

J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh,
Truth is Stranger Than It Used To Be
Chapter One: "The Crisis of our Times"

1. What is the significance of the Columbus debate?

It illustrates the shift in worldview and cultural sensibilities from the modern to the postmodern.

2. Exactly how does the Columbus debate signal the end of modernity?

1. The classical, modern form of the Columbus story reflects the worldview that was once central and unproblematic in the West, but is now losing its hold on our culture.

Where are we? New world of promise ripe for the taking and offers riches (EDEN) to those who know how to take it.

Who are we? Conquistadors, exploiters, tamers.

What's wrong? Progress held in check by hierarchical European society and its threatened by pagan Indian savages.

What's the remedy? Release from European bondage and conquer native Americans for the sake of progress.

2. An alternative vision of the Columbus story is being told by the aboriginal peoples of N. America. From their perspective the story is now told which indicates a centering of the decentered, a repositioning of the previously marginalized minority.

Specifically, it is no longer White European Males who dominate the cultural landscape, but other voices and their stories must be told and heard. There is a new hearing of alternative voices. This impacts canon of literature and school curriculums and exhibition practices in museums, and the status of law. Its a challenge to the center of society from the margins.

3. What is the date of modernity?

Between 1470 (Italian Renaissance) and 1700 (Enlightenment), perhaps 1492, and therefore 500 or so years old.

4. What is the essence or the spirit of modernity?

According to John Dewey in his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*:

1. No longer preoccupied with the supernatural, but with the natural, this worldly, and secular.
2. Instead of submission to ecclesiastical authority, there is growing belief in the power of individual minds guided by observation, experience, and reflection to attain truth for life.
3. Belief in progress.
4. Science and technology to control nature and subdue her forces for social use, which is the method of progress.

But the primary spirit of modernity is PROGRESS—the dominant motif in Western society, the working faith of our civilization.

5. What is the nature of the connection between the story of modernity and the story of the tower of Babel?

Both are stories about independent, autonomous man seeking progress and the fulfillment of his aspirations, exemplified especially in a tower or in buildings. Both are motivated by pride, desired social and cultural cohesion, and in short, utopia.

6. How has the building of modernity been constructed?

Three phases:

1. Science under the architect of Francis Bacon.
2. Technology (scientific revolution led to the industrial revolution) and mass production.
3. Economic growth and the market economy as the reason to be of the scientific and technological revolutions.

7. How did the opening of the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London, in 1851 symbolize modern aspirations?

Quotes from Queen Victoria: filled with awe and devotion.

Quotes from Prince Albert: “We are living in a period of most wonderful transition which tends to accomplish that great end to which indeed all history points--the realization of the unity of mankind.”

Hence, it symbolizes a “veritable utopia of prosperity and progress in which the whole human race would be united.” THE MYTH OF PROGRESS DESCRIBES THE ESSENTIAL CONTOURS OF THE CULTURAL IMAGINATION AND SPIRITUAL DRIVING FORCE OF THE WEST. 19 Through science, technology and economics, we will bring about increased economic consumption and affluence, with resulting peace, fulfillment, and security!!!

On the meaning of progress, Langdon Gilkey writes: “Above all, progress tells us who we are and why we are here.” 19.

8. What, then, are the answers to the four-worldview questions according to modernity?

Where are we? In a world of natural resources that can be known scientifically, controlled technologically, exploited economically.

Who are we? Homo autonomous, self secure, self-formed, self-conscious, self-normed subjects.

What’s wrong? Anything that impedes our progress and our freedom and our sense or task of world mastery.

What’s the remedy? We are our own saviors. We do mighty deeds in this secular version of the history of salvation.

9. What’s the matter with modernity?

The myth of progress was a pipe dream and thus it is losing its compelling power, and sounds timeworn and outdated. Why? Two reasons.

1. The 20th century and its events, which is the fourth floor of this building.
2. The foundation on which it was built was inadequate, namely, human beings, faith in human beings, but faith that is false and idolatrous and unable to sustain the project.

10. What are the gods of this idolatrous structure?

Scientism: serving as omniscient source of revelation.

Technicism: power over and control of the world, omnipotentially.

Economism: rising standard of living as the goal of modern life and the route to personal peace, happiness and security.

Plus HUMANISM: man is the measure of all things.

These idols are ripe for judgment and destruction.

11. What is the trouble with idols and false gods?

Cannot save us; result in death, impotent, unstable.

So Psalm 115, Isa. 46: 1-7; Jer. 10: 3-5

12. What 20th century movements and events have signaled the demise of modernity?

- WWI (1914-1918)
- Great Depression
- WWII (1939-1945)--Holocaust; Hiroshima, Nagasaki
- Postwar existential movement (Sartre, Camus, Jaspers)
- Vietnam and student counterculture movement
- Pollution and rape of the environment
- Child labor and English factory system
- African slavery (upon whom western progress was built)
- Indian slavery (Columbus)
- Dissolution of Soviet Union—HERE SEE FOOTNOTE 39
- Rise of neo-nazism
- Ethnic cleansing of the Balkans
- Saddam Hussein
- Fragmentation and tribalization of the globe
- End of colonialism
- Uprising of women
- Shifts in balance of economic power and political power in world economy
- Recognition of the costs as well as the benefits of technology.

13. How did the viewing of the film Catch-22 on the campus of Cornell University reflect the shift of feeling about the confidence of America and its future?

Despite America's recent show of force in bombing Lybia and Qaddafi, when the old man said that America would be destroyed just like Rome, Greece, Persia, Spain and why not yours, it seemed inevitable that American progress would one day come to a halt.

14. Is America and the West as a whole experiencing an "autumnal chill" or even a "cultural winter" as Langdon Gilkey and Friedrich Nietzsche

have respectively suggested? What is the “naked public square” (Richard John Neuhaus) and are we truly undergoing “the gravest sort of anxiety” (Clifford Geertz)? Is there an emerging “new world order” (George Bush)? Is there a growing cynicism in relation to the political process?

15. Is the “candy man gone,” as Bruce Cockburn sings? What should be the response of Christians to the present “crisis of our times?”