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Club modernity for reluctant believers

Abstract:

Written for the people shearing the same reality, the same mental world of Modernity, this paper starts from the premise that we, as human beings, are not always consciously aware of the world we live in, of its constantly changing characteristics or attributes. It has already been demonstrated that our knowledge is contextual and limited. Thus, in order to accurately depict at least some of the attributes of Modernity, and consequently, to observe the major paradigm shift towards an age of dialogue, entailed by this expending-modernity, it became necessary to describe the values promoted by Modernity. In this paper we aim at discussing notions such as freedom, critical-thinking, history and the increasing need to be in dialogue with those who think differently from us, values which guide us mentally and determine our actions through Modernity.

INVITATION

These pages are written for persons who live in the mental world of Modernity.¹ Modernity, as I understand it, is a world which cherishes 1) *freedom* at the core of being human, 2) *critical-thinking* reason as the arbiter of what to affirm or not, 3) *history*, process, dynamism seen at the heart of human life and society, 4) the increasing need to be in *dialogue* with those who think differently from us-and yet sense that there is somehow more to life, to reality, than meets the eye, that there is a depth or spiritual dimension that is not captured in our every-day experiences.

Further, I am reflecting and writing for persons who have either been brought up as religious, or are now finding religion intriguing, but are having increasing difficulty in squaring it, or important portions of

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it, with one or more of the above core characteristics of Modernity. In brief, I am writing for “Reluctant Believers.” I am inviting all such readers to join me at, not “Club Mediterranean,” but “Club Modernity.” The latter, in contrast to the former, is not a geographical place to go to, but a mental world to inhabit, which of course then consequently determines how we act in the world (including whether or not we apply to Club Mod!).

So, if the above description fits you as a “Reluctant Believer,” and my planned reflections interest you, I invite you to come with me and join the Club Mod.

1. Modernity Is the Atmosphere We Live In

Anyone reading this essay is living in the mental world of Modernity with the four characteristics mentioned above: a sense 1) of radical freedom, 2) of automatically asking whether something makes rational sense, 3) of perceiving all human experience in its specific historical context, and because of the relationality of all knowledge, 4) the need to engage persons with different views and experiences in dialogue so as to learn more.

We cannot avoid Modernity, even if we do not allude to it, are not consciously aware of it. Modernity is all around us. It is the very air that we breathe, even when we might be vigorously trying to reject some part of it. In our bones we feel *free*, and feel outraged when we learn of others being robbed of their freedom. We cannot help but involuntarily ask of every new or old idea or bit of information that comes along whether it *makes sense*, whether we “buy it.” So too we are increasingly aware that reality around us is *constantly changing*, that old givens don’t necessarily hold anymore, and that consequently we constantly ask whether old saws are still valid, or are something of a past context. Also increasingly we do not automatically discount those who are different from us, but are more and more inclined at first to tolerate them, then to open out to them, and then even *to seek them out*.

Modernity makes up our mental world like water is where fish live, or the air is for us mammals. We don’t even notice it, unless it is severely damaged and we start to choke and even die. We automatically resist when our freedom is threatened, and protest when something unreasonable is being forced down our throats. We would do the same if our radios, TVs, or now increasingly our cell phones or computers, were taken from us and we were forced to go back to living in the older context, or if we no longer could learn new things from those elsewhere in the world. This is all true even if we don’t think about it-until part of it might be taken away.

Consequently, if a hoary tradition is to find a helpful, creative place in our life, we need to undertake two important steps. First, we need to reflect more intensely and consciously on just what our mental world of Modernity is like. We need to learn in greater depth what its elements are and how they intertwine to constitute the atmosphere in which we “live, move, and have our being,” as St. Paul wrote in quoting an ancient Greek poet. The contemporary philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) put it this way: “In fact history does not belong to us; but we belong to it.”

When we become more self-aware of the mental context in which we live, we will then be forced to ask ourselves questions about the “explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly, based on some notion of the transcendent,” which is my terse definition of religion. In my case, and likely the readers of this work (book), that religion is Christianity. The questions we will have to ask of our religion, of

Christianity, will automatically be raised by the elements of Modernity: Can Christianity promote my freedom; can it make reasonable sense; can it adapt to the changing world; can it help me expand my understanding through dialogue with the Other? If it can't answer those questions adequately, it will not be able to provide us with the "explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly."

In looking at the major characteristics of Modernity below I will frequently use examples from Christianity because that is the religious area of thought that most English readers are likely to be most familiar with. Those who might be attracted to Judaism, Islam.... Can perhaps mentally substitute their own examples.

2. Freedom at the Core of Being Human

We now are increasingly learning that at the heart of the universe there is a radical freedom, an indeterminacy. Already at the early part of the 20th century we learned of the "Heisenberg Principle of Indeterminacy," roughly stated: In investigating subatomic matter we cannot accurately know both the speed of an electron and its location. This may seem quite uninteresting to the non-physicist, but it has huge implications. It means that at the very foundation of our physical reality there is a radical freedom. Hence, when we humans *experience* or *feel* a radical freedom at the heart of *our* being, it is not some anomaly, not something strange. Our human sense of radical freedom—despite all the restraining limitations we may also experience—is something that is very much in sync with the very physical foundation of our bodies—and the whole universe.

Despite the arguments of famous psychologists of determinism like Ivan Pavlov, B.F. Skinner, and Jacques Monod, and philosophers of determinism like Arthur Schopenhauer, and theologians like St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and Jean Calvin, the vast majority of men and women are convinced that there is a core of freedom, of choice, at the center of our being human. Our whole civilized world of whatever culture is built on that bedrock of freedom. Let me point to one example standing in for all the other elements of civilization—All our legal systems are built on the presumption of a fundamental human freedom and responsibility: You know that this Ferrari is not yours. However, you take it anyhow for a joyride or to a chop shop, but are caught; the law determines that you will pay a penalty because it is presumed that you had a choice and *freely* decided to steal the car.

On a larger scale, think about the Nuremberg War Trials and other War Crimes Trials since then, as, for example, against the perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda, Bosnia, Iraq. The defense of the SS guards at Auschwitz, and others, that they were "just following orders" was not found persuasive. They were held responsible for their despicable crimes against humanity—because they were considered *free* in their actions.

In the theological sphere, nobody *really* follows those theologians who teach determinism, predestination. What preacher gets up in the pulpit on a Sunday morning and tells his congregation that there is nothing they can do about whether they are going to go to heaven or not; God decided that when he created them (I am deliberately using the traditional male sexist language here because all these things were/are normally done by males, including a "male" god)? The obvious conclusion by the congregation, if they believed him, would be to save their money by firing him and closing the church!

Even those theologians (like Luther and Calvin and their intellectual descendants) who teach that we humans can do nothing whatsoever to avoid eternal damnation will

nevertheless on Sundays enthusiastically preach that we should open ourselves to God's gracious mercy (although they also teach in self-contradictory fashion that God determined ahead of time that he would give us the grace to accept his offered mercy-or not!). No, no Christian preacher really seems to believe that we humans are not radically free, and hence are responsible for our "salvation," despite their sometimes confusing and self-contradictory teaching-not if he hopes to keep his job.

Is there a way for us humans to explain to ourselves how we are free, how it happens that we have the ability to make choices? There have been many such attempts, of course, but let me see if I can make it fairly clear from just your and my personal reflection-I mean, not by running neurological tests or any other experiments, but by simply recalling our common human experience and analyzing it for its implications.

First, let me say up front that I am not persuaded by that august ancient Greek philosopher Plato. He argued that we humans have certain inborn ideas and that they are the "really real," compared to the "shadowy" sense images that we experience in everyday life. Rather, I am persuaded by his equally, if not more, august student, Aristotle, who argued-in the words of his, in turn, much later also august student, St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century: *Nil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu*, "Nothing is in the intellect which was not first in the senses."

We humans, for example, are able to perceive through our senses a wide range of dogs, and then "abstract," that is, literally "pull away" (Latin: *ab* "from," *tractus* "pulled") from the myriad differing sense details (e.g., size, weight, color....) a common notion "dog" that fits all individual members of the species. Our abstract reasoning allows us to line up the variety of individuals, see their commonalities and their differences, compare them, and thereby choose one, several, all, or none of them. If we could not think abstractly, we would not be able to make comparisons, and from that, chose. We would not be free, but determined by our internal instincts, which operate much like computer programs, and just as ineluctably.

Another way to say "choosing" is to say "loving," in the broad sense. When our knowing faculties, e.g., senses or reason, present us with an aspect of reality (Truth), our appetitive faculties, i.e., our will or appetites, move to unite us with what they perceive as the Good. Here is a simple example: My sense of sight sees an ice cream cone, and from my past experience of the sense of taste I perceive it as Good; my appetitive faculty then moves to unite me physically with the Good, the ice cream cone. Thus, love, or choice, is a unitive force. It brings the "actor" together with what it perceives as the Good-whether it be the ice cream cone, a Mozart concerto, a friend....

Yet, even when we are presented with what our appetitive faculties perceive as the Good, we still have the capacity to not move to unite with that Good. We can refuse the ice cream, turn off the Mozart CD, not visit a friend, though we cannot thereby stop being drawn toward unity with them. That is one reason why some existentialist philosophers-who stressed the centrality of freedom for humans-have spoken of "our damnable freedom."

We humans have of course always been radically free, but in much of the history of humanity, most women and men were told that for the most part they were not free and physically were prevented from exercising most of their freedom. Only a very few elite humans-mostly males-were relatively fully free. Vast numbers of humans were "unfree." For example, in the "inventor" of democracy, ancient Athens, only about 10% of the population could actually take part in the government, were *demos*, and perhaps two-thirds of the population were either slaves or *metics* (those who had civic responsi-

bilities but no rights). Slavery goes back thousands of years to even before writing. It is only in the late eighteenth century as a result of the “abolitionist” movement, which was started in England by Christians, that it has been *almost* eliminated—something that both Christianity and Modernity can take pride in! Further, women have by far been the largest unfree group of humans, for throughout most of human history the vast majority of women have been greatly less free than men. Here too, Modernity can take satisfaction for working with significant success (though with far to go yet) to free women from sexist bondage. Unfortunately Christianity has either continued to be resistant to this freedom movement, or come to it late.

When the inner core of human freedom finally began to break through to a tipping point of freedom in the eighteenth century Western Enlightenment, it became unstoppable. Everybody wanted to exercise her/his radical human freedom. Almost all the civil and religious forces resisted viciously the expansion of human freedom. One egregious example was when Pope Gregory XVI in his encyclical *Mirari vos* in 1832, harshly condemned freedom of conscience and religious liberty as absolute madness. *Deliramentum* was the Latin term he used. In this he was quoted with even greater rage by his successor Pope Pius IX in 1864, in his *Syllabus of Errors*. Nevertheless, even the Catholic Church relented and totally reversed itself (without admitting it, of course) in the 1965 *Declaration of Religious Freedom* at the Second Vatican Council, insisting that religious liberty and freedom of conscience were at the heart of the Catholic tradition!

3. Critical-Thinking Reason the Arbiter of Truth

In the beginning of Christianity, there was no Christianity! There was Judaism, and one of its major interpreters, Jesus, or rather, *Yeshua ha Notzri*, Jesus of Nazareth, who was a student of the then two great rabbinic schools, if not the Masters of the schools themselves: Hillel and Shammai. Yeshua himself then became a great Rabbi. In the beginning, the following of Yeshua all took place within Judaism, but after his crucifixion and resurrection, his followers included only a small portion of the Jewish community and an ever increasing number of non-Jews, Gentiles. Already during Yeshua’s lifetime there was disagreement about where truth lay—following Yeshua’s teaching, or not. This division increased dramatically after his death and rather quickly moved out of the Semitic world with its largely “picture-language” way of thinking and speaking and major emphasis on, not “what should I think?” but “what should I do?” (which of course was also precisely how Jesus thought and taught). It moved into the Greek, Hellenistic world with its largely abstract, philosophical way of thinking and speaking and heavy emphasis on “what should I think?”

During the first century after the death of Yeshua all of the writings that eventually were judged to make up the New Testament were written—as were many other documents—but were not included in the canon of the New Testament. What was included, and what not, was decided gradually by the Christian community at large, the *Ekklesia Katholika*, as it was referred to, the Universal Church, and became definitive only around 367 C.E. Even during that formative first century, however, there was a great variety among the communities of Yeshua followers concerning what the truth about him was. This was reflected in the many different Christologies, that is, explanations of the meaning of Jesus the *Christ* (*Messiah* in Hebrew), expressed in the New Testament itself.

All through this time great debates took place about what was the Christian truth and how it was to be expressed. A great step toward clarity was taken in 325 C.E. when

the Roman Emperor Constantine called the first Ecumenical (Greek *oikumenos*, universal) Council in a suburb of the new imperial city of Constantinople named Nicaea. By then percentage of the number of Jewish followers of Yeshua had greatly diminished in comparison to the vast number of Gentiles. These “new” followers of Yeshua lived not in his Semitic mental world of “picture language” and “what to do?” but in the Greek, Hellenistic thought world of “philosophical abstractions” with a heavy focus on “how to think.”

The great debates about the meaning of the teaching and life of Yeshua thereafter continued to mine the now canonized New Testament writings, reaching a climax in the Council of Chalcedon (another suburb of Constantinople) in 451, although three more Ecumenical Councils took place thereafter, the last one being Nicaea II in 787 C.E. However, already by the middle of the fifth century there reigned the so-called Vincentian Canon: *Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*, “What has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” Hence, in sum, the path to truth was now largely through Greek philosophical thinking as expressed in the conciliar statements. After the split between Eastern and Western Christianity, confirmed in 1054 C.E., the statements of the papacy became more and more the locus of truth in Western Christianity, in Catholicism. Thus, in Catholicism the papal *Magisterium* became the final source of Truth, whereas in Eastern Christianity, Orthodoxy, the *Traditio* as reflected in the Ecumenical Councils remained the final arbiter. With the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation in the West, however, there came a shift away from *Traditio* and *Magisterium* to *Scriptura* for the Protestants, while the Catholics stuck with the former two.

This split led to terrible bloody wars for a century and a half all across Central and Western Europe, climaxing with the close of the Thirty Years War in 1648. In the meanwhile other momentous changes were taking place in Europe which would lead it to world domination: the 16th century World Exploration Revolution, the 17th century Scientific Revolution (e.g., Copernicus, Galileo, Newton), the 17th-18th centuries Philosophical Revolution (e.g., Descartes, Locke, Kant), the 18th century Industrial Revolution, the 18th century Economic Revolution with the rise of Capitalism (Adam Smith). Thus in the 18th century Enlightenment the measure of Truth was no longer *Traditio*, *Magisterium*, or *Scriptura*, but *Ratio*, Reason. What we were being asked to affirm and to determine how to act was now: Did it pass the test of reason, did it make sense, did it square with our experience and thoughtful analysis?

Now the statements of the Pope, of the Ecumenical Council, and Tradition in general, and even the source of both, the Scriptures were subjected to the questioning of Reason. The Enlightenment was a sweeping movement of intellectual reform based on the supremacy of reason on many levels mainly in England, France, and Germany. Among other things, it contributed significantly both to the French Revolution and the American Revolution. In America Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, and Thomas Paine counted themselves as men of the Enlightenment. Later critics of the Enlightenment charged it with being superficial (Immanuel Kant superficial?), naively claiming a universal human rationality, anti-historical in understanding, and sweepingly critical of Christianity. *Ecrase l'enfême!* “Crush the infamous one! (the clergy) wrote Voltaire, the French anti-clerical philosophe *par excellence*.

However, one should be careful to avoid reducing the entire Enlightenment to such superficiality, anti-clericalism, and negativity toward history. This is especially true of the German *Aufklärung* (the English term “Enlightenment” is simply a direct translation of

the German term *Aufklärung*, which came from one of the most influential philosophers of Modernity, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), when he wrote a book asking *Was Ist Aufklärung* ? “What is Enlightenment?” in 1784).

The *Aufklärung* in Germany was largely a reform movement both in civil society and in the Church, Protestant and Catholic (its leading thinkers included such luminaries as Gottfried Leibniz, Friederich the Great, Moses Mendelssohn, Gotthold Lessing, Herman Reimarus, Immanuel Kant). For example, the *Aufklärung* reforms carried out in all of German-speaking Switzerland and all of present-day Baden-Württemberg, Hesse, and part of Bavaria from 1802 to 1833 (then together making up the largest diocese in the world) under the leadership of its Administrator Ignaz von Wessenberg (1774-1860) looked amazingly like the reforms of Catholicism in Vatican II (1962-65).² It emphasized 1) a liturgical reform based on scholarship and the use of the vernacular, 2) promoting the popular use of the Bible, and a greater use of biblical scholarship, 3) an ecumenical outreach to Protestants, 4) the modernization of religious education, 5) collegial church decision-making, 6) the elimination of mandatory clerical celibacy, 7) the papal office as one of unity rather than authoritarian domination. Thus, the *Aufklärung* in the Germanies was not anti-church (as in much of the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution), but pro-(*Aufgeklärte*-Enlightened) church!

4. History Transforms All Human Reality

a) Development of “Scientific” and Philosophical History

Partly as a reaction to the Enlightenment’s stress on the universality of human reason, there arose at the same time, especially in Germany, a balancing stress on the particularity of individual communities, customs, languages, literatures, histories. As the *Aufklärung* was reaching its high plateau in the late 18th century (German scholars also speak of the *Spät-Aufklärung* - Late-Enlightenment-which ran well into the second quarter of the 19th century in Germany), the fore-runners of what became known as “Historicism” (*Historismus* in German) appeared, particularly Johann Georg Hamman (1730-1788) and Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803).

A key notion of Historicism is that human life (as all reality) is changing, dynamic, evolving. Human beings have evolved out of billions of years of the Universe. Though the current estimate of the age of the Universe as 13.7 billion years was not arrived at until recently, there developed already in the late 18th early 19th centuries a keen awareness that we humans are the product of our pasts, and therefore have, in addition to our commonalities, significant differences.

Of course, the writing of history in Western Civilization goes back at least to the Greek Herodotus (484-425 B.C.E.), the “Father of History,” and his younger compatriot Thucydides (460-400 B.C.E.). However, it is really in the early part of the 19th century that there arose modern, “scientific” historiography. It was Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) who led in this new Historical School which emphasized 1) the critical use of primary documents and original sources; the task of the historian was to ascertain the value of the sources used: Were they eyewitnesses? Were they reliable? Were they partisan?... 2) Then, the “facts” were to speak for themselves. The historian was 3) to strive to describe the past as objectively as possible: *Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, “How it actually was.”

The Historicists saw the past histories of each community as significantly formative of the community and its members, so that it was not just our common humanness

that shaped us. Hence, the 19th century Romantic movement lifted up the past as an essential element of our humanity; e.g., the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were looked at with new, positive-seeing, eyes, so that as a result we now have an immensely more accurate picture—and increasingly so—of the past of, not just Western Civilization, but of the entire world.

At the same time, the sense of history, of dynamism, evolution, process pervaded the philosophies springing up in Germany. One thinks of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854), and then preeminently Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831). Each of them were seriatim Professors at the new University of Berlin, Schelling and Hegel also having been students at my Alma Mater, the very old University of Tübingen. Of course, (in)famously there followed Karl Marx, who originally was part of the “Young Hegelians,” but soon turned Hegel’s philosophical idealism “on its head” in his “dialectical materialism,” maintaining, nevertheless, the stress on history, dynamism.

b) History Pervades Religious Thought

This centrality of history appeared also in German Christian theology. To begin with, Schelling and Hegel were philosophical theologians, and they in turn had a huge influence on the “Protestant Tübingen School of Theology” (the Catholic “Tübingen School of Theology” will be touched on below) in theologians like Ferdinand Christian Bauer (1792-1860) and David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874), both of whom continued to delve deeply into history in order to articulate their theology, following to a large extent Hegel’s view of world history. But doubtless the most influential Protestant theologian of this period, and up to today, was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).

Fundamentally, Schleiermacher understood dogmatic theology as the history of theology. For example, he argued that the Christian dogma of the Trinity did not so much describe the way things were “out there,” in this case, in God’s Self. Rather, the doctrine of the Trinity was an expression of the fourth-century Christian community’s encounter with the divine as it came through the New Testament and the first three centuries’ of Hellenistic followers’ understanding of it.

The focus on a critical analysis of documents and their backgrounds as promoted by scholars of Historicism such as von Ranke was applied to the Bible (actually begun already by Hermann Samuel Reimarus [1694-1768], but published only posthumously by Lessing in 1774-1778) was combined with the historicizing of theology by Schelling, Hegel, Schleiermacher, et al. to create what for a hundred years came to be known as Protestant “Liberal Theology.” It was temporarily seriously challenged after the disastrous World War I (1914-1918) by Karl Barth and other Protestant theologians, but their influence largely evaporated by the last third of the 20th century.

It needs to be noted that these developments in German Protestantism was in many ways matched in German Catholicism. To begin with, there were the *Aufklärung* Catholics exemplified by Ignaz von Wessenberg referred to above and others, who were committed to the reform of Catholicism in ways that definitely embraced the *Aufklärung*, as well as an appreciation of the importance of history. Besides von Wessenberg and his clerical and lay colleagues, another center of *Aufklärung Katholizismus* with its concurrent sensitivity to history was the Catholic Tübingen School of Theology, including preeminently Professors Johann Sebastian Drey (1777-1853), Johann Baptist Hirscher (1788-1865), Johann Adam Möhler (1796-1838), and a little later, Möhler’s student and

successor, the widely respected church historian Karl Josef Hefele (1809-1893). Hefele was the author of the magisterial seven volume history of the Ecumenical Councils, and consequently a dogged opponent of the 1870 Dogma of Papal Infallibility (he and the other German bishops left Rome rather than vote for the dogma, and he was the last German bishop finally formally to accept the dogma. After he became the bishop of Rottenburg (in which Tübingen lay) in 1869, his student Franz Xavier Funk (1840-1907) became his successor and followed the same progressive historical approach.

The blending of the spirit of the German *Aufklärung* and the emphasis on history in theology could best be seen in Johann Adam Möhler's first book *Die Einheit der Kirche* (*The Unity of the Church*) which saw the Christian Church, its teaching and practices as an organism, and hence a growing, changing, adapting entity. At the same time he proudly described himself as *Aufgeklärt*, Enlightened, and throughout the 1820s was highly critical of what he considered the backward, authoritarian attitude of Rome. This understanding of a human community, including the Christian Church, as an organism was very typical of the thinking of the 19th century, especially in Germany.

c) "Hermeneutics of Suspicion"

Almost at the same time Historicism brought forth a counter view to the ideal of "objective" history, increasingly seeing underlying layer after layer of "real" driving forces in history, which later was named "the hermeneutics of suspicion." One of the first exponents of such a hermeneutic of suspicion was Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), who-though he started out as a student of Hegel and his idealism, he later turned to materialism-understood Christianity as a wish projection. Marx followed him in abandoning Hegel's idealism for his own dialectical materialism and looked at religion as a false consciousness foisted on the oppressed to keep them from rebelling (colloquially put, religion was "pie in the sky bye and bye"); for Marx, the determining element of human life was economics. Emil Durkheim (1858-1917) saw religion as simply the necessary rules of survival of the community writ large as the decrees of God; only those societies which had rules against killing, stealing, lying, and the like could survive, and to make sure that the rules were followed, society declared them to be "from God." Then there was Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) who viewed God as nothing other than "Big Daddy in the Sky," and religion as a psychological crutch; "Man was not the image of God, but God the image of Man."

The obvious truth in these and other "hermeneutics of suspicion" drew them many followers, but their "single-noted" quality eventually made them in turn subjects of suspicion. They were seen by many, if not most, to be too simplistic and reductionist. For example, if indeed, as Genesis states, that men and women are made in God's image, then of course God must also in turn be something like humans. Again, to be sure, economics is a major force in human affairs, but so too are race, education, culture, weather, sex.... Because human life is extremely complicated, any "simple," that is, "single," explanation is bound to be one-sided, reductionist, and hence, badly mistaken despite, or perhaps even because of, the validity of its insight.

Nevertheless, it became increasingly clear that there are forces at work in human life and society that we are learning about more and more. As we learn about each of these forces, we see human life and affairs influenced by more and more elements that we were largely unaware of before. We see our world developing as a result of a whole congeries of forces operating on varying levels: psychological, social, economic, political, ecological, technological.... All of this is very fluid, dynamic, evolving, historical.

d) History Pervades Epistemology

With the rise of Historicism, our understanding of Truth was also pervaded by history. Truth was increasingly seen as dynamic, fluid, organic, contextual. What happened to our understanding of Truth was in retrospect quite commonsensical. But first, to avoid confusion, a word about how we use the term Truth:

Normally we use the term “true” to refer to our *statements* about some aspect of reality. We say a statement is true if it accurately describes some aspect of reality. For example, if the door to a room is in fact closed, and I state: “The door is closed,” we then say that my statement is “true.” However, we can also make many other “true” statements about the door, such as: the door is made of wood, is blue, weighs seven pounds, is off its hinges, and on and on endlessly. Well, this was always obvious. However, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries we in the West became increasingly aware that all statements about reality were, even if true, necessarily limited. It began slowly to dawn on us that if this was true about relatively simple physical reality like the door, how much more must it be true of our much more complicated human reality!

For example, we began to realize that we could properly understand statements of the past only if we read them in their historical setting. We could understand the *text* only in its *con*-text. A case in point: In order to understand why certain things were stressed in the description of the Holy Trinity at the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E., the reader needed to know a good deal about the fight between Arius and Athanasius concerning how the nature of Jesus was to be understood—was he God, man, both, in what way....? It would not be at all helpful today simply to repeat the Nicæan formula if we did not understand its historical setting. Hence, it was slowly realized that a statement could be “true” only in a limited sense, that is, insofar as it made sense only when seen within its limiting historical circumstances.

Further, we also began to realize that it was vital to notice what kind of language was being used in a statement about some important reality, for that also would “limit” its “truth.” To stay with our understanding of God as an example, biblical scholars increasingly realized that when the Hebrew Bible spoke about the “Spirit of God,” or the “Word of God,” it was speaking in metaphorical terms, not ontological terms. In fact, the customary language of the Jewish world was metaphorical, picture language. Think for a moment about what kind of language that devout Jew Jesus used. He always used picture language. Like a good rabbi, he told stories which communicated his points. When, for example, he told his followers that if their eye scandalized them they should “pluck it out!” he clearly meant that metaphorically. Otherwise we would have precious few sighted Christians in the world!

When the Hebrew Bible spoke of the “Spirit” (*Ruach*) of God brooding over the deep in Genesis 1:1, or when it spoke of the “Wisdom” (*Hochmah*) of God creating the world in Proverbs 8:22 ff., or the “Word” (*Dabar*) of God in Genesis 1, or the “Teaching” (*Torah*), or the “Presence” (*Shechinah*—in early Rabbinical writings starting around the time of Jesus³) of God, each of these “images” of God were just that, images, symbols, “fingers pointing to the moon.” No Jew, including Jesus and all of his Jewish followers, would ever have misunderstood them as ontological statements, any more than they thought that the Kingdom of God was ontologically a mustard seed, a net full of fish, a pearl....

To mistake the kind of language used in a text was to misunderstand the text. Hence, we again began to realize further how all statements are limited in the “truth”

they convey insofar as they are necessarily cast in a particular kind of language: ontological, symbolic, practical, abstract, legal....

Karl Mannheim (1893-1947) developed the notion of the “sociology of knowledge,” which meant that a person’s “place in the world” affects how s/he perceives the world. For example, a uneducated Chinese Buddhist woman will see the world significantly differently than an educated German Jewish man. The two persons are not only geographically but also “culturally” sitting on the other side of the globe and seeing a particular aspect of it through their own “lenses.” If each is careful in describing what they see, both of their statements will be true, that is, they will accurately describe what they perceive. However, they will not be the same, for one will be seeing “that” part and the other “this” part. Both will be “true,” but not the same. It is as if people around the globe were all observing an object in the center, and described it. If each person were careful, his/her statement describing the object would be “true,” but of course only limitedly so, for each could see only her/his side, and not that which the person on the other side saw and carefully, and therefore also “truthfully” described, in his/her “true,” but of course also only limitedly so, statement.

Similarly, German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) and the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) developed the science of Hermeneutics, arguing that all knowledge is interpreted knowledge. When one thinks at all about the process of knowing, it is clear that it is a relational activity. There is the *knower*, the *known*, and the relationship between the two, the *knowing*. It is also clear that the knower is necessarily involved in the gaining of knowledge.

What then about the writing of history? Is that a fatally flawed enterprise that should simply be abandoned? By no means, for as Winston Churchill once remarked: “The longer you look back, the farther you can look forward.” After quoting him, the well-known American historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. went on to answer, ironically, our question: “But all historians are prisoners of their own experience. We bring to history the preconceptions of our personalities and our age. We cannot seize on ultimate and absolute truths. So the historian is committed to a doomed enterprise—the quest for an unattainable objectivity.” But Schlesinger doesn’t leave the matter there. He cites Oscar Wilde once remarking that “The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it,” and then continues: “The great strength of history in a free society is its capacity for self-correction. This is the endless excitement of historical writing—the search to reconstruct what went before, a quest illuminated by those ever-changing prisms that continually place old questions in a new light.”⁴

Does all this mean that we can never know any object? No, but it does mean that all knowledge is limited knowledge. Hence, there can be no unlimited knowledge of anything. All knowledge necessarily is limited knowledge. When this realization begins to dawn on someone, or a whole community or culture, then not only the possibility, but rather the necessity, of Dialogue arises.

5. Excursus: Post-Modernity?

But just before I turn to the idea of Dialogue, let me at this point raise the question: Why do I find the term Post-Modernity essentially vacuous? First, any “movement” which cannot articulate what it is about, but can only say what it is not about, strikes me as intellectually adolescent, that is, immature. More importantly, as it slowly began to become clear what most “Post-Modern” writers seemed to be talking about when they

used the term Post-Modernity, it appeared to refer to three things: 1) Hermeneutics of Suspicion, 2) a stress on particularity, and 3) an *a priori* rejection of any “over-all” understanding of anything.

Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Have these writers been unaware of the scholarship of the past century and a half or more? As seen above, Hermeneutics of Suspicion began flooding into Western thought already before the middle of the 19th century. The stress on the Particularity of history started even earlier in the 18th century and has continued unabated into our 21st century in critical thinkers like Gadamer and Ricoeur. Yes, all knowledge is interpreted knowledge, and is affected by our “place in the world,” and hence is limited. Knowledge, we increasingly know, is far more complicated and layered than was realized before the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, and because of our ever deeper understanding of how we humans understand reality, we are coming ever closer to an endlessly more fully accurate picture of reality.

For over two hundred years we have been becoming increasingly aware of ever further dimensions of our human *Ratio*. *Ratio* is not at all limited to abstract syllogistic reason or the like. We are constantly learning that there are depths under depths in the intelligibility of both our humanity and indeed of the entire cosmos. Cosmologists now are even speaking about all reality being ultimately units of “information.” Perhaps Pythagoras (572-497 B.C.E.) was not so crazy when he talked about the world being composed of numbers!

As to the rejection of any and all attempts to understand an object of study in some “over-all way” is concerned, the rejection also strikes me as quite naive, as being unaware of how we humans *necessarily* think. We always want to try to relate one thing to others. It is an unavoidable move by our *Ratio*, whether it is the first step of analysis or the subsequent step of synthesis. We *automatically* try to mentally break things down into their component parts and then try to understand how they are related together. Our very language tells us that is how we think. We say that we can or cannot “grasp” what is being explained. That is, we “grasp” the various portions of an idea by detaching them from the rest, and then attempt to understand how the parts are related. For instance, the idea of “falling” is understood to contain the “parts” of above, below, movement from the former to the latter. The same “automatic” intellectual movement is reflected in other synonyms of “to grasp,” such as to “comprehend” (Latin *comprehendere*, to put our mental arms around something), or “conceive” (Latin *con-cepere*, to grasp around).

No doubt we make many defective “syntheses.” We often will not be aware of certain dimensions of a subject, and hence “get it together” in a way that is only partially accurate, or perhaps is even terribly mistaken. The “*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*” historians will strive to “tell it like it is” as best as they can, and may well stop there as historians of a specific area—just like workers on an assembly line. However, they will have to tell themselves not to follow their natural movement of the mind to relate the studied portion to contiguous portions of the story. Or, in philosophy, phenomenologists deliberately puts a mental “bracket” around the object they are studying, but the purpose of such an *epoché* (Greek, to hold back) is later to relate it to a larger context.

Far from being “Post-Modern,” it should be clear that all these developments of the past two hundred years were/are in fact a continuation, a deepening of Modernity. We are becoming more Modern than ever! Hence, at the beginning of the 21st century we are not at all “Post-Modern.” We are “Increasingly-Modern,” “Expandingly-Modern”!

6. Dialogue: Radicalizing All Thought

As it became increasingly apparent to more and more thinkers in the West, and then everywhere, that all statements about reality are necessarily limited, it also became increasingly clear that the only logical alternative to a silencing total relativism was: Dialogue. If my perception of reality—including pre-eminently the most complex of all human reality, Religion (“an explanation of the *ultimate* meaning of life, and how to live accordingly”)—is necessarily limited, then if I am going to continue to learn more “truth” about reality, I cannot avoid learning it from the Other, including the religiously Other.

Of course there are all of the “external” reasons why Dialogue is becoming more and more important today: For example, world travel has been expanding massively in recent decades. When I was a graduate student in the 1950s there were shipping companies which specialized in providing whole ships in the summer for students (e.g., Holland American Line), which shipped a few hundred thousand students back and forth between the U.S. and Europe. For us students, this was “cool.” (Yes, we used the word back then too!) For decades now, however, hundreds of *millions* of all kinds of people from all over the world fly everywhere with very little fuss about it. Further, it used to be in my student days that getting a long-distance telephone call from somewhere in the United States was a cause of great excitement. Overseas telephone call? You had to book an overseas call ahead of time! And it cost the proverbial arm and a leg. Today we telephone around the world without hesitation. More, we constantly send instant e-mail all over the world and think nothing of it. We are now moving into free telephoning via our computers, we have cell phones everywhere, podcasts, and an endless stream of new communications technologies. The whole world comes into our living rooms when we turn on the TV news. All the items we buy-and sell—are from all over the world.

All this is in stunning contrast to the way almost the whole world lived just a century ago—when my father was born! The vast majority of people were born, lived, and died within a days’ walk from their home village. Now, we indeed do live in a Global Village.

Serious talk about Dialogue means that I want to talk with you who thinks differently from me precisely so I can learn from you. In the past we basically talked only with ourselves, that is, we spoke only with persons who thought as we do—or *should* think as we do! Now, however, that we more and more are aware that all of our knowledge is limited, that we the knower are necessarily involved in the process of knowing—that is, as Gadamer and Ricoeur analyzed—that all knowledge is *interpreted* knowledge, we not only are grudgingly acknowledging that dialogue with the Other is “permitted,” we are being forced to recognize that it is *necessary*! Not only is the epistemological revolution, the “turn toward the subject,” of the 19th century, finally beginning to catch up with the major culture-shapers of the world, but since the “Fall of the Wall” in 1989 and even more so since 9/11/01, more and more people and institutions are becoming *aware* of the need for dialogue—which, of course, was always present.

The world at large is rejecting the position of Absolutism in all forms, including most dramatically in Religion. One might counter that extreme Absolutism in religion is massively on the rise today—after all the predictions that religion was on the wane. However, it is precisely the religious extremists, whether bomb-throwing Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland, the Hindutva fanatics in India, the Islamists/Jihadists

around the world, or....., that the vast majority of Catholics, Protestants, Hindus, Muslims.... are increasingly rejecting! There is validity in the old saying: You can fool *some* of the people *all* of the time; you can fool *all* of the people *some* of the time; but you cannot fool *all* of the people *all* of the time!

To be sure, this shift from, "If you differ from me, you are wrong!" to, "If you differ from me, I should look to learn from you!" is a major Paradigm Shift. In fact, it is much more. It is a true, a literal "re-volution," a "turning-around" from a position held by everyone from the beginning of humanity-Absolutism-to the position of Dialogue being increasingly espoused by the world's shapers of culture: Education, the Arts, Communication, Politics....Religion. As with all Paradigm Shifts, and vastly more with the "Global Revolution of the Dialogue Shift," resistance to the Shift is intense. All the current violent Absolutisms are prominent destructive signs of that resistance, as is also at the other end of the spectrum of resistance, the casting of "relativism" as the current *bete noir* by Pope Benedict XVI. Yes, as I noted above, "complete relativism" is a rationally and practically impossible position. However, in tilting at that chimera, that wind-mill, the great danger is that charging forth under such a banner will engender even more fear, thereby stoking still more the fires of violence, first psychological and then consequently (for the way we perceive the world determines how we will act in the world) practical.

To rephrase very succinctly what Dialogue is: *Dialogue is a whole new way of thinking!* Humankind is moving from the *Age Global Monologue* into the dawn of the *Age of Global Dialogue* wherein I increasingly feel the need to talk with those who think differently from me, including-nay, *especially*-religiously, precisely so I can *learn* from them, and they from me (now that is a revolution!), because I increasingly am aware that what I know, even when it is in fact true, is necessarily limited. And this limited characteristic of all knowing is most particularly the case with that most complicated, most comprehensive body of knowing (which then directs our actions), religion.

7. More to Reality Than Meets the Eye?

So, if this is the mental world you live in, that is, Modernity, and yet, one way or another you are not satisfied that our experience of Reality through our senses and rational thought completely plumbs its depth, that there is something much more to it than "meets the eye," then you are among the vast majority of humans who have ever lived, including now. You are looking at what we humans, at least in the West, have referred to as Religion—"an explanation of the *ultimate* meaning of life, and how to live accordingly." Here, of course, we are entering the realm not of Knowing but of Believing. That does not mean that we leave our rational intellects at the door. That is impossible after we have crossed the Rubicon of Modernity. We cannot go back, nor would we wish to.

Religion for the Modern Person means using our senses and intellects—both discursive and intuitive—which will carry us with proof to the ever moving edge of Reality where we cannot penetrate any further with "knowing," with proof. Many of us will stand there with the *feeling* (not something that we can "prove," of course) that there is much more to Reality than we are able to discern with proof. Then we must utilize all of our faculties to coolly look at the evidence for and against the notion that there is more to Reality than "meets the eye," or not. Ultimately we decide (for ultimately, not to decide in this case is to decide negatively): Yes, it makes more sense to affirm that

there is a greater depth to Reality than I can “prove” (e.g., “God” exists), or, No, it makes more sense to reject that idea (e.g., “God” does not exist). However, the yea-sayers cannot “prove” that they are right and that the nay-sayers are wrong—nor can the nay-sayers “prove” that they are right and the yea-sayers are wrong. Rather, we all must remain constantly in dialogue with both ourselves and each other. I invite both to come join Club Mod.

Notes:

1. Some may question my use of Modernity rather than Postmodernity. This is not an oversight on my part. Rather, I am deliberately choosing Modernity, and will argue later on why I find the term postmodern wanting in comparison.

2. See Leonard Swidler, *Aufklärung Catholicism 1780-1850* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), and Leonard Swidler, *Making the Church Our Own. Reforming the Catholic Church from the Ground Up* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 2007).

3. For details on all this material see Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988). It is interesting to note that all the terms—Ruach, Hochmah, Torah, Shechinah—except Dabar are feminine.

4. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Folly’s Antidote,” *New York Times*, (January 1, 2007), Op Ed page.