

Chapter 3.05 Christian Variations 2: Enlightenment to Now

This chapter continues describing major stances within Christianity. This chapter goes from the Enlightenment to Romanticism to the present.

Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment covered most of the 1700s. I do not say much about it in particular because my beliefs reflect Enlightenment ideas so you get the Enlightenment through the rest of the book. Some Enlightenment thinkers would insist I prove the existence of the supernatural, which I cannot do. Some Enlightenment thinkers, called "Deists", would accept God but think that God hardly interferes with the world after he made it. Albert Einstein thought a bit like a deist. Most founders of the United States were Enlightenment thinkers, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

The opposition of Reason versus Emotion is old in the West but takes a different form in each historical period. With the Enlightenment, we see the opposition between Reason and Emotion that still prevails now – watch any episode of the classic Star Trek. This opposition is simplistic and misleading, but people do believe in it, and sometimes it is useful. The Enlightenment stressed objective reason (logic), science, experiment, and the natural world. It downplayed emotion and mere opinion without reasons. It required evidence. If we cannot find evidence for the supernatural world, then we should not take it seriously. At the same time, the Enlightenment highly valued morality. It did not wish to give up morality even though it relied on the natural world and would not rely on the spiritual world. It wished to ground morality in nature, human nature, and logic. It did pretty well but did not succeed entirely.

The Enlightenment began the point of view which analyses the Bible as a secular text than as the revealed word of God. Modern understanding of the Bible began in the Enlightenment. The studies clarified meanings in the Bible and helped some modern people to greater faith. Modern fundamentalists do not like some of the methods and results.

Some Enlightenment thinkers denied Jesus was God, and denied the magical aspects of Jesus' life such as the virgin birth, the miracles, and the resurrection. They wished to find as much historical truth about Jesus as possible so they could discard the magic and save what was best. Enlightenment thinkers stressed the moral teachings of Jesus and the need to really act on the basis of his teachings. They set up the modern idea of Jesus as primarily a teacher of universal moral truths.

I disagree with some Enlightenment thinkers in that I accept the existence of God and so I accept the existence of the supernatural. I agree with Enlightenment thinkers in that I downplay supernatural intrusion into the natural world except to teach morality and to show the need for positive action to promote the good.

Romanticism.

Events in the late 1800s and early 1900s forced people to see that a large portion of us, likely the large majority, were not guided primarily by Enlightenment style logic and could not work for the smooth

progress of humankind. The American Revolution gave hope to rational progress but the French Revolution and the wars that followed overturned the hope. Democracy did not end all social evils but instead brought a new set of evils. Idealized capitalism promised prosperity; and a large minority did benefit; but we also got crushing poverty, slums, vast wealth detached from human sympathy, the business cycle, and another expansion of the state as business and state grew closer. People acted not by using their energy rationally to build a better world but on other grounds. Whatever those other grounds were, we had to take them into account and try to harness them to build a somewhat better world – if even that reduced goal was possible.

Eventually Enlightenment logic came up against the limitations of logic itself. Enlightenment thinkers realized that logic alone cannot provide a basis for morality and cannot even get people to act on practical daily affairs. Recall the donkey stuck between two exactly equal piles of hay. The donkey starves because it has no rational basis for choice. People need emotion and commitment as well as logic: Go into battle decisively.

Romantic thinkers founded their world on emotion and commitment. Modern people are more children of Romanticism than of the Enlightenment. We inherited the Romantic stress on emotion and commitment, as in the Star Wars movies: “Trust your feelings”, that is, commit to your feelings. These are the other grounds that we have to take into account. The Enlightenment accepted emotion but tried to keep it under the control of reason. The Romantics subordinated logic to emotion. Logic was merely the servant by which emotion most effectively got whatever it wanted. Whatever emotion wanted was what it wanted; ultimately there could be no further account. The heart has its reasons which the head cannot know. Because people are all emotional beings, as one emotional being, we can sympathetically feel the desires of other emotional beings, but we cannot explain them further.

All the ideas of the Romantic period appear in all other periods. There is not necessarily anything radically new. What differs is the entire assemblage of ideas, and the stress put on some ideas rather than others. Some ideas from the Romantic period were truly great. On the whole, though, Romanticism has been a disaster. Because modern life continues Romanticism, we continue the disaster, as in the polarization of American culture and politics after 1970. Jedi balance feelings and logic. Sith give over entirely to feelings; and we know what happens then. Feelings are only good as long as we can guarantee they are good feelings, and we cannot give that guarantee when feelings are entirely their own world. We have a lot of bad feelings; watch the science fiction classic “Forbidden Planet”. I cannot evaluate the Romantic period. All I can do is list a few ways in which Romanticism affected Christianity. Romantic ideas are not all consistent, any more than they are in any other era. I will not point out inconsistencies. Modernism and post-modernism are manifestations of Romanticism. Existentialism could have escaped Romanticism but ultimately succumbed and became a version too. I do not treat them separately.

Ethnic Politics and the Spirit(s).

In Romanticism, distinct ethnic groups each had their own spirit and identity, as for example the Irish, Jews, Italians, Germans, or Jews. This idea can lead to good and bad results. It is good when it leads people to search for their historical roots and common identity, and struggle to be better. It is bad when it leads one group to feel superior, when it leads other groups to look down on one group such as Jews,

and when it leads to refusal to understand. Just as the heart has its own reasons, different spirits are not comparable. You cannot compare the Italian spirit to the German, and you cannot derive the German spirit from the Italian. You cannot even derive the Italian spirit from the ancestral Roman spirit. Eventually the idea of ethnic spirit bolstered nationalistic wars of the 1800s and 1900s, and contributed to the Jewish Holocaust. It still drives how we see conflict, as for example as in the Cold War between America and Russia.

The same idea applies to religions and to Christian sects. You have to feel from the inside what it is like to be, say, a Baptist or a Muslim. Unless you become, say, a Lutheran, you cannot know what it is like, and you cannot know the truth of being a Lutheran. You cannot compare Roman Catholics and Methodists. You cannot even talk about them in the same terms. You cannot compare points to see who might be more historically accurate or more spiritually correct. There is no compromise. There is no search for the greater truth of which each might have a partial vision. There is no chance that our group might just be wrong on some points. You have to belong to one sect or the other. If one sect feels as if another is intruding, then there is no choice but to compete until one sect or the other is eliminated. In these situations, almost always, eventually, groups begin to feel competitive, and then are locked in mortal combat. They feel as if there can be no mutual coexistence. Often groups get to the point where their own identity is tied up in having an adversary. They do not cohere on their own without an opponent. In America now, Christians feel as if Liberals in general are “waging war” on Christians, in particular on Christmas, while strong Liberals fear Christians all want a theocracy.

Truth Lies in Attitudes not Facts.

If the truth of religion cannot be proven in logic starting from the Bible, maybe it can be found in attitudes. From the Romantic point of view, the truth of the Resurrection is not in whether Jesus really walked around in a physical body after he died but in the attitudes that arise in people when they hear about Jesus being raised: what people believe, how they feel as a result, especially any commitment they feel, and what they do on the basis of belief and commitment. The same can be said of any event in Jesus' life such as the virgin birth and crucifixion. Truth lies in the attitudes that it generates. The same is so of any sacrament. The truth of baptism is not in some mysterious thing that God does but in the attitude we have as a result of being baptized. It does not matter if God creates the attitude during our baptism or we get the attitude as a result of some human propensity during rites. All that matters is attitude. It is better if scripture is literally true but not needed. It is better if Jesus really was resurrected in a physical body but not needed. It is better if God does something to us at baptism, but if we change our hearts according to the attitude that God wants then it does not matter. Any debate that causes us to worry about whether or not scripture is really true instead of allowing scripture to generate the correct attitude in us, blocks the spiritual truth. It is better to have attitudinal truth than literal truth, so, if needed, we can cover up the literal truth to preserve the attitudinal truth.

Truth, Power, Words, and Society.

The West has always been impressed by power, by the power of words in particular, and Romantic thinkers elevated language to about the same status as attitudes. The way we talk determines how we think, determines reality, and determines what people do. The way we talk determines attitudes and commitment. People learn words and thinking in society, so social life determines reality and behavior.

Words are just as able to move people as real facts such as the climate or wealth. If we want to control behavior we can control the words that people use. If we want to control words, we can look to society. We can develop a new attitude (“new attiiii-tuuu-ude”) and a new vocabulary, and plug into a support network. “Anti-abortion” is now called “pro-life” while “tolerate abortion because we have to” is now called “pro-choice”. Since 2001, all rich people are “job creators”.

The problem is that words are not reality. Reality exists apart from words even if we can only access it through words and even if we can only ever access it partly at any one time. We always learn language in some particular society but that does not mean society fully determines words or reality. If you do not act in accord with reality then a change in attitude or words does not help very much for very long. If you called bigotry against gays in the military “discrimination against queers” or called it “don’t ask, don’t tell”, the end result was just about as bad. If you thought giving money to rich people would create more jobs every time, you deserve what you got.

With Protestantism, the Bible became “the Word” in close to the modern sense, as something self-subsistent with a power in itself rather like magic incantations. The Bible did not need a church to interpret it or to manifest its power. (I think even few Jews have this attitude toward the Tanakh.) Romanticism validated that attitude, and made the Bible another tool in the differences between incompatible sects. It gave a rationale as to why the Bible might be magic.

To a large extent, to an outsider like me, wars between Christian sects are wars of words. Wars about translations of the Bible are a good example. The Bible had to be literal truth or else its power would have been merely the same as any magic spell. That the Bible is both literal truth and magically efficacious makes it unique. To keep its power and uniqueness, the Bible has to be rendered exactly as God rendered it. The sect that renders it correctly controls its power just as the magician who knows the correct version of a spell has its full power. Thus various sects have to claim to be the only ones to correctly understand and render the Bible correctly.

The Artist.

Under Romanticism, creation and novelty became the most powerful forces in the universe. The artist became the most powerful being in the universe. The artist is the human creator, the closest analog to the creative power of the universe. Rather than the aristocrat, the priest, the soldier, or the farmer, the artist became the ideal person, a position he-she holds to this day as evident from the veneration we give to musicians, movie stars, and TV stars. Coming in second is the “natural” person, as in “Mother Nature” or as in the “noble savage”, an image that holds even in the social sciences where the myth of the noble non-capitalist native still prevails. Both artist and nature can be combined into one, as with some rockers, country and western musicians, some actors, or White witches. Actors who promote nature do well. Some women can get a high rank because all women are supposed to have the potential to be both more natural and somewhat creative. The creative witch theme shows up on TV as with “Bewitched”, “Jeannie”, “Sabrina”, and “Charmed”.

Nations that have accepted Western Romanticism are famous for coming up with new art and technology. America is the outstanding example. This can be one of the good aspects of

Romanticism. At the least, it often gives those countries an economic advantage. With its art, America almost conquered the world.

There is true art and there is imitation (“posing”). Real artists are creative while imitators are merely clever. God is the original true artist. God creates through nature (even I share this point of view). The Devil might be clever, and, in his own way might be much more creative than any mere human, but, in the long run, the Devil is merely an imitator of God. All evil art is imitation. All imitators who attempt to pass off their work as real art are evil. All imitation is evil unless it is openly acknowledged as imitation and its original source properly respected. Thankfully, any imitator who accepts his-her limits and acknowledges that he-she merely imitates can be a successful honest minor artist. When the Devil creates a “human”, he merely imitates in some way a human that God already created through nature. The Jewish “Gollum” is an imitation. “Gollum” in Lord of the Rings was an artistic creation based on this idea, and quite effective. In Lord of the Rings again, Goblins (orcs) were devised by Morgoth out of elves and men as imitations of elves and men while trolls were imitations of Ents.

Since its formative early councils, Christianity has stressed that Jesus created the world, he did so as The Word, and he did so through The Word because he is also fully God. Romanticism strengthens this image of Jesus by recognizing again the fusion of creativity and words. See the opening of the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John is probably the most important gospel in modern Christianity. Jesus’ creation of the world was true creation, and Jesus was the original true and greatest creator-artist.

What does Jesus create now? What makes him a true artist now? It depends on your view. Jesus continually re-creates the Church, the most important work on Earth. Jesus continually saves; a kind of great creation and re-creation. Jesus watches over us. Jesus inspires. Indirectly, but in an important way to artists, Jesus created the great religious art when he inspired the artists. I am sure Bach and Handel would be happy to give Jesus co-credit for their religious works. Jesus brings into being the most important attitudes and most important institutions of your sect. To a Conservative, Jesus created family values and he re-creates them every generation. To a Liberal, Jesus creates the great community of acceptance, love, and progress. To me, if we ever succeed at self-government and at taking care of the Earth, I am perfectly happy to give Jesus the credit for having created (with some help) the ideas and institutions that succeeded.

The Resurrection.

The Resurrection combines Jesus’ continued creativity with the emphasis on attitudes. The truth of the resurrection might not be in Jesus’ rising in a new physical body but in the changes that the idea of a resurrection made in human history and society. We do not know if Jesus really was resurrected into a physical body. Nobody since Jesus has been physically resurrected as expected. That does not matter because people, society, and history have been spiritually resurrected. They have been changed radically because now a lot of people believe in God, have hope, and listen to the Church. Jesus’ real resurrection is his new body in the lives of people, society, history, and the Church. That resurrection is real and powerful regardless of any trivial physical resurrection. To confirm that Jesus was never physically resurrected would not contradict the idea of a spiritual resurrection. We do not need a physical resurrection to confirm the idea of a spiritual resurrection, and focusing on the idea of a physical resurrection can confuse us about spiritual resurrection. Similar things can be said as to whether or not Jesus was born of a virgin, was God, died for our sins, and performed miracles. Whether or not Jesus’

death caused God to forgive our sins does not matter as much as that we think it did and we act accordingly en masse. The same is true of feeling the presence of the Lord or having a relation with God. What is important is how God (the Spirit) uses, as an artist uses marble, to express himself in the world, and how people use religion to impose their nature on the world.

This way of looking at the scriptures tries to reconcile orthodoxy and science by finding a truth that can be observed in human hearts and society. But it is also a way of having your spiritual cake and eating it too, and of avoiding questions about the truth of the scriptures and about the true intent, mostly-is, and all-about of Jesus.

It might seem as if I go along with Romanticism when I say the objective truth of the resurrection does not matter as much as our moral action. I hope I do not. I hold to objective standards of morality that would have been apparent to Enlightenment thinkers more than to Romantic thinkers or modern thinkers. Suppose you are on a train and discover it has caught fire (my thanks to the Lotus Sutra). It would not matter if the train is a freight train or passenger train, what color it is, who owns it, how fast it is going, how long it is, or even how the fire started. It matters only that everyone is safe. It only matters what we do. That is why I don't care about the Resurrection, not because I think the truth can be found in attitudes. I am not after only a change in attitude but also after fundamental moral principles, and I want to act according to those principles to do the most good in the real world. I do not want the "wow" experience of a new attitude from people so much as I want their determination to "do unto others" and to work rationally to build a better world. We can think about the other Romantic stuff later.

Other Religious Stances.

Romanticism reasserted Gnosticism, Dualism, Emanation, Wisdom, Culmination, underlying structure or underlying process, the importance of small details in a grand plan, and the importance of seemingly small characters. The best way to see these effects is to endure a great epic of the 1800s, such as Wagner's Ring cycle – if you can stand it. The Lord of the Rings is a 1900s version of similar ideas, including the importance of Frodo and Gollum. The Nutcracker ballet is milder version but still gets across most of the ideas and is more enjoyable. You can make a child happy if you go see her or him dance in it. As I was re-writing this chapter, the TV show "Once Upon a Time" was airing; it has every ingredient listed here. The story of the Spirit by the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel is the best example of modern Emanation, Gnosticism, Dualism, and the overcoming of Dualism, and it is not all that hard to read. Nearly all modern comic books are a celebration of Dualism and the importance of hidden truths. When comic books have an elaborate "back story", we usually see an example of Emanation in how good and evil came to be, how evil at first gradually took over, but how good will, finally, take over. If you don't read the comic books (I stopped in late adolescence) you can see the movies based on them. Graphic novels are similar and more tolerable by adults. Americans see history, and now see real current events, as the unfolding of good and evil, the battle of good and evil, with the gradual eventual victory of good.

"Culmination-ism" is the idea that unfolding history has reached a crisis in our time, our time will decide the outcome of the process of history, and we each might be able to play a small part in this great culmination. Our age is the age in which it is all decided; our age is the age to end all ages. The idea of culmination always goes along with Emanation. Again, Hegel is a clear version of both. Communism was a version. Capitalism has been developed by Republicans and Libertarians into this kind of a vision

to take over from the Communist version. It is the system to end all systems, the system to put it all right automatically. At least since World War 1, the “war to end all wars”, all large current events have been seen this way. Nearly all religious and philosophical movements style themselves as the movement to end all movements. I cannot count how many times I have heard “the end of the world is near”.

I can only mention a few ways that these ideas affected modern Christianity. As inspiring as he might be, Aslan (Jesus in disguise) of the Narnia books owes more to Romanticism than to the real Jesus. Aslan’s constant enemy is the White Witch, the false creator of stone statues and beguiling treats, or is another version of the ultimate evil from which she comes such as the fog. Aslan’s chief role is to fight evil. The same is true of the various “mostly-is” of Jesus in the Lord of the Rings: Frodo, Aragorn, Gandalf, Elrond, Treebeard, etc. Christians call “history” as “his story”. Jesus is the force of history as it unfolds and especially as it culminates in the great battle of good versus evil somewhere in our very own time. Jesus has a plan for all of us both in our daily lives and in the final showdown. We can all contribute a bit to the great victory. Because sects of Christianity are not mutually comprehensible, to know a sect is like having a secret knowledge that can only be conveyed by experience. But once you have this secret knowledge, it sets you free, and lets you merge into the unfolding of the great historical drama.

There are upsides to these ideas in Romanticism. We would not have nearly so much adventure without them, including some great adventure novels and movies. In “Waverley”, Walter Scott consciously has Romanticism taking over the adventure story, with good moments in which characters are rationally assessed and we see the scuffle between logic and attitude. The process is further along in “Kidnapped” by Robert Louis Stevenson. We would not have the modern detective story, born around 1840, for which Edgar Alan Poe usually gets credit. I prefer the detective story to straight Romantic epic because in it there is the dance of logic and emotion. A short funny wonderful satire of modern Romanticism, especially its narcissism, is “Pale Fire” by Vladimir Nabokov.

Modern and Post-Modern Relativism.

Romanticism is fun but also dangerous. We cannot stop the train once we get rolling on the Romanticism track. The eventual end is relativism. There are no objective standards for attitudes as there are with logic and facts. There is no intrinsic reason why helping a hungry child is any better than eating the child while there is still some meat left on its bones to ease our own hunger (see Swift’s “Modest Proposal”). There is no intrinsic reason why a new attitude, and the success that might go along with it, is any better than the old attitude, better than the old failure, better than being an office slave, or better than subjugation as a housewife with wine-pills-and-rock-n-roll to keep you in line. There is no reason why the Resurrection is a promise of God’s love rather than the gateway to an exclusive club for God’s pets. We can hope that contemplating the Resurrection leads believers to the proper attitude of awe and worship but there is no intrinsic reason it should. Any attitude to which it leads is a truth of the Resurrection. If the Resurrection makes believers into spoiled children, then that is also its real truth. If it leads people to become serial killers because they are setting their victims free to certain rebirth in heaven with Jesus, that makes sense as well. There are no standards, especially for morality. In the end, we can use scripture and logic to validate whatever we want for other reasons.

Obvious relativism is both an obvious powerful tool and obvious trap, so Christian sects want to have the cake of their own truth and deny the same cake to rivals. You have to join our sect to know the real truth

of our sect but even if you become a member of another sect you do not know the real truth of that sect, or any real truth, because that sect has no real truth; it has only delusion. We are true artists; they are false imitators. There is no objective standard by which to assert this, we just know it. Relativism leads to an odd mix of relativism and dogmatic anti-relativism.

Because of its clear statement of Jesus' intent, mostly-is, and all-about (Nicene Creed), it would seem as if the Church could guard against relativism about Jesus, but that is not entirely so. Normal people cannot feel satisfied with the official creed. They need in addition various mostly-is and even various all-about. I won't repeat them here. The point is that Romanticism gives normal people license to adopt various mostly-is and all-about.

To counter the relativism of "other sects", "our sect" adopts the position that they and their view are "nothing but". Somewhat counter to what we might expect, relativism leads to quite a bit of nothing but. Jesus was nothing but a zealot who got caught. He was nothing but an advanced hippie. He was nothing but a Cynic philosopher who was a Jew too. Jesus was nothing but a peasant reformer who did not understand real world politics. Jesus was nothing but a Jewish sage who got caught up in politics. Jesus was nothing but a moral teacher. Jesus was nothing but a prophet. Jesus was nothing but the one and only Son of the one and only God. Jesus was nothing but God incarnate. Christianity is nothing but the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus is nothing but material instantiation of his father's will.

The "nothing but" of relativism allows us to explain away. If we can put a person in a social arena, socio-economic class, historical trend, or ideology, then we can explain away his-her ideas entirely in terms of setting. We do not have to decide about the truth of his-her ideas. If there is truth but we do not like it, we can say that the truth is "nothing but" a product of the arena. We can say, "That truth might be good for some people but it is not general truth and it is not good for us". For example, if some people do think that Jesus was resurrected but we do not, then it is true for them but not for us. We do not have to think about whether it is really true or not, only how it might be true for them but does not have to be true for us. If conservatives insist Jesus was resurrected, then fine; it is true for them but not for us. If Jesus said to take care of the poor, that is true for him then but not for us now. If liberals insist Jesus said we have to take care of the poor, then fine; it is true for them but not for us. If we think Jesus was not resurrected, we do not have to think about whether he really was or not, we can say what matters about the truth is how people think about it.

We can pick and choose among truths. If Jesus said we should help the poor but a TV evangelist tells us God really wants us to be rich, then we can decide that being rich is more important than helping the poor, and feel good about it.

What people think about truth is more important than truth. If we really do not like a truth, and can find ways to get around it, then our interpretation trumps the plain truth. Jesus said it is hard for rich people to get into heaven, but people want to be rich. Suppose we say that rich people are really stewards of God's bounty, allowing God's bounty to be used effectively to make everybody's life better off. If all rich people really are job creators, I wish they would actually do it. A rich person can get into heaven as long as he-she shares a little bit or as long as his-her greed leads to jobs. Then what we think to serve our own benefit takes over from the plain truth.

The only good way to defend against relativism is to be clear about your morality and ideas. State your morals and ideas. That way, we have clear and open ground for argument. In the real non-Romantic world, groups of reasonable people do not split into qualitatively distinct sects unable to communicate. People share enough morality so we can work to reach understandings and better mutual ends. If not, then at least we will know what we really are fighting about.

Moral Relativism, Ambiguity, Inversion, and Hypocrisy.

Probably the worst kind of relativism is moral relativism. Romanticism did not invent moral relativism but did give it a big boost. The basic issue is simple. We need moral rules but we cannot have a tiny rule for every tiny situation, and it is not always clear how to apply rules in all situations. We have to use judgment. Judgment opens the door to moral relativism. Sometimes the same rule varies in application according to people and situation. We understand when a poor person takes a few apples off a tree he-she does not own so as to feed his-her family. We do not understand when a rich person takes apples without permission from a neighbor's tree because he-she feels like it. We understand when a poor person traps a rabbit on a rich person's land for dinner (see "Robin Hood" with Errol Flynn). We do not understand when a rich person takes the last lamb of a poor person to make a feast for guests (from the history of King David). We understand the need for a modest home for a family but not the lust of some house buyers or the greed of banks that led them on. Most of us have a good enough sense of these situations as long as ideology and religion do not confuse us.

Romanticism, democracy, capitalism, and Protestantism cloud the issues. They give us expectations that were not met. With democracy and capitalism, we expect governments to seek equal justice between rich and poor, powerful and weak; but they fall short. The Protestant Church is supposed to be "of the people" and to have a more direct relation with God, and so is not supposed to favor the rich over the poor, or favor the powerful over the weak. A reformed Roman Catholic Church is supposed to be similar. But in fact both favor the rich and powerful and both support the institutions of the state that favor the rich and powerful.

When aristocratic institutions exploited the people there was no hypocrisy. When democratic institutions say they are "of the people" but continue to exploit, then there is hypocrisy. When the Church supports exploitation, there is an added layer of hypocrisy. People revolt against this in spirit. There is moral inversion. If we cannot find the good guys among the supposed good guys then maybe we can find them among the bad guys. So the bad guys are all really good guys and the good guys are all really bad guys.

People in past times certainly understood moral ambiguity but they did not think moral ambiguity symbolized how the world really works. Modern people often do. The best place to see moral ambiguity at work is detective novels, "films noir", and recent movies such as the Batman series. Rock-n-roll is full of it, often comically so without intending, as with the Bob Dylan song "Tangled Up in Blues". A character in a film or TV show cannot possibly be good unless he-she is also flawed just enough to prove he-she has just enough bad to be good. Only a cop with a drinking problem can be honest. The musician with a drug problem is really a modern creative archangel. Anybody in a nice suit is a demon.

When a prosecutor puts a 14-year old girl in jail for stealing a TV dinner while letting a corporate officer embezzle millions with no jail time, people get confused. When the Church says the prosecutor is right, people get more confused. People turn from the Church to movies, TV, novels, comics, and illustrated novels for guidance. Thankfully, I think we get pretty good guidance from art, at least from shows that are not intended primarily to exploit moral ambiguity. We get really good guidance from some shows that do exploit it a little, such as from "CSI" and the various incarnations of "Law and Order". We learn from them how to control moral ambiguity and how to draw the line between right and wrong. "Harry Potter" has it all: the wizard as artist, inversions, moral ambiguity, and good moral lessons about friendship, loyalty, honest, hard work, keeping to the rules, and breaking the rules.

Conservatism Continues.

Even before Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine, it aligned itself with conservative deference to official authority rather than with any social action that might undermine authority. We clearly see the trend in Paul's letters. Christianity has been conservative this way since shortly after Jesus died. Official Christianity emphasizes the divine status of Jesus so it can overlook his teachings and his program for a better world.

When capitalism first dominated society it shook up society, fracturing society along lines such as between peasants and lords or between lords and capitalists. It was not always clear which side Christians would take, and sometimes they did take the side of the peasants against the lords or the poor against the rich. Yet as society adjusted to capitalism, Christianity again became conservative. By the middle 1800s, capitalists had supplanted the old aristocracy as the primary source of political and economic power. Churches aligned with the new capitalist authorities and the governments that the new capitalists controlled. Some of the new Protestant churches were open in doing so, such as Luther and the Lutheran churches in Northern Europe and most of the churches in England. The churches of the revivals in the northern states of America (see below) openly supported the Republican Party. I think Baptists and Methodists aligned with slaveholders in the American South. Christianity continued side with the powerful and rich against the weak and poor.

Modern Life.

Despite all the potentials for badness, I like modern life. I like the painting and music, the houses, the parks, capitalism and business, pretentious academics, and pretentious rockers. Despite the disaster it has been, I like Romanticism and its modern incarnations. I like that people try to have wild youth but settle down into good citizens. I love that most of us are not afraid of diversity and we want different kinds of people to get along. I love that we see the value of nature, and want to steward it as best we can while still making a living. I like the politics, wrangling, and contention. I like that many different temperaments can get along. I love space sciences, physics, biology, math, and computers. I love that we have facts in our science and fantasy in our arts. I think God approves of most of modern life. If you need to feel that life is worthwhile, listen to American music throughout the century of the 1900s.

Usually a way of life is not the expression of one particular group in society but is a compromise between various groups in which most groups get along better in society than they would out of society. One group often dominates but rarely does one group so dominate that society is simply an expression of it.

Even among hunters and gatherers, women and men, young and old, artists and drudges, all had to get along and none got its way entirely. Priests and the military squabbled and cooperated in Egypt. Capitalists and workers do the same now. Modern society is a compromise in which a lot of groups get along so each does better in than out. This spiel is not an ad for PC diversity. This argument is a warning that when one group really dominates society, or tries, then we are in trouble, even in the modern world.

Modern life really is more seductive. There are many lost souls in modern life, as you can see in bars, malls, office buildings, factories, sports teams, churches, and universities. Seduction of your soul is bad enough but what really counts is reproductive seduction, being seduced away from successfully raising a family to carry on. When parents worry about seduction this is what they really worry about. If our only daughter Susie drinks a glass of wine everyday to wash down her Valium but still has two kids and does a decent job with them, she is tolerable. If our only daughter Susie never gets married and never has kids, makes a lot of money, and lives in a big apartment where she practices yoga happily, that is almost as bad as a crack whore. I don't go into Tommy the Slacker. It is fine to be a rock and roll star as long as you are not a rock and roll bimbo. Parents fear this kind of seduction, and are willing to use church, state, and schools to protect their children. Parents will squash ideals of freedom and democracy to make sure junior does not become a pot-head living in the basement playing video games. Parents use Jesus to condemn mini-skirts so that young Brittany does not have a baby before she has her degree.

We should not worry as much and we should not use religion and the state to make sure our children have families. Despite early experimentation, the large majority of modern young people do not lose their souls or their reproduction. Most young Americans still have families. I know it is hard for parents to be calm about the dangers when they only have one or two children, and, if one or both get lost then all is lost. But parents still need not to distort religion and society just to insulate Jack and Diane from modern life's little ditty. Life in other times and places was even harder, and people made it through that too. Even George W. Bush and his daughters eventually settled down to get along.

Some modern trends in Christianity (and other religions) are better understood if they are seen as a reaction against the seductions of modern life and Romanticism while still borrowing ideas from Romanticism.

Fundamentalists, Evangelicals, and Charismatics.

These groups share the same basic orthodox view the divinity of Jesus, and the magic of the incarnation, crucifixion, and the resurrection.

When I came back to the U.S. in 2000, I wanted to know about the differences between Christian churches. I asked a few people to explain to me how their church was doctrinally distinct. Almost nobody could do that. They would tell me how good people at their church were, how much love they had, how much God loved them, how inspiring their priest was, how much fun were church events such as picnics, and the good works they did. Some people might mumble something about baptism and some might even say other churches were wrong. But I never understood why these people had to split up into different churches.

I do not fully understand differences between fundamentalist, evangelical, and charismatic Christians. The distinction has to do less with doctrines than with the history of groups and the temperaments of members. I have read the founding documents of the groups but I do not think that is what matters. So, by "fundamentalism" here I mean all three groups unless I need to distinguish them.

I have to be careful because I tend to see fundamentalists as reactionaries who use religion to advance their agenda of security, family security, wealth, power, and keeping the poor in line. They are that but they are more than that, and I have to seek the more.

Roman Catholicism had internal fundamentalists even well before Protestantism. Usually the Roman Catholic Church found a place for them. Mel Gibson is a member of a group of Roman Catholics who are fundamentalists. The idea of fundamentalism seems intrinsic to Protestantism so, when Protestantism arose, it was inevitable that strong groups of fundamentalists would arise within the movement. There are Jewish and Moslem fundamentalists too.

Modern fundamentalism began before most people realize. It is the flip side to the Romantic reaction against the modern world. The two movements share much in common although they differ in their overt theology. Many people cannot get along in the world of science, reason, capitalism, and personal freedom. They seek greater institutional security and religious security than is offered them on the truly free market and in democracy. Along with the Enlightenment and Romanticism came religious revivals that stressed a return to an earlier simpler idealized Christianity based on the fundamentals of Roman Catholicism or Protestantism. Contrary to popular belief, during the time of the American Revolution, few Americans went to church. Maybe only 18% of Americans went to church regularly, similar to attendance in "godless" Europe now and in "godless" regions of America. Christian thinkers were not the main force behind the Revolution although Revolutionary thinkers did use Christian ideas. In the early 1800s, as America settled down and the market pervaded society, came a religious revival led mostly by Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists. It swept the South and Midwest, leading to the high rate of church attendance in those areas now. The lingering results of that revival are what people mistakenly think was the original religious condition of America. The revival was a social and attitude backlash against the confusion caused by political freedom, the rise of science, and the rise of the market; and it was a way for beginning small capitalists in America and England to protect themselves by banding into groups. It was one Christian version of Romanticism. Modern fundamentalists continue this movement.

Attitudes were an important part of this movement. This movement was not primarily about ideas. People understood doctrine. People did not need doctrine read to them. Instead, people held revivals. They swooned in tents. They found a personal relation with Jesus. People felt the love of God. They healed. Hundreds of people got baptized at a time. Women marched against demon rum. People fought slavery. They argued about which was the best path to God. That is why this revival movement is the Christian version of Romanticism.

Beginning in the 1920s, groups of Christians began to react against the theology that was taught in the major seminaries. I do not go into what that theology was, but it was either too relativist (a gift of "mainstream" Romanticism) or it was similar to what I outlined as my personal beliefs (Enlightenment rationalism). They also reacted against the lifestyle of the "jazz age". They thought that lifestyle was bad and would inevitably seduce their children into damnation, or worse, into bad reproduction. They stressed a return to Christian fundamentals, in particular the Nicene Creed and a literal reading of the

Bible. The fundamentalism of today comes directly out of groups from the 1920s. For Fundamentalist groups of today, the jazz age has become the rock-n-roll age and the age of "liberal Hollywood". The 1920s fundamentalists wanted the emotionality of Romanticism but they did not want the inevitable relativism. They had to find a way to ground their attitudes in something objective. For that, they used the Nicene Creed and the Bible.

At about the same time, for similar reasons, other Christians felt that they could have spiritual gifts and could feel a personal relation with God. "Spiritual gifts" includes speaking in tongues, exorcism, healing, and prophecy. The term "charismatic" comes from the Greek "charism", which is based on a metaphor and means "a gift". It is a gift from God of special powers. Some Christians felt God had promised spiritual gifts to all true Christians and that, as Christians, they were entitled to special gifts, rather like apprentice Jedi expect special powers that come from the Force. They felt that spiritual gifts connected them to the pure early church. They needed to replicate the pure early church now in order to fight off the degeneracy of modern times. They wanted to share these feelings with other similar people, and they wanted to encourage other people to find these feelings. They wanted to set up communities of people with spiritual gifts and who had a personal relation with Jesus. They stressed the feeling of a personal relation with God and Jesus by calling it being "born again". These are the basis for modern evangelicals and charismatic Christians.

Some small Christian churches stress fundamentals but insist that spiritual gifts ended with the apostolic age a few decades after Jesus. They do understand the idea of a personal relation with Jesus. Evangelical Christians "preach the good news". They want to lead other people to true Christianity as exemplified in the Nicene Creed and in the early church so that other people can share in the joy of God's love, so that people will act better, so that better acting people will form a better society, and so that a nation composed of true Christians can be a better nation.

Fundamentalists, evangelicals, and charismatic Christians share a lot. It is hard to be an evangelical without grounding your message in fundamentals. It is hard to be a fundamentalist without accepting the possibility of spiritual gifts, the idea of powerful feelings that go along with accepting Jesus as Lord, and without wishing to share the good news. It is hard to be a charismatic without believing in the literal word of God and his promise in the Bible, so it is hard to be a charismatic without being a fundamentalist. It is hard to be "born again" and have a personal relation with Jesus without appreciating the role of attitudes.

Some Necessary Stereotyping.

Fundamentalists believe in most of the Nicene Creed but they also adhere to aspects of popular religion and local common religion rather than only the Nicene Creed. They insist that Jesus is God. They are dualists. If a person believes that Jesus is God then that person will go to heaven to be with Jesus and with other believers forever. Especially they anticipate seeing family members in heaven. If a person does not believe all this, then that person will go to hell. They believe Jesus has ordained their social-political agenda, such as state support of the idealized nuclear family, no divorce, no abortion, no intoxication, and strict enforcement of laws. Anybody who does not support their social-political agenda is going to hell whether or not that person also believes in Jesus as God. Their social-political agenda is as important as their theology.

In theory, orthodoxy and fundamentalism do not have to come together with a typical conservative political view such as supporting business, the free market, and strong military action. They could go along with helping the poor and making peace. But in fact, fundamentalists are almost always politically and socially conservative. Fundamentalist Christians have continued the tradition of conservative Christianity

Fundamentalists want to merge church and state. They want to recreate their own group as Israel in the time of Solomon. They believe they are the modern chosen people of God, supplanting Jews and modern Israel. If they are Americans, they see America as the modern true Israel. If they are European or South America, they might see the West as the modern true Israel. Otherwise, they might see the Christian Church as the modern true Israel.

As with Israel in the past, fundamentalists expect God to punish the nation when it deviates from purity and holiness, and to reward the nation with prosperity if it is holy enough and pure enough. They do not heed the lesson of Abraham bargaining with God. They do not think the presence of only a small minority of righteous people is enough to keep God from punishing America. They think the large majority of the nation has to believe in God correctly as they do, and believe in their social-political agenda, to keep the entire nation under God's protection and direction.

They must carry God's word to all other people both privately and through the state. Not to carry God's word would be selfish and would betray God and our fellow human beings.

They expect opposition but they also expect to prevail.

They think the state cannot be neutral between ideologies and religions, and that one ideology or religion has to dominate. It has to be them or they will be destroyed. If they do not dominate, then another group will dominate, and that other group will seek to destroy them. A nation either has to run according to Biblical principles or it has to be run by Satan against God's people. They do not accept neutrality. As in ancient Israel, either we are all on the side of God or else God's instrument of wrath will destroy us for lack of faith.

They do not see modern society as arising from a compromise but as always being dominated by some power group. They proclaim allegiance to democracy but do not see that their view is not compatible with democracy. They think people who believe along Enlightenment lines as I do are not a different kind of believer but are foolish and are really secular. Many suspect people like me of being pawns of Satan.

They see the secular state as waging war on Christian institutions such as Christmas and on the nuclear heterosexual family. They cannot allow the state to support some limited inadequate set of common morals while they live both according to the common morals and according to their own stricter morality too. They cannot live and let live. When the state permits abortion, the fact that other people have abortions is not neutral, or is not only a sin by people who commit abortions, but is a direct assault on the families of good Christians. Any homosexual relations are not a private matter between consenting adults but are an assault on the families of Christians. They cannot tolerate behaviors that are not in line with their own morality even if they are not forced to participate in those behaviors. They cannot tolerate

homosexuality even if they are not forced to be homosexuals. They cannot accept that other people smoke marijuana even if they are not forced to do so.

There can be only one morality, it has to apply to everyone all the time, and the state has to enforce it. If the state permits any immorality, they are sure their children will not be able to resist the immorality and so their children must be seduced into evil and into bad reproduction. They need to control the state so as to stamp out immoral behavior and thus save their children from damnation and bad reproduction. They fear poor people as threats to their own jobs, family security, and reproduction. They use morality and state power as a weapon against the poor. They blame all poverty on the poor, and they seek to control the poor through vigorous laws against small crime, soft drugs, drunkenness, and prostitution.

They see themselves as champions of decency, the only champions of decency of the only conceivable decency, and they do not understand why other people do not see them the same way.

More Attitudes.

Despite the public stress on articles of faith, fundamentalists really seem to stress attitudes. They seek the same experiences as did revivalists of the 1800s. This is what I found when I began to ask people about their churches. Church life was about experiences and attitudes.

Fundamentalists wish to ground their attitudes in the objectivity of the Bible and in the reality of the incarnation, salvation by Jesus' sacrifice, and the resurrection. They want an objective validation for their attitudes. They seek the hidden fact that swings the court case in their direction and that reveals their opponents as the true criminals. In their stress on attitudes, their appeal to magic facts, and the demonizing of opponents, they are like Romantics and relativists even though they dislike the relativism that came along with Romanticism.

Something Extremely Admirable.

On the other hand, fundamentalists genuinely love life, as long as another style of life does not threaten theirs. Life is a gift from God. As with the early Christians, they do help the poor, the sick, and people in jail. They do it directly face-to-face, and not indirectly through taxes as do most Liberals. When they see a problem, they go out and work on it, they don't think of starting a government program to take care of the problem so they don't have to get their hands dirty. They oppose abortion not only as a way to keep down the poor but also because they really do value life and want to protect innocents. They do not want people to use drugs or alcohol, to gamble, or to engage in meaningless sex, because those activities debase life, degrade the integrity of the individual as taught by Jesus, and detract from the possibility of better success. They put themselves on the line. They give a lot to charity, and not to buy their way into heaven. I would guess that fundamentalist Christians give a much higher percentage of their income to charity than any other group. In all this, they truly imitate Jesus. They truly live in a version of the Kingdom. They show each other active love in a way that is hard to find from people in other groups. They respect the truth as much as they can. They try not to lie or steal. They are truly decent people in many ways. They even know how to have fun.

Political Correctness.

Although I agree with many of the policies of PC people, and find it easier to talk to them than to talk to fundamentalists, still, the feeling I get from PC people is much like the feeling I get from fundamentalists. Their stress on doctrine, and their willingness to use the state to make people do what they want people to do, is exactly like fundamentalists. Their stress on attitudes, words, and social determination is much like the fundamentalist stress even if particular attitudes, words, and societies are not the same.