

Modernity

What kind of world do we live in? How did it get to be this way? What should be our attitude or relationship toward it? In this lesson, let's try to answer these questions. It's important to every follower of Christ. After introducing the issue, I'll review who Spinoza was and what he gave us; then his legacy to the world we know today, which is called Modernity; and then the effects of modernity in the Church.

We in the Western world live in a unique era. Of course every era throughout history has experienced new things, such as gunpowder, the printing press, steam engines, electricity and medicines. Lots of new things and new inventions have appeared throughout the ages. And not just inventions. The ancient world gave way to the feudal period, and that in turn to the more recent monarchies and states. Lots of new ideas and ways of society functioning appeared, such as banking and finance, consumerism, new forms of recreation and amusement, the concept of nation, republican government, industries and factories, and potable water. These and many other developments have made our modern era complex beyond anyone's ability to comprehend it. We have prosperity and comforts unimaginable in previous eras. But it's not these that define modernity. Modernity is something else. It's a controlling way of life and thought. It's everything in society that demands from us an attitude of delight in and submission to this world we now live in.

Four centuries ago, the Western world was much simpler. Everyone knew that God existed. There was the Church, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. And there were civil authorities, from the king on down to local magistrates. There were cities and towns, and guilds, and certain professions, and a few universities. People aggregated according to, and held as their identity, their ethnicity. And books. But otherwise, things weren't much different from life a millennium earlier. Into this world stepped Baruch Spinoza.

I. Spinoza was born in 1632 in what today is Holland of parents who were forced to leave Portugal because of the Inquisition. In Amsterdam, he received an up-to-date education from the rabbinical schools, but he evidently also studied the writings of Descartes, and probably those of Galileo, Hobbes, and Bacon as well. He found both Christianity and rabbinic Judaism repugnant. And he despised monarchies. He had a problem with authority! But he was, according to all accounts, a super nice guy, brilliant, yet also humble, kind, considerate and tolerant of others. Spinoza was, sadly, alienated from most other people and so had a rather reclusive life. In 1677, at the age of only 45, he died leaving a legacy of writings that have shaped the Western world. He gave us modernity.

What did Spinoza write? Radical ideas about life and reality! Ideas that had never before – up to the 17th century! – been expressed. • He declared that both Judaism and Christianity are superstitions. People who hold to them as divine are ignorant. • The Bible is only the work of various human authors, and the Scriptures' supposed authors are fictitious. Moses didn't write Torah, for example. And further, he said that the Bible has its historical details wrong. He rejected miracles, the existence even of *anything* supernatural. The Bible did however teach certain values, such as kindness and compassion, that were good for humanity, and he accepted that it's OK for humans to be "pious." • He stated that the God of the Scriptures didn't exist. His "god" was reason (or logic), and that it suffused all the physical world. • He repudiated all civil authorities as repressing the right of individuals (such as himself) to think freely and to express freely their thoughts without suffering consequences. He believed that democracy is the best form of government, because the values of many would be superior to the values of one individual (the monarch). • He thus also insisted that the only workable society would be one that was free of God, so that all religious and philosophical ideas could be tolerated.

Spinoza was a rebel. Although humble and kind, he nevertheless was in rebellion against all authority, even against God. Anti-theism saturated all his thought. We can easily identify his one primary lust: to be autonomous, free of all constraints. All his other radical ideas derive from that. We also must understand—and this is critical—that everything he wrote was just his own speculation, his personal beliefs, uniquely presented to the world as assertion.

In the ensuing centuries, Spinoza's written thoughts were picked up by others. He was regarded as an intellectual, a profound thinker, and his ideas appealed immensely to those who also self-identified as intellectuals. They in turn built upon Spinoza's ideas and profoundly influenced the Western world. The Enlightenment, which essentially elevates human Reason above revelation (that is, Scripture), is the unquestioned product of Spinoza. Leibniz, Kant, Hegel and Locke are just

a few who took Spinoza's ideas and disseminated them throughout the world of the intelligentsia. Locke, for example, took Spinoza's anti-monarchialism and ideas about democracy and gave them to America's founding fathers, especially Jefferson and (probably) Franklin. And from them, we have secularism, which today rules the Western world absolutely. Hegel took Spinoza's ideas and gave them to Marx and Darwin. Spinoza's anti-monarchial and anti-Church ideas were carried to France and picked up by Rousseau and others; in France, the ghastly Revolution of 1789 resulted. Spinoza's views of the Scriptures resulted in Wellhausen's "higher criticism," which has the goal of repudiating the Bible as the supernatural Word of God.

II. So we have today Modernity, an anti-theistic worldview. A worldview that includes all the following: • Democracy, secularism, humanism, intellectualism, higher criticism, liberalism (the old-fashioned kind), Marxism and naturalism (and thus its origins narratives). Secularism is especially malignant because its purpose is deliberately to keep God out of mind and out of the way. • The notion that religions are superstitions only the ignorant masses could believe. • Particularly heavy in this worldview is Spinoza's anti-authoritarianism, both religious as well as political, a fear and repudiation of any authority that seeks to repress an individual's liberty of thought and speech. • And of course the heady notion that reason and logic are the god-like, fundamental essence of nature; not revelation. • The presupposition that we live in a world controlled entirely and solely by nature's cause-and-effect relationships. • And this: That one should be (indeed, *can* be) virtuous or civilized *apart from* the love (or fear) of the transcendent God of Scripture. All "moderns" are really unwitting Spinozists.

Modernity's chief attribute is intellectualism. Marxism and "wokism" are today's intellectual exercises cloaked in man-made virtue. Politics today is the party of the "virtuous" and ideological intellectuals versus the party of those who don't trust the intellectuals. Science has devolved into a grand intellectual exercise. So, to a large extent, has the world of finance. All academic pursuit today is now mainly an intellectual exercise. The current world of technology fulfills all that an intellectual might hope for, imitating the workings of the mind (memory, logic and now creativity). That's because imitations, by their existence, exalt the original.

The world of the mind is opposed to the making of relationships. To be an intellectual is to be self-absorbed, so much so that relationships not merely assume less importance but intrude and become inimical to the workings of the mind. The Enlightenment project (i.e., modernity), is at war with personal relationships. This too is diabolical, because God created us to be in relationship with each other as well as with Himself. The current "polarization" of society is the necessary outworking of modernity: we necessarily hold each other in contempt. That's not just a pagan ideal, it's part of how we express our worship of the mind-god. We all hold in our minds exactly what "truth" is and everyone else who holds some (even slightly) different "truth" is evil and so to be shunned (or worse).

All modernity, all the "-isms" that comprise it, is really just assertion of speculative, godless notions, dressed up to appear rational. Opinions. It's, "Say anything anti-theistic, no matter how outrageous, with a covering of rationality attached, and Satan will see to it that intellectuals embrace it, promote it, and everyone eventually will believe it and live it." And be virtuous while being anti-theistic! And by the way, just to clarify: by "modernity," I'm not referring merely to sinful personal characteristics that all humans naturally express, such as greed, pride, hate, vindictiveness, selfishness, sloth, contempt for others, etc. Modernity is external to us, but it excites in us a desire to be part of it, to control us.

But the chief characteristic of Modernity is the fierce will to be autonomous. We want to be independent of God, we deny His authority over us. Why? So that we're free to indulge our lusts, free to live as we please and do as we want. So we deny His existence, reimagine God somehow (thus, pantheism and Deism), or we simply ignore Him. All Modernity, as I see it, is the outworking of this will to be free of God. It reprises the disastrous repudiation of His authority that occurred in the Garden in Genesis 3.

III. Modernity is also, sadly, in the Church. The church has imbibed (or acknowledged the validity of) a secular worldview. We believe that we can live our lives as we please just as long as we believe in the Gospel (as we now define it) and attend worship services. God's will, even His very existence, His presence, is divorced from our daily lives. And it's OK, we suppose, to be secular, to live our daily lives as if we were an atheist, just so we are properly pious. We revel in our autonomy, our supposed freedom. We don't want to be submitted to His will, so we ignore His Word and suppose that certain propositional truths are sufficient for salvation. We live purposelessly, in conformity with the inherent purposelessness and meaninglessness of a modern worldview. The strong patriotic movement in today's evangelical churches is thus sadly

wrong-headed; America's core values, secularism and love of liberty, are those of Modernity, the legacy of a Satan-inspired intellectual. Our deep political engagement assumes that God is not in control; He's not in our minds nor in our worldview; we voters are in control. We don't understand that if the Scriptures are not authoritative, that is, determinative for our character and behavior (and even our very thoughts), it's no different than denying its truthfulness as unbelievers do.

Let me expand on how Modernity has so powerfully affected today's evangelical church. We've abandoned the biblical gospel, which is Jesus, *everything* Jesus, for a handful of propositions. We no longer have or care about fellowship with Jesus; we have instead a mental construct. We've turned "belief," which is primarily trust in a trustworthy Person, into something cognitive, mere agreement with certain biblical propositional truths. In our will to be autonomous, free of restraints (even if it's our Creator God who lovingly and wisely gave us those restraints), we've made Christianity a religion of the mind. With, of course, its attendant necessary religious rituals that include being present for Sunday "worship" services. Spinoza resented authority and, it appears, so do we. We eschew discipleship, sanctification, obedience, and serving Christ because those are acts of the will, not of the mind, and we won't have someone else tell us what to be, think or do – even if that Someone is God. We eschew the commitment and the personal sacrifice necessary to differentiate true faith from profane life. We love our freedom, freedom to live as we choose. And so we fail to enter into the intimate relationship with Jesus for which we were called and don't even realize anything is wrong.

And this: Modernity has the entire theistic evolution crowd of today in its iron grip. Hugh Ross and his followers are bamboozled intellectuals, having become irrational in the name of reason. Or maybe better and simpler, they're idolaters; they worship Reason. They worship their intellect. As if an intellectual is a superior person! They're narcissists! The issue is idolatry, and in God's cosmos that's exceedingly immoral.

Paul understood the epistemology of unbelief. He reveals it in Romans 1 and Acts 17. Faith necessarily begins with God, the Creator, the God of Israel. If for whatever reason we repudiate His authority or the revelation of His will, something else gets substituted. Idolatry necessarily substitutes. We substitute ourselves. We love ourselves. We exalt ourselves. We live as if we're gods, our own authorities. We ignore Jesus' salvific invitation: "Take my yoke upon you," where "yoke" means submission to Him, His Person and His will, i.e., submission to His authority. That's the only way to "find rest," God's creational intent for humanity, being at peace in fellowship with Him.

We must conclude. We can reduce all that Modernity is to Satan worship. Satan must have, in some supernatural way, so controlled Spinoza that he developed his radical ideas, and Satan then saw to it that they were developed into what we have today. Satan benefits immensely from it. Modernity is his latest, his ultimate ploy to keep people alienated from God and condemned, whether outside the Church or in. All that Satan had to add in the 20th century was the great sexual revolution and mountains of entertainment options to make Modernity as we have it complete.

To any observer who isn't already in love with the claims of modernity, however, there's nothing to it. It's empty. Billions of years and social justice and errors in the Bible and all the rest . . . it's simply speculation put forth by arrogant assertion. The denial of the supernatural is nothing but (and *can't be* anything but) assertion. The supposed freedom from God is a colossal fraud, a false religion based on a set of lies that no one recognizes for what they are. The prosperity and the comforts we enjoy, along with our now vast knowledge of the physical world, as well as the noetic effect of our sin nature, make it impossible for us in the West to reflect on our culture, on our attitude toward the world we live in. Modernity is a delusion immense beyond understanding, and it has our nation in its unrelenting grip.

The great scandal is, Why is the Church today not more discerning? We need to break free from the self-deception that we're spiritually OK, a smugness not allowed anywhere in Scripture, and gain a fresh vision of the fiery holiness of God and the responsibilities expected of us. A follower of Jesus should want nothing to do with Modernity, nor with any component of it, because it's demonic. We're allowed no compromises with it, no assimilation into it, no tolerance of it. "Modernity" is today's word for what in the Bible is "world."

God has committed all authority on heaven and earth to the Son. We therefore *must* be faithful to Jesus. How? One way only, that's by being like Jesus, doing as Jesus did, and living as Jesus taught, which means obeying Him. And we do that by taking in the Word of God, then, empowered by His Spirit, living it out. There's no other way to escape and/or avoid Modernity.