




*The Theological Origins
of Modernity*

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PREFACE

Ours is a visual age, and in the last twenty years two images have shaped our understanding of the times in which we live. The first was the fall of the Berlin Wall and the second the collapse of the World Trade Center towers. These structures were not mere artifacts; they were also symbols deeply embedded in the public psyche. The first was the symbol of totalitarianism and the Cold War confrontation between a free and an enslaved world; the second the symbol of a liberal world unified by the forces of globalization. The fall of the Berlin Wall gave rise to a belief in a liberal future of peace and prosperity that revived a faith in human progress that the catastrophic events of the first part of the twentieth century had almost extinguished. The collapse of the Twin Towers, by contrast, kindled the fear of a rampant new fanaticism that threatened our lives and civilization in an especially insidious way. When the Wall came down, the future seemed to stretch out before us like a broad highway leading to a modern world united by commerce, the free exchange of ideas, and the proliferation of liberal government. This was to be the age of globalization, but a globalization that was conceived as the spread of Western values and institutions to the rest of the world. Science and technology would establish a realm of peace and prosperity in which human freedom could be finally and fully realized. With the destruction of the World Trade Center, globalization suddenly appeared in a new light, not as a one-way street to modernity but as a complex and confusing intersection of paved roads, dark alleys, and mountain pathways. As a result, we ceased to look forward to a new golden age and glanced instead over our shoulders and sideways into the out-of-the-way places we imagined to be filled with dark figures waiting to attack us.¹

The attack on the World Trade Center thus called the modern project into question, and it did so in a new and unsettling way. The perpetrators seemed to be opposed to modernity not because it had failed to live

up to its aspirations or because its obvious benefits had not been equally distributed, but because those aspirations and benefits were themselves defective and even evil. The events of 9/11 thrust these claims in front of us in a particularly trenchant way, and they left many liberal proponents of modernity incredulous. It was easy to understand how someone could be morally outraged by the failure to distribute the benefits of modernity more fairly or widely, or aghast at the environmental impact of modern industrial society, or even distressed by the way in which modernity has ridden roughshod over traditional culture, but how could anyone be opposed to the manifest goods that modernity had to offer, to equality, liberty, prosperity, toleration, pluralism, representative government, and the like? The answer for many was simple and predictable: these new antimodernists were religious fanatics seeking martyrdom, true believers, unenlightened zealots. However, while such answers may relieve the immediate anxiety that we feel in the face of these events, they cannot finally be satisfying, for they simply conceal a deeper perplexity. They name (or brand) the enemies of modernity fanatics, but they leave the source and nature of their fanaticism unexplained. We thus still face an unsettling perplexity. This perplexity in part is the consequence of our profound ignorance and consequent misperception of these new opponents of modernity, and we undoubtedly need to understand them more fully. The problem, however, lies deeper than this, not merely in our failure to understand these others but in our failure to understand ourselves.² This challenge to modernity has been particularly hard for us to understand because it forces us to confront an issue that is buried at the bottom of the modern psyche, since it was at the heart of the very decision that gave birth to the modern psyche and to the modern world. I am of course referring to the decision about the place of religious belief in the modern world. Modernity came to be as a result of the displacement of religious belief from its position of prominence at the center of public life into a private realm where it could be freely practiced as long as it did not challenge secular authority, science, or reason. The authority of religion to shape private and public life thus was replaced by a notion of private belief and ultimately personal “values.” The current attack upon modernity that is exemplified by the attack on the World Trade Center is particularly unsettling because it has violently reopened this unsettling question. In order to begin to come to terms with the current challenge to modernity, we thus must return to the question of the origin of the modern project.³

What then is modernity, and where did it come from? The conventional wisdom on this matter is quite clear: modernity is a secular realm

in which man replaces God as the center of existence and seeks to become the master and possessor of nature by the application of a new science and its attendant technology. The modern world is conceived as the realm of individualism, of representation and subjectivity, of exploration and discovery, of freedom, rights, equality, toleration, liberalism, and the nation state. Conventional wisdom also has a fairly clear story of the origin of this modern age. It was a product of seventeenth-century thinkers who rejected scholasticism in favor of science and religious belief and enthusiasm in favor of a secular world. It was rooted in the philosophy of Descartes and Hobbes and the science of Copernicus and Galileo.⁴

Can we still be satisfied with these answers? There are a number of reasons to doubt the adequacy of such accounts. This account is after all the self-congratulatory story that modernity tells about itself and its own origins.⁵ Moreover, recent scholarship, following the seminal work of Hans Blumenberg and Amos Funkenstein, has begun to reveal the enormous complexity of the question about the origins of the modern age.⁶ As a result, previous attempts to identify modernity as subjectivity, or the conquest of nature, or secularization have begun to look one-sided and inadequate.

This book is an examination of the origins of modernity that is informed by this new scholarship and that seeks to demonstrate the importance of understanding the origins of modernity for coming to terms with the problems we now confront in our globalizing world. It is especially concerned to demonstrate the central role that religion and theology played in the formation of the idea of modernity. This view, of course, is not typically a part of the modern story. Indeed, since the time of the Enlightenment modernity has thought of itself as an effort to suppress religious superstition and authority, encapsulated in Voltaire's famous imperative: "Écrasez l'infame!" In Europe this has meant a continual diminution of the importance of religion, confining it first "within the bounds of reason alone," as Kant put it, then attempting to put it out of its misery by declaring God was dead, and culminating in the exceptional decline in religious belief and practice in the latter half of the twentieth century. Even in America, where religion continues to play a much more important role than in Europe, the attachment to religion is often perceived, especially by intellectuals and academics, as atavistic and unseemly, especially when it takes on a fundamentalist or evangelical tone. And even in America, the idea that religion should guide public life continues to meet widespread opposition.

This opposition to religion in the modern age, however, should not be taken as a proof that at its core modernity is antireligious. It is certainly true that modernity has consistently struggled against certain forms of re-

ligious doctrine and practice, including the cult of the saints, teleology, the natural law teachings of scholasticism, the geocentric vision of the natural world, and creationism, but I want to suggest that this does not mean that it was therefore a rejection of religion as such. The argument presented in this book suggests that it is a mistake to imagine that modernity is in its origins and at its core atheistic, antireligious, or even agnostic. Indeed, I will show in what follows that from the very beginning modernity sought not to eliminate religion but to support and develop a new view of religion and its place in human life, and that it did so not out of hostility to religion but in order to sustain certain religious beliefs. As we shall see, modernity is better understood as an attempt to find a new metaphysical/theological answer to the question of the nature and relation of God, man, and the natural world that arose in the late medieval world as a result of a titanic struggle between contradictory elements within Christianity itself. Modernity, as we understand and experience it, came to be as a series of attempts to constitute a new and coherent metaphysics/theology. I will argue further that while this metaphysical/theological core of the modern project was concealed over time by the very sciences it produced, it was never far from the surface, and it continues to guide our thinking and action, often in ways we do not perceive or understand. I will argue that the attempt to read the questions of theology and metaphysics out of modernity has in fact blinded us to the continuing importance of theological issues in modern thought in ways that make it very difficult to come to terms with our current situation. Unless and until we understand the metaphysical/theological core of modernity, we will remain unable to understand religiously motivated antimodernism and our response to it. The current confrontation thus demands of us a greater understanding of our own religious and theological beginnings, not because ours is the only way, but in order to help us understand the concealed wellsprings of our own passions as well as the possibilities and dangers that confront us.

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INTRODUCTION THE CONCEPT OF THE MODERNITY

On a gray day in 1326 three men were standing amid a crowd of worshippers in the Cathédrale Notre-Dame des Doms in Avignon. The Romanesque structure was clearly in need of repair, but it had long been the center of the spiritual life of what only a decade before had been a small provincial town. But how all that had changed! The town had become the new seat of the papacy and as a result was undergoing a remarkable transformation. A *palais* was being built; money was flowing in; knights and bureaucrats, courtiers and ambassadors were everywhere. The market was filled with products from all over Europe and the Levant. Scholars, poets, and church officials from near and far came and went on a regular basis. The small town was becoming a city of real importance. That these three men were at the mass was an indication of the changing times. The first was English, the second Italian, and the third German. All spoke fluent Latin. The first, a Franciscan, was nervous and clearly under some stress; the second, a young man, was foppishly dressed and appeared to be a *bon vivant*; the third, an older Dominican, seemed lost in contemplation. When the mass ended they departed and went their separate ways. Little did they or their contemporaries know that the different paths they followed from that mass and from Avignon would lead humanity into the modern age.

Many today think that modernity is passé, but in 1326 it was not yet even a gleam in anyone's eye. The inhabitants of that world did not await a bright and shining tomorrow but the end of days. They did not look forward to the future or backward to the past, but upward to heaven and downward to hell. There is little doubt that they would have regarded our modern world with astonishment. We do not. Familiarity has bred contempt. We take modernity for granted, and we often are bored with it. We also think we know quite clearly what it is. But do we understand modernity? Do we even understand what it means to be modern? The premise of

this book is that we do not and that the impact of recent events is driving that fact home to us in a powerful way.

What then does it mean to be modern? As the term is used in everyday discourse, being modern means being fashionable, up to date, contemporary. This common usage actually captures a great deal of the truth of the matter, even if the deeper meaning and significance of this definition are seldom understood. In fact, it is one of the salient characteristics of modernity to focus on what is right in front of us and thus to overlook the deeper significance of our origins. What the common understanding points to, however, is the uncommon fact that, at its core, to think of oneself as modern is to define one's being in terms of time. This is remarkable. In previous ages and other places, people have defined themselves in terms of their land or place, their race or ethnic group, their traditions or their gods, but not explicitly in terms of time. Of course, any self-understanding assumes some notion of time, but in all other cases the temporal moment has remained implicit. Ancient peoples located themselves in terms of a seminal event, the creation of the world, an exodus from bondage, a memorable victory, or the first Olympiad, to take only a few examples, but locating oneself temporally in any of these ways is different than defining oneself in terms of time. To be modern means to be "new," to be an unprecedented event in the flow of time, a first beginning, something different than anything that has come before, a novel way of being in the world, ultimately not even a form of being but a form of becoming. To understand oneself as new is also to understand oneself as self-originating, as free and creative in a radical sense, not merely as determined by a tradition or governed by fate or providence. To be modern is to be self-liberating and self-making, and thus not merely to be *in* a history or tradition but to *make* history. To be modern consequently means not merely to define one's being in terms of time but also to define time in terms of one's being, to understand time as the product of human freedom in interaction with the natural world. Being modern at its core is thus something titanic, something Promethean. But what can possibly justify such an astonishing, such a hubristic claim?

This question is not easily answered, but an examination of the genealogy of the concept of modernity can help us begin to see how we came to think of ourselves in this remarkable way and in what sense it can be justified. The term 'modern' and its derivatives come from the Latin *modus* which means 'measure,' and, as a measure of time, 'just now' with the late Latin derivative *modernus*, from which all later forms derive. Cassiodorus used the term in the sixth century to distinguish his time from that of the earlier Roman and patristic authors. The term *modernitas* was used in the

twelfth century to distinguish contemporary times from those of the past.¹ Shortly thereafter, the term began to appear in the vernacular. Dante used the Italian *moderno* around 1300, and in 1361 Nicholas of Oresme used the French *moderne*. However, the term was not used to distinguish ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ until 1460 and was not used in its contemporary sense to distinguish a particular historical period until the sixteenth century. The English term ‘modern’ referring to modern times first appeared in 1585, and the term ‘modernity’ was not used until 1627. The concept of modernity as a historical epoch was originally and often since understood in opposition to antiquity. The term ‘middle ages’ does not appear in English until 1753, although the term ‘Gothic’ was used in the same sense in the sixteenth century and Latin equivalents even earlier.

While the distinction of old and new was already present in antiquity, it was never used in its modern sense, in large measure because the terms were deployed in the context of a cyclical view of time that was present in ancient mythological accounts of the nature and origin of the cosmos, which were later adopted by ancient philosophers and historians as well.² “New” in this context was almost invariably equated with degeneration and decline, as in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, where the newfangled ways of the Athenians are contrasted with the superior mores of the generation that fought at Marathon.

Medieval Christianity worked within this cyclical framework, reshaping it to fit its own theological notion of the world as the unfolding of God’s will. From this point of view, the world had a specific beginning, course of development, and end that was prefigured and revealed allegorically in Scripture. In framing this account, Christian thinkers drew heavily on the prophecy in Daniel that described the world as a series of four empires, which they identified as the Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian, and Roman Empires.³ In their eschatology, Christ appears at the moment the last empire came into being, and he will return to establish his golden age when it comes to an end. For Christianity time thus did not turn in an unending circle but began with the loss of paradise and will end with paradise regained.⁴ The medieval Christian thus imagined himself not as a competitor for power or fame in this world but as a sojourner (*viator*) whose actions on earth would determine his salvation or damnation. Piety was thus more important than courage or wisdom.

The concept of the ‘modern’ arose in the context of the twelfth-century reform of the church, although it had a different signification than it has today. In the belief that they stood at the beginning of a new age, these reformers or *moderni* saw themselves, in the words of Bernhard of Chartres

(1080–1167), as dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, lesser men than their predecessors but able to see farther. What they saw from their height, however, was not the way into a shining future of progress and increasing prosperity but the approaching end of time. This understanding was exemplified in the work of Joachim of Fiore (1130/35–1201/02) who preached the imminence of the final age in which the entire world would become a vast monastery.⁵ To be modern for them was thus to stand at the end of time, on the threshold of eternity. While this Joachimist vision of the coming spiritual age may seem to anticipate the Renaissance vision of a new golden age or modernity's idea of an age of reason, this medieval notion of the modern was still deeply embedded in the eschatological and allegorical conception of time. There was thus an enormous chasm dividing this view from later conceptions.

The idea of modernity, as we understand it, is closely tied to the idea of antiquity. The distinction of 'ancient' and 'modern' derives from the tenth-century distinction of a *via antiqua* and a *via moderna*. Originally, this was not a historical but a philosophical distinction between two different positions on universals, connected to two different ways of reading Aristotle. The *via antiqua* was the older realist path that saw universals as ultimately real, while the *via moderna* was the newer nominalist path that saw individual things as real and universals as mere names. These logical distinctions provided the schema for a new understanding of time and being.

While the concept of modernity was formulated in connection with the concept of antiquity, the two terms were initially used in a sense different than our own. Petrarch provided the foundation for the idea of a "new" time when he described a dark time that separated antiquity from his own age.⁶ However, he did not aim at something "new" or "modern," but at a restoration of the ancient golden age. This view was widely shared by the humanists. Lorenzo Valla, for example, argued in the mid-fifteenth century that his own age had turned away from the wretched modern age in which human beings had lived until recently.⁷ Modern to this way of thinking was not the world that was coming into being but the medieval world that was passing away.⁸ Valla understood his own time not as something new and unprecedented but as a recovery of what had been lost, a return to an older way of being.

The term 'modern' was actually not used in its current sense until the sixteenth century, and then only to define an artistic style.⁹ In fact, it was really only in the seventeenth century that first Georg Horn (1666) and then more importantly Christophus Cellarius (1696) described a three-

part schema of world history, with antiquity lasting until the time of Constantine, the Middle Ages until the end of Eastern Roman Empire, and *historia nova* beginning in the sixteenth century.¹⁰

The idea of a modern age or, as it was later called, modernity, was part of the self-understanding that characterized European thought from the time of Bacon and Descartes. This idea differed decisively from that used earlier because it rested on a revolutionary notion of freedom and progress.¹¹ Alluding to the discoveries of Columbus and Copernicus, Bacon, for example, argued that modernity was superior to antiquity and laid out a methodology for attaining knowledge of the world that would carry humanity to even greater heights.¹² He knew that this idea was deeply at odds with the prevailing prejudices of his age that looked to the ancients as unsurpassable models of perfection, and he confronted this problem directly, asserting that while the Greeks were “ancients,” this actually was not a reason to grant them authority. In his view they were mere boys in comparison to the men of his own time because they lacked the maturity produced by the intervening centuries of human experience.¹³ What underlay this changed evaluation of antiquity was not merely a new notion of knowledge but also a new notion of time not as circular and finite but as linear and infinite. Change was pictured as a continuous natural process that free human beings could master and control through the application of the proper scientific method. In this way they could become masters and possessors of nature and thereby produce a more hospitable world for themselves.

THE QUARREL OF THE ANCIENTS AND THE MODERNS

This concept of modernity was controversial from the very beginning. The rise of a new science and the corresponding notion of progress in the context of an intellectual milieu dominated by an unrestrained admiration for antiquity led to the famous “querelle des anciens et des modernes” that captured the attention of French thinkers at the end of the seventeenth century. The French Cartesians initiated the debate with the suggestion that the reality of scientific progress was an indication of the possibility of a modern art and literature superior to that of the ancients. In response, Nicholas Boileau and others defended the superiority of ancient art and literature. They, in turn, were attacked by Charles Perrault, Fontenelle, and other French *modernes*. However, these thinkers were not critical of the actual ancients but of those of their contemporaries who favored the Renaissance idealization of antiquity that transformed the ancients into classics.¹⁴

The quarrel was thus really a debate between the humanists and the Cartesianists, and it ended in France with the recognition that while there was progress in the natural sciences, this was not true in the arts. Each age was imagined to have its own standards of artistic perfection.

The differences that came to light in this debate, however, were not so easily resolved or set aside. In the years that followed, for example, Voltaire claimed in support of the moderns that the student leaving the lycée in his day was wiser than any of the philosophers of antiquity. Rousseau, by contrast, argued in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* that modern arts and sciences had served only to undermine human virtue and happiness, which had flowered so magnificently in Sparta and the Roman Republic.

While this quarrel began in France, it was also fought out in England and Germany. In England, where it was called the Battle of the Books, the quarrel extended into the first decades of the eighteenth century. It covered much of the same ground. Thomas Burnet and Richard Bentley among others argued for the superiority of the moderns, and Sir William Temple, Swift, and Dryden defended the ancients. William Wotton sought a middle position, arguing that it was necessary to divide the arts and sciences and judge them by different standards. The debate ended with the triumph of Pope's classicism, but this literary triumph was almost immediately called into question by Newton's remarkable discoveries that seemed to establish the preeminence of the moderns.¹⁵

In Germany, many of the same issues arose in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In this case, there was perhaps stronger initial support for the precedence of antiquity as a result of the broad influence of Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art*. In opposition to this position, Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, and Schiller argued that it was necessary to distinguish two different kinds of art and to recognize that modern art had a different ground from that of the ancients. While Hegel seemed to adopt a middle position that viewed different ages as governed by their own standards, he too finally supported the superiority of the moderns, although clearly not without a deep sympathy for the lost glories of antiquity.¹⁶

This entire debate points to the great importance modernity places upon distinguishing itself from what came before it. Robert Pippin has argued that modernity's need to demonstrate its originality is a reflection of its deep-seated belief in autonomy.¹⁷ One could go even further—modernity needs to demonstrate not merely its originality but also its superiority to its predecessors.¹⁸ The idea of progress in this sense is a corollary to or extension of the idea of autonomy at the heart of the modern project.

The importance of these two ideas is attested by the fact that they were

central to the intellectual crisis that called the modern project into question. While the earlier separation of a scientific and an aesthetic/moral realm governed by different standards and laws clearly called into question the initial global claims of modernity, it was really Kant's codification of this separation in his antinomy doctrine that cut the ground out from under the modern project as a whole. He demonstrated that nature and freedom as modernity had conceived them could not coexist, that their relationship was necessarily antinomious. The original modern vision of a unified theory that could explain the motions of God, man, and the natural world thus in his view had to be abandoned. The French Revolution, with its extravagant claims for the rule of reason and its abysmal realization of these claims in the Terror, only made these limitations of the modern project publicly apparent.

Despite the philosophic efforts of many profound thinkers to resolve this antinomy, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were characterized by an ever-widening gap between these two central components of the modern project. Many Romantics and post-Kantian Idealists, for example, emphasized the role of human freedom but rejected the notion that nature could be explained as the mechanical motion of unthinking matter or the interplay of purely natural forces. However, all of the questions that were raised about modernity were overshadowed by contemporaneous advances in the natural sciences and the rapid development of an industrial civilization that emphasized the benefits of increased human power but was more or less indifferent to the ways in which this power compromised human autonomy. As a practical matter, while the philosophical and aesthetic qualms of a few had some impact on intellectual life, little could shake the general public's growing faith in a modern scientific enterprise that seemed to promise such widespread benefits to humanity. This faith in progress reached its apogee in the latter half of the nineteenth century and found its most lasting expression in futurist art and literature and in great public monuments to technology such as the Eiffel Tower. Even vehement critics of nineteenth-century industrial society such as Marx remained wedded to the underlying aspirations of modernity, arguing only that further steps were necessary to guarantee that the fruits of progress were shared by all.¹⁹

THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY

Faith in the modern project and the idea of progress was shattered by the events of the first half of the twentieth century. The First World War in

particular revealed that the progressive development of human power was not simply constructive but could also be hideously destructive, and that technical progress was not identical with moral progress or with increasing human well-being. The interwar period saw the growth of this pessimism about modernity in philosophical works such as Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences*, and Heidegger's *Being and Time*, as well as in the literary works of those who came to be called "the lost generation."²⁰ However, in light of what at the time was seen as the remarkable social and economic development of the USSR, and the recovery of the world economy in the 1920s, the horrible events of the Great War seemed to be merely a momentary aberration in the progressive development of human power and well-being. However, with the onset of the Great Depression, the rise of National Socialism, and the outbreak of World War II, new and more profound doubts arose about progress and the modern project. These doubts seemed to be all too fully borne out by the Holocaust, after which it appeared to be impossible for even the most ardent modernists ever again to speak of progress. The advent of the Cold War with the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe in 1948 and the emergence of the threat of nuclear annihilation seemed to put the final nail into the coffin of modernity. The modern project, first conceived in the seventeenth century, had in fact enormously increased human power in precisely the ways Bacon, Descartes, and Hobbes had imagined, but it had not produced the peace, freedom, and prosperity they had predicted. In fact, it seemed to a number of postwar thinkers to have brought out the worst in humanity and in surprising fashion to have demonstrated the truth of Rousseau's claim that progress in the arts and sciences was increasing human power but also and simultaneously undermining virtue and morality.

The critique of the modern project in the aftermath of the Second World War took a variety of forms, building in many ways on the earlier critiques of Spengler, Husserl, and Heidegger. Some, following Husserl, saw the disasters of the twentieth century as the consequence of a defective notion of rationality that had been introduced by Galileo and Descartes. In this vein, Leo Strauss argued that the current crisis was only the final consequence of three successive waves of modern thought that had overwhelmed ancient rationalism and natural law, replacing them with a new technology of power and a doctrine of natural rights. The solution to the crisis of modernity in his view thus lay not in an intensification of modernity but in a recovery of ancient rationalism. In a similar vein, Hannah Arendt also saw hope for renewal in a return to the ancient world, although she drew more on the aesthetic politics and public life of Athenian democracy than

on ancient philosophy. Equally critical of modernity, Eric Voegelin saw a revival of Platonic Christianity as the best hope for renewal.

Another strand of critique saw the crisis of modernity not as the result of the defects of modern rationality but as a consequence of the failure of the Western tradition itself that began with Plato and that found its culmination in the thought of Hegel and his progeny. These thinkers did not believe that the solution to the crisis of modernity was a return to an earlier form of reason. Following Heidegger rather than Husserl, they argued that an ontological deconstruction of Western rationalism as a whole was the prerequisite for a new beginning. They thus saw the solution to the crisis of modernity not in a return to a premodern world but in the exploration of postmodern seas. For thinkers such as Adorno, Derrida, and Deleuze it was not a Platonist philosophy of identity but a post-structuralist philosophy of difference that was necessary to free us from the ills of modernity.

In contrast to both the premodernists and the postmodernists, supporters of the modern project have tried to show that the so-called crisis of modernity is not in itself something modern. Rather, in their view it is due to something atavistic that had been reborn within but in opposition to modernity. National Socialism, from this point of view, was not something modern but a remnant of a Teutonic past, or the product of a romantic reaction against modernity, or the consequence of a Lutheran fanaticism that was fundamentally antimodern. Similarly, the totalitarian character of socialism in Russia was not the result of the impossible modern hope of making man the master and possessor on nature but the product of the long spiritual authoritarianism of Russian Orthodoxy that was antimodern through and through. The solution to the crisis of modernity, as these supporters of modernity see it, thus does not require a turn away from modernity and a subsequent revival of previous forms of life or a turn to postmodern alternatives, but a purification of modernity itself and a purgation of these atavistic or alien (and predominantly religious) elements within it. They thus see the triumph over fascism, the growth of secularism, the economic development of Asia and Latin America, and above all the collapse of the Soviet Union as evidence of the continuing vitality and power of the modern project.

The fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of the era characterized by the confrontation of an individualistic liberalism and collectivist totalitarianism. This confrontation not only dominated the politics of the latter half of the twentieth century, it also dominated intellectual life. The fall of the Wall thus seemed to modernity's supporters to be an indication of the innate and irresistible power of the modern project. All that remained for

the future was the transformation of the formerly socialist countries into liberal capitalist societies, and the continued modernization of the developing world. Some commentators, perhaps carried away by the excitement of the time, saw this moment as unique and decisive, proclaiming it the end of history and the realization of humanity's ultimate destiny.²¹ In this same vein but in a more modest manner, others recognized that a great deal remained to be done to establish universal prosperity and perpetual peace, but they believed that this could be achieved by a gradual process of globalization and liberalization that relied on incentives rather than force. Others, and particularly those who were wedded to a postmodern future, saw the end of the Cold War as the triumph of an imperialistic liberalism but believed that this could be overcome by an aesthetic politics that sought to establish a multicultural society that was not hegemonic but agonistic and that moved forward by mutual learning and accommodation rather than war or conquest. Differences would thus not disappear and struggle would continue, but the future would be one of productive encounter.

The attack on the World Trade Center called all such optimism into question. In the aftermath of 9/11, the idea of a fruitfully agonistic multicultural world has receded and been replaced by the fear of an impending clash of civilizations. Insofar as this clash at its core is a confrontation between reason and revelation, it calls into question our easy Enlightenment conviction that reason is clearly and unarguably superior to revelation, and that while religion may have a place in modern life, it is clearly an inferior one. It is thus countenanced as a private good and is not seen as a force that ought to shape our public life.

What the events of 9/11 most powerfully call into question is the widespread Western assumption that civilization is grounded in rational self-interest and not in religious faith. While there is a general consensus that this is true, it is not clear in what sense it is true. The fact that others believe so vehemently that it is not has given us little choice in the short run but to defend our modern world and way of life, but at the same time we are impelled by this very challenge to reconsider the origins of modernity itself, and the decisions, now in many cases forgotten, that shaped and continue to shape our way of life.

THE ORIGIN OF MODERNITY

The conventional story that stretches back at least to Hegel sees the modern age as the product of exceptional human beings, of brilliant scientists, philosophers, writers, and explorers who overcame the religious supersti-

tions of their time and established a new world based on reason. Modernity in this way is portrayed as a radical break with the past. This vision of the origin of modernity was already called into question in the early twentieth century by scholars such as Etienne Gilson, who demonstrated that these supposed founders of the new age had in fact borrowed many of their essential ideas from their medieval predecessors.²² Neither they nor the age they founded was thus as original as they maintained. Building on this beginning, succeeding historians, often focusing on social history and the history of science, have tried to show that the transition from the medieval to the modern world was much more gradual than was hitherto believed. In fact, when examined closely, these historians argue, we see that there were many more similarities and continuities between the two epochs than the traditional view suggests.²³

Reflecting on these similarities and differences, Karl Löwith argued in *Meaning in History* (1949) that modernity was the result of the secularization of Christian ideals and that it was thus not ultimately distinct from the Middle Ages.²⁴ For example, from this perspective the notion of progress, which is so essential to the modern self-understanding, appears to have been the secularization of Christian millennialism. Seen in this way, the traditional account of the emergence of modernity as the triumph of reason over superstition seems to be seriously flawed.

This secularization thesis, which gained many adherents during the 1950s and 1960s, was challenged by Hans Blumenberg, who argued that the modern age is not a secularized medieval world but something new and unique.²⁵ On the surface, Blumenberg's position seems to be a revival of the conventional view that equates modernity with the triumph of reason, but in fact he adopts a more Nietzschean view that identifies modernity not with reason but with self-assertion. The self-assertion that characterizes the modern world in his view, however, is not merely a random will to power. Rather, it is directed at solving the problem or question left by the collapse of the medieval world. Blumenberg thus sees modernity as the second overcoming of the problem that gave birth to Christianity as we know it, the problem of Gnosticism. Such a second overcoming was necessary, Blumenberg argues, because the Christian attempt to overcome it was defective from the very beginning. Gnosticism in his view reappeared at the end of the Middle Ages in the form of nominalism, which destroyed scholasticism and gave birth to the view of a voluntaristic as opposed to a rational God. In opposition to this new Gnosticism, modernity attempted to establish a ground for human well-being in the notion of human self-assertion. Modernity in this way was not merely the secularization of

Christianity but something new and legitimate in its own right. Phenomena that look like secularized elements of the Christian view of the world are thus in fact only “reoccupations” of now empty Christian positions, that is, attempts to answer outmoded Christian questions in modern ways. The idea of progress, from this point of view, is not a secularized form of Christian millennialism but rather the “reoccupation” of the medieval need to show God’s hidden hand in all events. According to Blumenberg, the misperceived need to answer such now meaningless questions has blurred our understanding of modernity and led us incorrectly to question the legitimacy of the modern enterprise.

Blumenberg’s account points us in the right direction, but he does not understand the metaphysical significance of his own argument and thus does not appreciate the way in which modernity takes form within the metaphysical and theological structures of the tradition. Modernity, as he correctly points out, arose not in opposition to or as a continuation of the medieval world but out of its rubble. Superior or more powerful modern ideas did not drive out or overcome medieval ideas; rather, they pushed over the remnants of a medieval world after the internecine struggle between scholasticism and nominalism had reduced it to rubble. Modern “reason” was able to overcome medieval “superstition” or “dogma” only because that “dogma” was fatally weakened by the great metaphysical/theological crisis that brought the world in which it made sense to an end. Blumenberg is also correct in his assertion that the destruction of the medieval world did not merely open up space for new ideas and new ways of life but presented humanity with a new “epochal” question that has guided human thought in important ways ever since. What is missing in his account is the recognition that the shapes that modern thought subsequently assumed were not arbitrary reoccupations of medieval positions but a realization of the metaphysical and theological possibilities left by the antecedent tradition. To understand the shape of modernity as it has come down to us, we thus need to examine carefully the origins of modernity, to look behind the veil that modernity itself has drawn to conceal its origins. The origins of modernity therefore lie not in human self-assertion or in reason but in the great metaphysical and theological struggle that marked the end of the medieval world and that transformed Europe in the three hundred years that separate the medieval and the modern worlds. This book is the account of the hidden origins of modernity in those forgotten centuries.

In his inaugural lecture at the University of Freiburg in 1929, Martin Heidegger argued that human thought and action are propelled and guided by

the experience of fundamental questions, that is, by the experience of profound aporia that call into question the meaning and nature of everything including the being of the questioner himself. These questions arise in moments in which the meaningfulness and legitimacy of all existing ways of thinking and being dissolve and the world seems to be transformed into chaos or nothingness. The experience of this abyss generates a profound anxiety that impels human beings to search for answers, to formulate new ways of thinking and being, and thus to radically reshape the world in which they live. Real historical change in Heidegger's view occurs in these moments as the result of a confrontation with such epochal questions. Everything else follows from them. These questions do not merely liberate us from the past but direct us toward a new future. Heidegger believed that the pre-Socratic Greeks had faced such a fundamental question and that the history of the West since that time had been nothing other than a series of attempts to answer it. Nihilism, in his view, was the recognition that all of the answers to this question were inadequate. It was simultaneously the experience of the question itself. Humanity in his opinion once again had come face to face with such a question that shattered existing ontology and consequently opened up the possibility of a new beginning, a new world order, and a new history.

In developing this argument, Heidegger drew heavily on Nietzsche, who also saw the advent of nihilism as a moment of epochal openness. Nietzsche believed that while the death of God and the consequent collapse of European values would throw humanity into an abyss of war and destruction, this event would also open up the world in a way unknown since the tragic age of the Greeks. While he recognized that God's death would produce "a monstrous logic of terror," he also believed that "at long last, the horizon appears free to us again."²⁶ If God is dead and nothing is true, then, he concluded "everything is permitted."²⁷ The abyss of nihilism is thus intimately connected with a radical, epochal openness. While Nietzsche and Heidegger were correct in seeing the decisive nature of such questions, they exaggerated the openness that they produced. In fact, the experience of these questions may propel humanity in new directions and toward new answers, but human beings always formulate these answers within prevailing conceptual structures that thus continue in many ways to shape our ways of thinking about things. We see this clearly in the development of modern thought.

Modernity comes into being as the result of the confrontation with an epochal question. The real "world-midnight" that has shaped our thinking, however, lies not at the end of modernity but at its beginning. In fact,

the “nihilistic” end of modernity is only the pale image of this beginning, and if we want to understand ourselves, where we have come from, what has impelled us, and what continues to impel us we need to come to terms with this beginning. This is a book about that beginning, about the “nihilistic” crisis in late medieval thought that gave birth to the epochal question that stands behind and guides modernity. I will argue in what follows that modernity, as we understand it, came into being through a series of answers to this question that constructed new ways of thinking, being, and acting for a world that seemed to be slipping into an abyss. I will also try to show that while these “answers” all share certain ontological assumptions, they lay out radically different and at times mutually antagonistic visions of the nature and relationship of man, God, nature, and reason. An understanding of the *question* of modernity in this sense opens up a view into the conflictual essence of modernity.

The epochal question that gave birth to the modern age arose out of a metaphysical/theological crisis within Christianity about the nature of God and thus the nature of being. This crisis was most evident as the nominalist revolution against scholasticism. This revolution in thought, however, was itself a reflection of a deeper transformation in the experience of existence as such. Scholastics in the High Middle Ages were ontologically realist, that is to say, they believed in the real existence of universals, or to put the matter another way, they experienced the world as the instantiation of the categories of divine reason. They experienced, believed in, and asserted the ultimate reality not of particular things but of universals, and they articulated this experience in a syllogistic logic that was perceived to correspond to or reflect divine reason. Creation itself was the embodiment of this reason, and man, as the rational animal and *imago dei*, stood at the pinnacle of this creation, guided by a natural *telos* and a divinely revealed supernatural goal.

Nominalism turned this world on its head. For the nominalists, all real being was individual or particular and universals were thus mere fictions. Words did not point to real universal entities but were merely signs useful for human understanding. Creation was radically particular and thus not teleological. As a result, God could not be understood by human reason but only by biblical revelation or mystical experience. Human beings thus had no natural or supernatural end or *telos*. In this way the nominalist revolution against scholasticism shattered every aspect of the medieval world. It brought to an end the great effort that had begun with the church fathers to combine reason and revelation by uniting the natural and ethical teachings of the Greeks with the Christian notion of an omnipotent creator.²⁸

Until recently, the importance of this debate and the nominalist revolution that it engendered were not recognized. This was certainly due in part to the decision of the Catholic Church in the late nineteenth century to unify church doctrine around Thomism, which led to the neglect and belittlement of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century critics of Aquinas. This emphasis on Aquinas was motivated by a reasonable desire to clarify Catholic doctrine, but it also rested on the recognition that these nominalist critics had played an important role in laying the intellectual groundwork for the Reformation. A second and perhaps more important reason for the failure to recognize the importance of this epochal revolution is the fact that the God of nominalism was so unsettling. The God that Aquinas and Dante described was infinite, but the glory of his works and the certainty of his goodness were manifest everywhere. The nominalist God, by contrast, was frighteningly omnipotent, utterly beyond human ken, and a continual threat to human well-being. Moreover, this God could never be captured in words and consequently could be experienced only as a titanic question that evoked awe and dread. It was this question, I want to suggest, that stands at the beginning of modernity.

The new vision of God that rose to prominence in the fourteenth century emphasized divine power and unpredictability rather than divine love and reason, but this new God only made sense because of the tremendous changes in the world itself. The Great Schism, the Hundred Years War, the Black Death, the development of gunpowder, the dire economic circumstances brought on throughout Europe by the advent of the Little Ice Age, and the dislocations wrought by urban development, social mobility, and the Crusades, were all of crucial importance to the formation of the anxiety and insecurity that made the nominalist vision of the world believable.

THE METAPHYSICAL PATH TO MODERNITY

Modernity came into being as the result of a series of attempts to find a way out of the crisis engendered by the nominalist revolution. These attempts were neither arbitrary nor accidental but reflected the philosophical choices from among the available metaphysical possibilities. As we will see in what follows, each effort to find a way out of the abyss that nominalism seemed to open up was an attempt to construct the world on a specific metaphysical foundation. To understand what this means, however, we must briefly discuss the nature of metaphysics.

We understand metaphysics today as a specific branch of philosophy, a branch that in our secular and generally positivistic age is often denigrated

for its concern with those things that transcend the senses and for its connection with religion. Metaphysics in the period we are investigating, however, had a broader meaning. It was divided into *metaphysica generalis*, which included ontology and logic, and *metaphysica specialis*, which included rational theology, rational cosmology, and rational anthropology. Metaphysics was thus not a part of philosophy but the broadest kind of knowing, including the study of being, reason, God, man, and the natural world. To put this in more contemporary terms, general metaphysics involved the investigation of the nature of being and the nature of reason, while special metaphysics involved the investigation of three specific realms of being: the human, the natural, and the divine. To use the language that Heidegger later made famous, general metaphysics was concerned with ontological questions, while special metaphysics was concerned with ontic questions.

The nominalist revolution was an ontological revolution that called being itself into question. As we saw above, it thus gave rise to a new ontology, a new logic, and a new conception of man, God, and nature. All succeeding European thought has been shaped by this transformation. While nominalism undermined scholasticism, it was unable to provide a broadly acceptable alternative to the comprehensive view of the world it had destroyed. Some retreat from radical nominalism was thus probably inevitable. On the basic ontological point, however, there was no turning back—all or almost all succeeding forms of thought accepted the ontological individualism that nominalism had so forcefully asserted. With respect to the other elements of metaphysics, however, there was considerable variation, although these variations themselves were constrained by the structure of metaphysics itself. In fact, as we will see, succeeding thinkers focused not on the fundamental ontological question but on the ontic question of the priority or primacy of particular realms of being within *metaphysica specialis*. The deepest disagreements in the period between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries were thus not ontological but ontic, disagreements not about the nature of being but about which of the three realms of being—the human, the divine, or the natural—had priority. To put it simply, post-scholastic thinkers disagreed not about being itself but about the hierarchy among the realms of being.

This is immediately apparent from even a superficial examination of humanism and the Reformation, the two great movements of thought that stand between nominalism and the modern world. Both accepted the ontological individualism that nominalism proclaimed, but they differed fundamentally about whether man or God was ontically primary. Humanism,

for example, put man first and interpreted both God and nature on this basis. The Reformation, by contrast, began with God and viewed man and nature only from this perspective. Despite their agreement on ontological matters, the differences that resulted from their ontic disagreements were irremediable, and they played an important role in the cataclysmic wars of religion that shattered European life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Modernity, as we more narrowly understand it, was the consequence of the attempt to resolve this conflict by asserting the ontic priority not of man or God but of nature. As we will see, while this new naturalistic beginning helped to ameliorate the conflict, it could not eliminate the antagonism at its heart without eliminating either God or man. However, one cannot abandon God without turning man into a beast, and one cannot abandon man without falling into theological fanaticism.

The two great strains of modern thought that begin respectively with Descartes and Hobbes seek to reconstruct the world not as a human artifact or a divine miracle but as a natural object. They disagree, however, about the nature and place of God and man in the world as they open it up. For Descartes, man is in part a natural being, but he is also in part divine and is thus distinguished from nature and free from its laws. For Hobbes, man is thoroughly natural and thus free only in a sense compatible with universal natural causality. These two poles of modern thought are thus rent by the same contradiction that set humanism and the Reformation at odds with one another.

This contradiction posed a profound problem for modern thought, and successive modern thinkers dedicated to the process of enlightenment sought to resolve it, but in the end these efforts were to no avail, for this contradiction could not be resolved on modern metaphysical grounds. The recognition of this fact, which found its first and foremost expression in Kant's antinomy doctrine, brought about the crisis of modernity, in whose shadow we still live. To speak of the crisis of modernity is not to assert that modern thinkers gave up on the modern project. German idealism in particular was at its core nothing other than the attempt to find a solution to this problem. With the failure of this idealist project to reconcile modern reason, modernity has been increasingly characterized by a deep cleft between a radical voluntarism and a radical determinism. The persistence of this division and the seeming incapacity of modern thinkers to find a way to heal this wound has led many to abandon modernity in favor of either premodern or postmodern alternatives.

Whether and to what extent we can find an answer to this contradiction depends upon our coming to terms with the question that gave birth to

modernity. Confronting this question, however, means considering again the question of the relation of reason and revelation. If modernity is the age in which we define our own being in terms of time, and time in terms of our own being as historicity, we can only come to terms with ourselves by coming to terms with our temporality. Temporality, however, becomes meaningful for us against the background of eternity. To understand the question that modernity thus poses for us, we must consequently consider the question of the theological origins of modernity. This book is an attempt to raise that question.