

CULTURE WARS

“the foolishness of God and the wisdom of men”

Key question

What is the nature of the tension between the Kingdom of God and the World’s System?

Key Text

II Thessalonians 2:7

“For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.”

Key Definition

Culture War

Culture war is the tension and conflict between the people of the Kingdom of God and those who are a part of the systems of this world that ignore, resist, and try to repudiate it.

Introduction

1. The tension within our culture can be defined in many ways.
 - a. It can be defined along economic lines – the haves and the have-nots.
 - b. It can be defined along political lines – liberal and conservative, democrats and republicans,
 - c. It can be defined along geographic lines – urban and rural, north and south, coastal and inland.
 - d. It can be defined along ethnic and racial lines – whites and non-whites.
 - e. It can be defined along educational lines – educated and non-educated.
 - f. It can be defined along religious lines – formal religion and secularism.
2. Many understand the tensions in our culture along philosophical or “world and life views” that embrace very different presuppositions about reality. The term “culture wars” has come to describe this tension.
3. In short, the West is at war—with itself. Its scientific outlook has brought material progress. The Enlightenment’s appeal to reason has achieved a measure of freedom. But contrary to what many people suppose, both of these accomplishments depend on Judeo-Christian foundations, including the moral worldview that created Western culture.
4. Culture wars can best be understood by noting the following contrasts.

Secular Humanism	Biblical humanism
Absolute autonomy	Personal and corporate accountability
Comprehensive contingency	God acts and speaks in our world
Total temporality	Eternal perspective
Radical relativity	Prescribed moral absolutes
Closed system (materialism and the human spirit)	Open system (sacred canopy – man made in God’s image)
Defines reality and makes decisions as though the God of the Bible did not exist or made no difference.	Defines reality and makes decisions as though the God of the Bible exists and has revealed ultimate truth.

5. It should be made clear that the Biblical meta-narrative encompasses a much larger population than just those who are a part of any formal religious group. Many people who do not claim to be Christian, Jewish, Moslem, etc. might also embrace the world-view of the Bible (the notion that a God exists and that we are in some way accountable to that God).
6. It is also important to note that many members of religious organizations function as secular humanists in spite of their confessional faith.

A. **The origin of the culture wars is found in Gen.3.**

1. The Fall of Adam and Eve set the stage for a history of culture wars.
2. The essence of Eve’s temptation is to be understood as her faith in her personal sense experience stands against the revelation of God’s purpose and path for her.
3. The result of her search for wisdom apart from revelation is the disruption of her world and all relationships within it.
4. It is especially important to note how Eve’s decision impacts others (Adam).

B. **The cultural tensions embedded in the American system.**

1. Contrary to some popular versions of the origin of the American republic, our nation has from its origin embraced ideological tensions.
2. There are four major forces that have made a contribution to the development of our republic.
 - a. **Classic Republican government** — This model from the Greek and Roman classical period put decision making in the hands of elected representatives of the general public. This model respects both the necessity of respecting self-interest and societal interests. It sees social restraint as necessary for controlling self-interest that may be destructive to community. This is in contrast to both raw self-interest and raw societal interest.
 - b. **Puritan Christian values** — These values include a God-ordained and sanctioned plan centered in a covenant community of individuals and state interests with accountability of conscience before a transcendent and universal God.
 - c. **Enlightenment ideals** — Rationalism, Humanism, Pragmatism, Individualism
 - d. **Pluralism** — tolerance of individual differences within a broad framework of common cultural, “rules of engagement.”

3. America was founded as a “**Christian nation**” only in the sense that it:
 - a. Assumed that we live under a sacred canopy - a God-centered universe.
 - b. Assumed a personal and public ethic shaped (roughly) by Biblical moral law.
 - c. Assumed a personal moral accounting of individual conscience before God.
 - d. Assumed a sense of Divine calling and favor.
 - e. Assumed a view of humanity that respected both its dignity and depravity.
4. America was not an evangelical Christian nation, but rather a nation that held to a very **general Biblical ethic** and worldview.
 - a. It was a secular state with the soul of a church. It separated the state from the church (any one denomination or sect), but not the state from a generic theism.
 - b. Thomas Jefferson called it “**general religion**” (the general creed that distills values common to all sects, in all religions, from all cultures).
 - c. The Mayflower Compact with its strong Christian language stands in marked contrast with the American Constitution. This was because the Compact reflected the old worldview that came to America from Europe, a view that the founding fathers of the Revolution deliberately set out to counter.
 - d. When we read the essays and speeches of our eighteenth and nineteenth century forebears, one of the most striking revelations is the extent to which they shared a common moral vocabulary. This vocabulary was drawn from both the Judeo-Christian Biblical tradition and the Greco-Roman classical tradition (America was called “the new Athens.”)
 - e. In 1797 America made a treaty with Tripoli, declaring, “the government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.” This reassurance to Islam was written under Washington’s presidency, and approved by the Senate under John Adams.
5. America was to be a **civil society** with support from both government and religion.
 - a. Civil society is characterized by – Law and order, Diversity, and Tolerance.
 - b. When civil society is weak it can be taken over by either government or religion resulting in **Fanaticism** (intolerance, forced uniformity, and lack of human freedoms).
Civil Society and Fanaticism by Dominique Colas, Stanford Univ. Press. 1997

C. The nature of the American democratic republic

1. **The American Republic has borrowed from two philosophical traditions** represented by two great minds – Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and St. Augustine (353-430).
 - a. Both men shared a common struggle with the natural passions of the flesh and each wrote about it in books that shared the same name “*Confessions*.”
 - b. The way in which each assessed the meaning of and appropriate response to these passions was quite different.

Rousseau	St. Augustine
Man is basically good.	Man is by nature sinful.
Society corrupts man.	Society reflects man’s sinfulness.
Freedom comes from looking inside the heart.	Freedom comes from submitting to the authority of God.

<p>Feelings over Reason</p> <p>Societies must be controlled.</p> <p>Inspired the French Revolution, and Communism</p> <p>The father of Romanticism</p> <p><i>Sowed the seeds of radical secularism in our day</i></p>	<p>Reason over Feelings</p> <p>Societies must be balanced.</p> <p>Inspired traditional Christian doctrine and practice</p> <p>A father of Christian culture</p> <p><i>Sowed the seeds of traditional moral values in our day</i></p>
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2. **The American Republic consists of two principles** held in balanced tension.

E PLURIBUS	UNUM
Diversity	Unity
Enlightenment ideals	Classical & Biblical values
Freedom	Order
Individuality	Community
Personal choice	Common good
Personal rights	Social responsibilities
Man is exalted by self	Man is both sacred & sinful
Man deserves freedom	Man needs restraint
A democracy	A republic
The Constitution	The Bill of Rights

3. **Neither of these two forces can to be allowed to dominate** or eclipse the other.
 - a. America is not to be **E PLURIBUS (Period)** — a radical democracy where everyone is free to do what is right in their own eyes, a tyranny of the masses.
 - b. Nor is America to be **E PLURIBUS UNUM (IN CHRISTO)** — a theocratic state where unity is “in Christ” or defined by evangelical Christianity.
4. **The preservation of this balance is fragile** and only possible with the cooperation of the great institutions of our nation — the universities, the churches, the courts, and the legislative government.
5. **There is ample evidence for a respect for UNUM in early America.**
 - a. Laws of nature and **nature’s God**. Some examples of “laws of nature” - *incest, sanctity of life and property, marriage, civil order, etc.*
 - b. The national motto — E PLURIBUS UNUM (in diversity, unity)
 - c. The language of the U.S. Constitution “...to form a more perfect **union**, ... provide for the **common** defense, promote the **general** welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty ... our **posterity**...”
6. **The loss of balance and its consequences.**
 - a. When E PLURIBUS is exalted at the expense of UNUM (as is the case today) —

1. Idealism tends to result. No compromise of rights is allowed out of respect for diversity.
 2. Man concludes that he can exalt himself through political revolution, educational socialization, and psychotherapy — without the unifying influence of transcendent authority.
 3. MAN/god — God is optional or a chaplain to humanity.
 4. Man both ignores the threat of, and encourages the expression of his dark side — his “selfishness.”
 5. The disorder and crisis that results forces the pendulum to swing in the opposite direction toward tyranny or the loss of E PLURIBUS all together.
 6. The civilized values retained are borrowed capital from the past. They have no logical root in the prevailing philosophy.
- b. When UNUM is exalted at the expense of E PLURIBUS —
1. Cynicism tends to result — people feel insignificant and in bondage.
 2. Man loses sight of his exalted dignity.
 3. An elite group of managers wind up dictating society.

D. The cultural tensions within the growth of secularism in the modern age.

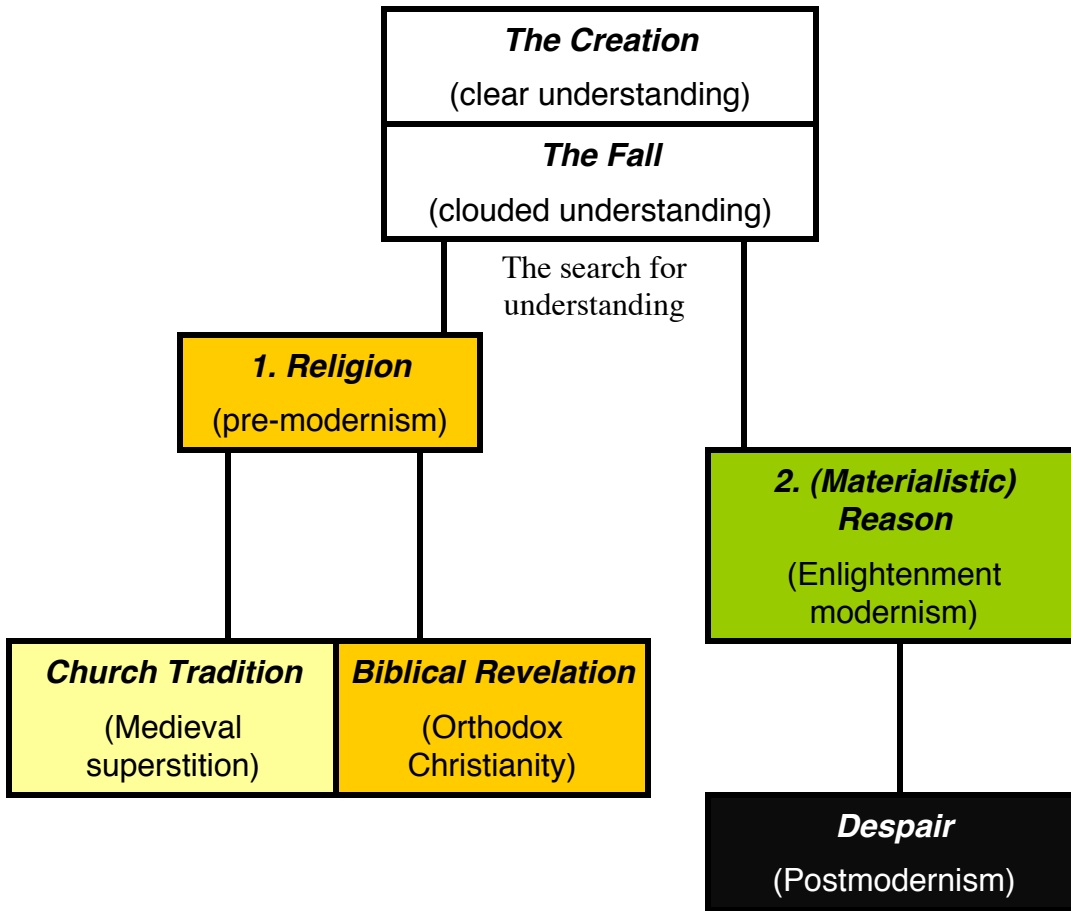
1. Postmodernism is a change in epistemology (the way we know things). Postmodernism is a philosophical conviction that truth and natural laws are illusory, and that the only reality is personal and group preference expressed in terms of political power.
2. Each of three eras in history reacted to that which came before it.

Pre-modern	Modern	Postmodern
transcendence	nature	personal
church authority	autonomy	community
truth is assumed	truth is discovered	truth is created
tradition	science	intuition
ascribed roles	earned roles	chosen roles

3. In the University postmodernism produces the transformationist (hard postmodernist) who understands the aim of higher education as not the pursuit of truth, but social deconstruction or the removal of all absolutes, transcendent authority, and normative truth.

E. How has postmodernism developed?

1. In Western civilization there were two paths in man’s search of understanding (after the Fall) – **religion and reason**. Religion lost its way through tradition and superstition. Reason produced hopeless despair.



2. Man centered reason seemed to be vindicated as science was solving many of the practical challenges of the material world but was unable to address the deep “value” questions that were at the heart of culture. It was forced to divorce “values questions” from the realm of reason and science because they did not fit the materialistic worldview of science. The late Francis Schaeffer described this shift in his book “Escape from Reason.”

Objective knowledge	Subjective knowledge
Science	Religion
Reason	Faith
Enlightenment ideals	Classical & Biblical values
Materialistic naturalism	Spiritual supernaturalism
Public knowledge	Private perspective
Universally accepted	Personal preference

3. We might view the history of presuppositions as a context for postmodernism.
 - a. In the **Theological era** (300BC - CE1600) of intellectual development science was under the control and tutelage of church tradition. It served the interests of

worshippers of an orderly Creator God who prescribed that His subjects take dominion over creation.

- b. In the **Metaphysical era** (CE1600 - CE1800), science led many people to wrongly conclude that all phenomena (physical and social) were contingent upon previous natural phenomena. A personal God was no longer necessary even though eternal moral truths were real and necessary.
- c. In the **Positivistic era** (CE1800 - CE 1950), science was believed to be the only source of all absolute truth. But as scientists began to make more sophisticated discoveries they learned that everything looked relative not absolute. Without God, the notion of absolute truth was extinct. This paved the way for postmodernism.
- d. In the **Existential era** (CE1950 - present), postmodernism was born as a logical and inescapable end of a Godless and truthless world.

<i>Reality is objective.</i>		<i>Reality is subjective.</i>	
<i>A universal moral order exists.</i>		<i>There is no universal moral order.</i>	
<i>God centered</i>		<i>Man centered</i>	
Pre-modernism (The Church) <i>Martin Luther</i> 0-1750	Early Modernism (Common sense) <i>Thomas Jefferson</i> 1750-1850	Late Modernism (Scientism) <i>Carl Sagan</i> 1850-1950	Post modernism (Personal preference) <i>Jacques Derrida</i> 1950-2000?
GOD <u>man</u> cosmos	God MAN cosmos	MAN god cosmos	? man chaos
The traditional American mind set		<i>The modern American mind set</i>	
25% of population largely conservative Christian	25% of population largely sympathetic to Biblical values	25% of population largely unsympathetic to Biblical values	25% of population largely cultural leaders and hostile to Biblical values
<i>Self-sacrifice is an expression of worship.</i>	<i>Self-sacrifice is a means of happiness.</i>	<i>Self-sacrifice is a necessary evil.</i>	<i>Self-sacrifice is foolish.</i>

- 3. In the 50 years between 1875 and 1925 there was a massive intellectual climate change in North America. What had started in the universities of Europe some 75 years earlier was now entering the great institutions of American culture - the university, the church, government, media, entertainment, etc.

F. **What are the consequences of the culture wars?**

- The health, strength, and survival of American culture can be threatened by the way we understand our core values and where we base them.
- Our ability to manage our international relationships is dramatically effected by the way we resolve our culture wars.

G. **Triumphalism closes more doors than it opens.**

1. Triumphalism is a posture (associated with many conservative Christians) that says:
 - What I do is (assumed uncritically to be) God's will and work (fully).
 - My perceptions are God's perceptions (exactly).
 - My motives are not mixed but pure.
 - All who question or appose me are obstructing the work of God and are evil.
 - I have no room for reflective self-critical analysis of anything other than how I can be more effective in furthering my causes.
 - I have answers - not questions, certainty – not doubts, mandates – not options, declarations – not dialogue.
 - I punctuate all of my statements with exclamation marks not comas, or question marks.
2. In reality this posture is:
 - Arrogant
 - Insensitive
 - Mean spirited
 - Abusive
 - Angry
 - Foolish
 - Embarrassing
3. But before we marginalize many of those who take a “triumphalist” posture we need to try to see through their cultural B.O. and B.S. and hear what might be some rather profound challenges. Consider the following questions that are raised by many triumphalists.
 - Is there meaning to life and death?
 - Is there meaningful public truth in the realm of moral values? Or is there a strict division between science (universal truth) and values (private preferences).
 - Can we dismiss the Scriptural story through historical critical “scholarship” so easily?
 - Are conservative fundamentalists the only people in the cultures war that are: closed-minded, heard hearted, uninformed, and bull headed?
 - What does it mean to be human?
 - Is the only source of public truth that which comes from naturalistic (materialistic) science? This assumes that there is no external authority to nature.
4. The need for a liberal learning style.
 - a. It is possible to be conservative in one's conclusions while at the same time being liberal (open, reasonable) in one's learning style.

- b. Classic liberalism (openness, reasonableness) need not be synonymous with culturally liberal moral and political conclusions.
- c. Classic fundamentalism (affirming the tenants of the historic Christian faith) need not to synonymous with cultural fundamentalism which is uncritical, anti-intellectual, angry, arrogant, narrow minded, mean spirited, and foolish.