EDITORIAL

MODERNITY, POSTMODERNITY AND RELIGION

'Modernism' and 'postmodernism' have, implicitly or explicitly, influenced much of the contemporary study of religion. To define either in a way that would be agreeable to all interlocutors would, however, be not just a difficult but a hopeless task; the terms are vague, they have been understood in many ways, and their sense shifts from discipline to discipline.

What 'modernism' long mean in religion, for example (i.e., a movement that held that religion must 'adapt' to the intellectual, moral and social needs of the day, that the meaning of religious dogma can change, and that ecclesiastical authority can be replaced by empirical science or subjective intuition), is certainly distinct from what it means in art (e.g., the impressionist, surrealist, and expressionist movements typical of the latter part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries). Again, what 'postmodernism' means in cultural studies or politics, (e.g., Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), where it is associated with the economic and cultural characteristics of post-World War II America) has little obviously in common with what it means in literature, where it is seen as an engagement in a self-conscious and self-referential 'play' that manifests itself in 'kitsch' and 'eclecticism' (see Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent* [1990]).

The diversity of meaning of the terms is equally apparent in recent theology, religious studies, and

philosophy.Nevertheless, one can provide some remarks on how they are generally understood in this context.

Broadly construed, philosophical 'modernism' holds the view that epistemology has a priority over metaphysics, and that objective 'truth' and 'knowledge' are possible and can be established by a formal, rational procedure, but that the conditions of knowledge are, in some way, determined by the capacities of the knowing subject. 'Modernism' is, moreover, 'optimistic'--it suggests that knowledge is 'progressive' and 'emancipatory,' and that the knowing subject is (self) perfectible. According to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (*Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, 1944), it also sees reason as 'instrumental'--that is, as a tool to be used, not only to understand, but to master or control, the world. This movement is typically said to have begun in the early seventeenth century (e.g., with Descartes), and to have had its most complete statement in the work of the enlightenment philosophers and, principally, Kant.

Postmodernism describes--and even celebrates--the disintegration of the cultural, political and philosophical views typical of modernity. It is associated with such philosophers as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty. These authors challenge the 'modern' position that there is a community of discourse or an epistemological model that allows for rational and objective knowledge. In the words of one of its principal representatives, Jean-François Lyotard, postmodernism is an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (*The Postmodern Condition*, 1984)--that there is or can be 'one story' into which all truth or knowledge can be placed. More specifically, within Anglo-American and German philosophy, it is considered to be anti-foundationalist, anti-realist, anti-essentialist, highly pluralistic and pragmatist. It rejects the quest for certainty in epistemology, specifically,

by denying the existence of any 'first principles' (see Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 1991).

There are several features common to the work of many so-called 'postmoderns.' To begin with, they argue against a view of the human subject as a privileged basis of knowledge, for--postmoderns claim--human beings have no 'essence' or 'nature' and are socially constructed and conditioned.

Second, 'postmodernism' challenges the 'modern' standard for knowledge--i.e., that, for one to know something, one's claim to knowledge must be directly or indirectly derivable from self-evident principles. Postmoderns assert that such a standard is, at best, arbitrary and, at worst, self defeating. It is arbitrary because there is no reason for believing that it is true, because there are other, equally plausible models of 'knowledge' that are available, and because few, if any, of our knowledge claims could ever pass such a test; it is self-refuting because it cannot measure up to the standard that it sets--i.e., it is neither derivable from principles we know independently to be true nor is it self-evident.

Third, 'postmoderns' deny that there is *any* single, universal and ahistorical model of 'rationality.' Empirical observation and history reveal that there are many different models of rationality, each rooted in distinct historical periods and each reflecting different social and cultural conditions--and there is no means of establishing any one as ultimately preferable. In other words, there is no single model of rationality in terms of which one could show that anything is 'true' or can be 'known.'

Finally, postmoderns point out that traditional philosophy attributes to reason (and, particularly, to philosophical demonstration) an authority and a universal character that is simply implausible. As Richard Rorty has

argued, there can be no 'grounding'--no 'foundation'--outside of a context or (what Wittgenstein called) a 'form of life'. Reason is contextual. There are, moreover, no universally shared beliefs from which one could provide a 'demonstration' of certain 'truths,' and any attempt at rational demonstration will fail because all argument rests on assumptions that a person may reasonably deny. Not surprisingly, postmoderns reject the 'modern' view that 'reason' has the power to evaluate the claims of all scientific or social endeavour.

Arguably, postmodernism has drawn attention to problems in modern thought--e.g., the emphasis on the powers of human reason and the exclusion of any role for the sentiments in knowledge. Moreover, by focusing on particulars, rather than universal principles, postmodernism reminds us that features of 'reality' have been marginalized or overlooked (e.g., the experience of non-western cultures, of women, and of propertyless classes). Still, it has been held to be not only relativistic, but fundamentally nihilistic, because it understands all human relations as mere relations of power.

Not surprisingly, there have been a number of attempts to respond to modernity and postmodernity. One important effort can be found in the work of the German philosopher, Juergen Habermas, who wishes to retain some elements of 'modernism' while abandoning its 'foundationalist' tendencies (see his *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 1987). Another, within the Catholic tradition, is found in the work of French philosopher, Jacques Maritain (1882-1973). Maritain holds that reason can attain objective knowledge, but that it must be ordered to its object (see *The Range of Reason*, 1952). To employ one sense of 'reason' to the exclusion of all others, without regard to the nature of the object to be known, leads to relativism and, ultimately, scepticism. Yet to say this is not to say that there are

different rationalities, but simply that we can make distinctions in rationality, dependent upon the object to be known.

In this collection of essays, the authors want to draw out some of the implications of modernism or postmodernism--or both--for the nature and practice of religion. In these studies, we find one of two questions invariably coming to the fore: first, 'Are modernity and postmodernity--and the religious and secular movements to which they have given rise--inconsistent with religious faith?' and, second, 'To what extent are contemporary religion and theology prisoners of modernity and postmodernity?"

The first essay in this collection provides some reflections on the relation of modernity and postmodernity to Christian religious belief. By drawing on the thought of Walter Kasper, Hunter Brown wishes to show what these two movements can teach Christianity about itself. Brown notes that modernism and postmodernism have presented a number of challenges to theology but, he believes, following Kasper, that they also provide an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the Christian faith--specifically, by reminding us that Christianity itself has long emphasized the centrality of the subject and of history. Christianity, however, is also able to draw on resources that prevent it from falling into postmodern relativism or perspectivism. By being attentive to this, Brown argues, we may undertake a new approach to theology that nevertheless has 'foundationalist' elements.

In "Bergson, Judaism and Catholicism," Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel of the Catholic University of Lublin (Poland) raises the question of the relation of religion to its pre-modern heritage, through a discussion of the connection between the philosophy and the religious

commitments of the French philosopher, Henri Bergson. Bergson is known as one of the pre-eminent French metaphysicians and philosophers of science of the turn of the century, and was a leading intellectual at the time of the 'modernist' controversy in France. He has often been seen as a 'secular' thinker and, while he was a major influence on the Catholic intellectuals, Jacques and Raissa Maritain, the Maritains rejected his work when they embraced Catholicism. Not surprisingly, then, Bergsonian philosophy is generally regarded as incompatible with 'orthodox' religion. But Bergson's philosophy is not, in fact, anti-religious, and in his private life he was not only open to religious belief but, despite his Jewish origins, frequently expressed a sympathy to Catholicism. Dr Weksler-Waszkinel's essay tells us something of the man, Henri Bergson, dispels some of the myths concerning the putatively secular character of his thought, and explains the 'rationality' of his decision to remain a Jew.

Many of those who attempt to understand the influence of modernity and post-modernity on religion and philosophy have turned to hermeneutics. In his essay, Purushottama Bilimoria presents an outline of the development of contemporary hermeneutics, from its beginnings in the nineteenth century, through its appearance in the work of Martin Heidegger, to the recent exchange between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Juergen Habermas. In order to outline the 'proper task' of hermeneutics and its bearing on religion, Bilimoria turns to the 'intervention' of Paul Ricoeur in the Gadamer-Habermas debate. He concludes by showing the implications of Ricoeur's analysis for thinking on religion.

In his article, "Desire and Religion," Ignace Verhack focuses on one aspect of Heidegger's philosophical views, as presented in the seminal work, *Being and Time*. Verhack is concerned with Heidegger's understanding and critique of

'the modern' as 'inauthentic being.' Specifically, he argues that, in his treatment of the will and the movement of *Dasein* (i.e., human being in the world), Heidegger leads us down a blind alley to a dead end. Heidegger's failure to understand the character of the will prevents him from explaining why or how human beings can be brought to existential authenticity. Such an explanation is, however, possible. It is related to the reality of desire--the desire for the absolute in religion--something which (Verhack suggests) Heidegger seemed to begin to recognize only much later in life.

As noted earlier, the issues and questions raised by postmoderns have also had an important influence on religious discourses that are concerned with recognizing the marginalization of groups, such as women and certain racial and ethnic communities.

In "Modernity, Postmodernity, and Feminism," Annette Ahern explains that feminism--both as a secular and as a religious movement--is rooted in the Enlightenment. She examines the feminist critique of traditional Christian theology and the response of the religious sociologist, Peter Berger. Ahern argues that Berger's famous critique of ideology, and his lesser-known challenge to feminist religious thought, fail his own methodological test. Nevertheless, she concludes that both feminists and their critics (such as Berger) must be more willing to accommodate the perspectives of their opponents.

Marsha Hewitt's essay on "The Eclipse of Subjectivity and Idealizations of the 'Other'" provides a solution to some of the problems raised in Ahern's analysis of postmodernism and feminist religious thought. Hewitt notes that one of the central debates in contemporary feminist theological discussion is on the issue of

autonomous identity and subjectivity--a debate which itself reflects fundamental conflicts between modernity and postmodernity. Hewitt wishes, first, to show how this conflict bears on contemporary feminism and, second, to provide a detailed critique of the postmodern theorist, Edith Wyschogrod, whose work has important implications for feminist religious thought. Hewitt argues that, in abandoning the model of autonomous subjectivity that is characteristic of modernity, postmodern theory undermines feminism and, thereby, feminist theology. She turns to the discourse theories of Juergen Habermas and Selya Benhabib, then, to show how some of the values of modernity can be preserved in feminist religious thought.

Finally, how does religion fare in light of the cultural and political crises of the past 30 years? One of the most obvious dangers of the postmodern era is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to mount a critique of the extremes of intolerance and ethnicism. Pantaleon Iroegbu turns to the African experience for a model of religious and ethnic conflict. He draws to our attention the economic, social, political, and moral malaise in Nigerian politics, and traces this not only to the after-effects of colonialism, but to the practices following out of ethnicity and religion. Fr. Iroegbu's solution to these problems--problems which are typical of postmodernity in general--is a restructuring of political society along a model that exhibits features of both modernity and post-modernity, which he calls communalism.

There are, of course, several additional issues that might have been raised in this discussion of religion, modernity and postmodernity. One might ask, for example, 'How can or might religious faith enable one to respond concretely to the problems of modernity and postmodernity?' or, more fundamentally, 'Can the principal values treasured by moderns and postmoderns alike not be

found in a metaphysic or a social ontology that has traces of both but is reducible to neither?' And there are many other questions besides. Nevertheless, the authors of the essays in this volume provide us with some information and insights from which to begin such enquiries.

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