveries in science have been and continue to be made by believers in God. As we noted in Study 22, the average education level of believers who attend church is higher than the average of those who don’t. How ironic that so many people who were set free by God’s truth and wisdom turned their thoughts against Him. Nevertheless, He still continues to bless people and enable countless good things to happen.

Our purpose in this study is to understand the worldview of modernism and its profound effects on people,

individually and collectively. Of course many discoveries of the modern eras benefit millions of people worldwide. Some aspects of modernism, however, have negative impacts on individuals, society and the environment.

Characteristics/Tenets of the Modern Worldview

A tenet is an idea or belief that is extremely important to a group that holds it. An interesting feature of worldviews is that not everyone who lives by their tenets has consciously examined them. This is particularly true of a worldview like modernism which has taken hundreds of years to develop. The characteristic and values of the worldview are often absorbed and lived out by individuals due to their overwhelming pervasiveness in the cultural environment surrounding them rather than by a conscious choice to embrace and develop them. By way of analogy, a fish may think all living things exist in water and never imagine the worldview of a bird because it has never lived in air, on the ground or anywhere but under water. The view of the world from the sky has never occurred to the fish. This, however, obviously does not mean the sky view doesn't exist; it does. The limitations of this analogy are that fish don't get to choose their worldview but we do. The following are some of the classic tenets and characteristics of the modern worldview:

- Reason is the supreme criterion of meaning.
- Mankind is supreme.
 - “Man is the measure of all things.” (Protagoras, 490-420 BC; how far back roots of modernism go!)
- Individualistic culture and ownership vs. group culture.
 - Individuals must achieve their own way.
 - Alienation of individuals to narrow peer or interest groups vs. multi-generational relationships.
- Humanism (philosophy and ethics based on human effort and reason vs. God and faith).
- Empirical.
 - Only the empirical is real, only what you can observe with your senses, see with your eyes.
 - Ironically, much of modernism is highly subjective because empirical reason cannot explain everything that is happening and it often leaves people without hope.
- Highly visual.
 - Trusts what is seen and places high value on appearance often favouring style over substance.
- There is no spiritual realm or Spirit. God does not exist nor does life after death.
 - God can't be seen or proven by scientific method.
 - Interestingly, physics and archaeology are constantly discovering facts proving the Bible.
- The scientific method is central to the discovery of empirical knowledge.
- Evolution explains the first cause by chance and subsequent natural selection even though it is impossible to prove evolution as a first cause by the scientific method.
- Continuous progress is inevitable.
- There is a solution to every problem.
 - We just need time to find it.
 - We find our own solutions and don't need help from God who doesn't exist anyway.
- Separation of facts from value.
 - Science discovers objective facts of what *is* but values about what *ought* to be are subjective.
 - There has been a divorce between *sapientia* and *scientia*, wisdom and science, the ability to use science wisely vs. destructively, doing things because we can vs. because they are wise.
 - Hard facts are more important than intrinsic values.
 - For example: being rich is good but the values and means of getting rich are not relevant.
- Capitalism and economic imperialism (the succession of geo-political colonialism).
 - Ignores whatever doesn't fit its own priorities such as love, humane treatment and the environment.
- More is better.
- Industrialism and mass production.
- Materialistic.
 - Materialism is the communion of society, what most tacitly agree is good.
- The “cult of the new.”
 - New is always better than old.
 - Constant restless striving for change.
- Favours its own art and culture (particularly in visual arts, literature, new music, etc.)
- Rejects the wisdom of the ages.
- History writing often excludes past events that don't fit modernism's worldview.
- Nationalism and secular liberal democracy vs. monarchy and church authorities.
- Secular: nothing is sacred.

Modern Individualism

Some characteristics of the modern self:

- Assumes an autonomy for self that rejects the claims of authority, tradition, or community.
- Moved from an emphasis on redemption of character to liberation from social inhibitions.
- Emphasises personality over integrity of character.
- Has an identity that is self-constructed through self-consumption of products of desire.
- Searches for the subjective experience of well-being.
- Truth, goodness and beauty are unattainable for most so are not essential in modern experience.
- Seeks technical mastery of the environment and division of public and private spheres of reality.

Adapted from Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live as if God Doesn't Exist* and Stephen Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS	MODERNISM
<p>God and Spirit: “<i>God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth</i>” (John 4:24). “<i>Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty</i>” (2 Corinthians 4:17). God exists. Jesus is fully divine, human and Spirit.</p>	<p>There is no spiritual realm. It can’t been observed empirically so it doesn’t exist. Many moderns are raised a-spiritual and can’t conceive of anything spiritual. (Physics, however, is discovering there is really no boundary between the physical and metaphysical.)</p>
<p>First Cause/Origins/Evolutionary Development: “<i>In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth</i>” (Genesis 1:1). God created the universe and everything in it. Genesis chapters 1-10 also show that nations and races evolved from small family/genetic origins, a fact with which science agrees.</p>	<p>The universe is a result of chance and evolution. Evolution as a first cause persists even though it can’t be proven by scientific method. (Interestingly, science has discovered a relatively small gene pool source for modern <i>homo sapiens</i>.)</p>
<p>Mankind: “<i>Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness’</i>” (Genesis 1:26ff). People are spiritual beings God made in His image.</p>	<p>People are the result of evolution and natural selection. They have no souls and no eternal existence.</p>
<p>Death and the Spirit in Eternity: “<i>the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it</i>” (Ecclesiastes 12:7; cf. James 2:26). At death the body ceases to live and the spirit returns to God’s eternal spiritual realm. God will give His people resurrection bodies (1 Corinthians 15).</p>	<p>There is nothing beyond death because there is no spiritual world.</p>
<p>Study and Discovery of Meaning (Epistemology): “<i>The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom</i>” (Psalm 111:10; cf. Job 28:28; Proverbs 1:7); “<i>The sum of Your word is truth</i>” (Psalm 119:160a); “<i>Come now, let us reason together,</i>” (Isaiah 1:18); “<i>Seek and you will find</i>” (Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9); “<i>that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made</i>” (Romans 1:19-20); “<i>I am the way, the truth and the life</i>” (John 14:6). God reveals truth through His Word and reason with Him. His work is seen in the natural world. God created the mind and the ability to reason but not for the purpose of ignoring Him.</p>	<p>Reason is the supreme criterion of meaning. Observation is the only reasonable means of discovery.</p> <p>Since reason can’t explain everything, however, much of the modern worldview is highly subjective. As we will see in Study 24, postmodernism often manifests itself in highly subjective and personal self-definitions of meaning, particularly in its emphasis on personal stories (narratives) and the rejection of one big-picture story (meta-narrative).</p>
<p>Ethics, Knowing Right and Wrong: Ethics are based on the character of God and His commands which ultimately flow from His character: “<i>You shall be holy, for I am holy</i>” (1 Peter 1:16; Leviticus 19:2). “<i>God is love</i>” (1 John 4:8, 16); “<i>This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you</i>” (John 15:12).</p>	<p>Ethics are human in origin and constantly change depending on liberal democratic preference and individual “rights.”</p>
<p>History & Nations: God “<i>made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation</i>” (Acts 17:26; cf. 1 Timothy 14-16). God is sovereign over history and nations. His history writing shows the good and the flaws.</p>	<p>Mankind is supreme in all its affairs and nations often exercise control (hegemony) over other nations. History writing frequently leaves out dimensions of real life events that don’t suit the purposes of the history writers or political power structures within which they write and rewrite.</p>
<p>The Future: God is moving history forward to the return of Jesus and His new heaven and earth for eternity (Revelation 21-22).</p>	<p>Whatever happens is the result of chance and individual human desire, control and intuition. There is no eternal plan.</p>