Tonight, I'm going to take you through a basic overview of the evolution of the cultural phenomenon we call post-modernism. This will involve a fair bit of history – mainly because I'm an historian, I suspect. And it will involve a lot of philosophy – mainly because I'm also a theologian, which is actually a Goddy type of philosopher. Still, I hope this will all prove very beneficial. I want to stress that my talk is largely diagnostic – I'm telling you what postmodernity is, and how it came about. I'll discuss how to respond to it towards the end, but that's not really the purpose of my talk.

The Middle Ages, and Universals

To begin with, post-modernism evolves out of the last place you'd look: medieval scholasticism. In fact, it evolves out of one of the last parts of medieval scholasticism that you would want to look: the debate about *Universals*. Universals became a very big deal in the High Middle Ages. They are also one of the hardest philosophical points for people today to understand, or to appreciate (including Matt!).

The issue of Universals actually began in the time of Plato and Aristotle, but didn't have much social impact until the rise of the medieval scholastics. Universals are the things that a group of something *must* have in common, what is *universal* in all of that grouping. All cats share the universal of "furriness", for example – if a cat wasn't furry, it wouldn't be a cat.[1] Plato argued that each universal had a higher existence above and outside those things that contained that universal property. A higher "Furriness", "*the* Furry", exists above and beyond all things furry: they participate in "Furriness" – otherwise how can you quantify some things as more furry than others? This became known as *realism* – that there is a *real* universal that defines all those things that share in that universal, by which they can be measured.

Nominalists disagreed, arguing instead that universals are just an arbitrary *name* given to the qualities things share – each cat, or dog, or mouse that exists is its own individual entity, and the universals it shares with other things are incidental.

Realists emphasise the communal similarity (even uniformity) of things, while nominalists emphasise the individuality of things. It's worth recognising this isn't black or white, but a matter of degrees – most people are actually realists to some degree (you might not see how yet, but wait), it's just some are more nominalist than others.

All of this might sound rather pointless when talking about cats and "furriness". But what if

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1   I know, I know, the cat could have all its fur shaved off and it still would be a cat, but hey, work with me here...

we change that to humans and some of *their* universals – like, say, dignity. Is dignity just an arbitrary name for something we incidentally apply to all human beings? Or is dignity an intrinsic reality that exists independent of humanity, that cannot be destroyed, and is shared by everyone?

As Christians, we claim all people have the universal of *deity* – not that they are all gods, but that they are God's image, and thus share aspects of *The* Universal, God Himself. Nominalists deny that.

And what of the qualities of God Himself – goodness, mercy, honour, etc: are these universals that *describe* God? If so, then these aren't real, in the sense of being intrinsic to God's identity. They are merely names we give for God's characteristics. Names are what WE give things, not necessarily what they intrinsically are. In this sense, nominalists imply that we tell God what He's like. Bernard of Clairvaux, arguably the greatest theologian of the early medieval period (before Thomas Aquinas), adamantly attacked nominalism. In Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, he gets really angry about the whole thing:

> Add to this that the Bridegroom is not only loving. He is Love...Love needs no cause, no fruit beside itself... Love is a great thing; as long as it returns to its beginning, goes back to its origin, turns again to its source, it will always draw afresh from it and flow freely... But the Bridegroom's love, or rather the Bridegroom who is Love, asks only the commitment of love and faith.[2]

Bernard is having a go here at one of the leading philosophers of the day, Gilbert of Poitiers, who was much more nominalist than Bernard. Bernard had already by then ripped into another person with a more nominalist approach, Peter Abelard. In the end, he warns his monks, "Keep away, beloved, keep away from those who teach innovations, who are not logicians but rather heretics!"[3]

And, what about atonement? Are we all just individual entities, and "humanity" is an incidental quality we all have coincidentally? Or is it something intrinsic that all of us share, and that thus Somebody, Who is our Universal, can represent on our behalf, can atone for? It's no coincidence that a more nominalist scholar like Abelard was the one that emphasised *subjective* atonement, whereby we are angry at God, not Him angry at us – after all, in a more nominalist scheme, there's nothing that we all share and that Jesus represents that He can die for.

Contemporary implications

In the end, Abelard lost the battle, but he won the war. Over time, Bernard's realist position would

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2   "Sermons on the Song of Songs", 83.IV.6 in Bernard of Clairvaux, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (ed. Gillian Rosemary Evans; Classics of Western Spirituality; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987).

3   "Sermons on the Song of Songs", 80.IV.6, in ibid.

be more and more dismissed, and instead, people came to take the nominalist position. Modernity, and subsequently post-modernity, is actually a highly nominalist culture – moreso than almost any culture in history. There is still an element of realist philosophy within it, but it is rather heavily pushed down at points. This most obviously comes out in our sense of privatism and individualism and relativism. How? Well, let's look at each one?

Nominalism is all about *individualism*, about us each being individuals – any property that we all share is entirely arbitrary, not intrinsic. Those properties are only delineated for convenience, not because we actually "own" them. The emphasis isn't on what (or more pointedly "Who") unites us, but on us being separate entities. This leads to *privatism*, because separate entities can decide what they want for them, in their own private realms. They have no Higher Reality that they need to answer to.

And this leads to *relativism*. If we are all individuals, unaccountable to a Higher Reality, then universal properties are not "set in stone" by that Higher Reality. Thus, those can change. That also means *morals* – the expectations placed upon all of us – can change. Morality becomes merely the name we all conveniently agree on for a social construct.

You see this all the time, in the way that Christians discuss moral change (or at least *should* discuss it) compared to non-Christians. Where a moral changes over time – say, the role of women – Christians seek to find out if the Bible always had that moral position, but we were too blind to see it. For the role of women, we look at Biblical passages like Romans 16, or the narrative of Deborah, or Jesus' female disciples, or try to understand better (*not* "reinterpret", which is about changing meaning, "renaming") a passage like Ephesians 5. Why? Because we see a Universal revealing Himself, and His expectations for ourselves, through an external constant, the Bible, outside of fad or fancy.

The nominalist, the relativist, doesn't need to to do that. They see the morals as merely a convenient label for something that we decided to agree upon. So when we all want to change the label, we can. When we democratise morality, we're being nominalist.

Now, inevitably, there's elements of both of these. Science is built on naming things, but also agrees that things are constant, and to some extent intrinsic. In terms of social philosophy, we HAVE to admit that sometimes God's will is unclear, and so we take the best collective guess we can. But the undercurrent, the motivation behind it, is what matters: are we looking to the Universal to define what we all are, and what we all should do? Or are we deciding, naming our own arbitrary delineations, based on convenience?

Now, that's the hardest part of tonight. Rest back in your chair for everything else. Most of the rest is about another part of post-modernity – a disjunction, suspicion, even repugnance, for history. This is partially because history is about previous "meta-narratives": that's the stories of how "everything" works. Christianity is a meta-narrative, precisely because of its realism, its recognition of Universals – we believe "everything" was made by the Universal God for His purposes.

Strangely, sometimes Christians themselves fall into this: not so much denying the overall meta-narrative of God creating us, but that antagonism of history. This particularly came out in the 1990s. In fact, right then, some missiologists seem downright proud of it:

> … we are on our way – or need to be on our way – to something new…. It will not be a matter of simply tinkering a bit with the form of the church that we have on our hands. What is called for under the present circumstance is much more thoroughgoing than that. It is "re-" work that we need to do: "revisioning" or "reinventing" the church.[4]

So, why do we hate history so much? Not just wider society, but Christians as well?

The Reformation

This helped bring about our antagonism to history in two ways. Firstly, it was interpreted by many people as telling us that the past we'd had, especially the Church during the medieval period, had been bad. Such a view became particularly prevalent among more radical Christian groups, like the Anabaptists – from which much of our current ideas about Church spring, especially in Baptist, Church of Christ and Pentecostal circles.

The technical term for certain aspects of this is primitivism – the idea that we could somehow get back to the "good old days" of the Early Church, and that everything since then has been a corruption of that.

> Primitivism has contributed to the evangelical bias against history. Because beginnings are always pure and a return is always possible by definition [in primitivism], the intervening history is seen as a matter of corruption and decline. We create the illusion that we can easily build anew and escape history and historical forces at will.[5]

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4   E. Dixon Junkin, "Up from the Grassroots: The Church in Transition," in George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 310.

5   Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Hourglass, 1994), 43.

The problem with this was, in doing that, we created a suspicion of previous narratives. Most societies have always been suspicious of *new* narratives, preferring to "trust the tried and true". Of course, in some ways, this was great, because it promoted scientific discovery, especially going into the next period. But it also meant we lost important "landmarks" in our past – not because they weren't any good, but because they were simply from before the Reformation "fixed" everything.

The Enlightenment (Modernity)

And of course, the Reformation didn't fix everything. Because it was defined around being "Protestant", it created hyper-Protestantism, a sense that you are never able to define yourself outside of being *not* like somebody else. This accelerated nominalism – how?

While this happened all across Europe, let's just focus on the English. England had had a civil war, in which they eventually deposed and executed their king for "treason". They had then tried living as a "theocratic" republic "Commonwealth" for about a decade, during which time the nation had seemed to go insane. They had then promptly eaten humble pie and asked the king's son, King Charles Stuart II to come back to rule them – while Charles was keen for religious tolerance (being a secret Catholic in Protestant England will do that...), his parliament wasn't so keen. Christians arguing with themselves had destroyed England, not to mention had killed his dad. The Stuart kings only lasted for a few more generations, before the very Catholic King James Stuart II was ousted in the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. And even though the new king, William of Orange was Protestant, he wasn't going to push for passionate religion, because he had seen that even if a king *was* keen about Christianity, "enthusiasts" (the Puritans, mainly) would still complain about *something*. They were too *Protestant*.

And if you think from the point of view of the commoners, they had gone from being Catholic with Henry, to kinda Protestant after his divorce, to totally Protestant with Edward, to totally Catholic with Mary, to the somewhat relativistic *via media* with Elizabeth which was a blissful 40 years, to Puritans making life hell for the Charles and James Stuart, to being a republic (something nobody but the Swiss had ever tried successfully) and going nuts. Then, a Protestant Stuart, then a Catholic Stuart, and now another Protestant king again... All that change over about 160 years!

On the Continent, the Catholics were still arguing with the Protestants, the Lutherans were arguing with the Swiss Reformed, the Swiss Reformed Calvinists were arguing with the Swiss Reformed Arminians, the Catholic Jesuits were arguing with the Catholic Jansenists (about the same thing the Calvinists and Arminians were arguing about down the road), the Anglicans were arguing

with the Presbyterians, who were also arguing with the Baptists, the General Baptists were arguing with the Particular Baptists (about Calvinism and Arminianism), etc, etc, etc. Even when they weren't physically fighting, it seemed like Christians just always fought.

And every religious change had brought about a change in worship on Sunday, what was worth dying for theologically, what made you a heretic, how you should pray, what you should read, what you shouldn't read, what would send you to hell, what would send you to heaven, etc, etc. What would *you* do?! Would you be able to believe any more that there's a real God, Who you can be sure shares intrinsic properties – that none of us can agree on?

In 1726, Jonathan Swift wrote his book "Gulliver's travels", in which two nations, the peoples of Lilliput and Blefescu, fight over which end to eat a boiled egg from (the round or pointy end). This was a direct satire of the religious debates surrounding the end of the Reformation.

Also in the mid-1700s, western society began to question many previous assumptions, especially the supernatural, and significantly, narrative. Instead, science and objectivity were valued.

> Enlightenment culture put a premium on facts… Values and religious beliefs were regarded as the realm of the superstitious and subjective – that is, the unprovable – and thus necessarily relegated to the private sphere. Faith and knowledge were held to be irreconcilable. This schism in modern culture is yet to be healed.[6]

Christians dived into this with wild abandon, especially by the 19th Century. The most notable example, is the way we view the purpose of Scripture. Scripture became less about narrative, and more about *doctrine*. We see this in the famous "Princeton School" of the late 19th Century. For example, in his *Outlines of Theology*, which is basically a summary of all the teaching he and his father gave to people at seminary and at churches, Princeton theologian, AA Hodge, states:

> Theology, in its most general sense, is the science of religion. The Christian religion is that body of truths, experiences, actions, and institutions which are determined by the revelation supernaturally presented in the Christian Scriptures. Christian Theology is the scientific determination, interpretation and defence of those Scriptures... [This book is a summary] of the special sciences devoted to the discovery, elucidation, and defence of the contents of the supernatural revelation contained in the Christian Scriptures, and aims to present these sciences... Theological Methodology is the science of theological method.[7]

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6   George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, *Church Between Gospel & Culture*, 70.

7   Archibald Alexander Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (2nd Edition.; Multiple Editions, 1880), 15.

The amount of references to theology as science in this work are too numerous to mention (but not to be astonished by!). This emphasis upon theology being all about the Bible (do you notice that God is not mentioned once in his definition of theology!?), and scientific method was aimed to make Christianity more tenable amidst the attacks that liberals were sending against it.

Few things show this better than the theology they developed about the Bible. Princeton argued vehemently that the Bible is inerrant, that is, factually accurate at every point, and that this is the source of its authority. They also denigrated the emphasis upon the human writers of the Bible – it was God's word, not Paul's or Luke's. Hodge famously declared, "the Bible is His (God's) storehouse of facts".

This elevation of science and reason all hurt history in two ways: firstly, the past was often caricatured as having been naïve and superstitious, and thus to be discounted even more than during the Reformation. Secondly, the idolisation of objectivity made the use of narrative as truth (telling the story) seem ridiculous – history became about facts and dates, not stories (which subsequently also made it boring!). There is of course an irony here: modernity was itself built upon a story – that the past had been stupid, but the moderns had figured it all out.

This emphasis on fact, on science, raised other "norms" for our culture. Firstly, Materialism. This can mean several things. It can mean wanting lots of material things (as is the case when we often use the term today). But it used to be more broadly applied to simply an emphasis and reliance upon the *material* "what can be touched", rather than the spiritual or "ethereal". The "materialist", in the 19th Century sense of the word, inherently dismissed the possibility that there could be anything spiritual at all. This is the antagonism we often have sensed towards "spirituality".

Instead, intelligence and technology were valued more highly than spirituality. Obviously, smart people had generally always been valued. But a genuine shift did occur, because now intelligence and education were seen as the way of getting people out of the mess they'd found themselves in. The other was this sense of technologism, particularly after the Industrial Revolution began. For them, it was the telegraph, the internal combustion engine, the railway. For us, it's tvs, computers, the internet. But underlying both is a sense that "we have the technology" to do good and improve the quality of life. Christians jumped on this bandwagon emphatically. For example, the "great" 19th Century revivalist, Charles Finney, redefined the methodology of revival to be more technological.

In 1835, he wrote is highly influential "Lectures on Revivals of Religion" which stated from the very start:

> A miracle has been generally defined to be, a Divine interference, setting aside or suspending the laws of nature. It [revival] is not a miracle, in this sense. All the laws of matter and mind remain in force. They are neither suspended nor set aside in a revival... There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists in the *right exercise* of the powers of nature. It is just that, and nothing else...[8]

Finney will concede that none of this happens without the blessing of God, but also strongly insists that conversion is merely the convincing of people through rational means. He goes on:

> … there has long been an idea prevalent that promoting religion has something very peculiar in it, not to be judged by the ordinary rules of cause and effect... No doctrine is more dangerous than this to the prosperity of the church, and nothing more absurd... [Terrible] results will follow from the church's being persuaded that promoting religion is somehow so mysteriously a subject of Divine sovereignty, that there is no natural connection between the end and the means.[9]

What this meant was that Finney established several ***tech***niques for ensuring people would come to believe in Jesus Christ. Some theologians were quick to realise this was actually unChristian. But most of us bought smoke machines and started playing soppy music when we did an altar call, just in case God didn't show up.

Technologism is actually the merging of two ideas – mechanisation and newness. Increasingly, everything needed to be thought of in mechanical terms, and not just machines – the world began to be seen as mechanical, social structures like business, government, and even church were made to work like machines, even for "open system" churches like the Baptists.

> As wealth increased, so did expectations, especially in large urban congregations. Men of affairs required churches to be organized on businesslike principles, with careful management, annual reports, and audited reports. At one Scottish Baptist church, Hillhead in Glasgow, the deacons were actually called "managers". Church meetings, where decisions were taken on policy matters, turned into business conferences, often run, especially in America, according to the formal rules of debate. The aim was no longer to reproduce the pattern of the earliest church but to imitate the methods of a modern corporation.[10]

Some people will of course claim that we are in a new era, post-modernity. While that is certainly true in *some* senses, we have to ask – have *any* of the descriptions of modernity described above

8   Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: www.ccel.org, 1868), sec. 1.1.1–2.

9   Ibid., sec. 1.1.3.

10   David W. Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 189.

dissipated? Many social analysts now describe our era not as post-modernity, but hyper-modernity! There are of course examples of anti-modernity today, but these have always been around in some form – the cultural term "romanticism" is often used for the examples of this from the 19th Century.

Still, something *did* happen in the 1960s, that seemed to be at least a suspicion of some of modernity's promises.

Post-modernism (1960s)

In 1964, Bob Dylan wrote a song:

1. Come gather 'round people
   Wherever you roam
   And admit that the waters
   Around you have grown
   And accept it that soon
   You'll be drenched to the bone.
   If your time to you
   Is worth savin'
   Then you better start swimmin'
   Or you'll sink like a stone
   For the times they are a-changin'.

2. Come writers and critics
   Who prophesize with your pen
   And keep your eyes wide
   The chance won't come again
   And don't speak too soon
   For the wheel's still in spin
   And there's no tellin' who
   That it's namin'.
   For the loser now
   Will be later to win
   For the times they are a-changin'.

3. Come senators, congressmen
   Please heed the call
   Don't stand in the doorway
   Don't block up the hall
   For he that gets hurt
   Will be he who has stalled
   There's a battle outside
   And it is ragin'.
   It'll soon shake your windows
   And rattle your walls
   For the times they are a-changin'.

4. Come mothers and fathers
   Throughout the land
   And don't criticize
   What you can't understand
   Your sons and your daughters
   Are beyond your command
   Your old road is rapidly agin'.
   Please get out of the new one
   If you can't lend your hand
   For the times they are a-changin'.

5. The line it is drawn
   The curse it is cast
   The slow one now
   Will later be fast
   As the present now
   Will later be past
   The order is rapidly fadin'.
   And the first one now
   Will later be last
   For the times they are a-changin'.

What was Dylan trying to get at? This song was written, largely in response to a disenchantment with the promises of the past. The technological utopia that Enlightenment modernity had promised, from about the late 18th Century, had severely come unstuck. The rise of technology, including advances in medicine, transport, communication, food production, and industrial output had all seemed so wonderful. But then when World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II had all hit, that was the end of such high hopes for modernity.

Where did this leave the Church? Well, it left us in a bit of a quandary. First of all, by now,

as we saw before, the Church had allied itself powerfully with modernity. Thus, we were commonly seen as one of the things the post-modern teens of the 60s wanted to run away from. Most of the time, they were led towards either nominalistic atheism, or if they wanted "spirituality", they didn't even consider the technological, scientific, structured Christendom in their churches as spiritual – they went and gave eastern religions a try, especially in the hippie movement.

But not *all* Christians were like that. Billy Graham said this at a youth rally as part of his 1969 New York Evangelistic Crusade (in which he preached the gospel to over 2 million people):

> But you know, today's youth is the first generation to grow up with modern parents. This is the first post-modern generation; and when they reached the age of awareness, they found waiting for them the jet airplane, the nuclear bomb, the television set, the computer, the pill, the space capsule… Most of all they entered a life where science was supposed to be transcendent. So this generation of young people have grown up with affluency, technology, rapid social change, and violence... And they've grown up with a system of education, part of which came from right here in New York City at the turn of the century, an experiment in education. This type of education said that truth is something that the individual must discover for himself. Truth is not objective, but subjective. Everything is relative. 'Is it true for me? Is it true for you?' they ask. They reject the statement of Jesus, Who said, 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.'"... because there is no such thing as absolute truth – so they said…
>
> Now, who are these people? Well… [they] are the idealistic, the 'now' generation – they want to remake society, but they don't know how. They believe America is sick, and they're disturbed about poverty and race and war…And then they're fed up with irrelevant university and college and high-school teaching, and we have a lot of it today. You see, we've made the mistake of teaching young people how to make a living – only. Now that's fine: learning to make a living – but there's more to life than just bread and butter, and a new car, and a new TV set… No wonder a university student tore up his diploma the other day in front of thousands of people and said, 'My education at this university has been meaningless to me.' He learned to make a living, but he hadn't learned how to live. He hadn't learned how to live and face the problems and difficulties of life, and he certainly hadn't learned how to die. And I don't think anyone knows how to live till he knows how to die."[11]

It is truly amazing that somebody like Graham was able to understand the growing postmodern culture before most westerners did, let alone western Christians.

The problem, though, was that now postmodernity made new progressive promises, just like modernity had... but because part of what it was arguing against was those vestiges of realism, it didn't actually know what "real" things it wanted to defend or advocate for. This made it somewhat

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11 Billy Graham, *The Challenge: Sermons from Madison Square Garden* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 28–30.

aimless. You see this in the Beatles song from 1966, Nowhere Man:

(*chorus*)

He's a real nowhere Man,
Sitting in his Nowhere Land,
Making all his nowhere plans
for nobody.

1. Doesn't have a point of view,
Knows not where he's going to,
Isn't he a bit like you and me?

Nowhere Man, please listen,
You don't know what you're missin',
Nowhere Man, the world is at your
command.

2. He's as blind as he can be,
Just sees what he wants to see,
Nowhere Man can you see me at
all?

Nowhere Man, don't worry,
Take your time, don't hurry,
Leave it all 'till somebody else
lends you a hand.

This gave rise to the moralistic ambiguity of the sexual revolution in the 1970s, the "greed is good" mentality of the 1980s. And overhanging it all, an antagonism to ideology, because ideology is about there being *ideals*, which is just another way of saying *real* standards that stand objectively outside of us. The Cold War, a battle over communist and capitalist ideology, became for many a "silly" war – if we could all just get along, realise how arbitrary all these ideals were, then we'd stop threatening the world with nuclear obliteration (oh, thanks modernist technology, just while we're here). But then the Berlin Wall came down, and we found ourselves about to enter...

Post-modernism (1990s)

Apart from the end of the Cold War, there were some other factors that started to play out to accelerate post-modernism. Aussies had it happen before the Americans did!

1. 1988 – the Australian Bicentennial.

2. 1992 – the 500 year anniversary of Columbus.

> This conquest was very much on our (Americans') minds during 1992. That was the year we "celebrated" the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of America by Christopher Columbus. But not everyone believed there was cause for celebration. Parades, worship services and other festivities throughout the Western hemisphere were disrupted by people who thought that Columbus and the period of history he inaugurated ought not to be valorised... The significance of the Columbus debate is that it illustrates the shift in worldview and cultural sensibility from the modern to the postmodern world... Why is it that we didn't hear this kind of questioning of Columbus when we were in elementary

school? What is the significance of this questioning? Could it be that such questioning is indicative of an ephochal shift in cultural sensibility?[12]

Both these events were seen, by modernists, as cause for celebration – the taming of savage, superstitious, under-developed lands by modernists. But the general community response was the exact opposite! Most people protested, especially about how aboriginal people's heritages had been stomped on by modernists. There was suddenly a new appreciation for these people's heritages, which were pre-modern, and thus built on narrative. This fulfilled the idea that there is no "meta-narrative", an overarching story, but that all stories had as much validity as we could be bothered giving them. By 2000, this had led to an essential disenchantment with the authority of any narrative, any story, and any history or heritage at all.

This is the other side of relativism, fuelled by globalism. We have now found that there are just so many narratives floating around, most of which people can happily exist within for centuries. Who's to say there is an overarching narrative that unites us all – other than science, since science is seen as universal (water boils at 100 degrees centigrade no matter what god you believe in).

So, do we fight it, or embrace it?

That isn't really what I'm here to do. I'm here to diagnose in this lecture, not to treat. However, I will point out a few things. Firstly, we must consciously ensure that we think about issues from a realist perspective before we jump into the habitual nominalist mindset of our culture. This comes out in our concern about false civility.

> True civility is very positive. It is a style of public discourse and engagement shaped by a principled respect for people, truth, the common good and the constitutional tradition. As such it is a civilised prerequisite for knowing how to live with our deepest differences. But the 'religion of civility' is different. It is a corrupt form of civility – an oppressive form of tolerance – that in seeking to give no offence to others ends with no conviction of its own. This pseudo-civility, or intolerant tolerance, begins with a bland exterior of permissive ecumenism – everybody is welcomed – but ends with a deep-rooted relativism hostile to all serious differences and distinctions. 'Tolerance,' G.K. Chesterton said, 'is the virtue of those who don't believe anything.'[13]

Of course, the challenge with that, is to promote *true* civility, not *lack* of civility!

Second, we need to admit that in certain aspects of life, we cannot be *certain*.

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12 J Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995), 9–10.

13 Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, 54.

> … real life is also filled with matters of truth, propositional statements that are either factually true or factually false. If I were to make the statement "God exists," and someone else were to make the statement "God does not exist," it's impossible for both of us to be making a true statement. All of that is fine, but it obviously gets more complicated than that pretty quickly. You and I could be standing in a field with a cow, me on one side and you on the opposite side. You could make the statement, 'This white cow has black spots,' to which I might reply, 'No, this white cow has no black spots.' In this situation, we could both be telling the truth as far as we can see it. A cow can certainly have spots on just one side and since I am only seeing my side of the cow (the one with no spots), I could be speaking truthfully about what I can presently see. But I am not speaking the truth of what really is, for there is an objective reality that exists outside my limited knowledge... As soon as I circle the cow and see it from both angles, I would figure out that the white cow did indeed have black spots. That's the way it is with truth.[14]

We must admit that we are all looking at the cow from our own perspective. We recognise, then, unlike the atheist, that other religions *do* have some grasp of the Universal reality that binds us together (the atheist denies there's a cow at all). All we are saying, is that we as Christians feel that we have a fuller view of that Universal reality, not because we're smarter, but because it was revealed to us by that Universal reality in the Person of Jesus Christ. Which leads to the next point.

We also need to make the strong point that there is a difference between truth and fact. When we think of truth, this is usually a "philosophical" or "poetical" thing, which is a lot less tangible.

> … the notion of *truth* has been under scrutiny and indeed attack. Many operate with two quite different types of "truth." If we asked, "Is it true that Jesus died on the cross?" we normally would mean, "Did it really happen?" But if we asked, "Is the parable of the Prodigal Son true?" we would quickly dismiss the idea that "it really happened"; that is simply not the sort of things parables are. We would insist that, in quite another sense, the parable is indeed "true" in that we discover within the narrative a picture of God and his love... So far, so good – though most people do not always stop to muse over these different sense of "true" and their implications for other questions.[15]

Here's the thing – most of the time, people assume that religions are based on philosophical truth, and they assume that this is also the case with Christianity. But Christianity is not based on this definition of a philosophical version of "truth" (ie, the Prodigal Son) - it is based on truth defined as fact (ie, Jesus died on the cross). Of course, Christianity has lots of philosophical truths (be kind to your neighbour, there's a God out there, etc), but these can *only* be valid if one key claim of Jesus

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14 Jim K. Thomas, *Coffeehouse Theology* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2000), 28–29.

15 NT Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 5–6.

Christ's is found to be *factually* true – namely, that He's really God. CS Lewis explains:

> I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [Jesus]: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit on Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.[16]

If Jesus did that, and that is historically tenable and reliable, then that gives Him a unique authority, unlike anybody else – it gives Him the authority of the Universal. It means when He said He was God, He was. And if He was God, all the "truths" He told us to uphold – including our shared universal humanity – must be taken very seriously. Jesus being God brings realism back into the equation.

The other thing we have to realise is that historical knowledge, is very powerful, because it gives strength in identity. Protestants are *notorious* for having a poor understanding of their history, precisely because of the Reformation, as we've seen. This makes us usually "lambs to the slaughter" when people attack us on historical points, like the Crusades, or missionaries – we don't *know* anything about those things, and so we are susceptible to other people telling us our own history, and becoming ashamed of it. But, most of the time, when we know our history, it is *empowering*, not depressing. Furthermore, if wider post-modern society is so poor at appreciating history, Christians knowing history will give them a significant advantage.

Finally, I want to advocate for Critical Realism. As we've seen, only extreme relativists actually believe there's nothing to believe – most recognise some element of reality. The question then is how sure do we have to be about something – how much information do we need?

Perhaps the best solution is that of NT Wright, who has used the phrase *critical realism*.

> … I propose a form of *critical realism.* This is a way of describing the process of "knowing" that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence "realism"), while fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the*

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16 CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity.* (London, UK: Fount, 1944), 63.

knower and the thing known (hence "critical").[17]

What this means is that, while nothing can be known for *certain* (not even the being hit by the bus), when given enough evidence, and enough dialogue that reveals enough evidence, then we can be more sure of some things than others.

Most Christians believe that the weight of evidence from the Bible, their own experience, their reason, and the collective Biblical reasoning and experience of Christians over its history, there is enough evidence to make their position far more tenable than alternatives.

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17 NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London, UK: SPCK, 2002), 35.