

# Understanding the Times: Christianity's Two Major Competitors in the University Today

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1 Chron 12.32 . . . *who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do. . . .*

Mt 16.3 *Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?*

## Why Is It Important to Understand the Times?

A recent *Dallas Morning News* article in the religion section saddened me. The story was told of a Southern Methodist University professor's impact on three students: a Presbyterian, a Southern Baptist and what is best described as a New Ager. The professor, my friendly opponent in a past debate, taught these students a religion course—from a thoroughly pluralist perspective. The New Ager came away confirmed in his view, the Presbyterian left apparently with her faith in Christ still intact, and the Southern Baptist noted how she now was not so sure about the truth claims of various religions. And that saddened me. I wondered if she might have fared better had a Christian leader equipped her before taking the class. Reason number one, then, why you should understand your spiritual competitors: to prepare young believing minds entrusted to you by the Lord to withstand the philosophy of the times (see Col 2.8). The second reason is similar: to evangelize effectively students who are bound by these philosophies (see 1 Cor 9.22).

## What Are Christianity's Two Major Competitors?

Clearly king on the mountain is evolutionary naturalism (EN). EN views ultimate reality as purposeless evolving matter/energy. Adherents of EN are easily recognizable by their cheery confidence in the power of human reason

to explain all of reality. Note how Stephen Hawking, the enormously influential Cambridge physicist, closes his bestseller:

[I]f we do discover a complete [grand unifying physical] theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God.<sup>1</sup>

Mark is a courteous graduate student in philosophy. He told me earlier this year that he comes from a conservative Christian background, but he now finds an atheistic explanation of the universe to make more sense. I am praying for and trying to reach Mark; but I wonder what might have been had someone prepared him for the EN he would encounter in college.

But if EN is king on the mountain, the postmodern/New Age synthesis (Pm/NAM) is queen. In a nutshell, radical postmodernism preaches that no worldview can be known to be ultimately true (except, of course, postmodernism!). The New Ager believes that reality is a spiritually evolving unity. The Pm/NAM slogan could be: "make reality what you want it to be—but don't be dogmatic about it." Pm/NAM thinking can be found everywhere, even when its adherents don't recognize it. Last year Oprah Winfrey denied that she is into the NA. Yet on the same show she proclaimed that agnostics are actually believers if they believe in love. Then she endorsed a panel of Pm/NAMers who agreed that all religions validly lead to God ("however you define God—and *it* does not care"). But she became quite exasperated with a Christian who claimed Jesus as the only Way.

I'd also like to introduce you to another college student. Brian is a winsome and creative Pm/NAer. Like Mark, he also had a conservative Christian upbringing, but has turned away from Jesus because of the racism (he's black) and hypocrisy he observed in his hometown churches. He says that he just can't see that Christ made any difference in the lives of those who claimed they belonged to Him. I am trying to work with Brian, but how I wish that he had been able to experience the real thing (New Testament Christianity) before being exposed to the allures of the Pm/NAM vision.

Curiously, the followers of EN and Pm/NAM despise each other almost as much as they despise Christianity (the western world's former worldview king). The competition can be noted in the way that the Public Broadcasting Service now slices its ideological pie. In the recent past almost all of the educational programming championed EN. But now the likes of Deepak Chopra, Joseph Campbell, and Huston Smith regularly challenge the Sagans, Hawkings and Goulds for air time, all at taxpayers's expense.

## How Can You Prepare Yourself and Students for These Challengers?

The first of two responses to the challengers is the “specialty option.” You can invite in Christian apologists to teach your students and/or debate representatives of EN and Pm/NAM. Students typically do not follow all the arguments being made, but a skillful apologist can foster great confidence by demonstrating to the student that *someone* is intellectually qualified to present a good case for belief in Christ.<sup>2</sup> The student begins to realize that Christians may *not* be irrational after all. You also would do well to read up on the issues.<sup>3</sup> Remember, you are your students’ resident theologian and philosopher.

Most importantly, you must continue to unleash the power of God’s word, the nonnegotiable essential. Only the gospel can make people free in Jesus Christ, not apologetics, not charisma, not anything else. It is vital then that you confidently present and model the good news of Jesus to students.

I’d like to share with you a way that I keep conversations going with disciples of EN or Pm/NAM even if they express their lack of interest in the gospel. I open them back up to the story of the Bible by comparing my worldview with theirs. Every worldview has an implicit story or narrative which answers the big questions of life. As I point this out, I emphasize that not every story is necessarily true, even if the story is moving. Let me illustrate. As far as I am able to tell, it is true that Napoleon was fond of telling the following story. On one occasion he was reviewing his troops. As he walked down the line of soldiers, his eyes fell upon an elderly veteran with only one arm. The warrior had pinned on his chest the highest medal of the land, the Legion of Honor. The emperor stopped and queried the proud old man, “How did you earn that medal?” The soldier replied, “I earned it when I lost my arm fighting for our cause!” Napoleon was impressed and remarked, “You strike me as the kind of man who would be willing to lose both arms for our cause.” The soldier inquired, “What would I earn if I did lose both arms?” Napoleon cried, “Why, you would earn an unprecedented second Legion of Honor!” Immediately, the old soldier drew his sword and without batting an eye slashed off his remaining arm.

Well. . . . Perhaps by now you are wondering how someone with one arm could cut that arm off! Or perhaps you are angry as it begins to dawn on you that the story is a hoax. (I didn’t lie. As far as I can tell, it is true that Napoleon loved to tell this story—and then laugh when he saw the reaction of his hearers.) The point is, that a story might intrigue us, and we might find it very meaningful personally, but it still might not be a true story. I like to point out to discussion partners, that most of us, Christians included, have never stopped to ask ourselves if our worldview story is true. Comparing the way that our stories answer four worldview questions can be extremely

helpful in the search for the true story: a story to die for and a story worth living.

## The Big Four Worldview Questions: Answers From the Front Lines

So, the first worldview question up for comparison is: "Where did I come from?" The Pm/NAM answer is from spirit. The EN answer is from dust. The biblical answer is from God through dust. Now it should be apparent that these answers are very different. Contrary to EN that all is dust and the Pm/NAM doctrine of an impersonal spirit, the Bible teaches that a personal loving Creator made human beings in his very image from the dust he had created. The implications of these differing views are staggering. If there is nothing but dust, how can anyone argue that human beings are of more worth than other animals? In fact, a number of the disciples of EN now see this and argue that human beings should not receive preferential treatment over other animals.<sup>4</sup> The Pm/NAM view is also problematic because there is no personal God who grounds objective moral values. Instead the individual is creator. Listen to a prominent Pm/NAM propheticess:

Twenty of us sat around an oval table; a crystal was passed to each of us and we expressed in words what we would like to manifest in our lives for the following year. The open and direct honesty was heart-glowing to witness. But when the crystal came to me I found myself expressing and understanding that for me was true, but for some of the others seemed outlandish. I began by saying that since I realized I created my own reality in every way, I must therefore admit that, in essence, *I was the only person alive in my universe*. I could feel the instant shock waves undulate around the table. I went on to express my feeling of total responsibility *and power* for all events that occur in the world because the world is happening only in my reality . . . Now, that truth can be very humorous. I could legitimately say that I created the Statue of Liberty, chocolate chip cookies, the Beatles, terrorism, and the Vietnam war.<sup>5</sup>

Seeing that she "created" terrorism and a war, it is hard to feel much confidence in the moral values of such a war.

In stark contrast, biblical revelation teaches that all human beings—whether winos or murderers—are of intrinsic worth because they are created in God's image. For Christians, objective values arise in the very nature and will of a loving Creator. Though it is common for the disciples of EN and Pm/NAM to hold that certain of their values are objectively right, it is inconsistent with their worldviews. Actually, it can be argued that frequently these values are the unrecognized remnants of the culture's former biblically informed worldview.

The second worldview question is: "What's wrong with things?" Have you noticed that everyone has an opinion on this? EN, however, if it is to be consistent with its assumption of a purposeless universe, should announce, "Nothing is wrong. There is no standard for the way things should be. This is just the way things are. Cheetahs hunt down gazelles, jaguars kill for the fun of it, and gang members kill in retaliation for attacks against their tribe." But adherents of EN are typically *not* consistent. They will, for example, argue that humans *ought* to be monogamous (something clearly borrowed from a biblical worldview), even though more than ninety percent of other mammals are not.

Pm/NAM is all over the page on this question, but a typical answer is: "You're out of touch with your divinity." *Au contraire*, the Christian worldview tells us that the problem is that we're out of touch with our Creator. Because of this inspired revelation, Christians can best explain why it is that human beings have such incredible potential for evil *which can be recognized as objective evil*. Yet because they are created in the *Imago Dei*, the same person can do *objectively good* things. The biblical worldview is not only more consistent with human experience but also has an elegant beauty missing in these other belief systems.

"What's the solution?" is the third question all worldview stories attempt to answer. We've already seen that the Pm/NAM answer is: "Be all that you can be." But this is not very much help to most people who recognize that they cannot solve their own problems. Self-help can only get you so far when it was the self that got you into trouble in the first place! For followers of EN, the answers are many because they do not widely agree on the problem. But it is interesting to note that more and more EN believers are looking to technology as a way of solving the ultimate problem of death. Some are placing their faith in the medical technology of the future to provide immortality. So they invest considerable sums of money in cryonic suspension, the procedure which deep freezes human corpses waiting for technological resurrection. An even hotter EN solution is to place one's hope in future supercomputers which might store "us" in their memories or even recreate the world!<sup>6</sup> In this light, the Christian belief that death is a Creator-sized problem which the Creator has solved doesn't sound so strange after all! And gratefully we proclaim that the Creator has come in person to our rescue in Jesus Christ!

The ultimate question is: "Where am I going?" Most who repose in EN reply: "Nowhere, probably." The stock-in-trade response of Pm/NAM is: "I'll be back"—a baby boomer consumer variety of reincarnation with absolutely no evidence in support. For the Christian the answer is clear: "I'm going to meet my Creator—and so will you." The resurrection of Jesus, so powerfully attested by historical evidences, guarantees the truth of the believer's hope for eternal life. Most significantly, the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirits that God's word on this matter can be trusted.

## The Story Is Not Finished Yet

I hope by now you can see that there is no reason for the believer to be intimidated by the false philosophies of our time. EN hides under the aura of “scientific respectability,” but is absolutely powerless to provide coherent and satisfactory answers to the most important questions of life. Pm/NAM fares no better with its dreamworld answers borrowed from eastern religions. The answers provided by authentic Christianity have never been needed more. By asking questions and comparing answers, Christians can keep up an apologetic dialogue with those who are confused and need Christ. And this can be done while integrating the biblical message: creation, fall, rescue, eternity. So now it’s up to you to start the conversations. Happily, your listener’s story is not finished being written. Will you share Christ with them so that it can be a “happy ever after” ending?

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1. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam, 1988), 175. Hawking, who has remarkably lived with Lou Gehrig’s disease for more than two decades, may himself believe in God. He has, nevertheless, become an icon for many who trust that science alone—without recourse to God—has all the answers to life’s questions.

2. An example of an excellent Christian apologist who does this regularly is Dr. William Lane Craig. See his web page for past and upcoming debates and more: <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/>.

3. On worldviews: James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, Rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IVP, 1996); on postmodernism: Dennis McCallum, *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996); on the NAM: Douglas Groothuis, *Deceived by the Light* (Harvest House, 1996); idem, *Are All Religions One?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996); idem, *The New Age Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992); idem, *Confronting the New Age* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988); idem, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986); on EN: Phillip Johnson, *Darwin on Trial*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993); idem, *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995); idem, *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997); J.P. Moreland, ed., *The Creation Hypothesis: Scientific Evidence for an Intelligent Designer* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994); on general apologetics: Corduan Winfried, *No Doubt About It* (Nashville: Broadman-Holman, 1997); William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994); Alister E. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God & Other Modern Myths: Building Bridges to Faith Through Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); James Sire, *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994).

4. A good example of this view can be found in James Rachels, *Created From Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

5. Shirley McClaine, *It's All in the Playing* (Thorndike Press, 1988), 171-73.

6. E.g., Frank Tipler, *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead* (New York: Doubleday, 1994). Tipler is professor of mathematical physics at Tulane University.