A New Modernity
Living and Believing in an Unstable World

PART FOUR

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The past three installments of this series have dealt with what it means to live in the unstable world we are now experiencing. I located some of the principal sources of that instability and looked at the possible critical and analytical frameworks that might be used to address them. In this concluding section, I turn to the resources of faith, especially Christian faith, to engage and address these challenges that lie ahead.

In part three, I suggested that the framework that might best describe our situation and direct our response is what is being called a “second modernity.” This second modernity has a reflexive or critical relationship with the first modernity and recognizes how things have become more complex, how boundaries and identities are changing, how we have to consider plurality in make-up of identities, and how a more cosmopolitan worldview will serve us better in the years ahead.

How might our faith provide an adequate and engaged response to the new modernity? If the Second Vatican Council—whose fortieth anniversary we recently celebrated—helped give contour to living in the first modernity, how might we seek out our responses for living in a second modernity?

The Role of Religion in International Politics

The Second Vatican Council, especially in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, charted out a trajectory into modernity that has served us quite well. Its commitment to the fundamental goodness of the world, its recognition of the centrality of the concept of culture in shaping human and social life, and its valuing of human agency or activity for the sake of that world are ideas that will continue to guide us. At the same time, no doubt inevitably, the world has continued to change. Globalization was still an unknown concept for most people in the 1960s. No one would have imagined the urbanization and the extent of migration that we now experience nearly a half century later, nor the profound pluralism of our societies as a consequence of this. The international religious issues at the time of the council were atheism and secularization. Today, as we have seen, there is a resurgence of religious feeling in the world.

We have already talked about some of these features thus far in this series. I would like to take as a point of departure for this final installment the role religion can play in the world as it is developing and some of the potential things that religion can contribute on the international scene today. It was already noted that religion now intrudes into international politics and studies of international relations in a way unimagined only a short time ago because of a renewed interest in religion and its own resilience. Scholars working in these areas are struggling to come up with models that give an appropriate place to religion in these settings.

Richard Falk has been one of the leading figures in this regard. In a work on the role of religion in creating a more humane model of governance on the international scene, he has made some brief suggestions about a number of potential contributions religion can make to this important area (Falk, 30–32). Let me enumerate them here as a way of beginning this reflection:

- An appreciation of suffering and a commitment to lift up people in society who are suffering.
- The mobilizing potential of religion and its resonance with the deep roots of a society.
- An ethos of solidarity, especially when religion shows its inclusivist face.
- Normative horizons that affirm humanity even in the midst of fragmentation and diversity.
- The transformative nature of faith and ideals, particularly as they are related to struggle and self-sacrifice.
• A sense of limits, growing out of an awareness of finitude and the capacity of human beings for evil.

• A sense of identity that is not achieved by subjection to the state, but rather in reference to a spiritual journey, making of the “citizen” a “citizen pilgrim.”

• A sense of reconciliation that recognizes human limits, and the need for forgiveness and the beginning of life again after conflict and catastrophe.

These eight points stake out a considerable agenda for faith as it faces a second modernity. I would like to combine them somewhat and focus on four areas where Christian faith might make a contribution to living in the second modernity, of believing in an unstable world.

**Suffering**

Suffering is a theological category that does not get much attention in the developed world. It is a reminder of the finitude and shortcomings of human existence and of the oppression and injustice that the developed world either imposes on the poor two-thirds world or acquiesces to in order not to be disturbed.

Yet suffering is the lot of much of the world’s population today—either suffering caused by poverty, malnutrition, and disease or the suffering caused by civil conflict, political oppression, and a variety of forms of racism and xenophobia. The theologian Edward Schillebeeckx speaks of the “ecumene of suffering,” the widespread, pervasive character of suffering that marks the world today. Suffering can be reduced but not entirely eradicated. Its causes are at times too complex to admit of simple solution. The fact that it cannot be completely eradicated reminds us of the *hybris* that haunts some of our enterprises. It recalls to our minds that margin that we cannot control.

But more important, suffering calls for response to the things we can indeed change, the suffering that is propped up and sustained by human sinfulness, by greed and injustice, by pride and by power. The call to justice has again echoed loudly in Catholic social teaching, especially since the bishops’ synod on justice in 1970. The quest for justice will continue to be central to the Christian agenda. Within the context of the second modernity, we are called upon to refocus our sense of justice, in order to create workable goals for eradication of certain kinds of suffering. There are forms of suffering, such as malnutrition and disease, which can be directly and effectively addressed by more effective food production and medical distribution systems. There are other forms, such as racism and xenophobia, which will require education especially to combat. Advocacy, using inter-
national forums and the means of modern communication, are already finding new avenues of effectiveness.

Reflecting on the meaning of suffering in no way legitimates it. But we need to come to understand better how it is that so many people who suffer manage not to lose their humanity in the process. What resources of the human spirit are called forth in the best of human beings that can take even the destructive trajectories of suffering and turn them into a source of an expanding and even transcending human spirit? What happened to someone like Nelson Mandela in all those years of imprisonment on Robben Island that produced not a man bent on revenge and retaliation, but one of the great statesmen of the close of the twentieth century? What lessons can be learned from his life to help oppressed people elsewhere? What did Mother Teresa learn from living among those dying people who had been abandoned by society? What did she learn about faithfulness, abiding presence, and care that has gone on to inspire so many people around the world? Spiritual guides have often spoken of the “school of suffering,” a trying discipline that strips us of our illusions, makes us adhere to what is central and fundamental, and steadies our hand in unstable, unsteady times. To learn from suffering is not to condone it; it is, rather, an attempt to harness its awesome power to a nobler calling and broader spiritual horizon. Christian faith in the second modernity must face the reality of suffering more squarely. It must not avert its eyes from suffering’s searching gaze. It must bring to it the wisdom of the cross, that central symbol in Christian faith that makes us rethink power and recipes for success.

Indeed, all the great religious traditions of the world have reflections on suffering. How can these be brought to bear on the suffering people experience today, not as a palliative, but as a means of strengthening the human spirit in its struggle to overcome suffering, and for the sake of recognizing the nobility that sometimes emerges in suffering rather than seeking ways for ourselves to insulate our lives from it?

**Mobilization and Solidarity**

One of the features that mark the resurgence of religion in the world is its capacity to mobilize energies and to create bonds of solidarity. Pope John

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Edward Schillebeeckx speaks of the “ecumene of suffering,” the widespread, pervasive character of suffering that marks the world today.
Paul II, in his many trips to different parts of the world, exhibited again and again this mobilizing power of faith. Because faith makes an appeal not only to transcendent realities but also has what Richard Falk calls “civilizational resonance,” it can draw the different strands of narrative in a society together into a greater sense of the whole. In the recent debates about whether to make inclusion of references to God and to Christianity in the European Union Constitution, EU leaders worked studiously to avoid recourse to religious references. At the same time, as the sense of multiculturalism was collapsing in those same countries, the possibility of a religious “grand narrative” was unavoidable: the religious face of Islam and of many of the African immigrants to those countries reminded an older Europe of its religious heritage.

Reference to religion can be divisive, but it can also mobilize solidarity. When Bosnia and Herzegovina were invaded by the Serbs in the early 1990s, the leaders of the three major religious traditions (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim) all spoke out against the invasion and the war. Yet none of the voices was strong enough to be heard outside its own community and sometimes was feeble even within them. After the war, those leaders committed themselves to forming an interreligious council. In the last years of the 1990s, they met publicly, sometimes as often as biweekly, in order to impress upon the public consciousness that they were acting together. In this way, they hope to be prepared should another war come to their country.

The centennial celebration of the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions, held again in Chicago in 1993, has created an ongoing organization—the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions—that has sponsored parliaments in Capetown in 1998 and in Barcelona in 2004. Besides bringing religionists of all kinds together, each of these parliaments has provided a forum for religious leaders to address together some of the world’s most pressing problems. These landmark events of religious cooperation show the potential of religion for making the world a better place. Much is being written about religion’s collusion—wittingly or unwittingly—with violence, and for the sake of a better world those collusions need to be uncovered and eradicated. But perhaps the best long-term antidote to such conspiracy is linking the religions together for the sake of good. In so doing, the potential for creating new bonds of solidarity for the sake of the betterment of humankind can help point the rest of the world toward ways of redefining the boundaries that separate rich and poor, the powerful from the powerless, and the races of humankind. The term “solidarity” first arose in the trade union movements of the nineteenth century. Pope John Paul II has made it very much part of the vocabulary of Catholic social teaching. In a second modernity, as boundaries shift
and are redefined, we must find new ways to bring people together as well. The affective bonds of faith are certainly among the strongest that may be able to do that.

**Forming Identities in a Second Modernity**

The complexity created by globalization and migration has put identities under greater stress. One of the things that a second modernity stresses about identities is similar to its understanding of the concept of culture. In modernity, culture was often seen as a reified, definable entity that was relatively stable and enduring through time. It had its roots in Johann Gottfried Herder’s definition of culture from the eighteenth century: that culture was a union of three things: language, custom, and territory. *Migration and globalization has deterritorialized culture.* The media have undermined any defining custom and have “creolized” language. Culture is much more a negotiated reality now, having a certain historical core but constantly in conversation with forces all around it. What happens to a migrant’s culture over the span of the first two to three generations in a new setting has been the object of much study. Culture is now seen more as a kind of force field in which identities are negotiated.

To say this does not make culture or any constructed identity utterly pliable or arbitrary. It is, however, to recognize that culture and identity are never utterly stable. They are living entities that react to and change in the midst of all kinds of stimuli.

For that reason, it may not be useful to think of identity as an entity or reified lump of stuff. It might better be seen as the intersection point of multiple relationships. Rather than thinking of identity as an isolate or independent entity, it might better be viewed as an interdependent reality that is greater than the sum of all its parts. An identity is not dependent upon a single relationship; rather, it gets its resilience from its capacity to identify with a whole range of relationships. One of the basic principles of *convivência* is to have people in many different sets of relationships, so as to avoid identifying solely with one single such set. Identities today have to be capable of functioning amid many cultural realities.

Religion plays a significant role in this. It has already been noted that religion is one of the most salient strands of identity in a migrant’s life: migrants often become more religiously attuned in their new country than they were in their
homeland. This seems to be so because religion provides a connecting and familiar bond in an otherwise strange world. The great religious traditions such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and others have the additional quality of creating solidarity among peoples who are otherwise so different. The experience of a papal audience in St. Peter’s Square in Rome, or of the *hajj* in Mecca, can give one the sensation of being one with a greater humanity. Those transethnic, transnational identities are important building blocks for creating a different kind of human community for the future. The calling on those principles to create genuine *communio* (as Roman Catholics would call it) or a worldwide *ummah* (as Muslims would call it) would be a powerful antidote to the xenophobia, the racism, and the forms of prejudice that still mark the human family.

To see identity as a series of relationships, to see religion as providing both face-to-face community, as well as a transcendental allegiance, is an example of the cosmopolitan “both-and” that is a hallmark of the second modernity. As Falk pointed out, in that transcendental allegiance, life and human community can also be seen as a pilgrimage or spiritual journey. This helps create a critical distance from kinds of nationalist loyalties that harden boundaries between people and create obstacles in communication. “We have here no lasting city,” as the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us (13:14). While this can be viewed as playing down citizenship and the commitments that flow from it, it should be read rather as not engaging in idolatrous behavior—assigning divine meaning to a human institution. Religion, it seems to me, can help balance the quest for identity between a static, immobile sense of self and an arbitrary, unstable anomie. It can help maintain flexibility but within the context of direction, moral grounding, and normative horizons.

**Reconciliation and Forgiveness**

Since the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, there has been a dramatic growth in interest in reconciliation and the possibilities of forgiveness. Some of this has come from a heightened awareness of the amount of destructive conflict that has happened in the last decade and a half. But it has also arisen from an admission of the profound damage that colonialism has done to indigenous peoples around the world, and how their cultures and personal lives were often wrecked by the advance of European settlers. The upheavals and social conflicts that have uprooted more than a hundred million people worldwide to create ongoing camps of displaced persons and flows of refugees into other countries has made people yearn for peace and repair from such disastrous occurrences.

The idea of reconciliation has been at the forefront especially of Christianity and increasingly Islam during this period. Caritas Internationalis, the umbrella organization for 164 relief and development agencies in the Roman Catholic Church, has been working since 1995 to build and implement training programs.
in reconciliation in its member organizations. To date thousands of people have been trained on all six continents to engage in this work. In its current phase, it is working especially with its counterparts in the Muslim world to collaborate in this work of reconstruction and peace (see Caritas Internationalis 1999 and 2003).

It has been noted that these religions dare to believe in reconciliation and forgiveness, in justice and living together. My own involvement in this work has convinced me that it helps to have a religious, even eschatological vision of reconciliation. Reconciliation is not an extrapolation from cessation of conflict to some point of living together. To create the conditions for reconciliation, one has to have what John Paul Lederach, a leading practitioner in the transformation of conflict, calls a “moral imagination” (2005).

Reconciliation is more than finding the right strategies or techniques to end conflict. It is built on a sense of humanity as a peaceable existence, a sensitivity to securing and sustaining justice, and a capacity to imagine those rituals and other practices that will ground such peace and celebrate it regularly. As Desmond Tutu put it so eloquently in his memoir of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, there is “no future without forgiveness” (1999). Without embarking on forgiveness, we remember too much and forget too little. As the narratives of a society are reconstructed in the forgiveness process, there has to be a capacity to see wrongdoers in a new light—not just as malevolent beings bent on our destruction, but as vulnerable, finite, even broken human beings acting out of a jumble of emotions and motivations. Forgiveness is the creation of a space for a different kind of future. The religious capacity to envision both reconciliation and forgiveness creates the conditions for the development of a genuinely new and renewed society. This possibility is crucial for a second modernity, as it tries to negotiate its way between destructive pasts and complex present situations.

The Two Pillars for a Theological Vision

In order to bring especially Christian faith into engagement with the second modernity, two areas of theology will need closer attention. One is the area of theological anthropology. The other is our sense of Christian faith itself—what I have called a “new Catholicity.”

It could be argued that christology was the key area for systematic theology in the last quarter of the twentieth century. This period coincided with what has been called the “third quest of the historical Jesus.” During that period the social study of the New Testament, with its use of contemporary sociological and anthropological methods, helped bring to life the Gospel stories about the life and ministry of Jesus in a new way. It was also the period when an emerging question—the relation of Christian claims about Jesus to the other great world religions—reached a new height of attention.
It has been my contention that the major area for theological reflection for the first quarter of the twenty-first century will be theological anthropology, our theological understanding of what it means to be human (see Schreiter, 2001). In doing so, theological anthropology will need to move beyond the "anthropocentric turn" that marked theology at the turn of the twentieth century, as cosmocentric views of creation made way for anthropocentric ones. Certainly the looming ecological crisis has made a solely anthropocentric view of the world obsolete and even dangerous. But there are a number of other reasons that have made a return to a theological anthropology more urgent.

One of these is the presence of biomedical technologies that have complicated the boundary between human and nonhuman life. The prospects of cloning, of continuance of life by technological means, and advances in cognitive science have all raised questions about the human that were not even thinkable a few decades ago. Here in the second modernity, boundaries are being redefined with great rapidity. We must constantly be thinking about how these affect our sense of the human.

Second, the development of concerns about human rights, the forms of racism that globalization have created alongside the intractable historical forms we have inherited from colonialism, the slave trade, and the racist ideologies of the nineteenth century all call us to expand what is included in the topic of theological anthropology (see Castles; Young). How identities are formed and how we will live together with all our difference, yet find means of social cohesion, constitute challenges to theological anthropology.

Third, our capacity to move beyond the anthropocentrism that shaped much of twentieth-century theological anthropology is crucial. To be sure, this anthropocentrism was experienced at the time as liberating from ecclesiastical and social strictures, but our continued survival is based on learning our proper place within the world and all its systems. As ecological theologies move into greater maturity—beyond lists of desiderata into carefully constructed new anthropologies—theological anthropology as a whole will benefit from this (see Bergmann, 1995; Rasmussen, 1997).

Fourth, the way that new social cohesion, through solidarity and convivência, is theologically grounded will be an important part of how we talk about human community. As has been noted, the second modernity will have to find ways for greater engagement and cohesion between groups that are different. To invoke
simply the beauty of difference when societies are under stress will not be effective. An intercultural hermeneutic is an important dimension of interpreting these communities to one another (see Sundermeier).

The other theological concept that will be important to the Christian theological interpretation of this vision is what I have called elsewhere a “new Catholicity” (Schreiter, 1997). Let me remind us here of the three dimensions that I saw as central to this new Catholicity.

The first two have long been seen as constitutive of catholicity as a descriptor of the church. The first was the universal extension of the church throughout the world (catholicity in its etymological sense). While such worldwide extension is even more true today, in the twenty-first century, than it was through much of the church’s history, that “seeking of the whole” of the church today will have to include aspects that have been discussed here as part of the second modernity: a cosmopolitan, rather than an ethnocentric view of humanity and human cultures; ways of including a sense of the “both-and” view of reality rather than the more familiar “either-or” attitude that has shaped much of our history; and ways to extend our sense of *communio* to include a *convivência* of peoples, where difference is not only recognized, but engaged.

The second was the fullness of faith. Not only must the faith handed down to us from the apostles be maintained in all its integrity, we may wish to emphasize within that faith elements that will keep us attuned to the fullness of humanity that must receive this fullness of faith. I would suggest two themes here.

The first is to bring together more closely the long Catholic tradition of natural law with the newer worldwide emphasis on human rights. In many ways this is what efforts at the global ethic are trying to do across religious lines. How these might be brought together should be high on the theological agenda (see Ruston, 2004; Porter, 2000).

The second is to continue to explore the theme of reconciliation, both for its Christian theological resources, and also for how it can link with those theological resources from other religious traditions. Here is one of the places where religious traditions can collaborate most fruitfully.

The third dimension of the new Catholicity is communication. It should be clear from what has been said in these articles that communication—efficacious speech, constructive listening, and creating the speech environment where all this can

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happen—is going to be essential for the well-being of the human family in all of its complexity. For the constructive engagement of cultural communities, patterns of communication and interpretation will have to be strengthened. Ways to keep all the groups in the conversation will need to be found in order to do this. An effective pedagogy of listening within the church itself will be one of the important ways of modeling this for the larger society. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest transnational, multicultural organization in the world. If it can translate its theology of catholicity into ways of creating this engagement, it will be doing incomparable service to humanity.

Conclusion

The possibility of embarking on a new, or second, modernity is the challenge before us. We must find more effective ways of analyzing our world if we are to be able to live together in the shrunken space and time of globalization, in the convergence of peoples in migration, amid new ways of living and believing in an unstable world. I would like to conclude here with a passage from the Letter to the Ephesians, since it embodies to my mind the vision that can animate this quest for a new way of seeking the whole:

So you are no longer aliens or foreign visitors; you are fellow-citizens with the holy people of God and part of God’s household. You are built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets, and Jesus Christ himself is the cornerstone. Every structure knit together in him grows into a holy temple in the Lord; and you too, in him, are being built up into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Eph 2:19-22 New Jerusalem Bible)

No longer aliens and strangers; citizens in a common household of God; built upon firm foundations; anchored by Christ as the cornerstone; knit together as a holy temple, a dwelling place of God in the Spirit: that strikes me as the visionary agenda for the church in a second, a new modernity.

References


