A New Modernity
Living and Believing in an Unstable World

PART TWO

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In this second installment of a four-part series, Schreiter evaluates the interpretative lenses of postmodernism and multiculturalism in his search for new frameworks that will help the church move forward into a different kind of modernity that can account more adequately for our contemporary experience. This series is based on the 2005 Anthony Jordan Lectures, delivered at Newman Theological College in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

In the first installment of this series (February 2007), I examined four phenomena that have contributed to making the world we inhabit an unstable place. They are: globalization, increased migration, the resurgence of religion, and threats of global terrorism. Now, I will turn to two of the principal frameworks available for accounting for the phenomena and, at times, the consequences of them. These frameworks are postmodernity and multiculturalism. They have both developed as ways to help us deal with the dynamics of diversity and difference we encounter in our environments. I will argue that both of these have become increasingly unhelpful as analytic tools for reading the signs of our times and that neither of them is serving us very well in these matters any more.

Postmodernity

Postmodernity is a slippery concept. As the word itself connotes, it is somehow after the “modern.” It was first used in the art world as early as the 1920s. It

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came to be used in philosophy, the social sciences, literature, and finally theology in the last third of the twentieth century.

Within the wider domain of knowledge, Jean-François Lyotard’s report on knowledge to the government of Quebec in 1979 has served as a kind of benchmark for the postmodern as an intellectual framework (Lyotard 1984). Lyotard paints a picture of the increasing complexification and differentiation of high modernity, an outgrowth of the European Enlightenment. In that process of complexification, one discovers an increasing plurality of phenomena and types of knowledge, with a concomitant sense of the radically historical and the local. The universalist pretensions of the French and German Enlightenments seem to be slipping further and further away. One is struck in this complexity by the fact that difference seems to press itself as a priority over similarity and sameness. One is faced with unavoidable and irreducible difference. Metaphysics—on uncertain legs since the time of Immanuel Kant—becomes an untenable assertion. Indeed, as Lyotard pointed out most famously, the “grand narratives” (grands récits), those shared narratives that are the basis of social cohesion and identity, slip further and further away. What we are left with is fragments, disruptions, and discontinuities. Even the sense of the self turns out to be illusory.

The work of French deconstruction in literature, led by figures such as Paul De Man and Jacques Derrida, used these same insights to show instabilities in what has been otherwise perceived as coherent texts.

Paul Lakeland has been one of the most thoughtful figures in seeing how postmodernity has worked itself out in theology (Lakeland 1997; see also Schreiter 2003, 373–88). He has suggested that “postmodern” can refer to an intellectual theory, a set of social values, or even a subculture where these values are lived out. In theology itself, the postmodern turn has manifested itself in three principal ways. First of all, it is an anti- or countermodern turn, questioning modernity as a sound basis for doing theology at all. This is most evident in the Radical Orthodoxy group around John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, a largely Anglo-American movement (see Milbank; Pickstock). Second, there is a belief that the postmodern is something radically new and thus separate and distinct from high modern theology. The “Death of God” theologians in the United States in the 1960s and
the work of figures such as Mark C. Taylor would fit into this category (Taylor 1984). A third group would say that modernity is only failing us because it has not been thoroughly implemented enough. Theologians following the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas would be in this movement (see Mendieta). Postmodernity for them (although some of this third category would not use the term) would entail a more radical delving into modernity.

One can see how the postmodern framework might be compatible with the four movements contributing instability to our world today. Globalization has been a fragmenting, destabilizing force for many. Among the majority poor of the world it often wrests away from them any control they may have over their lives and livelihood. Among the wealthy, people are inundated with choices, so that it is hard to think in any other terms than small discrete elements—sound bites—and to prefer the short-term gain over the long-term haul and development. Migration heightens our sense of difference. Difference in language and custom, especially in urban areas where more than a hundred different ethnicities may be rubbing up against each other, seems to be the very height of the postmodern. The resurgence of religion has also meant the proliferation of new types of religiosity—either independent forms of Pentecostal and charismatic faith, or New Age syncretisms between Asian traditions and the West, homemade forms of witchcraft in the West, and Neo-Hindu and Neo-Buddhist forms of religion at home in Asian countries but in the West as well (see Schreiter 2004a, 7–24). Even within established traditions of Christianity such as Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism we see the fragmentation caused by different ideologies or changing social conceptions of things such as the ordination of gay persons and the legitimating of gay marriage (see Higgins and Letson). Contending parties within churches can seem as heterogeneous as those without. And finally, terrorism itself is about the strange, the other, the different, and the dangerous.

When seen even cursorily in this light, an inclination might be to say that the postmodern framework is the most suitable one for understanding these changing, often turbulent movements in our kinds of societies. Many people self-consciously describe themselves as “postmodern,” as living in this fragmented, heterogeneous world where difference is prized in its very difference. It is most common among

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elites who are able to survey the difference around them. But it is also common among young adults who have grown up in this blooming, buzzing reality and see it as the way to survive and to thrive in an open-ending, ever-accelerating, always-changing society. But it is not a useful term for the poor of the world, who do not have the luxury of choice that postmodernity seems to provide and for whom further fragmentation may threaten their very survival.

Put succinctly, postmodernity is a useful way of describing the difference, discontinuity, and fragmentation we are experiencing provided that this difference, discontinuity, and fragmentation do not undermine a basic sense of security and safety. It may be experienced as swirling around us, but we still have our feet planted firmly on the ground. If that ground beneath our feet is sensed as itself unstable, we are likely no longer to want to exult in difference and discontinuity. This is what happens when one finds oneself living amidst a war, in a failed state, and under direct threat of global terrorism. Then difference and discontinuity are not seen as providing more possibilities for choice, but rather as a threat to our survival. My contention is that many people in wealthier parts of the world who once saw postmodernity as enhancing their choices are now beginning to experience postmodernity’s consequences as threatening their existence.

**Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism—like its counterpart, postmodernity—carries multiple meanings. In the study of populations, it refers to people of many different cultural backgrounds occupying the same space. Within that space, they contend for recognition and respect, for goods and services, for power, and for access to the meaning-making resources of society. This has been—up to the last few years—a common meaning of the term. It is an acknowledgment of the fact that globalization and migration have changed our neighborhoods and our cities.

It has another meaning, especially from the mid-1990s, a meaning used in a pejorative manner. It refers to the attempts to broaden the general education curriculum in universities to include non-Western texts. At times it has been used to decenter the educational syllabus altogether. To be reading “dead white European males” was to be “Eurocentric” and hence not “multicultural.” Because of those “culture wars” fought in the 1990s, multicultural has become a dirty word for those who wish to preserve the European heritage. The Nobel laureate in Literature Saul Bellow summed it up in these words: “When the Zulu produce a Tolstoy, I will read him.” These discussions and debates have subsided somewhat in academe, but the miasma around the term “multicultural” lingers on.

Most recently, another pejorative use of the term has appeared. “Multicultural” refers to failed government policies regarding the integration of newcomers into (predominantly Western) societies. Societies that welcomed newcomers with great
tolerance, provided support for maintaining cultural heritage (as does the Canadian government), and generally encouraged cultural distinctiveness are now blamed for these same newcomers not being integrated into the larger society. What “integrated” means varies from place to place. In some instances, it means that newcomers still do not speak the national language. In other instances, it refers to their rejection of dominant culture values regarding equality of women, freedom of choice, freedom of religion, and autonomy of individuals within families. In yet other instances, it means the failure of newcomers to take on citizenship in their adopted lands. In all these instances, those pointing to what they see as failure are now announcing, “Multiculturalism is dead!” By that they mean that such cultural tolerance is a failed policy that threatens the cohesion of the nation (see one of the most outspoken voices, Huntington 2004).

Thus, when multiculturalism operates in stable circumstances, it can be seen as enhancing the variety in our experience of life. In unstable situations, on the other hand, the plurality of cultures bumping up against one another becomes a sign for the unknown, even the dangerous unknown. Toleration of difference becomes strained. If a genuine crisis emerges, then the channels of communication between the different groups may not be sufficient to bear the weight of information and feeling needed, because those channels are not familiar and trusted pathways.

The End of Postmodernity and Multiculturalism?

As can be seen from even this brief overview of uses of the terms post-modernity and multiculturalism, they both have captured important aspects of the world we are now living in. The diversity, the fragmentation, and the acceleration of life all are given some meaning by appeal to postmodernity. They are all factors that square uneasily with the optimism of the high modern period. Multiculturalism was an attempt to name the increasing plurality of our societies, without perhaps giving much further description of the complex interplay. Some have tried to overcome the limitations of multiculturalism by speaking of poly-culturalism. I do not know if switching from a Latin-based to a Greek-based prefix really moves the debate along much.

In this series I am trying to suggest that, while postmodern and multicultural may be useful descriptive terms for our experience when things are stable and can go relatively unquestioned, they do very little to interpret those experiences or to engage them constructively when we are perceived to be moving into a crisis. The convergence of globalization, migration, the resurgence of religion, and now the threat of global terrorism have, together, given us a potent brew that makes the world seem a great deal more unstable than has been the case in the recent past. The Cold War certainly carried with it risk and uncertainty. But the lines of demarcation between East and West, between communist and capitalist, were more
sharply drawn. The postmodern, by definition, lacks such clarity. The sheer multiplication of cultures in a given place complicates the matter further.

I think that terms such as the postmodern and multicultural served us reasonably well in a time of relative stability—or at least perceived stability. That stability could be heard in the euphoric rhetoric after the fall of the Berlin Wall and announcements of the “end of history.” We are now in a much more unstable time, especially in view of the threat of global terrorism and ecological collapse. Ulrich Beck, the German sociologist who first wrote about technological and ecological risk in the mid-1980s, has returned again to that theme (see Beck). The sense of indeterminate but real and uncontrollable risk now pervades social consciousness. One of the consequences of this is much less tolerance of ambiguity. The language of multiculturalism collapsed in the weeks about September 11, 2001. Instead of celebrating diversity, the clarion cry was, “United we stand.” People of ethnic groups that looked to be Middle Eastern had to go out of their way to prove their loyalty to the American ideals. In some instances, Muslim institutions were attacked just because they were Muslim. Similarly, the language of tolerance—so long prized in Dutch society—has disappeared in the Netherlands since the political murders of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh. In times of risk, an openness to the different and the unknown becomes simply too dangerous (see Schreiter 2004b).

In the face of such threats to our security, the temptation is to move toward a kind of default position (to use the language of information technology) of self-defense. That is, an unexamined way of interpreting things takes over, reshaping our thinking and reorienting our action. This frame may represent our genuine feelings and fears, heretofore papered over with the rhetoric of postmodernity and multiculturalism. Such unexamined thinking does not serve us well. It attempts to shield us from uncertain and unwanted intrusions into our world, but it does not engage them in any significant way.

That is what is happening, I believe, in Western societies today, in the anxiety over the long-term effects of globalization, continuing migration, resurgent religion, and global terrorism. We know that, historically, societies that perceive themselves to be under such threat are willing to sacrifice their liberty to more authoritarian rule. If the perception of threat becomes interwoven with a sense of being wronged or humiliated, it can lead to forms of fascism and willingness to sacrifice those
“others” in our midst at any cost. The question then becomes: can we find a more adequate framework for interpreting this unstable world that will lead to a better way of living together on our planet, that will guide us in overcoming the challenges facing us (rather than ignoring, denying, or repressing them)? These are the questions that animate this article and this series.

Can we find our way forward into a different kind of modernity that will account for what we are experiencing in terms of plurality, difference, contingency, and instability without engaging in violence toward one another or creating fortress-like havens of safety where people may survive for a time, but will not flourish? It is to this question that we now turn.

**Seeking the Whole:**
*From Fundamentalism to a Cosmopolitan Worldview*

I would like to propose an interpretive framework that will attempt to move us beyond relying on postmodernity and multiculturalism as modes of response. This is, needless to say, a first and tentative effort. The reality we are addressing here is complex. Nor can it be worked out in sufficient detail within the short compass of this series of articles. My hope, however, is to give a first glimpse of a direction that might be taken to move along the discussion of how we are to live in the world that is taking shape around us.

My basic hypothesis is this: although Lyotard and others aligned with some form of postmodernism have declared the “death of the grand narrative” and even the “death of the subject,” I think their claim is overdrawn. To be sure, their consigning to the dustbin of history socially shared narratives of whole societies that make overstretched claims is probably well taken. The claims of the utter universality and triumph of Western values over those of other societies does look like imperial overreach. The confidence that reason can lead to socially engineered utopias probably deserves the same fate. If the twentieth century was the acme of high modernity, its far-reaching claims have much to answer for: two world wars, genocides on new and terrifying scales, nuclear destruction, and perhaps irreversible environmental degradation cannot be claimed as triumphs for human-kind. Certainly such grand narratives need to be exposed for what they are.

But to move from there and say that no grand narrative is any more possible goes a bit too far. If anything, global communications has made commonly shared narrative more possible now than in the past. Think of the rolling celebration of the millennium in the year 2000 from Kiribati around the world to the mid-Pacific on our televisions. The mobilization of sentiment through those same media, be it at the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, the views on the Middle East from Al-Jezeera, or the devastating effects of the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, have created shared narratives that were not possible before the information era.
To be sure, viewers of these spectacles and reportage are not passive agents; they can construct meaning at local levels that elude the control of the meaning-makers. One should more properly speak here of narrative flows, that is, chains of locally constructed and transmitted narratives that are at once mutually intelligible, yet reflect concrete circumstances in local communities. Such flows have been in evidence in the social forces of globalization since the mid-1990s and are becoming more prevalent today (see Schreiter 1997, 15–21). These flows may well represent as close as we may come to an explicitly “universal”—be it socially or in our theology—in our complex and interconnected times.

Similarly, how well people are able to adjust to constant and thoroughgoing difference—especially when it threatens identity and safety—cannot stand as an assumed and unexamined premise. Especially when the transition is very rapid, most of us are likely to need help through this period. Unlimited difference may work when other aspects of society are secure, but when society itself appears under threat, our actions need to be more deliberate, and we need a place to stand from which we can see the bigger picture.

I would suggest, then, that in an unstable world, the response to the heterogeneity, the difference, and the fragmentation of the postmodern and to the relativist juxtaposition of the multicultural is not more of the same—becoming more postmodern and more relativist. To advocate this strategy is not to take into account how people act under threat. To write people off as being overly anxious or pathologically afraid is not a recipe for an ordered society. That is precisely not a celebration of difference; it is, rather, excluding people from the conversation. I think a more fruitful approach is to posit that we, as human beings, are involved in a constant searching for the whole, that is, an ongoing quest to take these disparate experiences, sensations, and ideas and craft them into patterns of intelligibility. That intelligibility may be cognitive, moral, social, or aesthetic—or all of the above. The point is that we do not live in an utterly unordered world. To do so would condemn us all to solipsism and silence. Unless we can discern and delineate some of the patterning that is going on in this bewildering variety of data, we give ourselves over to a Hobbesian world where the strongest and those with most access to power will prevail.

If we are able to learn from history and from previous reflection on great human failures, we have a better chance of constructing something that will indeed serve the well-being of the human community.
The first reaction to such a proposal may be one of extreme caution, because we know what kind of unities or wholes were crafted out of the chaos of the immediate past century. Varieties of totalitarian rule—be it fascist, communist, revanchist, or what have you—have been imposed by strongmen upon a helpless population. To suggest such stirs resistance even in those who are the most critical of the Enlightenment. This is a set of dangers for which we must remain vigilant. But fear, uncertainty, and the lack of security will drive even the most rational into postures they would not have accepted of themselves in calmer times. Recent legislation regarding immigrants and potential terrorists in different countries in Europe, the United States, and Australia are evidence of this. To simply turn our heads away, saying that we must do this because the world has become too dangerous, will not eliminate the danger. As human beings, we are symbol-makers, and we do not make them in isolation from one another. It seems to me better to pay close attention to how we try to construct a sense of the whole rather than see it as a slippery slope that leads to totalitarianism. If we are able to learn from history and from previous reflection on great human failures, we have a better chance of constructing something that will indeed serve the well-being of the human community.

In order to move forward, however, there must be a few words about modernity itself. Like postmodernity, it is a slippery concept, one that cannot be resolved here. What is offered is no more than a benchmark against which to measure what will come after.

One View of Modernity

A good way to get some perspective on the elusive concept of modernity is to step outside the North Atlantic, Western ambit, where modernity was born and where its flame is kept most brightly burning. As with secularization, there was once the view that the rest of the world would follow in the path blazed by Europe, especially with the French and the Scottish Enlightenments. Today, it is more common to speak of modernities in the plural. They bear family resemblances and can communicate with one another, but are not carbon copies or (perhaps now the more apposite metaphor) clones of one another (see further in Schreiter 2000, 297–308).

For such a view, I turn here to the Mexican critic Néstor García Canclini, in his study of hybridity, modernity, and mixing (1995). In looking at modernization from a Latin American perspective, he describes modernity as the result of four interlocking projects.

The first he calls an emancipating project, wherein all aspects of life are secularized, i.e., emancipated from ecclesiastical or political control. Social life is rationalized and individualism becomes the norm, especially in urban areas.
The second is an expansive project, whereby society tries to gain power over nature as well as over the production and circulation of goods and knowledge. Extending scientific knowledge and enhancement of profit give this expansion an open horizon.

The third is a renovating project, that insists on constant innovation to elude sacred prescriptions and control, as well as constant renewal of the sign value of things in society as their value and meaning is eroded by a consumer mentality.

And finally, there is a democratizing project that constantly tries to extend all these other projects across all sectors of society for greater participation and reinforcement of the modernizing enterprise as a whole (García Canclini, 12–13).

This combination of emancipation, expansion, renovation, and democratization can provide a general framework for how modernity has operated heretofore, in a variety of cultural contexts, as well as give us a point of departure for how to think about a different kind of modernity. Before leaving this brief consideration, however, it is important to note that, for most of the world, modernity does not occupy a uniform space. Particularly in urban conglomerations outside the Western world, people may be passing daily from premodern to modern into postmodern settings. In the squatter settlements around Lagos, the favelas of Rio or São Paulo, the barrios of Mexico City, those arriving from the countryside try to reproduce their premodern villages in their new locale but go off to work (especially the women) in the modern or postmodern sites of the city—as domestic help or cleaning personnel, or doing the delicate work of computer board construction. More could be said about these different faces of modernity, but that is not our principal purpose here. In the next installment of this series, I will turn to some of the attempts to find the whole that are currently practiced but fall short of the idea and present the emerging model of second modernity.

References


