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Diagnosing Western Modernity: A Review Article

Summary: In this review article, the understanding of modernity in some contemporary English language publications is addressed. The older paradigms that these contemporary sources draw upon are also presented. With this, some critical questions are raised about these interpretations of modernity. Following these questions, the recent historical context of these narratives of modernity is described. Finally, an alternative interpretive paradigm is introduced.

Zusammenfassung: In diesem Review-Artikel wird das Verständnis der Moderne in einigen gegenwärtigen englischsprachigen Veröffentlichungen besprochen. Die älteren Paradigmen, auf die sich diese gegenwärtigen Quellen stützen, werden ebenfalls dargestellt. Daraufhin werden einige kritische Fragen zu diesen Interpretationen der Moderne gestellt. Im Anschluss an diese Fragen wird der zeitgeschichtliche Kontext dieser Erzählungen der Moderne präsentiert. Schließlich wird ein alternatives Interpretationsparadigma eingeführt.

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In this review article the diagnosis of modernity¹ and the modern subject in some contemporary English language publications is addressed. These are partly historical, partly philosophical and partly theological. One of the central aspects of these works is the negative analysis of modernity and the modern subject. In order to substantiate these negative accounts, they develop narratives which go from the late middle ages to the modern period. Here three recent examples are briefly presented from Brad S. Gregory, Thomas Pfau and Adrian Pabst. With these, other authors are also addressed who have contributed to this theme in different ways before them. As will be argued here, the sig-

¹ While recent literature has called attention to the inner plurality of modernity, and in some cases has come to use the term “multiple modernities,” most of the literature addressed in this review article uses the term “modernity” in the singular form to signify contemporary Western culture and society and the very general transition from the feudal middle ages to the Reformation, nation states, Enlightenment and ultimately to the present.

nificance of the historical and sociopolitical dimensions of the emergence of modernity is not sufficiently integrated into these narratives. Some open questions about the narratives of decline are also raised with aid of Colin Gunton. Following this, the contemporary historical and cultural context of the narratives is addressed. At the end of this article, a plea is made for a well-balanced assessment of modernity, one which includes both the negative and the positive aspects.

I Contemporary criticisms of modernity

Brad S. Gregory has offered a significant contribution to the debate about the relationship of the Reformation to the modern Western world in his book *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*.² While the book is primarily concerned with the consequences of the Reformation, a central argument of his book – the first argument made – is concerned with the philosophical dynamics of nominalism before the Reformation. In Chapter One (“Excluding God”), Gregory makes an argument that has been popularized in contemporary theological discourse by authors from the Radical Orthodoxy group (such as John Milbank). He points to the shift in ontology with Duns Scotus (1265–1308), a shift in describing God as “existing” (analogically) to existing (univocally, 37). He sees this as having contributed to, as he draws upon Radical Orthodoxy, the loss of a sacramental view of the world and, as he draws upon Amos Funkenstein, the rise of scientific naturalism. (55) He holds that this resulted in the eventual exclusion of God from intellectual discourse. The Reformation also brought “the new and compounding problem of how to know what true Christianity was. ‘Scripture alone’ was not a solution to this new problem, but its cause.” (368f.) While Gregory is right to point out that many theological and exegetical disputes followed the Reformation, the emphasis on Scriptural authority did not, of course, begin with the Reformation. Furthermore, it also provided, and continues to provide, a unifying and not only a dividing impulse. It is a framework in which theological disputes can be negotiated – disputes which were previously silenced by magisterial decree.

² Brad S. GREGORY, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Pr. of Harvard Univ. Pr., 2012). Further to this book, see my “On Brad S. Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation*,” in *Theologie.Geschichte: Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kulturgeschichte* 9 (2014), URL: universaar.uni-saarland.de/journals/index.php/tg/article/view/656/701

Gregory addresses many aspects of the emergence of the modern period. One of these is presented in Chapter Four which is titled “Secularizing Morality.” Here Gregory writes that the Reformation “ended more than a thousand years of efforts in the Latin West to create a unified moral community through Christianity. [...] Yet no such alternative moral community emerged. There were only rival moral communities [...]” (203) In his account, this led ultimately to the modern situation, the “inexorable trend toward increasing permissiveness” which is “necessarily coupled with ever more insistent calls for toleration.” (187) In the context of pluralism, and “especially after World War II and even more since the 1960s [...] the emptiness of the United States’ formal ethics of rights [would] start to become visible, the fragility of its citizens’ social relationships begin to be exposed, and its lack of any substantive moral community be gradually revealed through the sociological reality of its subjectivized ethics.” (218) Gregory’s articulation of the ideal “unified moral community” is an echo of Alasdair MacIntyre’s analysis, which lamented the decline of the Aristotelian ethical program of the middle ages. Although Gregory employs a multidimensional approach in his analysis of the emergence of the modern period by drawing upon the history of philosophy, theology, politics, morality, economics and the university, the methodological plurality is controlled by a singular metanarrative of decline.

A similarly negative analysis is found in Thomas Pfau’s recent study of modernity. He sees modernity as the home of the “modern subject” of the Western world, or the “quintessentially modern, solitary individual” in his “palpable melancholy,” both “altogether adrift” and without “interpersonal relations” or “eros as a source of motivation”. This subject, who is “utterly alone in the world,” is exemplified in a “pervasive loss of intellectual orientation and practical purpose”.³ As Stanley Hauerwas remarks in his back cover endorsement of Pfau’s book: “Pfau locates the philosophical developments that contributed to the agony of the modern mind. Moreover, he helps us see why many who exemplify that intellectual stance do not recognize their own despair.” Pfau thus offers a challenge to what he sometimes calls the “modern apologists of secular, liberal, Enlightenment society”. (170) After endorsing Brad Gregory’s criticisms of modern society and politics in the USA, Pfau claims that “a political community no longer capable of distinguishing between engaging an idea and holding an opinion [...] is almost certainly in a phase of advanced decline.” (58)

3 Thomas PFAU, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Pr., 2013), 1f.

Like many before him, Pfau identifies a theological-philosophical error at the historical root of modernity. Its “watershed moment” (163), as he calls it, was in the year of 1277 when the Bishop of Paris, Étienne Tempier, effectively condemned the synthesis of Christian theology and Aristotelianism and strengthened the shift to nominalism and ultimately voluntarism.⁴ (164–166) Surprising as it may sound, Pfau’s narrative thereby suggests that the emergence of the modern secular individual was in large part brought about by a pious French bishop (with Abelard preparing some of the groundwork for nominalism before this). What follows later is a “deeply problematic change in European modernity.” (9) He sees it as a “progressive conceptual amnesia” (10) which ultimately leads to “impoverished modernity” (185) and the triumph of the atomistic, naturalistic and reductionistic approach over the “Christian-Platonic framework”. (17) The negative momentum gained strength with William of Ockham (c. 1287–1347). While the “secular implications of Ockham’s theological arguments would not reveal themselves for some time, a fundamental shift had taken place.” (19)

Seeking to assess the “viability of the project of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment political culture,” Pfau holds that his genealogical narrative from the middle ages to the early modern subject (what he calls a “counter-narrative”) is necessary. Without it, “all thinking about modernity – and the modern state’s institutional, economic, and constitutional frameworks – remains premised on an underlying (and, I [i.e. Pfau] would argue deeply flawed) assumption that these frameworks are the only conceivable embodiment, indeed the very apotheosis of rationality.” (186f.) In this regard, the historization of modernity from middle age theological-philosophical errors is a way of challenging what he sees as a naive acceptance of modernity’s inevitability or necessity.

Another recent diagnosis of modernity is provided by Adrian Pabst. According to his study, which also draws upon the 1277 theme, “in the long and non-linear passage to modernity, faith was sundered from reason and reason was gradually reduced to the narrow rationality of logical deduction, mathematical calculation, and scientific experimentation.”⁵ Following upon nominalism and

4 Further to Tempier’s condemnation of the 219 theses, see Edward GRANT, ed., *A Source Book in Medieval Science*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1974), § 13, pp. 45–49; David PICHE, ed., *La condamnation parisienne de 1277. Articles condamnés par l’évêque Étienne de Paris en 1277, nouvelle éd. du texte latin, trad., introd. et commentaire* (Paris: Vrin, 1999); Jan A. AERTSEN, Kent EMERY Jr. and Andreas SPEER, eds., *Nach der Verurteilung von 1277. Philosophie und Theologie an der Universität von Paris im letzten Viertel des 13. Jahrhunderts. Studien und Texte* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001).

5 Adrian PABST, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), 56.

voluntarism, modernity brought “rationalism and fideism”. Ultimately, “the modern settlement has promoted [...] secular extremism and religious fundamentalism”. (199) Criticizing Spinoza’s political philosophy, Pabst writes that the “result is that individuals confound their own self-interest with the common sharing in the substance. As such, democracy is constitutively incapable of resolving the conflict between clusters of individual finite modes.” (xxxiv) Modernity ultimately leads to “modern dualism and opposition between two false alternatives – liberalism and communism.” (381) Not surprisingly, then, he rejects “the dubious attempts to rehabilitate the mainstream English, French, German, or American enlightenments”. (384) Here he cites Jürgen Habermas as an example. Pabst seems to endorse Vladimir Solovyov’s “‘free theocracy’ where all spheres of activity are framed and ordered by Christian principles and virtues of charity, solidarity, equality, and the pursuit of the common good.” (442) “Given that secular liberal democracy and unbridled ‘free-market’ capitalism have so clearly failed to deliver universal freedom and prosperity,” Pabst is also supportive of Joseph Ratzinger who, as Pabst claims, “argues for a new form of constitutional corporatism against modern liberalism, which is closely connected with the fundamental relationality of all beings and the indelible role of basic social units above the level of the individual.” (451) A criticism of democracy seems to go together with some of the contemporary critical narratives of modernity.⁶

As will be addressed below, these contemporary examples of a critical diagnosis of modernity both follow upon and modify a discourse about modernity in the 1980s and 1990s. They see the shift towards nominalism and voluntarism (and in some cases the Reformation itself) as highly problematic and indeed in many ways determinative for the emergence of modernity. In this, however, they also tend to overlook the significance of the political and social world of the late middle ages.

⁶ For example, Pabst writes: “The depth and mysteriousness of reality warrant the use of myths, metaphors, and analogies that go beyond the categories of logic. [...] This is connected with the idea of a virtuous guiding elite – the guardians of the republic or the Church and the corporate bodies of civil society. The pursuit of wisdom in defense of a just political order balances the democratic demand for the equal right of all opinions with universal standards of truth and goodness. As such, the perennial realism of theological metaphysics from Plato to Aquinas to modern Christian Neo-Platonists rejects the empty universalism that underpins the liberal fusion of political absolutism with moral relativism under the guise of individual freedom of choice and the tyranny of mass opinion.” PABST, *Metaphysics*, 441.

II The historical socio-political dimension of modernity

In many regards these works are very insightful and deeply learned. Even if one may not agree with their diagnosis of modernity, it is instructive to encounter their accounts of the causal intellectual relationship between the middle ages and modernity. Of course, many other themes, and not only the history of philosophy or theology, would also be necessary to understand the emergence and development of the intellectual frameworks, institutions and political orders of modernity. Some of these other aspects are the social and political dimensions of the history. These are also very important aspects of the narrative which leads to modernity. They help to show how modern liberal ideas emerged and why the people that argued for them in the 17th and 18th century saw them as necessary.

In this sense, one of the important themes is the transformation of social, political and economic structures in the late middle ages. As Johannes Grabmayer claims, “the late middle ages is characterized by revolutionary economic and social restructuring.”⁷ The impacts of these developments were not only felt in trade and in the feudal orders of the late middle ages. They also had an effect on the intellectual habits of scholars and worked to destabilize spiritual traditions associated with the old orders. Of course, the authors of the recent diagnoses of modernity and the forerunners before them in the English language context are all aware of these transformations. These shifts, however, do not play a significant role in their narratives. In this, they do not sufficiently describe the momentum behind the reforms leading to modernity. Instead of this, the transition to modernity is presented as a shift in intellectual history based upon theological or philosophical conflicts.

Besides these economic and social issues, there are other important ecclesial, political and cultural dimensions of the history. A fair account of the emergence of modernity or the modern subject would have to address (and not only simply acknowledge) the significance of the corruption of the Rome-centered church in the pre-Reformation era. Not from our perspective today, that is, but from the perspectives of the very figures who lived in the late middle ages and the early modern period. One of the classic examples of this corruption comes to expression at the Council of Toulouse under Pope Gregory IX in 1229. As Mar-

⁷ Johannes GRABMAYER, *Europa im späten Mittelalter 1250–1500: eine Kultur- und Mentalitätsgeschichte* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2004), 10.

garet Deanesly has documented in *The Lollard Bible*, the council forbid the laity from the use of the Bible, indeed even the possession of it:

*Lay people shall not have books of Scripture, except the psalter and the divine office: and they shall not have these books in the vulgar tongue. Moreover we prohibit that lay people should be permitted to have books of the Old or New Testament, except perchance any should wish from devotion to have a psalter, or a breviary for the divine office, or the hours of the blessed Virgin: but we strictly forbid their having even the aforesaid books translated into the vulgar tongue.*⁸

Deanesly has many other examples of this from across Europe at this time. This sort of authoritarianism had a significant impact on the emergence of early modern and modern thought. John Wyclif and the Lollards would later directly challenge this by putting the Bible into the hands of the people. The brutal execution of Jan Hus is perhaps the most vivid example of the lack of toleration in the ecclesial order. The executioners, of course, could have nevertheless called upon Thomas Aquinas to support their work. I do not wish to belabor the point, but another extended citation is required here. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas – the pinnacle of the human spirit for some of the critics of modernity – provided this argument for executing heretics:

With regard to heretics there are two points to be observed, one on their side, the other on the side of the Church. As for heretics their sin deserves banishment, not only from the Church by excommunication, but also from this world by death. To corrupt the faith, whereby the soul lives, is much graver than to counterfeit money, which supports temporal life. Since forgers and other malefactors are summarily condemned to death by the civil authorities, with much more reason may heretics as soon as they are convicted of heresy be not only excommunicated, but also justly be put to death. / But on the side of the Church is mercy which seeks the conversion of the wanderer, and she condemns not at once, but after the first and second admonition, as the Apostle directs. Afterwards, however, if he is yet stubborn, the Church no longer confidant about his conversion, takes care of the salvation of others by separating him from the Church by excommunication, and furthermore delivers him to the secular court to be removed from this world by death.⁹

⁸ As cited in Margaret DEANESLY, *The Lollard Bible: And Other Medieval Biblical Versions* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1920), 36f. Emphasis in original. Frans van Liere has also addressed some of the prohibitions which called for the translations to be burned by the bishops. If someone did not turn in his vernacular bible eight days after its publication, he would be, whether lay or cleric, held suspect of heresy. IDEM, *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 2014), 177–207, esp. 190 ff.

⁹ Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 32 *Consequences of faith*, 2a2æ 8–16, transl. Urban Voll (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1975), Quest. 11, Art. 3, p. 89.

Martin Luther's late attack on the Jews should also be mentioned here, as well as his contribution to the violent suppression of the Anabaptists and the revolting peasants and some of his remarks about women.¹⁰ Of course, both Aquinas and Luther have positively contributed to the theological tradition as well. These critical points should not be understood as a rejection of their work *in toto*. These points rather briefly illustrate that world from which modernity emerged. That which was to follow in the two centuries after the Reformation, in the "nonlinear" (to use Pabst's term) path to modernity, is well described by Diarmaid MacCulloch in his remarks on the Reformation. Europe was "torn apart by deep disagreements about how human beings should exercise the power of God in the world, arguments even about what it was to be human. It was a process of extreme mental and physical violence."¹¹ It was also, of course, a process which brought a positive new emphasis on the importance of an individual's conscience.

Thomas Hobbes's theory of the state was one of the ideas which emerged to deal with what MacCulloch describes. While John Milbank, and many of the critics of modernity addressed here, see Hobbes constructing "a new metaphysics of political power," this analysis is one-sided.¹² Whatever one may think about the contemporary relevance of Hobbes's anthropology, his political philosophy followed directly from the historical context mentioned above. He claimed that while man may be a kind of God and could act in charity and justice, there is also a brutality in humanity according to which "man is a wolf to man" taking up "violence and fraud." Especially between commonwealths, man may adopt the "predatory nature of beasts."¹³ The vivid descriptions of human brutality are related to his urgency to restrain it with a better political order.

Some have sought to make the decline of the middle age order and the "transfer of power from the church to the state" responsible for the violence in the early modern period. William T. Cavanaugh writes in *The Myth of Religious*

¹⁰ Thomas KAUFMANN, *Luthers "Judenschriften": ein Beitrag zu ihrer historischen Kontextualisierung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); Jörg TRELENBERG, "Luther und die Bestrafung der Täufer," in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 110 (2013), 22–49; Michael G. BAYLOR, *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, Mass.: Bedford St. Martin's, 2012); Susan C. KARANT-NUNN and Merry E. WIESNER-HANKS, eds., *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 2003).

¹¹ Diarmaid MACCULLOCH, *Reformation: A History* (New York, N.Y.: Viking, 2004), xix.

¹² John MILBANK, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 1st ed. 1990 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 27.

¹³ Thomas HOBBS, *On the Citizen*, eds. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1998), 3f.

Violence: “The so-called wars of religion appear as wars fought by state-building elites for the purpose of consolidating their power over the church and other rivals”. He also states that “the very distinction of politics and religion made possible by the rise of the modern state against the decaying medieval order – the transfer of power from the church to the state – was itself at the root of these wars.”¹⁴ While “state-building” (162) was surely a part of the story, there was nevertheless a deep interconnection of religious and political interests in most all of the early modern European wars of religion. This makes it difficult to single out “state-building” as a scapegoat and thereby effectively exculpate “the religion of the church,” as Cavanaugh calls it elsewhere, from the criticisms of the “liberal theorists.” (177)

The emergence of nominalism and voluntarism were certainly important developments in philosophical theology, developments that had a significant influence on early modern thought. At the same time, however, the economic, social, ecclesial and political forces of the late middle ages and the early modern period were critical factors in the history. These factors should not be overlooked in the narrative to the “altogether adrift” modern subject, as Pfau calls it, or as Gregory remarks, the “Kingdom of Whatever.”¹⁵

III Some open questions about the narratives of decline

There are a few open questions that Colin Gunton has put forward about what might be called the “middle age nominalism and voluntarism to modern alienation theory.” Gunton’s 1992 Bampton Lectures, published as *The One, the Three and the Many* in 1993, is itself one of the works which popularized the theory for the 1990s English speaking theological crowd (along with Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory*).¹⁶ Pfau also drew upon *The One, the Three and the Many* in his *Minding the Modern*. Later in 1999 in an “Editorial” for the second issue of the first volume of the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Gunton seems to show some critical distance to the way that the above named theory

¹⁴ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2009), 162. Cf. Barbara B. Diefendorf, “Were the wars of religion about religion?” in *Political Theology* 15 (2014), 552–563.

¹⁵ Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 378.

¹⁶ Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity, The 1992 Bampton Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1993).

was developing in contemporary theology. There he offers a review of *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, an editorial work of John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward. This volume included many essays which promoted the theory.¹⁷ There Gunton wrote: “However much we may be able to agree that Ockhamist voluntarism has much to answer for the alienation of modernity, it is remarkable that nowhere in these papers [in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*] is reference made to the possibility that the synthesis fell apart under the weight of its own contradictions.”¹⁸

Gunton goes on to cite Lawrence Paul Hemming’s contribution in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* as an example of the awareness that the historical narrative may start too late with Ockham. Hemming writes: “The question remains whether Augustine or Ockham and not only Descartes are the founders of modern subjectivity.”¹⁹ Regarding Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory*, Gunton wrote that Milbank “runs the risk of making modernity emerge too suddenly out of the past.”²⁰ While Gunton agrees with some of the criticism of Scotus and nominalism, he also draws attention to another perspective on the issue. He writes in his “Editorial”:

Granted that nominalism tore apart God and the world, with the dire consequences with which we now have to live, it can still be held that they had been held together conceptually by a structure that was bound to collapse and, indeed, ought to have collapsed; that is, by a world of forms and *rationes*, intermediate between the creator and the creation, rooted in an essentially pagan philosophy. Scotus, with his distinctive christology, could and should equally well be credited with an attempt to put back trinitarianly that which had been held together merely philosophically.²¹

In contrast to a metaphysics of mystical union where individuality is lost, Gunton drew attention to the particularity of the divine persons in the unity of the relational Trinity. In this he emphasized something which is praiseworthy: an understanding of unity as differentiated and an understanding of individuality as relational. Gunton raises another issue in his criticism of *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*:

17 London: Routledge, 1999.

18 COLIN GUNTON, “Editorial,” in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1 (1999), 113–118, here: 115.

19 *IBID.*, 115. Cf. Laurence Paul HEMMING, “Nihilism: Heidegger and the Grounds of Redemption,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, 91–108, here: 93.

20 GUNTON, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 55.

21 GUNTON, “Editorial,” 115.

[...] the question remains whether orthodoxy must depend on a reversion to a dependence on that particular high mediaeval philosophy. If it must, it is scarcely a radical step, except backwards. Moreover, should not theological assaults on the modern make a little more obeisance to the fact that the institutionalism against which the modern world reacted was often repressive and coercive, and owed rather more than is comfortable to Augustine's allegorizing of "compel them to come in"? Nor can the modern advocate of orthodoxy ignore the pervasive anti-semitism of a western culture that systematically minimized the Jewish component of its faith in part because of its captivity to Hellenistic philosophy. More radical questioning of the tradition than is offered here [in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*] is a necessity.²²

As a theologian, Gunton raises important questions which go to the heart of what Pfau calls the "Christian-Platonic framework," and what Pabst calls the "Christian Neo-Platonic fusion of biblical revelation with Greco-Roman philosophy".²³ In this regard, Gunton wants to emphasize the importance of the Old Testament and the interrelationship between Christianity and Judaism for the understanding of the Christian faith today. He sees the "Jewish component," as he calls it, as potentially endangered by the strong emphasis on Greek philosophy. While there is, of course, the possibility of a harmonious synthesis, Gunton raises the question as to whether this issue has been recognized as a potential problem.²⁴ One of the most important authors working in this area today is Peter Schäfer, the new director of the Jewish Museum in Berlin. With his many publications, such as *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (2012), he has shown how the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, especially in the first six or seven centuries after the inception of Christianity, is far more complex and mutually conditioning than has often been assumed.

IV The contemporary context of the narratives

If we jump ahead around 700 years after 1277 we enter the historical framework in which many of the English language narratives of modernity in the last 30 years have their *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life). Following Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), in the middle of the broad discourse about postmo-

²² GUNTON, "Editorial," 116.

²³ PABST, *Metaphysics*, xxvii.

²⁴ Sven Grosse has addressed a "remarkable neglect of the Bible in the discourses and arguments of Radical Orthodoxy." IDEM, "'Radical Orthodoxy' – Darstellung und Würdigung einer herausfordernden Theologie," in *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 55 (2013), 437–464, here: 456.

dermism in the 1980s and 1990s,²⁵ and in the midst of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the primary opponent of liberal, modern, capitalistic, democratic and free societies after World War II, and already before the decisive year of 1989, as the social and political orders of the Warsaw Pact countries began to deteriorate in the Cold War, a new wave of intellectual criticism emerged to challenge the dominate intellectual paradigm in the West.²⁶ These challenges to liberalism and modernism were primarily focused on the intellectual background of the USA and the UK. While there are many differences between them, most of them developed narratives about the emergence of modernity and the modern individual. Since then, the critical diagnosis of modernity has become more precise. There has been a consolidation of the sources and arguments. Among the many key figures in the English language discourse, a few names are Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue*, 1981), Stanley Hauerwas (*A Community of Character*, 1981), Colin E. Gunton, Michael J. Buckley, Charles Taylor (*Sources of the Self*, 1989; *A Secular Age*, 2007), John Milbank, Michael A. Gillespie (*Nihilism before Nietzsche*, 1995; *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, 2008) and more recently David B. Hart, Adrian Pabst, Brad S. Gregory and Thomas Pfau. With most of these authors and many others, the reader will encounter a critical intellectual diagnosis of modernity and the modern individual. Some critical responses have also emerged in English with Jeffrey Stout (*Democracy and Tradition*, 2004) and in the editorial work of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marion Grau (*Interpreting the Postmodern*, 2006).

It is important to emphasize the diversity and sophistication of these authors' critical appraisals of modernity. In the 1980s and 1990s, many of them were drawing upon new innovative streams of philosophy, such as hermeneutical philosophy and postmodernism. In the mid 1980s in *Enlightenment and Alienation*,²⁷ for example, Gunton drew upon a critique of objective scientific positivism from Michael Polanyi. Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958) was the publication of his 1951–52 Gifford Lectures (Aberdeen). Gunton also drew upon Hans-Georg Gadamer and Helmut Kuhn. He was also in conversation with many contemporary philosophers in his critique of the Enlightenment in the *The One, the Three and the Many*, such as Theodor

²⁵ Apart from Richard Rorty's English publications in the 1970s and 1980s, Hans-Georg GADAMER's *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) was first translated into English in 1975; Jacques DERRIDA's *De la grammatologie* (1967) was translated in 1976, and Jean-François LYOTARD's *La condition postmoderne* (1979) was translated in 1984.

²⁶ Further to this theme, see my "Freedom in the 1990s," in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66 (2013), 414–430; cf. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 19.

²⁷ Colin E. GUNTON, *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay Towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985).

W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Isaiah Berlin, Amos Funkenstein, Robert B. Pippin (*Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 1991), Karl Popper, Hilary Putnam, John Rawls, Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, Charles Taylor, and many theologians. Indeed, some of his criticism of modernity is drawn from a few of these philosophers, such as Pippin, or even from art critics, such as Norman Rosenthal (the former Exhibitions Director at the Royal Academy in London).²⁸ There is also a degree of ambiguity regarding the criticism of modernity among many of these authors. As Christoph Schwöbel has remarked with view to *Enlightenment and Alienation*, Gunton's "'skeptical,' yet optimistic attitude shows that he is not only a passionate critic of the Enlightenment's alienation, but also an heir to its liberation."²⁹

Of course, many of these themes are not unique to the contemporary English language discourse. Some of the arguments can be found with the French Catholic reform theologians in the early 20th century (e.g. Henri de Lubac). In his essay in *Catholicism, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century France*, David Curtis has shown that the decline-and-fall narrative from the middle ages into modernity was a *lieu commun* (a platitude) among Catholic intellectuals in the 1930s in France.³⁰ Curtis remarks: "Catholic writers developed what was in effect an ideological secularization theory with a medieval 'baseline.'"³¹ There were also many German speaking intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, both Protestant (such as Karl Barth) and Catholic (such as Erich Przywara), who were developing sweeping rejections of liberalism that cast a dark light on modernity and thus implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, called into question the rationale and legitimacy of the liberal order and thereby also the liberal political order. Pfauf claims that his book does not provide one of these narratives.³² It does seem to be similar, however, to the decline-and-fall narratives. Even the essays at the end of the book about "retrieving the human" could be understood to be similar. Gregory is more explicit; he writes: "Judged on their own terms and with respect to the objectives of their own leading protagonists, medieval Christendom failed, the Reformation failed, confessionalized Europe failed, and Western modernity is failing".³³

28 GUNTON, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 13, 68.

29 Christoph SCHWÖBEL, Review of Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation*, in *Kings's Theological Review* 9 (1986), 31–32, here: 32.

30 David CURTIS, "True and False Modernity: Catholicism and Communist Marxism in 1930s France," in *Catholicism, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century France*, ed. Kay Chadwick (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Pr., 2000), 73–96, here: 84.

31 *IBID.*, 83.

32 PFAUF, *Minding the Modern*, 41.

33 GREGORY, *The Unintended Reformation*, 365.

Étienne Gilson himself should also be named with the authors above. Indeed, he may be seen as the father of the fall narrative in the English language context of the 1980s and 1990s. His *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* was originally written in English while he was in Toronto.³⁴ It was published in 1955 and was very popular, not least because of the aggressive work of the publisher. He was also interviewed for *Time* and *Newsweek*. The work popularized what might be called the “1277 decline-and-fall narrative” for philosophers of religion and theologians. As Philip Daileader remarks in his essay on Gilson in *French Historians 1900-2000*, the Catholic intellectual saw “the condemnation of 1277 as regrettable, indeed tragic.”³⁵ Daileader explains that Gilson was in a long struggle in France against the “secularization of state-supported public education” (297) both before and after World War II.

Not all of it, but some parts of Hans Blumenberg’s historical narrative were also influential for the Christian intellectual analysis of modernity in the English speaking world in the 1980s and 1990s. Gunton, for example, drew upon the 1983 translation of Blumenberg’s *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* in his *The One, the Three and the Many*. In his analysis of the importance of middle age voluntarism, Gunton also relied upon Buckley (*At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 1987), who in turn knew Gilson’s work. Gunton also drew upon Gilson in the above mentioned “Editorial.” Blumenberg himself was familiar with the work of Gilson. He also drew upon the 1277 theme in *The Legitimacy*. Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory* from 1990 demonstrates knowledge of Gilson and Blumenberg (as well as Lubac, who also promoted the theory). By the later 1980s, Gilson’s (and Lubac’s) narrative (or something like it) had become widely absorbed in many contexts in the English language discourse.

While many of these contemporary authors are truly insightful in their diagnosis of modernity and its history, they tend to emphasize the genetic emergence of the modern individual through a relatively narrow perspective of philosophical theology. Reading their work leads one to think that something went wrong in philosophy and theology in the 13th century and that this intellectual error progressively worked out into what they see as the crisis of the present. They tend to be pessimistic about contemporary Western society and the near future. The therapy tends to be a call for a reconstruction of the lost idealized theological-philosophical paradigm or idealized community.

Gunton, for example, warns against Radical Orthodoxy’s drive towards “repristinatio,” that is, a striving for the restoration of the original state of pur-

³⁴ GILSON, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955).

³⁵ Philip DAILEADER, “Étienne Gilson (1884–1978),” in *French Historians 1900–2000*, eds. Philip Daileader and Philip Whalen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 285–305, here: 300.

ity.³⁶ For example, Michael Hanby (whom Pfau also draws upon) remarks in his essay, “Desire: Augustine beyond Western Subjectivity” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*: “If Augustinian Christianity is true, then should modernity wish to escape the imprisonment of its fly-bottle, it will find only one exit – the hole by which it flew in.”³⁷ While there is much to gain from a study of these authors, when it comes to the issue of modernity itself one often encounters a negative decline-and-fall narrative that overlook the positive aspects of modernity and the other non-philosophical or theological conditions which contributed to the emergence of modernity.

These debates are not limited to the English language context today. In the German context, the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk recently published a long criticism of the cultural developments of modernity. With elusive language, he regrets the passing of the “nameless heroes of continuity” and the associated birth of the “terrible children of the modern age.”³⁸ The perspective on the left about such a critical diagnosis is brought to expression in Georg Diez’s review of the book. He characterizes Sloterdijk’s book as “the classic work of a conservative revolutionary.”³⁹ Sloterdijk and the other contemporary authors mentioned above are not, in my opinion, “conservative revolutionaries.” Such a characterization is, in my opinion, unfair, especially when one compares their work to true conservative revolutionaries.

These authors are not revolutionaries but rather critics of modernity. If they were revolutionaries they would be calling for a radical transformation of the social and political order and organizing themselves to carry this out through popular means. Even the one case from *Radical Orthodoxy* that might qualify, Phillip Blond’s “Red Toryism,” does not appear to fit this definition of a “conservative revolutionary” when it is analyzed.⁴⁰ These authors do not call for revolution and most of them are not widely known in the broader English speaking public which they write about. They rather tend to call for a renewal of the value-oriented religious community and social reform along communitarian lines. While they are not revolutionaries, some of the works of these authors could be fairly described as anti-modernist, and in some cases as critical of democracy. In this sense, the term “anti-modernist” would signify a stronger form

36 GUNTON, “Editorial,” 113.

37 In *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, 109–126, here: 110.

38 SLOTERDIJK, *Die schrecklichen Kinder der Neuzeit: Über das anti-genealogische Experiment der Moderne* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), 79.

39 Georg DIEZ, “Nach ihm die Sintflut,” Spiegel Online, spiegel.de (13 June 2014).

40 Phillip BLOND, *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).

of criticism, a fundamental opposition to modernity and especially to liberalism. A contemporary example of this is found in John Milbank's 2009 essay in *The Monstrosity of Christ*. He remarks on

all those craven, weak, sentimental theologians, doused in multiple tinctures of *mauvaise foi*, who claim to believe in some sort of remote, abstract, transcendent deity and who yet compromise the universal claims of Christianity in favor of mystical relativism, glorification of hypostasized uncertainty, and practical indulgence in the malignly infinite air-shuttle of mindless "dialogue."⁴¹

V Concluding reflections

While some of the sweeping narratives in these contemporary works are unconvincing, and while some of the generalizing claims seem both overly simplistic and one-sided, all of this does not mean, by any measure, that modern Western society or its intellectual frameworks and institutions are perfect, or have reached, as Pfau remarks, a state of "apotheosis." There is – especially in the age of "too-big-to-fail" banks – a need to make the economic markets free from the "oppressive genius of an exclusive company," to use Adam Smith's expression.⁴² Granted, it is not only companies that have acted irresponsibly in recent history. The mountains of sovereign debt that many Western nations have created, and that continue to be loaded upon the coming generations without their consent, is also evidence of our imperfect political order. Protecting, supporting, educating and training the poor, weak and vulnerable, to ensure that everyone, and not only the privileged, can participate in and profit from the wealth of the nations, remains a challenging goal for all liberal Western societies. The logic of the Levitical code provides a good example here in that it takes account of the specific situation of each individual: "But if he cannot afford a lamb, then" let him give only "two turtledoves or two pigeons" (Lev. 5:7).

David L. Tubbs has recently addressed another issue which deserves more attention in modern Western societies than it has been given. In *Freedom's Orphans: Contemporary Liberalism and the Fate of American Children*, he argues that there is a danger for the wellbeing of children in a society that promotes moral indifference. Tubbs is no outsider to these issues. Before he became Pro-

⁴¹ John MILBANK, "The Double Glory, or Paradox versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek," in Slavoj ŽIŽEK and John MILBANK, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic*, ed. Creston DAVIS (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Pr., 2009), 110–233, here: 111.

⁴² Adam SMITH, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1st ed. (Dublin: Whitestone, et al., 1776), vol. 2, bk. 4, ch., 7, p. 516.

fessor of Politics at the King's College in New York City, he "worked in state government as a child-support investigator."⁴³ Regarding his work at that time, Tubbs states "The most discouraging aspect of this work is parental indifference." (7) Later in his studies at graduate school, he "saw that contemporary liberal thinkers were minimizing or denying the importance of what were previously considered essential elements of children's welfare." (8)

Tubbs claims that "if we take account of the main currents of liberal thought over the last fifty to sixty years, we could say that it lacks the resources to criticize – in a truly cogent way – such parental indifference." (8) He draws upon many examples, such as child pornography, but his main diagnosis is concerned with the "moral reticence" (from the Latin, *reticere*, "to keep silent") of contemporary liberalism when it comes to affirming, supporting and serving dutifully the interest of children. Rather than describing contemporary American liberalism as "radically subjectivist" (in the terms of MacIntyre and others) he calls it "morally reticent." (19) He analyzes a "permissive ethos" and a reluctance which helps "to obscure the difference between the responsible and the irresponsible exercise of freedom." (20) It is, as Tubbs correctly points out, a particularly important assignment of Western societies to affirm a positive moral vision for the sake of children, one that is verified with moral examples in the family, in religious communities and in the broader cultural, social and political realm.

While there is a time for criticism, there is also a time for praise. It is important that the diagnosis of modernity does not lose sight of the positive sides. Pope John Paul II was critical of modernity in many ways but his thoughts on "The Positive Fruits of the Enlightenment" in his *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium* capture the other side of the story well. He writes:

The European Enlightenment not only led to the carnage of the French Revolution, but also bore positive fruits, such as the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, values which are rooted in the Gospel. Even when proclaimed independently, these ideas point naturally to their proper origin. Hence, the French Enlightenment prepared the way for a better understanding of human rights. Of course, the Revolution violated those rights in many ways. Yet this was also the time when human rights began to be properly acknowledged and put into effect more forcefully, leaving behind the traditions of feudalism.⁴⁴

⁴³ David L. TUBBS, *Freedom's Orphans: Contemporary Liberalism and the Fate of American Children* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Pr., 2007), 7.

⁴⁴ Pope JOHN PAUL II, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 107.

There is much to learn from the authors mentioned above who are critical of modernity. The criticism of some of their conclusions here regarding modernity should not be understood as a dismissal of their work. The issue here is rather a very specific matter with far reaching consequences: the diagnosis of modernity and the modern subject. Just as there is a middle path between the extreme forms of communitarianism and the extreme forms of liberalism, there is also a *via media* in the analysis of modernity and the modern subject. Diagnosing modernity in a well-balanced way, including both the positive and the negative sides, remains an important task for theology. While some may claim that we are called to proclaim the gospel and that this has nothing to do with the diagnosis of modernity, it is important to remember that the Prophets of the Old Testament and the Apostles of the New Testament always preached their message with critical knowledge of their cultural context. Although a “well-balanced diagnosis” is indeed a very challenging ideal to strive after, and perhaps an impossible one, such a goal offers an alternative to the easier approaches of quietism, simple affirmation or negation. In any case, the diagnosis of modernity should offer a workable interpretive framework that can help Christians engage the world around them effectively in the present. Of course, a well-balanced diagnosis can only be reached through dialog – hopefully mindful dialog – between the various interpretive paradigms.