

EVANGELIZING MODERNS: GIVING REASONS TO RATIONALISTS

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Introduction: While it is true that few of us live next to rationalists, most of us do know such people. We have family members, friends from high school or college, or work contacts who are modernistic in their thinking. These people need the gospel too, and they need Christians who are able to reason with them about their unbelief. Is it a compromise of the Christian faith to attempt to reason with a rationalist? The Apostle Peter did not seem to think so. He exhorted his readers to be “ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). We cannot “make a defense” and “give an account” without giving reasons, and we cannot say that we are ready to have an answer for “everyone” unless we know how to interact with modernists.

Before I begin, I need to acknowledge the sources that have most shaped my thinking on this subject. I have found Cornelius Van Til’s *Christian Apologetics* and his *Defense of the Faith* to be helpful. These books are, however, difficult to read. For this reason I highly recommend John Frame’s *Apologetics to the Glory of God*. Another source that I have found useful is the audio recording of the debate between Greg Bahnsen and Gordon Stein. It is titled *The Great Debate: Does God Exist?*, and it can be obtained from Covenant Media Foundation.

I. *What Is Modernism?*

Our word *modern* comes from the Latin word *modo*, which means “just now.” It is an appropriate label because throughout its history modernism has distinguished itself as a viewpoint that prefers the new over the old. In particular modernism asserts that the premodern foundation for human knowledge (the authority of divine revelation) is passé and must be replaced.

A. **René Descartes (1596-1650)**

This philosopher, mathematician, and scientist lived at the end of the Reformation and the beginning of the scientific revolution. It was a period of great change. The control of the Roman Catholic Church had been broken, and many were doubting the accuracy of the Scripture. It no longer seemed reasonable to say that divine revelation was the highest court of appeal for all human knowing.

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes asserts a different foundation for knowledge. He asks what it is that cannot be doubted, thinking that whatever cannot be doubted should be the foundation for all knowledge. His conclusion is that when he is doubting, he cannot doubt that he is doubting and that he therefore exists as a doubter. He stated this famously with the line, “I think, therefore I am.” His thesis affirms that the only sufficient foundation for knowledge is reason. But not just any reason. He is claiming that the highest court of appeal for truth is the thinking capacity of the individual human knower. Individualism, rationalism, and humanism were now all pushed to the fore.

B. **Development in the 1700s and Beyond**

The eighteenth century has been labeled the Enlightenment because it was during this century that faith in the sufficiency of human reason began to be integrated into the main segments of European society. This faith in reason was complemented by a similar trust in the power of scientific investigation. By the

end of the Enlightenment, modernism had formulated its thesis: *Human reason informed by science is the only reliable path to truth*. Of course, not everyone in Europe and North America believed this thesis, but it did become one of the most influential ideas in Western civilization. Many very influential people believed it (implicitly or explicitly), and many who disagreed with it were nonetheless under its influence. This thesis led to three emphases in the development of modernism.

1. *Human reason is to be preferred over divine revelation*. Modernism was not opposed to religion, at least most early modernists were not. But modernism did believe that religion must commend itself to autonomous (“self ruling”) human reason. Human reason was not to be tested by revelation; revelation was to be tested by human reason.
2. *Freedom of individual humans to determine their own destinies is considered one of the highest values*. It is instructive that Descartes did not say, “We think, therefore we are.” Even in his brief statement one can see an emphasis on individualism. It was believed that the best way to study and understand the world was to do so alone, without the influence of others to bias or prejudice. This was to be applied not just to thinking but to all of life. The best life is the self-determined life.
3. *The story of human history is the story of progress*. It was common to believe that as the good news of the sufficiency of reason swept the globe, the world could not help becoming a better place—one freed from ignorance, superstition, and the many other things that (to the modern mind) had enslaved premodern culture.

C. Icons of Modernism

1. *Paul Kurtz*
Kurtz is a leading secular humanist. He co-authored *Humanist Manifesto II* and authored *Humanist Manifesto 2000*. In the following quotation, notice the importance of reason, freedom, and individualism: “Using reason and cognition will better enable us to appraise our values in the light of evidence and by their consequences. . . . The dignity and autonomy of the individual is the central value. Humanist ethics is committed to maximizing freedom of choice.” (*Humanist Manifesto 2000*, 29, 31)
2. *Richard Dawkins*
Dawkins is perhaps the leading atheist promoter in the world today. In 2006, he published *The God Delusion*. In the following quotation, notice his emphasis on “evidence” as superior to revelation. Notice also that he accepts without question an evolutionary view of religion: “Since it is founded on local traditions of private revelation rather than evidence, the God Hypothesis comes in many versions. Historians of religion recognize a progression from primitive tribal animisms, through polytheisms . . . to monotheisms such as Judaism, and its derivatives, Christianity and Islam.” (p. 32)
3. *Bill Moyers*
Not all modernists are atheists. Moyers has been a Christian minister. But when he talks about Christianity, it is clear that reason for him comes first. The following is from an upcoming PBS series titled “Reason and Faith”: “How do we keep the public space between reason and faith . . . from becoming a ‘no man’s land’ of constant warfare? Like so many people who are not wholly a believer nor wholly a skeptic, I myself fall in the middle of this one. But what matters most to me is that we remember democracy is a cooperative where compromise keeps the peace by enabling each of us to

aspects of God’s character could not be known: His righteous wrath, His mercy and grace, His sorrow, and His self-sacrificing love.

Because we are fallen (and therefore selfish), we tend to find this answer unsatisfying. But this answer is consistent with the presuppositions of the Christian worldview. In fact, if we deny that this answer is viable, we end up denying certain Christian presuppositions. In the Christian worldview, what is more precious than God and the declaration of His glory? Human happiness? Such an answer departs from the Christian worldview and moves toward modernism.

- 4) *God has chosen to be a victim of evil*. Whatever we say to unbelievers about the problem of evil, we must not fail to say that God Himself has been touched by evil. Many unbelievers cling to the problem of evil for emotional reasons. They hold a grudge against God because they have suffered. Perhaps the person you are seeking to evangelize has lost a son to leukemia. “God did not spare my son,” he may say, “and I hate Him!” To this we may respond, “God had a Son too. And He did not spare Him. He sacrificed His own Son to deliver the world from evil.” God is absolute and sovereign, but He is no ogre. He loves His creatures, and He has suffered as no human has in order to rescue us from ourselves. Obviously, this discussion can lead to a presentation of human sinfulness, the sacrifice of Christ, and the forgiveness of sin that God grants to all who believe the gospel.

Conclusion: As we conclude, I want to emphasize several admonitions. First, *be kind*. We must go out of our way to show the unbeliever that our goal is not to humiliate him or even to win an argument. This will be difficult because part of our aim is to clash with the unbeliever over the ideas each of us value most. We should speak in love. To do anything else is to deny the Christian worldview (cf. Mark 12:30-31). The modernist can be consistent with his worldview and be unkind to us; we, however, cannot be consistent and be unkind to him. Second, *be inquisitive*. Learn the art of moving an argument forward not with accusations but with questions. Present yourself not as a warrior on the attack but as student who wants to know more (or a physician who is trying to diagnose a problem). This will keep you from coming across as arrogant; it will also help you to avoid making claims you cannot back up. Third, *be flexible*. This presentation is no roadmap to success in evangelism. Its goal is more modest. It is designed to help you get familiar with the thinking of a certain kind of unbeliever. But no two modernists are identical. And many who seem at first to be modernists are not purely modernistic. They are instead an odd mix of modernism, postmodernism, and a few other “-isms.” Be prepared to tailor your conversation to meet the needs of the person you are talking to (not the person you wish you were talking to!). Fourth, *be patient*. Few people travel from committed unbelief to committed belief in 30 minutes. People need time, love, and many conversations. Finally, *be prayerful*. Recognize that apart from Christ’s working through us, nothing supernatural will happen (John 15:5). This does not mean that we need not be concerned about adopting the right approach in evangelism. God is the one who saves, but He has chosen to use us as His tools. We should therefore desire to become tools that are well suited to His work. But recognizing the necessity of Christ’s working does mean that we prayerfully depend on Him to work through us. It also means that when we see people repent and believe, we take no credit for the success of the gospel.

who has been robbed. Also, such a view of morals would lead to anarchy in society. It is untenable because it is unlivable.

- c. *Morals are subjective feelings that have become cultural conventions.* This explanation takes the previous view but asserts that the feelings are agreed upon by a given culture. One can with this view rescue a society from anarchy. But with this view one is still not able to condemn the moral standards of another culture. Can we embrace a view of morality that does not enable us to condemn Nazi Germany or the Taliban regime? This view is particularly problematic when cultures collide. Were the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, evil? We certainly want to be able to say yes. But this view of morality does not enable us to do so.

2. *Morality on the Christian's Ground*

a. Christian position

The Christian begins with the assumption that the Bible is the Word of God. We therefore can say that ultimate reality is the Christian God: a person who is absolute, sovereign, distinct from His creatures, and triune. From Scripture we learn that standards of morality are expressions of the character of the God who has made us in His image. These standards are therefore universal and absolute. We all have a moral sense because God's own personality and character are to a certain extent reflected in our personality and character. We fail to live consistently with this moral sense because we are fallen (Rom. 2:14-15). But God has given us the Scripture to show us the way back to Himself. Because we are made in God's image, we sense that it is true; because we are fallen, we wish it were not true.

b. Responding to the problem of evil

Of the many possible objections to the Christian position, the most significant is the problem of evil. The modernist will likely ask, "If the Christian God is all-powerful and good, why does evil exist? If He is all-powerful, He is able to stop it; if He is good, He will want to."

- 1) *In the Christian worldview, God does not owe us an explanation.* Modernism claims that man is the measure of all things. If this is so, then man must measure evil: he must give a satisfying answer to the problem of evil. But modernism cannot deal with the problem of evil because it cannot account for the existence of standards of morality. Christianity, however, claims that God is the measure of all things. He knows all things and has chosen to share some of that knowledge with us. If He chooses not to give us an answer, that is His prerogative. If He chooses to give us only part of an answer (or an answer that we do not like), that is also His prerogative.
- 2) *The Bible does not ignore the problem of evil.* But the Bible is far from ignoring the problem of evil. It deals with this problem many times (note especially Job and Romans).
- 3) *God's glory is more precious than human happiness or well being.* God is absolute and distinct from His creatures. The declaration of His glory is infinitely more precious than the well being of His creatures. He did not make evil, but He did make a world where evil would be possible (and where He knew evil would eventually arise). Based on Romans 9:10-23, I would say that He did this to declare the full depth of His glory. Without the possibility of evil, significant

believe what we will . . . while settling our political and economic differences with common sense, not appeals to divine sanction. One of my favorite verses in the Bible says, 'Come now and let us reason together.' But there is also another moving verse in the NT that says, 'I believe; help thou my unbelief.'"

4. *Harry E. Fosdick*

Fosdick was a famous liberal preacher during the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy of the 1920s. This quotation is from a sermon he preached during that time. Notice the emphasis on reason and science, as well as the emphasis on individual freedom: "A great mass of new knowledge has come into man's possession. . . . [The fundamentalists] insist that we must all believe in the historicity of certain special miracles, preeminently the virgin birth of our Lord. . . . Has anybody a right to deny the Christian name to those who differ with him on such points?" ("Shall the Fundamentalists Win?")

II. *Dealing with the Charge of Circular Reasoning*

A modernist is committed to what he believes is the proper use of reason. He is as serious about the right use of reason as we are about the inerrancy of Scripture. One of the things they despise most about Christianity is its tendency to engage in circular reasoning: Christians believe the Bible is the Word of God because it claims to be. As we consider how to interact with moderns, we need to think through this charge and how Scripture would have us deal with it.

A. **Danger of Pretended Neutrality**

Many Christians attempt to deal with the charge of circular reasoning by pretending to be neutral. They attempt to argue for Christianity without appealing to the Bible's authority. This is evident in statements such as the following: "I can prove that Jesus rose from the dead by anyone's standards for historical investigation." It is also evident in the following: "To prove that the Bible is true we simply approach the Bible as we would any book. Look at what it says and then test it to see if it lives up to its claims. Sure, a fool will not be convinced, but any reasonable person will."

The problem with such reasoning is that it gives humans too much credit. *Humans are finite.* We cannot investigate a truth claim apart from a worldview (a perspective from which evidence is viewed and evaluated), which is composed of many presuppositions (propositions that a person reasons *from* not *to*). Therefore, for humans there are no "brute facts"; that is, facts that do not need to be interpreted. The Bible's claims are infinite. How does a finite mind objectively evaluate the infinite? We cannot begin our investigation without first presupposing certain things. A common presupposition for secular historians is that the supernatural does not happen. Can a believer be "neutral" while attempting to prove the resurrection to a person who is committed to such a presupposition? Also, *humans are fallen.* The human mind has been twisted by the fall (1 Cor. 2:14). Therefore, human reasoning is poisoned. Humans prefer presuppositions and a worldview that affirm their twisted loves and hates. This is the reason that Solomon affirms that fearing God is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7). Humans cannot have true knowledge unless they become "biased"—unless they embrace the fear of the Lord (cf. Col. 2:3; 1 Pet. 3:15). What the unbeliever claims is neutrality is in fact taking sides against God. Can we prove God's truthfulness by taking sides against Him and His Word?

B. **Inescapability of Circular Reasoning**

Because of human finitude, all humans are forced to faith. The Christian position can be reduced to the following syllogism: (1) the Bible is the Word of God, and it is therefore true; and (2) the Bible claims to be the Word of God; therefore (3) the Bible is the Word of God and is true. Though I would never state my beliefs in such a bare, unadorned way, this syllogism is what I believe. To deny this syllogism would be to assert that there is an authority higher than God's Word.

But the modernist's syllogism is similarly circular: (1) reason informed by science is the only path to truth; and (2) this statement is reasonable; therefore (3) reason informed by science is the only path to truth. Of course, the modernist will never admit that this syllogism reflects his thinking, but this circularity can be detected. The best demonstration of this that I have observed is in the Bahnsen/Stein debate. Bahnsen (a Christian) dealt with the charge of circular reasoning by quoting from a book by Stein (an atheist): "The use of logic or reason is the only valid way to examine the truth or falsity of a statement which claims to be factual." Bahnsen went on to ask how Stein would prove that statement itself. "If he says it is proved by reason," Bahnsen said to the audience, "he has engaged in circular reasoning. If he says it is proved in some other fashion, he has refuted the statement."

The difference between the Christian and the modernist is not that one lives by faith and the other by evidence. We all live by faith. Christians have their faith in God and His Word; the modernist has his faith in reason and science. Part of reasoning with a modernist is showing him this truth whenever he charges us with circular reasoning.

III. *Conversing with a Modernist*

Since the Christian and the modernist look at ideas from different worldviews (since we use circular reasonings that cannot be reconciled), is it not possible to converse with a modernist?

A. **Basis of Conversation**

A conversation is possible because all humans unavoidably know God and His law. God has revealed Himself in human nature and in the created order (Gen. 1:26-27; Rom. 1:18-21; 2:14-15). Because of this revelation all men know that God exists and that He has eternal power (Rom. 1:20); they also know that He is justifiably angry with them (v. 32). Nevertheless, they are also darkened (v. 21). On a deep level, they know God and His moral expectations. But on a shallower level, this knowledge is so suppressed that they are blind to it. Our conversing with the modernist should be crafted to stir up this suppressed knowledge.

B. **Approach: Two Complementary Moves**

I suppose there are many ways to stir up this knowledge of God. I recommend the approach I learned from Van Til. It consists of two complementary moves.

1. *Standing on the Modernist's Ground*

We stand, for the sake of argument, on the ground of the modernist's presuppositions. We stand alongside the unbeliever and examine the picture of the world that his worldview produces, and we compare that to the world we actually live in. In our conversing we repeatedly ask how, from modernistic presuppositions, a person can account for meaning and values. Our goal is to demonstrate that modernism cannot account for meaning and values. Eventually, we want to drive the unbeliever to grapple with this question: "If the modernistic worldview falls under its own weight, can it really be considered true?"

2. *Standing of the Christian's Ground*

We complete this approach by inviting the modernist to stand on the ground of Christian presuppositions. We ask him to look at our circle and see how we can account for meaning and values. In this part of the conversation, we are asking the unbeliever to experience the truth of verses like Psalm 34:8 ("O taste and see that the LORD is good") and John 7:17 ("If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God"). Our goal is to drive him to consider the following question: Why cling to autonomous reason when you could cling to Scripture and the reasoning that it justifies? If he allows us to answer this question for him, we may wish to walk him through the argument of Romans 1. This may, in turn, lead to a discussion of the hope that the rest of Romans unfolds.

C. **Using the Moral Argument**

What particularly should we talk about when working through these complementary moves? Several of the traditional arguments for the existence of God will be useful (e.g., human rationality, teleology, cosmology, and morality). I will focus on the moral argument.

1. *Morality on the Modernist's Ground*

Our leading question will be something like this: Given that human reason is the only reliable path to truth, how does a person account for universal standards of morality? In atheistic modernism, this faith in reason has led to the conclusion that ultimate reality is impersonal. Personality is just a mask for motion, matter, and chance. But, we must ask, how can the impersonal (e.g., the relationship between protons and electrons) make a binding claim on the personal. Doesn't this lead to the conclusion that morality itself is part of the "personality mask"? The following points are some common modernistic responses.

(At this point I should add a few comments about theistic modernism. Theistic modernism attempts to escape this trap by asserting there is a God. But since it rejects the Bible as unreasonable, it cannot say who this God is or what His moral standards are. If we ask the theistic modernist to account for standards of morality, he may say they come from God. We should then ask him what these standards are and how he knows they come from God. This may lead us to ask him why he thinks God would have moral standards but then not communicate them clearly to us.)

- a. *Morals arise from human experience.* This is the belief that we get our sense of morality from observing choices and their consequences. From an early age we see that certain choices lead to pain while others lead to satisfaction. From that we conclude that the former choices are immoral and the latter are moral. There are many problems with this. One is that people often suffer for doing what we sense to be right. In fact, modernists often celebrate the lives and legacies of people who stood by their convictions, even though their convictions may have cost them their lives.
- b. *Morals are the combination of individual subjective feelings.* With this view, acts are considered evil because individuals find them to be emotionally repulsive. Eating broccoli and robbing a bank are therefore similar. This view, however, does not give us a satisfying picture of the world. We all sense that morality is more than a matter of personal taste. This view may satisfy a bank robber, but it does not satisfy the person