

# Modernity

Kenton Machina

We will be focusing this semester on the interaction between culture and religion in the last 100 years or so, focusing on Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism. During that period the main issue regarding religion and culture, I believe, has been tension between traditional religious ways of thinking and the cultural changes that can be placed under the general heading, *modernity*.

However, for us to be able to talk meaningfully with each other about the interaction between modernity and religion, we need to come to an understanding of what is meant by "modernity". This is a loose and ambiguous term, used in varying ways depending on context. For example, in art and architecture, "modern" refers to specific styles. Many of these ways of talking about what counts as being modern have very little to do with religion. So, some clarification and definition is called for if we are going to have a meaningful discussion on religion and modernity.

## Modernity shapes an entire culture

What we need is a notion of modernity that focuses on very broad cultural themes that shape an entire culture, or worldview – an entire outlook on life together as humans. We need to look for the most fundamental and sweeping changes in human culture that distinguish the modern from the pre-modern forms such as traditional tribal culture or Medieval European feudal cultures. When considering such broad and fundamental cultural changes, clearly we are looking for things that do not change suddenly or everywhere at once. It is reasonable to suppose that such changes took place only with considerable anguish, and only over a period of many centuries. So, we are not looking for a specific date on which any particular people became modern – it would be silly to do so. Modernity pops up at different times in different places. (Remember, we are looking for a notion of modernity that has to do with outlook, with broad ways of thinking and living; so being modern isn't just about possessing cell phones.)

## “Modern” is not equal to “contemporary”, “technological”, “superior”, or “recent”

Nor should we assume that all *contemporary* cultures are modern. Perhaps *no* contemporary culture is thoroughly and completely modern. During recent violent turmoil in Iraq subsequent to the US invasion of that country, the news media finally began to mention that the internal divisions among the Iraqis had something to do with *tribal* divisions, and there was discussion of the role of tribal elders in determining the course of events. The media were slow to pick up on the importance of tribalism in Iraq presumably because the initial presumption, based on cultural ignorance, was that Iraq is a modern nation with a modern culture, similar to that in the US, except for the dictatorship under Saddam Hussein and the religion of Islam. It was not recognized to what extent Iraq exhibits a tribal culture held together by force under Hussein. In mainstream US cultures, most people do not think of themselves as belonging to a tribe, and there are no tribal elders. (Some Native Americans, however, do maintain tribal identities.) This difference between the US and Iraq means that US culture is more modern than Iraqi culture, and

that may explain why people in the US have a difficult time understanding the internal strife in Iraq.

It is important to note that one should not assume that “modern” means “advanced” or “superior”. Possibly, tribal or feudal society offers some real advantages, and one might mourn the loss of those advantages as US culture has become more modern. This point will become more obvious once we look at the effect of modernity on religion.

There is a temptation to think of "modern" as referring to things that have developed over the last few years. That is much too narrow a focus when doing cultural analysis. Instead, think of human cultures as having existed for thousands of years, and think of the large-scale trends and changes that have occurred over that span of time. Here's a hint about the kinds of time spans we're talking about: in the academic field of philosophy, it is typical to offer courses in "modern Western philosophy". Those courses see modern philosophy as beginning in the West in the 16th Century -- a far cry from, say, a week from last Wednesday!

### **Tribal culture**

Since we in the US live every day in a culture that is heavily invested in modern ways, we may take those ways of thinking to be so natural that we do not notice them or see them as anything remarkable. In order to make modernity stand out and become noticeable for us it can be helpful to think about those features of tribal culture that differ from typical contemporary US culture. This exercise may cause one to recognize modern thought patterns we may take for granted. Moreover, religious ways of thinking originated in tribal cultures, so this exercise will be especially helpful in leading us to recognize aspects of modernity that cause trouble for religious ideas, since those ideas may well be expected to be more “at home” in cultures that are more like those in which religion originated.

Tribal cultures vary considerably, and we do not have time to investigate them in detail and in all their variety. Nevertheless, some typical central aspects that differ from typical key aspects of modern cultures can be described. That is the goal of the list found below.

#### General Features

- A tribe tends to be a collection of clans – that is a collection of extended family groups. One is almost always born into a tribe, unless one is captured in battle and kept (for example, as a slave). However, if a tribe comes on hard times, through war, disease, famine, and the like, those of its members who survive may be absorbed by a neighboring tribe. (The absorbed tribe loses its identity and unity.)
- Tribes sometimes form larger groups which may be termed “nations”. (For example, according to the Hebrew Bible, at times the twelve tribes of Israel – the Hebrew people – formed a more-or-less unified “nation” with some central leadership, e.g., King David or King Solomon. Similarly, Native American tribes formed into “nations”.)

- The geographical region “belonging” to a tribe or a tribal “nation” is defined by the areas frequented by the tribe. If the tribe moves, its territory moves. Territories inhabited by different tribes may overlap.
- A tribe is a narrower grouping than an ethnic group. E.g., there have been many different Arab tribes. Many different Native American tribes. And being a member of a tribe is somewhat more flexible than being a member of an ethnic group, since tribes sometimes go out of existence by combining with another tribe (after an epidemic, for example), and tribal alliances can change rather quickly.
- Individual tribe members don’t have much status as individuals. The tribe does not exist to make the individual tribe members happy or fulfilled. There is not a developed notion of individual rights. The individual tribe member’s role is to support the tribe. Tribes are much more about community than about individuals. Success is measured by whether the tribe flourishes, not by whether the individual members have “freedom” or have adequate avenues for self-development. (For example, in the Hebrew Bible, one of the great heroes is Abraham, the assumed father of the Jewish nation. The central feature of Abraham’s role is his “covenant” with God. God’s promise of blessing to Abraham as God’s part of the “covenant” is that Abraham’s descendants will become a great people who will flourish in Palestine. God does not promise Abraham any individual happiness, health, or life after death. Abraham thinks God’s promise is a good deal. The covenant thus reflects tribal values.)

### Tribal ways and traditions

- There are tribal expectations regarding appropriate behaviors for members of the tribe. These are the tribal ways and are typically seen as having been decreed by divine authority. There may be written laws (as in the Hebrew Bible – see for example the book of Leviticus in that Bible), or simply traditions passed on through example and oral teaching. Individual ordinary tribe members have little ability to question these laws, to suggest changes in them, or to push for reinterpretation of them. The interpretation, enforcement, and development of tribal law and habits are left to the tribal elders – mature men who are selected by previous tribal elders to lead the tribe’s affairs. Some tribes have local chiefs who lead a village or encampment, but even then there are likely to be a few mature men who carry some weight.
- Tradition is the main determinant of overall tribal ways. Some tribes acknowledge a central leader over the local councils of elders, and over the central council of elders. Some of these leaders have tremendous authority over important day-to-day tribal policy decisions, and these decisions can, over time, affect tradition, or undermine it.
- Tribal traditions change slowly, if at all, unless the tribe is defeated in war, faces desperate circumstances, or comes under the influence of an influential reformer. In the case of defeat, many of the winning tribe’s traditions might well rather quickly take over, even if the defeated tribe is not absorbed or taken captive by the winning tribe, and even if the winning tribe does not try to force its ways on the losers. (This sort of change in

traditions happened frequently as Arab Muslim groups defeated neighboring non-Muslim tribes in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE. The defeated groups remained in tact, but became Muslim, creating their own versions of Islamic culture by blending their traditions with Muslim ideas.)

- Because tribal society is based on tradition, there is a built-in conservatism – there is no concern for staying “up-to-date”, or being trendy, having the “latest” fashion or seeking to be on the cultural cutting edge. The ways of the past are not often looked down upon as being obsolete, except perhaps when the tribe’s situation becomes desperate.
- Despite the conservative norm, there have been occasional outstanding individual agents for radical change arising within tribal cultures – individuals who build on the tribal heritage but still manage to persuade others to see things in a new way. Jesus and Muhammad are two examples of such agents of change. Both of these men started reform movements within their own tribe and related tribes, and in both cases, these movements ended up spreading to many other tribes (and changing in character as a result). One might see the trans-tribal character of these movements as evidence that these movements were movements away from tribalism and toward modernity (described below).

### Tribal “religion”

- There are specially selected members of a tribe who are charged with what we might loosely call spiritual matters – priests, assistant priests, shamans, spiritual advisers, and the like. Sometimes these are also elders. They play a significant role in maintaining tribal ways and keeping the peace within the tribe.
- In traditional tribal thinking, there is no distinction between religious and secular matters. The distinction between the religious and the secular is a modern one. Traditional tribal ways always were heavily “religious” (from a modern point of view), but the members of ancient tribes would not have segregated some of their practices and ideas as being religious and some others as being secular. From the point of view of the traditional member of a tribe, there is simply the way of the tribe, sanctioned by divinity or the ancestors.
- A tribe would share rituals (e.g., prayers and offerings made at a temple in a standardized way, led by a priest, or ritual dances and story-telling), as well as a mythology. Mythology is a set of sacred stories about the origins of things and about how life is to be lived, seen as embodying the deepest insights and truths of the tribe. Mythological stories explain life and origins of things like the world, sex, animals. The explanations rely on the conscious activity of “supernatural” intelligences. (From the point of view of the ancients who created these stories, the distinction between the “natural” and the “supernatural” was missing. To term the intelligent beings “supernatural” is modern.) The mythology provides the basis for the tribe’s attitudes toward life, and its practices. Much of the unity of a tribe depended on this sharing.

- If tribe A were defeated by tribe B in war, that would be taken to show that the mythology of tribe A, including its stories about divinity, were inferior to tribe B's mythology. For example, if tribe A worshiped a particular divinity that seemed to be quite distinct from tribe B's divinity, then the god of tribe B was seen as more powerful or more real than the god of tribe A. (This is why it was devastating to the tribal identity of the Hebrew tribe of Judah to be defeated by the Babylonians in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, with their gleaming temple – the house of the Lord of the universe – on the temple mount in Jerusalem destroyed, and all their leaders hauled off in captivity to Babylon.)
- Individual tribe members do not choose to adopt the “religion” of the tribe. The tribe's members, except for deviants, are simply all part of the tribe's ways, and that includes what moderns call “religion”. (Even today, the culture in many Muslim countries, such as Afghanistan, is to some extent tribal in character. Inhabitants of these countries are assumed to be Sunni Muslims or Shiite Muslims, depending on their tribal backgrounds, unless the individual does something public to renounce their tribal heritage.)

### **The development of modern cultures**

By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century in Europe it had become common to think that a cultural revolution was well underway, a revolution that replaced old ways of thinking with new and much better ways. The word “modern” came into general use to refer to the new cultural elements, often indicating pride in the new ways, or, sometimes to put those elements down with a sneer. The culture truly was changing in numerous dramatic ways, and the use of the word “modern” to refer to those ways and the offspring of those ways is still with us.

Some contemporary intellectuals now claim that we are living in a “post-modern” age, having outgrown the limitations of modern culture. I have my doubts about those claims, but in any case it doesn't really matter for our purposes whether we have become post-modern or not, since the religiously significant elements of modernity clearly are still very much with us, even if those who see us as post-modern in some sense are right. Modernity put various pressures on religion and those pressures are still being felt within religious movements today.

The fact that the word “modern” didn't come into common use in English until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century to refer to the supposedly new and improved culture that was developing at the time should not be taken to indicate that modernity itself suddenly popped into existence for the first time then. In fact, I would argue that the culture in ancient Athens (Greece) roughly 300 BCE (around the time of Plato and Aristotle) was already quite modern in many respects. I would also argue that Jesus and Muhammad both promoted certain ideas that have a modern flavor. The point is that modernity has grown in influence and has become more popular in fits and starts over the centuries. At the same time, tribalism is also still alive and sometimes quite influential in large regions of the world today (e.g., in Iraq and Afghanistan).

In the contemporary world, even in those cultures that seem generally quite modern, there may be powerful remnants of old tribal ways of thinking. Some critics see religion as one of those remnants that no longer “belongs” in a modern culture.

But what exactly do I mean by “modern” cultures? What makes a culture “modern”? The answers to these questions stem from the cultural changes that were taking place in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries when the word “modern” came into common use. These changes, and those that followed from them in a natural progression, to create what we can now identify as modernity, need to be brought out into the open and described.

There is no commonly accepted standard list of features defining modernity, although there are some frequently mentioned themes. The definition of modernity given below does not fall outside these themes, but the details may not exactly match someone else’s list. This list is the one we will use as the basis for discussing the relation between modernity and religion.

### **Modernity defined**

Compare and contrast the following list of the key features of modernity with the list of tribal culture features to see the differences.

#### *Modern attitudes toward traditional ways*

- Traditional ways of thinking tend to be seen as outmoded and old-fashioned, where that implies that the old ways are inferior. However, even moderns sometimes exhibit nostalgia for certain very specific traditional styles or techniques. (Hence, the marketing appeal of “old-fashioned” ice cream.)
- Being “cutting edge” and “up-to-date” are seen as good. The “latest” trends and fashions are desirable, while older approaches are seen as outmoded or dated. Even when nostalgia emerges, and something older is revived in popularity, it often comes back in new clothing – “old-fashioned” ice cream contains chemical emulsifiers and is packaged by a machine in a highly engineered container.
- Even the “conservatives” in a modern culture typically don’t want to preserve genuinely traditional ways of thinking and doing things. For example, the typical Christian “conservative” in the US welcomes the use of modern technology – the Internet, radio, and television – and embraces new “contemporary” worship styles and music. More politically-oriented US Christian “conservatives” emphasize issues such as abortion or gay marriage that never were central to the traditional Christian agenda.

#### *Individualism and the creation of knowledge in modern cultures*

- A modern believes that it is natural and appropriate for individuals to figure out life and the world by relying on their own experiences and the experiences of others, rather than automatically relying on the cultural traditions, divine revelations, or the authority of the elders (which implies that there are no elders). In actual practice, even modern people generally accept the commonly held opinions of those around them, often blindly, but the modern *ideal* sees individual authority over belief as appropriate and reasonable so long as individuals rely on experience and logic.

- Since experience and logic are the appropriate basis for knowledge about life and the world in a modern outlook, science (broadly conceived as the systematic use of experience and logic to develop knowledge) is the right approach to knowledge generation. Traditional beliefs at least in theory carry no weight unless they can be supported by a broadly scientific approach.
- Broadly scientific explanations work by finding natural causes. Natural causes rely on constant patterns exhibited by nature, not on choices made by divine beings. Over time, science developed so as to explain more and more of the present by reference to the past that produced it, not by reference to the goals of purposive agents. This move away from explanations in terms of purposes is not complete – social sciences continue to talk about purposes and goals – but even so the relevant purposes and goals are those of natural beings such as people, not unseen “supernatural” beings such as gods.
- The authority of elders, shamans, prophets, priests, kings, and other traditional truth-determiners, to automatically be believed is destroyed. The individual is allowed to think for themselves about even the most important issues of life. (This opens up the art of marketing and opinion manipulation. Moderns are not nearly as independent in their thinking as they often believe. The fact that the modern ideal allows the individual to have autonomy does not imply that actual modern individuals exercise their autonomy.)
- Because in modern cultures there is a route to truth other than received tradition, and that route is distinct from divine revelation, the possibility of secular knowledge opens up. It becomes possible to make a distinction between the secular and the religious elements in the culture (and some would argue that the religious elements don’t make sense any longer). The possibility of making a distinction between the religious and the secular also makes possible the modern concept of *religion*.
- Because of the above points about the authority of the individual, democracy makes more sense in modern culture than other forms of political decision-making. The notion of individual human rights seems natural in this setting. And, since experience and logic will constantly lead to new ideas about how the world works best, modernity provides a strong bias in favor of liberalism – that is, the acceptance of new ways and approaches.

### Modern social organization

- The modern bias toward liberal democracy mentioned above undermines the status of clan and lineage in social organization. This in turn renders tribal organization and mythology obsolete as the foundation for social fabric. But unchecked individualism produces anarchy and chaos, so social organization requires another basis. That basis is the modern nation-state. The nation-state is the basic modern form of social organization.
- The modern nation-state has more-or-less recognized fixed geographical boundaries – its territory. These do not necessarily match the regions inhabited by the descendants of the tribes that formerly existed in the region, and they do not change as people move.

- Citizenship replaces tribal membership. Citizenship is a legal status made possible by the legal structure of the nation-state, recorded in written laws. Frequently, there is also a written constitution that outlines the basic organization of the nation-state. A measure of control over the nation-state is exercised by a *government* that creates and tries to enforce the laws. Unity is achieved, often with great difficulty, through the development of a national sense of identity, often based in part on some embellished stories about the national past. (These stories function as a partial substitute for a shared mythology.)
- Combining all the above features in their fullest development results in a modern secular liberal democracy.
- Nation-states, like tribes, are not necessarily permanent. They can fall apart, be destroyed, be absorbed by other nation-states. New ones can come into being. The process by which nation-states come into being varies, but when nation-states are created by force exercised by outsiders, as in the Middle East and Africa, without regard to previously existing tribal structures, the result is typically a dysfunctional unstable mix of tribalism and government.

Modernity is never the complete story about any culture anywhere. There are anti-modern forces at work in every culture that sees itself as modern. Moreover, many people living in more or less modern cultures are not altogether happy with their modernity. In particular, there have been quite a few anguished clashes between modernity and religion, and those clashes will form the backdrop to our continuing class discussion of religion and culture in the 20th and 21st Centuries.

### **What about religion?**

The world's major religious traditions are rooted in ancient tribal cultures. Modernity has gained considerable cultural influence in the last centuries in many areas of the world inhabited by individuals who see themselves as belonging within one of the old religious traditions. The question then becomes, How does religion respond to the impact of modern culture?

Certainly some aspects of modernity appear to cause trouble for religion. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, social scientists generally predicted the complete demise of religion under the modern onslaught in every fundamentally modern culture. The fact that there has been something of a religious upsurge at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, then, might mean that modernity is fading, or it might mean that the social scientists were wrong. But if they were wrong, what has happened within the religious realm to deal with modernity?