



# Naming the Beast:

## The Roots of our Post-Christian Malaise

Dr. Angus J. L. Menuge  
Professor of Philosophy  
Concordia University Wisconsin

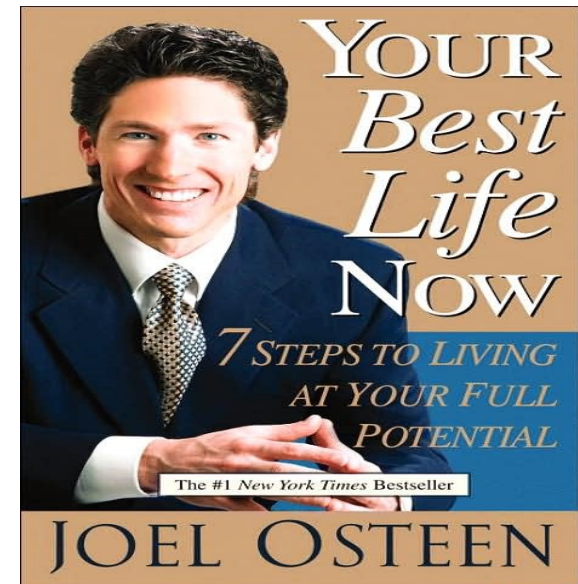
# I. Introduction.

- **A paradoxical malaise:  
“Post-Christian Christianity.”**
  - Non-Christian ideas are used to judge and re-shape the Christian faith.
  - “Cafeteria Christianity.”
  - Doctrinal dissolution.
  - Embracing contradictions.
  - Conflict within the soul.
  - Conflict in family, state and church.

# What kind of faith would you like?



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# Outline of presentation.

- **Symptoms of the malaise:**
  - The data that show we have a problem.
- **Diagnosing the malaise:**
  - What are the names of this sickness?
- **Where does it come from?**
  - Modern sources.
  - Postmodern sources.
- **What are the implications?**
  - For the individual, family, state and church.
- **Where do we look for hope?**

## 2. Symptoms of the malaise.

- Eclecticism and Inconsistency of belief.
- The Rev. Ann Holmes Redding, an Episcopal priest:
- "I am both Muslim and Christian, just like I'm both an American of African descent and a woman. I'm 100 percent both."

--*The Seattle Times*, June 17, 2007.

([http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/localnews/2003751274\\_redding17m.html](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/localnews/2003751274_redding17m.html)).

# Christianity

- God is triune.
- Jesus is the Son of God.
- Christ was crucified for us.
- Christ was raised from the dead.

# Islam

- Allah “has no partners.”
- “Isa” (Jesus) is only a great prophet.
- This was only an appearance.
- Resurrection denied.

# Why don't the contradictions matter?

- **Emotional preference:**

- "It wasn't about intellect.....All I know is the calling of my heart to Islam was very much something about my identity."

- **Compromise:**

- She does not take the Trinity literally.
- She thinks God is “more” than Jesus.
- These are unorthodox, Islam-friendly beliefs.

# Distinctions are divisive.

- Brian McLaren of the “emergent church”:
- “a missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian.” [Inhale now]
- –*A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), cover.



# The general population.

- The Pew Forum U. S. Religious Landscape Survey (2008):
- “**A strong majority** of those who are affiliated with a religion, including majorities of nearly every religious tradition, **do not believe their religion is the only way to salvation.** And almost the same number believes that there is more than one **true** way to interpret the teachings of their religion.”
- --<http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2religious-landscape-study-key-findings.pdf>, emphasis mine.

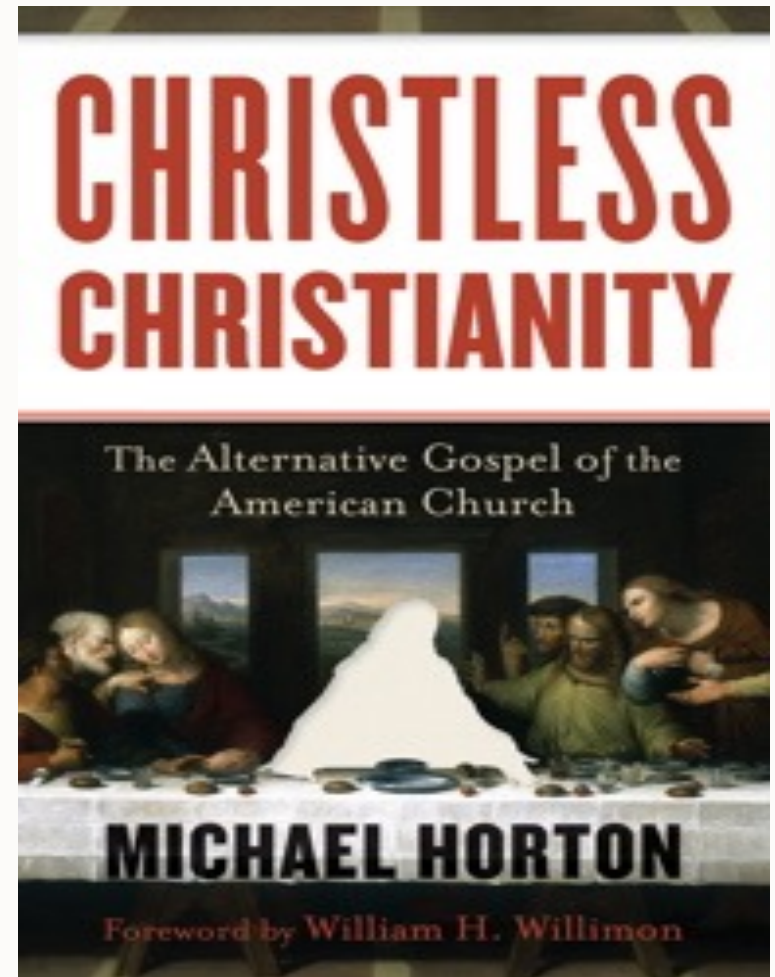
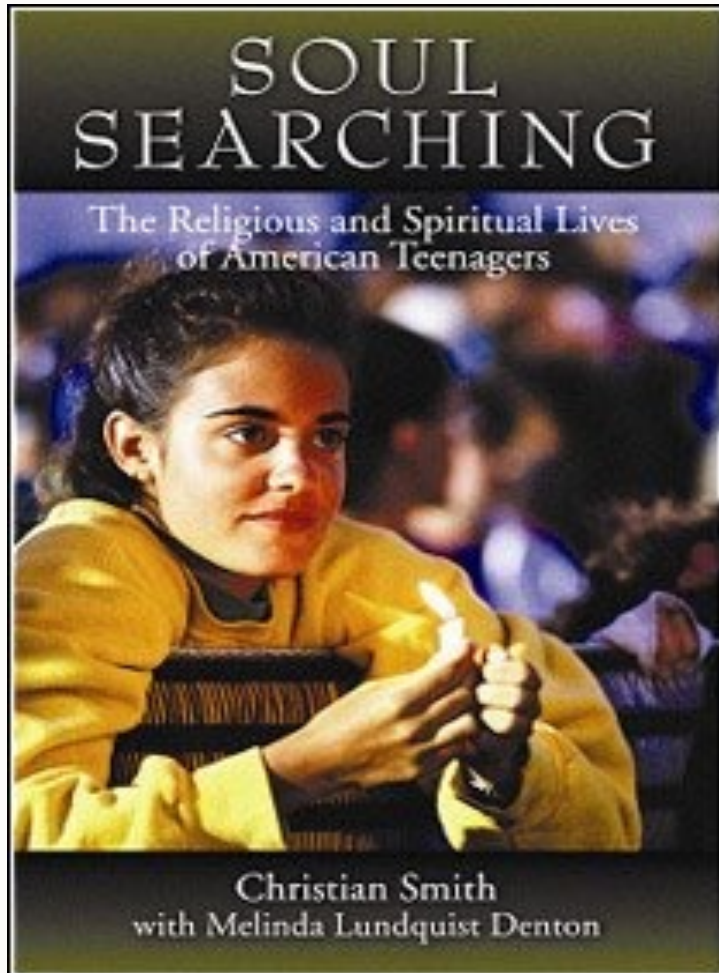
# The personal turn.

- “For me, the Christian faith....”
  - Faith is viewed as a personal possession:
  - It can be tailored to personal preferences.
- **Contrast St. Paul:**
  - “**For I delivered to you** as of first importance **what I also received:** that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures...” (1 Cor 15).
  - “By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard **the good deposit entrusted to you**” (2 Tim 1.18).

# Summary of the symptoms:

- **1) Blurring of distinctions between Christianity and other faiths.**
- **2) Blurring of distinctions between Christian confessions.**
- **3) Emotion before logic.**
- **4) Inclusivity before coherence and orthodoxy.**
- **5) *My* faith, not *the* faith.**

### 3. Diagnosing the malaise.



# A. Sociological diagnosis.

- The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) conducted from 2001 to 2005 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill:
- “the largest, most comprehensive and detailed study of American teenage religion and spirituality conducted to date.” —Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.
- The NSYR telephone survey (2002-2003) included 3,370 teens between 13 and 17 and their parents. Followed by in-depth personal interviews of 267 teens.

# Main Conclusion of the NSYR.

- “The *de facto* dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers is...  
**‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism’** [MTD].”  
--Smith and Denton, 162.
- Of the 3 terms, “therapeutic” is the central one which qualifies the other two.
- The essence of the faith is about feeling good about oneself.

# Moralism:

- “Being moral in this faith means being **the kind of person that other people will like, fulfilling one’s personal potential, and not being socially disruptive....** [One teen said:] **‘It’s just whatever makes you feel good about you’.**” —Smith and Denton, 163.
- The therapeutic benefits of being liked and being happy supplant conviction of sin and falling on God’s mercy.

# Therapeutic:

- “This is not a religion of repentance from sin...of building character through suffering...of basking in God’s love and grace.... **It is about attaining subjective well-being**, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people....

**‘When I became a Christian...it always made me feel better.’** —Smith and Denton, 163-164.



# Deism:

- God exists, but is usually “not particularly involved in one’s affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved.” —Smith and Denton 164.
- “Deism...is revised...by the therapeutic qualifier, making the **distant God selectively available for taking care of needs...like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist**” —165.

# Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:

- “appears to operate as a parasitic faith. It cannot sustain its own integral, independent life; rather it must attach itself like an incubus to established historical religious traditions, feeding on their doctrines and sensibilities...expanding by mutating their theological substance to resemble its own distinctive image...”

—Smith and Denton, 166.

# A source of unity but not life.

- “adherents must be Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deists, Jewish Moralistic Therapeutic Deists...and even nonreligious Moralistic Therapeutic Deists... **these believers get to enjoy whatever particulars of their own heritage that appeal to them, while also reaping the benefits of this shared, harmonizing, interfaith religion....** What is there to have conflict about?” —Smith and Denton, 166-167.

# The tragic cost.

- MTD “is colonizing many historical religious traditions and...converting believers...to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness... **[A] significant part of Christianity in the United States is...only tenuously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition.**”

--Smith and Denton, 171.

# Only teenagers?

- “religious and spiritual life, is primarily about personally feeling good and being happy. This...defines the dominant epistemological framework and evaluative standard for most contemporary **U.S. teenagers—and probably for most of their baby boomer parents...reflecting the...larger adult world into which adolescents are being socialized.**” —Smith and Denton, 168, 170.

## B. Theological diagnosis:

- Sin: being curved in oneself.
- Yet denial of sin and hence need for a savior.
- Authority is shifted from the outside (God's saving actions in Christ) to the inside (reason, experience, feeling).
- **Christless Christianity (Horton).**

# Auto-salvation.

- “the self is made the measure of truth and redemption is something we find within ourselves”

—Michael Horton, “Christless Christianity: Getting in Christ’s Way,” 2, available at [www.modernreformation.org](http://www.modernreformation.org).

- “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”

—H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 193.

# A theology of glory.

- **Theology of Glory:** Trying to approach God directly through our own finite, fallen faculties (feelings, experience, reason).
- Luther's Heidelberg Disputation (1518):
  - **Article 21:** “**A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.**”
    - Self-reliance and pride are called “good.”
    - Suffering and humility are called “evil.”



# The triumphant self:

- Successful self-realization according to our own preferences is a sign of God's favor!



# Something has gone wrong:

- “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”  
(Matthew 20: 28) Was it really necessary?
- “Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"

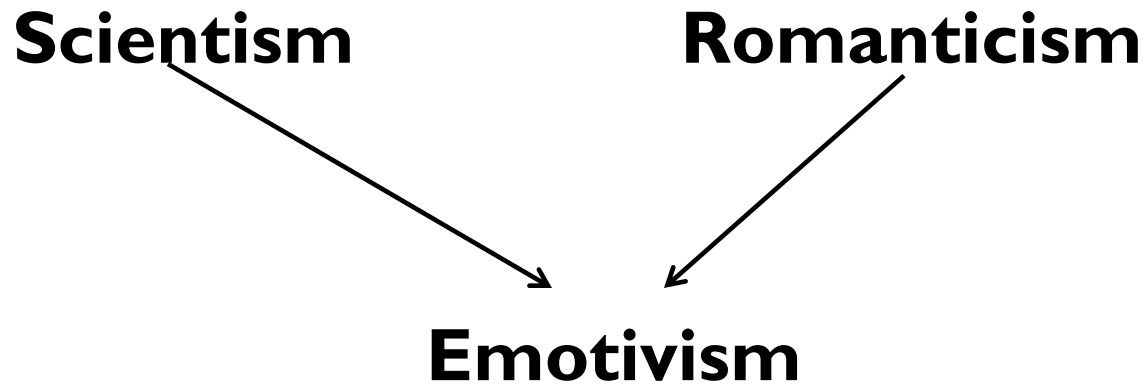
(Matthew 16: 24-26) Denial and death lead to new life.

## 4. What are the sources?

- It can't all be blamed on postmodernism!
- Modernity laid the foundation for MTD and Christless Christianity with its skepticism about objective value.
- Postmodernism *continued* the trend by exalting subjective and cultural constructions.

## A. Modern Sources.

- Modernism contributed 2 main ideologies that led to the same result.



# Scientism.

- The success of Newtonian science led many to denigrate other ways of knowing.
- **Scientism:**
  - Science is the *only* way to gain knowledge about *reality* (forget literature, history, philosophy, theology).
- **Materialism and Reductionism:**
  - Science must explain everything by appeal to physical entities and undirected causes.

# Logical Positivism.

- **An outgrowth of scientism.**
  - Began with Auguste Comte (1798-1857).
  - The Vienna Circle (1922-1936).
  - Popularized by A. J. Ayer (1910-1989) in his manifesto: *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936).
- **The Verification Principle (VP):**
  - A statement is literally meaningful only if it is true by definition (e.g.  $2 + 3 = 5$ ) or verifiable by observation (e.g. salt dissolves in water).
  - There is logical truth and scientific truth; everything else is literally meaningless (metaphor or nonsense).

# The fall-out of positivism.

- Given VP, many important statements are not literally meaningful.
- **Theological and metaphysical statements:**
  - God exists, there is a soul.
- **Ethical statements:**
  - Torturing people for fun is wrong.
- **So why do we say these things?**
  - They are indirect reports of our own feelings.  
“Torture is wrong” really means “I strongly disapprove of torture.”

# Emotivism:

- “the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, ... of attitude or feeling” – Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Second Edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11-12.
- Theology and ethics are viewed as non-cognitive, so people view faith and morality as matters of personal emotion.



# Romanticism.

- Some were repelled by scientism, as it took away the very meaning of life.
  - we are machines; there is no purpose for our life.
- They sought value in the **inner life** of artists, moral reformers or religious believers.
- It also supports emotivism: meaning is located in private, subjective feelings. Science remains sovereign of the world of fact.

# Theological manifestations:

- Pietism.
- Enthusiasm.
- Revivalism.
- “Bible-only-ism”: *my* response to the Bible.
- Some approaches to Church growth?
- Some contemporary worship?
- “Consumers of beliefs.”
- “Designer creeds.”

# Sheilaism: One faith per person.

- “‘I believe in God,’ Sheila says. ‘I am not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. **It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice...It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself.** You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think God would want us to take care of each other.’”

--Robert Bellah, “Habits of the Heart: Implications for Religion,” at:  
[http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures\\_5.htm](http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_5.htm)

# The common factor: 2-story minds.

See Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth*.

**Emotivism (subjective value)**

=====

**Scientism (objective knowledge)**

## B. Postmodern Sources.

- (My view) Postmodernism is not the source of the malaise but has contributed to it.
- Some key factors:
  - (1) Denial of objective truth;
  - (2) The hermeneutics of suspicion;
  - (3) The imperious self;
  - (4) The “Age of Aquarius.”

# (I) Denial of objective truth.

- **Richard Rorty:** there is no **Truth**, out there, only the **truth** we construct. This “truth” emerges from unstable consensus.  
(*Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* [Cambridge, 1989]).
- **R. Scott Smith:** for postmodernists, “we cannot know reality as it truly is, but only as we talk about it in our respective communities”  
(*Truth and the New Kind of Christian* [Crossway, 2005], 31).
- **We are “imprisoned” in our language communities:** there is no such thing as *the* faith, only *our* community’s faith.

## (2) The hermeneutics of suspicion.

- A cynical debunking attitude to the authority of texts and established social or biological order.
- “The hermeneutics of suspicion sees every text as a political creation...as propaganda for the status quo...**all social relationships are only masks for power.**” --Veith, *Postmodern Times* (Crossway, 1994), 54, 75.
- **Objective creeds, prescribed roles in family, state and church are “oppressive.”**

### (3) The imperious self.

- “if no meaning can be found in the objective scheme of things, then it must be sought in the experiencing subject... Having turned its back on all notions of the supernatural....it can look for authentication of its judgments only in the individual self.”  
—Harry Blamires, *The Post-Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1999), 12-13.



## (4) The “Age of Aquarius.”

- Experience yields shifting, ephemeral sands:
- “Where intellect and feeling were in conflict, where wisdom and whim collided, **it became the smart thing to reject the intellect and wisdom because they belonged to a sphere of rules...of fixities and demarcations, while feelings and whim inhabited the ever-changing environment of the fluid, the environment of the Age of Aquarius.**” —Blamires, *The Post-Christian Mind*, 17.



the Zodiac

# The Aquarian Creed:

- “What is **your** truth? What opportunities are available to you right now? **Do you have faith and trust to follow your own intuition and instincts?** ...What would you dare to dream and do if you knew you could not fail?...  
**Aquarians heartily dislike any restraint.**”
- <http://www.kelleyrosano.com/2012/01/15/aquarius-new-moon-2/>.

## 5. What are the implications?

- Implications are at 4 levels:
- 1) Individual;
- 2) Family;
- 3) State;
- 4) Church.
- The primary problem is undermining of vocation and conflict with the orders of creation: **people do not know who they are supposed to be individually, or in their roles in family, state and church.**

# I) The Individual.

- To be a “free spirit” sounds appealing.
- But, without a sense of objective moral and religious value (magnanimity), we get “men without chests”  
(C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*).
- The Reason = The Head
- Magnanimity = The Chest
- Desire = The Belly
  - Without magnanimity, reason becomes the slave of desire.



# Self-destruction.

- Our desires are at war with each other:
  - Ignoring family duties to experience alternate states of mind may make one a *slave* of addiction.
  - Someone who thinks ‘I want it at all, to be successful in my career, popular with others, and also to experience every pleasure,’ discovers that a life of dissipation undermines the other goals.

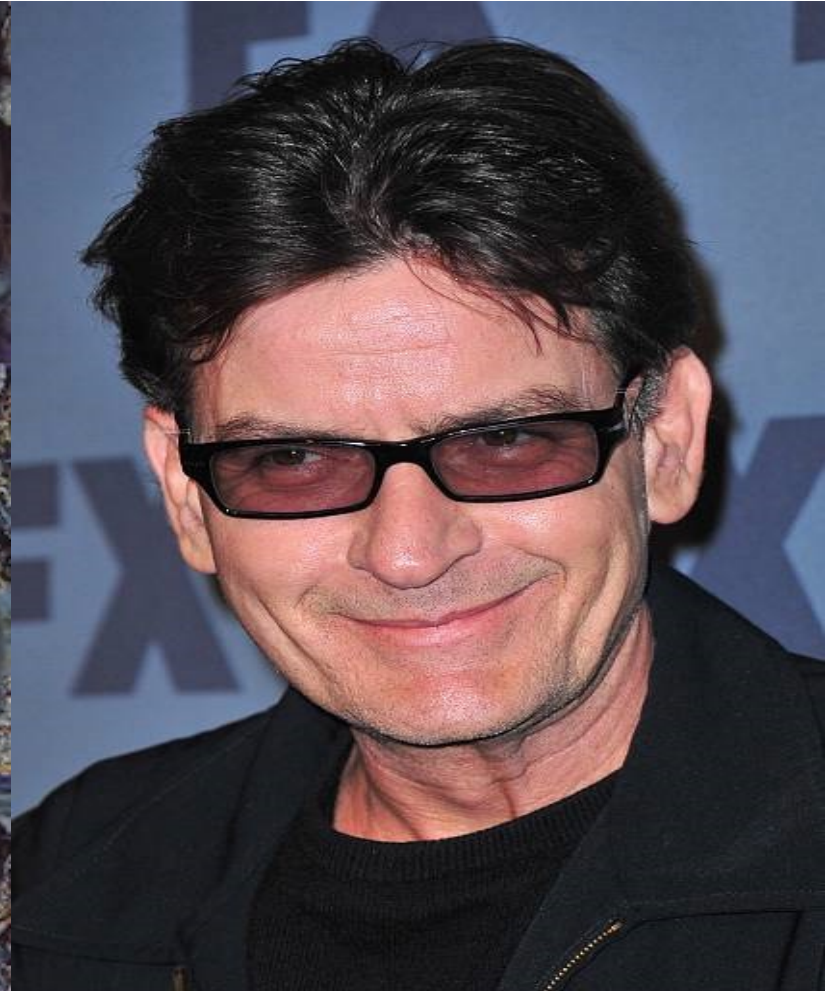
# Plato's multifarious beast.

- One who thinks “it profits him to feast and make strong **the multifarious beast**” of his desires **will find himself dragged around in an erratic, uncontrolled path.**

--Plato, “The Republic,” in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), Book IX, 588e-589a.

- This is a picture of the natural man in rebellion against God's Law and his need for an external savior

# Who (what) is in charge?





# Happiness means doing what I want?



# Self-realization?

- “For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.”

(2 Timothy 3: 2-5).

# A common feature:

- Both modernism and postmodernism are in denial of original sin.
- They attempt to set the self free from the Law's boundaries and the need for a savior.
- But the self becomes enslaved to warring desires, and loses its identity.
- “For whoever would save his life will lose it.”

# The Blank Generation?

- “I belong to the Blank Generation. I have no beliefs. I belong to no community, tradition, or anything like that. I’m lost in this vast, vast world. I belong nowhere. **I have absolutely no identity.**” —postmodern punk-rocker, quoted in Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 72.
- “Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay.” —C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

## 2) The Family.

- The imperious self does not accept the biological orders of creation.
  - Being a parent, spouse or child is oppressive.
- Propaganda is used to mask breakdown:
  - The “family” becomes the “nuclear family.”
  - “[T]he conversion of norms into variants is a means of destroying standards” —Blamires, *The Post-Christian Mind*, 30.
  - Like: “shoplifting” is “uncompounded purchase.”
  - Divorce ceremonies (divorce as a kind of marriage)!

# Abdication of parenthood.

- The office of parent involves duties.
  - Many cede these to the state or their own children.
- The family risks dissolving into a loose association of “separate but equal” individuals, who happen to share resources.
  - King Lear abdicated his role as king **and** father.
  - Luther on the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment connects parental with state authority.

### 3) The State.

- “[I]n *King Lear*, when a kingdom’s ruler who has proper authority abdicates and hands over the reins of government to those whose only claim is their greed for power, then the forces of anarchy and criminality take over.”

—Blamires, *The Post-Christian Mind*, 39.

- In *Macbeth*, a usurping tyrant grasps after powers his office does not provide.

# *Troilus and Cressida*, Act I Scene 3 (Ulysses' speech):

- “Take but degree away, untune that string,  
And, hark, what discord follows! each thing meets  
In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters  
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores  
And make a sop of all this solid globe:  
Strength should be lord of imbecility,  
And the rude son should strike his father dead:  
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,  
Between whose endless jar justice resides,  
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.  
Then every thing includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite;  
And appetite, an universal wolf...  
Must make perforce an universal prey,  
And last eat up himself.”



# A recipe for social conflict.

- If fulfillment is found by realizing the goals of a favored group, why compromise or accept higher authority?
- “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.”  
—W. B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*.
- “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” (Judges, 21:25)

## 4) The Church.

- “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” (2 Timothy 4: 3-4).
- The common denominator of the myths: Christless Christianity.

## 6. Where do we look for hope?

- **Outside of ourselves: Christ.**
  - Hope is found not within the the old self, but in its **death and rebirth in Christ.**
- “We know that our **old self** was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” (Romans 6: 6-8)

# In Christ all things (people, family, the state, the church) hold together.

- “And he is before all things, and **in him all things hold together**. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” (Colossians 1: 17-20).

## 7. Conclusion: Naming the Beast.

- Sin is nothing new. But we must recognize the worldviews that solidify its foothold.
- We have looked at the symptoms, diagnosis and source of “post-Christian Christianity.”
- We have examined its destructive implications for individuals, families, the state and the church.
- Tomorrow, we will discuss remedies.