

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

**Communicating the Gospel
in a Pluralistic World**



SESSION 2

The Influence of the Modern Era on Religious Pluralism

CLT Bible Study

The Influence of the Modern Era on Religious Pluralism

Certificate of Lay Ministry
Communicating the Gospel in a Pluralistic World
Dr. David Ackerman, editor
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The Influence of the Modern Era on Religious Pluralism

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INFLUENCE OF THE MODERN ERA ON
RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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INTRODUCTION

Religious pluralism developed in various historical, cultural, religious, and philosophical contexts. The gospel is also proclaimed in these contexts. The modern and postmodern eras have influenced, and continue to influence, religious pluralism. The modern era was built on trust in human reason. Reason was believed to be the best way to understand everything. People trusted human reason to interpret the universe, religion, history, the mind, morality, philosophy, and politics.

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- understand the characteristics of modernity;
- understand why modernity's trust in reason often led to a suspicion of religion in all its forms;
- understand why many modern thinkers dismissed religion as a hindrance to human progress, and thereby put it to the margins of life; and
- understand how modernity could in some ways undercut the claims of any religion to be the true one.

The Influence of the Modern Era on Religious Pluralism

INTRODUCTION

Just about everything else people consider important could be understood with reason. Modernity believed that human life could be organized well through the right use of reason. The tools needed for this harmony are within our reach. Many people in the modern era either thought religion was not very important or were sure religion had no good future.

Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) thought religion could still be helpful to society, even if its claims about God were wrong. William James (1843-1910), an American philosopher, thought belief in God is preferable to atheism. It is better to believe in God than not to. This is not because there is a strong reason to believe, but because it makes the world seem nicer and more meaningful. Religious faith is practical. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was certain religion has no good future. He thought religion comes from a problem that can be fixed if its truth is faced. He thought religion was a form of neurosis. And Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72) thought religion was something humans made up as they evolved.

Just because we live in modern times does not mean we have to stop believing in religion. Many thinkers and leaders have insisted that being modern and believing in a religion are not contradictions. They say that religion is still important. They believe that the orthodox Christian faith and modernity can go together. Modern science is a great way to see how God works in creation.

However, not everyone accepts that, especially the leading intellectuals in Europe and North America. These people say that the key ideas of modernity have become like a religion and even led to the formation of new religions. Thus, modernity has helped develop religious pluralism. We will explore what characteristics of modernity have led to such pluralism. But we should remember that not all modern thinkers and leaders feel this way. And just because we are questioning modern thinking does not mean we are against everything it has or has not done.



INTRODUCTION

Even though there are some problems with the modern period, the world has greatly benefited from it. For example, things like democracy, science, technology, education for all children, the good parts of the industrial revolution, and amazing medicines that cure deadly diseases are all thanks to modern times. Modernity has also helped spread the gospel and given us many useful tools for studying the Scriptures. In the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, we do not put reason above Scripture. But we rely on the careful use of reason for studying the Bible and spreading the gospel of Christ. In many ways, modern times have helped with this.

The following story appeared in the Washington Times on December 8, 2002.

Suit Seeks to Allow Wiccan's Invocation

The Virginia chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union is suing the Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors for refusing to allow a Wiccan leader to give the invocation at the start of its meeting. The lawsuit was filed in federal court in Richmond and says the Board of Supervisors is violating the constitutional ban on state-sponsored religion by denying Wiccan priestess Cynthia Simpson the opportunity to offer an invocation. The lawsuit also says the board's policy violates the constitutional guarantee of equal protection. "They are supposed to be making laws, not theological judgments," said the Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, which has joined in the suit with the ACLU. "They do not believe Wicca to be a religion like Christianity, but government officials cannot be making these decisions."

The board regularly opens its meetings with a voluntary invocation by a leader of a Judeo-Christian denomination. Earlier this year, Miss Simpson asked the Board of Supervisors to allow her to give an invocation. She was denied. "Chesterfield's nonsectarian invocations are traditionally made to a divinity that is consistent with the Judeo-Christian tradition," wrote Chesterfield County Attorney Steven Micas in a letter to Miss Simpson denying her request.

- Mary Shaffrey

INFLUENCE OF THE MODERN ERA ON RELIGIOUS PLURALISM



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We have been looking at how religious pluralism has developed in the Western world. Two big events in history need to be examined next. In the next two sessions, we will be studying the impact of modernity and postmodernity on religious pluralism. We must realize, however, that we cannot cover everything. Much more can be said about many of the following topics.

It is impossible to say exactly when the modern era started and ended because people do not agree on the dates. History changes slowly over time. It is difficult to tell when one era ends and another begins. It is like trying to put a date on a gravestone for something that is still changing. In fact, people argue about whether the modern era has ended and what that means if it has ended. Some people think the modern era started as early as the 1500s, while others think it did not start until around 1850. Those who believe we are now in a “postmodern” era think the modern era ended in the middle of the 20th century. Brian McLaren suggests we should start talking about the modern era as something from the past and not the present. Being “postmodern” means “after modernity.” It has gone through the modern era, been changed by it, and then moved beyond it.

HOW MODERNITY LED TO THE GROWTH OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

We will next look at how modernity affected the growth of religious pluralism. Some of these ways have already been suggested. As society advanced, religion became less important in many areas. It was put in the margins of society in philosophy, politics, economics, culture, science, and intellect. In most of McLaren's ten characteristics above, religion could not have an important role in public life. Many people of the modern period thought Christianity had been harmful. They looked at the history of Western Europe since the fourth century, saw problems, and thought Christianity was the source. They believed it was controlling, especially with the privileges clergy received in France. Humanity needed to be set free from this tyranny. Another example was the religious wars from 1562 until the edict of Nantes in 1598. A whole generation was devastated and stayed in people's memories.

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Many people from this period also thought they had figured out the truth. They looked at religions, their founders, practices, and scriptures through historical research. They determined that these religions were just part of the historical setting of those who followed them. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was paraphrased as saying, "The truth is that there is no one here but us, and that's good." Historical research challenged the authority of religion and its claims about transcendence.

When people accept this conclusion, no religion can claim to be the true religion above all others. To save a place for religion in human experience, a person could argue that one religion is more useful for human well-being than another. But this usefulness is only in a practical way. Another argument is to say that one religion fits better with a certain culture than another. But again, this is only practical. Even if we find out in the afterlife that one religion is true over all the others, we cannot decide this based on history.

The best thing for religious people to do is to believe firmly in their own faith. But they should also prioritize the well-being of the state over religious disagreements. They can show their beliefs through honesty, devotion, self-discipline, and respect for others. The worst thing they can do is to act arrogantly and oppressively toward other religions or to try to convert people against their will. This only proves the falsehood of their religion. True devotion and tolerance are the best ways to achieve peace and good religious practices admired by others. The philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) took this position in his dramatic poem, "Nathan the Wise." In the parable of the three rings, Nathan advised people of different religions to compete in generosity and treat one another with humility, patience, and goodwill.

In general, if religion has any place in public life, it should focus on creating good citizens who contribute to the peace of the nation. Otherwise, religion should be kept private and to one's personal opinion. Religion has no place or importance in modern life that relies on knowledge. Let the religions determine what their own stories will be, but they need to do that in private.

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If this is true, then public spaces are not the right place for religions to argue about their superiority. Instead, they should be humble in the presence of other people and their beliefs. There are bigger and more important things to achieve as a human community than fighting over religious differences. Most of the tools for bringing people together in harmony and to make things better come from modernity. Religion, at most, can only help a little as a support but not the source. We may wonder how once-popular ideas lose favor over time. But this is what happened to religion in the modern era.

POSTMODERNITY MUST FACE THE CHALLENGE OF CONDEMNING THE “UNSAFE STRUCTURE”



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MICHAEL HORTON (SELECTED AND PARAPHRASED)

“Our Time” is the epithet David Wells gives to modernity and its successor of postmodernism. Princeton philosopher Diogenes Allen declared that a significant revolution in how people think is taking place right now. It is as big as what happened in the change from the Middle Ages to the modern era. This shift in thinking is impacting every area of study and influencing law, medicine, politics, and religion in our culture.

The following article introduces a topic that has become important in every university study: the collapse of the modern worldview and its greatly acclaimed successor: postmodernism.

Theologian Thomas Oden suggests that modernity started with the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, and ended when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Art philosopher Charles Jencks was even more specific by saying it ended at 3:32 pm on July 15, 1972. This was when the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis was blown up. This housing was considered inadequate for its low-income people. Many people have their own opinions, but most agree it happened recently.

In both attempts at determining a date, we get a glimpse at modernity. Why did Oden choose the storming of the Bastille as the beginning? Back then, the French Revolution was an example of many of the revolutions that tried to rebuild the world from scratch. People believed reason, progress, and planning would lead to a perfect society, even though it came at a high cost, including genocide. People were sacrificed to arrive at the gates of Utopia.

In the second example, the Soviet empire collapsed due to economic exhaustion and spiritual weariness. While the United States played a role by outspending the Soviets, deeper and more significant philosophical issues assisted. When the Berlin Wall fell, it marked the end of overly optimistic ideas about ideological movements. Maybe Utopia would have to wait.

Jencks shows us how to see the identity of modernity. From the architectural side of things, he reminds us of the silliness of it all. He points out that everything, like art, politics, and education, has been used to

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support the big idea of modernity. Humility has not been a major characteristic of this era. People in this time believe they can control everything, from the environment to their own future, using technology, politics, power, and science.

Jencks saw the destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis as a sign. This place, designed to be a perfect living machine, turned out to be unlivable. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, everyone from scientists to artists has seen the world as a machine. Even their homes were machines that could fix social problems. The destruction of this building, like the fall of the Berlin Wall, signaled the end of a society built by engineering.

But did it really end?

That is the question. Many people argue that modernity has not ended but has actually sped up. Even those who criticize modernity and call themselves postmodern often have a very modern way of thinking. This makes sense when you see that postmodernists often do not realize that the label itself implies progress. Postmodern academics criticize this cherished idea of modernity.

So, what is modernity, and why do people react to it? How does the church fit into all of this? How does our faith relate to these big changes in how people think? Let us start with the first question: What is modernity?

Some people see the world more in pictures than in ideas, which is an influence of postmodernism. So one way to understand modernity is to picture the Rockefeller Center, city projects, and suburban homes. Each of these, in its own way, shows the spirit of modernity. Modern architecture emphasizes order. Driving down some of the big streets in Washington, D.C., one can see these modern towers on both sides.

Modernity made these large, business-like buildings little trimmings and ornaments for a reason. Unlike an old town square in the Midwest or a village in Bavaria, there is no unique local style. You could be in New York, Nairobi, Singapore, or Sao Paulo and see the same thing. You would have to look at your travel itinerary to remember where you were. While many styles throughout history have been unique to a region, the modern style is global. This style is part of a culture focused on business, making money, selling things, and building a New World.

Buildings and houses are all part of what we call the modern world. We

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can simply look at the pattern of tract homes. Neighborhoods that are organized and well-planned show the modern worldview. People move around a lot, leaving the old homes of their ancestors behind. These new neighborhoods are signs of this modern world. Each house is mostly like the one next to it because it is more about convenience than charm.

Other people who are less visual might think about modernity in sociological terms. They think about how people move around frequently and quickly. They look at how technology has changed everything. In his book *Technopoly*, Neil Postman writes about this in a detailed and interesting way. Everyone who reads this article should try to read this book. Postman says we all think technology is our friend. He gives two reasons for this.

First, technology is a friend. It makes life easier, cleaner, and longer. Can anyone ask for a better friend? Second, because technology is so closely tied to our culture, we often do not think closely about its consequences.

He writes that technology is the kind of friend that asks for trust and obedience, which most people are willing to give because it offers so many benefits. But there is a dark side to this friend. Its benefits come with a cost. It creates a culture without a moral base. It changes the way we think and interact in ways that can make life less enjoyable and worth living. In short, technology is both a friend and an enemy.

Modernity is the confidence in machines, organized work, management, and distribution. It is the certainty in science, technology, social, and material progress. It is trust in buying and selling and in the power of economic systems to free the human spirit (whether capitalism or communism). This is a big part of what is called modernity.

Let us look at some big ideas in a simpler way. Modernity started with the success of the Enlightenment. During the Renaissance and Reformation, a lot of changes happened. There was a push for freedom, civil rights, and the ability for secular areas to work without the church's control. These changes also led to the start of modern science, education, and everyone being able to read and write.

The Protestant Reformers, like the Roman Church, believed that authority was very important. They believed in *Sola Scriptura* or "Scripture Alone," which meant that the church did not have the final say. Instead, they believed that God's voice could be heard in the pages of the Bible. The

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church was supposed to use skilled teachers to help everyone, not just monks and clergy, understand the important teachings of the Faith. The Reformers did not like it when people only thought about themselves and did not respect the church. They criticized the sects of their time for not respecting the institutional church.

However, a lot changed when Rene Descartes (1596-1650) introduced his famous idea: Cogito ergo sum—"I think. Therefore, I am."

Descartes believed in rationalism. He stressed that there must be a way to know things without any doubt. He thought that all human knowledge should be based on reason. Like Plato, he believed our minds shape the world, not the other way around. David Hume, a British thinker, looked at things differently. He was an empiricist, which means he believed that all knowledge comes from what we can observe. He thought that knowledge could not include guesses or leaps of faith. Knowledge must come from observation. He believed that if we knew from our experience that people do not come back to life, then we should not believe that it could have happened in first-century Palestine. He thought that Christianity could not be true because miracles do not happen.

This shift has two big effects. First, Enlightenment thinkers, both rationalists and empiricists, believed in absolute certainty. They thought that through deduction (rationalism) or induction (empiricism), a person could reach certainty. This gave modern people a lot of confidence. They were even arrogant. They thought they could rebuild the world from scratch based on a universal foundation of knowledge. Even religion could be explained in terms of universal ideas common to all religions. The result was the modern university's religion department, where Christianity, Buddhism, and fern worship are all studied to find common threads.

These common threads are part of the universal reason that underlies foundationalism. Foundationalism argues that there are basic beliefs that serve as the foundation for all other beliefs. We will see how postmodernism is helping us by taking apart this approach. Postmodernism questions the possibility of having a grand explanation that is more important than all the other explanations. Christians believe that God's revelation in the Bible is this big explanation. In postmodern talk, this is called the metanarrative.

Second, foundationalism puts each individual at the center. The rationalist, who believes in "I think, therefore, I am," made the person the center of everything. I am the center of the universe. My own mind can form ideas

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about what the world is like. Like an ice-cube tray, my ideas could make a secure structure for understanding everything—except for divine messages or the church.

Empiricists at least changed the focus from just thinking inside one's own mind to looking at the world outside. They realized that gravity is real and it exists even if we do not think about it. It is not just an idea that our minds make up. It is the way the world really is. We can only know about this reality by changing our thinking to match what really happens. But, even then, the person trying to understand was still central. Things like divine revelation, tradition, and community were not considered in this new modern experiment.

With the self (who is the knower) at the center of everything, modernity's new way of thinking challenged authority, traditions, and communities. Instead, it created its own rules, big organizations, market trends, and individual preferences.

Sadly, many Christians either tried to fit into this new way of thinking in order to be relevant or ignored it as if the Enlightenment never happened. Karl Barth (1886-1968) was a liberal theologian who became disenchanted with modernity and strongly criticized it. Although some of his thoughts may not be orthodox, he strongly attacked modern liberalism that had emerged in modernity. Alexander Pope had declared, "The proper study of Man is Man."

Barth reacted strongly at this idea he had once happily embraced. He was firm in saying that humans are not the main focus; God is. He said that we do not learn the truth about God, ourselves, or how we are saved by just thinking logically or by watching the world around us. We need something more.

Christianity does not just repeat the best from other religions. It actually goes against reason and experience. Barth said that we do not find God, but God finds us.

In this new way of thinking, the Enlightenment was like teenagers rebelling against their parents' religion. Colin Gunton argues that modernity's disconnect from the world came from its rebellion against Christian theology. "Modern disengagement is disengagement from the God of Christendom."

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That is why Vaclav Havel said that the West and the East are built on the same foundation. Our future is their present. He believed that when people lost God, they lost a kind of map that helped them understand everything, especially themselves. Their world and the human personality started to break up into separate, confusing pieces.

This is why the breakdown in a clear system of beliefs within evangelical Christianity is so serious. This is the part of Christianity that claims to still hold on to the historic faith.

Like waves crashing on the shore, the above issues have brought a lot of criticism to the optimism of the Enlightenment. After two big wars that were supposed to end all wars, people started to question the idea of progress and improvement. Existentialism turned on modernity. People lost faith in the idea of creating a perfect world or Utopia. Some, like the philosopher Sartre, even suggested that maybe ending one's life was the best option.

Where does our culture go for answers? Some thinkers, like Derrida and Lyotard, say that we are all just playing games with words. They agree with Nietzsche, who said that all human interaction is about trying to control others. People seek power and control. They tell us that language is often used to oppress without people realizing it. This has been used a lot by scholars who want to promote Marxist ideas like Liberation Theology and feminism. Words do not really have any meaning on their own. But if we read between the lines, we can guess what our opponent will do next. This is called the hermeneutic of suspicion. It is a way of thinking called deconstructionism. It says that there are no rules for what words mean and how we use language.

The idea of progress has faced a lot of challenges in recent decades. Still, people find it hard to let go of the belief that evil institutions cause all the problems and not sinful people. They also believe that we can create a good society through practical solutions and beliefs. It is hard to tell if postmodernism is just a faster version of modernism.

Whether you are a student studying advanced philosophy or a parent trying to understand why the ground is shifting while you are raising your kids, this topic is very relevant. In order to be disciples of our Lord, we must be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves. Before we can "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5), we first need to have our own thoughts. After that, we can also try to

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understand other thoughts that might challenge ours.

Understanding other thoughts is not easy. But following Jesus as a disciple is not easy either. Deciding to follow Jesus does not instantly renew our minds. Nor do we instantly have victory over sin. Our commitment to Christ, like an ancient marriage between princes of allied nations, means we are ready to fight anything that goes against peace, freedom, and the growth of Christ's kingdom. May we be given the grace and the determination to have "minds that are alert and fully sober" (1 Pet. 1:13), especially now when there are so many new challenges and opportunities.

Michael S. Horton is the president of Christians United for Reformation. Educated at Biola University and Westminster Theological Seminary, Michael is a Ph.D. candidate at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and the University of Coventry and is the author/editor of eight books, including *The Agony of Deceit*, *Made in America: The Shaping of American Evangelicalism*, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace*, and *Beyond Culture Wars*.

APPLICATION



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1. Spend some time exploring various internet sites for the word “modernism.” Check out images for Pruitt-Igoe housing to see the housing project that exemplified modernism
2. Write a reflection paper based on the following questions. Be prepared to share that paper with your mentor.
 - What features of modernity do you think are most positive?
 - What features of modernity do you think are most negative?
 - Do you think of yourself as modern or postmodern?

EXAM



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1. The beginning of the modern era is easy to date.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. This thinker influenced modernity with his emphasis on the authority of empirical observation and rejection of miracles.
 - A. David Hume
 - B. Immanuel Kant
 - C. John Locke
 - D. Rene Descartes
3. Postmodernism accepts the claims of modernism to know the answers.
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. Modernity tended to see the world in mechanical terms
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. The notion of Truth was a casualty of modernity.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. Modernity reflected the belief that we could fix the world.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. The modern style is global, part of a culture concerned with doing business, making money, and engineering the new world.
 - A. True
 - B. False

EXAM



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8. This thinker influenced modernity with his assertion, "I think. Therefore, I am."
 - A. David Hume
 - B. Immanuel Kant
 - C. John Locke
 - D. Rene Descartes
9. Modernity focuses attention and authority on the community.
 - A. True
 - B. False
10. Some modern thinkers (i.e., Sigmund Freud) have thought that personal religious faith is a problem that needs to be fixed.
 - A. True
 - B. False
11. Postmodernism shares modernity's confidence in science.
 - A. True
 - B. False
12. There is a consensus about when postmodernity began and what it is.
 - A. True
 - B. False
13. Modernity tended to believe we could find objective truth without religious faith.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Review the exam questions and answers. Discuss any issues or questions the participant raises for you.
2. What features of modernity do you think are most positive?
3. What features of modernity do you think are most negative?
4. Do you think of yourself as modern or postmodern?