CHAPTER 2

The Project of Modernity: Pro et Contra

Defining Modern Times

In order to begin a discussion of modernity in the context of my theory of religious cycles, we should first clarify the meaning of the term “modern” and define the limits of modernity as a historical and cultural epoch. As the contemporary German philosopher Jürgen Habermas wrote, the word “modern” initially referred to the distinction between the fading ancient culture and the rising Christian civilization, while, “in its Latin form, ‘modernus’ was used for the first time in the late fifth century in order to distinguish the present, which had become officially Christian, from the Roman and pagan past” (3). Since then, the term “modern” has reappeared every time “the consciousness of a new epoch formed itself through a renewed relationship to the ancients—whenever, moreover, antiquity was considered a model to be recovered through some kind of imitation” (4).

The European Renaissance was the first such historical epoch—the age of the rediscovery and rebirth of the ancient Greek and Roman culture that started in mid-fourteenth-century Italy and then, extending to other parts of Europe, flourished until the middle of the seventeenth century. The newfound interest in classical art and education was paralleled by progressive developments in all spheres of life, including politics, economics, science and technology. The formation of national states, the rise of urban culture and capitalist economy, the discovery of America, and the invention of the printing press—those and many other characteristic features of the new era gave the reason for future European historians to describe the Renaissance as a distinct historical age with its own power and mystique, the dawning place of modern Europe.

The French historian, Jules Michelet, in his book Histoire de France (History of France), published in 1855, for the first time “use[d] and define[d] the word Renaissance (“Re-birth” in French), as a period in Europe’s cultural history that represented a break from the Middle Ages, creating a modern understanding of humanity and its place in the world” (“Jules Michelet”). The Swiss historian of art and culture, Jakob Burckhardt, in his book The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, published twelve years later in 1867, “first showed how a period should be treated in its entirety, with regard not only for its painting, sculpture and architecture, but for the social institutions of its daily life as well” (Giedion 3). As one contemporary historian of the Renaissance, Richard
Hooker, notes, according to Burckhardt, two factors were important in this transition to the new epoch, namely, “the revival of classical learning, character and life...and the beginning of the modern age. For in reviving classical learning, the Italians of the Renaissance created the prototype of modern culture” (Hooker “The Idea of the Renaissance”).

Despite many criticisms by Medievalist historians who stressed the continuity between the Middle Ages and the following Renaissance, and pointed out the difficulty, if not impossibility, of separating the two periods in real history, the Burckhardt concept of the Renaissance has survived, with slight modifications. In the last several decades of the twentieth century, the New Historicist School of cultural history revitalized the Burckhardt position with the substitution of the term “Renaissance” by “Early Modern” in order to describe “a historical period that encompasses all of European history from the Italian Renaissance to the Enlightenment.” Following Burckhardt, the New Historicists argue that at the heart of this period lies the creation of a unique European cultural identity or the invention of Europe per se. Since, as they believe, “the unique configuration of power, gender, race and subjectivity in the modern world owes its origins to new practices, rather than reborn practices, in the Early Modern period” (Hooker “The Idea of the Renaissance”).

Given the complexity of the Renaissance period in modern European cultural history, I would like to discuss in more detail two issues: namely, power and spirituality, since the domains of politics and religion, in my view, are the key to any cultural formations and, more importantly, they are directly linked to the narrative of my book. In the sphere of politics, the clear demarcation between antiquity and modernity lies in the limitation of power of the ruler. Ancient political theory stands unquestionably on the side of absolute monarchy as the most practical—if not simply the best—way to preserve order and authority in society. Rare exceptions from this general rule are the experiments of Athens and Rome. Athens was the first known successful example of direct democracy on the city level. Rome established the republican government on the level of the nation, with its complex system of checks and balances.

Neither Athenian democracy nor the Roman republic was able to survive for a long period of time. In the third century BCE, Alexander of Macedonia founded the Hellenistic empire, which swallowed the Athenian city-state. Rome, in its turn, became an empire right around the beginning of the Christian era. When Christianity was legalized and later proclaimed the state religion by the end of the fourth century CE, Rome already represented a deteriorating bureaucratic political machine that would soon be overwhelmed by barbarian invaders. And so it happened that in the collective mind of Western Christians, the triumph of their faith was linked to the fall of the empire that made it victorious.