

Theology, Modernity, and Postmodernity

What do people mean when they speak of “modernity?” Let me give an example. I was driving in my minivan with my fifteen-year-old daughter listening to the radio when an advertisement came on for a popular television show. It said, “Don’t miss this week’s episode; the best episode ever.” My daughter naively said, “Dad, didn’t they say that last week?” To which I responded, “Yes and they will say it next week and the next week and the week after that. . . .” I then went into a long discourse on what philosophers mean when they speak of the “end of modernity,” to which she quickly tuned out once the music returned. What is modernity and why has it come to an end? That example illustrates it well. Modernity is the assumption that everything must be new: each episode, each product, each performance is “new and improved,” better than the one before. It is so new and improved that it renders the old obsolete.

The term modernity comes from the Latin word *modo*, which means “now” or “just now.” Modernity is characterized by a perpetual preparation for the now, a perpetual change that

must always present itself as new and different, even when it is the same old thing endlessly repeated and simply repackaged with minor changes. But what would it mean to live assuming that we must perpetually change to become something new and different that never quite arrives? Such a perpetual now only masquerades as difference; for, a perpetual now that always almost-appears as new, as change, as difference, is really nothing but sameness under the illusion of difference. Modernity is the repetition of sameness under the illusion of difference. In fact, modernity is a strategy of fear that says everything which has come before has not prepared us for this moment, for this “now,” this modo—this “just now”—that has almost arrived. If we are to survive we must discard the past and become relevant to the “now,” to this moment. Modernity is thus an exercise in intentional forgetfulness as movies like *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* seek to represent. The “now,” the present time, becomes the measure against which all things are assessed. It becomes the answer to the question Karl Barth asked at Vatican II, “accommodation to what?” The answer is “to the present, to the now,” which seems to be always the answer in much of modern theology and church life and has been for the past three centuries. “We must be relevant to the now.” But this creates serious problems for our culture. As St. Augustine recognized time cannot be measured; it has no extension. If the time of the now is to be the measure which we accommodate, what kind of measure could this possibly be? Take a minute and measure “now.” How would you do it? It is a measurement of nothing, it is nihilistic. And thus as a measure it judges nothing except

for the one single, dogmatic, and unequivocal judgment—we must be relevant to the new that does not exist.

If this is what characterizes modernity, what is “post-modernity?” Here things become exceedingly difficult. Postmodernity cannot simply be the next cultural stage after the modern, the next “new,” because the modern is nothing but the assumption that what is coming is always new and different. So if we define postmodernity as nothing but the next “new and different” we are not postmodern, but merely modern yet again. Many people use “postmodern” simply with this modern cultural sensibility. The postmodern is the next cultural stage to which we must make theology or the church relevant. That is unfortunate for it does not adequately characterize whatever usefulness that problematic term—“postmodern”—actually has. Postmodern culture cannot be the next new and improved version of modern culture; postmodern culture is useful as a term only when it helps us recognize what we mean by “modern” culture. Postmodern culture is not anything but the recognition that we can now see what “modern culture” was and is, and can begin to recognize its limits, even if in so doing we cannot completely transcend those limits. Postmodernity is nothing more than the fact that we recognize the “end of modernity,” but this is not an end in the sense that it has come to its completion. Modernity can never end. It is more an “end” in the sense of an ever-increasing, ceaseless repetition that has no purpose other than its own repetition. It is an “end” in the sense that one comes to the end of a record playing on an old phonograph that skips and plays the last note again and again and again. Modernity is a broken record you cannot stop. Postmodernity is the

recognition that we, that is those of us formed by modern western culture, are fated to replay modern culture infinitely, more effectively, with an ever intensified rapidity until it kills us with boredom.

For those of us living in the twenty-first century, the question of theology and culture has become inextricably related to “modernity.” In fact, we now have a distinct discipline in theology called “modern theology.” By this term we do not simply mean “contemporary theology,” for every theologian is in his or her day a contemporary theologian. This is inescapable. *Modern* theology means much more than contemporary. It means theology which takes the culture of “modernity” into account. In some sense, every theologian working after modernity has to do this. As the Catholic theologian Tracy Rowland puts it, at the end of the twentieth century, the key issue in theology is “not so much whether one is a self-described Protestant or Catholic, but that of where one stands in relation to the *cultural formation* described as ‘modernity.’”¹ David Ford and Rachel Muers have collected the various theological responses to modernity in their work *The Modern Theologians*. Ford offers an important introduction to this collection that begins with two presuppositions: 1) Christianity must have “some continuity with its past”; we cannot be Christian if we become so modern that we altogether forget or jettison the past; and 2) we cannot deny that those of us who live after modernity live in a changed context, a context defined by “modernity” that represents “novelty and disruption.”² Ford characterizes five types of theology based on

1. Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition*, 12.

2. Ford and Muers, *The Modern Theologians*, 2.

these two presuppositions. The first type would seek a *simple repetition* of the tradition as if modernity never disrupted it. The second type would argue for a *complete capitulation* to the modern spirit without any concern for traditional continuity. These two types look quite similar to Troeltsch's Church/sect and Niebuhr's Christ-against-culture/Christ-of-culture types. However, Ford notes that neither of these two positions refers to arguments any theologian actually makes. They are positions people use against others. They are accusations—"You think theology is nothing but the simple repetition of tradition!" or "You sell theology out to modernity evacuating it of the content of the faith!" They are usually mere caricatures of other theologians' positions; for no theologian would be so silly as to do one of these two things intentionally, which is not to say that we might not do one of them unintentionally or that the implications of what we do could lead to one of these options. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* would certainly be an example of a complete accommodation to modernity, while his caricature of Catholicism in that novel would be an example of simple repetition. But this is a piece of fiction; it is not theology and should not be discussed as such. Novelists are free to do what they want to entertain us. If we theologians present theology as simple repetition of the past or complete accommodation to modernity that evacuates the faith of content, we fail at our task.

Ford's next three types attempt to categorize various theologians based on their responses to modern culture. His third type gives priority to the *self-description* of the Christian community. These theologians tend to recover the theology of the eleventh-century theologian Anselm or the thirteenth-

century theologian Aquinas. Some representatives would be Karl Barth, Stanley Hauerwas, and George Lindbeck. The fourth type seeks a *correlation* between theology and modern culture. These theologians tend to adopt a more positive attitude toward the modern era and seek to address its concerns. Theologians in this category are often called “revisionists.” Examples would be Paul Tillich, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Hans Küng. The final type uses some modern conceptuality and seeks to *integrate* Christianity with it. Examples here would be Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Bultmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Karl Rahner, and much of what is called contextual theology. If we placed it on a continuum, Ford’s typology of theological responses to modernity lines up like this:

1. Theology simply *repeats* past creedal statements.
2. Theology *privileges* the self-description of the Christian Community over modernity.
3. Theology *correlates* modernity to Christian Theology.
4. Theology *integrates* Christian theology into a modern conceptual framework.
5. Theology *accommodates* Christian theology without remainder to a modern conceptual framework.

Of course Ford’s typology has all the limitations of Troeltsch’s and Niebuhr’s typologies. Many of the persons listed in these various types will certainly balk at their placement just as Mennonites, Catholics, and at least this Methodist balk at their placement in Niebuhr’s typology. Yet what I find helpful in Ford’s typology is that *verbs* more so than *nouns*

characterize it. Ford shows us that theology is less a proper categorization of positions in terms of some “periodic chart of the theologians,” and more an activity people do. How they do that activity after modernity differs. Those differences will have significant theological and political consequences, even if those differences are not necessarily incommensurable. Privileging does not exclude repeating, correlating, integrating or accommodating. Correlating does not exclude repeating, privileging, integrating or accommodating and so on. But this does not mean we can simply include all these activities in a smooth harmonious whole. How we begin and execute the activity called theology matters. If we begin correlating rather than accommodating or privileging then we will get a “cultural” product that looks different just as if we begin baking pie with apples rather than peaches we will get something different, although we will not know that simply looking at it from the outside. One has to taste and see.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is modernity?
2. What is postmodernity?
3. Can you give an example of theology as simple repetition of the past?
4. Can you give an example of theology as selling out to modernity?
5. Do Ford's five verbs help us understand how theology deals with modernity?

SAMPLE