

# Pick and myth

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] Good. Great. Very well welcome to everyone to the first of our series of Bethinking talks this autumn.! In two weeks time we're going to be having a film, not quite sure which one this is yet, followed by discussion.

And then the following week, so that was the 1st of November, then the 8th of November, we have Ellis Potter coming from Switzerland. Ellis, for those who don't know him, is American. He became a Buddhist monk and ended up in Switzerland and was converted under the ministry of Francis Schaeffer.

And then Ellis has worked for a long time at Labrie in Switzerland, and now he works mostly in Eastern Europe, sharing the gospel around there.

So, he's definitely worth hearing. He's an excellent speaker. He's going to be talking about comparing Eastern and Western worldviews. So, bringing some of his knowledge of Buddhism, you know, comparing how Buddhists view the world and how Christians view the world and that sort of thing.

I've heard similar talk before, and I can say it's an excellent talk. So, please come. Please invite people along as well. These yellow flies. This evening we have Steve Ellicott speaking to us about postmodernism.

[1:29] Steve is a lecturer in mathematics at the University of Bryson. He's a reader in mathematics, which is like a very good lecturer. So, before I hand over to him, let's just pray that God would help us this evening.

Thank you, Lord, that we can be here tonight to think about things in some more depth than maybe we usually do. We ask you, Lord, to help us, help our concentration, help our understanding. And we pray, Lord, that you would help us see something of your glory through what we think about tonight. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Right, well, yeah, this, I hope I'm sort of not expecting a detailed analysis of postmodernism, because that's not what this talk is.

It's really to do with the power of story and the power of narrative. And the question is, is narrative all there is?

[2:44] Because, in a sense, that is the postmodern view, that narrative is all there is, that all meaning is constructed. And it's really looking at this idea of story that, and trying to think how it might relate to a Christian worldview, that is what this talk is about.

And I'd like to start with a kind of fairy story, but a story that actually is at least based in, oh, yeah, sorry, that's just, so, yeah, it's about the power of the story, but then I'm going to talk about stories that fail, and I'll say a little bit at the end about the Bible story, and how we might consider it in a sort of, in the light of postmodern views of knowledge, but not sort of taking the postmodern views at face value.

So, here's a story. Once upon a time, in a land not very far away, there was a beautiful girl who worked, in fact, in a nursery school.

And one day she made a handsome prince. And, but, well, all princes are handsome by definition. So, it's... Very soon they were married, but unfortunately they didn't live happily ever after.

And, in fact, as we know, there's a newspaper article here, I haven't brought my pointer with me, but facing in opposite directions, and if you were around at the time, there was a lot of TV analysis and interviews and people putting their own point of view.

[4:26] But they didn't live happily ever after, and in fact, not long after that, the girl died. And then something quite remarkable happened, if you were around at the time, all the people cried.

Almost literally. People understand perhaps, you know, I think most people realise that there's something strange about this.

Anybody with any sort of analytical view of the world would have said, well, what are we doing here? Yeah. And yet, in a sense, we all signed up for it anyway. We all, you know, because it's... We all joined in the morning because it was, in a sense, the end of a beautiful story. It was a tragic story, as it turned out. But it just seemed a tremendous waste and tremendous tragedy, really, probably, in the scheme of things, it wasn't that important, but it just seemed like a terrible tragedy at the time.

And in fact, a few years ago, there was a film called *The Queen*, which set out to explore the historical events that surrounding, surrounded this death.

[ 5 : 39 ] But in particular, the power of that myth of the people's princess. Because that's what it was really was, was this idea of the people's princess, that myth of somebody who was, in a sense, one of the people, but almost the perfect celebrity.

You know, the celebrity nowadays doesn't actually do anything. It's just somebody who is there as a sort of icon, almost. And surely Princess Diana, above all, was the ultimate icon of that sort.

And there was a tremendous power in that myth at the time. And as I say, the film *The Queen*, he really explored the details of that at that time.

And if you haven't seen the film yet, I haven't seen the film, just to tell you basically what it's about. After the messy divorce, and particularly when the concern for Diana's sons, the royal family initially is unable to buy into this myth, that you're unable to take seriously what everybody else seem to be taking probably too seriously.

And even to the extent that the monarchy itself was rocked, and a lot of the film is concerned with this, and the Queen sort of, you know, not used to being so unpopular.

[ 7 : 13 ] And a lot of, that's a lot of what the film is about. And it probably is true that the monarchy itself was threatened by these events. And eventually, after, I mean, it's a long film, but eventually, after a lot of heart searching, the Queen is forced to make a speech reflecting the public mood and saying how we all love Diana really.

And I think, to me, this is the, the crucial moment in the film. And, in fact, what the film shows is the Tony Blair character, not obviously Tony Blair himself, but the actor who played Tony Blair, surrounded by his advisors and spin doctors watching this on the television, watching this speech on the television.

And one of these rather cynical spin doctors sort of says, well, you know, she's saying all this, but she doesn't believe a word of it. And to me, Tony Blair gave the absolute perfect postmodern reply to this.

He says, that's true, yes, that's true, but it doesn't matter. That's what you do to survive. You had to buy into the story in order to survive, and the Queen had to buy into the story in order to survive. Because the story has such tremendous power. So even though she didn't really, you know, wasn't really saying what she felt. She had, in a sense, no choice but to buy into the story. It doesn't matter, that's what you do to survive.

[ 8 : 49 ] That to me is the crucial point in this film. Stories are what we tell ourselves to make sense of the world.

We all try and make sense of the world. And we tend to have sort of big stories or we have tended to have big stories that try and give us some way of understanding the world.

The world is a complicated place and we want to try and understand it. And so we tend to construct stories around it to try and understand it. And for the ancient Romans, for instance, the big story was the state.

All, yeah, all the sort of philosophy really, all the activity of Rome revolved around the idea of the state. The great political entity that was Rome, an economic entity that was Rome.

Life was about the spread of Roman rule and civilization. That was what Rome was all about. Now, of course, in the latter years of the Roman Empire when Rome became officially Christian, then this story became Christianized.

[ 10 : 03 ] and the spread of Roman civilization was not so much the idea of the Roman state as such, but the idea of Christian civilization to be fed and to be held by the Roman, held together by the Roman Empire.

But of course that didn't happen. The fall of the Roman Empire was a great shock. And I think it's explored somewhere in Augustine's book *The City of God*, in which he has to point out or come to terms with the fact that the city of God is not a political entity at all.

It's something entirely different, something that God himself builds. But certainly it was a tremendous shock, the collapse of Roman civilization to all of Christendom and led to what we now talk about as the Dark Ages.

But in the Middle Ages, Western Europe at least, Christian Western Europe, adopted a new kind of myth, a new story about how the world was built.

And this actually is Dante's version. I'm afraid you can't really read the text, but the idea is that here is the earth where we live, underneath is hell.

[ 11 : 21 ] And then there are these various circles which, where the stars are, the planets are. And right at the top there is the Elysian realm where God lives.

Now, of course, essentially this was Aristotle's view of the world, but it's, has been rather adopted into a Christian view of thinking about how the world was put together.

It's Aristotle's cosmology overlaid with the Christian symbolism. And it's a very nice tidy view, isn't it? God and angels and planets and men and demons all have a clear place.

There's all the right place for them. It's stable, it's even in static in a sense. It's true that the planets move, but according to Aristotle, the planets only move, the stars and planets only move in perfect circles.

So, everything is static and set and firm and perfect. And even if it isn't perfect on Earth, that's only a sort of small bubble of imperfection in the perfect universe.

[ 12 : 29 ] And of course, it also made up and down very tidy. You know, down was bad, up is good. Makes it very easy to, to know where you are in the scheme of things.

But of course, this worldview was shattered by Copernicus and Galileo. They showed that in fact, the Earth goes around the Sun, not the Sun around the Earth.

Now, of course, this wasn't just a scientific theory. I mean, in fact, the sort of myth that's told nowadays is that the Catholic Church was totally opposed to Galileo and Galileo was some kind of atheist hero.

Galileo, of course, wasn't an atheist at all. He was a very devout Catholic. And that's the sort of structure, you know, the Roman Catholic Church was totally opposed to these ideas.

Well, initially, in fact, that's far from being the case. But the problem was that if Galileo and Copernicus was right, this nice tidy idea of God at the top and the devil and demons at the bottom and everybody in its place was going to be undermined.

[ 13 : 44 ] Well, in fact, it was undermined. And this really was the objection that the Catholic Church had to this new cosmology. So, from about 1600 on, a new story took over.

It's often regarded Descartes as the founder of this. The idea that everything should be found out by reason. Descartes, we would, after Descartes, we would reconstruct the world as mathematics.

Everything would have the certainty that we attach to mathematics. Our knowledge would be certain and unshakable. But actually, this story soon split into two competing strands.

On the one hand, there were the theists who understood that the world made sense because it was designed by God and therefore it made sense to search for scientific explanations because the world was built by a rational God.

On the other hand, there were naturalists and the naturalists took the view that God wasn't necessary. That the natural world, the physical world, is all you get, all there is.

[ 15 : 09 ] And science was the key to understanding it. Now, up to about 1850 or so, these world views very much existed together in competition but it wasn't entirely clear which was going to take over.

and of course, people again often assume that all the scientists were opposed to a theistic view but of course, historically, that's simply untrue. Most of the famous 19th century scientists you've heard of, putting aside perhaps the biologists, you look at Faraday, for instance, well known to be a very orthodox Christian, James Clerk Maxwell, famous physicist, Maxwell's equations, Lord Kelvin, Stokes, all these great British mathematical physicists, all very much theists and believers in the order of the universe.

And of course, even Darwin was no atheist really, he was essentially an agnostic. It was really only his successors that made Darwin into a sort of orthodox atheism.

But during the 19th century, nonetheless, it is true that the theists ran into increasing problems, particularly because the scientific evidence seemed to undermine a simple interpretation of biblical creation.

Yes, it undermined a scientific, a simple interpretation of biblical creation.

[16:55] Now, it is debatable, of course, whether before the 16th century or so, everybody actually held a very simplistic understanding of the first chapters of Genesis.

But anyway, they'd rather come to by about 1850 or so, I'm saying, and yet, at the same time, this position was becoming increasingly untenable. What was clearly the case was that the world was a much more complicated place than a very simple interpretation might think.

And, of course, it was, again, it was often religious men who understood this, who found this out because they often were the scientists of the day and many of the naturalists who sort of dug up generations and generations of bones and things were in fact clergymen in many cases.

But certainly, it did seem that there were problems with the biblical understanding of creation and that maybe naturalism was the way to go and indeed, by about 1900, you might have thought that naturalism had triumphed.

And, of course, Darwin, as I say, was not really any atheist himself, certainly not a very militant one anyway, but nevertheless, he provided an explanation of origins that perhaps enabled the naturalists to have, you know, to be at least plausible.

[18:16] And, after Darwin, we'd be our own gods, we would reconstruct the world by technology. And the triumph of reason seemed to be imminent.

Like, 1900, had, for instance, in mathematics, the famous talk by Hilbert, famous German mathematician, who, you know, suggested in the next 30, 40, 50 years, all the great problems of mathematics could be solved and that we'd essentially understand the world by reason.

And, of course, I haven't got a slide for this, but in mathematics, in fact, in a sense, it almost came apart first with Gödel's incompleteness theorem in about 1930. But in the world as a whole, in the political world, the whole program of modernism was really about to fall apart.

First of all, it failed intellectually, because the problem is, if we're just monkeys, how can we know anything truly? And the difficulty is that if, with any purely positivist view of knowledge, is that how do we know that our perceptions are valid?

We don't, of course. So you can't actually, in the end, you can't know anything. And of course, as any philosopher will tell you, you can't prove the truth of science scientifically, because you have to start by assuming it.

[19:46] You have to assume that knowledge is determined empirically. You can't prove that all knowledge is gained empirically. You can't prove that empirically. It's called positivist position.

Philosophers abandon very quickly, because you can't test what's called the verification principle, says that we'll only take as true that which can be verified empirically. But of course, the problem is you can't verify that statement empirically.

Therefore, by definition, it isn't true. And philosophers realise this very quickly, to be fair, but sometimes the rest of the population doesn't seem to have quite caught up.

But actually, perhaps even worse than that, modernism failed morally. Atheism, it turned out, could justify tyranny, either the communist tyrannies of Stalin, or the right-wing tyrannies of Hitler and Mussolini.

And what did science give us? Well, it gave us a lot better ways of killing each other. We could kill each other in a grander scale than anybody had ever managed before in the 20th century. And, of course, as we, towards the end of the century, we began to realise that very technology that, you know, it's amazing, isn't it?

[21:07] You listen to these TV programmes made in the 1950s sometimes, sometimes they bring them out again just to have a laugh at. Because, you know, how everything was so positive, how you're opening all these nuclear power stations, how this was going to give everybody free, cheap energy, and how, by the turn of the century, we were all going to be flying around in our own little helicopters and things.

As if, you know, by the 1950s, people still thought technology was going to be perfect. And then we realised that it just doesn't quite work like that. Sure, none of us wants to go back, none of us wants to give up our cars, do we?

None of us wants to go back to abandoning our medical technology. And yet, we find that technology has its bad side as well and in fact it actually can damage the planet and indeed is damaging the planet.

So, modernism failed morally as well as intellectually. So, where do we go from there? And this was the problem that the philosophers in the last half of the 20th century really wrestled with.

Sartre, for instance, the existentialist, took the view that ultimately there was only despair, the successor of Nietzsche, that the only logical position was despair and the only thing you could do is assert your existence by doing something.

[ 22 : 33 ] Doesn't really matter what, but just do something. But Foucault and Derrida and what we now think of as the postmodern philosophers took a somewhat different view.

They said, no, what there is, is text. There is story. And in a sense, if you go look at it, in a sense everything is story. But what they said was, of course, but there's no big story.

Those things we had been looking at, this medieval view, the modernist view, all tried to be a big story, a story that, you know, was a theory of everything, if you like.

But the postmoderns said, no, there is no big story. There are just lots of little stories. And some of those stories can be very powerful. That's why I started with that story of the people's princess.

Some of these stories can have a tremendous power. But there are two problems with the stories. First of all, that every text will ultimately contradict itself. This was one of the views that the philosophers took.

[ 23 : 35 ] But also, that the purpose of those stories really and ultimately is to enslave and manipulate us. And, again, if you think of that story of the people's princess, you can see there's a certain amount of truth in that, isn't there?

These stories do manipulate us. They have a tremendous power for us. But ultimately, to the postmoderns, there is no meaning. There aren't really even any authors.

It doesn't even really matter what the author of the story meant. There's only the text itself and what the power of that text is and what it does. there is just story.

So, in this postmodern world, the cosmos is a joke at our expense. And the only sensible policy is to laugh it in the face. And particularly towards the end of the 20th century, the postmoderns delighted in the absurd.

That's perhaps changed slightly in this decade. but certainly towards the end of the 20th century, only the absurd was meaningful. The only thing you could do was laugh at it.

[ 24 : 51 ] Something that's tragic or disgusting becomes funny. And of course, Clockwork Owens was the precursor of this, was coming out in the 70s. And yet, Stanley Kubrick was way ahead of his time with that film.

film. He realised that anything could have meaning. And so, he wrote this frightening vision, terrifying vision of the future, really.

And then, of course, he found that it was actually encouraging people to violence. He actually withdrew it. It was withdrawn for several decades. And then it's only been recently re-released again. It's a horrible film.

film. But I personally think it's a film that some people should see. Because it really gives you a very black view of the human nature.

And of the position of man without meaning. But of course, you don't have to go that far back. Because you've only got to look at Quentin Tarantino to see how film is used to make what is horrific, funny or amusing.

[ 25 : 59 ] I must admit, I won't see, I won't watch Tarantino now, because I haven't seen Kill Bill. Because I just don't want to be made to laugh at things that he makes us laugh at.

But I have seen Pulp Fiction. And if you haven't, I mean, Pulp Fiction is hilarious. You can't argue with it. It's an absolute scream. You laugh all the way through. And then you ask yourself, what are you laughing at?

You're laughing at people blowing each other's brains out. When they have to clean the car out because somebody accidentally blows somebody's brains out in the car. You're laughing at the problems that John Travolta has to try and stop his boss's girlfriend dying from an overdose of heroin.

It's horrid, really. And yet, the thing is very, very funny. Tarantino has this genius for making you laugh at what is really quite horrific. I haven't seen Kill Bill, but if anybody has, I gather it's extremely

violent.

But, you know, that becomes the result in the end. We look into the horror of the cosmos and the only thing we can do is laugh at it because otherwise it is despair.

[ 27 : 14 ] And the conclusion here is that truth in the end is not discerned by reason. And you will really find this, this is debated in university circles.

A few, maybe 30 years ago, Richard Dawkins would have been regarded as more or less the orthodox position, you know, very much a positivist view. Now, I'm saying I'm actually in charge of postgraduate training at Brighton University and the key course we have in research methodologies starts with this issue of epistemology.

And actually, we've just revamped it and we've got two people doing the first issue. One of whom is an old-fashioned, died-in-the-world positivist biologist. And the other is a professor of education who's essentially an ethnographer and very much of the position that knowledge is constructed. It's not that knowledge is out there, you just make your own knowledge and you construct it. And, but if there is truth, perhaps it's only found in paradox and humour and contradiction.

And ultimately, I make up my own story. If you want to be a positivist, fine, that's, you can go with that story. But don't expect everybody else to sign up to it.

[ 28 : 43 ] If you want to believe in crystals, fine, believe in crystals, but don't expect everybody else to sign up to it. You make your own story.

And the only thing that matters is whatever effect it has on me and you. And of course, the postmodern view itself is that sort of story.

It's rife with contradiction, postmodernism, of course, but then it's supposed to be. So, you get, you know, there's no big story and yet deconstruction becomes the big story.

And each, each thing you look at, you try and pick it apart and see where the, where it's been set up to manipulate people and what assumptions there are built in which are going to catch you out and manipulate you.

And that becomes itself in a sense, the way critical theory works and becomes the big story itself. So, even the postmoderns have a big story and they're saying that there isn't a big story.

[ 29 : 46 ] But, so, the advantage of being a postmodernist is you don't actually have to make sense. It's a tremendous liberating position. It's only whether it's whatever effect it has on me and you.

And as the film, the Queen says, it doesn't matter if you believe what you're saying. that's what you do to survive. And this has a tremendous impact.

I mean, I think sometimes people think this is all very academic and doesn't really affect the way the world works. But, but it does. So, in politics, instead of having leadership, and this was perhaps particularly true under, under Tony Blair's prime premiership, but I think it's still largely true.

And it's true, it's even more true of the American elections, and probably is so still, that focus groups replace leadership. You know, you're not actually saying this is the right thing to do.

You find out, not so much what the population wants, as to what you've got a chance of getting away with. And debate, instead of having rational debate, you have spin.

[ 30 : 58 ] So, instead of having, you know, you've got this raw fact. How can you interpret it so that it supports me? There's a thing that we give to some of our business studies students which deal with some statistics on newspaper sales and how it was reported by, the same statistics were reported by the Times and the Telegraph, but carefully spun so that the same statistics imply to the Times readers that the Times is doing better and to the Telegraph readers that the Telegraph is doing better.

It's mind control by manipulation of language. In other words, it's 1984, except instead of the Orwell's 1984, which was grim and, you know, grey and sort of boring, this is 1984 with jokes.

It's glitzy. It's glamorous. But it's still Big Brother. Now, we've talked about the story and the stories that fail.

I just want to say a little bit about sort of the Christian view. We're not going to any great detail. This picture of an ostrich with its chicks.

Do ostriches have chicks? I guess they do. The young ostriches at the bottom, anyway. The mother bird and the young one spreading out its wings to protect the young. And this actually comes off an evolutionary website, talkorigins.org.

[ 32 : 38 ] And the vestigial wings of an ostrich are presented as evidence of evolution. Well, possibly they are, although even in this picture you can see that this ostrich is making good use of its wings.

Well, certainly the wings of an ostrich are evidence of something. Ostriches are birds, yet they can't fly. There's certainly some significance in this.

But you'd almost believe that nobody actually realised before the time of Darwin that ostriches couldn't fly. So, let me just refer you to this passage of Job.

Written from the Job written, I don't think we know, do we? About at least 1500 BC, I think. It's thought to be one of the oldest books of the Bible, Job. And Job comments that the ostriches can't fly.

Well, the wings of the ostrich flap joyfully, but they cannot compare with the pinions and feathers of the hawk. And later on he says that when the ostrich opens her wings to run, she laughs at horse and rider.

[ 33 : 45 ] The ostrich may not be able to fly, but she makes very good use of her wings. I don't think Job had ever seen a penguin, or we might have talked about penguins' wings as well.

Penguins can't fly either, but they're very good swimmers. But still, there is some point in this. God warns Job about oversimplifying the world. And it's possible that we have done that.

It's possible that Christians have done that, tried to become too simple a view of the world, without realising that the world that God created is more complex than one might try and think.

And really, that's what a lot of the book of Job is about. I say it's perhaps the oldest book in the Bible, so it's clear that people have been doing this for an awfully long time. If you think about the book of Job, if you're familiar with it, it's about a very simple story.

You do what God wants and God will bless you. If God isn't blessing you, you must have done something wrong. That's, you know, it takes 30 chapters of debate on this, but that's basically what the book of Job is about.

[ 34 : 54 ] But the point is, of course, that Job hadn't done anything wrong particularly, at least not worse than anybody else. In fact, on the whole, he's regarded as a righteous man in the scriptures. And yet, things didn't go well for him.

And it was that simplistic view of the world, the book of Job was written about, and yet we still don't seem to have learnt that lesson 3,000 years later. Any theory of knowledge on modernist lines is doomed to failure because of self-reference.

You can't prove empirically that knowledge is empirical. You can't prove by reason that reason is consistent.

And if all you conclude is that, you know, that our brains are deterministic anyway, then how can you attract any meaning to the, to knowledge at all? Postmoderns are quite right about that.

But Christians can think of the book of Job, I think, as a critique of reductionist, modernist thinking. That's, you can't always come up with a simplistic explanation.

[ 36 : 11 ] If you do, it's very likely wrong. And the Bible itself certainly uses paradox.

I mean, again, the whole of the book of Job is almost a paradox, or that reference to the ostrich is a paradox. It uses deliberate, formal self-contradiction.

And Phil, in the sermons, likes to point out the way that, on several occasions, Paul quite deliberately formally contradicts himself to make his point. It uses logical reasoning as well, of course.

It's not irrational. It's not a paradox of the scripture. In fact, it uses a lot of logical reasoning.

Probably more than you might expect, which seems to be rather, rather bely Richard Dawkins' view that faith is knowledge without evidence.

The Bible is very keen on evidence. Consider, think, think it through. And we won't disagree, perhaps, with the post-moderns, that in the beginning was the word, but the author matters.

[ 37 : 34 ] And that's where we'll part company. The word is a communication from one being to another.

Whereas, who wrote it matters to the Christian. See, you could have a thoroughly post-modern view of the scripture, and I think some people do, and say that, well, if it talks to me, then it's meaningful. If it doesn't, I'll ignore it. But, in the end, you'll end up knowing nothing, and you'll end up with real contradiction. The word of God, we say, is its own authentication.

Yes, it's true that the word itself is what speaks. But the word of God authenticates itself and points us to its author, not to itself. And so, this points a way forward.

We don't have to be stuck in the rationalism and reductionism and modernism. But neither do we have to put up with that solipsism that's inherent in post-modernism, the view that, in the end, only what it means to me matters.

[ 38 : 55 ] Because solipsism is technically the view that everybody else is a function, only I exist, and everybody else is a function of my imagination. And that, of course, fairly coherent, you know, fairly logical view, really.

But, and it, post-modernism is inherently solipsist. It doesn't go quite that far, but it says, effectively, only I exist in my universe, and that's all that matters.

But the world isn't our story. The world is God's story. And we are expected to understand it.

That was the last slide. Oh no, that's right, I've just put that one down. I've just quoted Peter here. Paul's letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do with the other scriptures, to their own destruction.

We don't claim that everything in the scripture is perfectly understandable at an elementary level. And in fact, it is possible to twist it to destruction.

[ 40 : 06 ] We have to understand it. But we're reminded also that the perfect revelation of God is through not a person, a person who is described as the Word, but who is a person, Jesus Christ.

The Word is personal. And the scripture is personal because it is communication. So, that's my idea perhaps of the power of the story and how the story can manipulate people, and it does manipulate people.

And we should be aware of that, and how we should be, avoid stories that are too simple, but that we can find that there is, if we don't try and interpret it in either a modernist or post-modern way, we can find the meaning of the scripture, because the scripture does create its own meaning in that sense, but it's the meaning that the author intended.

Okay, stop there. I don't know if anyone wants to ask questions or say anything. I read today, Steve, about this whole thing that evolution and all the changes it goes through, and what's it likely to develop into?

I think it's Steve Jones, because it's famous by the religious and it's unlikely to change very much now. In the same way, you can see how the lost things of life have developed at the ages of me now in a post-modern state.

[ 41 : 53 ] Do you think in the same way that things are unlikely to change as drastically as they have done over the centuries in terms of people's view of life?

It's very, I don't know, I mean, it's very hard, because if we knew what next, then we'd all, you know, we'd all be, I mean, there are people who have seen where the implications, I mean, Nietzsche did it very much, for instance.

Nietzsche was 150 years ahead of his time, but he saw that, you know, that without God that meaning would be degraded. I mean, what next?

I don't know. I do think that post-modernism is inherently unstable, because it suffers from the objection that you have to try and persuade people to be post-moderns or whatever.

You do actually have to try and communicate something. You have to, can you believe that it's an absolute truth, that there's no absolute truth? You know, maybe Foucault could, but most of us find this a bit difficult.

[ 43 : 05 ] So, I do think that it is inherently unstable. I mean, the critical theories are talking about post-post-modernism now, and they keep the idea of text, I think, but they're talking about the idea that text, that you can attach a deep meaning to text.

I have to say, I don't really understand this. I'm not exactly sure what this means, but it's less, and it's more serious, if you like, less playful than post-modernism, but whether it will actually catch on as a, you know, as a sort of philosophy of life, as opposed to something that the critical theorists talk about in literature or media studies, is a different, a different issue.

I mean, you know, I don't know, maybe we'll all become Muslims, but, you can see that there is this, that there is this attraction, interesting, of the more rigid forms of religion now.

Protestantism has the disadvantage that it requires you to think for yourself, in a way that some forms of Islam, not all of course, I mean, not all forms of Islam, and not all forms of Catholicism, but one tends to see the attractions of those forms of religion which don't require you to think for

yourself.

that you can be told what to think. And maybe that's a reaction, I don't know. I mean, how, the contradictions in modern political correctness and liberalism are becoming more and more obvious by the day.

[ 44 : 53 ] I mean, the government has to sort of exist in a state of permanent schizophrenia in one sense, when they, you know, they're pro-family, but they're pro-gay rights as well.

They're pro-immigration, but they're anti-immigration. That's just where it brings you. And there's no, if you've got no concept of, real concept of truth.

So, I think that the situation we're in is inherently unstable, but where it will go from here, I'm afraid I don't make any claim to that sort of insight. You've made a, the postmodernism teaches that the whole cosmos is a joke.

I mean, is that a, a sort of an idea that people shouldn't take life or anything for no service? Yes, I think that is true. Postmodernism, certainly, in, you know, saying that, perhaps in the last decade, particularly the last couple of decades of the 20th century, very much put the emphasis on, on, on, on the playful, on the, on the iconic, that, for instance, to be about postmodern architecture, for instance, when you would perhaps have a perfectly ordinary, you know, semi-detached house, but when you go inside, you would find this grand staircase or something like that.

It's very much, a, a, a, a, a distort, you know, a sort of picking up of ideas and, and this idea of the people's princess, I think, is very much that sort of idea.

[ 46 : 28 ] It's, perhaps it's not humorous in the, in the sense that some of the, these ideas are, but it's, it's playful, certainly, that there is a, you know, that there is a, a member of royalty who's sort of exalted, sort of person who is, still one of the people, as it were.

And it's, it's very, that sort of playful idea, I think. And, yeah, I mean, I think that, that certainly was true. To some extent, it is still true.

I mean, it's certainly true of comedy, for instance. I mean, it was true of, obviously, an obvious example is the, um, uh, Monty Python's Flying Circus type comedy, so, that puts everything as ridiculous.

There is, you know, there is nothing that is serious. Everything is up for being presented as ridiculous. And, of course, now, the BBC is having heart-searching, isn't it?

It has a different, it's discovering, it has a different attitude to Islam than, than to almost anything else. Um, whether this is a fear of being blown up or whether it's, you know, they justify it and once it says something, oh, well, they're a minority, they have to be given special treatment or something, but, well, who isn't a minority?

[ 47 : 46 ] Everybody's a minority nowadays. In my minority of one, you know, one suspects that it's really a case they don't, they don't want to become a target like Sam and Rushdie did. Steve, on the idea of Christian being unstable, are there not views of the world that have contradictions and kind of thrive on that like some aspects of Buddhism perhaps, where you know, you have these paradoxes but they're kind of the heart of it.

So I wonder if is postmodernism necessarily unstable because it has these kind of paradoxes within it? Um, well, is postmodernism a zen?

Yes, the sound of one hand clapping. Um, I'm not sure it's quite the same.

I mean, zen is about, well, first of all, zen has never really taken over the world anyway, has it? I mean, it is a very intellectual kind of religion, zen.

Um, and it's, yeah, it does thrive on paradox, sure, but I think the paradox is meant to lead to insight in zen, whereas I think in postmodernism the paradox is meant to lead to paradox.

[ 49 : 12 ] Can you say what zen is? Well, I'm not an expert on eastern religions, I mean, if you come along in three weeks, you'll probably find a lot, you know, yeah, yeah, but three weeks later you'll come and say, you told me that and it was wrong.

But, zen is the form of Buddhism, I think, that suggests that insight can't be taught, but you can only achieve insight yourself, but what you can do is point people in the right direction by sort of things that you meditate on.

And, of course, the famous one that everybody thinks of in the West is what is the sound of one hand clapping? I just read a book called The Sound of No Hands Clapping, actually, I thought it was a much better paradox, but that's the sort of zen that you achieve insight, so you detach yourself from the world.

One story about, I suppose, the modernist story is that once we're dealing with superstition or religion, then it might become an enlightenedist.

Yes. That's the modernist story, the naturalist, version of the modernist story anyway, yes. Yeah, and some people still believe that, Richard Dawkins being the obvious example, and he doesn't, I honestly think he doesn't understand why people don't agree with him.

[ 50 : 58 ] You know, he can't see why people insist on believing in all these weird religions and things. Because to him, that's his story and it makes sense to him, it just doesn't make sense to other people.

And I think that that's, yeah, I mean, I think modernism, you know, there are still modernists around, but I think that modernism as a dominant force, intellectual force, is not what it was.

And I think certainly its influence on the general population, not just on the, not just as I say intellectual circles, but I think the influence on the general population has very much declined.

So why has Dawkins come through in such a big way? It's like he's leading a new neo-atholic movement, isn't he? Well, that's certainly what he's trying to do.

I mean, he's good communicator, how successful he's in doing that is another question. Possibly.

[ 52 : 16 ] Yeah. I can think of question that we're not sort of more missing science. Still, yes.

Because the general view is that we're working, we're doing research the experiments to find it better than things.

And if there's disagreements, it's because at least one of the views is wrong. And we're going to do an experiment to decide conclusively which view is correct and which is wrong.

It's not just that these views are there, it's the perspective and that's OK, and our people are OK.

There's that sort of seeking the truth.

Yes, the problem is that it only works in certain fields of knowledge. I mean, I don't think anybody disputes that in the physical sciences positivism is the way to go. You know, that's the way science is done and within that context it works very well.

But you can only talk about certain types of knowledge that way. I mean, the current financial crisis is a very good example of almost entirely constructed meaning and yet something that has impact on everybody.

[ 53 : 34 ] You know, people losing their jobs and so on and not having standard living declining. It's almost entirely, the modern concept of money is almost entirely a constructed one.

It has no relation really. I mean, if it's backed by anything, it's labour-backed but even that's only to a limited extent. And I mean, even 30 years ago, I remember when I did this, when I first went to university and I had to do a training then and even then somebody was talking, you know, this sort of idea was around even then and somebody said to me, well, let's face it, if you can convince everybody in the world that you own the Eiffel Tower, then let's face it, you do own it.

And that's true enough, isn't it? I mean, even the concept of ownership to that extent is a constructed meaning. On the other hand, I said, well, that's okay, but do you mean if I could convince everybody that I could jump off the Eiffel Tower without killing myself, then I could do it? And so, you can't entirely divorce yourself from the empirical world, but empiricism is very good at talking about certain things, but the jump is to say that those are the only things it's worth talking about.

And I don't think that is a plausible view because there are lots of things that we, there are lots of meanings that are not empirically verified, verifiable. So, yeah, I mean, I think modernism as, I think, you know, as I say, empiricism and positivism as a philosophy of science is a different issue, I think.

[ 55 : 27 ] I think most scientists would regard, you know, physical scientists at least, not mathematicians rather different of course, but physical scientists would regard positivism as the correct way of doing science, but the modernist view is that that is the only sort of information that's worth having, that if you can't verify something empirically, it can't have any meaning.

And yet, Dawkins himself uses terms that have meaning if they're not empirical, like wicked, for instance. And, I don't know, I mean, I don't know.

people, the man on the number 49 verse, don't people don't generally function on the basis of certain understandings, that may not be joined up in their thinking, but they'd say, yes, I prefer truth to lies, I prefer peace to war, I prefer being fed than being hungry.

It's not as if everyone's looking at a vacuum. No. No. I'm taking a lot of these things, you could say, it's a modernist kind of view. Well, I'm not sure it's a modernist view that you prefer peace to war, for

instance.

but a rational viewpoint. I appreciate that people interrogate us to death and say, well, if you really take it to its conclusion, it doesn't sort of stack up.

[ 57 : 08 ] But in practice, and this is where I think of the Bible, God has put his conscience in people that awareness of the difference between that which is good and that which is not good, and that people are often responding to that.

Yes. Do I believe that people have consciences? Then yes, of course. It's actually interesting that, I mean, I'm not, you see, people say that Foucault took his view because he was a paedophile, which I think he was.

But, you know, does that mean what he says is wrong? You know, you can argue that Dawkins takes a view because he was brought up in a rather unsupportive Catholic background, which I've been told, I don't know the history, but somebody told me that once.

And that's why he's so anti-religion, but that doesn't actually mean that what he's saying is wrong. But we are so manipulated by our society, by our backgrounds.

You know, that's why we don't understand the past. You know, we find it actually very difficult to understand the position of, say, the Catholic Church at the time of Galileo, because we've been so manipulated by generations of enlightenment and thinking.

[ 58 : 38 ] And yet, you know, at the time, they probably thought they were doing the best for the people. we can't, even though, we can look back at Rome and think, oh, that's interesting, this idea of the empire that Rome had, and how can we possibly, you know, but we can't go with that now.

And yet, you've only got to go back 100, 150 years, when Britain ran an even bigger empire, and imperialism then was good. suddenly got out of fashion.

Well, it went out of fashion, it seems to be coming back into fashion now. And yet, we don't, even, you know, two generations later, we find it very hard to think, to have that view of empire that, say, Cecil Rhodes had, or perhaps some of the more liberal, you know, perhaps Cecil Rhodes isn't a good example because he was a bit of a chancer, wasn't he?

But some of the, you know, well, Livingstone, for instance. Livingstone, the missionary, he definitely had a view of, you know, taking Western British civilisation to the United Heathen.

It wasn't only that he was taking Christianity, though he was doing that, but he was taking civilisation as well. You know, he tried to open up the roots to the interior. And we find it difficult to think in those.

[ 60 : 10 ] Now, of course, we just get ourselves totally confused. Because on one hand, we're all in favour of preserving indigenous cultures. But, you know, on the other hand, you know, you can't do that without, you know, if you impact on them, they change.

All cultures change, adapt. So what's the point in trying to hold in stasis, as it were? It doesn't make any sense. And yet, you know, we find ourselves in that position of you value everything, then you've got to keep everything.

So I think we are much more manipulated. Yeah, sure, we function. And you say, you know, the person on the Clapper-Mondy bus probably has a conscience and probably doesn't go on to go around sort of throwing people off, pushing people off the bus or whatever.

But we're so manipulated by the way that the society around us thinks. You know, you said that some philosophers were talking about post-modernism.

I won't ask you to explain that because you said that really good. And also, I know it would be almost a silly question to say, well, what could come after post-modernism comes after modernism, what could come after post-modernism?

[ 61 : 21 ] But, I mean, might you speculate? I mean, what would be a kind of logical next step to a dominant theory of life?

Yeah. Well, as I said, I didn't say philosophers actually, I said critical theorists. I, yeah, I was on a validation panel for a media degree and they talked about post-post-modernism there and I said, well, what does this actually mean?

And I'm not sure I got an entirely convincing explanation but the explanation I was given was that in critical theories nobody's used the term post-modernism since about 1994 and nowadays they they're interested in the deep meaning of text and that's about the best explanation I could get but how much impact that's had on the general more general philosophical world or even if there is a more general philosophical world anymore is a different question.

I suppose it will. I mean, philosophy certainly is much more popular as a study than it used to be 30, 40 years ago.

philosophy is not getting any jobs except teaching philosophy. Yes. Yes. So they've got the ability to have to sort of be one step ahead of someone else.

[ 62 : 56 ] No, it's not destroying things as a philosophy after destroying other barriers to create units. That's why we've not thought to some of the great rest. Yeah, we've got kind of destroying things and they are basically in the rest.

Yes, it's easier, isn't it? You can always see what's wrong when it's trying to produce something that's coherent is different. I rather like the this is probably entirely irrelevant.

In fact, this is probably a very postmodern comment actually. I rather like the quote I heard from Socrates on marriage recently who said it was in the Telegraph they published this book of apt quotations and this one from Socrates said, Socrates said, by all means get married.

If you find a good wife you'll be happy and if you get a bad one you'll become a philosopher.

Socrates I think it is, I mean, it is worth being aware of the way that the world thinks and I think that's the point of saying this really, that the world is very manipulated now by the media and we are and everybody is and I think it's worth being aware of that.

I'm not saying you can necessarily totally avoid it and we do, we are, everybody is influenced by the culture in which they live, question or not, but they do you think that would make the ordinary person for instance be more questioning about things like whatever they read or hear via the media, is that the value of being aware of the existence of a postmodern way of thinking?

[ 65 : 07 ] Well, it would be if you could convince people of that. I mean, the advantage of being a, that's another quote, I'm going to approve all these quotes now, that Aldous Huxley apparently said an intellectual is somebody who's found something more interesting than sex, but I don't know if that's but the intellectual world is about looking at these, looking at these, you know, things and stepping back and so, you know, there are certain advantages in being an academic and at least you know you're being messed about with, but the problem is that people, you know, the man on the Clapham omnibus, as we say, tends to think this is the only way of looking at the world.

So, you know, the man on the Clapham horse tram 150 years ago thought it was entirely natural that Britain should rule the world, that was the way the world was, you know.

You can't think of any other, and this is the difficulty that people don't realise that they are manipulated. So, are you not saying that people have always been manipulated?

Oh, I'm sure people have always been manipulated by stories, yes. Yeah, yeah, I mean, I think to that extent the postmoderns are quite right. They've pointed out this fact that people are always manipulated by stories.

Yes. That's true of the Bible, because even though the Bible itself, the Christian is concerned represents truth in all its purity, but of course it is a classic case of it being used to manipulate by the hell.

[ 66 : 53 ] It has been, yes. So it has the bad name that comes to be able to use that to be in. Yeah, yeah, sure. And of course, I mean, the original French revolutionaries tried to banish religion, but of course they rapidly realised it was a very bad idea, because the whole social fabric fell apart, and so Napoleon was quite in favour of religion in fact, not because he believed it himself, but he realised what the advantages for maintaining the stability of the society.

Yeah, yeah, which is why I find Dawkins, I personally find Dawkins' argument against religion totally meaningless, because his argument against religion is not true, but his argument should be, is it survival, does it help you survive?

And if there is any, if there is, as far as statistics is concerned, it seems that religion actually does help you to survive. I mean, after giving up smoking, the best things you can do to increase your life expectancy are to get married and take up a religion.

Yes. So, if that, you know, and yet Dawkins insists on this concept of truth, which is a bit balancing there.

to draw into pictures is just a bombast. He's media savvy. He knows how to manipulate the media.

[ 68 : 20 ] the time of launching this God deluge book was delayed and then lodged in the United States to get in with the whole evangelical Christian thing that George Washington was beginning to accumulate a bad reputation.

Yes. He launched his book right in the middle of it and of course people turn into this way of thinking because the quizzes got that significant way of thinking. It doesn't look as though they have done in America.

I mean, Sarah Palin is a more conservative religiously than George Bush or what. Yes, I guess so.

Sarah Palin philosophy. I mean, it's the sort of thing you look at. Sarah Palin phenomenon must be a sociological interesting piece of sociology.

I said, have I got news for you? She's pro-life but not for bears. What do you think the Christian church or what sort of perspective do you think the Christian church takes on that?

[ 69 : 56 ] I sometimes hear preachers talk about postmodern people. I think when people are really bad they're having values. You know, would my preacher rather ask?

I was a woman. What I really think is that too much of the church is actually influenced by postmodern thinking. That there's a kind of religious political correctness that there's certain things that one doesn't do.

There's so much emphasis on how it feels as to whether it's true or not. I think that I mean, are you saying do you think preachers should rage against postmodernism?

I guess I think they ought to point out that what it says point out what it is saying and what the implications of that are.

That's not to say that I think that the Christian church should totally abandon, divorce itself from the surrounding culture. It never has done that. When it's tried to it's usually been a disaster.

[ 71 : 30 ] I mean like the murder of Hypatia for instance. Whereas Augustine was very much sort of said we can learn from the Greek philosophers. I think that we should understand, learn from the postmodern critique of meaning and understand the way that we are manipulated by the text.

So I think that's good. But to buy it then into the implication that the text constructs its own meaning independently of anything else, which is dangerously close to what some Christians seem to think.

If it feels right, it must be the right interpretation. You can construct your own meaning of the scripture, whereas Peter says scripture is not a matter of private interpretation.

Is that Peter? Sure, anyway. we don't want to be postmodern in our Christianity, but we don't want to be modernists.

So I suppose there's the danger of looking into a modernist kind of Christianity. Yeah, well I think that is what happened.

[ 72 : 52 ] I think that was true in mid-century. Sorry? Well, no, because people have largely, I mean again, even 30, 40 years ago, people were saying to me, it doesn't matter what you believe as long as we love each other.

In about 1950. I think that Christianity was too influenced then probably by rationalist ideas.

Even if it was opposing them, it took, you know, the opposition to, say, or support or opposition to evolutionism for instance was very much a sort of on the ground of the of you know, if this is true then Genesis can't be true or whatever rather than saying was this actually, are they actually saying something different anyway and if so, what is different.

So you're saying that the modernist would have just totally objected that the thing would have said that. Well, some did, yeah. Some, some, some did, and of course, some people still do, of course.

But, yes. Yeah, yeah, I think there's an aspect of modernist thinking there that the, the, that the scripture is, can be interpreted in a very, in a rather simplistic way.

[ 74 : 26 ] And yet, that is exactly, that's why, I'm always quoting the book of Job, because I think the whole point of the book of Job is it's there to tell us that the scripture can't always be interpreted in a very simplistic way.

That you have to understand that there is, that there are subtleties of meaning. Like, I mean, I think one thing I did agree with, I noticed one, there's one reporter on the television was talking about the financial crisis and talking about the influence of religion and said that the Bible is ambivalent about money and I think actually she was right.

I think the Bible is very ambivalent about wealth. It's, you know, it's not in favour of poverty but realised that all the way through there are warnings against the dangers inherent in wealth.

So, what I was meaning was not so much that we would become modernist in the sense of, you know, reason over faith and the natural way and the supernatural and the other, but that we would become modernist in terms of being you know, very certain, too certain about how clear things are.

As you can do it, as you can say we, you know, we form our doctrine statements, we systemize our community and then everything is really big up. That's quite a modernist sort of approach where everything is sort of objective and we can see things very clearly.

[ 76 : 00 ] But I think that's the danger and we need to take the lesson from postmodernism that even when we do that, the end politics is to some extent a reflection of our own perspective and our own culture.

So not necessarily we would come with falsehood rather than truth, but the questions we ask would be different questions. I mean, I was a wonder that I think he said when he was in Nepal and facing sort of idol, kind of idol version in Hinduism or something, the classical Western systematic theology didn't deal with that just because that's a very different culture and they didn't have Hinduism to do with it.

So, yeah. Yeah, I try to agree, I think that's what I was trying to say and I think that's what the book of Job is saying, that any formulation, and that's why, you know, why don't we chuck out the Bible and use Birkhoff instead because the Bible isn't written that way.

You know, we do try and codify things because that's the way we think. You know, we tend to try and think, we tend to sell ourselves stories to make sense of things. And yet, as you say, the story is always determined to some extent by our cultural context, even if we're opposing it.

You still, and like, somebody pointed out that the American Academy of Science was saying, you know, it doesn't make sense to say that God would have hidden all these fossils in the ground just to confuse you, you know, just to play a joke on you.

[ 77 : 43 ] And so somebody pointed out, because if you were talking about the Norse god Locte, that would be exactly what you expect. So they pointed out, in fact, the American Academy of Science was very clear about which god they didn't believe in.

So, yeah, I mean, we're always determined by the questions we ask. So, we look at the Greek, the early formulations of the Trinitarian doctrine, for instance, about being of one substance and I can't remember even what it says now.

Three persons with one substance. I can't remember exactly what it says, but it's very rooted in Greek philosophy. And some of the concepts don't quite make sense nowadays, but we keep them as a, you know, as a good historical statement of the Trinitarian position anyway.

But, yeah, I do think that we were over systematic, yes. But now I think we've gone to the opposite extreme and denied that, we're almost taking the view that meaning is whatever you construct it to be.

And to me that is far more dangerous actually than being over systematic. I think.

[ 79 : 27 ] I do, I mean, if you read the FIAC doctrine, actually it doesn't say inerrant and infallible and inerrant, does it?

I mean, I agree, you know, I'd sign up to that, I have to, I can't be a deacon here if I don't sign up to it being infallible and inerrant. And yet, those two terms do slightly well with me, because I think they are kind of modernist terms.

And as I said before, what the Bible says about itself is that it's inspired, it's God-breathed and it's unbreakable. Scripture cannot be broken. Which isn't almost the same, but maybe not quite.

The Pope is supposed to be infallible, I think, in Catholic doctrine, when he speaks ex cathedra.

I've got a bit of a lecture on this from my R.S. teacher. Pope is, he's not infallible, he's only infallible when he's speaking ex cathedra. Ex cathedra, yeah. So, I think Pope, I mean, officially Pope has only spoken infallible once on a single doctrine.

[ 80 : 44 ] Other times he's just any other dude. Otherwise he's infallible. Yeah. But what I mean is that that's the word that is used to describe the Pope.

So, that's quite true. I think, though, I don't know what this would like to say, is that the Bible itself says all scripture is God-breathed and is profitable.

Yeah, for doctrine and correction, training and righteousness. That the man of God may be thoroughly prepared for works of service. Yeah. And that deeply encourages me, you know, in the sense that we may not understand everything, but there is enough that can be understood, formulated, talked about to one another, which is true for mankind.

Yeah, indeed. That will bring us into relationship with God and keep us in that position. Yeah, yeah, I'll thoroughly agree with that, that the scripture is sufficient for salvation.

And... Jesus himself said that we may not pass away, my words will not pass away, meaning whatever crazy ideas about the rapture, what he said would be with us to the end of time.

[ 82 : 04 ] Yeah, that's right. Yeah. That we should not pass away, which is a fellow and a fellow and a fellow. Yeah. at this point the conversation goes on it's good to be challenged in this way isn't it so thank you ever so much Steve for the material you put together and we will be having a film in a couple of weeks time I don't know exactly which one it is but there we are come with anticipation on the night and we'll have some more stimulation in that way so let me close in prayer thank you Father you've given us minds to think and we thank you for what has been put before us tonight we do pray that you would help us to be thoughtful and careful in our thinking and our living and we do thank you for the fact that you have spoken to us and you do speak to us and we thank you for that reality we ask that in this very confusing world that we might have better and clearer understanding of you and your ways and your purposes and we ask Father that you would bless us now as we leave give us a good night a good night's rest and be with us tomorrow and indeed the rest of our lives we ask this in Jesus name

Amen Amen Thank you.