Before you start...

- Post your response to last week’s forum question onto Moodle and interact on social media.
- Consider this week’s forum question, then complete 2 hours pre-reading from recommended and optional sources on Moodle (cf. Resource boxes below), to help answer this question.
- From the reading, come prepared to share a question, challenge, implication & application.
- Download this learning guide (and the associated powerpoint pdf), and have it open on your computer ready to edit if you are a class-based student.
- Optional: Bring along something for show & tell, re: current examples of postmodernism, and contemporary expressions of questions concerning violence, evil, suffering and Hell.

1. INTRODUCTION

This module we complete our two part study of Philosophical Challenges to Christian Belief. Last week we explored deism and atheism, and questions of science, miracles, and evolution. This week we shift from the modern to the postmodern, deconstructing Christian belief from the perspective of divine and human violence, evil and temporal human suffering, and questions of eternal suffering through Hell. In the first session, we will practice one minute “big story” answers to tough questions, pray for non-Christian friends, and debrief the pre-reading for this module’s focus. In the second session of the lecture, we will unpack the shift from modernity to postmodernity, and how this plays out in questions of violence, oppression and freedom. In the third session, we will extend our focus on violence to suffering in general, both temporal through natural and moral evil, and eternal through God’s judgement and Hell. In both sessions two and three, primary emphasis will be given to students constructing their own answers to forum questions, using the meta-apologetic method from Module 2. Afterwards, we will critique and debrief your responses.

Next week we continue in Section B of the course, exploring “Critiques of Christian Faith”. Having addressed primary philosophical challenges, we face historical challenges to Christian belief, both in the reliability and morality/beauty/excellence of the Tanakh (Hebrew Scriptures, i.e., “Old Testament”).

OBJECTIVES
The objectives of this module are to:

- Consider contemporary philosophical challenges to Christian belief posed by postmodernism, violence, suffering and evil.
- Form a cogent response to one or more central challenges, drawing on a range of apologetic approaches.

OUTCOMES
On completion of this module, students should be able to explain the main philosophical challenges posed by postmodernism and evil/suffering to Christian theism, and give a simple but multifaceted reply.
Aligned with the Unit Guide Outcomes, students should be able to:

Knowledge (know and understand):
A3. Critiques of the Christian faith
A5. Strategies to defend and commend Christian faith

Skills (be able to):
B2. Assess critiques of Christianity from a Christian perspective
B4. Engage in Christian apologetics
B5. Present an analytical evidence-based argument or perspective

Application (be in a position to):
C3. Defend and commend the truth claims of the Christian faith

SESSION FLOW (lecture runs 6:15-9:00pm, breaks from 7:05-7:10pm, and 7:55-8:05pm)

6:15  Big Story Recap and Responses + Prayer + Reading debrief (50 minutes)
7:10  Philosophical Challenges to Christianity 2: Postmodernism, Violence & “Freedom” (45 minutes)
8:05  Workshop: Evil & Suffering, Both Present & Future (i.e., Hell) (55 minutes)

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................................ 1

2. BIG STORY “CAUGHT OUT” RESPONSES + READING REVIEW ............................................. 3

3. POSTMODERNISM AND THE ELUSIVE QUEST FOR FREEDOM ........................................... 4
3.1  A Potted History of Postmodernity: Pursuing Truth and Freedom ........................................ 6
3.2  The Question of Freedom ........................................................................................................ 9
3.3  Extended thoughts on Apologetics in the Postmodern Age (Benson 2006; 2012b) .............. 11

4. EVIL AND SUFFERING, TEMPORAL AND ETERNAL ........................................................... 17
4.1  The Problem of Suffering ....................................................................................................... 18
   4.1.1  Different Apologetic Angles on Suffering (cf. Boa & Bowman 2001) ......................... 22
   4.1.2  Sample Dialogues on Suffering ..................................................................................... 23
4.2  On the Existence and Nature of Evil ......................................................................................... 28
4.3  On the Existence and Nature of Hell ....................................................................................... 31

5. PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT CLASS ............................................................... .......................... 34

6. REFERENCES ............................................................................................................................... 37
2. BIG STORY “CAUGHT OUT” RESPONSES + READING REVIEW

“The big story is that God designed us all for good, but through our bad choices we’ve been damaged by evil. But, through Jesus’ life, death on the cross, and resurrection, we’ve been restored for better. If you’re humble enough to admit to God that you fall short, and ask Him to forgive you for the wrong you’ve done, putting God first, then you can connect with life to the full—what God always intended for you. Then you can join other Christ-followers, empowered by God’s Spirit, sent together to heal a hurting world, waiting for the day when God will set everything right by judging all the evil and restoring the whole universe.”

Class Activity 5.1—10 minutes
Using the post-it-notes from module one, two students will each select one of the five circles from “The Big Story”, then randomly choose a paper slip from that circle. Each student will take up to 1 minute to respond to this question or objection, as if in conversation with the person who posted the slip. Afterward, the class can unpack what did/didn’t work in this response, and other ways to dialogue.

(Wanting some encouragement evangelistically in “Answering Tough Questions”? See Benson 2010.)

Class Activity 5.2—30 minutes
Whether as a whole class, or in smaller groups, share your response to the pre-reading for this module:

- a question—something you don’t get, or want to clarify
- a challenge—something you disagree with, or want to nuance
- an implication—“so what” for our apologetic practice
- an application—something useful right now in your context

Consider how these readings relate to your life and witness in general and ministry context in particular. ...

This is the ideal time to bring up whatever is confusing, or questions you have in regards to the course material, so don’t be shy!

If time permits, feel free to discuss the forum question from last module, or get a jump start on the question for this module: Respond to one of the following statements: (a) “All your religious ‘truth’ claims are simply a ploy to control my life; why submit to Jesus when I’m free right now?”; or (b) “Look how bad the world is; either God doesn’t exist, or isn’t worth trusting”; or (c) “I refuse to trust a being who damns people to suffer in hell for eternity simply because they haven’t heard the ‘good news’ or won’t do what the bully demands”
### Resource 5.1: Postmodernism and Violence

*Postmodernism* is a notoriously difficult ideology to define. Thankfully we’ve already touched on this in Modules 1 and 3, as I raised my concerns over purely modernist apologetics chained to purportedly objective reason and evidence. As such, I’ll just highlight a few sources to help you delve deeper.

- For a popular blog post exploring the rise and fall of postmodernism, see Michael Keller’s “Postmodernism Is Dead” *(Wondering Fair* Blog, October 14, 2013 [here](https://wonderingfair.com/postmodernism-is-dead/)).

- For my own effort to unpack *postmodernism* (the philosophy), distinguish it from *postmodernity* (the social context facing a plurality of choice with no agreed mechanism to weigh alternatives), and the implications for our efforts to commend the Bible to contemporary adolescents, see Benson (“*The Thinking Teen*” 2009d, 51-56). See also Benson (2006) on postmodern apologetics.

- Additionally, you can watch a video of my attempt in a sermon to deconstruct the idolatry of knowledge (both modern knowing built on science/reason and postmodern “knowing” built on pragmatic technique)—a project like the Tower of Babel, sure to fail. See [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=example_video_id).

- Listen to theologian N. T. Wright (3xmp3 sessions) explore “Christian hope in a postmodern age.” Session one (1 hour) in particular is a brilliant, concise, and punchy analysis of the shift between premodernity, modernity, and our current postmodern malaise. Sessions two and three then chart a way forward, by an epistemology (knowing) built on love.

- The notes that follow contain snippets of my session (Benson 2012b) on “Evangelism in a Postmodern Age”. This, in turn, draws on two excellent Lausanne Occasional Papers (LOP 27 and 31; Lausanne is a Movement for World Evangelization). See Reid, Newbigin and Pullinger’s “Modern, Postmodern and Christian” (1996), and “The Uniqueness of Christ in a Postmodern World and the Challenge of World Religions” (2004).

- Many evangelists and apologists operating out of a modernist paradigm (including William Lane Craig) routinely dismiss postmodernism as a watering down and relativisation of the Christian faith’s truth claims. This is unfortunate, and a simplistic, errant reading of the claims of the leading postmodernists. For a helpful and orthodox Christian guide through this minefield, see Jamie Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (2008). And for a more refined literary demolition of popular postmodernism, see Terry Eagleton’s (1996) *The Illusions of Postmodernism*.

In Module 6 we will deal with the particular (and historical) claim that the Bible is a violent text, in turn inspiring acts of violence in the name of religion. In preparation, it is helpful in this Module’s context to introduce the philosophical objection to Christian belief on the grounds of its intrinsic violence. After all, postmodernism may be better understood not as a rationalist epistemological critique of our pretensions to knowledge; instead, postmodernism was birthed as an *ethical* movement concerned over how truth claims mask the will to power, justifying oppression of the defenseless—as seen in countless wars and political movements of the left and right. In the title words of a key essay by Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1989) “Ethics [Must Be Our] First Philosophy”. The following sources will help open up this topic:

- See my extended PhD dissertation “Sacred Texts and Secular Education” (2015b) for a response to the secular claim that Religions and their Revelations are inherently dangerous (pp. 159-173; cf. Cavanaugh 2014). I reframe sacrificial love to avoid claims of the the cross being either *sado masochism* or divine child abuse (pp. 280-290; cf. “Good News for Cutters” Benson 2012c), before making a case that reciprocity and love, rightly framed, emerge from a biblical worldview and can benefit public/secular education (pp. 356-377). In the next section, “Holiness, Reconciliation and Intercultural/Ethical Understanding in English” (pp. 377-396) I include a case study of Emmanuel Levinas’s thought, as a proto-postmodern thinker who critiqued violence in all forms, and called for radical inclusion and embrace of the Other (see pp. 388-395).
Similarly, see Boersma’s (2006) book, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, as he carves out a path for rightly understanding and reappropriating the atonement without falling foul of postmodern critiques that sully the gospel of love and justice. (While not referenced, Nicholas Wolterstorff’s works on *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (2010), and *Justice in Love* (2015), are brilliant to get this relationship right without denying the simplicity/unity of God’s identity and schizophrenically playing love and justice off against each other.)

For a range of readings and files on the theme of “Divine Violence”, see [here](#). Again, re-explored next module, you can see my grappling with God’s forceful intervention (“God’s Two Hands” Benson 2011; “Is God Pro-Genocide?” Benson 2015a), and Dan Paterson’s similar reflections (“Did God Command Genocide?” Paterson 2015) on Moodle.


Finally, addressing the claim that Christianity restricts our freedom, see:


This framing of freedom is in dialogue with philosopher Isaiah Berlin’s classic exploration, “Two Concepts of Liberty” (public lecture at Oxford University, 1958, and later published as a 58 page pamphlet; see youtube explanatory video [here](#)), i.e., negative (“freedom from”) vs. positive freedom (“freedom for”—a positive vision of the good). For a helpful Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy exploration of this concept, see [here](#): “Negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. One has negative liberty to the extent that actions are available to one in this negative sense. Positive liberty is the possibility of acting—or the fact of acting—in such a way as to take control of one’s life and realize one’s fundamental purposes.”

► From your pre-reading for this Module, what is postmodernism, and why is it so difficult to define?

► “The heart of postmodernity is doubt regarding any claims to having ‘The Truth’” (Stackhouse 2002, 22). Why are postmoderns so “incredulous toward all metanarratives”? 

► “The act of knowing is always an act of violence” (Michael Foucault). Postmodernists believe that truth claims merely mask a will to power. Agree or disagree?
3.1 A Potted History of Postmodernity: Pursuing Truth and Freedom

History often moves by dialectic, swinging like a pendulum from one position often to its opposite. Yet history seems to progress in a direction—in the case of the western world, history may be understood as the muddled up pursuit of freedom as we grapple with the nature of truth.

What is our authority for truth—how do we ‘know’? + What is the nature of freedom?

Perhaps this very simplistic sketch will help:

**Premodern era = RELIGION/TRADITION** *(i.e., religion/tradition are our authority for truth)*

*When:* ~Pre-1600

*Authority:* Truth is given to us, by God or King ... hierarchy and tradition are key.

*Freedom:* Found in obedience to the forms given from above

*Problem:* Religious wars exposed violence done by conflicting authorities and abuse under authority

*Christianity:* Luther deconstructed religious authority (Pope and tradition), reducing authority to the Bible, beginning the process of finding common foundations accessible by all

*Transition:* Descartes, Kant and the like in their pursuit of an indubitable foundation built only on reason.

**Modern era (Enlightenment) = REASON/SCIENCE**

*When:* ~1600-1960

*Authority:* Truth is determined by reason and science (rationalism and empiricism)*

*Freedom:* Found in living out the indubitable forms reason (separate from revelation) gives—in government, psychology, sociology, and the like—this is foundationalism, addicted to progress

*Problem:* World Wars and abuse of science revealed that even reason is biased, and truth claims are often a mask for oppression, so governmental and scientific authority were deconstructed

*Christianity:* The Bible was also deconstructed by the dictates of reason, science, history, the Jesus quest and so on. Liberals modified revelation to accord with reason, while fundamentalists detached from science to assert an often naive reading of Scripture as their foundation

*Pivot:* Nietzsche, Freud and Marx (“masters of suspicion”—early deconstruction). More recently, key postmodern thinkers bringing about the change include Wittgenstein, Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault and more.

**Post-Modern era (post-colonial; post-structuralism; post-foundational etc.) = EXPERIENCE**

*When:* ~1960 onwards

*Authority:* Truth is what you make it. Self and one’s experience is the ultimate authority—the autonomous individual following their desires. ‘Truth’ is socially constructed, and used to control others—there is no final connection between our words (identifiers) and reality itself (the object)—so language is a game to get what you want. There is an “incredulity toward all metanarratives” (i.e., big overriding stories of the way the world is). All authority (beyond the autonomous individual) must be deconstructed with an hermeneutic of suspicion that the other is using language to control.

*Freedom:* Found in living out your desires—the consumer self constructs an identity from various resources (whether religious, scientific, or otherwise) in pursuing the happy life, free from any overriding big story of the way the world is: “the mid-narrative of secular happiness”, without reference to God or government

*Problem:* Postmodernism gives us no frame for morality, or critiquing something as good, true or beautiful, leaving us more vulnerable than ever to ‘modernity’ and its manipulation and power games, and also premodernity such as extremism/fundamentalism/terrorism. We are isolated and individualistic yet must find new resources for truth and meaning toward the common good in a fragmented and pluralistic society.

*Christianity:* Reformed epistemologists and fideists reasserted that all knowing is subjective (involves a subject) and thus takes trust/faith. Love is the core of life, so we need a new way of knowing and being.

*Pivot:* Michael Polanyi, Thomas Kuhn, Bernard Lonergan, Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre, N. T. Wright.

---

1 Despite appearances, this is a simplistic sketch of history, for I don’t even touch on the counter-Enlightenment, with the trend toward Romanticism: that we can objectively find what is true, but through emotion and beauty rather than dry rationality. Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* and other books on authenticity, argues that today’s postmodernism is largely in continuity with romanticism, though transposed into a subjective existential key.
SO, key questions for our age are: *Who can I trust* (Truth), and *What leads to life* (Freedom)?

... All of that *simplistically* said, postmodernism is *not* a new thing! As Ravi Zacharias explained, deconstruction began in the first three chapters of Genesis: “Did God *really* say?” Premodernity, modernity and postmodernity exist in each person, simultaneously. A Gen Y non-Christian may hang a crystal in her car for positive power (premodern), choose the best acne cream by active ingredients (modern), and then head out to buy expensive clothes based on what colours make her feel most happy (postmodern).

As many have argued, *postmodernism* is perhaps best understood as *hypermodernity*: modernity radicalized and turned on itself. The very fact we want to be post- something (post-structural; post-colonial; post-modern) shows our addiction to progress, which is an entirely modern obsession. Even the fact that our morality seems ‘relative’ is the fruit of the modern world: science gives us our facts and reduces all of life to matter; in the process, morality (being non-material) is made relative. As Lesslie Newbigin said, “we are pluralist with respect to our values, but not our facts.”

It would seem that there is a difference between *postmodernism* and *postmodernity*.

**Postmodernism** is the philosophical view already explored, in which truth is merely a word-game and all meaning is socially constructed—thus, we must deconstruct with suspicion every truth claim to see how the claimant seeks to oppress us for their own benefit and power. We must actively privilege little stories from minorities to keep the big stories of those in power from dominating. And because there is no ‘truth’, we are free to follow our own desires and experiences as we please.

**Postmodernity**, however, is not tied to any particular philosophy. It is more a generic description of our cultural condition in which we are overwhelmed by a plurality of options (from brands of milk to types of religion and ways to live) with no clear criteria to choose between the options. We may be unclear because we hold there is no truth. Yet for the majority of people, they still believe that there is such a thing as ‘reality’, and that ideally our words should correspond to this reality. They are just not sure how we can judge, or if we could ever know what is ultimately true. And in the absence of certainty, they follow their desires and experience to whatever seems to deliver freedom and happiness.

Either way, given the mixed history of how we got here, and the common perception that Christianity was on the side of asserting its authoritative truth claims to coerce belief, *many postmoderns are unlikely to seriously consider submission to the Lordship of Christ as the path to freedom.*
‘Deconstructionism’ driven to its ultimate end leaves us with no meaning at all. We can say what we like and offer our own ‘angle’ and ‘interpretation’ without reference to reality. The result: gibberish!

(Perhaps this song and clip from Australian band The Bedroom Philosopher will demonstrate it better than I could ever write. It’s called “I’m so postmodern…”)

Postmodernism then is a way-station between modern pride/hubris, and hopefully something better! ... But it is not a place to stay. Having deconstructed everything, the task remains to re-construct a better world in which we want to live. Into this gap are emerging many Christian philosophers offering a path between the naïve realism of modernism, and the radical relativism of postmodernism. It is the path of critical realism, in which we are aware of our limitations and bias (finitude and fallenness), but based upon trust in God’s self-revelation, we have grounds to think, to reason, and ultimately to love—for we can only truly ‘know’ that which we truly love (cf. Module 3).

► “How can Christianity’s claims to truth be taken seriously, when there are so many rival alternatives? No-one can lay claim to possession of the truth. It is all a question of perspective. All claims to truth are equally valid; there is no universal or privileged vantage point which allows anyone to decide what is right and what is wrong. This situation has both significant advantages and drawbacks for the Christian apologist” (McGrath 1992, 225f). What are they? (Cf. Phillips and Okholm 1995; Penner 2013)

► In broad brush strokes, how might you modify your apologetic to better reach today’s postmodern sceptic, a person sceptical of your truth claims and suspicious of your argument as an act of rhetorical violence? (cf. Benson 2012b; Reid, Newbigin and Pullinger 1996; “Uniqueness of Christ” 2013)

Class Activity 5.1—10 minutes

In pairs, try and answer the following question in a 1 minute response:

► How might you answer the two key questions, if sharing with a postmodernist:
  Who can I trust (Truth), and What leads to life (Freedom)?
  Why should they trust that Jesus really is “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6)?

Now, choose one or two of the following questions to discuss together. Report back to the class any questions or insights you feel would help us each better reach postmodernists with the gospel:

► How does postmodernism relate to relativism and pluralism?
► “Postmodernism represents a situation in which the signifier has replaced the signified as the focus of orientation and value” (McGrath 1992, 223). What does this mean, and why is language so central?
► “Baudrillard argued that modern society was trapped in an endless network of artificial sign systems, which meant nothing, and merely perpetuated the belief systems of those who created them” (McGrath, 1992, 224). What assumptions lie behind this assertion? And how does this relate to deconstructionism?
► Stanley Grenz notes two foundational assumptions in the postmodern world: (1) Postmoderns view all explanations of reality as constructions that are useful but not objectively true; (2) Postmoderns deny that we have the ability to step outside our constructions of reality. How does Christian Theism both confirm and challenge these beliefs?
► How is it that postmodernism can be both a reaction against modernism, yet also a radicalized extension of the modern project (i.e., hypermodernity)? Which worldview is, in your view, more consonant with Christianity. Why?
► Few people, if any, are exclusively postmodern. We segment our lives and switch between cognitive styles. In what areas of life do we tend to be premodern, modern, or postmodern?
# Reflection Activity 5.1—Online Students

In place of class discussion, online students are required to complete a series of reflections—four per week. For each reflection activity/question, journal at least 30 (meaningful!) words, and tick off the related boxes in the middle of the Unit Guide.

### #5.1 How might you answer these questions, if sharing with a postmodernist:

- Who can I trust (Truth), and What leads to life (Freedom)?
- Why should they trust that Jesus really is “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6)?

---

## 3.2 The Question of Freedom

### What is FREEDOM? (cf. Benson 2009b, “Christianity Restricts My Freedom” talk)

Read John 8:31-36 as Jesus challenges the thinking of the Pharisees:

> Jesus said to the people who believed in him, “You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

> “But we are descendants of Abraham,” they said. “We have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean, ‘You will be set free’?”

> Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin. A slave is not a permanent member of the family, but a son is part of the family forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free.

- Imagine you are in a prison cell, externally confined by constraints beyond your control. What is freedom from this perspective? This represents negative freedom: “freedom from ...”
- Name a situation in which there are no external constraints—you are following your own desires—and yet you are not truly free.
- What, then, is positive freedom: “freedom for ...”?
- How might Jesus define freedom?

---

## Class Activity 5.2—15 minutes

With a postmodernist in mind, how would you address this question of, and objection to, Christianity?

> “Why should I believe in a God who condemns almost everything I do? All those rules put you in a strait-jacket and restrict your freedom.”

Watch/read Suze’s or Dave’s attempted response (below)—what works, and what is missing?

This will prepare you well for option (a) in Journal 5, responding to this statement:

> “All your religious ‘truth’ claims are simply a ploy to control my life; why submit to Jesus when I’m free right now?”
Reflection Activity 5.2—Online Students

In place of class discussion, online students are required to complete a series of reflections—four per week. For each reflection activity/question, journal at least 30 (meaningful!) words, and tick off the related boxes in the middle of the Unit Guide.

#5.2 In what sense is a Christian who follows an authoritative text and obeys an all powerful God more free than either the modern who follows only the dictates of science, or a postmodern who follows her own desires?

Suzanne Arulogun (2016) shared this response to the question, “Does God Restrict Your Freedom” here:

From “Caught Out” Discussion Guide, question 10 pp40-43: FREEDOM response by Dave Benson:

For all the reasons I’ve heard for rejecting Christianity, this objection tends to be central. Often we don’t want to believe, because it will interfere with our freedom. We don’t want the whole God thing to be true, because we don’t want any authority telling us what to do. Following Jesus cramps my style and constrains my sexuality.

I get why you feel this way. Perhaps getting drunk and casual sex are your definition of fun. Why tie yourself to a rule-based club? Besides which, some Christians are so religious and serious that they look out of place at anything but a funeral.

But what is freedom? Is it merely the absence of constraint, to do what you wanna’ do, and be what you wanna’ be? If so, then Christianity is a loss of freedom. I’ve made an unconditional commitment to follow Jesus—to discipline my life according to His teaching.

But is that all freedom is? Think of all those bad habits we have—binging on chocolate, ogling internet porn, cutting our flesh, injecting illicit drugs. In Australia we’re free to do as we want ... but are we really “free” if we can’t control our own will? No wonder these same “free” people willingly submit to the authority of coaches and counsellors to help discipline their desires.

We’re all looking for someone to trust who leads us to life.

Freedom is more than the absence of constraint. A train is most free when it’s secured to the tracks, not when it rides rough-shod over the dirt. Trains were designed to run on tracks. Likewise, freedom always comes with a form.

Lungs come alive with oxygen, plants come alive in soil, fish come alive in the sea, and the heart comes alive pumping blood. Like the banks of a river, the right form channels our vitality, energy and affections toward life.

As part of the Logos apologetics ministry, Suze worked from and modified my original answer, in the text below: Benson (2009a, discussion guide question 10 pp40-43). This in turn drew upon Keller (2008a).
So here’s where our discussion moves beyond words. Jesus says that if you keep returning to the same harmful habits, then you’re not free. You’re a *slave* to selfishness, a slave to sin. But, Jesus claims that if anyone—and that includes you—if *anyone* follows Him and lives in His form, the rhythms of grace … “then you’ll know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

This is not a proposition to argue over. It’s a challenge to accept or reject. Try it and see.

Remember, this was the same Jesus who went to wild parties—a friend to prostitutes, drunkards, and tax collectors. He didn’t judge or condemn. He just offered a better way.

Have you taken up Jesus’ challenge? Have you tried His form? If not, how can you be so sure that Jesus *isn’t* trustworthy. Ask someone who has, and hear the difference it makes.

And I’m starting to understand why Jesus brings freedom. It’s because *love* is the most liberating form. “Love God, love others”—this summarizes all the Bible’s commands. It’s more an invitation to life than an imposition. But not only do we get the right form … we also connect to the power source. For God is Love. If love is more than an emotion—if love is a commitment—then surely *binding myself to the source of love is the path to freedom*.

It’s in choosing to follow Jesus that I’ve really found my life. We’re all worried about being used, or controlled, or manipulated. But at the heart of the Christian message is Jesus—the God man—who gave up all of His freedoms to show us how to live. Free to find all we were made to be. Free to find joy and happiness even during the toughest times. Free to love. And because He first loved me, I can love Him, and I can love others. And in so doing, I can be free.

### 3.3 Extended thoughts on Apologetics in the Postmodern Age (Benson 2006; 2012b)

**Apologetics and World-Views—a changing scene**

Apologetics is both a science and an art. It must be ‘audience-centered’. “An apologetic that is insensitive to human individuality and the variety of situations in which people find themselves is going to get nowhere—fast.” As such, as predominant world-views shift, we must modify our apologetic to commend the time-full truths and relevance of the gospel—with fresh eyes.

Time have indeed changed. Many have noted that modernity is dying, and postmodernity is now flourishing. Modernity, dominant from roughly 1789 through 1989 (though some, such as Oden, consider its demise to be in the 1960s), was characterised by confidence in human reason, a belief in inevitable progress, use of science to ascertain absolute truth, and the quest for a unified base to morality, essentially without needing to include God or anything super-natural. Nature was God. Leo Tolstoy once remarked that modern man mistook what limited life for life itself. Apologetics during this period typically considered the common ground with unbelievers, commending the faith as ‘true’ based upon a strictly correspondence definition of truth (consistency, completeness, correspondence). It was framed with arguments, point-making, rationality, and was often high-brow—too complicated to connect with the layperson. It would lay out ‘irrefutable’ evidences, construct proofs convincing only to those sharing the same assumptions, and brow-beat unbelievers to concede defeat in the face of a superior belief system. Clearly this is portraying a more extreme, and dysfunctional mode of modern apologetics, yet this was common all the same.

---

Enter Post-Modernity

Modernity failed. No unified approach to rationality and morality has been accepted, and the two world-wars have cast a shadow of inevitable progress to perfection, and even the inherent ‘goodness’ of knowledge. Knowledge can be used for oppression.

In reaction, existentialism saw that there was essentially no meaning—separating knowledge from experience. Nihilism saw that all was pointless—death about the only certainty. Finally, the postmodernist world-view emerged, seeking to do away with the old oppressive metanarratives. Its core characteristic: “doubt regarding any claims to having the truth.” It emphasises experience and relevance and meaning over facts, contends that ‘truth’ is socially constructed (inherently perspectival and subjective), and instead seeks to encourage localized narratives to celebrate diversity and pluralism as a guard against more oppression at the hands of the arrogant and naive who believe they hold the ‘truth’. Relativism reigns, with your ‘truth’ equal to my ‘truth’, and consumerism dictates much of how we live: the ‘self’ is the source and goal of all truth—using language to get what you want. Designer religion and generic spirituality that seems to ‘meet your needs’ is celebrated. People want to know ‘what’s in it for them?’ We approach all making truth claims with a hermeneutic of suspicion, deconstructing their claims to find their agenda, and constructing meaning for ourselves.

Tough Questions and a Biblical Approach

The cultural climate makes apologetics difficult. As Stackhouse points out, there is a general resistance as an epistemological condition, opposing certainty and ‘truth’ as naïve and foolishly dogmatic—we must therefore be humble (epistemologically, rhetorically and spiritually). Our society is concerned for multiculturalism, where everyone gets along. As such there is a moral concern about imposing one’s ‘superior’ beliefs hegemonically on another—this is impolite at best, oppressive at worst. Practically, politics and religion are avoided to remove ‘unnecessary’ tension in a pluralistic society that just wants to get along. The barriers are many, yet if we really love the lost, then we will need to find new ways of commending the truth and beauty of the faith in blessing those outside God’s shalom.

Many wonder if apologetics is still valid in a society that no longer believes in objective truth. What strategy provides postmodern relevance yet preserves the gospel’s purity? Ambivalence has replaced dogmatism at the apologetic pulpit. Should we jettison our offensive meta-narrative, focusing on ‘lure,’ or continue, unchanged? This questions have tended to polarise many Christians, including apologists. Responses have varied. Craig debunks postmodernism as self-defeating; evidentialism still holds the key. (This can, at times, equate to a double conversion: first the non-believer is converted from postmodernism to modernism; then we can use our traditional modernist apologetic approaches.) Sire promotes epistemological humility, championing reason and rhetoric through sharing our story. Kenneson embraces postmodernism, celebrating objective truth’s demise. Christianity is attractive when genuinely lived.

---

6 See Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis Okholm, ed., *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*.
9 Philip D. Kenneson, “There’s No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It’s a Good Thing, Too,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Phillips and Okholm, 156, 166, 169.
Somewhere in between is a biblical worldview. This must be the foundation for any apologetic approach, not simply the ideas of man.\textsuperscript{10} Man-made philosophies take us captive: beware.\textsuperscript{11} God abhors both passionless, pride-filled, fruitless knowledge,\textsuperscript{12} and ignorant zeal which leads to death.\textsuperscript{13} Truth exists, and matters.\textsuperscript{14} Yet, God meets our deepest longings.\textsuperscript{15} Modernity elevated truth, yet excluded its founder. Postmodernity elevates experience, yet ignores the giver and his guidelines.\textsuperscript{16} Test everything: keep what’s good; reject what’s bad.\textsuperscript{17} Fusion, not elimination, is our path: truth \textit{and} transformation; reality \textit{and} relevance.\textsuperscript{18}

We must preach within this tension. This balancing act\textsuperscript{19} requires ‘straight shooting’ in truth (lest the cross become empty\textsuperscript{20}), whilst using all means to save some.\textsuperscript{21} Compromise is no option. Love compels us, however, to accommodate.\textsuperscript{22} We dare not add to the offence of the cross through poor homiletics.\textsuperscript{23} We must stay true to God whilst loving the lost.

It must be mentioned that postmodernity has opened up some new opportunities. By widening the definition of truth to include ‘trust’, we can get to the heart of the gospel, which is not a premise but a person: Christ. We can engage in a more co-operative dialogue which is less likely to harden their heart in pride, as we commend what makes sense and works for us to them for their genuine good. We can reach not just one’s mind with arguments, but affections and heart with stories and creative approaches. Finally, we can reach the populace, not just a select group of intellectuals, with less complicated arguments, appealing to self-evident beauty in Christ, that even makes sense to a child. Postmodernism may have levelled all ‘truth’ claims, but it has opened the door for Christianity to return to the cultural discussion table after a long period of social disenfranchisement.

So, how then to best apologetically engage postmoderns? In essence, two main approaches commend themselves, both considered below:

(1) \textit{Work within} postmodernism to draw postmoderns to Christ through appeal

(2) \textit{Challenge} postmodernism, in helping reconstruct a more biblical world-view in which the gospel can be better received and appropriated.

\textsuperscript{10} Cf. Proverbs 3:5-7; Jeremiah 17:5-8; Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 2:16.
\textsuperscript{11} Cf. Colossians 2:8; 2 Corinthians 10:5.
\textsuperscript{12} Cf. Psalm 10:4; 1 Corinthians 8:1b; 2 Timothy 2:14; James 2:19; Revelation 3:15-16.
\textsuperscript{13} Cf. Proverbs 14:12; Jeremiah 7:28; Hosea 4:6; Romans 10:2.
\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Psalm 34:8; John 6:35; Revelation 22:17.
\textsuperscript{16} Cf. Romans 1:25; James 1:17. See also Loscalzo, \textit{Apologetic Preaching}, 85.
\textsuperscript{17} Cf. Romans 12:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:21.
\textsuperscript{18} “Reliability and relevance thus go hand in hand within effective Christian apologetics.” McGrath, \textit{Intellectuals Don’t Need God}, 74.
\textsuperscript{19} Lundun captures well this balancing act, recognising that there is a serious difference between “a Christian apologetic that engages the postmodern world seriously but critically and one that capitulates to that world by appropriating its vocabulary and assumptions.” Roger Lundin, “The Pragmatics of Postmodernity,” in \textit{Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World}, ed. Phillips and Okholm, 33.
\textsuperscript{20} Cf. Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 1:17; 2 Corinthians 10:5; 2 Timothy 2:15.
\textsuperscript{21} Cf. 1 Corinthians 9:22; Colossians 4:5-6.
\textsuperscript{22} Cf. Hebrews 4:15. Like Christ, sinless yet a friend of sinners, thus the perfect and only High Priest.
\textsuperscript{23} Cf. Galatians 1:11.
Consideration of Specific Themes—practical postmodern apologetics

#1. Working Within Postmodernism: Insights and Responses.

1) Truth is seen as socially constructed and oppressive
The overall rejection of metanarratives has opened the door for localized narratives, told subjectively, of one’s personal experience of God. It offers goodness, rather than demanding a response. Testimonies are a great avenue for this approach. The postmodernists applies deconstructionism with a hermeneutic of suspicion to our claims. Yet, we can use the greatest story of all, Christ’s sacrifice, to show how this truth is used to set us free (John 8:32). Like the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:45-46), we can picture people (and indeed ourselves) laying down our own agenda in submission to Christ, because we have found something more appealing, satisfying and beautiful. God’s identification with the suffering helps offset the tendency of metanarratives to oppress. Some truth does oppress (as we saw with Stalinist Russia and the subsequent body count), but not all truth (e.g. breaking down of apartheid in South Africa). The cross is the contradiction of all imperialisms.

2) ‘Objective’ truth and correspondence are rejected
As such, widening our definition of truth to include ‘trust’ in the face of uncertainty, linking with stories of relational trust (e.g. no relationship will succeed if there isn’t any trust), we can break through this barrier. Stories can be told to show the trust-worthiness of Christ as a guide in life, and as a saviour. This transformation is offered to them in story: “This could be for you, too, if you choose.”

3) Rhetoric is prized over reason, to get what you want
Whilst not distorting the gospel to appeal to man, in the Saviour we see a mirror image of ourselves—a correspondence between the nature of the Saviour and the ones He came to save. He brings love; we need love. He conquers death; we are fearful. He brings peace and comfort in an uncertain world; we are anxious. He brings forgiveness; we feel guilt. As mentioned earlier (from McGrath’s points of contact), we can use language beautifully to draw people to Christ, rather than simply condemning culture. We must equally emphasise rhetoric and reason. The arts, such as music (cf. the success of groups such as Switchfoot, singing in a secular market yet appealing to real needs), drama and the like must be employed to connect, in “offering as much as possible.”

4) Certainty is abhorred.
As such, rather than seeking to prove our position, we can commend its plausibility using “graduated assent” and a cumulative case analysis for best fit: we ask “what makes best sense to you of the world we witness?” We can approach the issue side-by-side, rather than confrontationally, together dialoguing to find what seems to best approximate the truth, all the while aware of the subjective nature of knowledge. Postmodernists hate being confined in discussion, so use of stories and even image (e.g. Salvador Dali’s image of Christ on the cross) for an open discussion of meaning allows each person to “work the angles” and find meaning rather than have it forced on them. Again, using stories to embody truth is a key approach in this, using narrative to get past the “watchful dragons” of one’s intellect (as Lewis put it).

---

24 Stackhouse, Humble Apologetics, 164.
25 Stackhouse, Humble Apologetics, 180.
26 Ibid., 96-99.
5) Pluralism is celebrated, hegemony is despised
Instead of quoting DWEMs (Dead White European Males) and the “all too alive white males” who maintain a certain position, postmodern apologetics will use a variety of voices, both male and female, from all cultures and demographics. To convey the message. Christ offers salvation not just to male Caucasians, but to all people. All can be transformed in Him. He is no respecter of persons. Additionally, with the silencing of religious discussions, we have a culture that is post-Christian in attitude (“We’ve been there and done that—why return?”), yet pre-Christian in understanding. Clear teaching rather than preaching will have greater effect. We have a place at the table for discussions, and can gently use this opportunity.

6) Consumerism and experience dictate what postmodernists embrace
As mentioned earlier, points of contact are crucial. Broadening out from this, however, we can point out the genuine issues in our culture. Does consumerism really satisfy? We have the greatest wealth, yet the highest depression rates. We can show how the beauty and fulfilment we seek in nature, relationships, sex, money and the like is fleeting, as it is really a pointer to the creator who gives only good gifts. We can point out that Christianity works because it’s true, using the element of the gospel that best connects to where they’re at, as a starting point. From there we can unleash the full resources of the gospel.

7) Postmodernists are mosaic thinkers with a love of image
More as a condition of postmodernity, we are over stimulated. A word-based message only is boring and will rarely connect. Our message can utilise imagination, image, use audio-visual resources such as powerpoint, music, movies and the like, all to build bridges and connect. The message is, also, our lives. The greatest witness to a postmodernist may be seeing us caring for someone without material gain—this makes no sense apart from God. Authenticity disarms an image-is-everything generation.

Challenging Postmodernism: Insights and Responses.

8) All beliefs are equally good?
2 Corinthians 10:5 gives us warrant to graciously, yet firmly, challenge and bring down all beliefs that set themselves up against the knowledge of God. Cognitive dissonance can be used in a Schaefferian-style dialogue to highlight the self-referencing (self-refuting, contradictory) nature of postmodernism.27 “There is no truth.” Is that true? “All beliefs are equally valid.” Is a dictatorship bringing death equivalent to a balanced democracy? Is it equivalent to save a Jew as to kill a Jew as did Nazism? Postmodernism does not have the resources to stop the next holocaust. When we see evil, we gutturally respond with unbelief and anger, but if postmodernism is correct, there is no right and wrong—is it socially constructed. Dialogue can help shake one’s foundation, opening them up to another way—a more grounded world-view.

A Closing Word—what matters most

One of the greatest challenges to Christians in a postmodern age is that we can’t simply point to evidences and arguments outside ourselves. It may suit for a bumper sticker to say “Don’t look at me, look at Him [Jesus],” yet is doesn’t “cut it” with a postmodern audience. If our lives don’t match up to our profession, then our rhetoric will be seen to be vacuous. Ultimately love is our greatest apologetic in reaching the postmodern, and indeed all people (1 Corinthians 13), modelling a community of compassion that beats with the heart of God. No approach will be effective without love positioned centrally. This is the greatest challenge.

---

27 McGrath models this well in Intellectuals Don’t Need God, 175-80.
For those of you who prefer plain English to essay form, here’s a response I wrote to a friend asking how we, as Christians, should understand and engage postmodernists:

1) Every person compartmentalizes and moves almost seamlessly between different thinking styles in different contexts—the professional nurse thinks like a modern in her workplace while administering medication, like a premodern in her Catholic mass while taking holy communion, and then like a postmodern in her morality and reasoning as she questions any one’s assertion that she shouldn’t be living with her boyfriend or hanging a crystal for good luck off her rear-vision mirror.

2) Thus, modern approaches like in some apologetics are not irrelevant. You need to find where they’re coming from, and what is their particular objection. I’ve found many postmodern relativists justify their approach because it is built upon an implicit acceptance of an evolutionary/naturalistic (modern) view of the world. Once this foundation is exposed as cracked and unable to support the edifice thereupon, they’re often more open to talking about faith in Christ.

3) Just watch for the postmodern 2 step: (1) proposing all is relative; (2) now that all is relative, asserting that your view is really the one by which to understand all others—i.e., postmodernism. It’s ironic that the postmodern stance—often held to safeguard against any oppressive claim—leaves itself more open than modernity to oppressive systems. By relativising all beliefs, without criteria for truth, they’re most at risk of being manipulated and dominated by whoever has the catchiest slogan and slickest subjective lures. Thankfully, even though Christianity has a metanarrative, it subverts all other metanarratives and the will to power. Christ on the cross reveals a truth-bearer whose claims were used to liberate the poor and weak, through absorbing evil. Thus, though it has been abused—because of fallen human nature, and in tension with Jesus’ own life and teaching—it isn’t inherently totalizing, evil, or oppressive. In many cases, Christianity has been the preferred option of the poor and struggling, so who is the postmodernist to block people from choosing what they deem to bring freedom?

4) Some of the beliefs in postmodernity are consonant with Christianity. We are limited/finite (thus can’t know everything) and biased/fallen (thus even what we think we know is commonly misunderstood and interpreted for our own gain). Thus, we concur that our thinking isn’t perfect, and epistemically we can’t be 100% certain. Nevertheless, all knowledge is personal and has both a subject and an object—the subjective-objective split is artificial (cf. Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*). I commend to all people that we should—rather than throwing our arms up in despair—seek the explanation that has the most warrant for believing in it, and follow that wholeheartedly even while expanding our knowledge. We bump up against something—reality?—everyday that needs explaining, and ultimately one cannot live without commitment of some kind. Thus, I commend Christianity as *warranted*, even *reasonable* (using the criteria of coherence, completeness, correspondence and liveability—not modern criteria, but self-evident as we use these in all we do), and even most *plausible* of the views I’ve explored, in making sense of my life and experience in the world. Finally, I commend it as an experiential hypothesis—that ‘truth’ is ultimately a person who can be experienced if we’re willing to step out in faith. For knowledge is our base for faith, yet faith well placed leads to knowledge otherwise unobtainable. (Faith is here defined as cantilevering your life over what we don’t know, grounded in what we think we know).

5) Okay, this is getting too long. Sorry! Last point. Rick Richardson wrote an excellent book called *Evangelism Outside the Box* (2000), explaining practically the implications of postmodernity for how we most effectively share. He says on pages 45-46, “In medieval culture, truth was religious and universal. In modern culture, truth was scientific and universal. In a postmodern world, truth is EXPERIENTIAL and PERSONAL or COMMUNAL.” Thus, he suggests on pages 51-52 (a bit too broadly, as it’s not true of every person, but more a tendency), “First, people today are looking for truth that is experiential, for communities in which faith is lived out and for spiritual experiences that are tangible and real.

SO EXPERIENCE COMES BEFORE EXPLANATION. ... Second, people today are looking for a safe and accepting community in which to work out their identity. SO BELONGING COMES BEFORE BELIEVING. ... Third, the battle for allegiance today is a battle for people’s spiritual and moral imagination. SO IMAGE COMES BEFORE WORD.” Also, on page 96 he suggests that “the postmodern asks two questions before ‘Is it true?” those being: 1. Is it attractive? Does it bring relational harmony? Does it enrich human life? Would it enrich my life?; 2. Is it relevant? Does it work? Would it make my life better? Would it improve society? After these questions are addressed, they will be open to asking, ‘Is it true?’ in a more conceptual or evidential sense.” Anyway, hopefully that’s helpful, Dave
4. EVIL AND SUFFERING, TEMPORAL AND ETERNAL

In this session, we will focus upon arguably the greatest objection to Christian belief. The existence of evil, and the reality of suffering—both now in this world, and the possibility of conscious eternal torment in Hell to come—pose what for many is an insoluble philosophical and existential barrier to trusting God. Even as Alvin Plantinga’s “free will defense” has moved us past the logical problem of evil—i.e. the strong and imperative claim that God cannot be all powerful, all knowing and loving, and yet evil happens—we are still faced by a comparative claim, the probabilistic problem of evil: it seems highly unlikely that this kind of ‘God’ exists given the sheer amount of suffering and apparent evil in the world.

How, then, to answer?

We will focus primarily upon temporal suffering, watching a video and constructing our own responses. However, the sub-sections and resource boxes also deal with the existence of evil, the person of Satan, and the nature of Hell. As per the forum question for this Module, you have a range of options:

Respond to one of the following statements:
(a) “All your religious ‘truth’ claims are simply a ploy to control my life; why submit to Jesus when I’m free right now?” (cf. §3.2); or
(b) “Look how bad the world is; either God doesn’t exist, or isn’t worth trusting” (cf. §4.1-4.2); or
(c) “I refuse to trust a being who damns people to suffer in hell for eternity simply because they haven’t heard the ‘good news’ or won’t do what the bully demands” (cf. §4.3)

Resource 5.2
See the reference list for any sources without hyperlinks. Concerning suffering, see the following:

- Given our combined focus this module on postmodernism, violence and suffering, it’s best to start with my essay, “Embodied Truth: The Importance of Stories in Apologetic Preaching that Crosses the Postmodern Divide” (Benson 2006). The best chapters to read giving a broad ranging apologetic in response to suffering are Keller (2008b; cf. 2015b video below) and Zacharias (2007). And the most wide-ranging and constructive debate I have seen on this topic that keeps sight of the personal dimension is between John Lennox and Gideon Rosen (2012).
- If you’re after a book-length treatment of the topic of suffering, see Keller (2015a), C. S. Lewis’s classic The Problem of Pain (1940), Stackhouse (2009), Kreft (1987) and Alcorn (2014). The classic philosophical treatment, and the basis of the “free will defense”—that true love requires “free will” (or at least, genuine choice, albeit shaped/conditioned by our environment/society/genes), and free will in this life requires the possibility of spurning God’s love, which opens the door to suffering/evil as rebellion—comes from Plantinga’s God, Freedom and Evil (2008).
- For more popular video and blog responses, as a model for your own response, see Benson “Caught Out: Quick Answers to Tough Questions” (2009a Discussion Guide, 40-43; video excerpt here), Benson “Good News for Cutters” (2012c), Benson “Why Jesus Won’t Heal Disabilities” (2014), Benson “Nanna’s Rainbows in the Tears” (Wonderingfair Blog, December 5, 2013), Burkhalter “Where Is God for the Suffering, Starving and Freezing?” (2014), and Paterson’s blog series on “Christianity and Suffering” (2014a, Pt. 1, 2, 3, 4). Bogost (2013) also has an interesting piece, not coming from a Christian perspective, but using “Google” company ethics as an inroad to the cultural problem of relativising good and evil to corporate gain.
- For speaker’s manuscripts of 30+ minute apologetic talks, see Benson “Making Sense of Suffering” (2009c), Paterson “Why Suffering?” (2014c, podcast and booklet), and Paterson “If God, Why Suffering” (2014b manuscript and powerpoint). For a collection of thoughts on God and suffering, download this Logos pdf booklet from here.
Over recent years, we have realised how inadequate are primarily rationalist responses to the problem of suffering. Notice, for instance, the contrast between C. S. Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain* (1940), and his gut wrenching pseudonymous book *A Grief Observed* (2015 [1961]), after the loss of his wife to cancer—also reflected in his personal letters to Sheldon Vanauken after his wife similarly died, recorded in *A Severe Mercy: A Story of Faith, Tragedy and Triumph* (Vanauken 2009). For a most powerful emotional and theological exploration of this grief, see Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son* (2009). Two of the most poignant books and classics, thankfully combined in one volume, taking this person–theological approach, are by Philip Yancy, *Where Is God When It Hurts? And Disappointment with God* (1996)—I’ve given away many copies of these gems to people searching for real answers amidst pain.

Following on from the personal/fideist approach, there has been a growing recognition of the ugliness of evil and the beauty of holiness and creativity especially in the midst of being pulverized by suffering. This has opened the door to artistic and literary/narrative explorations of suffering as perhaps more holistic than offering logical arguments. See, for instance, Tallon *The Poetics of Evil: Toward an Aesthetic Theodicy* (2011), Edvard Munch’s painting “The Scream” (1893), Edward Shillito’s post WWI poem, “Jesus of the Scars”, Shūsaku Endō’s Japanese classic *Silence* (2017; cf. reflection by Benson 2017), Fujimura *Silence and Beauty: Hidden Faith Born of Suffering* (2016; see introductory video on the website here), and Rob Bell’s *Drops Like Stars: A Few Thoughts on Creativity and Suffering* (2012a, with preview and full youtube talk here). For a powerful 12 minute video/documentary on how a teacher’s life, amidst significant family turmoil, brought out such beauty in others, see “Wright’s Law” (2012).

4.1 The Problem of Suffering

Consider what many grant is a **valid argument**. That is, if we grant the premises, the conclusion follows.

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
2. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all evil.
3. If God is omniscient, then God knows when evil exists.
4. If God is morally perfect, then God has the desire to eliminate all evil.
5. Evil exists.
6. If evil exists and God exists, then either God doesn’t have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn’t know when evil exists, or doesn’t have the desire to eliminate all evil.
7. Therefore, God doesn’t exist.

► **Is this a sound argument, however?** That is, are each of the premises correct? Where you do disagree? With reference to “the big story”, how might you reframe this argument?
Class Activity 5.3—30 minutes

(1) In pairs, take one minute each to try and answer the following question/objection:

If God is good and powerful, why is the world so bad?
I won’t believe in a God who allows suffering.
Maybe God exists. Maybe not. But if he does, he can’t be trusted.

(2) Remember back to the Meta-Apologetic Model from Module 2:

a. What hopes and fears are common to my neighbour, with whom I will dialogue?
b. What terms and concepts must be clarified for a productive dialogue to ensue?
c. What genuine admissions should I make to begin the dialogue?
d. How could I defend the plausibility of Christianity in light of the key objections?
e. How could I commend the credibility, relevance & attractiveness of Christianity to the Other?
f. What other actions—corollary apologetics—add tangibility, strengthening the dialogue?

With these six questions in mind, watch this objection to God’s existence on the basis of theodicy:

(Bouncing off Module 4, you might like to map the structure of his assertions (roof) and arguments (walls), testing the structural integrity of his claims. This helps to expose the weakness, and reframe his genuine concerns within a more rigorous and Bible centred structure.)

(3) Discuss in pairs what most impacted you in Stephen Fry’s answer. Then, jot some solid points you would make in response, using the 6 key questions above.

(4) With reference to “the big story” (Designed for Good, Damaged by Evil, Restored for Better, Sent Together to Heal, God sets everything right), map out a 3 minute response to the initial question (1 above)
Reflection Activity 5.3—Online Students

In place of class discussion, online students are required to complete a series of reflections—four per week. For each reflection activity/question, journal at least 30 (meaningful!) words, and tick off the related boxes in the middle of the Unit Guide.

#5.3 Drawing on your own experiences, what stories would you share in responding to a non-Christian friend who doubts God’s goodness (or even existence) because of their personal suffering?

From “Caught Out” Discussion Guide, SUFFERING response by Dave Benson—

“If God is good and powerful, why is the world so bad?”
I won’t believe in a God who allows suffering.
Maybe God exists. Maybe not. But if he does, he can’t be trusted.”

This challenge gets to the heart of all our lives. We’ve all been touched by tragedy. Car crashes, family breakdown, bankruptcy, sickness, death. In the face of all this suffering, there’s something deep within that knows “This is not the way the world is supposed to be.” But how do we explain this?

Suffering poses a problem for everyone. Take two examples: In Hinduism, your suffering is bad karma working its way out in the present reincarnation—it’s justice. And in Atheism, humanity only exists because we outlasted the opposition—only the strongest deserve to survive. In most belief systems, suffering is the way the world is supposed to be. It may not be our preference, but on what basis can we judge it as “wrong” or “evil,” or say we should help the hurting? The fact that we all believe some things to be evil, and suffering to be bad, suggests that there must be some ultimate standard of good and evil. And to speak of an ultimate standard is to speak of God. If anything, suffering is evidence for God.
Now, it’s easy to say that God should have made a world without suffering. But what would it take? I suffered a broken neck back in 1998. I could blame God for it, but ultimately the pain came from my poor choices plus natural laws like gravity.

God could step in every time and re-arrange the universe for a soft landing, but then would we really be free? Without freedom, there can be no love. And love is the greatest thing of all. God has geared this life so you can accept or reject His love. But He won’t force His love on anyone. A world without suffering is a world of mindless, loveless robots.

God made us to love him, love each other, and lovingly care for this world. Instead, we’ve each despised God, abused each other, and vandalized our planet. In a world designed for relationship, our choices affect others. Good and evil run through every heart, and the blood of the world is on every hand. Blaming God for this is to miss our personal responsibility.

Christianity makes sense of why your suffering is not the way it’s supposed to be. We’re in a good world gone bad. But to speak of “God-and-suffering” is to miss the heart of our story. For God entered the story to set things right. The problem looks radically different when we speak of “God-in-Jesus-and-suffering.”

Did Jesus sit idly by and watch our pain? He healed the sick, set captives free, and comforted those grieving. In my experience, He’s still doing this today. When we’re in pain, smart answers don’t help. We need a wounded healer to stay by our side. As I was paralysed, I pictured Jesus immobilized on a cross. I’d sinned. He hadn’t. He picked up the tab for all our sin that causes so much suffering. He is the God with scars. So God suffers too. He enters into this mystery. Even more, He defeats death and grounds my hope that one day He will resurrect the whole cosmos and us with it to a world without suffering—no more tears, no more brokenness, just a loving embrace. In this God I can trust. That’s how I make sense of suffering.

**Some extra thoughts in response to my response …**

“No one likes to suffer, but is all suffering worthless? Just because suffering appears pointless to me, does that mean it is pointless? Think of a parent allowing their child to be stabbed with a needle for immunization. The child can’t understand, but yet good can come through the pain. When someone can’t feel any pain, we don’t call this “good” … we call it “leprosy.” Suffering and pain serves a function in this world. Surely an all knowing God may have reasons for allowing suffering that bring greater good, that are presently beyond our understanding. Through suffering God alerts us to what matters most, he shapes our character, and he unites us through the pain. Suffering acts as God’s megaphone to wake up a deaf world.”

“As we complain about God allowing suffering, it’s easy to forget that out of the greatest evil and injustice, the greatest good came. Jesus, God in the flesh, had committed no wrong, and He was killed on our behalf. Yet out of this God brought about forgiveness and freedom available to anyone willing to receive his gift. This isn’t just a one-off, either. In Genesis 50:20 Joseph remembers his tragic life of abuse by his brothers, then decades of imprisonment. Yet after it all he says that what they meant for evil, God meant for good, so that literally millions of people would survive the famine in Egypt under his wise rule. What if this isn’t just an outlier, but the pattern? If Nelson Mandela was never imprisoned, would apartheid have been dismantled? If Martin Luther King wasn’t assassinated, would his dream of racial equality have become a reality? I wonder, then, how we can ever fairly judge that there is too much suffering, when perhaps at least some suffering is necessary for the good we take for granted.”
“God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers. The pain and fallenness of humanity have entered into his heart. Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God.

... And great mystery: to redeem our brokenness and lovelessness the God who suffers with us did not strike some mighty blow of power but sent his beloved son to suffer like us, through his suffering to redeem us from suffering and evil. Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it.

But I never saw it. Though I confessed that the man of sorrows was God himself, I never saw the God of sorrows. Though I confessed the man bleeding on the cross was the redeeming God, I never saw God himself on the cross, blood from sword and thorn and nail dripping healing into the world’s wounds. What does this mean for life, that God suffers? I’m only beginning to learn.

When we think of God the Creator, then we naturally see the rich and powerful of the earth as his closest image. But when we hold steady before us the sight of God the Redeemer redeeming from sin and suffering by suffering, then perhaps we must look elsewhere for earth’s closest icon. Where? Perhaps to the face of that woman with soup tin in hand and bloated child at side. Perhaps that is why Jesus said that inasmuch as we show love to such a one, we show love to him.”


4.1.1 Different Apologetic Angles on Suffering (cf. Boa & Bowman 2001)

*If God does exist, why does he permit evil?*

Ask ten non-Christians at random to give two objections to the Christian faith, and very likely nine of them will mention what is known as the problem of evil: How is it that there is evil in the world created by an all-powerful and all-loving God? Christian apologists respond to this challenge with different argumentative strategies. Some argue for the coherence of the Christian worldview as inclusive of evil and suffering. Others contend that the question is impudent and cannot be rationally answered. As this is probably the number one objection to the Christian faith, apologists must wrestle seriously with this question.

**Classical Approach (Reason): - Is theism coherent?**

* deductive problem of evil: is theism inconsistent? (i.e. is it logical to have a good/powerful God + evil?)
* beginning: evil is the result of the free choice of creatures
* end: a world with evil now is the best possible way to get the best possible world: where free creatures can respond to God’s love and spend eternity in relationship on a renewed earth.

**Evidential Approach (Evidence): - Is theism likely?**

* inductive problem of evil: is theism likely? (i.e. are there counter-warrants, despite evil, to believe God exists and God is good?)
* evidence for God holds up despite the problem of evil

**Reformed Approach (Scripture): - Is God sovereign?**

* theological problem of evil: did God cause sin?
* evil can only be deemed evil if God exists

**Fideist Approach (Experience): - Is God trustworthy?**

* personal problem of evil: how do I trust God in the midst of evil and suffering?
* God shows His goodness in Christ’s suffering
4.1.2 Sample Dialogues on Suffering

The following two dialogues, both taken from Boa & Bowman (2001), might make these different apologetic angles on suffering more tangible. Additionally, they give a great model for PE420 students of the kind of dialogue you are to construct for your final research assignment.

(A) Classical Apologist “Tom” on the Logic of Suffering (Boa & Bowman 2001, 140-144)

In this dialogue, a Christian named Tom becomes involved in a discussion with Sarah and Murali while waiting in line to see a movie. Tom is a computer programmer. He has read widely in philosophy and apologetics; his favorite author is C. S. Lewis. In fact, he has brought a copy of Lewis’s Problem of Pain with him to read while waiting to see the movie. Sarah notices the book and asks him about it:

Sarah: That book sounds interesting. What’s it about?

Tom: It’s about the question of why there is pain and death in the world if the world was made by an all-powerful and all-loving God.

Sarah: That seems like an obvious contradiction to me.

Tom: Yes, I know it seems like one. But I think it’s only an apparent contradiction, not a real one. I think a good answer can be given that will resolve the problem.

Murali: Excuse me, may I say something? This question is of interest to me as well.

Tom: Sure. By the way, my name’s Tom. What’s yours?

Murali: Murali. I am from India.

Sarah: My name’s Sarah. Nice to meet you guys.

Tom: Likewise. Murali, you were going to say something?

Murali: Yes. You said you thought there was a good answer to the question about evil in the world if God is good. I have found that there are many religions and they all have answers that satisfy the people who believe them. I do not believe there is only one right answer to the question.

Tom: Let me ask you a question, then. Do you think all the answers given to this question by the different world religions are equally valid?

Murali: Yes, I think so. After all, as I said, they are helpful to the people who believe them. And none of us is really in a position to say that our answer to this great question is better than anyone else’s.

Tom: Well, I don’t claim to have a perfect understanding of the issue, but I do think some answers are better than others. And they can’t all be right. For example, Taoism and other religions have taught that good and evil are co-eternal realities that balance each other out. If Taoism is right, evil is just part of the way things have always been and always will be. Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that evil has not always existed but began when creatures with free will chose to abuse their freedom by doing wrong. If Christianity is right, evil is not just part of the way things have always been, and some day evil will be completely gone. Now, these can’t both be right, can they?

Murali: You are looking at these religions using Western logic. On that logical level the two religions seem to contradict each other. But at a higher level both are true.

Sarah: Wait a minute. I’m not convinced that either of these religions gives a good answer to the question. And I certainly don’t see how they can both be true. Either evil has always been around, or it hasn’t. Which do you think it is, Murali?

Murali: I think it depends on how you look at things.

Tom: Well, how do you look at things?

Murali: I don’t have a very strong opinion on the question either way. I just think that whichever way you want to answer the question is fine for you, and that it’s wrong to claim that your answer is the only right answer.
Tom: But Murali, I’m not interested in finding an answer that is “fine for me.” I’m interested in finding an answer that is true. If one person’s answer to the problem of evil is right, it must be true, and any answer that contradicts it must be false. For example, I believe that evil exists because creatures like us have chosen to abuse the free will that God gave us. That answer assumes that other answers that contradict it must be false. For example, saying that evil resulted from a conflict among the gods, as in ancient polytheism, or that evil is an illusion, as the New Age movement claims, simply cannot agree with the belief that evil is a choice made by creatures to rebel against their Creator. So if you say my answer is not the only right answer, you’re saying it is the wrong answer.

Sarah: But you’re assuming that God exists.

Tom: Not really. I’m saying that if God exists, then the problem of evil has to be solved by understanding who God is and what his purpose is in creating this world. But I don’t simply assume God exists. I think there are good reasons for believing that God exists. I’d be happy to share those reasons with you if you’re interested.

Sarah: I took a course in philosophy last year, and most philosophers today agree that there’s no way to prove that God exists.

Tom: Well, that depends on what you mean by “prove.” If you studied philosophy, then you probably know that there are lots of good arguments that show that it is more reasonable to believe that God exists than that he doesn’t.

Sarah: But these arguments don’t seem to me to outweigh the problem of evil. After all, it’s a blatant contradiction. If God is all-powerful, he could stop evil anytime he wants to. If God is all-loving, then he’d want to stop it right away, maybe even before it got started. But evil has been around for a long time, and God hasn’t done anything to stop it. So it seems that either God doesn’t exist at all, or that if he does exist he either isn’t all-powerful or he isn’t all-loving. Which is it?

Tom: Your dilemma has another solution. God may allow evil because, as an all-loving God, he has a greater good in mind that necessitates allowing evil to exist, and as an all-powerful God, he has the ability to bring about that greater good despite all the evil that happens.

Sarah: What exactly is this greater good that requires God to allow evil in the world?

Tom: God has a plan to bring about the best of all possible worlds, a world with finite creatures with the capacity to love one another. For him to carry out that plan, he had to give us the freedom to do good or evil.

Sarah: Why? Why couldn’t he just make everybody choose to do good?

Tom: I’m not sure I understand this perfectly myself, but it seems to me that if God made everybody do good all the time, then it wouldn’t really be good. You see, God is a God of love, and he wants us to be creatures who love him and love each other. But even God can’t make people love others. He can do a lot to make it possible for us to love, but in some sense that love has to be freely given. But evidently people who have the capacity to give freely must also have the capacity, at least at first, to withhold freely. And that’s what’s happened. Creatures that God created with the capacity to love or not to love have chosen not to love God, and the result has been that we have had a very hard time loving each other as well.

Murali: But insisting that one’s religion is the only true religion has been one of the main reasons for people not getting along in this world. In the part of the world where I come from, Hindus and Muslims kill each other over religion. In the Middle East it’s the Jews against the Muslims. In Northern Ireland it’s been the Catholics against the Protestants. People need to stop being so intolerant of the religions of other people and try to get along. Any religion is good as long as it isn’t made into a reason to hate and kill people of other religions.

Sarah: It sounds like most of the world’s religions have made the problem of evil worse, not better. Maybe we’d be better off with less religion and more education.

Tom: I’m inclined to agree with both of you more than you might think. I agree that religion has often been made the basis for hating and killing other people. But religion has also been made the basis for loving and caring for other people. I think that any religion that teaches hatred and violence against other people because of their beliefs is wrong.

Sarah: But doesn’t Christianity have a long history of teaching those things? Look at the Crusades, and the Inquisitions. Look at the long history of anti-Semitism in Christianity. I don’t think Christianity is exempt from the charge of teaching hatred and violence against others because of their beliefs.

Tom: Again, I think you might be surprised to hear that I agree with you. But I’m not saying Christianity as a religion has always been right. Far from it. Christians, especially Christians in positions of political power, have done some terrible things. When they do evil, they disobey God himself. That’s what evil is, whether it’s Christians or non-Christians doing it.

Murali: But if you agree that Christians also do evil, why insist that Christianity is the only right religion? What is the advantage in believing in Christianity rather than any other religion, if its people do the same things as people in other religions?
Tom: There’s no advantage in being a member of the Christian religion if a person does not take the central teaching of Christianity seriously.

Murali: And what is that central teaching?

Tom: I’m glad you asked! The central teaching of Christianity is that God sent his Son Jesus into the world to take our evil and turn it around to bring about our ultimate good.

Sarah: You’re talking about Jesus dying on the cross, right?

Tom: Exactly.

(B) Fideist Apologist “Martina” on the Experience of Suffering
(Boa & Bowman 2001, 439-443)

In this dialogue, a Christian named Martina becomes involved in a discussion with Sarah and Murali while shopping at the mall. The three of them, along with others, have stopped to watch a news bulletin on a television in the department store. The bulletin announces that a gunman has killed several people at a local high school. As Martina stands next to Sarah and Murali, the three of them discuss the shocking story.

Murali: How can people do things like this? What’s wrong with the world today?

Martina: [speaking softly]: I am.

Sarah: Come again?

Martina: I’m sorry. I guess that must have sounded strange. My name’s Martina. What’s yours?

Sarah: I’m Sarah.

Murali: My name is Murali. What did you mean by saying “I am”?

Martina: I was thinking of G. K. Chesterton’s answer to your question. The London Times once invited correspondence from readers in answer to that same question, “What’s wrong with the world today?” Chesterton wrote a letter in reply that read, “Dear Sirs: I am. Yours respectfully, G. K. Chesterton.”

Murali: But what does it mean? Surely he didn’t blame himself for all the problems of the world.

Martina: No. But he was saying that the source of all the world’s problems was just as much in him, and it is just as much in me, as it was in that teenager who killed all those people.

Murali: And what is that source?

Martina: Sin.

Sarah: Oh, brother. You’re saying that the world is a mess because we’re all a bunch of sinners?

Martina: Well, yes, we are—myself included. Aren’t you?

Sarah: No, I don’t consider myself a sinner.

Martina: Why not?

Sarah: Because for there to be sin, there’d have to be a God.

Martina: You’re quite right about that.

Sarah: But I don’t believe in a God.

Martina: Then how do you explain the sin that is within us all?

Sarah: I just told you, I don’t think there is sin in us all. I mean, we’re not all like that sicko. I certainly don’t have that kind of hatred that would make me want to kill innocent people.

Martina: So you think that for all people to be sinners, sin would have to show itself in the same way in all people?

Sarah: Uh—well, no, that’s not what I meant.

Martina: So perhaps sin shows itself in me, or in you, in a different way than the way it shows itself in a mass murderer.

Sarah: I don’t think so. I don’t think I have any sin in me at all.

Martina: What about the mass murderer? Is there sin in him?

Sarah: No, because nothing is sin unless there’s a God.

Martina: Then the fact that you and Murali and I are relatively decent, moral people in comparison to the mass murderers of the world is beside the point. If no one is a sinner, then even the worst of us is not a sinner. And if sin is determined in relation to God, then we might all be sinners in his eyes.
Murali: But why would He consider us sinners, if we’re good people?
Martina: Perhaps the two of you are thinking of sin in terms of overtly immoral and even criminal behavior, like stealing and murder. But those kinds of things are only symptoms of sin.
Sarah: What is sin, then?
Martina: There are many ways to define sin, but my favorite way is to say that sin is falling short of embodying God’s glorious character—the perfect, infinite love of God. You see, sin is not merely doing forbidden things like stealing, but it’s also the failure to do good things like giving generously and sacrificially to others.
Murali: That sounds like a beautiful and noble definition to me. It is a way of challenging us all to strive to be better persons.
Martina: Actually, it’s no such thing.
Murali: How can you say that? If we all fall short of this ideal, should we not all strive to come closer to it?
Martina: No. Let me explain. Suppose you were being chased on foot by an army of soldiers bent on killing you, and you came to the edge of a cliff. The only way to safety is to jump half a mile across a canyon to the other side. Could you do it?
Murali: No.
Sarah: No one could.
Martina: Exactly. You’re saying that the love of God is so far beyond our capacity that it is pointless for us to strive to meet that ideal.
Murali: Exactly.
Martina: It seems to me that you’re taking this idea rather literally.
Murali: How else should I take it?
Martina: All of the religions of the world employ beautiful myths that inspire us to transcend the normal limitations of our material existence. They all have different ways of saying the same thing: that we must reach beyond ourselves.
Murali: And have you done that?
Martina: Well—I’m trying in my own way, as are we all, are we not?
Murali: But if we’re all trying, is that good enough? Remember, you asked what’s wrong with the world. Apparently some of us aren’t trying, or trying isn’t good enough, or both.
Martina: You have a point. I guess I would have to say that some of us aren’t trying.
Murali: But why should any of us need to try?
Sarah: That’s a good question. I don’t think any religion is the answer. I think we need to grow up and stop believing in myths.
Martina: I couldn’t agree with you more, Sarah. We shouldn’t believe in myths, and religion is not the answer.
Sarah: I couldn’t agree with you more, Sarah. We shouldn’t believe in myths, and religion is not the answer.
Martina: But I thought you said that our problem was sin. Isn’t that a religious concept?
Sarah: Then what is?
Martina: Since we can’t solve our sin problem, the only way it could ever be solved is for God to solve it for us. And that’s what He did in Jesus Christ.

Sarah: Whoa. I thought you said that the solution wasn’t a religion. But Christianity is a religion.

Martina: In one sense, you’re quite right. If by Christianity you mean the doctrines, rituals, buildings, moral codes, organizations, and so on that together constitute the world religion known as Christianity, then, yes, Christianity is a religion. But in that sense Christianity won’t solve the problem any more than any other religion. In fact, as I’m sure you will agree, sometimes Christianity as a religion has made things worse.

Sarah: I’m so glad to hear you say that. I get so tired of Christians thinking that their religion is better than everyone else’s religion.

Martina: Actually, I think it is, too.

Murali: There you go again! You seem to delight in contradictions.

Martina: I would prefer to call them paradoxes. They only seem contradictory to us because they challenge our way of thinking about life. You see, I think Christianity is better than other religions for only one reason: God has mercifully used Christianity to point to the true solution that no religion, not even Christianity, can provide.

Sarah: I’m so glad to hear you say that. I get so tired of Christians thinking that their religion is better than everyone else’s religion.

Murali: And that solution is?

Martina: As I said, that solution is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Through Jesus becoming a human being and suffering and dying for us on the cross, He overcame sin for us.

Murali: I have always thought of the story of Christ as a wonderful myth, not as literal fact.

Martina: And myths can be wonderful stories. But while the story of Christ makes a wonderful fact, it makes a terrible myth.

Murali: Why do you say that?

Martina: Because the whole point of the story is that God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. If that isn’t actual fact, then God has not really done anything for us, and we are left in our hopeless state. That’s what the apostle Paul meant when he said that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, we are still in our sins and our faith is in vain.

Sarah: But how do you know that it is a fact?

Martina: Because God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and by his Spirit He has led me to receive that revelation and to know that it is true.

Sarah: All that tells me is that you’ve had an experience that convinces you that it’s true. That’s not an argument that could convince you.

Martina: Of course not. You asked me how I knew it was true. That’s different from asking for an argument that could convince you.

Sarah: Do you have such an argument?

Martina: I don’t know. I’m not sure that arguments ever convince anyone to put their faith in Christ. That would be like a child asking for a reason to trust her mother.

Sarah: Then why should I believe in Christ?

Martina: Well, Sarah, the best way I know to learn to trust someone is to get to know that person. You can get acquainted with Jesus by reading the Bible, especially the Gospels. Have you read the Gospels?

Sarah: Yes, as a child I heard all the stories about Jesus, and in college I took a course on the Bible. We learned about the origins of the Gospels—that they probably weren’t written by Matthew, Mark, and so on, and how they were composed from earlier sources like “Q.”

Martina: Oh, my, that’s not what I meant. Reading the Gospels as ancient documents to be analyzed and dissected may be a legitimate activity in its own right, but you’ll never come to faith in that way. That would be like performing literary source criticism on a love letter in order to get to know your beloved better. No, you need to read the Gospels as a way of getting to know Jesus. Listen to what He says. Look at how He handles various situations. Ask yourself, is this someone I can trust? Is this someone who perfectly embodies the love of God? That’s the way you need to read the Gospels.

Sarah: So, what you’re saying is that we should believe in Jesus because the Bible says so. You’re saying that we should just accept whatever is in the Bible.
Philosophical Challenges: Pomo & Evil

Module #5-28

PE420/620-D

Martina: Not at all. I do not believe in Jesus because I believe in the Bible. I believe the Bible because, as I read it, I find Jesus there. I believe the Bible because it speaks to me about Jesus and produces within me a confidence in Jesus and a love for Jesus that cannot be explained away. I believe the Bible because, as I read it, I realize that what it says about Jesus could never have been made up by human beings.

Murali: I have never heard the Bible explained in this way before. I have always found Jesus to be an intriguing figure. I think I will try to read the Gospels and see if what you say is true.

Martina: That’s wonderful.

Sarah: I don’t know if I buy any of this, but you’ve given me something to think about.

Martina: That’s a start!

Reflection Activity 5.4—Online Students

In place of class discussion, online students are required to complete a series of reflections—four per week. For each reflection activity/question, journal at least 30 (meaningful!) words, and tick off the related boxes in the middle of the Unit Guide.

#5.4 Of the two dialogues above, with which character’s approach—Tom or Martina—do you most identify, and why? Which one line from either character connected with you the most? And what story from your own life might you have introduced at this point to put flesh on the point being made?

OR

#5.4 For either Tom’s or Martina’s response, where was it strongest and weakest? How might you have replied to one of Sarah or Murali’s comments differently, for greater effect?

4.2 On the Existence and Nature of Evil

Resource 5.3

Concerning the existence and nature of evil and “the Satan”, check these sources out:

The best place to start is with the talk and extensive reference list from the Logos presentation, “Diablo: An Examination of Evil” (Benson 2012, including manuscript, outline, discussion guide and mp3). As this talk highlights, while “evil” may not have any ontological reality (cf. Plantinga 1999, i.e., it’s not a “thing” that eternally exists, but rather a privation/corruption of shalom, which is real), it is carried by beings living in rebellion to the way of God, bent on misusing his good gifts. This addresses the common impasse between Calvinists (who stress the sovereignty of God over any perceived “evil”, e.g. Genesis 50:20) and Arminians (who stress our “free will” in choosing wrong), and places stress on Christus Victor (Christ the Victor), God incarnate warring against evil forces and ultimately overcoming rebellion and redeeming any suffering. This theme is explored by Greg Boyd in God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict (1997).

Perhaps the best liberal analysis of evil comes from the late Walter Wink, summarised in The Powers that Be (1999). Wink systematically works through most every Bible passage on the nature of evil, and “the Satan”, but largely sees this as an anthropomorphism/personification of larger systemic forces that lead to death rather than to life. This still leaves open the question of what spiritual forces, if any, lie behind these systems. For a meandering podcast on this topic, with a range of views presented by N. T. Wright, Richard Beck, Tony Jones and Greg Boyd, listen to “Devilpalooza” by Homebrewed Christian (2016).

For my money, our experience of “evil” in this world resists reduction to natural forces alone. This conviction is explored by N. T. Wright, Evil and the Justice of God (2013), Os Guinness, Unspeakable: Facing Up to the Challenge of Evil (2006), and Peter van Inwagen, Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil (2004).
Sample response by Bruce Blackshaw, in the Logos talk, “Diablo” (Benson 2012a, 9-10) discussion guide:

**Bruce, you’ve lectured in both maths and computer science. And presently you’re doing another degree in philosophy. All three fields are heavy on logic.**

**When it comes to the logic of evil, then, what is it? In the modern world, is belief in supernatural evil a superstition or is it rational?**

Many people think belief in the supernatural means you are anti-science and anti-reason. Living in the wrong century. Modern science has shown us that matter—molecules—is all that there is, hasn’t it?

Well, no, it hasn’t. By definition, science explains the natural world using natural causes. That’s its job. And it is very successful at what it does. But science isn’t as useful when it comes to things that aren’t made of matter—inmaterial things.

If I said “I love you” to my wife, and she said “prove it using the scientific method”, what could I do? Attach electrodes to my head to record my brain waves and show her the patterns? I can guarantee that won’t convince her. Science can’t fully describe our emotions. Things like love, happiness and contentment have to be experienced to be understood.

Or take our minds. Are they really just chemical reactions produced by our brains? Well, hands up if you chose to come to the service today. If you really, really did choose to (and your wife or husband didn’t force you!), your mind can’t just be a result of physical causes. True choice means your body didn’t just respond to stimuli—instead, your mind controlled your body.

Ok, immaterial things exist, and science has limitations investigating them. What about spiritual forces? Science assumes they can’t exist. But that is contrary to the beliefs of almost every culture that has existed. We shouldn't rule out widely held views simply because they can't be confirmed by science.

Let's take it a bit further. If spiritual forces are possible, could there be good and bad ones? Are there angels and demons? And is there such a thing as evil?

During the Enlightenment period in the 18th century, it was thought evil was merely an abstract idea. If only. I remember a few years ago visiting Dachau concentration camp, just outside Munich, where over 40,000 people died. It was sobering walking under the “Arbeit machs frei” sign: work makes you free. The crematoriums and horrific photos were stark reminders of the Holocaust. It is hard to argue evil is just abstract when confronted with such scenes. Evil seems real.

Well, what is evil then? Why does it exist? And did God have a hand in creating evil?

For many, evil is the biggest stumbling block to believing in God at all.
The great Christian thinker Augustine’s answer was an emphatic no; God did not create evil! In fact evil is not a thing at all. Evil happens when goodness is diminished or corrupted—evil is the act of choosing the lesser good. It’s when we choose to misuse the good things God has given us.

It’s fair to ask, should God have allowed this? Why didn’t he make a world where evil was impossible? Surely he could have!

I suppose so, but at what cost? We would no longer be able to choose to do good or evil, and most importantly, we could not choose to love God of our own free will. God loves what he has created, and he wants us to respond by loving him. But forced love is not love at all. Who wants a husband or wife who has been forced to love you? So God gave us the freedom to reject him, and his goodness—therefore the possibility of evil.

But this is talking about human evil, not supernatural evil. Is there any basis for believing that evil is more than just our bad choices?

I’ll finish with the words of Lieutenant-General Romeo Dallaire, commander of the UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda during the horrific genocide in 1994. One million people were murdered in 100 days. He was asked how he could still believe in God after all he had seen:

“I know there is a God, because in Rwanda I shook hands with the devil. I have seen him, I have smelled him, and I have touched him. I know the devil exists and therefore I know there is a God”.

[Subsequent speakers give responses on the psychology of evil (pp11-12), the Bible and Satan/a theology of evil (pp13-14), exorcism and psychiatric diagnosis (pp15-17), systems of evil (pp18-19), and the apologetic value of speaking of evil in the pursuit of true freedom (pp20-22)]
4.3 On the Existence and Nature of Hell

Resource 5.4

Note that in Module 9 we will address the question of salvation (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism) and in what sense “no one comes to the Father” except by Jesus. This overlaps with our present focus. Concerning the existence and nature of “Hell”, explore here:

- Rob Bell’s Love Wins (2012b, youtube clip here and interview here) opened a can of worms for the evangelical community. There had always been debates about whether the Bible allows for the possibility of annihilationism for those who ultimately won’t repent—as opposed to conscious eternal torment (see Edwards and Stott 1988, 312-329). Bell, however, followed the early church father, Origen (a heretic by some estimations), in suggesting that ultimately Hell will be emptied and all people (perhaps all forces, including Satan?) will be with God in the New Creation: thus, “love wins”. As for the mechanism, it’s shady. It has highlighted, however, that many of our views of the nature of hell have been shaped by non-biblical neo-Platonic conceptions of a substantial “soul” which will spend forever after in either Heaven or Hell. This cosmology and eschatology is now broadly under fire, with many highlighting that “immortality”—if this be the future state of humanity—is only “conditional”, built upon God’s gift of grace, which isn’t guaranteed. That is, while all will resurrect, some to life and others to judgement (Jn 5:29), unless God continues to sustain the “damned”, they—like Adam and Eve barred from the Tree of Life—will ultimately cease to exist (thus “conditional immortality”). For some forums exploring these themes, see “The Australian Apologetics and Evangelism” facebook group (2016, posts by Gray [October 5], Benson [October 25], and Thompson [November 6]). Similarly, see the “Rethinking Hell: Exploring Evangelical Conditionalism” facebook group here and Peoples (2014 podcast, “Hell as an Apologetics Concern”).

- For helpful overviews of different perspectives on the nature of hell and final judgement, see Preston Sprinkle’s edited volume Four Views on Hell (2016; similar two views here), John Stackhouse’s public lecture “Hell and the Goodness of God” (2011 mp3) and his Regent College audio course “Heaven, Hell, and Everything Inbetween” (Stackhouse 2014 mp3), and the edited volume, Rethinking Hell (2014 + here)

- Despite these reformulations, many continue to argue for the justice and goodness of the broad contours of Hell as conscious punishment of the unrepentant (Paterson 2013 “Why Hell: Restoring the Heart to the Traditionalist Account”; Chan and Sprinkle 2011 Erasing Hell). For my manuscript of a public apologetics talks on this topic, before most of this “Rethinking Hell” debate began, see Benson “Whatever Happened to Hell” (2004). I’ve also uploaded a range of articles and links to an online dropbox here.

Sadly, we’re out of time to give this huge topic—the justice and goodness of God alongside the doctrine of Hell—anything more than a cursory glance. That said, the following albeit brief class activity should open up some interesting discussion.

Class Activity 5.4—15 minutes

(1) In pairs, take one minute each to try and answer the following question/objection:

I refuse to trust a being who damns people to suffer in hell for eternity simply because they haven’t heard the ‘good news’ or won’t do what the bully demands

(2) Watch this clip from Rob Bell (2012b Love Wins youtube preview here) and share your own thoughts on how you personally grapple with God’s justice and goodness alongside the threat of Hell.
To be clear, my views have changed slightly since I first wrote and presented the talk, “Whatever Happened to Hell?” (2004: discussion guide + outline + slides).

The synopsis read as follows:

“Hell is not a popular concept, and seems on face value to conflict with the nature of God, making Him unjust and unloving. Yet, beliefs should be based on truth, not preference. The Bible, established as inspired, is clear about the reality and everlasting duration of hell, and Jesus’ teaching on Hell is the most blatant. Upon deeper analysis, we can see that Hell is just, allows for differential punishment of all people depending on what they know and how they’ve responded, and that God has taken every step but one to reconcile us to Himself, through the loving gift of His Son upon the cross. Accept His warning to escape “the fire that shall never be quenched” and instead find the life of freedom desired for you from before creation by God.”

Since that time, I’ve become convinced that our “immortality” is conditional, premised upon God’s ongoing gift of life rather than possession of a Platonic essence as an eternal ideal. To be human is to be a non-reducible unity, a spirited body/embodied spirit, rather than a disembodied soul heading up to an immaterial heaven or down to an immaterial hell when we die. This opens up the possibility of annihilationism, without necessarily making a strong case Scripturally. I’ve also recognised that while Gehenna (Hell) seems to have a future referent beyond our earthly existence, with partial preterists like N. T. Wright (in particular, see Surprised by Hope) I can see that at least some of the supposed end-times passages were Jesus giving a this-worldly warning about where their bodies would be thrown and burned—the actual valley of Ben Hinnom—were they to continue their violent campaign to overthrow the Roman occupying forces rather than embracing his mission of peace. Given the highly symbolic nature of language and images in the Bible, it is less clear to me than it used to be as to whether “eternal destruction” and “smoke that rises forever” literally means everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked. Perhaps there is significant hyperbole going on here? Even if, however, the punishment is temporal, and the suffering is a result of our own rebellion rather than God’s active inflicting of pain, it’s still anything but a holiday destination one would choose to simply “be with their mates”. Our evangelistic imperative to call people to repent remains, especially when contrasted with the “life of the ages” (i.e., eternal life) only found in Christ: “to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth” (Jn 17:3).

For what it’s worth, after outlining from the Bible what Hell is like and who is headed there, I address seven common objections:

<objection one> “Hell is simply a scare tactic”
<objection two> “Christians should just preach love”
<objection three> “You can’t know what Hell is really like, or even if it exists”
<objection four> “Christians have no right to judge where I’m going”
<objection five> “Hell is unjust to those who’ve never heard about Jesus”
<objection six> “Everlasting punishment is a gross over-reaction to a sinful life”
<objection seven> “A loving God wouldn’t send people to Hell”

I will leave it to you to work through my responses, if this is a big question for you. In the meantime, hopefully framing your answers within “the big story” moves us toward a more coherent response to legitimate questions raised by all people who struggle to see how the God revealed in Jesus could possibly send people to such a horrible destiny. Rightly, then, may we answer with a “yes” to Abraham’s question: “Will not the judge of the whole earth do what is right?” (Genesis 18:25)

Core questions: (1) Is **JUSTICE** concerning the unsaved finally corporal, capital, or remedial? (2) Is **EVIL** in the cosmos finally converted, restrained, or destroyed?
5. PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT CLASS

Forum Activity Module 5
For each of modules 1 through 12 of the course, please submit a forum post, comprising:

(a) A 250 word first-person response to the set question/comment, tailored for explaining your beliefs to a twenty-something Australian who is post-Christian in attitude but pre-Christian in understanding. Note that when options are available, indicate to which of the statements you are responding. Additionally, this response must demonstrate a sound grasp of underlying course/Module content, and interaction with at least one (PE420) or two (PE620) pre-readings, whether recommended or optional (reference these). Across modules 1-6, and then 7-12, you must demonstrate a range of apologetic approaches, defending and commending the plausibility, credibility, and relevance of Christian belief. Post this to Moodle *before* the following class.

(b) Interaction with at least one other person that advances the conversation, perhaps through a comment or question. Note that this interaction can be with other students on the Moodle forum, but may also be through the “Australian Apologetics & Evangelism” facebook group or your own social media site, as people interact with your posted response. Interaction isn’t in the word count.

Group five of the first six forum posts, and the interaction with others, into one word.doc for submission via the Moodle assessment tab by March 28 for assessment requirement 1a, and then a further five posts from module 7-12 by May 23 for requirement 1b.

For each Moodle Module, I’ve set up a forum bubble.

THIS WEEK’S forum question/comment awaiting your response, before next class, is this:

Week 5: Respond to one of the following statements: (a) “All your religious ‘truth’ claims are simply a ploy to control my life; why submit to Jesus when I’m free right now?”; or (b) “Look how bad the world is; either God doesn’t exist, or isn’t worth trusting”; or (c) “I refuse to trust a being who damns people to suffer in hell for eternity simply because they haven’t heard the ‘good news’ or won’t do what the bully demands”

You will have time to discuss your responses to this forum question in your small group during the first session of our next class together.

All students respond on the Moodle Forum (250 words)

Preparation for Next Week ...

- Forum post work (as per the unit guide assessment requirement) both addressing the set question, and interacting with others. Post this to Moodle before next class.
- 2 hours pre-reading from recommended and optional readings on Moodle.
  Come ready to share on each of the following:
  - a question—something you don’t get, or want to clarify
  - a challenge—something you disagree with, or want to nuance
  - an implication—“so what” for your our apologetic practice
  - an application—something useful right now in your context, to help your holistic witness
Significance for Christian theology, life and thought...

**What in this session is most significant to you personally, in forming your own theology, life and thought?**

*Hebrews 4:14-15 (NLT)*

14 So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. 15 This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. 16 So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.

Are you going through a tough time? Do you feel abandoned? Have you given till you hurt and bled? Have you collapsed into bed at the end of the day, exhausted, depressed and dry?

*God understands.* Counter to the claims of postmodernism, God is neither a dictator in the sky nor a useful idea to oppress the masses, fearing them into submission. Through Jesus, God enters in as a disempowered baby—son of an unmarried teenage mum, into a family too poor to offer the standard sacrifice. At the pinnacle of the Christ expressing the very heart of God, He hangs naked, His only possessions being the garments on His body. Yet His arms are open to the world. The cross is the contradiction of all imperialisms.

We do not worship a distant and demanding God. God is transcendent and greater than we can comprehend. *And,* God is immanent. We speak to a great High Priest who has suffered as we have—likely far worse—and yet without sin overcame. He comforts us in our affliction, so we can likewise be a source of salvation to the world (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). We are sent through the scars in Christ’s hands (John 20:10-21), conquering not with the sword but instead by the word of our testimony and the blood of our martyrdom (Revelation 12). This is our witness in a world gone wrong.

So, when next you feel alone, join the cloud of witnesses who testify that only this God, is enough for us in the midst of suffering. Join World War I veteran and Pastor Edward Shillito (1872-1948), who in the aftermath of so much destruction and his own wounds composed this poem: *Jesus of the Scars.*

> **If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;**
> Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
> We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow;
> We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.
>
> The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
> In all the universe we have no place.
> Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
> Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars we claim Thy grace.
>
> If when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
> Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
> We know today what wounds are; have no fear;
> Show us Thy Scars; we know the countersign.
>
> The other gods were strong, but Thou wast weak;
> They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
> But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak,
> And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.
2 "Beautiful Jesus" painting by Nigerian artist, Mariama McCarthy
6. REFERENCES


“Australian Apologetics and Evangelism.” Facebook Group, posts on “Hell” here, particularly posts by Andy Gray (October 5, 2016), Dave Benson (October 25, 2016), and Ian Thompson (November 6, 2016).


Benson, David. “Christianity Restricts My Freedom.” Speaker’s Notes for the talk delivered at Student Life, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, on August 26, 2009b.


Benson, David. “Making Sense of Suffering.” Speaker’s Notes for the talk delivered at Student Life, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, on September 30, 2009c.


Kreeft, Peter J. “If God, Why Suffering?” Unpublished Manuscript and PowerPoint of a Talk presented at Swansea University, U.


