

# The Enduring Tensions Between Catholicism and Modernity

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This essay intervenes in the ongoing debate on the place of the Church in the contemporary world by returning to older discussions of Catholicism and modernity. After revisiting the role of anti-Catholicism in the classic account of modernity as well as the tradition of Catholic anti-modernism, I focus on how the Vatican II spirit of *aggiornamento* unhappily coincided with a more general crisis of modernity in the 1970s–1990s. The moment witnessed both the retreat of modernity as a meaningful concept and “postmodern” religious revival. In our new century we confront the challenge of articulating living traditions amidst global complexity. Against the temptation of tribalism and its self-reinforcing cognitive dissonance, aspects of the modern paradigm may still be useful in imagining a post-triumphalist and cosmopolitan Catholic culture adequate to our day.

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## I. Separate Ways

The tensions between Catholicism and modernity are indeed enduring. They emerged over centuries and are deep and abiding. Considering this general picture will require certain generalizations and ideal-typical characterizations, for which I ask forgiveness ahead of time. Stating the obvious while making a few provocations is intended to further reflection and dialogue. An initial irony is that the very notion of the modern bears some relationship to Catholic Christianity. In terms of the all-important category of time, “the Christian notion of the Incarnation, a decisive, revolutionary moment in time, before and after which all was different” helped create “a general historical or ‘epochal,’ revolutionary consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> With inextricable ties to Judaism, Christian eschatology enabled the articulation of temporalities of past, present, and future that were generally unavailable to Greek and Roman cosmologies. The concept of the modern emerged as early as the fifth century when Latin authors needed to contrast contemporaneous Christian texts with those of their classical, pagan predecessors. Debates between the *moderni* and *antiqui* were reawakened in medieval Christendom and continued through the Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> Building on the older understanding of *secular* clergy not bound to religious orders, one later version of the modern secularization thesis holds that many aspects of modernity have involved the translation of religious content into non-religious form. Most famously according to this view, the modern secular philosophy of historical progress marked the worldly rendering of Christian eschatology.<sup>4</sup> Other examples of the notion of secular modernity as “a disguised version of what went before” include the following:

radical social utopias like Marxism as secularizations of millennial dreams of paradise; modern political leaders as secularized theocratic monarchs; the modern work ethic as a secularized version of Christian asceticism; modern psychological self-examination as secularized confessionalism; or modern political egalitarianism as the secularization of the Christian idea of man’s equality in the eyes of God. Even modern science has been derived from the Christian faith in an intelligible and rational world designed by a trustworthy deity.<sup>5</sup>

This rich history of deep connection and overlap is of interest but in the end inadequate to understand the reality and stakes of the enduring tensions between Catholicism and modernity. It may be a particularly Catholic temptation to emphasize origins because doing so shifts the focus away from new things that did not always need the Church.

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2 Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), 17.

3 Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, and Postmodernism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987), 14–16. Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity—An Incomplete Project,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), 3.

4 Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Presuppositions of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

5 Martin Jay, “Blumenberg and Modernism: A Reflection on *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*,” in *Fin de Siècle Socialism and Other Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 150.

Even if Christianity had provided some of the resources for the emergence of the modern era and modern worldviews, a radical rupture between modernity and Catholicism did occur. How did they eventually part company and go their separate ways? Two magisterial accounts of the emergence of modernity locate its origins in theological contexts while emphasizing revolutionary breakthroughs and departures. Amos Funkenstein shows that movements within late medieval theology such as nominalism and voluntarism helped open the door on the search for possibly unified knowledge. Science and theology were initially commensurable before eventually coming into conflict. “Never before or after [the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries],” he writes, “were science, philosophy, and theology seen as almost one and the same occupation.”<sup>6</sup> Hans Blumenberg’s account of the “legitimacy” of the modern project of “human self-

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assertion” rejects the view of secularization as mere continuity, arguing instead that medieval and early modern thinkers generated theoretical problems to which available solutions were insufficient. Modern secularity was not merely a functional equivalent of religion: asking unanswerable questions stimulated new ways of thinking. Modern or secular content developed through the formal and functional “re-occupation” of previous “positions” bequeathed by tradition. The modern age marked the “second overcoming of Gnosticism.”<sup>7</sup> Both Funkenstein and Blumenberg nuance the view that modernity simply reflected the recurrent translation of theological themes into mundane ones. They help us understand how some things meaningfully changed in ways irreducible to Christian “typological” time (soteriological, eschatological, sacramental, liturgical, etc.) that holds as a standard *non nova, sed nove* (not the new, but anew).<sup>8</sup> Modernity involves both the possibility of “the epoch of Being conceived under the sign of the *novum*,” as Gianni Vattimo put it, and the real developments, accomplishments, crises, catastrophes, etc., that have taken place during the modern era.<sup>9</sup> In other words, it involves the paradigm

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6 Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 1–22, 57–71.

7 Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1983; org. pub. 1966), 125–266.

8 Antoine Compagnon, *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 8–9.

9 Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 168.

and worldview of thinking in terms of paradigms and worldviews. Religion is treated as a worldview, and non-religious factors and forces achieve legitimacy. Whatever was once combined did come to separate.

### *Anti-Catholic Modernity*

Catholicism has served as a straw man against which the modern defines itself; that is, modernity has understood itself in part as anti-Catholicism. Following the fracturing of Western Christendom around 1500 by the three overlapping forces of non-European encounter, the Renaissance, and the Reformation, seventeenth-century natural philosophy and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment formulated the two basic theses of what Bruno Latour calls the modern “constitution”: mastery of nature and social emancipation.<sup>10</sup> Such projects were no longer beholden to the guarantees of divine transcendence, although outright incompatibility emerged more gradually. Stephen Toulmin recounts the “standard account” of modernity since the seventeenth century:

[B]y 1600 most of Europe, notably the Protestant countries of Northern Europe, had reached a new level of prosperity and material comfort. The development of trade, the growth of cities, and the invention of printed books, had made literacy as widespread in the prosperous laity as it had earlier been among priests, monks, and other ecclesiastics. A secular culture emerged, characteristic of the educated laity rather than of the Church. Lay scholars read and thought for themselves, no longer recognized the Church’s right to tell them what to believe, and began to judge all doctrines by their inherent plausibility. Turning away from medieval scholasticism, seventeenth century thinkers developed new ideas based on their first-hand experience. ... [T]his seventeenth-century insistence on the power of *rationality*, along with the rejection of tradition and superstition—the two were not clearly distinguished—reshaped European life and society generally.<sup>11</sup>

The modern constitution broke with “tradition” and “superstition”—code words for Catholicism even among Protestants—and achieved its fullest early expression in the French Enlightenment. *Philosophes* rallied by Voltaire’s call to *écrasez l’infâme* made their home in France, “the eldest daughter of the Church.” Only gradually was religion in general and not merely Catholicism in particular the object of modern derision; although “unbelief” became an issue as early as the sixteenth century, free-thinking atheism did not take hold until the latter 1700s.<sup>12</sup> According to the standard account, over the long haul, knowledge, politics, society, culture, and economics were less and less legitimated by religion. Robert Pippin points to the modern critique of “the claims of tradition, the ancestors, and especially the Church (the public status of reason, it

10 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 34.

11 Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 13–15.

12 Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, tr. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985). Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 60.

was hoped, could provide the social integration and cultural stability long a function of tradition and religion).”<sup>13</sup>

The image of Catholicism in modern eyes is blurry. For a worldview committed to the possibility of meaningful change over time, its judgment of the Church, which it treats as a foil, is remarkably static. To be sure, as we will see, Catholics did their part in reinforcing the prejudices of their modern critics. Still, there is no mistaking the way that Catholics have served moderns as the case *par excellence* of what they were not. The Church generally appeared to moderns as a pre- or antimodern contrariety—archaically and dogmatically inimical to its constitution. Actually, modernity has needed the concept of the premodern or antimodern Church as an essential part of its own foundational self-understanding in the sense that identity requires differentiation and negation. From natural science and technology to democracy to capitalism to progressivism, and beyond, in spite of all its variety, the standard account of modernity echoes a basic refrain: *at least we’re not Catholic*.

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### *Catholic Anti-Modernity*

The standard account goes some distance in explaining why Catholicism has often been defensive vis-à-vis the modern, a defensiveness that has sometimes been adapted to narratives of persecution familiar to the Christian tradition. Catholics had cause to be wary: the anticlerical Enlightenment found concrete expression in the French Revolution. In 1789–90, Church property was nationalized, religious orders dissolved, and clergy obliged to swear a loyalty oath to the state. The event signaled a new era. In its wake, Catholic anti-modern stances hardened over the next 150 years, passing from traditionalism under attack to conservation to assertive engagement—for instance, Catholic social thought imagining alternate ways of being modern, “reactionary modernism” embracing corporatist authoritarianism and fascism.<sup>14</sup> Catholic anti-modernity opposed its own multilayered experience of typological time to modern “homogeneous, empty time,” with its fetish of rupture, the new, acceleration, and an indeterminate future.<sup>15</sup> In ways that were often reactive but could also be critical, it resisted the shift from the theocentric to the anthropocentric imagination.<sup>16</sup>

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13 Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 4.

14 Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

15 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 261.

16 Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 9.

Between Pius IX's *Syllabus errorum* (1864) and Pius X's condemnation of the modernists in *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907)—to be sure, an era that also included more “liberal” Popes—the line between conservation and reaction was sometimes difficult to discern. As is well known, the *Syllabus* rejected central pillars of the modern paradigm: reason as the “sole arbiter of truth” and “ultimate standard”; the eclipse of scholasticism; the evaluation of dogma by scientific, philosophical, and historical thinking; religious pluralism; materialism, socialism, and communism; the privilege of right over duty; and especially the separation of Church and state authority, and the submission of the former to the latter, with respect to marriage, schools, and religious orders. The last fallacy rejected was that “the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization.”<sup>17</sup>

In retrospect, the immediate context weighed decisively on both the *Syllabus*'s content and the need to promulgate it: France had recalled home its troops protecting the Vatican from Italian nationalist armies. The experience of the Vatican as a citadel besieged by temporal powers pervaded the First Vatican Council (1869–70). By 1907, Pius X was scouring the Church for internal signs of problematic modern philosophy and textual criticism. The “number of the enemies of the cross of Christ has in these last days increased exceedingly,” he began. “Partisans of error are to be sought not only among the Church's open enemies; they lie hidden ... in her very bosom and heart, and are the more mischievous, the less conspicuously they appear.” The modernists were accused of forming a coherent conspiracy under cover of seemingly disparate methods: “agnosticism” about “phenomena” led to atheism; “immanent vitalism” prioritized human need and “sentiment” for the divine; dogmas were treated as “secondary” articulations, “symbols,” and “instruments”; faith was subjected to science; and the Bible to historico-critical analysis. The causes of this tendency were “a blind and unchecked passion for novelty,” curiosity, pride, and ignorance. Its remedy involved doubling down on scholasticism; “vigilance” over seminaries, universities, and conferences; explicit censorship; and diocesan watch committees.<sup>18</sup> The Catholic modernists (e.g., Alfred Loisy, George Tyrrell) were modernizers rejected as heterodox.

More generally, the term *modernism* can mean a critical engagement with modernity on its own terrain, turning the modern spirit not against “tradition” but against aspects of modernity itself. By the late nineteenth century, religion was emerging in new ways as a means not to shun the modern but to engage and act on it, to imagine pathways different than those mapped by the orthodox cartographers of a triumphant secular bourgeois modernity. Although Catholic traditionalism could lead to nostalgia about bygone medieval Christendom, taking a critical stance against the modern could, like the

17 Pius IX, *Syllabus Errorum* (8 December 1864), [www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/pgsyll.htm](http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/pgsyll.htm). See also *Quanta cura* (8 December 1864) on naturalism, “the liberty of perdition,” civil society, public opinion, and the privatization of religion, [www.ewtn.com/library/encyc/pgquanta.htm](http://www.ewtn.com/library/encyc/pgquanta.htm)

18 Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (8 September 1907), online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). *Lamentabili sane exitu* (3 July 1907) said that “immutable doctrines” and “modern progress,” “modern Catholicism,” and “true science” could not be “reconciled.” At [papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10lumen.htm](http://papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10lumen.htm).

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modernists, point toward being other than modern or toward alternative modernities. Two examples of this orientation are Catholic social thought and Catholic accommodation to fascism. The first continues to resonate today; the latter is sometimes underemphasized. Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) accepted that modern industrial capitalism had transformed society and created an immiserated working class. As a rebuttal to socialism, it envisioned the harmonization of class interests, protecting private property while encouraging solidaristic labor unions. Economies should serve humans, the famous formula went, not vice versa. Rights and duties were to be mutually conditioning in an organic whole, and the Church would act "directly on behalf of the poor."<sup>19</sup> The modern stood in need of correction by the Church, which offered a concrete and realistic social philosophy of solidaristic community and communitarian solidarity. Several decades later, during the interwar period, too, Catholics in Europe looked for alternatives to liberalism as well as now communism. In Italy, Austria, Spain, Portugal, France, Slovakia, and elsewhere, many found corporatist authoritarianism and fascism to be viable options; their commitment to order, family values, discipline, hierarchy, subsidiarity, and organic holism promised a solution to modern atomism and materialism.<sup>20</sup> The Church's relationship to fascism on the whole is complicated, yet, as Samuel Moyn has recently observed, if Catholics turned to dignity and human rights during the Second World War, they did so in part because immediately prior commitments to fascism were suddenly in question.<sup>21</sup> In short, modern Catholic integralism as alter-modern or anti-modern has had a number of different manifestations, not all of which have been exactly anodyne. In its dialectical relationship with the modern from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, Catholicism often fulfilled its assigned oppositional role. Nevertheless, antiCatholic modernity and Catholic anti-modernity are not reciprocal. The former exists

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19 Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (15 May 1891), online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

20 For examples from a vast literature see David I. Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini: The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe* (New York: Random House, 2014) and Tom Villis, *British Catholics and Fascism: Religious Identity and Political Extremism Between the Wars* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

21 Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 7. John McGreevy notes Moyn's "sighs" and "gloom" about the "retrograde concession" of the conservative Catholic origins of contemporary human rights. See McGreevy, review of Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* in *Commonweal* (8 October 2015), [www.commonwealmagazine.org/christian-human-rights](http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/christian-human-rights).

as part of the foundational imaginary and mythos of an era and worldview. The latter has included a range of defensive, reactionary, and engaged responses to changing historical circumstances and conditions. Narratives of persecution and victimization are limited by the fact that Catholics in the modern era have been perpetrators as well as casualties.

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## II. Ships Passing (Can't Keep Up)

We noted in passing above that the eventual split between modernity and Catholicism concealed the irony of something of *longue durée* common origin in notions of “epochal” rupture deep in the Western imagination. When we turn to the late twentieth century we are confronted with a second, more local irony: just as Catholics were beginning to embrace modernity, many moderns themselves were having serious doubts about it. The momentous developments of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) ushered in sustained reflection on Catholic modernity and modern Catholicism, at least through the late 1990s. Debate has not ceased on whether Vatican II went “too far” or “not far enough.” Shorn of reactive and authoritarian affinities normal only a few decades before, certain strains of Catholic anti-modernity have been subsequently reasserted. At the same time, “bringing up to date” has enabled new forms of renewal, relevance, and vitality. Between these poles, the Church in the late twentieth century proved to be a powerful voice on religious freedom, the violation of human rights, economic disparity, and peace. As it turned out these dynamics of the post-Vatican II Church coincided with the postmodern turn. Affirming differentiation without novelty, the postmodern pushed the critique of modernity to a breaking point, opening the door on the revalorization or, as some would have it, the “return” of religion. Reflection on Catholic modernity and modern Catholicism was thus blunted by the postmodern de-legitimization of the modern paradigm and worldview. For if modernity itself was unraveling, then it was too late to seek rapprochement between it and Catholicism, and new life could be breathed into anti-modern Catholicism.

### *Aggiornamento*

In 1990, Leszek Kołakowski criticized the intellectual “prejudices which we have inherited directly from the progressivism of the Enlightenment ... the evolutionist theory whereby religion has been and continues to be no more effective than magic as a technique for covering the gaps in our knowledge and practical abilities. But nothing is less certain than that this is the case.”<sup>22</sup> At some point moderns had to contend with

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22 Leszek Kołakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 64.



what Max Weber once called an inconvenient fact: Catholicism had ceased to be a potent or vital cultural force in the modern era—except for all those people for whom it was. Against the modern mythos in practice during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, secularization and religiosity had co-existed and even fed one another. From one point of view, secularization could be a positive process that uncluttered and disentangled Christianity from encumbrances distracting it from its primary mission. In 1966, for instance, Blumenberg noted the contemporary “theological justification of secularization,” a position reinforced at the time by the emergent sociology of religion.<sup>23</sup> During the turbulent Sixties, searching and far-reaching reappraisals of the relationship between modernity and Catholicism were underway. As Kołakowski would later say, “the Church of *aggiornamento*” means that “to be a Christian is to be not only outside the world but also in the world ... to be a Christian is never to be against the world.”<sup>24</sup>

One striking aspect of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, with which the Second Vatican Council closed and which was communicated by Paul VI on 7 December 1965, is its engagement with postwar modernization theory under the shadow of possible atomic catastrophe. Recall that after the Second World War, the reconstruction of Western Europe, Cold War decolonization, and economic boom had led to the rise of a developmentalist paradigm whereby peace and prosperity for the West and the rest were to be guaranteed by the spread of liberal norms, market economies, and social-democratic safety nets. European Christian democracy largely shared in this post-fascist, non-communist philosophy of history. In this climate, *Gaudium et Spes* offered a description and critical diagnosis of modern reality, and prescribed a global role for the Church. Seeking to engage “the entire human family” while pursuing the “solitary goal” of the Church—“to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending spirit”—the constitution explicitly acknowledged that “the human race is involved in a new stage of history” characterized by “[p]rofound and rapid changes” and the shift from “a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one.”<sup>25</sup> Science and technology had transformed the world, and “[m]odern man is on the road to a more thorough development of his own personality, and to a growing discovery and vindication of his own rights.”<sup>26</sup> The moment, however, presented both opportunities (global interdependence and unity) and dangers (disaggregation, atheism, war). Confidence and doubt, wealth and poverty, freedom and slavery came together: “the modern world shows itself at once powerful and weak, capable of the noblest deeds or the foulest; before it lies the path to freedom or

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23 Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 6. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: MacMillan, 1965). Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). David Martin, *The Religious and the Secular: Studies in Secularization* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).

24 Kołakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, 69.

25 *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965), 3–5, online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). (Hereafter GS)

26 GS 41.

to slavery, to progress or retreat, to brotherhood or hatred.”<sup>27</sup> The document highlighted in particular the destructive potential of technology.<sup>28</sup> The source of danger and harm lay in the modern preoccupation with “earthly affairs,” in the friction between “an intellect which is modern in practical matters and a theoretical system of thought” incapable of synthesis, and ultimately in “the heart of man.”<sup>29</sup> It was for the Church to engage the world through the light of faith, hope, peace, and reconciliation. *Gaudium et Spes* thus called for “sincere and prudent dialogue” with all people; for dignity, human rights, and religious toleration to be causes of global concern; and for the Church to go “forward together with humanity and experience the same earthly lot which the world does. She serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God’s family.”<sup>30</sup> It imagined a non-imperious engagement in the form of a duty to reduce suffering:

For the force which the Church can inject into the modern society of man consists in that faith and charity put into vital practice, not in any external dominion exercised by merely human means. ... Indeed, it is the duty of the whole People of God, following the word and example of the bishops, to alleviate as far as they are able the sufferings of the modern age.<sup>31</sup>

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The Constitution concluded by focusing on the themes of marriage and family, culture, socioeconomic life, politics, and peace. The battles of the nineteenth century were no longer worth fighting; the needs of the twentieth century were unavoidable.

Needless to say that Vatican II opened a period of sustained debate about Catholic modernity and modern Catholicism—their possibilities and limits. I will take two notable examples: Gabriel Daly and Charles Taylor. In a 1985 essay on “Catholicism and Modernity,” Daly turned to the imagination as a “neglected area” of “encounter,” noting that Catholics had experienced “stresses and strains” while “facing” modernity over the previous twenty-five years. The Second Vatican Council (which Daly compared to “a massive surgical operation carried out without anesthesia on a patient who thought he was in the best of health”) had been preceded by earlier efforts “to persuade the

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<sup>27</sup> GS 9.

<sup>28</sup> “Indeed, now that every kind of weapon produced by modern science is used in war, the fierce character of warfare threatens to lead the combatants to a savagery far surpassing that of the past” (GS 79).

<sup>29</sup> GS 8, 9, 19.

<sup>30</sup> GS 21, 40.

<sup>31</sup> GS 42, 88.

Catholic Church to come to terms with the post-Enlightenment world”: Catholic thinkers under the leadership of Ignaz von Döllinger during the 1860s, modernism at the turn of the twentieth century, and French *nouvelle théologie* of the 1940s. Vatican II had “breached” the walled village the Church had become, but inner structural tensions over authority and administration had persisted, stymieing somewhat the theological spirit of openness. Most interestingly of all, Daly contrasted the experiences of Protestants, who had been grappling with modernity for several centuries, with those of Catholics obliged to “telescope” their relationship with modernity into a compressed, because belated, timeframe. Leaning on Langdon Gilkey’s “Protestant view” of the Catholic situation, he distinguished two faces of the modern: updating ecclesiology was not the same as facing the real possibility of post-religious life. As Protestants had contended with modern challenges to the Word, Catholics would have to cope with challenges to their belief in real presence. Reclaiming the mystical tradition—or put differently, the “imaginative,” “affective,” and “intuitional”—might offer a way forward, and “political consciousness,” including liberation theology, another. The poetic and religious imagination, Daly concluded, might provide an antidote to contemporary fundamentalism—religious or secular.<sup>32</sup>

A decade later things looked different. In one of the most rigorous and searching reflections on these themes, in 1996 Charles Taylor posed the question of “a Catholic modernity?” He argued that “in modern, secularist culture there are mingled together both authentic developments of the gospel, of an incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel.” Behind this seemingly prosaic claim, however, were a number of sweeping positions. First of all, Taylor suggested that modernity had taken shape “in this civilization which has issued from Christendom.” The irony with which we began—what came to be separated had once been joined—could be explicitly embraced. To treat modernity as having issued from Christian civilization was to counter the objection that it had been only or above all an unwelcome calamity for the Church. A second point was that modernity itself was “another of those great cultural forms that have come and gone in human history.” It was occasional and temporary because temporal. Taylor evoked Matteo Ricci as an analogue for the contemporary Catholic

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32 Gabriel Daly, “Catholicism and Modernity,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53, 4 (December 1985), 773–96. See also Langdon Gilkey, *Catholicism Confronts Modernity: A Protestant View* (New York: Seabury, 1975). Joseph Fichter, “Restructuring Catholicism,” *Sociological Analysis* 38, 2 (Summer 1977), 154–66. James Hitchcock, *Catholicism and Modernity: Confrontation or Capitulation?* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1979). Peter Williamson and Kevin Perrota, eds., *Christianity Confronts Modernity: A Theological and Pastoral Inquiry by Protestant Evangelicals and Roman Catholics* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1981). John A. Coleman, S.J., “The Fall from Innocence: Contemporary American Catholicism,” *Revue française d’études américaines* 12 (October 1981), 187–206. Jay P. Dolan, “A Catholic Romance with Modernity,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 5, 4 (Autumn 1981), 120–33. Michael F. Aloisi, “Vatican II, Ecumenism and a Parsonian Analysis of Change,” *Sociological Analysis* 49, 1 (Spring 1988), 17–28. Claude Geffré and Jean-Pierre Jossua, *The Debate on Modernity* (London: SCM Press, 1992). Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

seeking to sort out “what in the culture represents a valid human difference, and what is incompatible with Christian faith.”

And yet—here is the third and largest point—modernity had happened: “the Christian faith was attacked from within Christendom and dethroned.” Perhaps surprisingly, this event and history had been a *good thing*: “a humbling experience, but also a liberating one.” Theologies of secularization had earlier made a similar point. It had been a good thing because “modern culture, in breaking with the structures and beliefs of Christendom, also carried certain facets of Christian life further than they ever were taken or could have been taken within Christendom.” For instance, “universal human rights” had been inconceivable within Christendom because the incarnational impulse to locate the divine in the human had been restricted and held back by an exclusionary worldview: *only Christians need apply*. Confession trumped universalism. Furthermore, Taylor observed, “there can never be a total fusion of the faith and any particular society, and the attempt to achieve it is dangerous for the faith.” And potentially dangerous for others, one might add. Thus, insofar as modernity had relieved Catholicism of the blind alley of trying to “[run] the show,” Taylor offered “a vote of thanks to Voltaire and others.” Modern secularization was a “process that made possible what we now recognize as a great advance in the practical penetration of the gospel in human life.” Under modern conditions, Christians were freer to attend to the gospel message: “the freedom to come to God on one’s own or, otherwise put, moved only by the Holy Spirit.”

A fourth and final point teased out the distinction between “valid human difference” and what was “incompatible with Christian faith.” The modern, which had humbled Christianity and liberated it from earlier cultural forms, also came with dangers of its own; what Taylor referred to as “exclusive humanism” was “based exclusively on a notion of human flourishing” and acknowledged “no valid aim beyond this.” In other words, the modern rejection of transcendence “beyond life” was a deal breaker since it amounted to “a kind of spiritual lobotomy.” To repeat the main argument cited above, the tense paradox of Catholic modernity involved both “authentic developments of the gospel, of an incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel.” Its tensions involved continuity and change as well as harmonization and antagonism. For Taylor, modernity inspired humility and “unease” in the Catholic.<sup>33</sup>

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33 Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture, with responses by William M. Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, and Jean Bethke Elshtain*, ed. James L. Heft (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 14–19, 26. Modern hostility to transcendence emerged for Taylor in the early modern period as the “affirmation of ordinary life” came to predominate and view with suspicion that which was “beyond life.” Lost, though, has been a perspective rooted in that which exceeds life—suffering, death, and “a radical decentering of the self”—a perspective that engages human flourishing not on the terms of ordinary life but from the position that climbs across (transcends) toward that which exceeds the human. “Renouncing—aiming beyond life,” Taylor says, “not only takes you away but also brings you back to flourishing.” He has in mind Buddhist *karuna* (compassion) and Christian *agape*. The inability of modern culture to take transcendence seriously is manifest in “the widespread inability to give any human meaning to suffering and death” and, for instance, in medical practices that prolong life simply because it is

Taylor next turned to the “immanent revolt” from within modern culture itself against the modern “affirmation of ordinary life.” While not restoring a relation to transcendence, nineteenth-century thinkers such as Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Friedrich Nietzsche rebelled against narrowly conceived human being. This is the strain I referred to above as *modernism* (turning the modern spirit not against “tradition” but against aspects of modernity itself). It involved an immanent revolt against the worldview of immanence, a revolt “from within” that highlighted the insufficiencies and limitations of the “affirmation of ordinary life.” The Nietzschean notion of vitalistic “enhanced life” that could embrace suffering, destruction, and death (more so than could insipid humanism) was for Taylor “analogous with other, religious notions of enhanced life (like the New Testament’s ‘eternal life’).” Although historically the religious imaginary had been entwined with violence precisely because it climbed across and looked beyond human bare life, Taylor, leaning on the late René Girard, suggested that “the only way to escape fully the draw toward violence lies somewhere in the turn to transcendence.” Thus, while modernist antihumanism showed the insufficiency of exclusive humanism, it could only go so far. So in 1996 we were left with a “four-cornered battle” among secular humanists, neo-Nietzscheans (Taylor was thinking of Michel Foucault), and “those who acknowledge some good beyond life,” including both those for whom secular humanism had been a wrong turn altogether (an older reactive position) and those such as Taylor who believed “the practical primacy of life has been a great gain for humankind” but that “the metaphysical primacy of life is wrong and stifling and that its continued dominance puts in danger the practical primacy.”<sup>34</sup>

Taylor wanted it all. Or rather, he laid the groundwork for rejecting both modern anti-Catholicism in the form of exclusive humanism and anti-modern Catholicism in the form of an unsound nostalgia for a lost Christendom fortunately left behind. The views of both the “boosters” and the “knockers” could be criticized. In the moving final section of his essay, Taylor marveled at the humanitarian sensibility of the present: “our age makes higher demands for solidarity and benevolence on people today than ever before.” In his view, this perspective reflected deep continuity with impulses of the gospel that had been freed up through the modern demolition of Christendom. But he worried that if such orientations were grounded merely in exclusive humanism (mundane life) and not in transcendence (beyond life), then they would sputter and devolve. In other words, the danger was that our normative aspirations would exceed our ability to justify and secure them. We were at risk of relying only on “our own high sense of self-worth ... a high notion of human worth ... and a flaming indignation against wrong and oppression

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technically possible to do so. In our “post-revolutionary” society, to speak of transcendence seems like the bad faith of wanting to turn back the clock to the premodern. Even contemporary religious believers often share this injunction to consider life and not transcendence as the limit that cannot be traversed. Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” 19–25.

34 Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” 25–29.

to energize us.” Although in a way Nietzsche had been right when he complained that pity could simply mask resentment, Taylor concluded instead that Christian spirituality provided a way forward, spirituality in the forms of unconditional love and compassion and of the human in the image of God. Such a faith and love became a possibility if “we open ourselves to God.” Beyond “bewilderment,” then, Catholics would

gradually find our voice from within the achievements of modernity, measuring the humble degree to which some of the most impressive extensions of a gospel ethic depended on a breakaway from Christendom, and from within these gains try to make clearer to ourselves and others the tremendous dangers that arise in them.<sup>35</sup>

The challenge of a Catholic modernity was to imagine “unity-across-difference” instead of “unity-through-identity.” To put it in a way that Taylor did not, a universalism based on solidarity with diverse others searching for autonomy and community on their own terms differs from an imperious universalism that tells others to be the same.<sup>36</sup>

Taylor’s question as to whether a Catholic modernity was possible and the conditions under which it could emerge marked a certain crescendo to post-Vatican II reflection on

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*While Catholic thinkers were considering the possibility of reconciling what had long been split asunder, others were placing the entire modern paradigm in question.*

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the Catholic/modern dyad. Yet as his references to Nietzsche and the neo-Nietzscheans intimated, the conversation had moved beyond the simple terms of Catholic-modern reconciliation. Already in 1985, Daly had written, “Modernity is not what it used to be.”<sup>37</sup> He was not alone in this view. For while Catholic thinkers were considering the possibility of reconciling what had long been split asunder, others were placing the entire modern paradigm in question. These postmodern voices provided the implicit background to Taylor’s meditations, since if all was not well with the modern, then long-excluded religious perspectives might have occasion to return.

#### *Ritardando, poi ritorno*

The 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of talk of the postmodern in poetry, architecture, literature, social and political theory, philosophy, science, and theology. Jean-François Lyotard’s influential formulation of growing “incredulity toward metanarratives,” especially the two modern metanarratives of mastery of nature and

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35 Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” 36–37.

36 Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” 14, 30–37.

37 Daly, “Catholicism and Modernity,” 781.

political emancipation, symptomatized the broader phenomenon, as did his celebrated, so-called debate with Jürgen Habermas over whether modernity was finished or an “incomplete project.”<sup>38</sup> Amidst the variety of meanings associated with postmodernism, including the tempting self-reflexive idea that the postmodern amounted to variety itself, two convergent notions could be discerned: modernity might be at end (“post-” meaning “after”), or the postmodern might be seen as a mode of the modern that emphasized multiplicity, diversity, plurality (modernity could not be “over” since irruptive beginnings and endings were themselves quintessentially modern!). The postmodern could be an era, or it could be a way of seeing. Gianni Vattimo spoke of “the end of modernity,” while Bruno Latour asserted that “we have never been modern.”<sup>39</sup> I probably do not need to point out that almost every single reference to modernity to which I have referred thus far was published in the 1980s and 1990s. The owl of Minerva flies at dusk.

For some, there was deflation about endings. Stephen Toulmin expressed a common mood in 1992:

Today, the program of Modernity—even the very, *concept*—no longer carries anything like the same conviction [it once did]. If a historical era is ending, it is the era of Modernity itself. ... What looked in the nineteenth century like an irresistible river has disappeared in the sand, and we seem to have run aground. ... [W]e are now stranded and uncertain of our location. The very project of Modernity thus seems to have lost momentum, and we need to fashion a successor program.<sup>40</sup>

Latour echoed the sentiment the following year: “[Y]ou can feel that the heart is gone. The will to be modern seems hesitant, sometimes even outmoded.”<sup>41</sup> For others, deflation of a certain conceptualization of modernity raised original opportunities: thoroughgoing reassessments of what modernity had been all along enabled fresh questions to be asked, not least about the superstition-to-Enlightenment, emancipation-from-tradition myths. One “successor program” to modernity could be to re-write the stories of the modern to include exclusions, exceptions, and hybrids that did not fit older versions of rupture, the new, acceleration, and an indeterminate future. Such re-visioning brought into relief the depth of modernity’s past and present contradictions and paradoxes. Toulmin himself appreciated the relationship between theoretical reorientation and the historical record:

[T]he dividing line between Medieval and Modern times rests more on our philosophical assumptions than we had supposed. Now that rationality too is open

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38 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). Habermas, “Modernity—An Incomplete Project,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 3–15. Richard Rorty, “Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity,” in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985). For a useful reconstruction of the emergence of the postmodern, see Pery Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso Books, 1998).

39 Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

40 Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 3.

41 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 9.



to challenge, the traditional picture of a medieval world dominated by theology yielding to a modern world committed to rationality must be reconsidered.<sup>42</sup>

As Latour put it, “*It is the sorting that makes the times, not the times that make the sorting.*”<sup>43</sup> Modernity, which had dismissed religion as a worldview/era, turned out to be just another worldview/era itself. In a sense, the modern got what was coming to it. The irony of Catholic-modern dialogue in the era of the postmodern de-legitimization of modernity comes down to this: postmodern relativization opened the door on the re-legitimization of religious perspectives, even those with absolutist claims. Who can deny that both evolution and creationism are worldviews?

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*Modernity, which had dismissed religion as a worldview/era, turned out to be just another worldview/era itself.*

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And so through the postmodern moment of the 1980s and 1990s religion “returned.”<sup>44</sup> The phenomenon could seem to modern eyes as new: what had been *out* was being brought back *in*. For instance, by the early twenty-first century scholars were revisiting the primal scene of the anticlerical Enlightenment and drawing novel conclusions about the role of religion in the eighteenth century.<sup>45</sup> But for those with religious commitments it was possible to appreciate the incongruity: the fact that religion had never gone away seemed to have dawned on moderns rather late in the day. Of the larger story of the return of religion, from the 1980s Moral Majority alliance of American evangelicals and Catholics (and subsequent culture wars) to the unavoidable injection of militant political theology into consciousness after 11 September 2001, it is worth saying a word about the distinctively paradoxical situation in which John Paul II and Benedict XVI found themselves. From one point of view, they were popes of the postmodern moment who

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42 Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 12.

43 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 76.

44 Note how John Courtney Murray, S.J., had phrased this perspective as early as 1956. “Now the day of modernity is sloping to its close,” he said. “We are near to the end of modern times. In our generation the spirit of modernity has almost done its full work. As Ignatius strove to convert the modern age in its youth by infusing a new inspiration into the school, so by the same means the Jesuit college of today is striving to convert the modern age upon its death bed.” John Courtney Murray, “The Founder’s Day Convocation, Georgetown University (22 March 1956)” [“St. Ignatius and the End of Modernity”], in *The Ignatian Year at Georgetown* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, n.d.), mimeographed version in Murray Archives, file 5–410, [www.library.georgetown.edu/woodstock/murray/1956j](http://www.library.georgetown.edu/woodstock/murray/1956j).

45 Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). Michael Printy, *Enlightenment and the Creation of German Catholicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).



joined the chorus criticizing modernity's limitations, exclusions, and blind spots. In 1998, John Paul II expressed a certain openness to the ethos:

Our age has been termed by some thinkers the age of "postmodernity." ... [The term] has remained somewhat ambiguous, both because judgment on what is called "postmodern" is sometimes positive and sometimes negative, and because there is as yet no consensus on the delicate question of the demarcation of the different historical periods. One thing however is certain: the currents of thought which claim to be postmodern merit appropriate attention.<sup>46</sup>

In the same encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, he reaffirmed the critique of modern philosophy: Modern philosophy clearly has the great merit of focusing attention upon man. ... Yet the positive results achieved must not obscure the fact that reason, in its one-sided concern to investigate human subjectivity, seems to have forgotten that men and women are always called to direct their steps towards a truth which transcends them. ... This has given rise to different forms of agnosticism and relativism which have led philosophical research to lose its way in the shifting sands of widespread skepticism."<sup>47</sup>

Such a position sounded different in the 1990s than it had at earlier times. Modern philosophy was on the defensive in the wake of the postmodern challenge; rationalism and humanism were being attacked from multiple angles, including the antihumanist neo-Nietzschean corner that Taylor had evoked. In a way, John Paul II and Benedict XVI symptomatized the postmodern: opposition to exclusive humanism could draw on and lead to a once-excluded religiosity. Why accommodate the Church to a worldview in clear crisis and to an era that might be ending?

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*Against the middle way of the Catholic intellectual tradition, excessive modern rationalism had culminated in postmodern relativism, skepticism, and irrationalism.*

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At the same time, both pontificates tended to see the postmodern as an intensification of modern perfidy. The postmodern did not mark a break from the modern; it was a facet and thus a continuation of it. John Paul II worried, for instance, that "media culture is so deeply imbued with a typically postmodern sense that the only absolute truth is that there are no absolute truths or that, if there were, they would be inaccessible to human reason and therefore irrelevant."<sup>48</sup> Against the middle way of the Catholic intellectual tradition, excessive modern rationalism had culminated in postmodern relativism,

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46 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 91 (14 September 1998), online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

47 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 5.

48 John Paul II, "Preach from the Housetops": The Gospel in the Age of Global Communication," 3 (27 May 2001), online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

skepticism, and irrationalism. Where Paul VI had engaged postwar modernization theory, Benedict XVI seemed to recall an earlier era when he expressed the need to attack Francis Bacon.<sup>49</sup> As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger then as Pope Benedict XVI, he continuously denounced the “dictatorship of relativism.”<sup>50</sup> The postmodern could thus be considered the latest chapter in the story of modernity as the Second Fall. Certainly some of John Paul II’s and Benedict XVI’s concerns were anchored in the late-twentieth-century intra-Catholic context; that is, in the ongoing debate over whether Vatican II had “gone too far” or had “not gone far enough.” In 1997 the Protestant theologian and philosopher of religion John Hick commented sharply that what Cardinal Ratzinger “calls relativism is what most writers in this area today call pluralism.”<sup>51</sup> Thus at the turn of the twenty-first century it was possible for the Catholic mind to cheer the postmodern opening to the religious imagination while decrying its relativism, and to opt for global pluralism, reinvestment in the Catholic intellectual heritage, or both.

### III. Coming Home? Seeing and Hearing

Where are we today in the early twenty-first century with respect to the enduring tensions between Catholicism and modernity? A final paradox to consider is that over the past decade “modernity” is invoked only in highly qualified ways, or better, it no longer evokes the urgency and stakes that it had during the 1980s and 1990s. “The postmodern” has almost entirely disappeared from scholarly and public dialogue as a useful category of analysis. Instead one finds animated discussions of the return of religion, the post-secular, and political theology.<sup>52</sup> Significantly, one of the principal

49 Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 16–17 (30 November 2007), online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

50 The day before he was elected pope, Cardinal Ratzinger said that “relativism, that is, letting oneself be ‘tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,’ seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.” Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “‘Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice’: Homily of His Eminence Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Dean of the College of Cardinals” [Dictatorship of Relativism Homily] (18 April 2005), online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). See Ratzinger, “Relativism: The Central Problem for the Faith Today,” address given during the meeting with the presidents of the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops’ Conferences of Latin America, held in Guadalajara, Mexico, in May 1996, [www.ewtn.com/library/curia/ratzrela.htm](http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/ratzrela.htm). See also Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants in the Ecclesial Diocesan Convention of Rome (6 June 2005), online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). To be sure, Benedict XVI also affirmed openness to the world: “As a missionary Church, we are all called to understand the challenges that our postmodern culture poses to the new evangelization. ... The Church’s dialogue with the culture of our time is vital, to the Church herself and to the world.” Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Bishops of Mexico (15 September 2005), online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

51 John Hick, “Ratzinger Absolutely Wrong on Relativism,” *National Catholic Reporter* (24 October 1997). Hick’s theology of religious pluralism was implicitly answered by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in *Dominus Iesus* 4, 9 (6 August 2000), online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

52 Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory, ed., *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009); Matthew Sharpe and Dylan Nickelson, eds., *Secularisations and Their Debates: Perspectives on the Return of Religion in the Contemporary West* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014); Philip Blond, ed., *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998); Philip S. Gorski, *The Post-Secular in Question*:

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*Thinkers capable of speaking fluently the languages of both Catholicism and modernity/postmodernity, not as antipodal forces but as intelligible discourses, are rare.*

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defenders of the Enlightenment tradition, Jürgen Habermas, has newly engaged with religion in unexpected ways.<sup>53</sup> In my own field of European history, Catholicism has figured centrally in recent lively debates on Christian human rights and the unintended consequences of the Reformation,<sup>54</sup> and a new generation of historians is reconsidering the role of the Church in twentieth-century national and international politics.<sup>55</sup> We can note two related aspects of this situation: first, these dialogues address issues related to modern disaggregation and entropy (which itself presumes that modernity *happened*); and second, with exceptions, Catholic thinkers have been relatively absent from these explorations (that is, thinkers who see Catholicism as part of the *solution* to modernity's aporias and not merely as an ongoing problem). In truth, thinkers capable of speaking fluently the languages of both Catholicism and modernity/postmodernity, not as antipodal forces but as intelligible discourses, are rare. Charles Taylor, David Tracy, José Casanova, and Leszek Kołakowski come to mind.

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*Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Hent de Vries and Lawrence Eugene Sullivan, ed., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); Michael Jon Kessler, *Political Theology for a Plural Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Among the most assertive calls for post-secular religion have been the advocates of "radical orthodoxy": John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990; 2006); Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013); John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999); James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004).

- 53 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) and Jürgen Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006). Jürgen Habermas, *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2010). Nicholas Adams, *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornell West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Craig J. Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, ed., *Habermas and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).
- 54 "The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religions and the Public Sphere" website has hosted crowded and spirited discussions on Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (blogs.ssrc.org/tif/christian-human-rights) and Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012) (blogs.ssrc.org/tif/the-unintended-reformation).
- 55 James G. Chapell, "Slaying the Leviathan: Catholicism and the Rebirth of European Conservatism, 1920–1950" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia 2012). Giuliana Chamedes, "The Vatican and the Making of the Atlantic Order, 1920–1960" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia 2013). Sarah Shortall, "Soldiers of God in a Secular World: The Politics of Catholic Theology, 1905–1962" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard 2015).

The era of intense antagonism is gone but vestiges of “anti-” worldviews are ready at hand. One senses that old and hardened positions rest behind some of the new post-secular openness to religion. As deeply embedded habits of mind with historical staying power, anti-Catholicism and anti-modernity remain easy-to-reach repertoires. Such positions are not asserted over nothing. Some see Church teachings and structures as based on pre- or non-modern premises and in conflict with certain widely accepted norms of the good. Some Catholics, on the other hand, see themselves victims of “the last acceptable prejudice,” their faith and identity excluded from dialogues structured by anti-Catholic presuppositions and codes.<sup>56</sup> The culture wars between Catholicism’s “cultured despisers” and defensive Catholics continue more or less instinctively, like a family feud whose origins have been long forgotten.<sup>57</sup> A starting point for meaningful life is to reaffirm always and ever again the necessity of engagement as a corrective to dialogues of the deaf. Easier said than done, perhaps. The complex historical matrix denoted by “the ongoing tensions between Catholicism and modernity”—today, neither white-hot nor entirely extinguished—may still provide a valuable interpretive frame for naming, describing, analyzing, evaluating, negotiating, etc., particular themes of contemporary significance. The “promise and predicament [of] Catholic intellectual life,” to borrow a phrase, may continue to reside in the Church’s perpendicular and bisecting relationships to the modern, post-modern, post-secular, and so forth: different, unwelcome, familiar, challenging, frustrating, promising, reassuring.<sup>58</sup> What of the modern can be salvaged? What of the Church needs the modern? As Taylor asked, what is compatible and what is incompatible? As Latour said, it is the sorting that makes the times.

Tensions can be productive. Modern anti-Catholicism had stimulated reflection within the Church on its own mission, place, and role in the world. As we have seen, historically this reflection has in turn been reactive, defensive, open, conciliatory, cautious, and ambivalent. In addition to clear opportunities, our own post-postmodern context poses a certain danger. The post-secular sometimes never even mentions the modern; occasionally one finds a certain glee that modern worldviews, norms, institutions, etc., have difficulty justifying and legitimizing themselves (the anti-modern and the postmodern resonate here). To my mind, one message of *Gaudium et Spes*, as well as of voices such as Daly’s and Taylor’s, is that one should warily avoid the temptation to *skip over the modern*. This temptation seems particularly pervasive today: to jettison valuable, even precious facets of the modern in the name of recombinant antimodernity. Doing so is tantamount to a certain kind of self-inflicted blindness. Fideism comes in many

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56 Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: Oxford, 2003); Mark S. Massa, S.J., “The New and Old Anti-Catholicism and the Analogical Imagination,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 549–70.

57 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

58 Father James L. Heft, S.M., and Una M. Cadegan, ed., *In the Lógos of Love: Promise and Predicament in Catholic Intellectual Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

colors; if one has the answers, then one does not need to ask questions. But why be afraid of learning something new? The often-evoked Catholic model of “conversation” cannot be genuine encounter *and* exchange if only others’ basic commitments are at issue. The Church is historical, too, and its foci change over time.

Paradoxically, the Church’s accommodation to a modern accomplishment such as democratic equality has proceeded at a different pace than adaptation to automobiles and Twitter. In a sense, both democracy and cars are modern technologies (arts). At the same time, it may be that modernity is being *chastened and humbled* as Christendom once had been, and through this process, aspects of the modern paradigm may turn out to be useful for Catholic experience, identity, and organization. We cannot so easily shake modernity. Even fundamentalism and archaism are modern phenomena, in the sense that in a truly “traditional” society, tradition is all there is. What aspects and achievements of the modern can be salvaged or reinvigorated? If God is in all things, then knowledge about the world is sacramental and curiosity can be considered a good since it potentially leads outward to the whole. The Church’s commitments to dignity and social justice, which possess distinctive Catholic meanings, have proved compatible with movements of rights, solidarity, and peace. In other words, the aspirations of science and democratic emancipation have not gone away, and we still need reasons to think of humanity and our planet in their diverse wholeness. An ultimate irony would be for the Church to become a defender of some aspects of modernity. One challenge is defining what human flourishing and emancipation mean, for our shared problems and questions transcend distinctive faith communities. We are caught productively between the promising ideal of the universal and a really existing plural world in which there are many, sometimes irreconcilable “goods.” Yet we can take heart in the fact that the world has always been plural—it was created/found as such—even if recognition of this reality came slowly and is still resisted. Beyond pluralism as a lens, then, there might be cause to consider the real, common world of fecund creation. The point is to move with and beyond pluralism to an apprehension of and experience with fecund reality.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps there is symmetry between the spirit of openness and openness to the Spirit.

Thirty years ago Daly valuably suggested that resources internal to Catholic traditions (e.g., the “intuitional” spirituality of mysticism) might help facilitate the encounter between Catholicism and modernity. Another internal resource, drawn from the sacramental imagination, might be *Reconciliation*. For if something is broken, it must be mended to be made whole. Humility, profession, and penance are sources for constant renewal, or rather means to address the constant and enduring rupture that is the

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59 To take one recent example, Patrick McKinley Brennan pursues the project of creating a “Christian commonwealth ... in a predominantly Christian nation.” In my view his realism is unrealistic and carries obvious dangers. Brennan, “An Essay on Christian Constitutionalism: Building in the Divine Style, for the Common Good(s),” Villanova University School of Law, Public Law and Legal Theory, Working Paper No. 2015-1014 (March 2015). More generally see Brennan’s work here: [works.bepress.com/patrick\\_brennan](http://works.bepress.com/patrick_brennan).

sinful world. The Church alone did not bring about, for instance, the multi-generational atonement by Germans for the Holocaust or model the nearly three dozen Truth and Reconciliation Commissions around the world. But here the distance may not be so great. “The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and grants us peace”—what would it mean to find mutually comprehensible vocabulary and translate this spirit into a cosmopolitan form recognizable to others? For a universalism that begins with the realism of the plenitude of the world, all human speech is translation. Reconciliation begins at home in one’s heart. Beyond simple guilt or narratives of victimization, attitudes of contrition hold promise.

So, too, the present “Francis moment” promises. Needless to say, Pope Francis’s tone and emphases mark a departure and a renewal. The spirit of openness and engagement has been constantly on display. *Laudato Si’* (2015) positions the Church as a leading voice on science today. The 2015 Synod on the Family closed with the Holy Father cautioning against “burying our heads in the sand” and inviting us “to open up broader horizons, rising above conspiracy theories and blinkered viewpoints.”<sup>60</sup> One of Francis’s clearest statements on Catholicism and modernity came in October 2014 to a group of university students, and it has particular resonance for university faculty and for our meeting:

Research constantly interrogates itself, it becomes an encounter with mystery and is open to faith: research makes possible the encounter of faith, reason and science, it allows a harmonious dialogue among them, a fruitful exchange that, in awareness and acceptance of the limits of human understanding allows scientific research to be conducted in freedom of conscience. Through this method of research it is possible to reach an ambitious goal: *to heal the rift between the Gospel and modernity through the approach of cultural mediation, an itinerant mediation which, without denying cultural differences, indeed by valuing them, becomes the horizon of positive planning.* May research teach you to be capable of planning and investment, even if it requires effort and patience. It is in the long run that one reaps the harvest of the seeds sown with research!<sup>61</sup>

To heal, to bring back together, through mediation that preserves, values, and celebrates differences—this is the requirement of moving toward the future of our common home. The people of God wait in joyful hope for the Kingdom of God. The world waits for the Church to discern the power and glory of fecund reality. Waiting, we consider the prophet Isaiah:

On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll;  
And out of gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see.

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60 Edward Pentin, “Pope Francis’ Closing Speech of Synod on the Family,” *National Catholic Register* 24 October 2015, [www.ncregister.com/blog/edward-pentin/pope-francis-closing-speech-of-synod-on-the-family](http://www.ncregister.com/blog/edward-pentin/pope-francis-closing-speech-of-synod-on-the-family).

61 Message of Pope Francis to the Italian Catholic Federation of University Students (FUCI), 2 (14 October 2014), online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).