

# The Way We Live Now

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**A**t the beginning of the third decade of this new century, *Unio cum Christo* will address the issues of apologetics and public theology. Both subjects present challenges that demand the attention of Reformed Christianity since we live in a world where change seems to be accelerating at breathtaking speed with new issues constantly surfacing. We trust the way of presenting these questions will be stimulating and useful to you, our readers.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, when the narrative of modernism disintegrated, the radical individualism of “me and my conscience” invaded the social beachheads. The title of Elton John’s recent autobiography *Me* says it all. The identity constructs of subjective autonomy sounded the death knell of rationalism, debate, and historical materialism. It is the final escape from reason, to use Francis Schaeffer’s term. Traditional understandings of class, gender, and language are seen to be the tools of ruling elite oppression. The order of the day became deconstruction of worn-out narratives to remove the injustices of the past: of reason, history, nature, class, sex, and, above all, family and religion. Autonomous individuals attach themselves to groups or lobbies to reconstruct the world. Freedom is defined by group identity, a social metastasis of collectivist Marxism. The ground motif of postmodernity is a juxtaposition of nature and freedom—no longer the freedom of autonomous reason, historical liberation, depth psychology, or romantic mysticism, but identitarian liberty without limits in a posttruth situation.

This new version of human flourishing is different from but coexists with and challenges previous versions of the good life, whether humanism, existentialism, Marxism, or the remnants of a Christian worldview. Opposing

values lead to culture wars against conservatism, first in ideas, then in social practice and political debate, and finally in lawmaking, as the old order is swept away. Pockets of resistance hunker down for a long struggle.

There are also crossovers. The aspirations of modernism and postmodernism fraternize because of a shared nature-freedom ground motive. Four common elements of all post-Enlightenment secularisms are individual autonomy, the neutrality of reason, the innate goodness of human beings, and progress. Relativism, naturalism, and evolutionism follow in their wake. The common ground between modernism and postmodernism is that both undermine objective truth, particularly that of any supposed revelation. When relativity rules the day, and right disappears from the realm of facts or values, so does wrong, but good and evil are redefined. So, there is little debate today about ideas, only power confrontations between opposing groups. Lobbies are the heavy armor of various pressure groups.

What does differentiate the present from the past is the radical nature of the emerging hyperindividualism with which Christian apologetics is struggling to catch up; our apologetics often remain preoccupied with themes that are irrelevant to this new ethos, and Christian preaching even more so. There are numerous flashpoints at which the new hyperindividualism confronts the Christian apologist. Here are a few challenges, by no means all:

### **1. *Christianity on Trial***

Radical individualism accentuates the idea, already present in modernism, that religion belongs to the past, but with an add-on: religious values are immoral. Christianity was the cement of a certain morality in the West, but a reversal of values has taken place with astonishing speed. In today's narrative, the Judeo-Christian God is an executioner and Christian values are male oriented, sexist, and patriarchal. The Bible promotes slavery. Christians are hypocrites in opposing diversity and egalitarianism, and their past is marked by all sorts of violence: crusades, colonialism, slavery, war, and the oppression of women. Having always been on the side of white male bosses, Christianity, as a religion of oppression, has controlled historical narrative and filled the earth with victims. Its values are unethical and must be gotten rid of for the sake of freedom and progress.

### **2. *The Imperative of Egalitarian Tolerance***

Freedom of conscience, a fruit of the Reformation, has morphed into the imperative of tolerance. The personal self-identification of other people must be accepted because of the rights of diversity, inclusivity, and equality. Those demanding tolerance do not grant others the right to object on

grounds of conscience to egalitarian inclusive ideologies. Donald Carson makes a distinction between old and new tolerance.<sup>1</sup> The former accepted what was not necessarily approved out of respect for the freedom of others. The latter no longer works with ethical categories but prioritizes individual choice, and certain choices are considered no longer acceptable. If you do not agree with gay marriage, you *are* homophobic. Not “celebrating” the preferences of others is deemed to be racism, sexism, bigotry, or fascism. It has become nigh on impossible to discuss any subject calmly. How can one defend the principles of a Christian worldview when the only push-back is ridicule?

### **3. *Obsession with Self***

Self-obsession is the key to the decadence of our time. Everything feeds into this attitude, and consumerism is geared to it: how one looks, what one eats, the fitness fad, mental health issues, leisure and tourism experiences, virtue signaling, and virtual or real group recognition. Hyperindividualism paradoxically leads to collective asphyxia because of its obsession with creature comforts and the inalienable right to consume endlessly. Regardless of one’s sex one can choose a gender; one can be white and identify as black, human and identify as something else. When fulfillment is reduced to feel-goodism, perception is all that matters. Self-obsession is the apotheosis of a decadent society as it slips into dystopia. Almost everything is driven by self-indulgence and the satisfaction of gratification. This idolatry is a new slavery and leads to death. How can the good news of the gospel penetrate the hermetic echo chamber?

### **4. *The Past Lost in the Fog***

The hypermodern digital age blanks out historical perspective, as history is not what happened in the past but how we appropriate the past according to the values of today. Just as history published in Stalinist Moscow was airbrushed, so is the history of the West today. The screen-oriented present is what matters. If God did act in the past, it is irrelevant in the here and now. The past is like a lost Atlantis. In progressive liberal societies, references to tried and tested institutions, moral virtues recognized since the dawn of time, social values and national identity, or the reality of the spiritual dimension pale into insignificance. You are from nowhere, not somewhere, a rootless autonomous individual without a past or future. This view of history is

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<sup>1</sup> Donald A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 28–29, 129–33, 167–68.

opposed to the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption in Christ. However, this contrast is no longer an issue.

### **5. *Climate Change***

Self-obsession reaches a paroxysm when the individual takes responsibility for saving the planet. Whether humans are responsible for climate change, as the media say through the Attenboroughs and Thunbergs, is difficult to determine. Still, we are ordered to change our personal lifestyle to save a future which will not in any case be ours. Responsibility means changing soon to ethical veganism, electric cars, less air travel, and carbon-neutral cities. However, everything we use day by day is a factor in diminishing planetary resources, and every time we drive to the store, we unavoidably buy tons of cardboard and plastic. There is no way out, so we are over a barrel. No wonder mental health is a huge issue among malleable young people who live in fear and have no alternative to the way we live now. How can the fact that only the Creator can be the Savior of the planet be brought home in our generation?

### **6. *The State's Increasing Control***

The sovereign secular state, seeking by *realpolitik* and neutrality to accommodate the many diverse mixes of multiculturalism, is at a crossroads. On the one hand, it seems powerless to face global financial crises, does not know what to do about climate change except enact policies that have no sure results, is unable to protect citizens from terrorism and knife crime, has borders that have become sieves, and has no way of handling new forms of poverty related to ingrained deprivation and different kinds of abuse. Respect for the political class has hit a low. On the other hand, all the issues discussed above tend to isolate rootless individuals and make them malleable to group control. So, the state limits the damage by making politics governance, exercising social control through egalitarianism and diversity in compliance with pressure groups.

Individualism is ultimately self-destructive as freedom, including freedom of conscience, is undermined by the forces of collective control. These pressures may well increase as a result of the global pandemic of Spring 2020. The harvesting of information about everything and everyone is opening the way to future totalitarianisms, which may be far off but are being modeled in China. Little wonder that in this context, public theology is assuming new importance.

All these issues raise novel questions for Christian apologetics. Our initial reaction might be to throw up our hands and say, “Lord have mercy, what can be done?” This might well be the sane reaction, so seemingly insurmountable are the challenges. We certainly need to awaken to the woke. That is one thing, as many Christian organizations and churches are carrying on business as usual although these issues are not going away. Another thing seems obvious: in the face of the new self-obsessed attitudes of radical individualism, we need to abandon any illusions we might have had about the usefulness of rational arguments (ontological, cosmological or teleological) or evidences for the resurrection, miracles, and anything else, to demonstrate the truth of Christianity. Talk about Christianity as the highest form of religious expression, as a completed form of humanism, or even as a social gospel, have been once and for all kicked out of bounds. Any of these ideas seem laughable to social justice warriors or climate activists.

Finally, Reformed apologists and preachers need a renewed sense of the absolute necessity of dependence on the Holy Spirit for any gospel witness to the truth, because the truth of the Word needs to be illuminated by the life-giving Spirit. As Herman Bavinck remarked,

Just as the eye alone is insufficient and sees only when rays of light pass through it, and the ear alone is insufficient and hears only when it receives sounds from the outside, so also the seed which is sown in regeneration cannot progress to the act of faith without encountering the Word of the Gospel from the outside. Just as light suits the eye and sound suits the ear, so the object of faith offered in the Holy Scriptures suits the new life which the Holy Spirit breathes into the heart through regeneration.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Saved by Grace: The Holy Spirit's Work in Calling and Regeneration* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Heritage Books, 2008), 150.