

- 1 History itself seems to demand that we divide it up into «periods,» that is, times when men and women shared some common assumptions about the human condition and about its possibilities and challenges. These assumptions touch many areas: political, social, and economic life, the arts, religion (or the absence thereof), science and technology, but most of all in the sense of what it really means to be human, and the world-view of men and women who lived at that time,
  - 1.1 For example, we talk about «the Late Ancient World,» «the Greco-Roman World,» «the World of Early Christianity,» «the Dark Ages,» «the Medieval World,» «the Renaissance,» «the Enlightenment,» «the Age of Revolution,» «Romanticism,» and «the Modern World.» And these periods themselves can be subdivided almost endlessly.
  - 1.2 These divisions are useful, provided we realize their limitations.
- 2 Some of these limitations:
  - 2.1 It is rarely possible to determine the precise point at which a historical period begins or ends.<sup>1</sup> Periods blend into each other, and the seeds of the new are always there, germinating unseen, while the old seems to be in peaceful possession of the field. In fact, it is precisely when a historical period seems to claim the allegiance of almost all men and women, that its collapse is imminent.<sup>2</sup>
  - 2.2 Since a historical period embraces so many different human endeavors, so many areas of human concern, a given element (e.g. ideas about ideal political structures) may belong to one period, while other elements (e.g. literature, music, and pictorial art) may already belong to the coming age (and may be instrumental in ushering in that coming age).<sup>3</sup>
  - 2.3 The divisions between historical periods are never absolute, and the values of one historical period often continue, in changed and adapted

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<sup>1</sup> But sometimes it can be done. Arguably the Enlightenment came to an end in 1791, when the French Revolution turned into the Reign of Terror.

<sup>2</sup> The Medieval World is a good example, with its confident convictions about the durability of the feudal system, and its intellectual certitudes about God and the world (expressed in the great «Summas» of Thomas Aquinas and others). Only thirty years after Thomas' death, this world had begun to fragment, and in the mid-fourteenth century the plague known as the black death had undermined medieval certitudes about an ordered world under the providence of God. Auschwitz and the Gulag played a similar role in undermining many of the certitudes of the modern era.

<sup>3</sup> A good example of this would be the research and writing of men like Nietzsche and Freud, who worked at the height of the modern period, but had already staked out positions which would one day be called «post modern.»

- form, in later periods. Sometimes these values go into a kind of dormant state, only to awaken with new vitality centuries or millennia later.<sup>4</sup> In time, the authentic values of any age live on, by acquiring new contexts and developing a new language and terminology which is comprehensible to those who live in a new and different world.
- 3 With these limitations in mind, we can turn to the present period in world history, which many call «post-modern.»
    - 3.1 The term «post-modern» has a certain trendy ring to it, which inspires suspicion<sup>5</sup>. However, if we define it carefully, it does refer to an objective situation today, which is characterized by certain tendencies and problems.
    - 3.2 We have to begin by identifying the features which are distinctive of the *modern* era, since this is obviously the point from which «post-modern» has to be defined.<sup>6</sup>
  - 4 The modern world has been characterized, above all, by the conviction that human beings have come of age, that we are mature, and free of the tutelage of authorities in the church or in civil society, whose decisions would determine our destiny.<sup>7</sup>
    - 4.1 This conviction led to another: the sense that the creation of a better world is in our own hands, and that human reason and general education are the tools which will bring about this better world.
    - 4.2 In the modern era, men and women were optimistic about the future, and they had unbounded faith in progress.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Many of the values of classical antiquity resurfaced during the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment's esteem of reason lives on in the search of theoretical physics in the modern era for the grand unified theory.

<sup>5</sup> Those who use this term to describe their own thinking seem to be saying «we are so modern that we have even left modernity behind.»

<sup>6</sup> To assign a date when the «modern world» or «modernity» began, and to speak of when it ended (if it has), is extremely difficult, and agreement on even approximate dates will be hard to achieve. Did it begin with the Reformation? (See the next footnote), or with the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution? Each of these left its stamp on the modern era.

<sup>7</sup> The Reformation, which championed the right of the individual to interpret the Bible for him/herself, was both a symptom of the coming modern age, as well as a powerful factor in its coming.

<sup>8</sup> This was typical of the Victorian and Edwardian ages in England (late  
(continued...))

- 4.2.1 This progress would come about through advances in science and technology (particularly medicine).
- 4.2.2 Darwin's theory of evolution, *as popularly understood*, was a typical expression of this belief in progress: life began with simple, one-celled animal life, and proceeded up the ladder of life until it finally reached the summit of perfection – the human animal.<sup>9</sup>
- 4.3 From the fact that human beings have «come of age,» people drew the conclusion that each human being has his or her own dignity.
  - 4.3.1 And this meant that *all* men and women were equal.
  - 4.3.2 This meant that each human person has a right to political freedom, to «life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.» Political freedom would be the key to developing the potential of all.
  - 4.3.3 From this insight came the conviction of the brotherhood of all human beings,<sup>10</sup> which Marx longed to bring about, but for which the Communist states who claimed his paternity could only fashion cruel parodies.<sup>11</sup>
- 5 Most (but not all) of these characteristics of modernity have been called into question in these early years of the third millennium (and many were already under assault in the early years of the twentieth century). In what follows (§6ff.) I will list some of the reasons why modernity and its values have been called into question or rejected outright.
- 6 Instead of human beings coming of age, the post-modern view sees them as opening Pandora's box. This, in turn, has led to a descent into tyranny in

many parts of the world which has been far worse than anything the world had

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<sup>8</sup>(...continued)  
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), and it characterized life in the United States up to about 1960.

<sup>9</sup> This view of evolution as an inexorable advance toward ever-greater perfection was not a necessary part of Darwin's theory, nor is it an essential element of neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory, as Stephen Jay Gould demonstrated in *Wonderful Life: the Story of the Burgess Shale*.

<sup>10</sup> This insight was inherited from the Enlightenment, and is beautifully exemplified in Friedrich Schiller's poem which forms the text of the choral movement of Beethoven's Ninth: «Alle Menschen werden Brüder.»

<sup>11</sup> The Communist states have shown remarkable efficiency in only three areas: producing tyranny, shortages, and world-class pollution.

ever seen.<sup>12</sup>

- 6.1 The spread of terrorism and suicide bombing has brought the denial of human dignity to our newspapers and TV screens on a daily basis.
  - 6.1.1 The pursuit of happiness and the attainment of political freedom seem ever more elusive for growing numbers.
  - 6.1.2 The inequality of women in large sectors of the modern world makes a mockery of equality.
  - 6.1.3 Rather than the brotherhood of all, religious and ethnic hatred have brought about the death, by starvation or violence, of millions.
- 6.2 Human reason has seemed powerless to cope with these perversions, and the spread of education has brought neither happiness nor peace.<sup>13</sup>
- 6.3 Optimism about the future has given way to pessimism. Science has brought us the threat of nuclear annihilation, and advances in medicine have raised the threat of over-population.<sup>14</sup>
- 7 The failure of so many of the bright hopes of the Enlightenment and the early years of the twentieth century has led many to deny the existence of objective values, and, in fact, to proclaim that human beings can find their true selves only in denying that *any* values claim them.
  - 7.1 Nietzsche's Übermensch (superman) acknowledges the claim of no values on his conduct.
  - 7.2 Sartre and Camus asserted that the only human dignity consisted in «absolute freedom» – the act of making a choice which has no rational justification.<sup>15</sup>
  - 7.3 Derrida and other literary and philosophical figures («deconstructionists») denied that literary texts had meaning in themselves, and asserted that their only meaning consisted in what their readers or interpreters wanted to impose on them.

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<sup>12</sup> On the grand scale, Hitler and Stalin; more local in nature, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein, Pol Pot, and dozens of others.

<sup>13</sup> In the absence of the conviction that there are objective values which claim us and demand that we recognize them, there is nothing surprising about this.

<sup>14</sup> We seem to be in a position where one threat (overpopulation) is being dealt with by the effects of disease, catastrophic weather conditions, and human malevolence.

<sup>15</sup> This definition of freedom lies at the opposite pole from the biblical understanding of freedom, which sees it as the decision to live solely for God, and finding in that decision the authentic selves we are called to be.

- 7.4 Fletcher and other situation-ethics moralists have argued that there are no moral absolutes, but that everything depends on the individual's assessment of the unique situation, which is not to be judged by general norms.
- 8 Like most historical periods, post-modernism calls for evaluation and assessment. And, as is the case for most periods, that assessment will find a mixture of positive and negative elements.
- 8.1 On the positive side, the post-modern period broke with the naïve optimism and the blind faith in reason and in the power of natural science to create a better world.
- 8.1.1 In the work of its best artists<sup>16</sup> and thinkers,<sup>17</sup> it looked deeply into the human situation and saw how profound our alienation was from the material world, from other human beings, and from our inmost selves.
- 8.2 Negatively, much post-modernism simply rejects the power of human intelligence to recognize objective value, and more, the very existence of such values.<sup>18</sup> And in frustration at mankind's power to create, singlehandedly, a better world, it denied even the possibility of such a better world, and of the religious faith that might achieve what science could not.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> A good example is Goya's painting of the destruction of Guernica.

<sup>17</sup> The collected sermons of Paul Tillich are a good source. See *The Eternal Now*, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, *The Courage to Be*, *The New Being*.

<sup>18</sup> Without objective values there is no way of distinguishing a life worth living from a life which is without meaning. Sartre, Camus, and other champions of atheistic existentialism claimed the title «heroic» for the decision to live in a world without God, but a number of their young disciples showed, in choosing suicide, how hollow this claim was.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, many of the leading lights of the modern era had already decreed the irrelevance of religious faith to the realities of life, and had relegated it to the domain of emotion and feeling. Nietzsche had spoken of the death of God, and during the modern era there has been a general tendency to deal with the world «as if there were no God.» (Hugo Grotius' phrasing of the task of international law).