
Preface

The thesis of this book is that the developments of modernity are decisive for contemporary Christian self-understanding. In this context, the meaning of modernity is kept intentionally broad. In its deepest historical reach, it includes the large-scale social and political transformations that emerged from the Enlightenment period, such as the development of the modern nation-state and the promotion of democratic political ideals. It includes the Enlightenment's valorization of the freedom of the individual, a freedom that includes independent choice in religious matters. It includes the emergence of a secular culture in the West with its art, music, literature, movies, media, and communal forms. It includes the demands that have emerged in the past century or two to make real the promise of liberty for all by overcoming the oppressions manifest in colonialism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Most importantly, it includes the emergence of independent critical fields of inquiry in the natural, social, and human sciences, as well as these sciences' major findings throughout the past several centuries.

All these elements and more are what is meant by "modernity" or "the modern context." While Christianity certainly had a decisive role to play in birthing this context, it also has had to respond to it. How can or will the doctrine of creation be made compatible with the physicist's theory about the emergence and history of the material universe and with the biologist's explanation for the cause of the variety of living species on earth? How is the Bible to be understood as God's Word, or Jesus as God's son, given the historian's ideas about how the Bible was constructed and the Christian community formed? What should be the role of women in church and society given women's demonstrations of equal value and ability and their critique of a church that has denied them opportunity while providing religious justification for this denial? What about the role of gays and lesbians in church and society? Can Christianity be of service in restoring the natural environment, or does it simply promote an orientation that is environmentally destructive? These are the kinds of questions to which Christianity needs to respond in the modern context. While some of these questions are newer than

others, none of them are being asked for the first time in the twenty-first century. They have engaged the minds and hearts of countless numbers of professional theologians and faithful laypeople over the past decades, and, in some cases, centuries. Christianity and Christians live in the modern context, even while they wrestle with and ask how the ancient faith they have inherited and to which they are committed is compatible with and should express itself in this context.

The intention of the book, which comes out of this Christian wrestling with modernity, is to give a limited expression to Christian responses to modernity on an introductory level. There are several important elements about the text's approach to this that require explanation. First, the text makes an effort to clarify in the most basic way what modernity itself involves and why it raises certain challenges or questions for Christianity. With this, the book shows how the contemporary context for interpreting Christian meaning is unique from the ancient context in which Christianity emerged, from medieval Christian civilization, and from the period of the Protestant Reformation. Many questions that are potent today simply were not relevant and therefore were not asked in these prior contexts. Establishing and understanding the context from which some distinctively modern questions for Christianity have emerged is part of the task of this text.

Second, as an introduction, this text seeks to present general patterns of the Christian response to modernity as well as some admittedly limited but more in-depth responses of individual theologians. Because the territory to be covered is vast and because there is no systematic way of deriving a necessary set of responses to modernity, in every case there is room for criticism of the patterns of thought and the theologians selected. Openness to such criticism is the risk taken by writing this text. Concern about this risk is mitigated at least somewhat by the acknowledgment that the text makes no claim at comprehensiveness and in the hope that the ideas presented will motivate deeper penetration and engagement with the vast and creative field on which a narrow beam of light has shined.

Third, in covering Christian responses to modernity, the text covers both traditional theological territory and issues that are more strictly cultural. In other words, the text tries to show how intellectual developments in modernity have elicited a variety of responses in Christianity regarding its understanding of creation, the Bible, God, Christ, and human destiny. It also tries to show how multiculturalism, the women's movement, gay rights, and environmental concerns have in their own ways yielded a set of creative responses.

Finally, a word about the use of language in the text needs to be clarified. In this preface and at times in the text, the terms *modernity* or *modern context* are used to refer broadly to the contemporary period. In certain contexts today, these terms no doubt seem outdated. In much of academia, at least, the more common term for the contemporary period is *postmodern*, a term that has been in vogue for several decades. The fact I do not use this term does not imply a rejection of the idea connected to its coinage—namely, that the contemporary context has changed in significant ways from the context of the Enlightenment period. It does not imply a rejection of the insights of postmodernity and its critique of Enlightenment rationality. As I understand it, among other things, postmodernity has stressed the limits of knowledge and been skeptical about universals, often promoting a pluralism of views. In important ways, it has sought to penetrate claims to knowledge to find the power relations, which, in its understanding, are effective in and often determinative of those claims. These insights are valuable and are taken up in a multiplicity of ways in the text. Having said this, however, the term *postmodern* is for the most part avoided in the text for several reasons. For one, in my judgment, the meaning of the term remains unsettled and contested. Beyond the general insights listed above, which can be and often are interpreted in dramatically different ways, the term is often connected to a single kind of contemporary thought embodied in deconstruction. I want to avoid the confusion that would be involved in regarding this single perspective as the only or even predominant contemporary perspective. Further, in displaying the context for contemporary theology, the text often focuses on general patterns of thought and broad historical and scientific conclusions, many of which emerged and eventually became normative over the past several centuries. In examining Christian theological responses, the text often reaches back deeply into the twentieth century and pursues with seriousness some of the directions of thought that emerged between that century's world wars. Given the attempted reach of the text, it is simply not productive to continually bump against the question of just what approaches, conclusions, and insights of what thinkers are modern and what are postmodern. It is to avoid the requirement of hammering out this distinction again and again in the presentation that the term *modern* is used with as broad a meaning as possible, while what are considered typically postmodern ideas are at times freely adopted.

The text itself contains nine chapters. The first five concern modern ideas and aspects of traditional Christian theology, while the last four

address cultural issues and Christian life and thought. The first two chapters are intended as a unit and should be understood together. All of the remaining chapters can be read, understood, and taught independently.

When I first came to McKendree University, where I have taught for eleven years as a full-time professor, I was assigned a course called Introduction to Christianity. It is a general education undergraduate course and is typically populated with mostly first- and second-year students. The question I faced in preparing to teach this course was the same one faced by teachers of many other general education courses: Since you only have one course in which to teach a vast area, on what will you focus? Certainly a respectable answer to this question for a course called Introduction to Christianity is to do a historical survey of Christianity. One can establish the Old Testament context from which Christianity emerges, read and study parts of the New Testament, speak about transformations toward orthodoxy in the Patristic period, trace the establishment of Christian civilizations in East and West in the Middle Ages, describe the fracturing of Western Christianity in the Protestant Reformation, and cover the ongoing emergence of Protestant groups in the post-Reformation context. In fact, this is the pattern I followed when I began teaching the course.

While I do not want in any way to diminish the value of learning church history, I became dissatisfied with this approach in this course. As is typical in a modern university, my courses regularly had more women in them than men. I wondered whether these young women knew that this ancient faith about which I was speaking had been re-thought in profound ways by contemporary feminists. Many of my students were science majors, or they were required to take science classes as part of general education. I wondered if they knew about the profound dialogue between science and the Christian faith through the past few centuries. Many of my students were learning critical methodologies for analyzing and interpreting texts in other classes. I wondered if they knew about the generations of ongoing critical scholarship that has been applied to the Bible and whether they had thought about what this might mean for Christianity today. These kinds of questions led me to reshape the class to focus on Christianity in a broad sense and modernity. Out of this reshaping, this text was born.

Over the past several years, I used rudimentary forms of the chapters of this text in my classes, along with other material. In 2009, I was awarded a sabbatical by McKendree University and used that opportunity to write the bulk of this text.

There are many people to thank. I am grateful to McKendree University for providing the sabbatical that led to the writing of this text and for supporting me in the process of its publication. Thanks to my colleagues at McKendree, with whom I am constantly kept in a stimulating and engaging dialogue about a host of issues that deepen and broaden me as a scholar and as a person. Thanks to Michael West and the fine people at Fortress Press whose questions, suggestions, and editing improved this text in multiple ways. Thanks to my research assistant, Michael Anderson, for his careful and critical reading of the text and for helping put together the glossary. The text is better because of his work. Thanks to the students in my Introduction to Christianity class over the years. Virtually all varieties of American Christianity, as well as forms of international Christianity, have been represented in these classes. Many of these students are ardent believers, many are skeptics, and many are reeling from all things Christian. There have been representatives of other world religions, along with confirmed atheists and agnostics. I have learned much about the culture and about the dynamics of contemporary Christianity from engagement with this diversity.

Special thanks must go to the religion majors and minors whom I have had the privilege to teach over the past eleven years at McKendree University. It has been a rare and special treat to be able to have the same students in five, six, or seven different courses. You keep coming back! What more could a teacher want over the years than to be able to sit in seminar after seminar with intelligent, interested, and engaged students and discuss new texts and ideas. In all cases, my goal was to impart some wisdom. In all cases, I ended up receiving more knowledge and insight than I had to give.

Finally, thanks to my daughters, Jody and Robin. You have always given me reason upon reason to feel satisfaction with the present and optimism about the future. And to my wife, Brenda: simple words of thanks fail. I do not know how you do it. You continually have more insight, more ideas, more energy, more understanding, and more good plans than I ever anticipate. I am happy to be part of it.