

# H.M.S. Modernity

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Ingrained ideas die hard. That's why the ideas of modernism, though on the brink of ideological overthrow at the hands of postmodernism, retain some sway over popular thought. And perhaps one of the most ingrained and common of these is the dichotomy many non-Christians draw between faith and knowledge. Michael Shermer is a good example:

When I was a theology student...I came to understand "faith" to mean "belief in a claim for which there is no evidence." When I later became a scientist...I came to understand "reason" to mean "belief in a claim based on evidence."...If there is enough evidence to believe something, you don't need faith. Scientists do not have "faith" in their conclusions, they have provisional confidence based on probabilities of likelihood....I see [science and religion] as two different non-overlapping (and nonconflicting) human goals.<sup>i</sup>

The idea is that knowledge is completely independent of faith; it results, rather, from the application of the proper methods of inquiry (such as scientific observation). Karl Pearson, bolder than Shermer, asserted that "the scientific method is the sole gateway to the whole region of knowledge."<sup>ii</sup> To this Carl Sagan would add that "all assumptions must be critically examined; arguments from authority are worthless."<sup>iii</sup>

Yet perhaps we should critically examine *these* views. We should ask, with Greg Bahnsen, whether beliefs *about proper method* are acquired by means of that method. "If so," says Bahnsen, "they have no independent...authority or foundation! If not, then what has been deemed the proper method for arriving at beliefs is not foundational after all."<sup>iv</sup> Far from being independent of faith, the so-called proper method of inquiry cannot itself be selected without it.

Consider the question from slightly different angle. One particular branch of modern philosophy—empiricism—holds that all knowledge (excluding analytic or definitional truths) is derived from sensation or deductions from sensation. This view has filtered down into our culture and is embodied in the cliché "Seeing is believing." But think a moment: how do we *know* that seeing is believing? Have we *seen* this doctrine floating around in outer space or tested it in a laboratory? We haven't—the view that sensation or empirical proof is the only reliable method of arriving at truth is itself accepted *without proof* and *without observation*. And so it must be. The foundational starting point of empiricism has to be non-empirical, for, as Gordon Clark noted, "Observation can never prove the reliability of observation."<sup>v</sup>

In other words, Sagan's idea that appeals to authority are worthless is *itself* an appeal to authority; it was not discovered by observation and it was not tested in a laboratory.<sup>vi</sup> Pearson's belief that the scientific method is the sole gateway to the whole region of knowledge is a *non-scientific* belief. And Shermer's emphasis on evidence and probability relies on assumptions of *faith*. Did we say that moderns *never* think dogmatically? Well, in the words of Captain Corcoran from *H.M.S. Pinafore*, hardly ever.

But modernistic empiricism is not alone in requiring an unproved foundational presupposition. This is a must for *every* system of thought. Again, Clark:

There is a definite reason why not everything can be deduced. If one tried to prove the axioms of geometry, one must refer back to prior propositions. If these too must be deduced, there must be previous propositions, and so on back *ad infinitum*. From which it follows: If everything must be demonstrated, nothing can be demonstrated, for there would be no starting point. If you cannot start, then you surely cannot finish.<sup>vii</sup>

Dogmatism is not a distinctive philosophy held by Christians, Muslims, and a few others who have not yet graduated to modernity. Dogmatism is simply what *all* systems, including modernity, boil down to. The question, then, is not whether we can survive philosophically without religious judgments. All our judgments are inescapably religious. The question is whether we have the right religion. And since most non-Christians are loath to follow Sagan's dictum and critically examine their basic assumptions, we have to question these assumptions for them.

It is at this point that Christianity enters the fray with a radical challenge. Christianity pits itself against all competing worldviews, emphasizing the antithesis between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15)—between regenerate thought and rebellious thought. Christianity declares intellectual war on non-Christian philosophy (II Cor. 10:4-5), a war that involves the rejection of claims to human epistemological autonomy (Job 40:2; Col. 2:8) and the enthronement of Christ as Lord of the intellect (Col. 2:3).

This doesn't mean that Christianity rejects philosophy, only that it refuses to believe that philosophy which operates "according to the rudiments [first principles, presuppositions] of this world" (Col. 2:8). Nor does it reject reason; it merely denies the non-Christian's claim that "reason" is independent of God.

Christians, in fact, attempt to ruthlessly reason with non-Christian thought. We critically examine opposing worldviews (such as modernism) and ask important questions. We question whether empiricism or any form of epistemic autonomy can provide us with knowledge and avoid the pitfalls of skepticism and subjectivism. We ask whether modernism might need a dose of postmodernism.

- i Douglas Jones and Michael Shermer, “*Disputatio: Faith, Reason, and Rationality*,” *Credenda/Agenda*, vol. 8 no. 4.
- ii Karl Pearson, *Grammar of Science*, cited in Gordon H. Clark, *The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God* (Hobbs, NM: Trinity Foundation, 1996), p. 53.
- iii Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*. Cited in T. M. Moore, “Beyond Creation vs. Evolution: Taking the Full Measure of the Materialist Challenge,” *Antithesis*, vol. 1 no. 6.
- iv Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Problem of Faith (Part 2)” in *The Biblical Worldview*, vol. 8, no. 6; June, 1992.
- v Gordon H. Clark, “How Does Man Know God?”, *Trinity Review*, July/August 1989. Someone might try to avoid Clark’s conclusion by saying that the validity of the scientific method is vindicated by hundreds of years of human experience. But this doesn’t get us very far; it basically says that we know observation is valid because observation tells us so.
- vi We might also ask how science, which is tentative and empirical, is suddenly able to make universal epistemological claims. Sagan’s view is not good science but rather bad philosophy.
- vii Clark, “Atheism,” *Trinity Review*, July/August 1983.

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