

The Flow of Materialism

by Francis Schaeffer

The sermon argues that materialism is a worldview that is impossible to live consistently within, and that the alternatives to Christianity are also flawed, leading to a rise of irrationalism and a lack of clear standards in Western society.

Scripture: Psalm 119:105, Proverbs 14:12, Ecclesiastes 1:2, Isaiah 40:8, John 14:6, Romans 1:25, 1 Corinthians 15:32, Colossians 2:8, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, James 1:5

Topics: "Materialism", "Relativism"

Description

Francis Schaeffer addresses the pervasive influence of materialism and relativism in both Western and Eastern thought, arguing that these worldviews lead to a lack of meaning and moral clarity. He highlights the tension faced by those who reject a Christian perspective, as they grapple with the absurdity of existence while still seeking purpose and significance. Schaeffer critiques the reliance on experience over reason in modern society, suggesting that this shift has resulted in a moral vacuum where absolutes are abandoned. He warns that without a foundation in truth, humanity is left with a chaotic and meaningless existence, ultimately calling for a return to the Christian worldview for true answers to life's dilemmas.

Transcript

What is left is relative truth, relative morality. Given time, even the certainties of our ethical systems can be undone. The Bill of Rights, the Charters of Freedom, the Principles of Justice, and, as in our own day, the Sanctity of Life, everything.

It is not only the Iron Curtain countries that operate upon the basis of a relativistic morality. The West now does, too. We, too, are dominated by the materialistic worldview.

Thus, we can expect the same in humanity, here. The great dilemma of those who try to live upon the basis of a materialistic worldview is that it is impossible to live consistently within it. Take Samuel Beckett, the playwright.

He can say that words do not convey anything, and he can say that everything, including language, is observed, but he must use words to write his plays, including his plays about meaninglessness. If his words did not convey meaning to his audience, he could not use words to say that words are meaningless. The truth of the matter is that anyone who rejects the Christian worldview must live in tension between his idea of reality and what reality is.

The reason for this is that every individual is faced with two unchanging aspects of reality, the universe and its form, and the manishness of man. The materialist or humanist may say that all life is relativistic and without meaning, but he lives as though it had meaning. There is difference between justice and injustice.

There is a difference between cruelty and non-cruelty. There are two main alternate views to Christianity. The West has a materialistic, non-religious view.

The East has a religious, immaterialistic view, that is, that matter is an illusion and that only spirit is reality. But both are impersonal systems. That is the important point.

Both in the West and East, men and women are seen as abnormal warts in an impersonal universe. In Eastern terms, it is regarded as maya, a Sanskrit word meaning illusion, in the West as absurd machines. In both cases, there is an attempt to relieve the tension caused by believing one is nothing.

On the materialistic side, Sir Julian Huxley clarified the dilemma by acknowledging, though an atheist, that man functions better if he acts as though God exists. Another tension-relieving device is putting faith in the theory of evolution. People are given an impression of progress, up from the primeval slime in the amoeba, up through the evolutionary chain, with life developing, by chance, from the simple to the complex, right up to the pinnacle, man.

Evolutionary theory teaches that, by chance, this amazing complexity called man has been generated out of the slime. Of course, then, they say, there is progress. In this way, people are led into imagining that, really, the whole thing does have some purpose.

This theory of evolution places men and women highest on the scale. But in the materialistic framework, the whole thing is meaningless, and the concept of higher means nothing. This concept is an illusion.

Only some form of absurd, mystical jump will allow us to accept that personality comes from impersonality. If man has been kicked up out of the impersonal by chance, then those things that make him personal, hope of purpose and significance, love, notions of morality and rationality, beauty and verbal communication, are ultimately unfulfillable and are thus meaningless. This is how ridiculous the illusion of meaning or purpose derived from chance evolution is.

On the other side, within Eastern thinking, attempts to relieve the tension have been made by introducing personalized gods. But they are not really personal. Their source is the impersonal everything, of which they are simply emanations.

Because it has no real alternatives, the East proposes a system of endless cycles to try to give some explanation for things which exist about us. This has sometimes been likened to the ocean. The ocean casts up waves for a time, but the waves are still a part of the ocean, and then the waves pull back into the ocean and disappear.

It is interesting to see that the Western materialist does exactly the same thing. He too tries to explain the form of the universe with a theory of endless cycles. He says that impersonal energy or matter has always existed, but has gone through endless cycles taking different forms.

Both the Eastern and the Western thought put forth their ideas of endless cycles because their answers are really answers to nothing. It is helpful to see that the only alternatives intellectually to the Christian position are so full of problems that they really are non-answers. You find people in the West who imagine

that Christianity has nothing to say about these big issues, and they discard the Bible without considering it.

This superior attitude is quite unfounded. The real situation is very different. The humanists of the Enlightenment acted as if they would conquer all before them, but two centuries have changed that.

One would have imagined at this point that Western man would be glad for a solution to the various dilemmas facing him and would welcome an answer that does answer the big questions. But people are not always eager to find the truth. Western thought during the past century confirms this.

The hallmark of the Enlightenment had been reason is king. Gradually, however, the problems of this enthronement of man's reason emerged. And what man was left with was relative knowledge and relative morality.

This was the noose about the humanist's neck which tightened with every passing decade and generation. What would he do? Ironically, what he did was to abandon reason. Modern irrationalism was born.

When I speak of irrationalism, existentialism, or the existential methodology, what I am getting at is a quite simple idea that has been expressed in a variety of complicated ways. You are at the back of a theater watching a melodrama. The heroine is trapped in an impossible situation.

Everyone is groaning inwardly, wondering how she is going to get out of the mess. The suspense is heightened by the knowledge of the audience, but not of the heroine, that help is on the way in the character of our hero. The only question is, will he arrive in time? Now imagine for a moment that the audience has slipped the information that there is no hero, that the situation of the heroine is not just desperate, but completely hopeless.

If the heroine faces her end with courage, this would be morally edifying, but the situation itself would be tragic. If, however, she pretends as if help were around the corner and keeps bolstering herself up with the thought, someone is on the way, help is at hand, when she knows that there is no help, all that one can feel for her is pity. She is unable to manufacture the hero out of nothing.

All it would achieve would be her own mental state of hopefulness rather than despair, but her hopefulness would rest on a lie or an illusion, and thus viewed objectively, would be finally absurd. Now this is what the existential methodology is all about. With my reason, I can find absolutely no way to have meaning, morality, hope or beauty if the universe I am living in is only an existential absurdity.

This would plunge me into despair. Ah, but that is not where I stop. I say to myself, there is hope, even though there is none.

There is help on the way, even though there is no help. We shall overcome, even though nothing is more certain than we shall be destroyed. When modern philosophers finally realized that they were not going to be able to find answers on the basis of their reason alone, they crossed over, in one way or another, to the remarkable position of saying, it doesn't matter, even though there are no answers by way of the mind, we will find them without the mind.

What was left was experience as experience, for its own sake. Experience is the key word to understanding modern man in the West. For everyday purposes, the mind is a useful instrument, but for the things of meaning, for the answers to the big questions, it is set aside.

Rather, they say, the way to deal with the big questions is upon the basis of the individual's experience. What is involved is experience as experience, and not the question of whether there is an objective base for that experience. It is exactly like the heroine of which we spoke, when she said, hope is coming, to keep herself going.

Let us look at a few examples to see what it means to try to find hope, irrationally. In the West, there is the spread of Eastern religions and techniques, such as TM, the cults, and all the rest. What has become important is not whether there is something that causes the experience, but the experience as an experience.

What about modern theology in the churches? The terminology is Christian, but the ideas have gone over to the other side. Experience is that which is important, not propositions about God, life, or salvation. People are hungry for something that will give them a meaning in life, and people are afraid.

Life does seem rather hopeless, even on the level of everyday life. The threat of a lower standard of living, a growing authoritarianism, world hunger, an ecological disaster, a devastating war. They are looking for any answer.

What about the growth of occultism, witchcraft, astrology? People are looking for answers, answers they can experience. Wherever you look, what confronts you is irrational experience. We must be careful not to be bewildered by the surface differences among these movements.

There are differences, yet all of them represent a mysticism, which is based on experience as experience for its own sake. The problem with this mysticism is, who is going to say what is right? Are we going to find guiding absolutes in the midst of this mishmash of experience? What base do we have to fight inhumanity? As soon as the conscious restraints of the mind are removed, then everything can be right, and everything can be wrong. In fact, there are no clear standards in Western society.

And why? Because there is an inadequate base for knowledge and for morality.

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