gion, and the responses of modern religion. Most religion today is not all that modern. Fundamentalism rejects the modern orientation entirely. Much of traditional faith has accommodated itself to modernity in some way. There is, however, a religiousness that is rather thoroughly modern in that it has come to terms with scientific world-views, has a secular orientation, promotes responsible autonomy, and lives by an openness to new ideas and changes. Modern thought in religion will never replace earlier forms, but it will continue to influence them as well as draw upon their heritage.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Which of the challenges of modern thought to religion are the most serious: the challenges of science, secularism, autonomy, or tentativeness of belief? Explain why.

2. Is it legitimate and possible to maintain traditional faith in these modern times? Why? Why not?

3. To what extent does your religious faith rest mainly on inner experience or choice rather than on external evidence?

4. Why should the three liberation theology movements cited in this chapter—black, feminist, and Latin-American—be taken seriously?

5. Are other people worth loving because God says so, or because they are of intrinsic value? Explain.

6. How useful is a religion that cannot guarantee the stable permanence of its beliefs and moral rules and so forth?

7. How much more must a religion do for people beyond affirming its basic faith that there is ultimate value in being a person in the world? Explain.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Rudolph Bultmann, Jesus Christ and Mythology, 1958.
Diana L. Hayes, And Still We Rise: An Introduction to Black Liberation Theology, 1996.
Ann Loades, ed., Feminist Theology: A Reader, 1990. Includes excerpts from Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mary Daly, Sally McFague, Letty Russell, and Ursula King.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Future of Religion

Religion in the Twenty-First Century

THE VITALITY OF RELIGION

The Secularization Thesis

Chapter Thirteen described the growth of various forms of nonreligious secular evolutionary humanisms (Recall that there is also a religious humanism.) In the twentieth century many became convinced that religion would continue to diminish, especially among the educated. Secular ("worldly") forces would replace religion. One of the more famous books on the topic of secularization was mentioned in Chapter Seven, The Sacred Canopy, by sociologist Peter Berger. As a sociologist, Berger interprets religion as the product of human social processes. We humans, unfinished animals, need some social norms and practices in order to have stable identities and patterns of life. These norms and practices are developed over hundreds and even thousands of years of cultural evolution. This is "the social construction of reality."

But we now have become consciously aware that we produce society, Berger continues, including perhaps even the religious beliefs which support society. This means that we think that religion comes at least partly, perhaps even entirely, from us rather than from God or the supernatural. This undermines religion's legitimacy. We are in a position to evaluate social and religious patterns, and perhaps choose to modify them or even replace them entirely. So whether we like it or not, says Berger, we can expect the process of secularization to continue. Another sociologist, David Martin, has called this "the secularization thesis."

It was not just sociological theory that led Berger and others to predict the continuing diminishment of religion. Earlier attacks on belief in miracles by deists, and on religion in general by critical skeptics such as Comte, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and Dewey undercut the plausibility of religion, at least for those educated in such skeptical ideas. As a result, in some
European nations only about half of the populace says it believes in God. Perhaps it is just a matter of time before the U.S. catches up with this European trend. As the previous chapter noted, modern religion in general is more accepting of this world. Perhaps modern religion is just a stage on the way to a thorough secularity.

Yet Martin thinks the secularization thesis has proved to be wrong—and now so does Berger, for that matter. There are various reasons for this conclusion.

Increased Church Attendance in the U.S.

In the United States, a popular but mistaken idea seemed to support the secularization thesis. This was the idea that the colonists who founded the United States were all deeply religious and that religion has been on the wane ever since, except for an occasional burst of fervor now and then. Some colonists were indeed seeking religious freedom. Puritans in New England, Quakers in Pennsylvania, and Catholics in Maryland fit this mold. But they were exceptions. Most colonists were simply looking for a new start in life, a place to get land of their own and have an opportunity to rise above the station in life they held in Europe. Regular churchgoers in the years before the American Revolution were in the minority. Recall also that many of the leaders of the American Revolution were deists, who rejected any traditional religious beliefs they considered irrational.

Sociologists who have tracked religious behaviors from colonial times up through the twentieth century, however, claim that there has been an overall, if not steady, increase in church attendance. A "great awakening" of religious fervor here and there in the mid-eighteenth century and another in the early nineteenth century produced intermittent swells of religiousness which were not sustained. Nevertheless, the long-term picture of religion in the U.S. shows a gradual increase in church attendance. Religious faith certainly involves more than just going to church. But an increase in church attendance is hard to reconcile with the claim that people are getting less religious. The secularization thesis is not working well in the U.S., nor in Canada for that matter.

Liberal Religiousness and Supernaturalism

Another reason why the secularization thesis looks less plausible is that even as there has been a relative loss of attendance at the more liberal churches, there has been a revival in the churches that offer direct experience of supernatural interventions by God. When history books speak of religion in the U.S., they often focus on what are sometimes called the "mainline" Protestant churches. This includes Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists, and Baptists. But with the exception of the Baptists, these are no

longer the most significant centers of religious population in the U.S. Membership in these mainline churches has increased over the last two centuries, but not nearly as fast as the population as a whole has grown. They have lost "market share."

There is reason to suspect it is the liberal theology favored in "mainline" seminaries that makes these churches less appealing to many. Ever since Schleiermacher at the end of the eighteenth century, liberal theology has interpreted the Bible rather symbolically, often concluding that the miracles described in scripture are not to be taken too literally. Religious groups which reject liberal theology and promote belief in the power of God to intervene in human life have experienced the greatest increase in membership. These interventions take many forms. Baptist meetings often lead a person to feel moved by the Spirit to make a commitment to Christ, and there-by be born again in the Spirit. Pentecostal churches feature miracles of healing, gifts of prophecy or of tongues, and being raptured by the Spirit. Assemblies of God and other Pentecostal churches have grown the most in membership in the U.S. Catholicism, which has also retained beliefs in miraculous interventions by God, has maintained its market share.

The Growth of Expressive Individualism in Religion

In Western nations a significant shift in the form of religiousness has been taking place, from adherence to traditional doctrines and morals and practices to more individualistic forms of religion which allow a person to choose particular doctrines and morals and practices. Previous chapters noted that "modern" religion treats beliefs and morals more flexibly than historical religion. This seems to have legitimized a greater degree of freedom for people to form their own religious ethos. People who move in this direction often themselves refer to it as a shift from "religion" (meaning institutionalized religion) to "spirituality."

It is wise to be wary of exaggerating the extent of this shift. The majority of religious people still belong to traditional religious groups which teach that there are certain basic doctrines and moral rules that are correct and to which everyone ought to adhere. Baptists are taught they must accept Jesus as their savior through a personal act of faith, and that the Bible is the inspired word of God. Roman Catholics are taught that the Pope, in communion with the rest of the church, has the official duty and authority to define true Catholic doctrine and moral teachings. Orthodox and Conservative Jews adhere closely to the Torah. Muslims consider the Qur'an to be the final and definitive revelation from God.

Yet current cultural patterns have loosened the hold of tradition for many, allowing them to formulate and express their own beliefs, in accord with
their own individual sense of what is true and good. This new style of religiousness is described variously as “expressive individualism,” “privatization,” or “pluralization,” because this new freedom of individual expression in religion often leads to more private and varied spiritualities. Thus many of the people who no longer attend church have not become more secular or unreligious; they have simply adopted a more individualistic spirituality.

New Age Beliefs and Practices

One of the more striking forms of expressive individualism can be found in New Age beliefs and practices. There is no simple definition of what belongs to the New Age set of ideas and what does not. But it is possible to identify several characteristic elements, and these elements can be divided into two sets. One set is more “classical” or historic; the other is more archaic or even primitive. The classical elements include belief in an all-embracing unity to things; the primitive or archaic elements focus more on spirits and mana-power. The same person, of course, may find both the archaic and classical elements attractive.

Among the classical elements is the one that has given its name to New Age religion: the belief that a new age of universal peace among people and between people and nature can be achieved if people will learn certain deeper truths and adhere to certain wise practices. This has been called a “soft apocalypticism.” Like apocalypticism in general it proposes that the old order of pain and alienation and sin will be overcome. Unlike traditional apocalypticism, however, it expects the new ideal order to arrive through a constructive transformation of attitudes and actions rather than through a terrible period of destruction.

The expectation of an age of peace is related to a second classical element in New Age thought, which is belief in an overall cosmic unity or harmony. New Age ideas are usually “holistic” (occasionally spelled “wholistic”), which means that they seek integration of various parts rather than opposition among them. Male and female, body and spirit, nature and persons, cosmos and history—New Age proponents claim that all of these are part of a deep harmony that has been obscured by dualistic notions, which falsely divide the body from the soul, the person from nature, the heavenly from the earthly. This holistic approach is a major point in many of the spiritual guidance books that fill bookstore shelves.

Third among the more classical elements of New Age beliefs is a sense that each person is either a part of the divine or can directly experience the divine. Belief that the self is part of a great and ultimate divine unity is similar to Hindu belief that each person’s atman is part of the Infinite Atman. In fact the transcendentalists in early nineteenth-century New England and Great Britain, and then the Theosophical Society, with Madame Blavatsky as its driving force, looked to India for many of their ideas. Belief that each person can have a direct experience of the divine is a continuation of ancient Neo-Platonic ideas, which had a great influence on mysticism among Christians and Jews, and of various forms of the Sufi movement in Islam. This is reminiscent of the emphasis by Schleiermacher and Otto on an experience of the Whole or the Holy, though their thought is usually not called New Age.

New Age is also the label, however, for a set of beliefs and practices that are much closer to primitive or archaic beliefs. Those who “channel” the spirits of ancient people are usually put in the New Age category. A person channeling speaks with the voice and ideas of someone who has already died, perhaps even many centuries ago, as though the person’s body has been taken over by the spirit of a dead person. Those who communicate with angels may also be called New Age. Like archaic or primitive beliefs, these concern specific spirit beings, not the Ultimate nor the universal unity of things. Those who believe crystals have the power to create certain moods, or who believe that the proper magical spell can really be efficacious, manifest the perennial human tendency to believe in mana-power. This also is usually called New Age, though it is as old as the most primitive magical beliefs. New Age ideas of this sort are thus not so much an abandonment of religion as a return to some of the earliest elements of religion in human history.

New Religious Movements and Cults

The proliferation of New Religious Movements (NRMs) is another reason to be suspicious of the secularization thesis. In recent decades it has been hard to keep track of the many NRMs, though all of them have a rather limited number of members. The Unification Church founded by the Korean leader, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, is strongly Christian, yet places an emphasis on family that may reflect Confucian influence. Scientology, originally a pseudo-scientific movement which then got itself classified legally in the U.S. as a religion, offers ways to unblock the power of the inner spirit-being each person supposedly truly is. The International Krishna Consciousness Movement (ISKCON), derived from ancient Hinduism, trains people, many of them at its university in Iowa, in methods for tapping into the universal cosmic force.

All the many NRMs, including dozens not mentioned here, are part of a long history of new religious movements. From the nineteenth century in the United States alone, for example, we now have the Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), Christian Science (First Church of Christ Scientist), Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah’s Witnesses (of the Watchtower and Bible Society), as well as the continuing New Age tradition of Theosophy.

Non-western NRMs attest further to the continuing attractiveness of reli-
The Vitality of Non-Western Traditions

Islam remains energetically alive around the world. From the largest Muslim nation, Indonesia, westward around the world even to the Americas, Islam is growing. Westerners hear of “Muslim fundamentalism.” Those who write on Islam more often refer to this as the Islamist movement. It includes both a traditionalist religious dimension and a political goal.

Many Muslims have experienced colonization by European powers, find themselves still politically weak on the world stage, and see secular humanist and exploitative capitalist elements intruding where Qur'anic morality ought to rule. In reaction, Islamists look to their own traditions to find an alternative social and political format, true to the Qur’an, and more likely, they believe, to provide a Godly rightness and strength to their lives.

Islamic tradition holds that the civil government ideally should not be divorced from religious influence. The government’s actions should always be approved by the ulama—the scholars well educated in the Qur’an and hadith (tradition), able therefore to give valid interpretations. Where Shi’ite (partition) Islam predominates there may be an official clergy who can perform this role. Laws, election processes, and candidates for election in the Islamic Republic of Iran must be approved by the Council of Guardians, composed of some of the highest clergy in Iran.

As Chapter Ten mentioned briefly, a strict Sunni (traditional) version arose in Arabia in the eighteenth century, called the Wahhabi movement, named after its founder Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791). It was intent on cleansing Islam of Sufi accretions such as fervid dancing, which the Wahhabis called “magical rituals,” and the veneration of certain Sufi leaders as saints, which the Wahhabis thought of as idolatry. The Wahhabi leaders succeeded in imposing their views on most of Arabia through an alliance with the Saud tribe, whose eighteenth-century sheik was an excellent military leader. After more than a century of successes and failures, King Ibn Saud regained authority for his family over Arabia in the early twentieth century, and re-established the strict and traditionalist Wahhabi approach to Islam.

The Saudi family has considered it its duty to promote Islamist movements, and has done so in various countries. Members of this family, along with other citizens of the oil-rich gulf states, have the money to fund many Islamist groups. Sufism has long predominated in Sudan, for example, but a Sunni Islamist movement took over the government not long ago, under the name of the National Islamic Front and with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood that is also active in Egypt. Gulf oil money flows to charitable institutions to help the poor and weak, as well as to terrorist groups. It is usually difficult to keep track of where the money goes.

Finally, amidst all this, in various nations at least some modernizing Muslim voices recommend that more attention be paid to the rationalistic Muslim philosophers of the ninth and later centuries, CE (second century A.H. —Anno Hegira). These are called the Mu’tazilis, some of whom strongly influenced late medieval Christians like Aquinas. These modernizing voices invoke the Mu’tazilis as an authentically Muslim precedent for entering more fully into the scientific rationality that pervades the world today. The ferment among these and other variants of Islam shows the continuing vitality of this complex tradition.

Islam is not the only tradition to manifest continuing vitality. In India,
many of the better educated leaders had their own version of a secularization thesis, though they were willing to link it to the more philosophically sophisticated aspects of Hindu thought, as in the theology of Shankara. But throughout India the traditional caste system is still extremely strong; the thousands of gods still receive their care and worship, the stories of Krishna and Rama are still cherished, and religion strongly influences politics.

Buddhism is still powerful across southeast Asia and the Far East. A Japanese variant called "Zen Buddhism," which stresses meditative practices, has proved popular in the Western world. Soka Gakkai International is expanding into various Western nations. It too has ancient roots, as a lay offshoot of a form of Buddhism developed by a thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist monk, Nichiren. He taught that devotion to the mystic teaching of spiritual cause and effect, symbolized by the lotus which both blossoms (effect) and seeds (cause) at the same time, will create a deep compassion for all suffering and lead to world peace. An interesting Buddhist-derived NRM is developing currently in Kenya. A Englishman named Benjamin Creme proclaims that a Kenyan of Indian origins is the Maitreya Buddha, the fifth appearance of the Buddha in cosmic history, one whom people have been waiting for also in the form of the Christ or Messiah, Krishna, and the Mahdi (the one guided by Allah).

In the light of these and other ways that people show continuing interest in a religious approach to life, the secularization thesis might seem untenable. On the other hand, the example of Europe shows that secularization can reduce religions collectively to a minority position. It is probably too soon to predict the long-term fate of religion in Russia, for example, where Orthodox Christianity now has more freedom than in the past, but where it has to compete with eager Christian fundamentalist missionaries from the West. Predicting the future of religion in general is an even more difficult task.

It may be more useful first to take note again of differences in basic styles of religiousness, from primitive to modern. They exist together today as different styles of religiousness even among people in the same synagogue, temple, church or masjid (mosque). Different styles of religiousness lead people to respond differently to skepticism and secularization.

**STAGES AND STYLES OF RELIGION TODAY**

**James Fowler's Stages of Faith**

There are numerous analyses of stages of individual development. Piagetian and Neo-Piagetian and post-Piagetian scholars argue over many aspects of cognitive development. Kohlbergians and post-Kohlbergians do the same about moral development. James Fowler has used the ideas of Piaget and Kohlberg and others in his own study of what he calls "stages of faith" in a 1981 book by that name. Because he both integrates the ideas of a number of sources and is concerned with faith development, his analysis forms a useful guide for the following summaries.

Much of this book has been devoted to showing differences among primitive, archaic, historic or classical, and modern modes of religion. As the Preface indicated, individual development proceeds along a path similar to cultural development. To explain this there need be no hidden power pushing history along a certain path, as some nineteenth-century philosophers believed. There need be no law of history that individual development "recapitulates" cultural development. Both cultures and individuals may simply require time to develop more complex modes of thought. History shows that cultures need centuries or even thousands of years to develop complex cognitve tools such as literacy or formalized logic. Similarly, in an individual's life, a person first learns simpler cognitive methods and slowly becomes educated in the more difficult modes of thought that took the culture many centuries to develop. This occurs also in religion.

In the case of both cultures and individuals, the process of development is not one in which earlier modes of thought are simply rejected and replaced by later ones. Rather, it is usually a cumulative process, where earlier and simpler thought styles are enriched or reinterpreted through the addition of new and more complex thought styles. We have seen, for example, that preliterate cultures use simple folk tales to express their origins and how things came to be in the world, and that only after literacy appears do cultures develop complex epics myths with a unified plot. Yet often the folktales are not left behind but are incorporated into the larger myth. Similarly in individual development, the tale of The Three Little Pigs or of Little Red Riding Hood are beyond the full comprehension of a two-year-old, but are easily understood by the five-year-old. Not until the age of ten or so will a child be able to grasp that the many chapters of a bigger book contain not many separate stories about the same cast of characters but a single long complex story. Yet the ten-year-old will still enjoy telling the story of The Three Little Pigs or Little Red Riding Hood and explain aspects of them to a younger sibling.

Those who readily accept the power of crystals to change moods, or hear the words of ancient souls channelled by certain people today, seem to rely on the imaginative powers that we all first enjoy from as early as the age of two or so. The fast growing minds of young children latch on to countless ideas without much ability to distinguish between what is fact and what is fantasy. Whatever ideas lodge in the child's mind seem true just by their vivid presence. Thus a four-year-old believes readily in Santa Claus, has an invisible friend, and fears monsters under the bed. For the four-year-old,
adults and older children constitute the major authoritative source of beliefs. This susceptibility to believe whatever is truly vivid and interesting can remain with people throughout their lives. So the earliest standards of belief—the authority of people in the know, and the vividness of ideas—are always with us in any society.

Around the age of seven or so, however, as Fowler and others describe it, most children enter a new stage of thought. They become aware of a clear distinction between fact and fantasy. They become capable of using firsthand experience and simple logic to test some ideas. They realize, for example, that not even a Santa Claus could possibly bring toys to all the millions of children of the world in a single night. If they are told that they used to have an invisible friend, they are likely to insist that they were never so silly as that. The monsters under the bed disappear (most of them, at least). Yet if authoritative adults assure them that angels really do exist, even if Santa Claus does not, the child will accept this. Imagination is now under the control of a serious intent to distinguish between fact and fantasy, but the standard of listening to authority remains. The seven-year-old child also begins to have a clearer sense of the reality of a larger society. As the child matures, society takes on an authoritative role as a source of knowing what is true or false, good or bad, proper or improper to do. Obviously, this also remains true for people throughout their lives.

In early adolescence, yet another stage usually appears. The adolescent’s awareness expands to include the larger world, in a kind of late arthritic perspective. The adolescent needs a large narrative which encompasses major aspects of life all at once and, most importantly, tells the adolescent where she or he may fit in this story. It might be the story of the cosmos told in the Mahabharata, particularly in the Bhagavad Gita’s story of Krishna, the charioteer, explaining all of life to the warrior Arjuna, on the verge of a great battle among clans. Or it may be the epic of the universe in Hebrew, from the six days of creation, through a long history of interaction with God, to the messianic age. Christians find their main focus in the story of Jesus, whose teachings and sacrificial death and resurrection into new life make sense of things for Christians.

The stories have greatest effect if there is a heroic figure or two with whom the listener might identify. These grand narratives are “personal” in the sense that they are not abstract analyses; instead they are vivid tales of personal beings to whom the adolescent can feel some relationship. The religious narratives themselves are accepted as the proper standards for evaluating all beliefs and morals and practices, though the consensus of the larger religious community and the tradition behind the narrative provides authority to authenticate it.

Fowler calls this early adolescent style of thought and faith the “synthetic-conventional.” This basic style may remain dominant for the person’s whole life, even though continuing life experiences will enrich it greatly. Most of us synthesize or sum up the meaning of life through some grand narratives, whether about Moses or the Buddha or Krishna or Jesus or Muhammad. Most of us are conventional in the sense that we accept certain narratives as part of the conventional truths we learn from others. Most people continue to learn from pastors, priests, and rabbis, from gurus and imams. Most find these instructions reinforced by their religious communities. The synthetic-conventional style supports social cohesion and cooperation, and provides a secure identity and set of values for the individual. On the other hand, it also supports conformity, even to ideas and values and practices that might otherwise be rejected.

By late adolescence, however, a fourth stage may emerge. People in cultures with elaborate systems of formal education receive training in the more abstract and systematic methods of analysis that historic culture first developed. Mathematical training in school prepares the way, through the logical structures of geometry and algebra. Techniques of debating issues pro and con challenge students to carefully line up evidence both for and against certain positions, to search out logical inconsistencies in the arguments used to support these positions. Essay writing, social science classes, the sciences, philosophy and theology, all include lessons in how to think logically and analytically. People in any culture have the innate intelligence to use these methods, but not all cultures provide training in them.

Some people who are trained this way will find these methods appealing. Some may learn to use them in certain restricted areas of life but exclude them from other areas. It takes long years of formal training to become comfortable with highly abstract and systematic thought. It may also seem simply wrong to be too logical about one’s interpersonal relations. The religious relation a person has with God or Krishna or Amída Buddha may be exempted from any sort of rational analysis or criticism. That is why “faith” is more often the norm for religious belief than “reason.” It may also be why the synthetic-conventional approach has continuing appeal.

We have seen many people, however, who think it quite appropriate to apply strict standards of abstract reasoning to their religious beliefs. This practice sometimes turns excessively self-confident as in the case of both religious dogmatism and early modern science. But it can also be a positive tool for identifying inconsistencies and increasing internal coherence in a religious tradition. Or it may serve an “apologetic” role, to show the reasonableness of the beliefs. The theology discussed in Chapter Eleven relies on tools of rationality. Enlightenment denial is another example.
A recent school of thought called postmodernism claims to have surpassed the universalizing rationality of the Enlightenment, by showing that we cannot know whether any truths or values are universally valid, because all truths and values are "socially constructed." This has implications for religious thought.

**Postmodernism and Religion**

So far in this book, the word "modern" has been used as Talcott Parsons and Robert Bellah used it, to identify in a general way how religion has been influenced by the style of modern science, which is now more tentative than it originally was, and by other prevailing ideas in European-based culture, such as greater religious tolerance and an acceptance of this world. But as the first part of Chapter Fourteen indicated, the meaning of "modern" has shifted in the last two decades. Unfortunately, the shift of meaning has not been towards clear and well-defined usage. So it would not help much to try to change each use of the word "modern" in this book. But here are some guidelines on how to understand the word when it is used today.

People tend to think of their own times as "modern," and previous centuries as pre-modern. We have already seen, however, that this common usage is not what historians and philosophers have in mind when they use the term. For them, "modern" may apply all the way back to the early seventeenth century. In fact the core era of the European Enlightenment, the eighteenth century, is the epitome of what the word "modern" has recently come to mean. Philosophers and historians (and literary critics and theologians and others) now identify the "modern" precisely with the great confidence in rational inquiry and analysis that characterized the Enlightenment. (Ironically, as the Introduction to Part IV indicated, this means that the label "modern" has come to be used for the devotion to rationality one can also find in ancient classical or historic thought, as in Greek philosophy and in some Chinese and Indian philosophies.) According to this use of the word "modern," some claim that we no longer live in modern times but in postmodern times, though the modern lingers with us, as do the archaic and primitive also. Yet there are others who think of postmodernism as just a recent competitor to an equally vital late modern approach.

To sort all this into clearer categories, we can divide the modern into early and late forms, and then compare both of them with the postmodern. Early modern thought consists of the classical self-confident rationality of early modern science in the Enlightenment. (Note again that many people still maintain this approach to knowledge.) Late modern thought consists of the more cautious approach that slowly developed in science, as scientists and philosophers began to recognize that science advances precisely by maintaining a degree of self-critical doubt or skepticism about its own conclusions (as described in Chapter Thirteen). This gets us closer to the notion of "postmodern."

Postmodern is the label for various theories which argue that the rationality of both the modern Enlightenment and also of late modern self-critical science share an important limitation. Both of them, like all human ideas, are socially constructed. (Some philosophers speak more of a "linguistic" construction of reality, to highlight the role that language plays in transmitting social reality to us.) Just as Langer argued that social norms, identities, and religious viewpoints are constructed by people over time, postmodernists argue that all human ideas are products also of their time and place. According to postmodernists this includes not only religion, morality, and the social order, but even science.

A religion may appear to its adherents to be the single universally valid religion. The postmodernist, however, says this is a socially constructed belief, reflecting the bias and interests and values of the social history behind it. A postmodernist could perhaps say that this or that religion might actually be universally valid, but that there is no outside objective place to stand in order to figure out which religion that is. So in practice believers can go on believing in the single universal validity of their own religious tradition. But they should not expect an outsider to agree (especially if that outsider is a postmodernist).

A postmodernist will likewise say that every moral code is a social product. "Modern" Enlightenment thought argued that there are universal human rights. "All men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" says the 1776 U.S. Declaration of Independence. Postmodernism points out that the Declaration of Independence was the product of Enlightenment theories, formulated in the West, by peoples with a common religious heritage. Therefore this declaration of rights is valid in those societies which support it, but not necessarily in other societies.

Postmodernism usually treats science the same as it treats religion and morality. Both early modern science and later modern science are produced by people with certain ideological biases and certain local interests and certain presuppositions that are shared by people of their time and place. Therefore a scientific picture of reality may just reflect the social context that produced it and have no lasting or universal validity. In general, then, postmodernists claim that no framework for understanding things is universally valid.

**Postmodernism and Cultural Relativism**

To an extent postmodernism is just cultural relativism given a philosophical justification. Cultural relativists argue that every culture has its own beliefs and practices that constitute a well-functioning social reality ("functionalism")
is another name for this viewpoint). This means that the beliefs and practices of a society can be judged only in terms of how well they function in that society, not in terms of whether they are compatible with the beliefs and practices of other societies. This leads to the further conclusion that European and North American imperialists and colonialists should not impose their values on other cultures. Every culture should be respected as it is.

That includes a culture’s religious beliefs. If a group that is called “primitive” from a European-American perspective happens to believe that the spirits of the ancestors offer guidance through dreams, then the European-American visitors to that group should respect those beliefs and not call them superstitious or primitive. The same would be true about belief that all illness and death is caused by sorcery, or that certain animals are sacred and must not be killed. Missionaries should not try to replace one society’s traditions with outside traditions. So says cultural relativism.

There are at least two problems with cultural relativism. One is that not all the beliefs and practices of a culture are truly well-functioning. The belief that illness and death are caused by sorcery leads to constant suspicion and fights. Innocent people are accused of sorcery, just as in the witch hunts of early modern Europe. Feuds between families break out, to avenge the death of the supposed victim. When given a chance to use modern medicine to cure a child, many primitive people have decided that modern medicine is more effective in promoting the child’s health than the traditional shamanistic rituals for driving out harmful spirits.

A second problem with cultural relativism is that it is very hard for even the cultural relativists to maintain when the relativists are faced with certain practices. Should we treat infanticide and forced female “circumcision” and slavery simply as the customs of others which we cannot legitimately judge? Should abuse of the poor by a small, well-armed dictatorial class be deemed acceptable as long as it is part of the religious tradition of the culture? Cultural relativism seems to imply that a society which does not respect human rights, has a long tradition of not respecting human rights, and lacks a religion which argues for human rights, can therefore legitimately ignore human rights.

The type of answer usually given by a postmodernist is that those of us who believe in human rights should try to get other societies to change their social customs until they do accept and support human rights. Our belief that every human being everywhere deserves to be treated with at least a certain minimum human dignity is a belief worth propagating. But this puts the postmodernist in the position of trying to make certain values universal. The postmodernist is stepping beyond a given social context to try to get all societies to share some ideas. The goal then is to make some values universal and not just relative to certain cultures. This will not be entirely difficult.

It is not European-American culture alone that provides a basis for human rights. Many historic religious traditions of the world tend to preach universal compassion, or that people everywhere should not do to others what they do not like done to themselves.

Postmodernism also steps beyond relativism in at least one of its conclusions. Postmodern thought arrives at what it claims to be a universal truth, that every society is constructed by people’s subjective ideas, and that people’s ideas are first formed by a prior social context. To be consistent, they should say that their own social context thought led them to think this way.

Postmodernists also step beyond relativism by the way they arrive at this conclusion. They use rational arguments based on evidence. Postmodern thought appeals to the evidence about how we learn and think, about the variations among cultures, and about the dependence of every person upon a social context for the person’s language, early beliefs, sense of identity, and values. Postmodern thought then makes a rational case of what the evidence implies. By using evidence and logic to make their case, postmodernists are participating in a human practice that is far older than postmodernism, and which is spread across historic or classical as well as modern cultures. They may in fact be using a universally effective method of thought when they rely on evidence and logic, as Chapter Eleven indicated.

Postmodernists, then, have some problems with inner consistency. They say there are no universally valid truths, yet in practice they promote universal values, use a universal rational method, and promote their own theory as universally valid.

Nevertheless, postmodernism has many adherents because it offers methods other than scientific rationality for evaluating truth-claims. Postmodernism says there can be many methods for deciding what is true, depending on one’s community. Many postmodernists also insist that there is more than one kind of truth—literary truth, moral truth, religious truth, for example. Others like postmodern relativism because it helps to establish respect for different cultures, including hunting-gathering cultures. Among those it especially appeals to are religious thinkers who find postmodernism useful as a defense against both secularism and challenges by science.

A Postmodern Form of Anti-Secularism

Modern theologies have tended first to accept the modern secular world and then to see how religious tradition can be interpreted in response to that world. There are many in religion who think the opposite should be the case, that theology should either reject the secular world or challenge that world to change and conform to the ideals promoted by religion. Christian Fundamentalists do this. Islamists do also. But they are not alone.
Among religious people there are two camps that might be called accommodationists and anti-accommodationists. The accommodationists engage in a form of what Tillich called “correlational theology” (see Chapter Eleven), a phrase that eventually came to mean a reciprocal interaction between the religious tradition and the modern secular world. The accommodationist perspective maintains that both the religious tradition and the world can not only challenge each other but that they can learn from each other as well. Each side will sometimes end up making accommodations to the needs and vision of the other. Accommodationists are usually “modern” in their willingness to appreciate secularity and the value of religious tolerance.

Anti-accommodationists, as you might expect from the name, think that the truth of religion is not to accommodate itself to the world but to confront and guide the world. Theologians should spend less time re-interpreting their own tradition and more time being true to it. Secular rationality is the problem, not the answer. On issues of war and poverty and abortion the churches ought to take a stand like the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, standing up against the common wisdom of secular culture in order to pass judgment on that culture where it fails morally.

Postmodernism provides a way to justify anti-accommodationism. In an influential book, The Nature of Doctrine (1984), George Lindbeck (1923- ) argues against the claim by Schleiermacher and other liberal theologians, that the basis of religion is an individual experience of the Whole, an experience that any person anywhere can have. Instead, Lindbeck argues, we should recognize that every person becomes religious through some particular social context. Every religious group is a social reality, what he calls a “cultural-linguistic” form of life for a community. Each community has its basic narratives which deal with the most important dimensions of life. There is no need to give in to or accommodate the standards of other groups, including secular standards. Each community of faith can legitimately focus on its own way of life, strengthen that way of life, and speak from it to the rest of the world. Lindbeck calls this application of postmodern thought to religion a “postliberal” theology.

This means that postmodernism gives at least implicit support to the hidden logic of blind faith described in Chapter Eleven. By default, there is no place to go to find the truth and basic values about life except to some community, to some society and its tradition. What counts in the end is simply whether the community and its tradition provide a coherent and meaningful form of life. Postmodernism tends to emphasize the role “master narratives” play in teaching people people in the community who they are and what is important and how to live. If the narratives of a religious tradition enable people to deal well with all the confusion and challenges of life, one could then argue that is enough. If the secular world fails to provide a compelling enough story for a fully meaningful life, that makes religious faith all the more reasonable.

Postmodernism Limits Science

Science can challenge religious traditions both by the conclusions that it reaches and by its method. Fundamentalists are bothered by any conclusions of science that run contrary to a literal reading of scripture. That is a major reason fundamentalists oppose the theory of evolution. The book of Genesis says that God made the first man and woman, probably about six thousand years ago. To attribute human origins to evolution takes place over billions of years must therefore be wrong. But fundamentalists often try themselves to use scientific methods to attack evolution. They gather evidence to show evolution is incorrect. (It is incompetent science, short on relevant data, misleading in its arguments, and has often been irresponsible in its use of citations from other sources, but it nonetheless tries to appeal to empirical evidence and rational analysis.)

As we saw in earlier chapters, both the method of science and some of its conclusions challenge even those religious believers who are not fundamentalists. As was said, science operates by methodological naturalism, treating every event as though it were due to natural causes alone. That means that science cannot allow the hypothesis that some supernatural cause was at work. So the method of science at least implicitly challenges belief in miracles. Recall also that as science has progressed it has been able to show that many things that once looked miraculous have natural explanations. Hence the expression “God of the gaps,” to indicate that divine intervention is appealing only in fewer and fewer apparent gaps in the natural order. The implication is that perhaps all the gaps can someday be closed up. Similarly even non-fundamentalists can also be bothered by the implications of the theory of evolution, as we have seen, because it makes the world look unplanned and human life just an accident of a partly random process.

Postmodernism provides a shield against science by arguing that even science, that supposedly objective and universally valid enterprise, is actually the product of a certain social context. Historians of science have written influential histories of this or that scientific discovery, starting with Copernicus, Galileo, and Boyle, to show social influences at work in the formulation and spread of various methods and conclusions. (Thomas Kuhn is the most famous of these historians. He is the one who popularized the word “paradigm” to stand for a big theory or a basic worldview.) The implication is that science is not objective, and that when society changes science may change also. If a religious person, then, has a religious community that pro-
vides a vivifying guide to all of life, but disagrees with scientific thought on some point (such as the reality of miracles), postmodernism says it is legitimate to ignore science and be true to the way of life of the traditional religion.

The Late Modern, Postmodernism, and Fowler's Stages

Four of Fowler's stages have been described already. The last of them mentioned so far is the tendency among many in late adolescence to have such great certainty in the power of rationality that their religiousness becomes rather dogmatic. Early modern science shared this characteristic. Later modern science recognized the tentativeness of ideas, even though there was great confidence in those that had withstood a long process of testing and application. Similarly, in their adult years many people become less dogmatic about their beliefs and values, even while holding on to them. It is a stage of increased self-awareness, of self-transcendence in the vocabulary of Chapters Four and Fourteen here. This is the ability to step outside oneself, as it were, to be aware of one's own ideas and values as an observer of those thoughts and values and ask questions about them. The late modern self-reflective person is called upon to take individual responsibility for one's own theories, beliefs, values, and commitments. This is the new way of understanding the self discussed in Chapter Thirteen.

This is quite similar to what Fowler describes as a fifth stage of faith development. He calls it "conjunctive" faith, in which a person faces various deep issues in life and brings them together (conjoin them) coherently by making some fundamental commitments to an overall vision of life. The morality of this fifth stage is much like basic value morality. This faith is a decision to trust in life's meaningfulness, in spite of an inability to prove that any clear set of beliefs about life is the ultimate truth.

Fowler says that a danger of this stage is a temptation to passivity, despair, or cynicism. If no one really knows for sure what is valuable or not, why is anything worth choosing? If all of our beliefs and values are just fictions produced by this or that social context, why take any of it seriously? A person might just as well drift along on the surface of life, grabbing a little enjoyment as opportunities arise.

Postmodernism can respond to this danger not by the late modern appeal to individual commitment but by an appeal to trust in the community which formed the ideas and values by which the person lives. Postmodernism argues that we can never be fully responsible as individuals, because our beliefs and values are all the product of some community or another—even our belief in individual responsibility, if we have such a belief. When we commit ourselves to a certain way of life, then, we are really trusting in the community that formed us.

But we have just seen that even the postmodernists are not quite as postmodern as they claim. They want to make universally valid statements about the human condition, in particular about the effects of social contexts on all people, on all ideas and values. They also act as though using evidence and logic is an effective way to arrive at such universally valid statements. They act as though it were worth being a knower in the world (Chapter Fourteen). They usually promote concern and compassion for all people, including those who are different in any way. Their belief that different social contexts may all be valid makes them extend concern towards every one who is "other." Regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, say the postmodernists, we should respect everyone.

So both late modern people and postmodernists often end up doing the same thing—make commitments. Without dogmatic certitudes, they can nonetheless commit themselves to a view that there is ultimate value in personness and in the world. The commitments of both late modern and postmodern people may be guided by ideas from tradition and authority figures passed on in a community context. But some communities teach people they must finally make their own individual commitments—who to be, how to live, what values to live by and for, how best to learn what is probably true, and whether or not to choose a given religious perspective. This is the "conjunctive" stage which Fowler describes as a fifth and final stage of religious development.

It would take another book to address these issues adequately. But it is important to at least look at the problem raised by postmodernism and cultural relativism, the problem of whether it is legitimate to evaluate religion except from within. The Epilogue will take up this task. It shifts the focus of attention from an attempt to describe religion, which has been the main goal of this book, to attempts to evaluate religion.

Summary

Predictions that religion would fade away have not come true. Some forms of traditional religion have weakened, but new religious movements, New Age thought, revivals such as those among Pentecostals and Muslims and Hindus, all exhibit ongoing religious vitality. Modern religion's appreciation of greater individual freedom has made religion more private and personal in many cases. Postmodernism has supported the notion that every religious group has a way of life that need not justify itself by any standards except its own. Religious people have to choose between more or less accommodation to secular and scientific rationality.
FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Do you think you have enough evidence to judge whether the secularization theory is simply wrong? Explain.
2. Give reasons why either accommodationism or anti-accommodationism is a better approach.
3. Some have said that when they read James Fowler’s theory of stages of faith development, that it reminds them of their own life so far. To what extent is this true of you?
4. To what extent are you persuaded by postmodernist arguments that science is not universally or objectively valid?

SUGGESTED READINGS


EPLOGUE

Evaluating Religion(s)

TO EVALUATE OR NOT

Evaluation is part of any academic study, including the study of religion. In a literature course students apply criteria for evaluating the literary merits of a work. In a political science course students review arguments for and against different forms of government. Why not also make evaluation part of the study of religion? The validity of the truth claims and the moral norms of various religions can be subjected to some interesting questions. So can the overall impact of this or that religion on people’s lives.

On the other hand, religion is touchier than politics or literature. In many modern nations it is considered a rather personal matter. Because we each have the right to believe as we choose, perhaps it is better not to try to evaluate different forms of religion at all. Postmodernism and cultural relativism support this by their claim that there are no objectively valid standards to use in making an evaluation of religion.

In one sense, however, it is too late to avoid evaluation. Atheists and agnostics have already offered their evaluations. If this were a textbook on the philosophy of religion, many segments would be devoted to the criticism of religion advanced by philosophers like David Hume and Karl Marx, or sociologists like Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Various skeptical groups today continue to challenge religious beliefs. Nonetheless, there are many who argue that it is better just to appreciate the development and diversity of religion, without engaging in critical evaluation of the truth claims and moral norms of various religions, or evaluating the impact of religion on people’s lives.

Many religions have agreed for a very traditional reason. They say that the only truth a person needs to know is the revelation from God, or a sacred text, or the prophetic vision that is the source of that religion. No human evaluation is legitimate if the evaluation challenges what comes from the divine or sacred source. Fallible human minds have neither the ability nor the right to question the divine. Orthodox Hindus know that the basic truths about karma and dharma contained in the Vedic tradition are the unquestionable truth. Traditionalist Muslims accept God’s message contained in the