



Moreland, J. P.

Kingdom Triangle: Recover the Christian Mind, Renovate the Soul, Restore the Spirit's Power

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1. The Hunger for Drama in a Thin World

In *Kingdom Triangle*, Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland examines three different worldviews: Naturalism, Postmodernism, and Christianity, arguing for the consistency, validity, and truthfulness of the latter. As the subtitle to the book suggests, Moreland's "Kingdom Triangle" consists of a (1) recovery of the Christian mind, (2) renovation of the soul, and (3) restoration of the Spirit's power. If the Church can accomplish these three things then it should be able to greatly impact the world around it, even in the midst of competing worldviews.

In chapter one Moreland begins with a brief story about a missionary in Africa who received a miraculous answer to the prayers of a young girl. He sketches out what the response to this story would be from the three worldviews that he addresses in the book, but notes one thing that all parties would agree on, that is, the drama in the story. He notes a longing for drama that exists within the human condition and goes on to outline various ways in which this plays out, most notably in the pursuit of happiness. Moreland does well to show that with Naturalism's and Postmodernism's emphasis on individualistic happiness, they end up resulting in anything but what they so strongly desire.

Moreland also gives a preliminary view of what the difference is between a 'thin world' and a 'thick world.' Basically, a 'thin world' is a world in which there are no absolutes, and very little meaning. Naturalism and Postmodernism fit into this category. A 'thick world' is the polar opposite; it's a world in which things have meaning, a world in which we live for a higher purpose. He says that Islam fits into a 'thick world' even if it is ultimately a false belief system. He closes the chapter by asking what he calls "five crucial questions":

1. What is real?
2. What are the nature and limits of knowledge?
3. Who is well off? What is the good life?
4. Who is a really good person?
5. How does one become a really good person? (34)

2. The Naturalist Story

In chapter two Moreland says that his “*primary purpose is to expose naturalism for what it is, not to provide an apologetic critique of it.*” (40) However, he admits though, that at times throughout the chapter he will be doing exactly that. After introducing the reader to “strong scientism” (the view that we can only know things that can be tested scientifically) and “weak scientism” (the view that some claims in the fields outside of science are rational and justified), Moreland defines the naturalist theory of knowledge as: “*the belief that scientific knowledge is either the only kind of knowledge there is or an immeasurably superior kind of knowledge.*” (41) He follows this with a brief explanation of the “naturalist creation account” and launches into a mini-apologetic for Intelligent Design.

Moreland then discusses the naturalist view of reality which is grounded in physicalism. He says that such a view is ultimately reductionist or eliminativist in that “*what you cannot reduce to (identify with) the physical you must eliminate, pretend that it does not exist.*” (46) The rest of the chapter is devoted to outlining and commenting on Naturalism’s inadequacy to account for six factors that I will not list here in the interest of keeping this review as succinct as possible.

He concludes the chapter by showing how Naturalism fails to provide meaningful answers to his “five crucial questions” concluding that: “*[i]n light of these five questions, naturalism is exposed as the shallow, destructive fraud that it really is.*” (59) He believes however that the Christian worldview “*provides deep, satisfying, true answers to these questions.*” (59) While I would agree so far as his statements are concerned, I recognize that my agreement comes from sharing the same worldview. We share the basic presuppositions that things like “good” and “well off” actually exist and I doubt that many naturalists would accept these concepts on the same grounds that we do, so ultimately, I’m not sure as to their argumentative value.

3. The Postmodern Story

In chapter three Moreland turns to the “*Postmodern story*” taking it to include a “*rejection (1) of objective truth construed as correspondence with reality, (2) of the rational objectivity of reason, (3) of the reality of simply seeing and the human ability to be aware of and know reality directly, unmediated by ‘conceptual schemes,’ language, or their surrogates.*” (67) The first half of the chapter is spent discussing how the university devolved into a ‘pluraliversity’ once scientism was accepted. All nonempirical knowledge was deemed relative, subjective, and akin to personal opinion. The university

is no longer a place to “*acquir[e] knowledge and the tools necessary to obtain it*”, but rather it has become a place to “*facilitat[e] research that [can] provide useful information against the background of changing truth.*” (71)

In the second half of the chapter Moreland reminds me why I never took a liking to philosophy. He sketches out briefly what postmodernism is exactly, i.e., a reaction to Modernity, the “*period of European thought that developed out of the Renaissance and flourished during the Enlightenment.*” (77) He goes on to enumerate how postmodernism denies (1) objective knowledge and reason, and (2) objective, absolute truth. In speaking of absolute truth, Moreland argues for the correspondence theory of truth, and in my opinion makes the concept more difficult to understand than is necessary in a popular level book such as this. He details the difference between the “truth bearer” and the “truth maker” and their correspondence relations. He goes through the differences between a sentence and a proposition, all the while speaking of the arbitrariness of the one (the sentence) but the absolutivity of the other (the proposition, be it true or false). I would have much preferred Norman Geisler’s simple “absolute truth is telling it like it is” here.

When looking at postmodernism in light of his “five crucial questions,” Moreland concludes that it can’t adequately answer them because “*reality for postmodernism either does not exist or we have no direct access to it.*” (85) He sees Christians adopting postmodern thought as harmful, and suggests that they shouldn’t even dabble in it, accepting only the good parts. He makes his point by comparing postmodernism to Nazi ideology (clearly for rhetorical effect), showing that the bad far outweighs the good, and also that the good features are not unique to that system alone. I’m still left wondering though, how important Moreland’s “five crucial questions” are to those who start with different presuppositions. These questions are represented as crucial, but why are they crucial and to whom are they crucial? Those are my crucial questions.

4. From Drama to Deadness in Five Steps

In chapter four Moreland turns his attention to five paradigm shifts that he believes have played a part in deadening our souls to some extent. The first shift is from knowledge to faith. He gives a hilarious example, using Oprah Winfrey and a show she did after the September 11, 2001 terrorists attacks to make his point that when dealing with what people recognize as objective fact, they seek the expert opinions of those who know about the subject. But when it comes to Oprah’s urging people to seek God, she urged them to look inside and seek “*whatever he, she, it, or they mean to you.*” (92) The point that Moreland makes is that in such thinking, “[r]eligious claims are neither factual in nature nor subject to rational evaluation.” (92) Everyone’s feelings are as valid as everyone else’s.

The second shift is from human flourishing to satisfaction of desire. Here Moreland notes that happiness at one time meant (and truly still does mean) human flourishing. It was “*understood as a life of virtue and the successful person was the person who knew how to live life well according to what we are by nature [. . .] So understood, happiness*

involves suffering, endurance, and patience..." (94) This has been replaced by a *"feeling close to pleasure."* (95) Such a view of happiness is selfish and narcissistic and is a *"result of the loss of moral and spiritual knowledge."* (95)

The third shift is duty and virtue to minimalist ethics. Here Moreland argues that *"knowledge of duty and virtue is no longer seen as a possibility."* (96) The minimalist ethic is that *"[o]ne may morally act in any way one chooses so long as one does not do harm to others."* (96) He sees the underlying problem as the *"loss of belief . . . in the existence of nonempirical, nonscientific knowledge, especially moral and religious knowledge."* (97)

The fourth shift is from classic freedom to contemporary freedom. He states that *"classically, freedom meant the power to do what one ought to do."* (98) So freedom in life is when one lives how they out to live, which is according to God's plan for their life. But contemporary freedom is has *"come to be understood as the right to do what one wants to do."* (99) He argues that according to this view of freedom, adults should be able to have sex with minors simply because they want to. He acknowledges that some might argue against this, saying that minors are not mature enough to give informed consent, but he counters this argument by pointing out that minors aren't old enough to give informed consent to things like receiving vaccinations or going to school. His point is that without moral absolutes, it's nearly impossible to make such judgments. I think his argument is extremely potent here.

The final shift is from classic tolerance to contemporary tolerance. It is on this point that Moreland is at his best. He notes the downfalls to individual moral relativism (subjectivism) and cultural moral relativism (conventionalism) by exposing how such concepts don't work when one is a part of more than one culture with different morals. For example:

If a man from [society] A has extramarital sex with a woman from [society] B in a hotel in a third society C with a different view from either A or B, which is the relevant society for determining whether the act was right or wrong? (101)

He also brings up a good point in that in such morally relativistic societies, moral reform is impossible because moral reformers would always be going against the grain of the society, which defines the morality. I think Moreland's arguments are valid, and as such, I believe this is the best chapter I have read so far. He has set the stage for suggesting a solution, the so-called "Kingdom Triangle" which he will spend the next three chapters explaining.

5. The Recovery of Knowledge

In chapter five Moreland argues that the Christian faith is rooted in knowledge, and that true faith is never found apart from knowledge. This entails him first defining what knowledge is, and outlining different kinds of knowledge. Moreland assures the reader

that “*knowledge does not require certainty*” (121), saying that there are very few things that can be known with certainty (e.g., that I exist, basic principles of math, and fundamental laws of logic). He goes on to say that you can “*know something without knowing **that** you know it . . . [and] . . . know something without knowing **how** you know it.*” (121-22)

Moreland goes on to offer a brief critique of skepticism by first outlining the “problem of the criterion.” He says:

We can distinguish two different questions relevant to the human quest for knowledge. First, we can ask, “What is it that we know?” This is a question about the specific items of knowledge we possess and about the *extent* or *limits* of our knowledge. Second, we can ask, “How do we decide in any given case whether or not we have knowledge in that case? What are the criteria for knowledge?” This is a question about our criteria for knowledge. (122-23)

The “problem of the criterion” is that “*before we can have an answer to our first question about the extent of our knowledge, we would seem to need an answer to our second question about our criteria for knowledge. Yet before we can have an answer to the second question, we seem to require an answer to our first question.*” (123) Moreland suggests that the three main solutions are (1) skepticism, (2) methodism (not the denomination), and (3) particularism. The skeptic denies that there is a real solution and thus there is no knowledge. The methodist starts with an answer to question #2, but this leads to an infinite regress. The particularist starts with knowing certain things directly, without knowing *how* they know them, or even *that* they know them. Starting with clear instances of knowledge makes it possible to formulate criteria, which in turn helps us to extend our knowledge. He addresses the charge of question begging from the skeptic by noting that their constant asking of “how do you know” is unsubstantive, and tries to force the particularist to be a methodist. This all sounds strangely familiar to presuppositional apologetics, and as such, I’m not sure of the weight that I’d place on it at the moment.

Moreland rounds the chapter out by showing the three different kinds of knowledge: (1) knowledge by acquaintance, (2) propositional knowledge, and (3) know-how (126-30). He also gives the reader three things to ponder about their beliefs: (1) the content of a belief, (2) the strength of a belief, and (3) the centrality of a belief (130-33). Finally, Moreland suggests three ways to grow in knowledgeable confidence in God and his truth: (1) be ruthless in assessing the precise nature and strength of what you actually believe and develop a specific plan of attack for improvement, (2) take appropriate yearly risks and stretch your faith, and (3) read books about and share stories of God’s miraculous actions in other people’s lives as an encouragement to your own faith (133-37).

I was particularly pleased with #3 on the list of ways to grow in confidence, as I can speak first-hand to the power of a testimony. Moreland’s presentation of faith in this chapter largely agrees with the conclusions that I have drawn from my personal study. I

am in complete agreement that faith and knowledge/reason are not mutually exclusive concepts, and in fact that faith as presented in Scripture is confidence based on knowledge.

6. Renovation of the Soul

In chapter six Moreland presents his remedy to the “empty self” which he defines as: (1) infantile, (2) narcissistic, and (3) passive. The empty self is opposed to things such as patience and hard work, but instead wants instant gratification. It is concerned first and foremost with itself, exalting itself above God. The empty self would rather do nothing than get involved in life. Moreland’s solution to the problem of the “empty self” is the art of Christian self-denial. He bases his presentation on Jesus’ statement in Matthew 16:24-27. Such a task is concerned with the classic sense of happiness. Moreland assures us that:

Self-denial in Matthew 16:24-27 does not mean living without the things that bring pleasurable satisfaction. Self-denial certainly does not mean adopting the attitude of putting one’s self down, nor does it mean to get rid of any personal desires. (146)

What self-denial is concerned with is finding your place in God’s plan and giving yourself over to others for Christ’s sake. Moreland’s position here is poignant, and Jesus makes the same point when he says that there’s no greater love than to lay down your life for friends (John 15:3). Often we read that statement and think of Jesus’ death on the cross, which is entirely appropriate, but there is another sense in which we all can lay down our lives for those around us: by setting aside our desires in order to meet the needs of others.

Moreland then gives some instruction for fostering spiritual discipline in ourselves. His foundational text is Romans 12:1, which is clear enough when read on its own (in my opinion), but Moreland saw fit to offer a redundant example of learning how to play tennis, in order to make the point that Paul made so simply. I found myself less than impressed with the example, as it actually made it more difficult to understand what Paul was saying. The redeeming quality of the section is Moreland’s list of spiritual disciplines that he believes we should practice regularly:

disciplines of abstinence: solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice

disciplines of engagement: study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, submission (153)

These disciplines help us to address both sins of commission and sins of omission. Moreland closes the chapter with some tips for cultivating emotional sensitivity to the movement within your soul. He recommends some books that he considers essential reading on the subject of spiritual formation, as well as expressing the belief that we need

to encourage Christian counseling and therapy. His last point of consideration deals with facilitating meditation in our hearts (as opposed to our heads alone).

To be quite honest, I was very bored with this chapter. I had to put the book down numerous times and pick up something more stimulating, because I was falling asleep. When it comes down to it, I think that many of Moreland's tips are helpful and can be put into practice, but his presentation in this chapter is not as engaging as it has been in the rest of the book. In a book that I think has been progressively getting better, this chapter stopped the momentum as far as I'm concerned. Let's hope that it will pick back up in the final full chapter.

7. Restoration of the Kingdom's Miraculous Power

In this, the final chapter of the book, Moreland definitely picked up steam and regained the momentum I felt he had lost in the previous chapter. This chapter is really an ode to God the miracle worker. Moreland begins by giving a number of testimonies of God's miraculous healing and delivering power, from various people all over the world (166-72). He shares a personal testimony about God healing him of laryngitis, another testimony about God raising a little girl from the dead to preach the Gospel for 7 days only to die again. And he also points out how many times, American evangelicals have a hard time believing these kinds of stories.

I can freely admit to having been the recipient of miraculous healing and deliverance, with no explanation other than God's working, but to be honest, the more I got into historical-critical Biblical scholarship, the more willing I had become to dismiss the miraculous. This chapter has been a good reminder that God's kingdom is certainly announced in a powerful way. Paul's words to the Corinthians echoed in my mind as I read through this chapter:

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. (1Cor. 2:4-5, NIV)

Moreland notes the great revival taking place all over the world in so-called third world countries, and demonstrates in a succinct section, how Jesus was a perfect man empowered by the Spirit of God to perform the miraculous acts that he had performed. Often the thought is that Jesus, as God, performed his miracles according to his divine nature, but Moreland points out that this is not the case (174-75). He's also very apt to point out that cessationism is on the decline amongst evangelical scholars while noting that during the first four-hundred years of Church history, there was no shortage of claims to the miraculous gifts of God being in operation. But Moreland is also correct to say that:

Even if you remain a solidly convinced cessationist, however, there is still plenty of room in your theology to increase your passion for and

expectation of the supernatural, miraculous aspect of new covenant life and ministry. (176)

He closes the chapter with a testimony of his journey from cessationism to ‘Third Wave Evangelicalism,’ noting the need for balance. There’s nothing wrong with seeking for signs and wonders as long as they are “*means to progress.*” (182) His final four pieces of advice are to: (1) read widely in this area, (2) find credible witnesses to these things and invite them to teach about them, (3) provide opportunities for others to share their experiences of the miraculous, and (4) make growth in the miraculous a component of the missionary aspect of your church. All of these are excellent suggestions, and certainly things that many Charismatics and Pentecostals have been privy to for quite some time. I thoroughly enjoyed this chapter, as it has sparked something in me to hunger once for the supernatural things of God. Well done Dr. Moreland, well done!

Other features of the book include an annotated select bibliography, which is always nice to see. There’s a two-page Scripture index as well as a ten-page subject index. Each chapter concludes with questions for personal reflection or group discussion, which makes this a good title for a book club. I wouldn’t think to use this in the context of a Sunday school class or adult Bible study, but others might find it more appropriate for such a setting. This is actually one of those rare books where I don’t mind end notes because honestly, they don’t add much to the content of the book overall (they’re mostly bibliographic), meaning that I didn’t actually have to use two book marks with this one (because I didn’t read the notes until I actually got to the end). However, I did find the placement of them after the bibliography to be a bit odd; I would have thought to place them directly after the main body of text and then follow them with the bibliography.

I think this book would best suit the person immersed in postmodernism and possibly the Emergent Church movement. I don’t think that a hardcore skeptic is likely to be the least bit persuaded by Moreland’s arguments, and those who are already in agreement with Moreland would just be reading more of the same. I do however, think that he makes a good case for the ‘thin world’ of postmodernism, and I think his critiques are good enough to make the truth-seeker’s ears perk up. When it’s all said and done I just don’t think it will reach as large an audience as Moreland might have intended. And there are also points where it seems to be harder to follow than it should be. But I did find the final chapter to be superb in so many ways and for that, Dr. Moreland should be commended.