



Club Modernity





Club Modernity for Reluctant Christians

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Invitation

These pages are written for persons who live in the mental world of Modernity,¹ which, as I understand it, is a world which cherishes 1) *freedom* at the core of being human, 2) *critical-thinking* reason (not limited to discursive thought) as the arbiter of what to affirm or not, 3) *history-evolution*, process, dynamism seen at the heart of human life and society, and, indeed, all reality, and 4) the conscious recognition of cultural/religious *pluralism*, and the consequent increasing need to be in *dialogue* with those who think differently from us. These same persons also still sense that there is somehow more to life, to reality, than meets the eye, that there is a depth or spiritual dimension that is not captured in our everyday experiences, but is hinted at in them. A summary way to express these four key characteristics of Modernity in relationship to that spiritual dimension is to speak of *theology from below*, that is, a reflection on the ultimate meaning of life that begins with our human experiences and rigorously pursues the questions raised within the context of freedom, critical-thinking, historical sensibility, and dialogue with the world—ultimately leading to an inner encounter with the Transcendent which cannot be encased in rational categories or words, but must issue in acts of love in the concrete world.

Further, I am reflecting and writing for persons who have either been brought up as Christians, or are now finding Christianity intriguing, but are having increasing difficulty in squaring it, or important portions of it, with one or more of the above core characteristics of Modernity. In brief, I am writing for “Reluctant Christians.” (I trust that Jewish, Muslim thinkers will do the same for their communities.) I am inviting all such readers to join me at, not “Club Mediterranean,” but “Club Modernity.” The latter, in contrast to the former, is not a geographical place to go to, but a mental world to inhabit, which of course then consequently determines how we act in the world (including whether or not we apply to Club Med!).

The paragraphs above, of course, are the starting point of a small library. I am going to focus largely on one small part of that needed library, but one which is foundational, namely, how to make sense of the teaching about Jesus Christ (technically known as Christology) in 21st century Modernity. Afterward I will also raise questions about what implications my “Modern” understanding of Jesus Christ could have on various other Christian teachings, values, and practices.

So, if the above description fits you as a “Reluctant Christian,” and my planned reflections interest you, I invite you to come with me and join the Club Mod.

¹ Some may question my use of Modernity rather than Postmodernity. This is not an oversight on my part. Rather, I am deliberately choosing Modernity, and will argue later on why I find the term postmodern wanting in comparison.



Reflections On Modernity

1. *Modernity Is the Atmosphere We Live In*

Anyone reading this book is living in the mental world of Modernity with the four characteristics mentioned earlier: a sense 1) of radical freedom, 2) of automatically asking whether something makes rational sense, 3) of perceiving all human experience in its specific historical-evolutionary context, and because of the relationality of all knowledge, 4) the need to engage persons with different views and experiences in Deep-Dialogue so as to learn more.

We cannot avoid Modernity, even if we do not allude to it, are not consciously aware of it. Modernity is all around us. It is the very air that we breathe, even when we might be vigorously trying to reject some part of it. In our bones we feel *free*, and feel outraged when we learn of others being robbed of their freedom. We cannot help but involuntarily ask of every new or old idea or bit of information that comes along whether it *makes sense*, whether we “buy it.” So too we are increasingly aware that reality around us is *constantly changing*, that old givens don’t necessarily hold anymore, and that consequently we constantly ask whether old saws are still valid, or are something of a past context. Also increasingly we do not automatically discount those who are different from us, but are more and more inclined at first to tolerate them, then to open out to them, and then even *to seek them out*.

Modernity makes up our mental world like water is where fish live, or the air is for us mammals. We don’t even notice it, unless it is severely damaged and we start to choke and even die. We automatically resist when our freedom is threatened, and protest when something unreasonable is being forced down our throats. We would do the same if our radios, TVs, or now increasingly our cell phones or computers, were taken from us and we were forced to go back to living in the older context, or if we no longer could learn new things from those elsewhere in the world. This is all true even if we don’t think about it—until part of it might be taken away.

Consequently, if a hoary tradition is to find a helpful, creative place in our life, we must undertake two important steps. First, we need to reflect more intensely and consciously on what our mental world of Modernity is. We need to learn in greater depth what its elements are and how they intertwine to constitute the atmosphere in which we “live, move, and have our being,” as St. Paul wrote in quoting an ancient Greek poet. The contemporary philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) put it thus: “History does not belong to us; but we belong to it.”

When we become more self-aware of the mental context in which we live, we will





then be forced to ask ourselves questions about our religion, that is, the “*Explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly, based on some notion and experience of the transcendent*,” which is my dense definition of religion. Normally all religions contain the four “C’s”: Creed, Code, Cult, Community-structure, and are based on the notion of the Transcendent.

Creed refers to the cognitive aspect of a religion; it is everything that goes into the “explanation” of the ultimate meaning of life.

Code of behavior or ethics includes all the rules and customs of action that somehow follow from one aspect or another of the *Creed*.

Cult means all the ritual activities that relate the follower to one aspect or other of the Transcendent, either directly or indirectly, prayer being an example of the former and certain formal behavior toward representatives of the Transcendent, like priests, of the latter.

Community-structure refers to the relationships among the followers; this can vary widely, from an egalitarian relationship, as with Quakers, through a “republican” structure like Presbyterians have, to a monarchical one, as with some Hasidic Jews vis-à-vis their “Rebbe.”

The *Transcendent*, as the roots of the word indicate, means “that which goes beyond” the everyday, the ordinary, the surface experience of reality. It can refer to spirits, gods, a Personal God, an Impersonal God, Emptiness, etc.

Especially in modern times “explanations of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly” have developed, which are not based on a notion and experience of the Transcendent, e.g., secular humanism, atheistic Marxism. Although in every respect these “explanations” function as religions traditionally have in human life. Because the Transcendent, however it is understood, plays such a central role in religion, but not in these “explanations,” for the sake of accuracy it is best to give these “explanations” not based on the Transcendent a separate name; the name often used is: *Ideology*. Much, though not all, of the following will, *mutatis mutandis*, also apply to Ideology even when the term is not used.

In my case, and likely those of the readers of this book, the religion first focused on is Christianity. The questions we will have to ask of our religion, of Christianity, will automatically be raised by the elements of Modernity: Can Christianity promote my freedom; can it make reasonable sense; can it adapt to the changing world; can it help me expand my understanding through dialogue with the Other? If it can’t answer those questions adequately, it will not be able adequately to provide us with the “explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly”.

2. Freedom at the Core of Being Human

The Norwegian committee just awarded its 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, the jailed Chinese pro-democracy activist. The message to Beijing, I’d argue, was simple: Liberty is a value in and of itself, because without it human beings can never develop their full potential. And, therefore, liberty is also an essential ingredient for any society that wants to thrive in the 21st century. Otherwise, it can’t develop its full potential.²

We now are increasingly learning that at the heart of the universe there is a radical freedom, an indeterminacy. Already at the early part of the 20th century we learned of the “Heisenberg Principle of Indeterminacy,” roughly stated: In investigating subatomic matter we cannot accurately know both the speed of an electron and its location. This limit on knowledge may seem quite uninteresting to the non-physicist, but it has huge implications. It means that at the very foundation of our physical reality there is a radical indeterminacy, “freedom.” Hence, when we humans *experience* or *feel* a radical freedom at the heart of *our* being, it is not some anomaly, not something strange. Our human sense of radical freedom—despite all the restraining limitations we may also experience—is something that is very much in sync with the very physical foundation of our bodies—and the whole universe.

Despite the arguments of famous 20th-century biologists/psychologists of determinism like Ivan Pavlov, B.F. Skinner, and Jacques Monod,³ and philosophers of determinism like Arthur Schopenhauer, and theologians like St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and Jean Calvin, the vast majority of men and women are convinced that there is a core of freedom, of choice, at the center of our being human. Our whole civilized world of whatever culture is built on that bedrock of freedom. Let me point to one example standing in for all the other elements of civilization—all our legal systems are built on the presumption of a fundamental human freedom and responsibility: You know that this Ferrari is not yours. However, you take it anyhow for a joyride or to a chop shop, but are caught; the law determines that you will pay a penalty because it is presumed that you had a choice and *freely* decided to steal the car.

On a larger scale, think about the Nuremberg War Trials and other War Crimes Trials since then, as, for example, against the perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda,

² Thomas L. Friedman, “Going Long Liberty in China,” *New York Times*, October 17, 2010, Op Ed page.

³ For example, he wrote: “If man embraces this message in its full significance, then he will finally have to awaken from his millennial dream and recognize his complete aloneness, his radical alienation. He realizes now that his place is like that of a gypsy on the edge of the universe, which is deaf to his music [Monod was a superb musician], and indifferent toward his hopes, sufferings and crimes.” Jacques Monod, *Zufall und Notwendigkeit. Philosophische Fragen der modernen Biologie* (Munich, 5th ed. 1973), p. 211. The original: *Le hasard et la nécessité: Essai sur la philosophie naturelle de la biologie moderne* (Paris: Seuil, 1970). “L’ancienne alliance est rompue; l’homme sait enfin qu’il est seul dans l’immensité indifférente de l’Univers d’où il a émergé par hasard. Non plus que son destin, son devoir n’est écrit nulle part. À lui de choisir entre le Royaume et les ténèbres.” http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Hasard_et_la_N%C3%A9cessit%C3%A9

