

In this series of papers, I will explore some implications for liberal theology of the large-scale cultural turn to postmodernity. Since postmodernity is a derivative term, this inquiry necessarily involves an examination of modernity itself. But modernity is the appropriate starting point for a more important reason: Liberal theology is itself a product of modernity. Indeed, it is sometimes referred to as the “theology of modernity.” At the same time, many observers claim that our Western culture is now approaching the end of modernity. Some believe that we have already passed into a postmodern condition, and many who feel that modernity has not yet run its course nevertheless agree that we have entered a period of “high” or “late” modernity. Yet whether our condition is one of “late” or “post” modernity, nearly all observers agree that we live in a very different world than that which witnessed the rise of modernity three or four centuries ago.

This cultural shift raises several important questions for liberal theology. If liberalism is unavoidably linked to modernity, can it remain a viable theological option in the face of modernity’s demise or radical readjustment? To the extent that modernity generates negative as well as positive cultural consequences, is liberal theology subject to the same risks and limitations? Can liberal theology respond or adjust to the challenges of late- or post-modernity and still remain liberal? And finally, how do we, as self-professed religious liberals, sustain and nurture our faith in the spirit of our new age? These are the kinds of questions I wish to explore in these papers.

In Part I, I will set the context for the larger inquiry into postmodernity by exploring in detail the relationship between modernity and liberal theology. I will begin by outlining the central characteristics of modernity, then discussing the central features of liberal theology in light of them. Finally, I turn to a discussion of some of the tensions and critiques of modernity and their implications for liberal theology. I leave a more thorough-going critique of liberal

theology to be taken up in Parts II and III.

The Character of Modernity

There are perhaps as many different understandings of the nature of modernity as there are writers on the subject. At the most general level, most observers would probably agree with Anthony Giddens that the term modernity “refers to modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards”¹ or with David Lyon’s statement that modernity “refers to the social order that emerged following the Enlightenment” and that it involves “massive changes that took place at many levels from the mid-sixteenth century onwards.”² But these definitions don’t really tell us very much, and they don’t reflect the widespread differences among those interested in the modernity debate. There is disagreement about the origins of modernity and about whether it has yet passed. There is disagreement as well about its central characteristics. Thus, any particular characterization is bound to have different points of emphasis as well as its own limitations and biases.

For purposes of this paper, I am not interested in entering the modernity debate directly. Instead, I wish to focus on those characteristics of modernity that are most directly linked to liberal theology. Here, the task is somewhat more manageable. I have found it helpful to distinguish between two types of discussions about modernity: (1) the “philosophical discourse of modernity,” to use Habermas’ term,³ which focuses on the philosophical concepts that emerged during modernity and especially in the Enlightenment; and (2) the social conditions of modernity, which examines actual social structures and material conditions of life in the modern period. The relationship between modernity and liberal theology is most often explored only

¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 1.

² David Lyon, *Postmodernity* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 25, 27.

³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 17.

through the philosophical discourse. But even theological liberals live in the real world, and their theological orientations are necessarily affected by the social structures they inhabit and the social changes taking place around them. This is especially true in light of liberalism's proclivities for adapting itself to its own cultural conditions, a feature I address in more detail below. As a result, my own analysis will treat both the philosophical and social dimensions.

The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity

Despite the varied understandings of modernity, there is basic agreement about its most important philosophical orientations. While there are many useful ways to catalog this material, I have found it helpful to think of five distinct but related themes: (1) subjectivity; (2) reason; (3) optimism and progress; (4) universals; and (5) criticism.

Subjectivity. It is a truism that modern Western philosophy, beginning with Descartes in the seventeenth century, signaled a "turn to the subject" that enthroned individual consciousness at the center of human existence. This process began with the Reformation's challenge to the authority of the church. "Against faith in the authority of preaching and tradition, Protestantism asserted the authority of the subject relying upon his own insight."⁴ But it received its highest expression in the Enlightenment, especially in the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. The turn to subjectivity thus represents in part a rejection of external authority. Kant's motto, "have the courage to use your own reason,"⁵ is one expression of this perspective. During the Enlightenment, it also manifested itself in new conceptions of law and civil government that recognized individual rights as a restraint on state power and authority. Subjectivity thus carries with it an important dimension of individualism and autonomy of action.

⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" [1784] Immanuel Kant, *On History* Lewis White Beck, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 3.

Theologian Ernst Troeltsch, in his analysis of the modern period, emphasizes independence from external authority, especially the church, as perhaps its most important characteristic. Troeltsch contrasts modern civilization with what he calls the “Church-civilization” of earlier periods. The era of Church-civilization was “above all things a *civilization of authority*.”⁶ Both secular and religious authority were centralized in the Church. As external authority waned, other forms of authority were sought in its place, primarily forms that had an independent and rational basis and which derived their authority from “their inherent and immediate capacity to produce conviction.”⁷ In modernity, this new authority was the human subject, relying on his or her own individual insight.

But subjectivity is more than just a principle of autonomy; it also affects the nature and form of every dimension of modern culture. In science, for example, the knowing subject is elevated while nature is disenchanting and objectified. In morality, the subject is free to determine her own course of right action and to understand that course as valid precisely because of its self-determination. In art, both form and content are determined by inward reflection and expressive self-realization. Thus, in every dimension of public and private life, modernity signals a major shift external authority to the internal authority of the autonomous subject.

Reason. A second primary characteristic of modernity is reason or rationality. As it has emerged in modernity, reason is inherently related to subjectivity. Habermas recognizes this relationship when he uses terms such as “subjective reason” or “subject-centered rationality.” In the early modern period, reason was thought of as a separate faculty of the human mind. This capacity made it possible to formulate ideas clearly and to resolve scientific and other kinds of

⁶ Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: The Significance of Protestantism for the Rise of the Modern World* [1912] (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 22 (emphasis original).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

problems. Human reason became the final judge of all things, not only in science, but also in matters of philosophical and religious truth.

Another key aspect of modern rationality is that it is individualistic and will-based. It assumes an objectifying attitude toward the external world such that the subject becomes an observer. In addition, the rational subject seeks to fulfill a disposition to acquire knowledge and carry out purposive activity. In this endeavor, the subject makes use of a “purposive rationality which is tailored to the cognitive-instrumental dimension.”⁸ In other words, subject-centered rationality is geared toward cognitive or instrumental mastery of an objectified reality. This posture enables rational subjects to see order in the world. Thus, subjectivity involves not only a new understanding of the self, but also of the world. The world is now conceived as made up of phenomena that obey regular natural laws, laws that can be discovered and understood by means of the faculty of reason. But subject-centered reason also creates a subject-object duality that distances the subject from the world. Reason then combines with the felt need for autonomy, and as a result the rational self becomes artificially separated from its own lifeworld context.

Optimism and Progress. A third central characteristic of the modern spirit is what Troeltsch calls “its self-confident optimism and belief in progress.”⁹ Troeltsch sees this as an aspect of the struggle for freedom during the Enlightenment, which could not have occurred without this basic confidence. Old theological notions of fall, redemption, and final judgment gave way to a sense of continuing development and upward progress “to unknown heights.”¹⁰ Cornel West has called it the “belief in the unlimited possibilities of individuals in society when guided by reason.”¹¹

⁸ Habermas, 314.

⁹ Troeltsch, 26.

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹¹ Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 58.

Sociologist David Lyon echoes this idea in his claim that modernity reflects an “unprecedented dynamism,” a “forward looking thrust [that] relates strongly to belief in progress and the power of human reason to produce freedom.”¹² During the early modern period, advances in the sciences, new ideas about law and government, and other factors produced a general sense that anything was possible. The future was unlimited. Progress was not only possible; it was inevitable. For the first time, people began to think of history as having a direction, or at least a kind of trajectory. And its movement was in the direction of increased progress. These ideas were reinforced by the principle of evolution which emerged in the nineteenth century, first in geology, and then in biology with Darwin. One of the strongest expressions of the theory of progress was the idea of manifest destiny, through which European American Protestants came to think of themselves as God’s new chosen people. The racist and other negative dimensions of this attitude will be discussed below, but for now it is important to see how these sorts of ideas emerged from the larger modern belief in progress. Finally, of course, the unlimited possibilities of progress were famously reflected in James Freeman Clarke’s theological affirmation of progress onward and upward forever in all worlds.

Universals. The emphasis on reason during the modern period also led to the emergence of the concept of universals. For Enlightenment rationalists, the divergent energies of the mind were held together by means of a common center of force: “the unity and immutability of reason.”¹³ This human capacity for reason was held to be universal in the sense that it was the same for all thinking subjects in all times and cultures. In addition, a new form of analysis emerged that both stemmed from and reinforced this unifying view. In contrast to the deductive process of earlier science and philosophy, modern analysis moved inductively from the

¹² Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 25.

¹³ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), chapter one.

particular to the general. The central task of reasoned analysis was unification. To “know” meant to place all the parts in appropriate relation to each other. Thus, modern knowledge always involves a reduction: it moves from the complex to the simple, from apparent diversity to underlying unity. This way of thinking led to universalistic claims in many areas of knowledge, from science to psychology to religion. The world is governed by a set of universal laws. People share a common basic human nature. All religions at their core are basically the same. The possibility that there could be cultural or historical differences would simply not have occurred to modern rationalists.

Criticism. Finally, the modern mind-set included a strong conviction that everything must be subject to criticism. This was not just an attitude; it was a philosophical principle of free critical inquiry. At the very least, in line with the new emphasis on the authority of the subject, this principle meant that all claims of external authority, including especially the state and the church, were subject to challenge. But it also called for internal self-examination; even reason itself is subject to criticism. This of course was Kant’s major concern.¹⁴

Charlene Spretnak, in her otherwise highly negative treatment of modernity, holds up the principle of free inquiry as modernity’s “one profoundly corrective element, one grandly idealistic value, which eventually exposed the false claims and partial truths of its own dogma.”¹⁵ In other words, criticism becomes a kind of self-redeeming corrective principle. As we will see, this principle led eventually to the questioning of many features of the very system that produced it. David Lyon sees a paradox here. “Although the Enlightenment and thus the modern project were designed to eliminate uncertainty and ambivalence, autonomous reason would always have

¹⁴ The titles of Kant’s major works reflect this: *The Critique of Pure Reason* and *The Critique of Practical Reason*.

¹⁵ Charlene Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, Nature, and Place in a Hypermodern World* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 43.

its doubts. It was bound to if it wished to avoid relapsing into ‘dogma.’ Relativism of knowledge was built into modern thought.”¹⁶ I will treat the problem of relativism in Part II. For the moment, it is worth recognizing that both of these attitudes, the constant challenge to external authority and the constant re-evaluation of one’s own claims, became important characteristics of the liberal religious mind-set.

Social Characteristics of Modernity

As noted above, in addition to a philosophical discourse, modernity also involves a set of social and material characteristics that set it apart from the previous historical period. These, too, have affected the development of liberal theology, so it is important to summarize them here. Different commentators emphasize different social conditions as the most significant products of modernity. Troeltsch, for example, was concerned especially with the formation of militaristic nation states, the development of capitalistic forms of business organization, the growth of applied science and technology, an immense increase in population, the emergence of new social classes, and new forms of social and ethical life. Lyon, in turn, emphasizes capitalism, social differentiation, rationalization, and urbanism. While extended analysis of all of these features is neither possible nor necessary here, a brief look at three of them will help our understanding both of liberal theology and the challenge it faces in postmodernity. These are capitalism, differentiation, and rationalization.

Capitalism. For Lyon, capitalism is “the most conspicuous motor driving” the modern social world. Its main features include a “constant quest for new raw materials, new sources of labour power and, more recently, new technologies to supplement or replace that labour power and new applications that might attract new consumers.”¹⁷ The pursuit of profit is a central

¹⁶ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28

factor, as is unlimited growth and expansion. As I will note in Part II, and as anyone who lives in today's world will know, market capitalism eventually erupted into unbridled consumerism. But even in its original form, it depended from the beginning on self-interested competition and endless expansion. These characteristics reflect the modern values of individual autonomy and forward-looking progress, expressed in economic social structures.

Differentiation. The process of social differentiation that arose during modernity led to the division of life into separate spheres. Work life was separated from home life and from leisure; religion was separated from politics and other forms of public life. Part of this process was linked to the increasing secularization of society as a whole, and to the emergence of a professional class. "Tasks once performed by the family or the Church were taken over by schools, youth cultures and the mass media on the one hand, or by local hospitals and welfare departments on the other."¹⁸ But this process is also a consequence of modernity's elevation of the subject. Habermas refers to it as a process of "disreption" [*Entzweiung*; literally "in-two-ness" or brokenness] in which spheres of knowing are separated from each other, as well as from spheres of belief and from everyday life. As a result, "religious life, state, and society as well as science, morality, and art are transformed into just so many embodiments of the principle of subjectivity."¹⁹

This process of differentiation had important consequences for religion. Kant, of course, performed the conceptual surgery that separated theoretical or scientific reason from moral reason. And, by locating religion in the sphere of moral reason, he effectively separated religion from science, a move that still plagues us today. Perhaps more importantly, this also meant that faith was separated from knowledge. This, too, is a consequence of subjectivity and its

¹⁸ Ibid., 29.

¹⁹ Habermas, 18.

“disreptions.” Kant may have wanted to diminish knowledge in order to make room for faith, but in the end, he diminished faith as well. The result, as Habermas sees it, is that religion is no longer able to function as a unifying moral and cultural force. While the new self-conscious subjectivity is strong enough to undermine religion, it is not strong enough to create a new unifying power in its place through reason. In Hegel’s famous dictum, the finite subject was asked to shoulder an infinite task, an effort that was doomed from the start. The disreption is permanent; self-authentication becomes self-alienation. The end result is that “modernity has bequeathed to us a world split into social segments each governed by its own rules, implicit and explicit.”²⁰

Rationalization. The final characteristic of modernity I want to mention is rationalization. This term comes from Weber, and as it is used here, it is different from (though related to) the Enlightenment principle of reason or rationality discussed above. For Weber, rationalization refers primarily to a process of rigorous means-end calculation and the purposive or instrumental orientation of activities. It is in this sense that Weber speaks of such things as rational science, rational rules of law, and rational economic enterprise.²¹ As Lyon puts it, rationalization “meant the gradual adoption of a calculating attitude towards more and more aspects of life.”²² In cultural terms, this involves the structural differentiation of social and economic life, such as in the separation of business activity from the household noted above. But this process found its most systematic expression in capitalism, especially in functional specializations such as the division of labor, and in the emergence of modern bureaucracy. But it affected every aspect of society. An increasing focus on machine-like efficiency was found in

²⁰ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 41.

²¹ See generally, Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 1992).

²² Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 30.

social structures from the military to industry and agriculture, and even the household. As rationalization infused an ever-increasing number and variety of sectors of society, authority was “derived more and more from this calculating rationality and less and less from tradition.”²³

The Character of Liberal Theology

I would like to turn now to a more detailed discussion of the central characteristics of liberal theology and their relation to modernity. Because there is more than one useful way to do this, I have identified three sets of ideas or themes that might be said to characterize liberal theology: a particular mind-set; a particular interpretive tendency around the central theological categories of God, world, and human; and a set of characteristic traits that commonly appear in all types of liberal theology.

The Liberal Religious Mind-Set

“Liberalism is first of all a spirit, an attitude, a state of mind.”²⁴ The English word “liberal” is derived from the Latin *liberalis*, which means pertaining to the free person. Its root is *liber*, or free. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “liberal” as “free from bigotry or unreasonable prejudice in favour of traditional opinions or established institutions” and “open to the reception of new ideas or proposals of reform.” It goes on to explain that this term is often applied “to those members of a church or religious sect who hold opinions ‘broader’ or more ‘advanced’ than those in accordance with its commonly accepted standards of orthodoxy.” Finally, it notes that in the United States, this definition is applied chiefly to Unitarians and Universalists. And most religious liberals today, including Unitarian Universalists, I suspect, would probably accept this basic definition.

²³ Ibid., 24.

²⁴ Rufus M Jones, *Re-thinking Religious Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1935), 6.

Theologian David Tracy captures the basic liberal religious mind set when he describes the liberal theologian as one who “accepts the distinctly modern commitment to the values of free and open inquiry, autonomous judgment, [and] critical investigation of all claims to scientific, historical, philosophical, and religious truth.”²⁵ And James Woelfel, in an article exploring the future agenda of American religious thought, identifies several of its dominant tendencies. These include “a preference for the languages of science, philosophy and ethics over the language of myth and story,” and “the assumption of scientific knowledge ... as in one way or another paradigmatic or normative.”²⁶ Finally, James Luther Adams notes that “liberal religion by its very nature has aimed to live on the frontier and to break new paths.”²⁷ These observations fairly well capture the flavor of the liberal religious spirit.

Central Theological Categories

Another way to understand the basic character of liberal theology is to look at how it treats a set of key theological categories. The categories of God, humanity, and world (or creation), have been historically the fundamental symbol categories of Western monotheism. In other words, the monotheistic worldview is most fundamentally a function of how these three categories relate to each other. This worldview looks very different from the perspective of modern liberal theology than from the biblical perspective, or, say, the perspective of the sixteenth century Protestant reformers. But the basic categories have remained constant. So, one way to understand modern theological liberalism is to see how it has altered the traditional understandings of and relationships among these categories.

²⁵ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 25-6.

²⁶ James Woelfel, “The Future of American Liberal Religious Thought: A Critical Perspective,” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1985), 288-98, at 289.

²⁷ James Luther Adams, *The Prophethood of All Believers*, ed. G. Beach (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 72.

In biblical monotheism and in most traditional Christian theologies, God is the central category, “the ultimate point of reference in terms of which all else is to be interpreted.” God is a moral agent, as well as the creator and governor of all existence. As a result, the other two categories, humanity and world, “cannot be understood simply in terms of themselves.” Instead, “they gain their being and meaning from their relationship to God,” and only through this relationship can their true reality and purpose be known.²⁸

In traditional theologies, humanity, the second category, stands in special relationship to God. Because humans are created “in God’s image,” they are also free and creative moral agents. They can choose to align themselves with God’s will, or they can move away from God into sin. A kind of paradox is set up: At one level, humans are absolutely dependent on God; at another level, they are autonomous and morally responsible beings. Finally, the third category, the world or creation, is understood largely as the context within which human life unfolds. The world is also God’s creation, but humans have a special place in it, as well as special responsibilities toward it. If we represented the three categories in a diagram, we might have an elongated upright triangle with God at the top, and humanity and world close to each other on the bottom.

If we use this basic scheme as a reference point, then, liberalism marks a significant shift both in the functions and the relationship among these categories. First, in all liberal theologies, the relative weight of the second category, the human, is significantly increased. And the individual, not just humanity as such, takes on an important moral and theological status. Liberalism places significant emphasis on individual autonomy and freedom, and human nature

²⁸ Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 110.

is understood in mainly positive terms. The result is that humans are understood as substantially less dependent on God for their fulfillment than in traditional theologies.

Second, in liberal theologies the role of the second category, God, tends to be diminished. Liberals today rarely see God as a moral agent or being. Instead, God may be simply thinned out into process, or reduced to a linguistic symbol representing ultimate mystery or the like, or even eliminated altogether. And finally, the third category, world or creation, tends to expand in contemporary liberal theologies to include not only the social context of human life, but also the larger planetary and even cosmic context. In some liberal theologies the categories of God and world blend together, so that the evolutionary processes of the entire cosmos become the reference for understanding human existence. In liberal theology, the triangle representing the three categories has been flattened out into a more horizontal shape, with humanity on one side, and God now leaning close to the world, or perhaps subsumed into the world, on the other side.

Characteristic traits of liberal theology

As I noted above, liberal theology is a child of modernity. This means that the central characteristics of modernity are reflected in liberal theology's methods, attitudes, and substantive claims. Gary Dorrien captures this linkage in his observation that "the essential idea of liberal theology is that all claims to truth, in theology as in other disciplines, must be made on the basis of reason and experience, not by appeal to external authority."²⁹ Yet liberalism did not simply adopt the new cultural paradigms as its own. Instead, liberal theology was always a "mediating" movement that sought to find a middle ground between the old orthodoxy and the new modernity:

²⁹ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity 1900-1950* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 1, hereafter referred to as Dorrien, vol. 2.

From the beginning, liberal theology was a third way. It was not radical, infidel, agnostic, or atheist, though it was routinely called all of these; liberal theology was both a morally humanist alternative to Protestant orthodoxy and a religious alternative to rationalistic atheism. It shared the humanistic moral impulses of modern rationalism, as the guardians of New England Theology readily perceived, but it defended biblical religion in a manner that accorded with its image of Christ.³⁰

Paul Lakeland makes the same point in his observation that all modern theologies attempt a “reasonable accommodation to the Enlightenment project” and that “all are united in their commitment to the mediation of religious thought to a secular world.”³¹ Thus, it might be said that liberal theology represents an attempt to articulate a framework within which one can be both modern and religious at the same time. This mediating theme will be explored in more detail in the following discussion.

Yet while liberal theology is most fundamentally linked to its roots in the Enlightenment, it also has an important evangelical heritage that is often overlooked. Once again, Dorrien offers a helpful perspective:

Liberal theology is the child of two heritages. From its Enlightenment-modernist heritage it has upheld the authority of modern knowledge, emphasized the continuity between reason and revelation, championed the values of tolerance, humanistic individualism, and democracy, and, for the most part, distrusted metaphysical claims. From its evangelical heritage it has affirmed the authority of Christian experience, upheld the divinity and sovereignty of Christ, preached the need of personal salvation, and emphasized the importance of Christian missions.³²

The dividing line here is not sharp; Dorrien notes that most American liberal theologies have reflected both of these heritages in at least some respects. On the other hand, current discussions about God language, the extent to which we liberals are (or should be) linked to our Christian

³⁰ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 399, hereafter referred to as Dorrien, vol. 1.

³¹ Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 40.

³² Dorrien, Vol 2, 10-11.

past, the place of Christian teachings and the model of Jesus, and the like, have deep roots. As the following discussion will show, liberal theology is full of tensions; this is but one of them.

Beyond these general points, I identify four specific characteristics or themes that commonly appear in all forms of liberal theology. Of course they will appear with different emphases and in different kinds of relationship in different theological endeavors. But as I see it, the presence of these themes is, in general, what typically defines a theological orientation as “liberal.” These themes are (1) adaptation to culture; (2) continuity; (3) autonomy of the self; and (4) the prophetic voice.³³

Adaptation to culture. At least since Schleiermacher, liberals have believed that theology should be connected to the spirit of its own time. This posture is a natural corollary to the mediating stance noted above. Among other things, that has meant that religious ideas are often adapted or restated in terms of the language and values of contemporary culture. It has meant, too, that theology often looks to the natural and social sciences, the arts, and other cultural sources in formulating its positions. Liberals argue that only in this way can theology remain credible and relevant to the needs of the present.

But there is a tension here. One of the consequences of cultural adaptation is that liberals have tended to blur the distinction between religion and culture. H. R. Niebuhr’s charge that liberals created a “Christ of culture” emphasizes this point.³⁴ Critics of liberalism often charge that this kind of theological stance amounts to an accommodation of theology to culture, so that liberals are constantly in danger of losing their religious identity. Liberal religion then becomes no different from liberal politics or a liberal social agenda, and spirituality tends to bland out into

³³ Important early work on the characteristics of liberal theology was done by William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), and Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). I am indebted to these sources for several of the ideas in this section.

³⁴ See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), especially chapter three.

pop psychology or new age feel-good self-centeredness. This challenge to religious identity is an important issue for liberals today; I discuss it in more detail in Part II.

Continuity. The second characteristic of liberal theology is an emphasis on continuity over discontinuity. This was in part a modernist response to older orthodox theologies, which tended to make sharp distinctions and to preserve certain dualities. Perhaps the most important of these dualities was the distinction between the natural and the supernatural. God was associated with the supernatural realm, which existed behind or above the natural world. From that perspective, God acted upon and within the natural world by means of revelation, miracle, and such events as the incarnation, but was otherwise removed. Other dualisms preserved sharp distinctions between such categories as sacred and secular, nature and human, saved and sinner (or elect and non-elect), and the like. Liberal theology has generally sought to avoid these kinds of dualisms, and to emphasize instead the continuity or interrelatedness of things. The liberal tendency to blur the distinction between religion and culture is an example of this.

Perhaps the most significant theological consequence of this way of thinking is an understanding of God as immanent. As scientific developments increasingly pictured the world as a single organic whole, and as the distinction between the natural and the supernatural dissolved, liberal religious thinkers began to find God in the natural world rather than removed from it. Henry Nelson Wieman's naturalistic theism, in which God is understood as only one of many processes at work within the natural world, is one example of this tendency. A different kind of immanence was represented by Shailer Mathews, who held that the social meaning and functional significance of God were more important than the metaphysical attributes or even the objective reality.

For liberals, God was also “immanent in human cultural development and revealed through it.”³⁵ Western civilization was seen by many liberals as the most complete historical embodiment of Christian ideals, and the goal of the Social Gospel movement was nothing less than “the Christianization of society”³⁶ and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. Immanentism was expressed at the personal level as well. Walter Rauschenbusch, for example, held a democratic notion of God, in which God “lives and moves” in the lives of people, acting on them directly, and who is with them in their striving, “urging them onward toward greater achievements.”³⁷ This cultural and historical immanentism reflected the modern principle of progress and led to a view of human nature as basically good. These ideas are expressions of the general theme of continuity, and both became central principles in liberal religious thought.

A related emphasis is what Kenneth Cauthen calls “dynamism.” This represents a move away from the static and rigid categories that tended to characterize orthodox theology. The orthodox position held that the world and its creatures were created more or less in their present forms. Moreover, religious truth, as revealed in Christ and scripture, was understood as complete and unchanging. Even existing social structures and institutions were accepted as normative or simply taken for granted. In orthodoxy, in other words, there was little awareness of the historical and cultural conditioning of knowledge.

Liberals, in contrast, tended to see the world in terms of dynamic elements such as change and growth. If we use traditional concepts such as revelation, for example, we are likely to say that revelation is continuous, or that religious truth is not given for all time. Among the most important sources of this outlook were the Enlightenment ideal of social progress and the development of the concept of evolution in the 19th century. Thus, reason and science were

³⁵ Hutchison, 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

³⁷ Cauthen, 94.

thought “to make possible an unending ascent toward individual and social perfection.”³⁸

Moreover, the idea of progress combined with the principle of evolution to produce a particular climate of optimism that permeated every level of liberal theology. Hutchinson calls this “religiously-based progressivism,” or the “belief that human society is moving toward realization (even though it may never attain the reality) of the Kingdom of God.”³⁹ This theme is perhaps best exemplified in the Social Gospel, but it permeated all levels of the liberal religious mind set. While this “progressive optimism” was soon to be shattered by World War I and other events, it was nevertheless “the dominant mood among liberals at the turn of the century.”⁴⁰

One of the effects of this dynamic approach is that liberals tend to hold religious ideas with a kind of tentativeness. Experience can be reinterpreted; particular religious doctrines are likely to change over time. This reduces the importance of doctrinal disputes among liberals. This characteristic is an important part of the basic liberal attitude of tolerance and open-mindedness. But it also creates a tension. It contributes to a certain liberal tendency to avoid committing ourselves to anything, as though deep commitment somehow signifies narrow-mindedness. This is unfortunate. It reminds me of James Luther Adams’ warning that the liberal commitment to openness “can produce the mind that is simply open at both ends.”⁴¹

Autonomy of the self. The third liberal characteristic is an emphasis on the autonomy of human reason and experience. The relationship of this idea to modernity’s emphasis on subjectivity, including the challenge to traditional forms of authority, is obvious. Like other modernists, religious liberals have always tended to mistrust external authority, whether of the Church, the Bible, or the state. One reason for this is the generally critical modern mind-set

³⁸ Ibid., 21.

³⁹ Hutchison, 2.

⁴⁰ Hutchison, 186.

⁴¹ James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously* Max Stackhouse, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 11.

which holds that everything is in principle subject to criticism. Another factor was the development of scientific methodologies which stressed empirical verification by the observer. In terms of religious affirmations, this meant that liberals refused to appeal to external authority for religious truth, and insisted instead that all claims be grounded in reason or confirmed by personal religious experience. At the same time, liberals tend to place less reliance on the tradition as a source of authority, and this often leads to less commitment to the tradition in practice. We think of ourselves as our own ultimate authority, and this reinforces a kind of individualism. It's worth noting here that the word *autonomy* is from Greek roots that mean "self-law."

But there is more to it than this. The modern philosophical paradigm of subjectivity, which sees the individual as an autonomous and self-regulating subject, has long dominated the liberal religious understanding of the self. Earl Morse Wilbur, whose two-volume study of the origins of Unitarianism has become a standard reference, identified three defining principles that characterized the early liberal religious movement: freedom, reason, and tolerance. Freedom implied no bondage to creeds or confessions; reason meant no blind reliance on authority or tradition; and tolerance implied no insistence on uniformity in doctrine, worship, or polity.⁴² This highly individualized understanding of religion was reinforced by the philosophy of the subject that emerged in the Enlightenment, and it has characterized the liberal religious tradition, especially Unitarianism and Universalism, ever since.

A strong emphasis on individual reason and the "right of private judgment" was evident in the eighteenth century rational religion that eventually led to Unitarianism,⁴³ and a radical

⁴² Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism*, vol. 1: *Socinianism and Its Antecedents* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945), chapter one.

⁴³ Conrad Wright, *The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1970), chapter one.

individualism, including an almost pathological resistance to institutional authority, accompanied the rise of Universalism as a radical sect in pre-Revolutionary New England.⁴⁴ In the nineteenth century, liberal religious movements from Transcendentalism to Free Religion resisted institutional structures and upheld the primacy of direct, unmediated access to the divine. These forms of individualism have persisted into the twentieth century and, I argue, continue to dominate much liberal religious self-understanding.

Of course, there have been periodic challenges to this tradition of individualism. Early in the present century, Unitarian minister and pacifist John Haynes Holmes, for example, argued that the individual is not “an isolated personal entity,” but rather “in reality a social creature.”⁴⁵ By the same token, Universalist leader Clarence Russell Skinner insisted that the philosophy of individualism was simply “unworkable” in the contemporary context.⁴⁶ Unitarian Universalist theologian and ethicist James Luther Adams affirmed the relational nature of the self in his concept of “social incarnation.” As he liked to put it, “there is no such thing as a good person as such. There is the good husband, the good wife, the good worker, the good employer, the good layperson, the good citizen.”⁴⁷ And liberal theologian Henry Nelson Wieman also held a fundamentally social conception of the self, expressed most fully in his doctrine of creative interchange.⁴⁸ Yet despite these theological developments, the individualistic understanding of the self that emerged with the Enlightenment has proved remarkably persistent within the liberal

⁴⁴ Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), part two.

⁴⁵ John Haynes Holmes, *The Revolutionary Function of the Modern Church* (New York: Putnam, 1912), 38.

⁴⁶ Clarence Russell Skinner, *Liberalism Faces the Future* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 97.

⁴⁷ Adams, *On Being Human*, 17.

⁴⁸ I develop Wieman’s conception of the self more thoroughly in my doctoral dissertation, Paul B. Rasor, *Creative Interchange, Intersubjectivity, and the Social Self: A Contemporary Reexamination of Henry Nelson Wieman’s Empirical Theology* (unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, 1998).

religious tradition. This persistence has led to some important challenges for liberal theology, which I take up in Part II.

Prophetic Voice. Finally, the fourth characteristic I wish to emphasize is what I call the prophetic voice. Liberal theology has always understood itself in prophetic terms, as offering a critique of culture. Liberal theologians have been quick to call society to account in the face of injustice, to challenge the cultural status quo, and to call for reform. James Luther Adams has called this the “progressive element” in religious liberalism.⁴⁹ But there is a tension here, too. Liberals have tended to come from the educated classes of society, and sometimes the ruling classes, and in many ways they have often represented the very establishment they seek to critique. This was certainly true of our Unitarian forebears in New England, for example.

Another dimension of this tension is related to liberal theology’s adaptation to culture. As H. Richard Niebuhr recognized long ago, the easy accommodation of religion and culture tends to produce a certain level of intellectual and social comfort. The result, as Niebuhr put it, is that religious liberals tend to be “non-revolutionaries who find no need for positing ‘cracks in time.’”⁵⁰ So, while they often supported social reform, and while their theologies and religious ideas often provided the justification for reform, liberals have tended to avoid reform that was too radical, or that threatened their privilege or called on them to give up something. Again, I will take up this challenge in more detail in Part II.

Critiques of Modernity

Modernity was not simply an unbroken trajectory of progress and freedom. A critique of modernity appeared almost as soon as the discourse of modernity began. As Habermas notes, there was a “philosophical counterdiscourse” which accompanied the discourse of modernity

⁴⁹ Adams, *On Being Human Religiously*, 5.

⁵⁰ H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 84.

“from the start.”⁵¹ Marx pointed out how the modernist economic structure, capitalism, led to the alienation and exploitation of the very workers that produced the wealth. Nietzsche warned of the nihilism that stood at the door of modernity, and he announced that the Enlightenment’s claims to systematic reason were but systems of persuasion and the results of the willful uses of power. Full treatment of these critiques is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I wish to explore briefly the negative side of some of the elements of modernity discussed above, along with one critical theme not discussed earlier, the issue of race in modernity. Again, these critiques raise continuing challenges not only for modernity, but for liberal theology as well.

Alienation. As discussed above, the problem of rationalization was central to Weber’s understanding of modernity. His analysis led him to a very pessimistic assessment of the modern world. For example, the Puritan Calvinist idea of the “calling,” which once gave direction and meaning to one’s life, has been reduced by rationalism to the technical capitalism of “machine production.” Material goods, which once provided a source of comfort and security as well as a sign of election, have instead “gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over [our] lives.”⁵² As a result, “while modern liberal society was supposed to free people for involvement in more diverse ends,” instead it merely “enslaved [them] to supposedly neutral techniques and technologies.”⁵³ Moreover, religious ideas have lost the “significance for culture and national character which they deserve.”⁵⁴ We are caught in “iron cage” built from the material and bureaucratic reality we have constructed for ourselves. Our existence has become regimented by material and economic necessity, and we have lost the religious and other structures that once gave it meaning. We have become “specialists without spirit, sensualists

⁵¹ Habermas, 295.

⁵² Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 181.

⁵³ Lyon, 31.

⁵⁴ Weber, 183.

without heart.”⁵⁵ For Weber, ironically, it was those very structures, in the form of ascetic Protestantism, that created the ethos that led to our present state. But modernity now floats free, no longer anchored to the moral underpinnings once provided by these religious structures. As a result, the rationalism of modernity has led not to security, but to insecurity and alienation.

Racism. Cornel West raises an important challenge to the legacy of modernity that is often overlooked by traditional philosophical and sociological analysis. He calls it “the *night* side of the Age of Enlightenment, the reality left unlit by the torch of natural reason.”⁵⁶ This is the legacy of the enslavement of Africans and the white supremacist ideology that justified or tolerated it. West’s point is that white supremacy was not simply an aberration, the misguided ideology of an unenlightened minority. Instead, it was built into the very structures of modernity itself:

White supremacy is an integral component of European progress, with the evil of African slavery a precondition of progressive breakthroughs in the modern world. The great paradox of Western modernity is that democracy flourished for Europeans, especially men of property, alongside the flowering of the transatlantic slave trade and New World slavery. ... This tragic springboard of modernity, in which good and evil are inextricably interlocked, still plagues us.⁵⁷

In other words, the whole philosophical and social structure of modernity depended on the notion of white supremacy. White supremacy shaped the very discourse of modernity; it is a cultural presupposition for it. As West sees it, the forms of rationality as well as the aesthetic and cultural ideals that emerged during modernity required white supremacy. These included the adoption of classical Greek ideals of physical beauty and the emergence of forms of classification of human beings. Since it was the European elites that were defining the standards and doing the classifying, and since they inevitably conceived of themselves as more “advanced”

⁵⁵ Ibid., 182.

⁵⁶ West, 51.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 52.

than others, black people and others who seemed different were perceived to be inferior. The controlling metaphors, the classificatory nature of objective rationality, and other factors, meant that a notion of black equality in beauty or intellectual capacity simply could not be held. West calls this an act of “discursive exclusion.”⁵⁸

Thus, the very structures of modernity led inexorably to wholesale exclusion of an entire race of people from its touted ideals. Modernity’s “normative gaze,” the lens through which it saw the world, would simply not permit any other outcome. Indeed, the normative gaze of white supremacy was accepted, even presupposed, so that it did not have to be argued or justified. It could just be assumed, even by the most progressive white intellectuals. The inferiority of non-white peoples, and even the very classification of people into these categories, was just something that “everybody knows.” West concludes here by reminding us that this normative gaze and the discursive model it sets up do not by themselves explain racism; the more obvious factors of power, oppression, the political and economic interests of slave holders, and the like, are also critical. But for West, this idea of the normative gaze and the discourse of white supremacy is an important “neglected variable” in our understanding.

The legacy of modernity’s embedded racism continues to plague all aspects of our society, of course. And precisely because it was inherent in modernity, it was necessarily present from the beginning in liberal theology as well. Indeed, as West’s analysis of the normative gaze shows, it could not have been otherwise. I cannot here trace out the history of racism, or its links to sexism, in liberal religious thought. But it is worth noting that these views poisoned the minds of those involved in even the most progressive liberal theological movements, such as the Social Gospel of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As

⁵⁸ Ibid., 70.

Dorrien notes, most of the social gospellers “were middle class and politically conventional.” As such, “they did not think of blacks or women as possessing intellectual or political agency,” and they “embraced the dominant culture’s Anglo-Saxon racial mythology.”⁵⁹ The liberal church has struggled with this legacy ever since, and continues to struggle with it today. I have addressed some of the ways in which the tendencies of liberal theology both help and interfere with our ongoing anti-racism work in other writing, and I treat some related issues in Part II.⁶⁰

Not all of the negative aspects of modernity have a direct relation to the question of religion, nor can all of them necessarily be linked to liberal theology. But the links between modernity and liberal theology are strong enough that any critique of the one is bound to have serious implications for the other. Thus as modernity’s weaknesses become more apparent, serious challenges are raised for liberal theology as well. These weaknesses can be said to represent the negative side of liberalism’s link to modernity.

Modernity’s limits. In sum, while modernity and the ideas of the Enlightenment shaped in some way nearly everything we think about today, it did (and does) have its limits. I’ll make just two final points here. First, it is worth remembering that the Enlightenment was not universal, even where it was strongest. In many ways these were just the ideas of a particular group of male intellectual elites in Northern and Western Europe. The vast majority of people still held traditional ideas about religion, and any real individual autonomy was available only to those with means. Still, the ideas of these intellectual elites did have a profound impact on the Western world.

⁵⁹ Dorrien, vol. 1, 408-09.

⁶⁰ See Paul Rasor, “Reclaiming Our Prophetic Voice: Liberal Theology and the Challenge of Racism,” in Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones, eds., *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (Boston: Skinner House, 2003), 105-25.

Second, as I have noted, modernity itself has been a mixed bag. It gave us science, technology, modern medicine, universal education, democracy, the concept of human rights, the middle class, religious freedom, and much else that we take as good. But it also led to militarism, nationalism, rampant capitalism, bureaucratization, colonialism, and at the extremes of rationalism gone mad, things like totalitarianism. This is worth remembering when we consider some of the challenges presented to modernity and to liberalism by the postmodern perspective.