

Naturalism and How it is Affecting Culture
Dr. J. P. Moreland

Whatever role I have played in the church as a Christian scholar has really been born out of my passion to win people to Christ, to disciple them, and to plant churches. So, I have had experience doing that, and I come to you this morning with the assignment from Professor Little and others to discuss the worldview of naturalism and how it is affecting culture. I want you to understand that my heart on this is not simply to give you an intellectual analysis of what is happening. More importantly, I want you to understand the culture in which we live and move and have our being. And so my goal is to explain to you in the time we have this morning and tomorrow morning what is going on in American culture that impacts the preaching of the gospel and the teaching of the Scriptures.

I was in the Seattle airport one Sunday coming back from a speaking engagement. I got a copy of the *Seattle Times*, and I made a beeline for the Sports page.¹ But en route, I ran across the editorial section of the *Seattle Times*. The lead editorial in position number one on the editorial page was an article entitled “A Divided Nation.” It was a syndicated column which was reprinted in several newspapers that morning. The article said that we now live in the most divided nation in the history of our people, except for the Civil War. The author went on to identify what is at the core of this division, and when I read it, I practically fell out of my chair in the airport. He said the division is not fundamentally political. It is not fundamentally socio-economic. It is not fundamentally racial. The fundamental division among Americans today, he said, is a division of worldview. Now what shocked me is that we who love the Lord Jesus talk about

worldview quite a bit, but it is very seldom that you see on *Fox News* or on CNN or in a major newspaper or *Time* or *Newsweek* an analysis of what is happening in culture that traces it down to the level of worldview. The professor who wrote the article can be forgiven (he's a political science professor) for getting the worldview issue wrong because he said that we have two fundamentally different worldviews, and I think there are actually three that I will mention a little bit later.

But he said that the fundamental divide is between people that he would call "secularists" who believe that there is no transcendent realm, and that the physical world is all there is. As a result, the family is merely a socially contrived arrangement produced by evolutionary struggle and to change the nature of family is very much like changing from the one-point conversion to the two-point conversion in football – there is no right or wrong answer on this, no fact of the matter at stake. This is a social convention that resulted from evolutionary processes. People who resist changing the nature of family to include whatever social arrangement people want, just do not get it. They are intolerant bigots.

On the other side are people called "transcendentalists." They are ethical monotheists – e.g., conservative Catholics, conservative Jews and evangelicals – who see, in addition to the physical world, a transcendent realm where there is a God and a spirit world. Moral values, the nature of the family, and things like that came from a Creator. We're no more free to change the rules on that than we are to change water from H₂O to CH₄. There is a nature to water, whether we like it or not, and there is a nature to the family. Calling three men in a tub a family does not make it a family any more than calling CH₄ "water" makes it water.

Now, what was interesting was that the author went on to say that the leading exponents of this more secularist perspective are (and this will come as no shock to you, but it was interesting to have it identified) the universities, the media, and Hollywood. The leading exponent on the other side is evangelical churches. If you stop and think about it, that is a pretty scary situation. Are we ready to go up against Duke, UNC, *Time* magazine, Barbara Streisand... So this is a difficult situation. The author was right, though, to lay this issue at the fundamental level of secularists versus ethical monotheists.

In his recent book *Culture Warrior*, Bill O'Reilly was wise to say that while the division in our culture does have implications for politics (it would be silly to think otherwise), still the fundamental divide is not political. It is between what he calls secular progressives and traditionalists. He is getting at very much the same distinction.

In this cultural divide, then, the people who have the microphone and who have the opportunity to color how people see reality are folks who are becoming increasingly like Europeans in that they increasingly see the world through secular glasses. It would be bad enough for one of the sides in this discussion to have, as far as human eyes can see, all the power or most of the power. But it is worse because the people on the other side of the divide not only think that you and I are ignorant, they also think that we are immoral bigots. And for the very first time in the history of the church since Jesus was executed, as far as I know, we now live in a period in which the religion of Jesus and His teachings are now considered to be immoral. They're considered to be intolerant, bigoted, and judgmental. So, for example, in the *New York Times*, not long ago, a columnist raised the following issue: "Can a people that believes more fervently in the virgin birth than in

evolution still be called an enlightened nation?” So, if you believe in the virgin birth and you do not believe in evolution, you are ignorant.

You are also a bigot, you’ll be glad to know. Another columnist made the following statement about our bigotry. She said, “Here’s how their ignorance and bigotry works. First, they put the fear of God into you. If you don’t believe the literal word of the Bible, then you’ll burn in hell. Of course, the literal word of the Bible is tremendously contradictory and so you have to abdicate all critical thinking and accept a very simple but logical belief that it’s dangerous to question. A corollary to this point is that they [we] make sure you understand that Satan resides in the toils and snares of complex thought, so it’s best not to try to think at all.”

One more citation that I think will shock you. Robert Reich, former professor at Harvard University was on President Clinton’s Cabinet, Secretary of Labor, I believe. A few summers ago, he published the following article in a journal called *American Prospect*.² Listen carefully to what he says. What I’m about to read to you represents roughly 20 percent of the American public. They have a disproportionate influence on the people in your church and the people we’re trying to influence for Christ. Here’s what Reich said: “The great conflict of the 21st century will not be between the West and terrorism. Terrorism is a tactic, not a belief. The true battle will be between those who believe in the primacy of the individual and those who believe that they owe their allegiance and obedience to a higher authority, between those who give a priority to life in this world and those who believe that the human life is a mere preparation for existence beyond the grave, between those who believe in science, reason, and logic and those who believe that truth is revealed through Scripture and religious dogma. Terrorism

will disrupt and destroy our lives, but terrorism is not the greatest danger we face.” You are. I am. We are genuinely perceived as a threat to the health of this country among a growing number of cultural elites.

Now, I want to explain to you a little bit about how we got here. I want to tell you a story to see what you hear. I wonder what you will hear and think about in this story. By the way, this is no idle exercise I am about to do. If you are going to pastor a church or be on the staff of a church or be on the mission field or work in a para-church ministry, one of the things you have the privilege of doing is instructing your people about how to listen to the news and how to see things other people do not see when they are watching the news because we have a worldview to bring to bear on these issues others lack.

Here is the story. After the terrorist attacks on 9-11, a few weeks later, Oprah Winfrey did an entire program focusing on the return to God. And she got up at the beginning of the show and she said, “People have been returning to God since the terrorist attack, and I want to take the time to encourage people to seek god, whatever he, she, it, or they is to you. And I don’t think that we ought to get hung up in the word that we use for her or them or it. What matters is not the name that we use for it. What matters is that we seek god, whatever she, he, it, or they is to you.” One woman in the audience stood up and said, “Oprah, I have a question. I’m an atheist.” “Well, you can’t possibly be an atheist,” said Oprah. The woman said, “I really am. I don’t believe in God.” Oprah said, “You believe in love, don’t you?” A little puzzled, the woman said, “Yeah.” “Well, then, you believe in god, you just use a different name for it.” Move to commercial.

What comes to your mind when you hear this? What is going on in this incident? If I were to sit down over coffee with you and say, “What is the most fundamental, most

important, most basic observation that you could make about what just happened?” I wonder what you would tell me.

What I want to do in the time we have left is to tell you very briefly how we got to where we are today. Very basically, when America was founded, up until about the middle of the 1800s, pastors and local churches were not only passionate but were also the intellectual leaders of culture. So it was the church and it was the local minister who was the leader in thought in his community. We have the first 117 and the first 124 universities founded to glorify the Lord Jesus and to promote gospel ministry. So you go in university libraries, and you find biblical passages — “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free” – things of that sort. Something truly impossible to imagine if a new building were erected at UNC today where there would be some text from the gospels on the front of that building. My doctorate was at USC. Above the administration building there’s a set of statues, and these are actually Methodist circuit riders who were put up there in order to symbolize that they were watching the faculty and the student body to make sure that USC did not veer away from biblical Christianity. I think some of the folks at UCLA must have done something to the statues because we’ve veered at USC.

So in America’s early period we have a form of Christianity that sees part of its mission as taking the worldview of the Bible and the teachings of the Lord Jesus, and making sense out of art or psychology or science or literature or history or government and political thought. Thus the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence largely flow out of Christian people who care deeply about bringing biblical ideas to bear on the body politic. The Constitution did not come from the stork. It came from deeply

committed Christian thinkers who were trying to understand what it meant to follow Jesus in shaping the nature of the State herself. This was part of how people saw being a follower of Jesus.

Now, in the mid-1800s, there were three awakenings that broke out.³ One of the major ones started in upstate New York, went down the eastern seaboard into South Carolina, and swept across into Missouri and Kansas. Much good was accomplished by these awakenings. But the bad news was that for the very first time, these awakenings did a whole number of things that emphasized *feeling* as a guide to religious decision-making as opposed to thought.

In a certain sense, I am a mystic. I still believe God guides and speaks to people. I believe that we are to have very tender and affective feelings toward the Lord Jesus and the triune God. Emotion is critical. In fact, one of the things in *Kingdom Triangle I* mention is that our churches too often are led by type A, white males who are out of touch with their emotions. As a result, their ministries are very often dominated by a need to control. I'm *for* feeling. However, I do not think feeling is a good substitute for thinking. It ought to be a both-and. But what happened in these awakenings was that religious discipleship and fervor was largely reduced to a matter of the heart while the mind was set aside. As a result, in the area where these awakenings broke out, church historians in upper New York now often refer to that area as the "burnt-over district." Three of the major U.S. cults emerged there right after these awakenings, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons. You look at the front of the Book of Mormon, and it says, "If you want to know if this is the Word of God, all you have to do is ask God, and He will tell you. He will bring a burning in your heart, and you will feel it. You

will know through your heart that this is God's Word." Now, I think feeling is a test for truth, but I don't think it's the major test for truth.

Where did this idea come from, that feeling was a test for religious truth? In the U.S., it came from these awakenings. So what you have in these awakenings is that Christianity and its claims are reduced from being whole-life matters that include feeling but also include a need to think carefully about all of life in light of Christianity to being mere matters of private feeling. When was the last time in a Sunday School class in your church you saw a course that only allowed businessmen and women to take the class, and it was on "How to Think as a Christian Businessman" or "What does Christianity Have to Say about Business"? So there was a separation between faith and reason on the one hand, and the private/public sphere on the other hand, that arose in this particular context.

Toward the late 1800s, the evangelical community began to withdraw from culture so that by 1926, the end of the Scopes trial, God died in the United States.⁴ He has been dead ever since. It took until the 1960s; it took from 1926 to the 1960s, for His death to become evident to everybody. So, for example, in the 1950s, William F. Buckley wrote that there was a professor from Yale who was teaching things that were heretical from a biblical point of view. So the president at Yale did everything he could to assure the alumni that they were not tolerating heresy at Yale. In 1955, the president of UC Berkeley stood up at the beginning of the school year and did what the president had done for decades, namely; preached a message from the Scripture at Convocation. But this was all window dressing because God died in 1926. In the 1960s, it became evident that He was dead.

Now what do I mean, “God died”? When Nietzsche said, “God is dead,” he didn’t mean the Supreme Being had a fishing accident. When Nietzsche said “God is dead,” he wasn’t even talking about God. He was talking about the concept of God. When Nietzsche said “God is dead” he meant that the concept of God no longer had authority in the centers of power in Europe. Or to put the point differently, the death of God means the centers of power have become secularized. We live in a culture now where God is dead, meaning, for example, that if you want to do a doctorate at a major university in psychology, in addition to Freud, you don’t have to read Paul to understand Pauline psychology. The idea that in order to have a doctorate in psychology you have to familiarize yourself with New Testament anthropology and principles of psychology is just ludicrous. That means that biblical ideas are completely marginalized. So what we have is a situation in which reason governs the public domain and faith is relegated to the personal and private domain. A person can conduct his life quite nicely without any ideas from Scripture because Scripture isn’t needed to make sense of the world.

That’s the situation that began to emerge. So what happened? We began by de-valuing the life of the mind. These Awakenings in the mid-1800s overemphasized emotion to the exclusion of the mind. Christians became anti-intellectual and withdrew from culture. They developed a dichotomy between faith and reason. As a result of that, Christian ideas became privatized and marginalized from the public square. What happened as a result of that? That’s how we got here. Where is *here*?

We now live in a secular culture. That’s where *here* is. In the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the church, what we now have are three worldviews that are fighting for the allegiance of the minds of men and women in our culture. One worldview, I am

happy to tell you, is Christianity. Christianity is still a vibrant worldview. It is being propagated through the churches. It is also making a comeback in the seminaries and in the secular universities. I will tell you that in the field of philosophy, my academic discipline, there has been nothing short of a great Awakening that has broken out in philosophy. It is now to the point where it is widely recognized that the finest thinkers in various branches of philosophy include conservative Christian thinkers. This was unheard of fifteen or twenty years ago. So I want you to be encouraged by that. Christianity is one worldview.

The second worldview is postmodernism. There are many definitions of it. I will just give you the strict philosophical one. It is roughly the idea that all truth and reality is relative to your culture, so that there is no such thing as an objectively real world. There is no such thing as objective truth. All truth, all value, all that is real is what your culture says. So one culture says that God is there, another says that God isn't, and they're both right. No one's wrong, because there is no such thing as objective truth.

The third worldview, which is the most dominant worldview, is scientific naturalism. Scientific naturalism contains two ideas. The first idea has to do with knowledge and it basically says that knowledge comes only through the hard sciences. The second component of naturalism is something called "physicalism," and that is the physical world is all there is. The idea then becomes that what science tells us is real is all there is, and the physical world is all there is.

Tomorrow, I'm going to explain the implication of this for abortion and for human personhood and for the soul and things like that. I'll be talking about animal souls and human souls tomorrow. Now, the very fact that I would mention that animals have

souls, and you would look at me in a funny way, indicates how far we have veered from Christian teaching. The idea that animals have souls has been a part of the teachings of the church since its earliest days. I'll talk about where we lost the idea of the soul tomorrow.

For now, let me ask you a question. Given that Christianity and postmodernism and naturalism are in a three-way horse race, what do you think is at the very bottom of the naturalist view of the world? Scientific naturalism is the dominant worldview; it "wears the trousers," you might say. So let me ask you, what is at the core of the naturalist worldview? Let me tell you what it is. Here is the bottom line--it doesn't get any deeper--here is the fundamental issue. It is not moral relativism; it is not atheism or agnosticism; the core of the naturalistic worldview is a view of the nature and limits of knowledge. You go to your neighbor, and you're trying to win him to Jesus. He's not going to tell you, "You know, that contradicts my view of the nature and limits of knowledge, thank you very much." The average person couldn't spell it out like that. But what has happened is that the average American has absorbed a view of the nature and limits of knowledge without knowing it, and it affects his life in a powerful way.

Here's the view: the nature of knowledge is such that it can only come through the five senses, ideally, through empirical science. So this is a form of empiricism. There are different forms of empiricism, but the fundamental, certified epistemology of the authority centers of American culture is empiricism. Knowledge can only come from the five senses. That's the nature of knowledge. That means that there are limits to knowledge. Specifically the only or ideal place you can gain knowledge of reality is through the hard sciences. The hard sciences are the only or vastly superior place where

you can get knowledge, and if you can't prove something in the hard sciences, you can't know it. So what is at stake today is not merely truth; it's knowledge. Truth is part of what's at stake, certainly, but what is at issue today is deeper. It's not only truth; it's knowledge. You can go on some university campuses and say you think Christianity is true, and they'll tolerate that as long as you don't say you can *know* it's true.

I just was interviewed for four and a half hours last week for the most (I believe) important series ever done on science and religion. It's going to be a 100-episode series to be released by PBS in 2008, and I'm going to be spliced into several programs. Repeatedly, I was asked questions like "Do you believe in angels?" and I said, "No, I *know* there are angels." "Do you believe in demons?" "Well, I do believe in demons, but I *know* there are demons. I *know* there is a God." So for me, Christianity provides, not merely truths about reality, but it is also a source of knowledge. But if you tell somebody that you *know* that there's life after death or that you know things, that's like teeing off a golf ball in the shower. Don't try this at home, ladies and gentlemen; it comes right back at you in a hurry.

Let me illustrate this for you. Let me illustrate how this view of knowledge carries authority today. A few years ago, *Time* magazine did a cover story on how the universe is going to end.⁵ It said, basically, that scientists now know that the universe will eventually reach a point where it's going to wind down, and it will run out of heat, light, and motion. So there won't be any heat anymore; there won't be any light, and there won't be any motion. Now it never occurred to any of them that if things are winding down, they had to be wound up. And if things have to be wound up, there must be a Winder-Upper, but

that is a whole different point. Here is what is important for your pastoral ministry. That article made the following claim:

For centuries, millennia, [it said] we've wanted to know how all this would end. Unfortunately, the only place we could turn was religion and philosophy, which amount to idle speculation. Now, for the first time in the human race, science has moved into this area of inquiry, and for the first time, we now have knowledge in answer to our questions.

The idea is that science provides a source of knowledge to answer our questions, but that religion, ethics, politics, and things like that merely provide faith, mere belief of some kind, or some such thing.

Let me read to you another example from the state of California, what we call the California Framework.⁶ This is the state of California's guidelines for teaching evolution in the public schools. You can pick this up in any elementary, junior high, or high school principal's office anywhere in the state of California. Listen to this; let us see what you hear.

At times, some students may insist that certain conclusions of science can not be true because of certain religious or philosophical beliefs they hold. It is appropriate, if that happens, for the teacher to express the following: 'I understand you may have personal reservations about accepting the scientific evidence, but it is scientific knowledge about which there is no reasonable doubt amongst scientists in their field, and it is my responsibility to teach it because it is part of our common intellectual heritage.'

Now, the average Christian hears that and they walk away thinking that this is a statement about creation and evolution. That is where your teaching ministry comes in, because you have ears to hear differently. This is not about creation/evolution. It is about a view of knowledge from science and religion. Listen to the descriptors used of science: "scientific evidence," "scientific knowledge," "no reasonable doubt," "common intellectual heritage." Do you hear the deeply cognitive descriptors that are used of science?

“Evidence,” “knowledge,” “reason,” “intellectual heritage.” Contrast that with the descriptors used for a religious claim: “personal reservation,” “belief that you hold,” “faith commitment.” Do you understand the difference between the way science is being conveyed here as a source of knowledge, and Christianity and religious claims, which is a source of “personal reservation,” “personal feeling.”

Do you want to nullify church planting; do you want to undercut Christianity in the culture, or undercut any movement? You know what you do? You make people feel like the advocates of that movement don't have any knowledge at the core of their movement. You see, it does not matter if you think you have truth. That does not matter, because if you can not claim that you have knowledge of this truth, people can brush you off and say, “You think it's true; how sweet.”

Now, do you understand that the effect of (1) Christian withdrawal from culture and (2) the emergence of naturalism to fill that gap are to make the makeup man more important than the speech writer. Not in chemistry and physics, but in political campaigns, in moral debates, and in preaching or choosing a religion. The most important thing is that a person is winsome and is articulate in persuading people through illustrations to feel a certain way about what he says. All of which I'm for; it's all wonderful. I have no problem with that, but what I am concerned about is that, outside chemistry and physics, we now make decisions about religious ideas or moral positions based upon how they make me feel and what is in it for me.

Let us return to Oprah Winfrey. What did you hear when I recounted her program earlier? Is your answer inclusivism, pluralism, that whatever your religious view is, that is perfectly true for you? If that is what you heard, then you are not thinking deeply

enough. That is a *symptom* of a deeper issue. To see this, ask yourself whether Oprah Winfrey would go on national television and lecture on smallpox vaccination or lecture on cures for cancer? Would she do that? No. Why? Because she is not an expert. What do we presuppose if we think that a field has experts? Like medicine, we think there are experts in medicine. What are we assuming? We are assuming that in medicine there is knowledge. Experts have knowledge, and non-experts do not. What Oprah is assuming by standing up and speaking authoritatively about theological questions is that there are not any experts. What that means is that there is no such thing as knowledge in religion. Maybe there is truth, who knows. I am sure Oprah thought her views were true. But she would not think that you can *know* these things are true. So there are not any experts. Maybe someone is right. Who knows? But since we can't know, it is one person's feeling verses another. Therefore, Oprah is an expert about how she *feels* about these matters. So the fact that a talk-show host would have the gall to stand up in front of a national audience and speak about spiritual and theological matters presupposes that she does not worry that she is not an expert because there are no experts. In this area of life there is no knowledge to distinguish the experts from the non-experts.

Sadly, the evangelical response to this problem has been to overemphasize the Bible. Let me explain *exactly* what I mean by that. The Bible is the inerrant Word of God. Indeed. But there are other sources of knowledge about God and morality outside of Scripture. There is what is called the natural theology and moral law. There is knowledge of God and objective value from creation.

So if you take a look at Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict and how they approach European culture in an attempt to protect pro-life and promote a Christian

worldview, they correctly do not start with Scripture. Because they understand that if you think you have to have a Bible to know that abortion is wrong, or that you have to have Scripture to know the difference between right and wrong, then the State can not do its job in Romans 13 of punishing wrongdoing without the State submitting to Scripture. This would mean that the only kinds of States which can fulfill Romans 13 are theocracies. Both Popes correctly saw that if you're going to promote a culture of life, you start with the natural moral law that can be known by all people in creation. You don't start with the Bible.

Recently, J. Budziszewski at the University of Texas wrote a piece on evangelical social ethics.⁷ He did a very nice piece on Carl Henry, Francis Schaeffer, and John Yoder and said that while these were great men, their social ethics were inadequate because they were overcommitted to the role of Scripture in public engagement. The doctrine of *sola scriptura* means that the Bible is our ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice, not our only source of knowledge.

What evangelicals should have done, instead of going back and emphasizing the Bible as our source of knowledge, is they should have reasserted a view of knowledge broad enough such that Scripture could easily be seen as the main source of knowledge within this broader view. So if you look at Luther and Wesley and all the great Reformers and revivalists, they will tell you that there are four sources of knowledge of God and morality: Scripture, tradition, right reason, and experience. One of the things Luther does in his debates is appeal to right reason and not simply to Scripture. Is Scripture our ultimate authority? You bet. If something contradicts Scripture, it's out. But the evangelical community has got to start teaching people how to engage in moral discourse

by appealing to general canons of reason without Scripture. It is important to go to the Scriptures to see what it teaches, and then to go to independent reasons to argue for those conclusions in the public square that do not presuppose the authority of the Bible. If we can not do that then the only way we can engage the culture in a civil society is if people place themselves under Scripture to form a theocracy, and that's not what Romans 13 teaches.

I believe in the inerrant Word as much as anyone in here, and I have given my life to defending it. What I am saying is that we now have in our daily practice of church planting and ministry a culture that believes that knowledge can only come from the hard sciences and everything else is a matter of blind faith. If we think that Scripture is our only source of information in that kind of a situation, Scripture will continue to be marginalized. If we continue to assert and defend the idea, however, that we can have knowledge of reality well beyond the sciences (there is, for example, knowledge of right and wrong which has nothing to do with the sciences), then what we do is affirm that there is a source of knowable information about God and moral value that God put in the creation that is actually a part of general revelation. Special revelation trumps general revelation for us believers, but that doesn't mean the Scriptures are our only source of knowledge of reality. What we have to do in the evangelical community is listen to our Catholic brothers and sisters, because they have something to teach us about this, and learn to engage in public debate and dialogue by teaching people to deal with general revelation in addition to teaching them to deal with special revelation.

Dr. J. P. Moreland
Professor of Philosophy

Talbot School of Theology

Chapel Message Presented at
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

April 18, 2007

¹ For more details about this account, see J. P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 91.

² Robert Reich, "Bush's God," *The American Prospect* (July 2004): 40.

³ See J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 1997), chapter one.

⁴ See Julie Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁵ "How the Universe Will End," *Time* June 25, 2001, 48-56.

⁶ Cited in Mark Hartwig, Paul Nelson, *Invitation to Conflict: A Retrospective Look at the California Science Framework* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Access Research Network, 1992), p. 6). The statement is from page 20 of the *Framework*.

⁷ J. Budziszewski, "Four Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought," in J. Budziszewski, *Evangelicals in the Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 120.