

NO NEWS IS GOOD NEWS:
MODERNITY, THE POSTMODERN, AND APOLOGETICS

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*I would argue that the project of modernity (the realization of universality)
has not been forsaken or forgotten but destroyed, "liquidated."
There are several modes of destruction, several names or symbols for them.
"Auschwitz" can be taken as a paradigmatic name
for the tragic "incompletion" of modernity.¹*

THESE words were written by the French intellectual who more than anyone else made the West conscious of what he called "the postmodern condition."² Today Jean-François Lyotard is only one of a host of thinkers who use the term as a characterization of our contemporary culture. There are so many, in fact, and each has a different slant on exactly what the postmodern is, that it is easy to become confused, if not cynical. After all, the term itself is on one level a senseless oxymoron (how can anything be *postmodern*?). On another level, the term is meant to be strange and ironical, as if to tear down the pretense of monopolizing all history after a certain date (how else could one challenge the concept of the modern?). Is it possible to make any sense of the discussions surrounding the idea of the postmodern? How seriously should we take the issues? How should Christians assess these discussions? What is the appropriate apologetic strategy in view of the so-called postmodern condition?

On the surface, it may appear to be a good thing that many are standing up to denounce the proud claims of modernity. Has not modernity, however beneficial some of its aspects may be, produced a culture that is highly secular and that has turned on itself, giving us the tragedies and upheavals of our twentieth century? A number of theologians applaud the disillusionment with modernity, and proclaim ours to be a time of great opportunity for

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) 18. The original French title was *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*. The allusion to Jesus' words about the kingdom of heaven belonging to children should not escape attention. As Lyotard sees it, postmodernism cannot be grasped in an "adult" world of commitment to modern values.

² Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979). References are to the English edition, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

the gospel.³ But are matters so simple? What kind of ally is the prophet of the postmodern? Do those who propose a radical rejection of modernity and lay claims at the same time to "the postmodern condition" have a convincing program? They tend vastly to reduce the aspirations and hopes of believers in the modern, but at the same time, do they have any reason for living? What should Christians believe? Is the postmodern an encouraging new opportunity for apologetics? Or is it another, more gloomy notion, hostile to the gospel?

I. *What Is Modernity?*

The answer to this question must come from a careful study of the territory. First, what is meant by modernity? A basic distinction must be made at the outset. Modernity corresponds to the era characterized by the ideals of the West, an era that is relatively recent. *Modernism* refers to two things: first, specific movements in theology and in the arts; and second, the ideology of the modern. One may refer to such liberal Roman Catholics as Alfred Loisy, George Tyrrell, and Ernesto Buonaiuti, at the turn of our century, as "modernists." They sought to accommodate Catholicism to democracy and rational criticism. The liberal Protestantism against which fundamentalism went to war in the earlier part of the century is sometimes known as "modernism" as well. In the arts, modernism has been attributed to various twentieth-century movements, such as the School of Paris, the International Style, and twelve-tone composition. In the second place, modernism refers simply to the convictions and ideology of the modern. In this way, it is a philosophy, even a doctrine. Obviously, there is a good deal of interface between modernism and modernity.

Modernity is the broader, more inclusive concept. The history of the word is an interesting, though not critical, consideration. The Latin adjective *modernus* is ancient, going back at least to the fifth century AD, when it was used to distinguish between the Roman and pagan past and the officially Christian present.⁴ The English noun *modernity* has origins in the sixteenth century, but only takes on its fully current meaning in the mid-nineteenth century, especially in the writings of De Gauthier and Baudelaire.

What is critical is the *idea* of modernity. The essence of modernity is neither strictly historical nor sociological. It is rather a *mode* of civilization, which corresponds to the broad sweep of innovations that began in Europe in the late seventeenth century and became mature in the nineteenth and twentieth. Modernity is both an ideal and a reality, and it has implications

³ For example, to name only one, Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity . . . What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

⁴ See H. R. Jauss, "History of Art and Pragmatic History," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) 46-48.

in every sphere of life, science, the arts, economics, ideas, family life, and so on. Perhaps the simplest way to express it is to say modernity is a great shift from the mode of tradition to the mode of the new.⁵

One of the most lucid accounts of the coming of modernity is by the French historian Paul Hazard. In his classic *The Crisis of the European Conscience*, he examined certain key drifts that occurred in Europe between 1680 and 1715.⁶ He distinguished among various changes, such as “stability to movement,” “ancient to modern,” “orthodoxy to heterodoxy.” These implied changes in fundamental beliefs, producing rationalism, the negation of miracles, empiricism, and others. While most of the people he studied were the great individual thinkers and scientists of the period, Hazard did characterize these drifts as a *crisis* of the *conscience*. Later historians and sociologists would look for the drift in the ordinary levels of social life, not just among the philosophers. Part of their call was simply to recognize the importance of the social dimension of life. But another part was to point out that what had been restricted to the salons in the eighteenth century was shared by a greater number of classes in the nineteenth.

Hazard is right to draw attention to the mentality of modernity. This is where it would be appropriate to speak of *modernism*. What is modernist thinking? Many categories can be found to describe the modern mentality. Lonnie Kliever suggests three: subjectivity, universality, and immanence.⁷ Though I agree with much of what Kliever says about the reality of these three categories, I would prefer to call attention to the dualistic nature of modern thought. The Bible often describes idolatry as dualistic. Idols are of two kinds, sometimes held separately, sometimes together. Richard Keyes has described them as the *nearby god* and the *faraway god*. Idols may be statues, of the kind described by Isaiah (44:10-20). Or they may be faraway concepts, such as “Fortune” or “Destiny” (Isa 65:11). An example of both held at the same time is deduced from Paul’s speech to the Athenians, recorded in Acts 17. He notes the presence on the one hand of idols and shrines, and on the other hand of the altar to the unknown god.⁸ Furthermore, Reformational philosophy speaks of an intrinsic polarity or dialectic that characterizes the humanistic worldview.⁹ Cornelius Van Til

⁵ Jean Baudrillard suggests that modernity has made a value out of this crisis of tradition, a universal value that in fact becomes a cultural tradition. Rosenberg calls it the “tradition of the new.”

⁶ Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1600-1715* (Paris: Fayard, 1961).

⁷ Lonnie D. Kliever, “Polysymbolism and Modern Religiosity,” *JR* 59 (1979) 169-94. He is indebted for these categories to the preeminent historian of modernity in the first half of our century, Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind* (rev. ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940).

⁸ Richard B. Keyes, “The Idol Factory,” in *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age* (ed. Os Guinness and John Seel; Chicago: Moody, 1992) 29-48.

⁹ See Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1953) vol. 1, part 2, chap. 1, *passim*.

also describes the tension between rationalism and irrationalism at the same time as endemic to unbelieving thought.¹⁰

The first pole of modern thought, then, is rationalism. According to this category, knowledge is only attainable if the objects are defined by human reason. This means that the facts of the world belong to the human thought world. Or, rather, they are legislated by it. Science at best clarifies this relation. But it does not discover truly new facts, nor does it marshal them from outside of human experience. For most rationalists progress is inevitable, because human thought is basically good. The more reason is free to articulate its view of things, the better things will be. Such a view leads to historicism, the notion that the history, and the culture, of anything is a sufficient explanation of it.

The second pole is in dialectical opposition to the first. We could call it the pole of subjective freedom. This means that there is a domain that is outside of the phenomenal realm of science. It is the sphere of religion, morals, and meaning. While the normal standards for objective knowledge cannot apply to this noumenal realm, human self-consciousness is sufficient to sanction religious truth. From this comes the modern emphasis on individualism. The romantic movement owed a great deal to the idea that freedom is irrational. The location of beauty for the romantics is in the art object, a human creation which is nonetheless superior to its creator and able to lead us to the truth.

These two poles are held together in an unholy tension. Although the philosophical origins of modernity may be traced back to Descartes, perhaps the philosopher who most powerfully set the tone for this modern dialectic is Immanuel Kant. To use the popular assessment, Kant tried to "save" science and yet "make room for" religion. In his supposed Copernican Revolution, Kant affirmed that science is not the record of preexisting, preinterpreted data, but is the field where our categories of thought create order over a noninterpreted pool of contingency. This move protected science from the hopelessness of facing brute facts without the benefit of revelation. At the same time, religion is safeguarded from critical inquiry by placing it in the realm of pure freedom. In fact, the best religion for Kant is centered not in worship but in morality, morality based on human disposition alone.

In doing apologetics, we can begin to pick apart this dialectic. If we can grasp something of Kant's worldview, we will have a good deal to say to our generation. Kant has had a powerful influence on the course of subsequent philosophy.¹¹ The rationalist and the irrationalist sides of the dialectic can be traced from Kant to the most recent developments in philosophy. Some

¹⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) 106-16.

¹¹ See Bella K. Milmed, *Kant and Current Philosophical Issues* (New York: New York University Press, 1961).

major in rationalism and minor in irrationalism. Others invert the coefficient. No thinker, however, is purely one or the other. Pushed to an extreme, the one always swallows up the other. Rationalism is always based on a first move, which is to accept rationalism. That first move is irrational. Irrationalism is always a reasoned articulation. That is a rationalistic first move. In specific cases, however, never does this pure commitment to one or the other occur. Bertrand Russell is a good case in point. Russell's reduction of mathematics to logic makes logic analytic and "empty," that is, purely formal. That should mean that it has no use or applicability whatsoever. In point of fact, Russell applies it where he will. He often chides Christian faith for being unreasonable, but his own beginning point appears arbitrary and irrational.¹² This approach can be followed in certain modern Protestant theologies as well, where the resurrection of Christ is not regarded as a historical occurrence, but as a symbol of an inexpressible experience.

Such dialectical thinking is hardly the exclusive domain of professional philosophers. It is just as true on the street level. Take for example film director Woody Allen. In most of his films two things are going on at the same time. First, an apparently honest, rather penetrating search for meaning. But finding none, the solution is simply to enjoy the pleasures of the moment and abandon the search. In *Hannah and Her Sisters*, there are a number of episodes where the protagonist asks the big questions: whether life has any meaning if there is no God, why there is evil, whether there is life after death. He admonishes others who are not troubled by these questions. In the end, though, he is happy simply to enjoy his favorite Marx Brothers movie, and he hopes to do better in his relationships with women, without asking any questions.

II. *The Social Dimension of Modernity*

As crucial as the mentality of modernity (modernism) may be, it is important to recognize the social dimension of modernity as well. Modernity has been legitimized in a number of structures of plausibility. These may be actual institutions. More often, they are trends that become catalysts, *Kulturbärer*, which not only reflect but also promote modernism. The list is elastic. Let me mention five of them, very succinctly, and then discuss a sixth in considerably more detail. (1) The first trend is the rise of the capitalist economy. This includes freedom for competition on an open market, the sharing of ownership of the means of production, and private rights

¹² See his arguments in "Can Religion Cure Our Troubles?" in *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (ed. Paul Edwards; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957) 193-204. Kant himself denied that being had any substance. On this basis, Kant not only refuted the ontological proof for the existence of God, but called into question all assertions of existence.

to capital. (2) Another parallel trend is the growth of technology and industry. In the modern sense this means the use of tools and machines that yield products in the most efficient way possible. (3) Following from this, but somewhat separate, is rapid communication. The use of high-speed operators such as the telegraph, the telephone, and various visual means to link people to each other or to sources of information represents a qualitative difference from previous means of communication. (4) Accompanying these are urbanization and globalization. Indications over the last two centuries show the trend toward dwelling in cities from less than five percent of the world's population in 1800 to an expected fifty-five percent by the year 2000. (5) Finally, a trend that is fundamental to modernity: the rise of democracy. Increasingly in the West, the vesting of rule is not in hereditary or elite power but in the population, whether directly or indirectly, through its representatives.

Many results can be connected with these trends. One psychological result is that because people are displaced in a number of ways, they are increasingly affected by anomie, or, as Peter Berger calls it, the "homeless mind."¹³ Though there can be blatant moral relativism, there is more often simply moral confusion. Ethical boundaries are not always clear.

(6) A sixth trend requires a little more comment. It is secularization. The term *secularization* refers at least to two phenomena. First is the uncoupling of church from the governing sectors of society, or the disestablishment of the church and consequent development of a lay sphere. This aspect of secularization is sometimes called *laicisation*. The second is the decline of reference to the Christian worldview in ordering human affairs, or the loss of Christian conviction. This aspect is properly known as *secularism*, and many people equate secularization only with this latter meaning. The most dramatic story of religion in modernity is the secularization story. We mentioned laicisation. In modern times, secularization has certainly meant the uncoupling of church from society described by the term laicisation. Sometimes this has been accomplished relatively peacefully, as in the establishment of Parliament in England, sometimes violently, as in the French Revolution, followed by the Napoleonic Law. But it does not follow logically from the first kind of secularization that faith is always diminished. In fact, there have been times when the church was more influential on general morals because it was free from the political entanglements it had been under in earlier times. However, in most cases in the West, secularization has eventually meant the removal of Christianity from its position as a principal source of authority, becoming instead one sphere competing with others. Religion, because of this, has become more and more of a private matter, and the coexistence of competing views has made it more difficult to proclaim universal truth.

¹³ Peter L. Berger et al., *The Homeless Mind* (New York: Penguin, 1974).

In the West, the bureaucratic state, the advances of technology, the market economy—rather than the structures of Christendom—are now the gatekeepers of truth and of ethical norms. As one sociologist puts it, we have moved from public morals to parking meters. If life can be regulated by a simple technique, why confuse things with mutual respect? A dramatic illustration of secularization can be seen in the changing skylines of our major cities. In the nineteenth century, inevitably the church was the tallest structure. Today, it is the skyscraper. In downtown New York City, Trinity Church is dwarfed by the buildings on Wall Street. In Paris, the Eiffel Tower and the Montparnasse are higher than any church.

Two caveats must be mentioned. First, secularization does not always mean a linear decline in faith. We mentioned that the two parts of secularization are not necessarily connected. One might expect in a secular society that all faith would decline, if not disappear altogether. Ironically, this has not been the case. An intriguing part of the secularization story is the survival and even resurgence of various faiths. Some of the surest predictions have not panned out. For example, it was thought by various sociologists, stemming from Weber, that a highly industrialized society was always incompatible with religion. In this case, the United States, the most industrially developed Western nation, should have a great vacuum of faith. But, to the contrary, church attendance has been at a steady forty-two percent since the 1930s. Today an astounding ninety-four percent of Americans believe in God, eighty-four percent believe Christ is the Son of God, and over thirty-four percent claim to be “born-again” or “evangelical.”¹⁴

Alternative religious beliefs have also flourished in the modern West. The rise of newer religious movements, such as the cults, both traditional and Eastern, is complemented by the growth of therapies, diets, recovery methods, new age, and other quasi-religious programs. Two types of relations between secularization and religious activity have been suggested to explain how this resurgence might be possible. First, such secular currents as technology and management create a spiritual vacuum, an alienation which must be filled with a world re-enchanted. Second, however, they also provide a unique catalyst for religion. Think only of how successfully the fundamentalists of the 1970s and '80s used television and other mass-communications methods for the propagation of their faith. In the broadest sense, any of the modes of the created order can be invested with religious meaning. Thus, modern candidates for religious resurgence include not only the classic ones, Christian or not, but such ideologies as socialism, science, and humanism.¹⁵

¹⁴ George Gallup, Jr., and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's* (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

¹⁵ Jacques Ellul, following Durkheim, considers secularization, in the sense of the loss of religion, an impossibility. Human beings by nature need to depend on the sacred, and will express it either in Christian terms or in other terms. In his scheme the function of the sacred is to explain two realities, *order* and *transgression*. His candidates for the sacred of modernity are

The second caveat is that while indeed Christendom is shrinking in the West, the process of secularization is quite different from one country to another. British sociologist David Martin has masterfully traced the various scenarios in his important study, *A General Theory of Secularization*.¹⁶ In it he compares three types of topography: monopolistic, pluralistic, and mixed. A monopolistic country is one where there has been a coalition between the state and the church, usually Orthodox or Roman Catholic. When secularization comes, the reaction to Christianity is massive, ending in conflict between the revolutionary ideal and the church. This happened in France, in Russia, in Spain, etc.

Pluralistic countries are ones where there is no obligation to believe in one religion—what Martin dubs “laissez-faire” religion. Secularization here means that religion is not an issue, so denominations and institutions of all kinds are free to develop. America is the clearest case of such pluralism. Ironically, while religion as such is not problematic, and there is even a civil religion (prayers in Congress, etc.), none of the institutions has a real impact on the gatekeepers of the culture.

Finally, the mixed pattern is where a church may be partly recognized by the state, but partly separate. England is such a country. There, secularization of the general ethos is partially offset by the official status of the Anglican Church. A variant on this is what Martin calls “duopoly,” that is, countries with two official churches. Holland and Ireland are good examples. In both cases the smaller church is likely to be more reform-oriented.

III. *The Origins of Modernity*

Now, a word about the history of the mode of modernity. When did modernity begin? We agree with historian Paul Johnson, who chronicles the birth of modernity in the fifteen-year period between 1815 and 1830.¹⁷ So many aspects of human existence changed during those years. The era opens with the twin victories of Wellington over Napoleon and Andrew Jackson over the British at New Orleans. The Congress of Vienna set the tone for the rest of the century. Britain and France dominated the world from their strong industrial, cultural, and political base. In America, the

(1) the axis technique/sex (order) and (2) the axis nation-state/revolution (transgression). Furthermore, in Ellul's approach, the sacred is attained by belief in myth. Instead of the Christian sacred, we now have others, but they are attained the same way, by faith. See *The New Demons* (New York: Seabury, 1975). While the basic idea of replacing one object of faith with another is Kuyperian, a presuppositionalist would want to point out that order and transgression are not universal categories into which we fit various versions of the sacred. Rather, we replace God himself with idols.

¹⁶ Oxford: Blackwell, 1978.

¹⁷ Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815–1830* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

West was beginning to be settled. And during those years the social, philosophical, and religious aspects of modernity that we have enumerated above became predominant.

Finding the exact origins for such a vague concept as modernity is not possible. But there is an issue at stake with certain rival theories to our own. For example, various historians would push the beginnings of modernity back to the Renaissance or the Reformation. They have a certain point. The humanism of the Renaissance, that is, the preoccupation with humane letters and rhetoric which helped the transition between the Medieval theocentric view and the later man-centered emphasis on philosophy and culture, is an important precedent for modernity. Others believe the Reformation was essentially a wresting of authority from the church to the individual, whose conscience alone guided his faith. This in turn led to such modern phenomena as capitalism, science, and democracy.

An important variant on this view is that the church in the Reformation is indirectly the cause of secularization. According to the "grave-digger" thesis, the Reformation view of the world was desacralized. Because of the Protestant interpretation of the second commandment, no earthly replica of heavenly things was permitted. While at first this led to the separation of church and state, the development of modern science, and the freedom of the individual, in the long run those became radicalized. Thus we move from freedom of religion to freedom *from* religion, from modern science to scientism, and from individual freedom to individual autonomy.

In my view the Renaissance and Reformation could be considered partial causes, but not principal causes, of modernity. What is missing from those movements is the strong dose of "pretended autonomy" that would characterize the mainstream of thought in the eighteenth, then the nineteenth century.¹⁸ In the Renaissance view, and certainly in the Reformation view, while there is a greater emphasis on humanity, that is rarely at the expense of a theocentric worldview. On the contrary, a biblical approach to life requires taking anthropology seriously precisely because God made mankind after his image. The flaw of the grave-digger thesis is the supposition that the Reformation created an inertia leading from one place to another. The reformers desired not to upset the order of things but to return to biblical truth. In fact the Reformation was not a revolution but a conservative movement, at least as far as relating the church to the state was concerned.¹⁹

¹⁸ The expression is Dooyeweerd's, who applies it to modern philosophical thought, according to which it is possible to be free from religious presuppositions. Dooyeweerd maintains it is the only "dogma" to have survived the general decay of Western thought since the two world wars (*In the Twilight of Western Thought* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960] passim).

¹⁹ Jean Baubérot, *Histoire du protestantisme* (2d ed.; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990) 43.

So modernity may claim the Renaissance and the Reformation as secondary causes. The primary background, however, is the "crisis of European conscience" that began in the late seventeenth century, matured in the eighteenth, and became a social and cultural reality in the nineteenth. Without wanting to be reductionist, we may note what is possibly the most fundamental theme of modernity, the theme that explains many of the others. Modernity moves Western civilization from transcendence to immanence. The human horizon replaces the divine as the basic ordering principle.

Where does this leave us? What is the future of modernity? What will the next millennium bring us? Two vast categories have been set forth by students of our times. These two approaches will form the backdrop for our apologetic, which differs with major aspects of both. The first states that while we may be at a critical juncture, modernity has not yet played itself out completely. The second says that modernity is exhausted, and belief in its project is no longer possible. We shall now examine each of these views.

IV. *On with Modernity*

There are many interpretations of the present status of modernity. Os Guinness wisely says, "The superlabyrinth of modernity is so vast and complex that a full account of its interconnections is beyond any single mind, let alone the scope of a single book." But he adds this corrective: "Yet the acknowledgment of such complexities and of the need for such care should not lead to paralysis."²⁰ It should be possible to evaluate modernity and find out its principal characteristics, sorting out surface ones from basic motives, and then decide its fate.

Many thinkers and analysts believe that modernity is not yet finished. Most of them are convinced that the structures of modernity are so entrenched that they cannot be easily reversed. Peter Berger, for example, has defined modernity as the movement from "fate to choice." That is, rather than being predetermined by tradition and class structure, people can choose across many lines in modernity. Technology is a carrier of such choice. Rapid communication and rapid transportation mean that we are constantly confronted with worldviews different from our own, and consequently our certainty of absolutes is diluted. Berger says this is a particular movement in history, but one which is very tenacious: "But it is very difficult to see how, given the necessary technological foundations of sustaining life for numbers such as now inhabit the earth, this movement could be reversed very easily."²¹

Neoconservative thinkers like Daniel Bell believe that modernity is here to stay, though there is a present crisis. The reason modernity will remain

²⁰ Os Guinness, *The American Hour: A Time of Reckoning and the Once and Future Role of Faith* (New York: Free Press, 1993) 65.

²¹ Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1980) 23.

is that the logic of capitalism is fundamentally sound. It is based on such values as economic rationality, discipline, perseverance, and so on. However, there is a difficulty, according to Bell, in the present circumstances. In various cultural circles, the spirit of criticism and the spirit of freedom have been exaggerated. Instead of progress in academics, we are in danger of giving in to the hypercritical project of deconstruction and grammarology. Instead of waiting for future benefits, we want them now; and we are close to a world where self-fulfillment is possible without ethical norms.²²

Pundits such as Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, and Dinesh D'Souza, in *Illiberal Education*, share Bell's view, although they are not as confident in the eventual survival of modernity's structures. Their subject is specifically the problems of modern education.²³ Bloom's theory is that the university is selling its Western soul against currents that undermine modernity. In his view the Enlightenment was a most "daring enterprise," one which sought to place both political and intellectual life under the supervision of philosophy and science. Bloom believes the universities and academies need to reinforce this relationship by emulating the spirit of Socrates. When in fact they do not, civilization is at a dangerous juncture. To him *expressionism* and *creativity* replace reason, and the forces of sensuality replace discipline. D'Souza's book is more pointed. He decries the "politically correct" campaign that, as he documents, is present in many prominent American universities. The push to rectify certain acknowledged injustices with affirmative action and anti-Western curricula is against reason and threatens to destroy the very purpose not only of the academy but of democracy itself. Both Bloom and D'Souza criticize the present culture by assuming the values of the Enlightenment to be the best we have.

Even more surprising is the position of Francis Fukuyama, in *The End of History and the Last Man*.²⁴ Though he has somewhat moderated his views recently, his basic thesis remains. Behind the events of the miracle year of 1989 lay not only the break-up of Communism but the "end of history as such." Western liberal democracy, with its capitalist underpinnings, is the "final form" of human government, and when the entire globe has accepted democracy we will have arrived at the end point of evolution. These popular views are particularly compatible with American optimism.²⁵

²² Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

²³ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991). A host of similar books have been written since. More recently one could note Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²⁴ New York: Free Press, 1991.

²⁵ One of the persistent features of the culture of middle class Americans is its incurable optimism. Rooted in our history, we think of our country as a place to start over again, to invent ourselves. As William A. Dyrness points out in his luminous book, *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 79-81, the missing ingredient from this middle class ethic is the doctrine of sin. With all that may be admirable about our spirit of

A more sophisticated form of commitment to modernity comes from the school of Critical Theory. Philosophers like Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, and Paul Goldberger, each in a different way affirms that the project of modernity, though yet unfulfilled, has enough in reserve that we may expect great things from it still. They believe, along with Max Weber, that the various social spheres must continue to differentiate. But they refuse to allow atomization, especially when that implies the loss of coherence provided by reason. Committed against the totalitarian régimes of Naziism and Communism, the Frankfurt School looked for such coherence in the three areas of instrumental reason (science and technology), normative reason (ethics and, in their scheme, politics), and emancipatory reason (aesthetics).

According to Habermas, the unity of reason is a “faint signal” emanating from the real world of words and communication. The neoconservatives have erred in separating cultural evil from capitalist good. They have especially erred in wanting cultural confidence to be restored through a return to religion. What they have not understood is that modernity itself is a far stronger force than the neoconservatives believe, reaching down into the very communicative infra-structures of our society. If we rightly understand this, we will be able to embrace true modernity without the fears about modern culture.

In staying with modernity, however, Habermas considers that we will need to be committed to its most crucial ingredient, self-referential reason, in its threefold modes. When we have grasped what a transcendental critique reason can give us, then we may use hermeneutics as the best social critique. Seeking true liberation, we may use hermeneutics to help us go beyond a simple market economy and simple political control to a more culturally beneficial community.²⁶ Thus, Habermas believes we must drive modernity to its logical conclusion rather than abandon it. The hallmarks of modernity, such as technology, can be a good tool, as long as they are used responsibly, in a socially conscious manner.

V. *Beyond Modernity*

The second basic approach to modernity is taken by those who believe that the fundamental tenets of modernity are no longer possible. The entire project of modernity is thus put into question. The most significant term to describe this is the *postmodern*. This represents a vast movement of ideas,

enterprise, compatible with modernity, the lack of conviction of guilt has made us blind to the obstacles confronting progress and insensitive to the needs of the oppressed. Dyrness reminds us that it is from the oppressed people of America that we could learn our most valuable lesson. African American theology is one of hope conditioned by the reality of suffering and evil. Such realism would cure us of an overconfident view of modernity.

²⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity—An Incomplete Project,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (trans. S. Ben-Habib; ed. Hal Foster; Port Townsend: Bay, 1983) 3–15.

some plausible, some preposterous. Although the primary domain of post-modernism is at the university, specifically in the human sciences, neither are its origins narrowly academic, nor are its implications restricted to the academy.

Once again, the word postmodern may be distinguished from postmodernism. Unlike the distinction between modernity and modernism, however, the contrast here is not between an era and an ideal. Rather, it is a matter of the smaller difference between a general state (the postmodern) and a prescription (postmodernism). Defining the postmodern involves several ironies. First of all, the obvious one of oxymoron. How could something come *after* what is contemporary? However, things are not so simple, because, as we have seen, it is not contemporaneity that is in question, but modernity, with all of the characteristics spelled out above. A second irony comes closer to home. At the heart of the postmodern is an open-endedness, a deep skepticism about classical values and definitions. At one level the word resembles other such terms which are vague and all encompassing. For example, "existentialism," "expressionism," and the like are fluid words that need to be pinned down before meaningful discussion can take place. At another level, however, the very strangeness of the word postmodern is intended by those who use it most consistently.

Although very little else can be said etymologically about the word, one meaning emerges from the core. Calling into question the project of modernity is the lowest common denominator. This aspect may come about through a conscious analysis of various features that make modernity undesirable. Or, it may be through the general ethos created by the conviction that progress is impossible. It was a part of the "epochal consciousness" of modernity to consider previous ages to have little bearing on the present. Modernity was the epoch of Enlightenment that rejected the darkness of tradition. Now we cannot, by definition, surpass Enlightenment, so instead we must get used to the absence of any light. Now that we cannot trust the *new*, we must settle for a dearth of truly novel features in our culture. There is "no news."

As is the case of the word modernity, the history of the term postmodern is not an important key to its meaning.²⁷ While postmodernism has many roots, it might be helpful to pause over two milestones on the way to full postmodern awareness. The first is in architecture. Architecture is one of

²⁷ It may have first been used by the Spanish author Federico De Onis, in 1934, describing a trend in poetry which reacted to certain aspects of modernism. Arnold Toynbee used it in *A Study of History*, vol. 9 (London: Oxford University Press, 1947). For him it represented the decline of Western culture into relativism and the challenge of non-Western cultures, which he dated beginning in 1970. Possibly the first favorable use of the prefix *post*, which could be affixed onto many words, was by Leslie Fiedler. See "The New Mutants," in *A Fiedler Reader* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970) 189-210. Fiedler praised various trends in the counter-culture, such as *post-humanist*, *post-male*, *post-white*, *post-heroic*, and so on.

the most conspicuous art forms. The experience of twentieth-century Westerners has been shaped by the presence of bold architectural statements of modernism. In the early years of our century, a sort of modernist revolution occurred, centered in the Bauhaus school in Germany, founded in 1919. The impact of this school on all of the visual arts is nothing short of astounding.

The three great pioneers of modernist architecture were Walter Gropius, Henri Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe. In their ideology, architecture had to express the "new," whether in the materials used or in the concepts set forth. At the heart of this novelty would be the reduction of buildings, furniture, paintings, etc., to *function*. Every element needed to be defined in terms of its function. According to Le Corbusier's famous slogan, "une maison est une machine à habiter."²⁸ The beauty of a building was not in its decorations or its symbolic shape, but in the fact that it is. The engineer became the truest artist. The claims of modernist architects could be utopian and extravagant. The Bauhaus Manifesto, penned by Walter Gropius, exhorts, "Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith."²⁹

As in so many other areas of culture, the "International Style" of architecture, with its streamlined functionalism, found fertile grounds for development in America. We are a country that is always reinventing itself. We celebrate the technological. We have the money base to support the new and the nontraditional. So our large cities have become visible bastions of modernism. Frank Lloyd Wright is our most visible example of such a philosophy. This visibility of modernist architecture is one of the reasons that the postmodernist reaction to the International Style came with such clarity and power.

The reaction also came most strongly in America, though not exclusively by Americans. Many architects are known for their postmodernist stand: Robert Venturi, Hans Hollein, Charles Moore, to name but a few. In his widely read book *What Is Post-Modernism?* Charles Jencks traces the origins of postmodern thinking to his own polemics and writings.³⁰ He observes that major architects had left modernism and were pursuing new directions. People were not at home in the coldly functional buildings. Modernist architecture "died," he maintains, in 1968, then in 1972, when two buildings were destroyed, one through cumulative collapse and the other by an explosion. With those deaths came the death of hope in the technological solution to our social problems.

²⁸ "A house is a machine for living."

²⁹ Ulrich Conrads, ed., *Programs and Manifestoes on Twentieth-Century Architecture* (London: Lund Humphries, 1970) 49.

³⁰ Charles Jencks, *What Is Post-Modernism?* (London: Academy Editions; New York: St Martin's Press, 1989) 14-15.

But what could take its place? Not a return to premodern times, with its “illusions” and unenlightened innocence. What Jencks suggests is *double coding*. That is, architecture that comes after modernism is not simply a new style to replace the old, but the combination of modernist functionality with other elements—often “quotes” from traditional buildings—in order to speak comfortably and humorously to the users. The typical departures from modernism are also pluriform, both philosophically and stylistically: That is, there is no dominant style, but many different definers.³¹ Thus, while modern architecture is “univalent,” stressing one principle with self-sufficiency, postmodernist architecture seeks to spread out and acknowledge meanings, symbols, and references to the past. Typical candidates for this kind of design would include the AT&T building in New York, a skyscraper with a rococo roof, and the Rauch, Brown and Wu Dining Hall in Princeton, with its modern strip windows and its ironic Serliana. A supreme example is the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart. Here slabs of masonry are held up by steel girders. The shape is an eighteenth-century style, but there are odd touches, such as openings in the wall with the removed slabs left on the ground, and a taxi drop-off that looks like a primitive hut.

On one level, this movement in architecture represents simply eclecticism. On a deeper level, this double coding represents the rejection of the possibility of a single meaning or a single order. This is the profoundest sense of the postmodern venture. Unitary truth is no longer possible. As Christians we need to note that the postmodernists have properly rejected the dubious claims of modernism. Truth based on pure function is not truth but rationalist pretension. But in so doing, they have thrown out the proverbial baby with the bath water. There is not much of a bargain between cold rationalism and hopeful irrationalism. And, to anticipate our conclusions, it appears that the rationalist-irrationalist dilemma of modernity has not been surpassed in postmodernity.

The second milestone is a piece of writing. It is the book by Jean-François Lyotard mentioned at the beginning of this article: *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Commissioned by the Council of the Québec university system, it has had an impact far beyond what one might have expected from such a title. Two reasons for that can be suggested. The first is that it was a cultural carrier, articulating the main themes of a movement that was coming into its prime, and simultaneously becoming a catalyst for the movement, one that brings innovations to it. The second is suggested by Frederic Jameson, another prophet of postmodernism, in his introduction to the English translation. The book represents a crossroads of various debates from various disciplines.³² Its large impact in America is explained by the fact that much of his argument revolves around science, technology, and the control of knowledge today.

³¹ Ibid., 14, 22.

³² Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, vii.

The argument of the book is that we no longer can believe in the “meta-narrative” (*le grand récit*). By this he means that previously societies had clear rules as to how knowledge was to be carried. “Narrative knowledge” is found in premodern societies and sets forth conventions about who may speak (tell the story) and who must listen. In this way, legitimation of social bonds is established. But it is “self-legitimation,” that is, it functions in a tautology. In contrast to this approach, the modern West has been trying to separate between narrative and legitimation. For example, scientific language operates by a new set of rules. The speaker cannot simply assert his authority, but his claims must be tested or verified. At first, this is the *modern* liberation from primitive authoritarian narrative, because it speaks of an objective set of criteria which is not self-legitimizing.

But then science itself becomes dependent on a narrative of its own.³³ The metanarrative of science, the *récit* that gives it authority, is the Enlightenment ideal of the emancipation of the human race from class oppression through the voice of reason. Since this is a new, yet no less authoritarian, dependency on the big picture, it must be rejected as a tautology. Lyotard sees the years following the Second World War as the time when the scientific narrative lost its status. With that loss comes the impotence of the paradigms of science to regulate our knowledge. Symptomatic of that is the hyper-specialization of science and general suspicion of its ecological dangers.

What does this leave us with? According to Lyotard, we only have an infinite plurality of language games. Using Wittgensteinian concepts, he sees us moving to an era where we will only have a “linguistic doing.” This takes us “from the muffled majesty of grand narratives to the splintering autonomy of micronarratives.”³⁴ Lyotard is not rejecting science, but is signaling the change from the older worldview of progress to the newer fragmentation. This brings with it the great difficulty of regulating science, which easily falls into pure power and performativity. On the other hand, it can also mean freedom for the imagination. Through “paralogy,” which is a faulty mode of thinking that can dislodge reason from its traditions, we can find new areas to explore. Not with metanarrative but through the “little narrative” (*petit récit*), we can find liberation from the “terror” of shared knowledge and stay confined to local games and limited contracts.³⁵

These two landmarks, one from architecture, the other from the author whose work has most catalyzed the movement, tell us much about the postmodern—not only its teachings, but its *problématique*. Its primary force is no doubt in academic circles. Nevertheless, the postmodern characterizes the general culture as well. One finds traces in the strangest places. For

³³ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

³⁴ Stephen Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 32.

³⁵ Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, 66.

example, there is now postmodern rock-and-roll music. Cynical television programs such as "The Simpsons" and "Beavis and Butthead" exhibit the same double coding and self-referential humor as architecture. The relation between the technical academic postmodern and the general cultural postmodern is twofold. First, there is a trickle-down effect. The teachings of postmodernist scholars are popularized by their students. Second, they are parallel developments without a causal link. The academic postmodern may be a kind of weather vane for the broader postmodern, but both are evolving separately.

Critical debates among its adherents are part of the essence of the postmodern condition. Some are more skeptical, offering only the most gloomy assessment of our age. Inspired by Heidegger and Nietzsche, they see room for little else in our fragmented age than occasional moments of insight. Richard Rorty advocates *therapy* as the only possible virtue of studying a text. Jacques Derrida, the deconstructionist darling of American audiences, following Roland Barthes, sees only pleasure (*jouissance*) of the most fleeting sort as a postmodern comfort.³⁶ Others are more affirmative. For some, the postmodern offers a chance to correct past evils, such as the repression of women and minorities.³⁷

A number of theologians have bought into the postmodern program, with various objectives. Mark Taylor pleads for a "post-ecclesiastical" atheology which rejects the traditional "dualism" of the Creator-creature distinction. In its place he asks for a theology of relative truth which is "disclosed through symbolic awareness."³⁸ John Milbank asks for a postmodern Christian social critique. When we are aware of the false claims of traditional sociology to positivistic knowledge, we can timidly use more recent social analysis, which shows that only local, limited claims can be made. Christianity can offer us the best critique of the self-contradictions of skeptical postmodernism. It can timidly supply a subjective apprehension of "difference" and created harmony in place of metanarratives.³⁹

A more apologetically oriented embrace of postmodernism is found in the works of theologians like Diogenes Allen and Thomas Oden, and Christian scholars like Brian Walsh. Diogenes Allen points out that the chief modern enemies of Christianity, Hume and Kant, have been defeated by our postmodern awareness. This frees us to look again at the world, and at

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London and New York: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1978) 292.

³⁷ The distinction between *skeptical* and *affirmative* postmodernists is suggested by Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 14-17.

³⁸ Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (New York: Crossroad; and Chico: Scholars Press, 1982) 57.

³⁹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 426.

other religions, for confirmations of Christianity's claims.⁴⁰ Thomas Oden, mentioned above, came to evangelical faith from a theologically liberal background. He sees our era as having come full circle from premodern to postmodern orthodoxy. An interruption came from modernity, which favored autonomous individualism, secularization, criticism, and the parallel errors of theology: pietism, liberalism, neoorthodoxy, demythologization, and so on. Today, the disillusionment from the paradigm of modernity opens the way to rediscover orthodoxy.⁴¹ Similarly, though more from the point of view of the social sciences, Brian Walsh has written of the opportunities to reassert the Christian worldview in a postmodern setting.⁴²

VI. *What Apologetics for Our Times?*

It is easy to become confused with these different assessments of our times. Surely it is not possible to come up with a sort of key that unlocks all the secrets of trends and philosophies. It is important to give proper due to the complexity of the situation. But what we should strive for is to provide a truly penetrating critique of the basic character of the present age. Let us move to a few specific remarks about each of the above two approaches to modernity and finally suggest another agenda.

First, the view that modernity has not yet played itself out has a good deal of strength. It seems to me that several features of modernity are so deeply entrenched that they will not disappear easily. Such social phenomena as capitalism, technology, rapid communications, urbanization, and so forth, though hardly neutral, are not likely to be reversed by the present self-doubts and criticisms, despite the claims of various post-modernists. We are indeed still living in modernity, at the structural level, and that is not likely to change in the near future.⁴³

However, the neoconservative appreciation of modernity is mistaken in some basic ways. To a certain extent, that position is blind to the structural links between the various parts of modernity. Daniel Bell tries to separate the cultural crisis from the rest of the capitalist society, but with no good reason. Individualism, hedonism, consumerism, and even racial tensions

⁴⁰ Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989).

⁴¹ Oden, *After Modernity . . . What?* See also his *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992).

⁴² Brian J. Walsh, "Who Turned Out the Lights?" *Faculty Dialogue* 13 (1990) 43-61; and "Worldview, Modernity, and the Task of Christian Higher Education," *Faculty Dialogue* 18 (1992) 13-35.

⁴³ David Wells believes that the "lag" between the mentality and the social aspect of modernity explains why today's intellectuals, while disillusioned with modernity, still believe they can transcend it (*No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993] 61). They are modern after all, because of their belief in the "progress" of overcoming modernity!

are deeply connected to the Enlightenment philosophy of autonomy. They are the dark side of rationality as god. For example, the pure capitalism advocated by Adam Smith, with its free-market regulation, inevitably leads, as it did in the previous century, to abuses in the distribution of wealth, in working conditions, and in approaches to ethnic inferiority. A market economy favors the most motivated, the strongest. The underclass, the poor, are considered to be weak and not worthy of success.

As for the criticism of the modern university by Allan Bloom and Dinesh D'Souza, the difficulty is, first, an exaggeration of the state of affairs and, second, the inadequacy of what they long to return to. While many people sense a decline in the atmosphere of our universities, it is important to be as careful as possible with the facts. In a famous debate sponsored by the Public Broadcasting Service, two sides lined up: those who believed the "politically correct" mentality was pervasive on our modern campuses and those who did not. The latter group found that some of the factual basis for the conservative side was missing. Furthermore, the conservatives appeared not to have acknowledged the genuine advances that had been made in civil rights and in recognizing the genuine contributions of minorities. Some newer perspectives in the university curriculum are indeed a healthy corrective to narrow emulation of "Western Civilization."

At the root of the matter, the conservative side seems to have a blind trust in the Enlightenment program for higher learning. They place blind faith in unaided human reason, which shows them tied to the most questionable aspects of modernity. Christian apologetics needs to point this out and lay bare the fallacy of unaided reason as a sure guide to meaning and hope.

The Critical School helps us in correctly pointing out that one cannot separate culture from economic structures as the neoconservatives have tried to do. Other insights come from this camp. In my judgment, Habermas has helped show us that reason and language possess a social and public dimension. When we discover that, we may look more carefully into the flaws of modern life, especially our modern individualism. The West, beginning with the Cartesian *cogito*, has exaggerated the power of the self, which in turn has translated into an élite that has colonized our modern life. There is a sense in which the proud rationalists of the West tend to use language to oppress the underprivileged. However, Habermas is seriously mistaken to believe that a rediscovery of tri-modal reason is also the way out of this colonization. For all his sophistication, Habermas has not really found a way out of an arbitrary and irrational use of language. He needs a transcendental beginning point if he wants to find a foundation for reason. If reason is going to be useful for social criticism, it must be grounded in revelation, the Word of the One who truly understands the human condition.

As for the "endist" views of Fukuyama and others, the idea that, with the triumph of democracy, history has come to its last stage appears more shaky every day. At least three flaws can be pointed out. First, taking the

totalitarian lid off former Communist countries has rekindled the ethnic wars from previous eras. Instead of ushering in a golden age, it seems to have put the clock back to before the Congress of Vienna (1815). Second, in a number of countries where capitalism is being developed, particularly in the Asian setting, liberal democracy is allied with anti-Western and authoritarian values. Is there not more in common between liberal democracy and certain arbitrary exercises of power than we would care to admit? What we see are cultural wars, not simply the skirmishes of tribes, and the fault lines between civilizations will engage the West in conflicts for years to come.⁴⁴ Third, "endism" ignores that the real end of history is at the *parousia*. Then, our Lord will return "like a thief" to a world where the love of many has grown cold, but where his elect wait for him with patient perseverance. Until then, there may be pockets of peace and hope, but democracy alone can never suffice as the ground to hold a culture together.

So, the various schools who wish to continue the project of modernity are right to applaud its strengths. They are right to warn against departures from those strengths. But they have missed the fatal flaw of modernity, the apostate dialectical principle of rationalism pitted against subjective freedom. For all the benefits of modernity, many of them a result of the Protestant Reformation, the cancer of this dialectic spreads to every aspect. While certain conservatives today recognize that modernity never functioned properly without Christian underpinnings, their plea is often to restore those underpinnings on grounds of natural theology, rather than to reformulate the relationship in a radically biblical way.⁴⁵

The second view, the postmodernist assessment of our present world, also has something to commend it. It is indeed true that the Enlightenment project is fraught with dangers. Although we may sympathize with the neoconservative nostalgia for older times, which may have heralded high standards and absolute values more fully, we ought to separate the wheat from the chaff. As Christians we can recognize that as long as modernity was partly funded by Protestant capital, it developed in a way that produced many benefits. But when secularization of the second kind (*secularism*) set in, that capital was attenuated, and the rationalist-irrationalist dialectic reared its ugly head. In a way it is true that Auschwitz was caused by Enlightenment arrogance.

The flaw of postmodernism is that, while claiming to have left modernity for newer ground, it has not really abandoned modernity at all. The fundamental presupposition of autonomous thought with the social structures that characterize modernity are still present as a ground to stand on, during

⁴⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72/3 (1993) 22-49. See Paul Johns, "How the West Was Lost," *Third Way Magazine* 16/5 (1993) 21-23.

⁴⁵ While many of us benefit enormously from periodicals such as *First Things* and the thoughtful social commentary of Richard John Neuhaus and his colleagues, it can be observed that for them natural theology is often assumed to be the proper way to integrate the gospel and culture.

the very effort of rejecting modernity. This is saying more than Habermas has said about the inevitability of ties between structural and cultural elements of modernity. Modernity not only unifies capitalism with culture, but both are expressions of the ground motive of reason and autonomous freedom.

Even the most radical and skeptical postmodernists find themselves unconsciously appealing to the very standards they reject. Christopher Norris has shown how a scholar like Stanley Fish, in his vehement attacks on theory as a mere justification of personal preference, perpetuates the illusion that he is somehow outside of the confines of that personal preference.⁴⁶ The reason-freedom dialectic cannot be left off unless a deeper challenge is made. Again, this is where a transcendental approach is able to clear away the underbrush. Because God is fully rational,⁴⁷ and because human knowledge is revelatory of that God, dependent rather than independent, our knowledge has meaning, and we can properly understand the world without falling into a dialectical labyrinth.

So then, we are confronted with a basic philosophical flaw. Recall the claim of François Lyotard that the metanarrative is no longer possible. There is something quite appealing about this program. Salvation from the deluded rationalism of the Enlightenment, release from the shackles of colonialist culture, and freedom from the tutelage of modernism are promised. The new paradise is “the ‘nomadic,’ unregulated freedom of pure difference.”⁴⁸ At the same time, there is a frustrating lack of support for Lyotard’s theory of scientific knowledge. He may be right to signal a certain questioning of scientific hegemony, but surely we are not moving into an era where the old paradigms will be abandoned in favor of “paralogy.” Illogic makes a come-back every so often, but it never manages to capture an entire culture, let alone the scientific culture of modernity. Must we choose between dogmatic universalism and anarchy?⁴⁹

The most serious flaw in Lyotard’s presentation, however, is the deep-rooted contradiction between his claims to do away with metanarrative and his own program, which is suspiciously like a metanarrative of another kind. This is all the more alarming when one considers his claim that previous to the postmodern condition the metanarrative was all-pervasive and included Marxist and liberal economic theories, both of which lead invitingly to “crimes against humanity.”⁵⁰ Is his intolerance of absolutes

⁴⁶ Christopher Norris, *What’s Wrong with Postmodernism?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) chap. 2.

⁴⁷ This terminology was used by Cornelius Van Til. He has sometimes been accused of rationalism because of it, but I believe it was simply his way of saying God is omniscient: it helps explain the dependent character of human knowledge.

⁴⁸ Lyotard, *Postmodernist Culture*, 34.

⁴⁹ Richard Rorty points out this dilemma in Lyotard’s “Missive sur l’histoire,” *Critique* 41 (1985) 456–76. Rorty’s reply is on pp. 570–71.

⁵⁰ Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, 212–22.

not a veiled absolute? Is his “free gaming” program not a veiled return to the “moral-cultural free market” of the neoconservatives?⁵¹

This same problem occurs in the Deconstructionist literary movement, which is a subheading of postmodernism. Richard Rorty sets about busily to dismantle traditional canons of literary criticism. He pleads for looking only at the text and disregarding the role of the author and of convention. When chided for leaving us with only a contentless *text* (all of life is somehow only a text), Rorty admits this is not much of a program. Yet his giveaway expression is that “God is in the details!”⁵²

It also should be pointed out that the attacks on modernity leveled by postmodernism are not really new. In point of historical fact, there has always been a certain challenge to modernity from within the camp. The romantic movement is in a certain way an anti-modern movement. Taken as a broad trend, and not just a literary movement, romanticism engaged in battles against industrialization and other “disenchanted” accents of modernity.⁵³ Nietzsche is also representative of a profoundly anti-modern stance. We hardly have to wait until Auschwitz to find prophets of the decline of the West. Rather than claim we are moving into a postmodern phase, then, it would be wiser to say that we are experiencing a particularly heavy dose of skeptical *anti-modern* or even *ultra-modern* thinking.⁵⁴

Still another important problem is that postmodernists, like their modernist counterparts, but in reverse, tend to ignore the complexity of modernity. Modernity is not one simple movement which can either be accepted or rejected unilaterally. Modernity has serious flaws, as we have just seen. But also there are many positive aspects of modernity, “babies” that should not be thrown out with the bath water. Each of the social aspects of modernity listed at the beginning of this article is a mixed blessing. There is the good as well as the problematic aspect of technology, of urbanization, of democracy, and so on. Perhaps postmodernists are right in wanting to subvert some of technology, at least so that it is not able to be hegemonic. But would they seriously desire systematically to dispose of all of modern medicine, of the entire modern economic system, of democratic freedoms?

⁵¹ Habermas, “Modernity—An Incomplete Project,” *passim*.

⁵² Geoff Benington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 114–17. Cornelius Van Til would call this the “impossibility of the contrary,” because, stemming from a transcendental argument, it notices the parasitic dependence of unbelieving thought on the truth. Similarly, the Apostle Paul told the Athenians that “[God] is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27).

⁵³ See Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Révolution et mélancholie: le romantisme à contre-courant de la modernité* (Paris: Payot, 1992).

⁵⁴ As we have noted earlier, even in the terminology of postmodernism there is an obvious flaw. Clearly, it is impossible with one hand to take away the convention of historical sequence and the notion of progress, while on the other hand claiming that going *beyond* modernity is somehow possible and desirable.

Even certain aspects of the mentality of modernity (modernism) have much to recommend them. While fully acknowledging the abuses rooted in an exaggerated individualism, one must recognize the merits of an emphasis on the self and an emphasis on reason. The emancipated self, when properly understood as image of God, with its privileges and responsibilities, is an indisputable advance over overly stratified views of human beings. As for reason, though we disagree with Allan Bloom's faith in Rousseau's rationality as a solution to our present crisis, we do affirm that reason, when properly subjected to the norms of revelation, is an essential resource.⁵⁵

A postmodern atmosphere is one in which words often lose their authority and are replaced by images or feelings. Doing apologetics in these circumstances is particularly difficult. Few people are asking the "big questions" today. Instead, they settle for a grab-bag of ideas and quasi-religious notions to be used at convenience. Only a truly radical apologetic can be effective in such an atmosphere. This involves going to the roots of our contemporary culture. But it also involves looking carefully at the facts, so that we may be plausible to the unbeliever.

VII. Conclusion

Is there really no news? Nothing New? On the basis suggested by those who wish to continue the program of modernity, despite the doctrine of reason and freedom, nothing really new is possible. Progress and improvement will not occur unless there is an adequate ground upon which to build. Without, first, a radical questioning of the Enlightenment premise of progress and, second, a self-conscious dependence on God's authority, there can be no real hope. Postmodernism is no better bargain. On the basis of postmodernism there is nothing new either, because there is no basis for building. In fact, according to postmodernism *news* itself is a modernist doctrine to be rejected. There is no news, nor should there be. No news is good news. But how can no news really be *good* news to the postmodern frame? Where does the notion of the good come from? It is borrowed from the very world they wish to reject. The only adequate notion of the good is a specifically transcendental notion.

In this regard, I am not as optimistic as Diogenes Allen, Thomas Oden, and Brian Walsh that the postmodern condition is far more favorable to commending Christian faith than is modernity. Even if we accepted for argument's sake that modernity is finished, and the confidence in unaided reason shaken, the fragmented and relativistic world of the postmodern is really no better friend of the gospel than the Enlightenment was.

⁵⁵ Some of the recent work by Vern S. Poythress on the workings of reason when properly subjected to divine norms is illuminating. See his unpublished manuscript, *The Supremacy of God in Interpretation* (Westminster Seminary) *passim*.

What needs to be presented, then, to both modernists and postmodernists is a radically biblical position which says, first, that there is nothing new under the sun. In a fallen world, humanist attempts to build societies and produce cultures are as doomed to dismal failure as anti-humanist pretensions to deconstruct them. Second, however, that very fact is the beginning of the good news, because our hope is not under the sun. It is instead in Jesus Christ, who *is* the good news to the confused West and, indeed, to the whole of humanity!

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