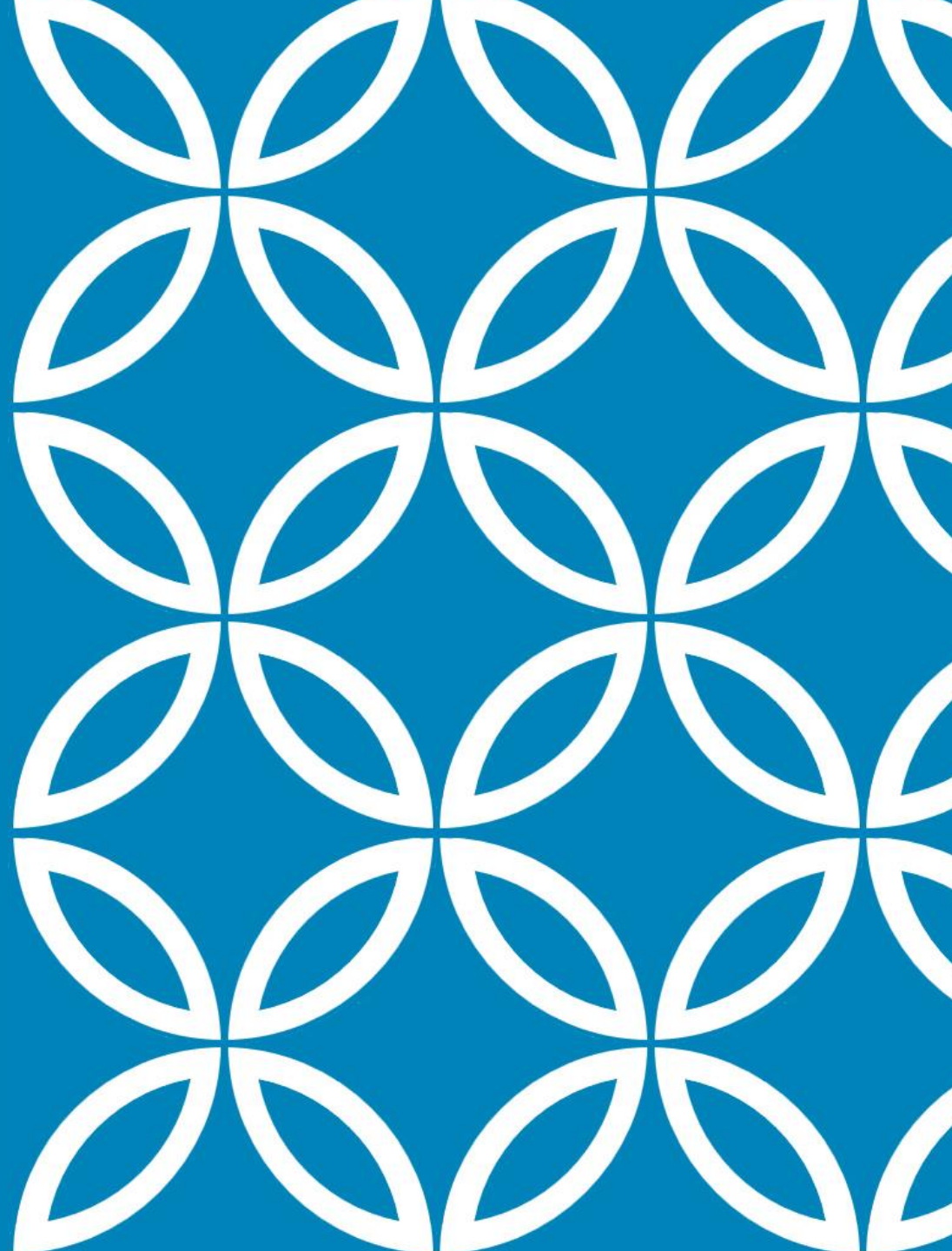
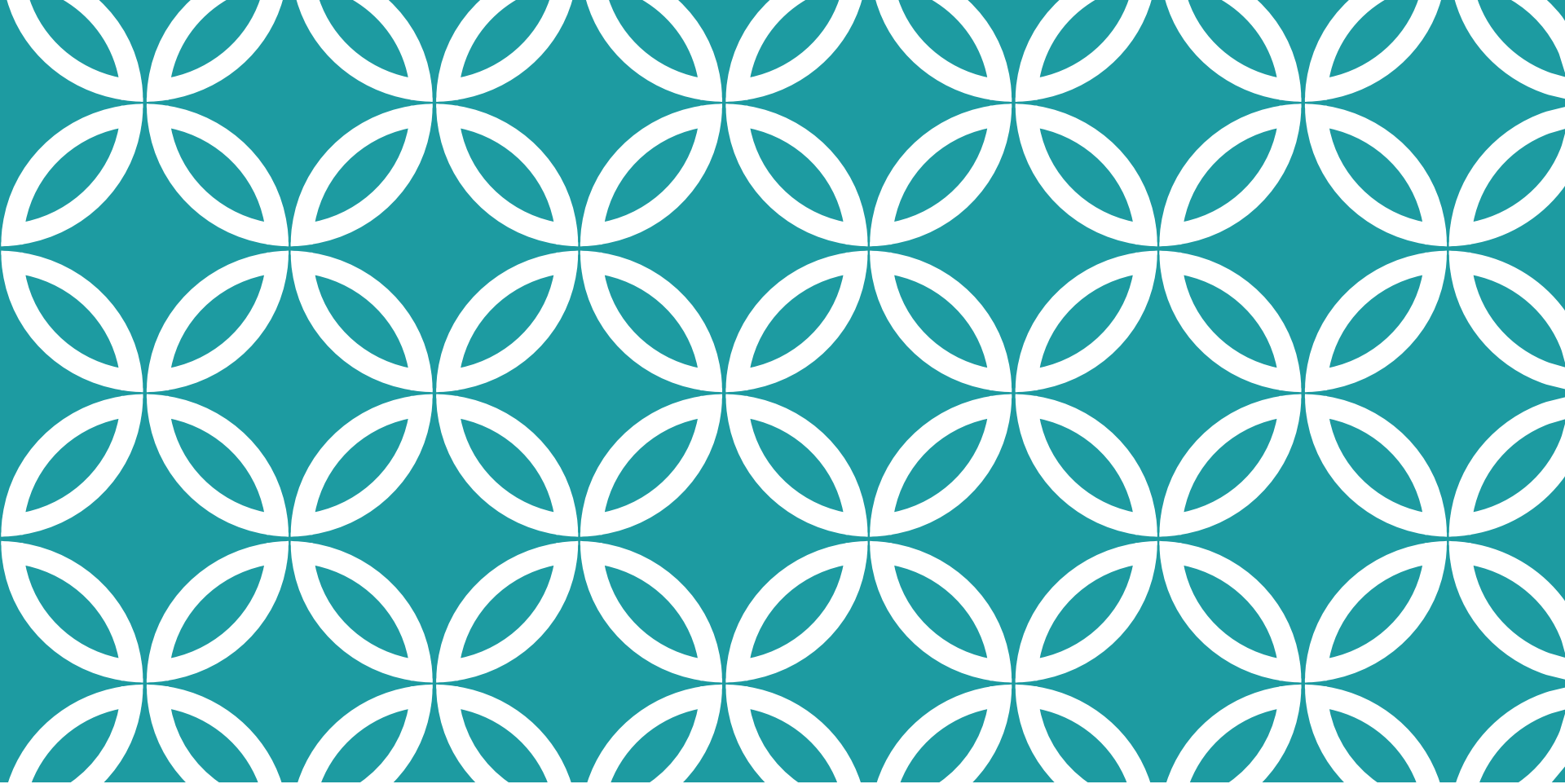


METHODS AND APPROACHES IN INTERFAITH STUDIES

Dr Angus M Slater





CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY AND INTERFAITH STUDY: MODERNITY

**1: Methods and
Approaches in Interfaith
Studies**

CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Before we begin by looking at the various way in which we approach interfaith studies, it is important we have a clear understanding of the broader social structure within which our studies takes places.

It is for this reason, that this initial lecture begins by asking questions of you about the nature of our current society – the assumptions that underpin it, the structures which shape it, and the broader trends and themes seen within it.



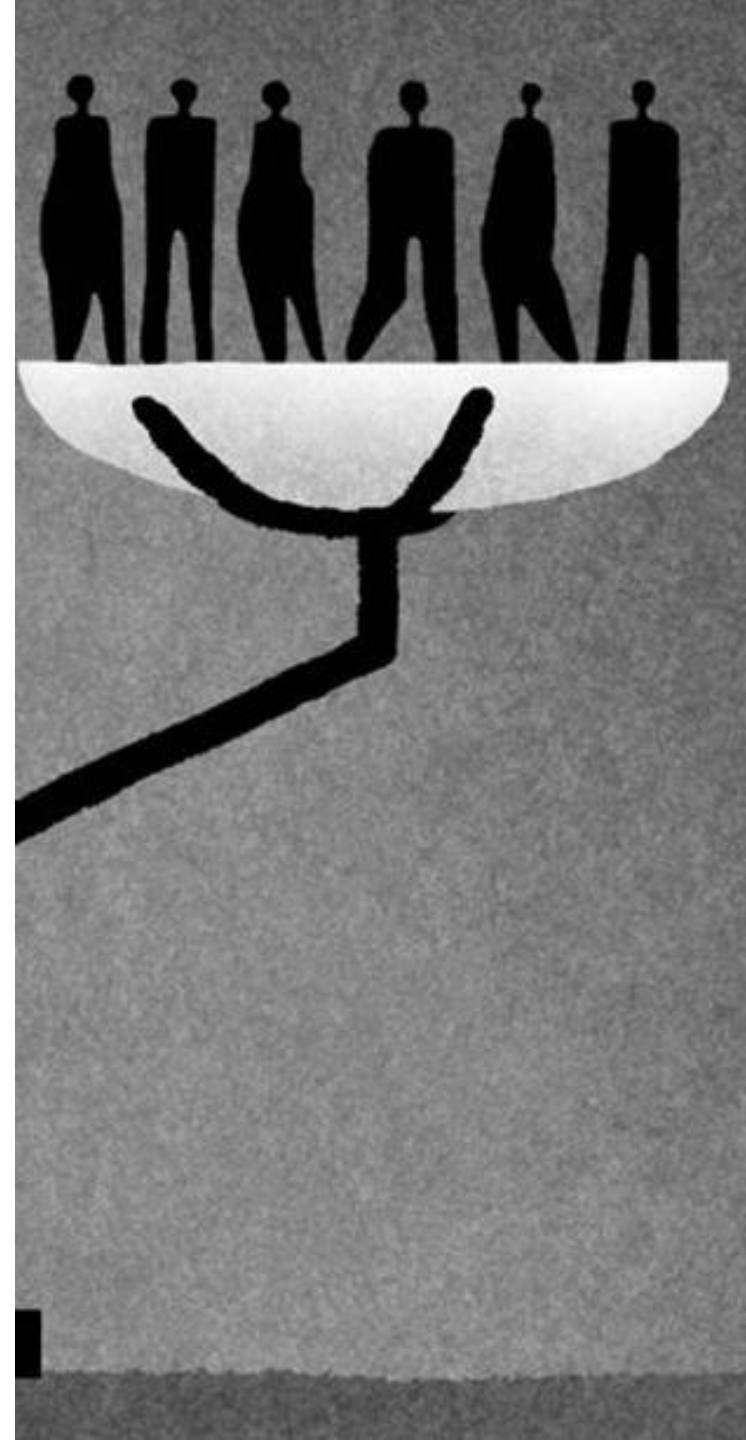
CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

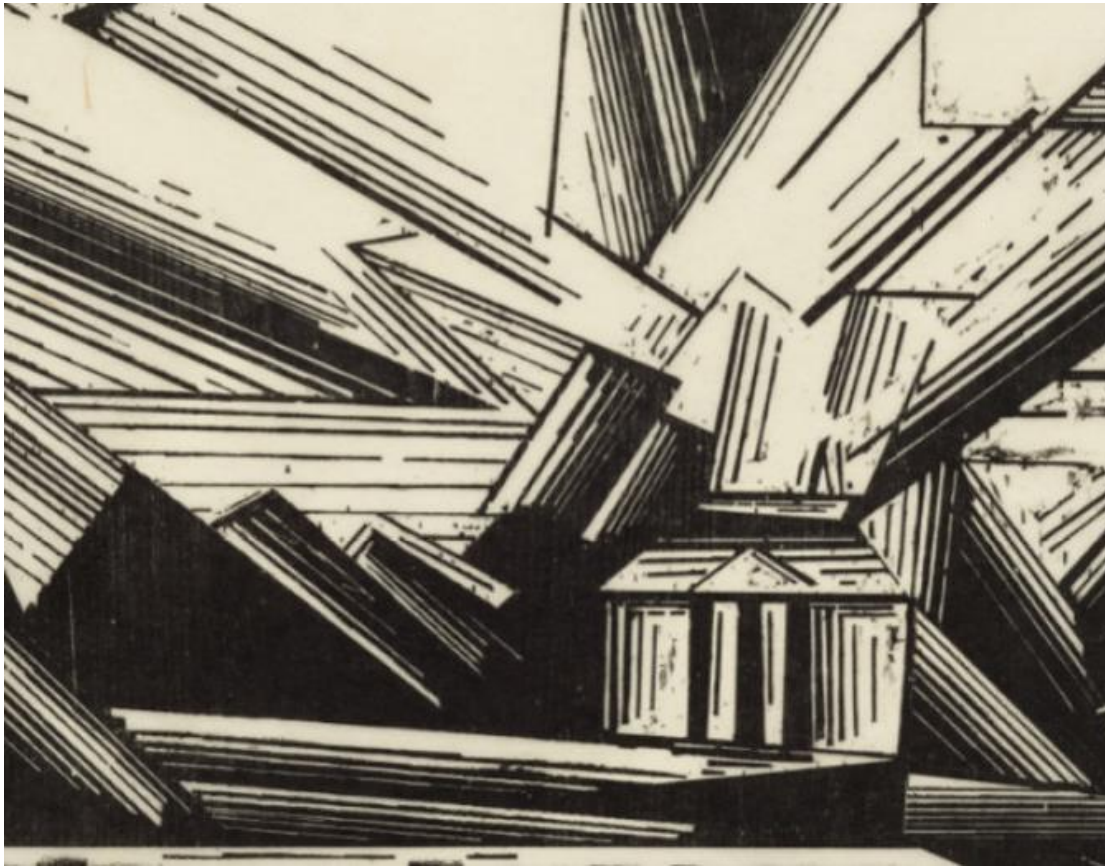
What are the defining characteristics of our contemporary society?

What makes our world different to previous historical eras?

How do we distinguish these differing historical time periods?

How might our current social characteristics explain the way we approach issues and questions?





CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

We often chose to distinguish our contemporary society from those that have gone before on the basis of being “modern” – often without thinking through exactly what we mean by this term, or how our division of history assumes things about our own, and other, historical and geographical contexts.

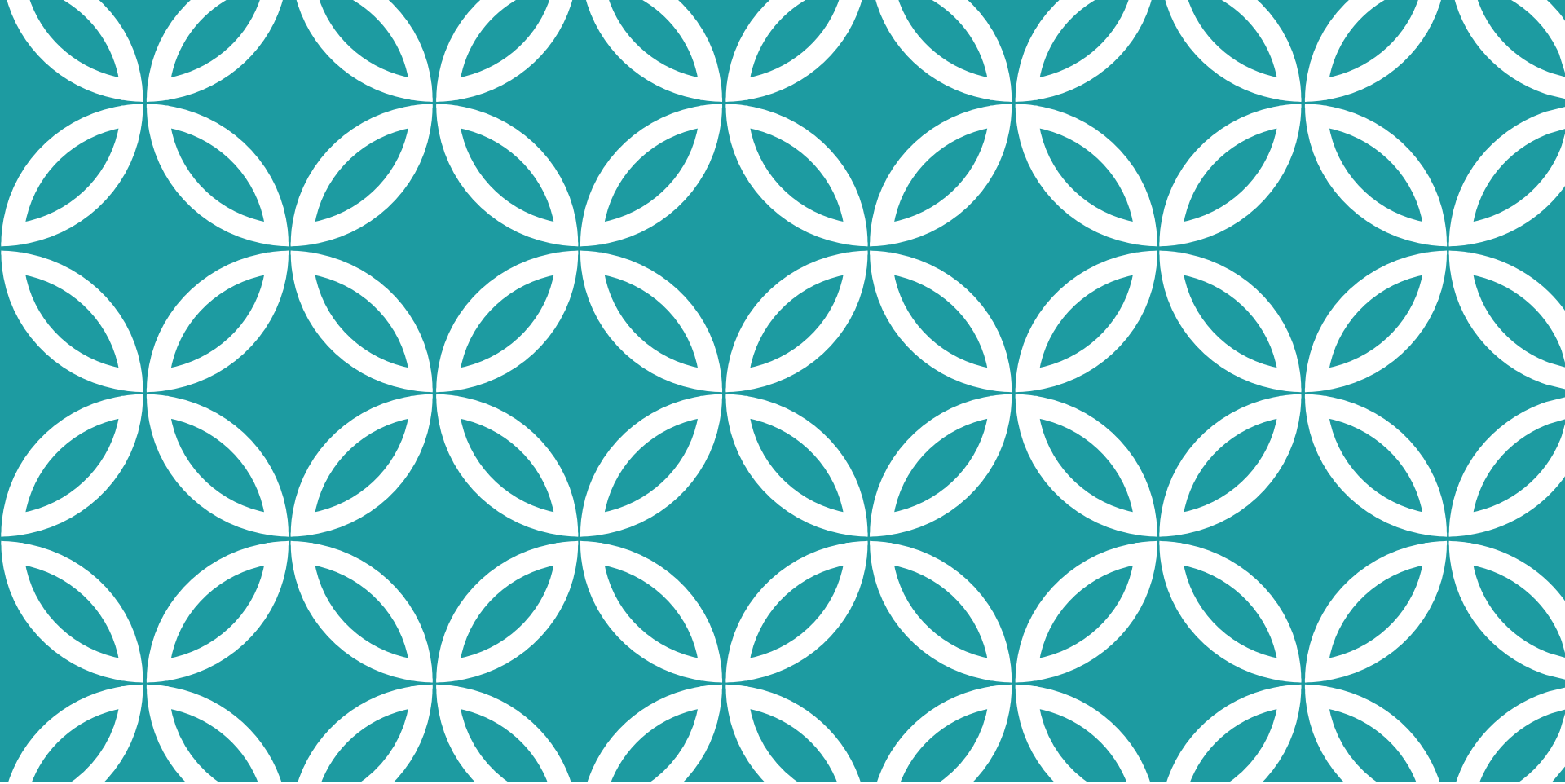
Pre-modern, modern, and post-modern are all critical terms to become familiar with in your studies as well as the various theoretical assumptions and theories behind them.



CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

We will begin by looking at the notion of the modern, or modernity; examining its relationship with history, but also the defining characteristics associated with the modern period or being modern.

We will then look at the way in which we draw contrasts between the modern and the pre-modern, and the way scholars have identified our contemporary age as beyond the modern – post-modernity.



MODERNITY





One of the best ways to begin this discussion is by trying to answer quite a straight forward question:

When does history or society become 'modern'?

MODERNITY



MODERNITY

There are obviously several different potential answers to the question.

Common suggestions might be anytime after the Protestant Reformation (1516-) the Enlightenment (1789-), the 1900's, the First World War (1914-), the Second World War (1939-).

Others might invoke modernity as a relative concept, relative either geographically (different areas of the globe as modern in certain periods), or historically (society might be modern 'for its time').



MODERNITY

Our definitions of when 'modernity' occurs naturally depend on the way in which we choose to define 'modern' – the characteristics that we view as paradigmatic of that specific period.

While we may associate a specific characteristic of society with modernity (or pre-modernity etc.) this does not mean that that characteristic is absent from other historical periods – rather only that it emerges as characteristic for that time period.

MODERNITY

Generally in social-scientific approaches to religion, the 'modern period' begins with the turn to rationality during the European Enlightenment and extends to around the 1970's.

This is a fuzzy description, as the processes and characteristics identified as modern naturally extend both before and after this period, and even these dates are contested on the basis of historical and geographical specificity.



MODERNITY

So, if we have come to the understanding that our categories of history like 'modernity' rely on characteristics we associate with societies from that time, we naturally turn to some subsidiary questions:

What characteristics does "the modern" have?

How does these differ from the period before and after it?



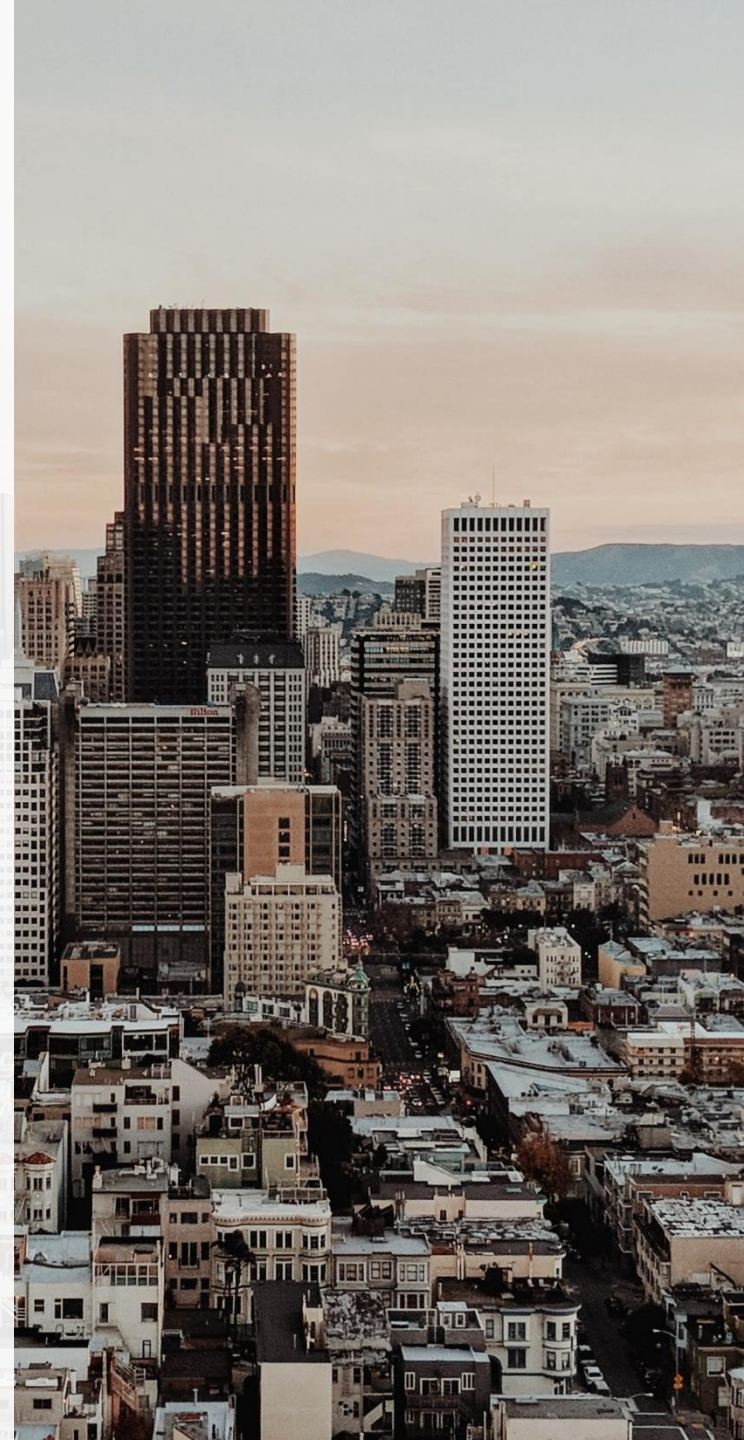
CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERNITY

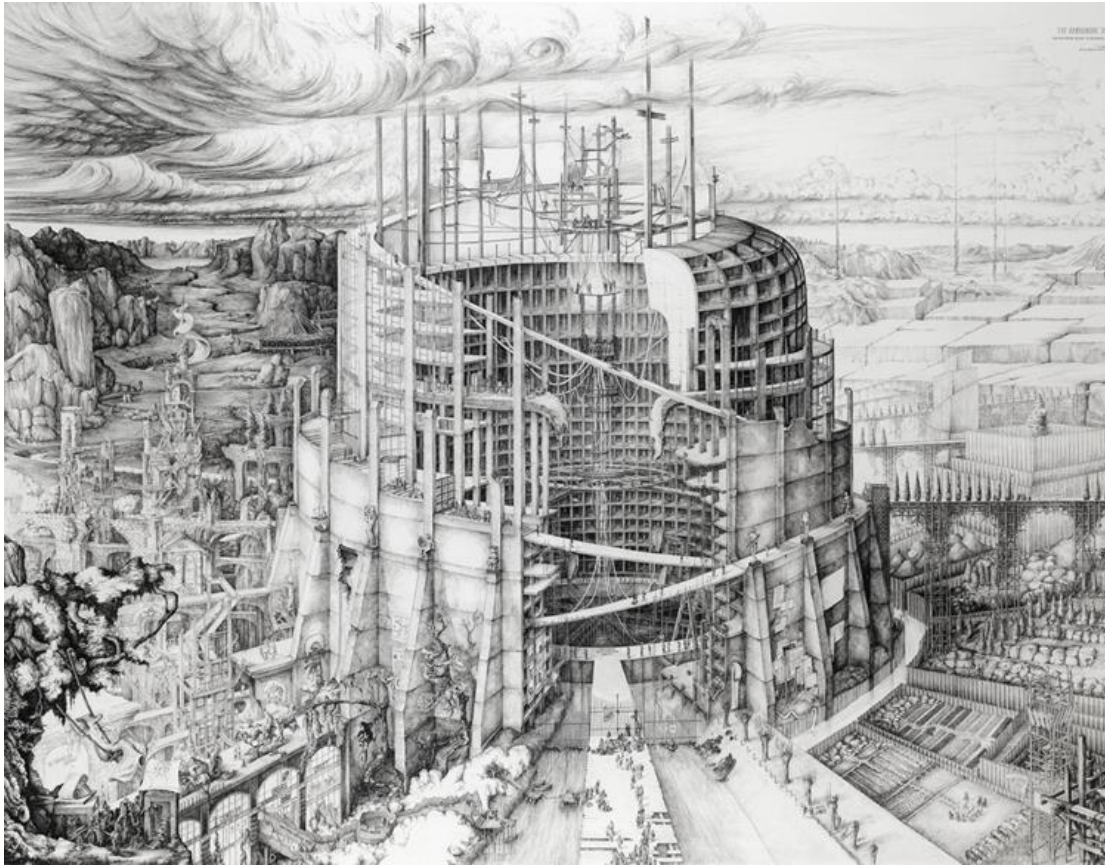
- Rise of the nation state
- Growth of tolerance as a political and social belief
- Industrialization
- Rise of mercantilism and capitalism
- Emergence of socialist countries
- Discovery and colonization of the Non-Western world



CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERNITY

- Rise of representative democracy
- Increasing role of science and technology
- Urbanization
- Mass literacy
- Proliferation of mass media
- The Cartesian and Kantian distrust of tradition for autonomous reason





MODERNITY

These commonly identified characteristics of modernity are a useful way of considering the currents that underpin and inform our contemporary world.

Obviously, these characteristics do not just suddenly appear and disappear – rather they are the symptoms and results of broader social trends and processes that operate to change the way in which our society, our economy, our selves, and our ways of thinking operate over time.

PROCESSES OF MODERNITY - SELF

Individualism: a growing stress on individuals as opposed to meditating structures such as family, clan, academy, village, or church

Disenchantment of the world: the loss of sacred and metaphysical understandings of all facets of life and culture

Subjectivism: the turn inward for definitions and evaluations of truth and meaning



PROCESSES OF MODERNITY - SOCIETY

Alienation: isolation of the individual from systems of meaning eg. family, meaningful work, religion, or clan.

Nationalism: the rise of the modern nation-states as rational centralized governments that often cross local or ethnic groupings.

Urbanization: the move of people, cultural centers, and political influence to large cities, denuding the non-urban as a location of vitality.



PROCESSES OF MODERNITY - ECONOMIC

Commodification: the reduction of all aspects of life to objects of monetary consumption and exchange

Rationalisation: the world can be understood and managed through a reasonable and logical system of objectively accessible theories and data

Secularisation: the loss of religious influence and/or religious belief at a societal level



PROCESSES OF MODERNITY - THOUGHT

Linear-progressivism: preference for forms of reasoning that stress presuppositions and resulting chains of propositions

Objectivism: the belief that truth-claims can be established by autonomous information accessible by all

Universalism: application of ideas/claims to all cultures/circumstances regardless of local distinctions



MODERNITY - NARRATIVE

All of these characteristics and processes that are intimately involved in the construction of the “modern” produce a story about what our society is and where that society is going.

This is called a “narrative” — an explanatory story for the shape of our societies



MODERNITY - NARRATIVE

These stories attempt to explain aspects of our societies — for example, the narrative of scientific progress explains our attitudes toward science - that science is a good thing that can eventually be harnessed to provide for all human needs.

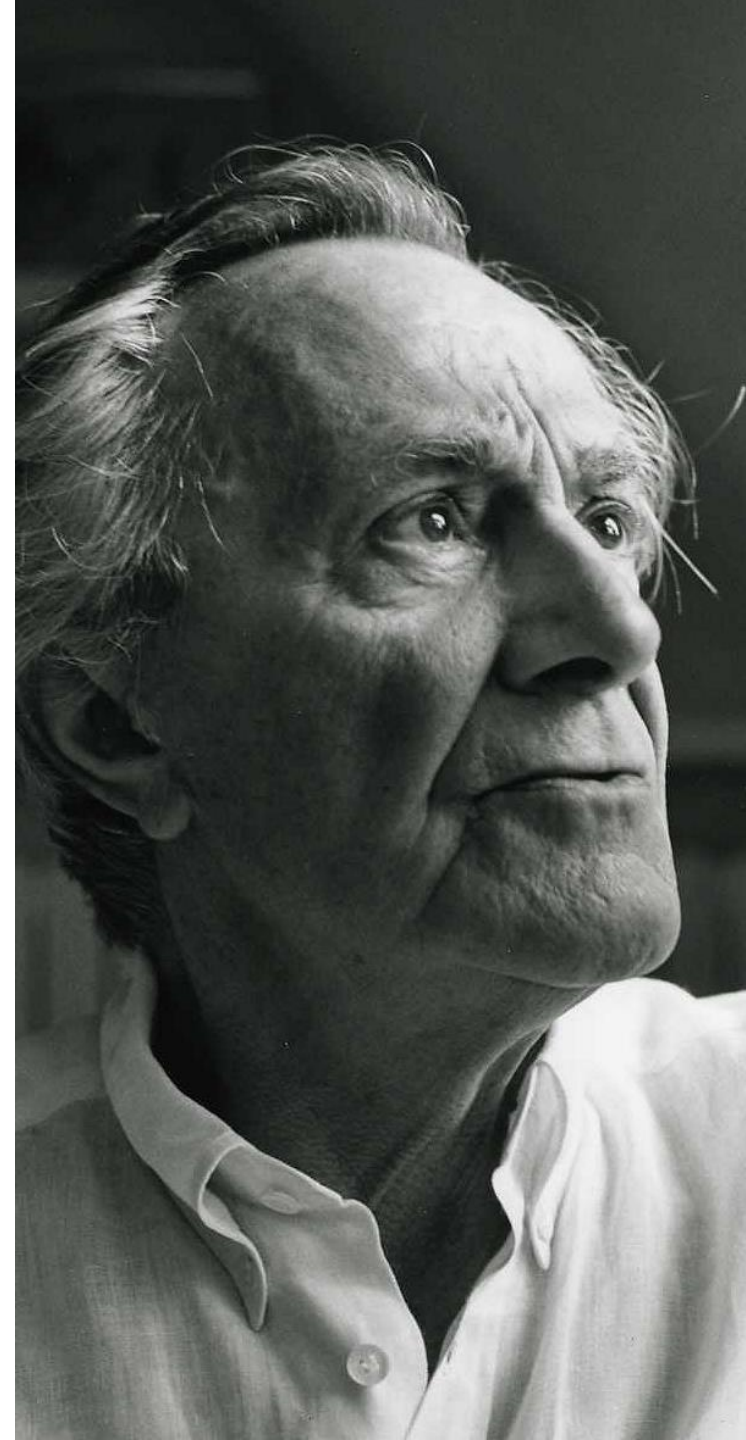
These narratives about aspects of our society coalesce into broader stories about the nature and purpose of our society and our existence



MODERNITY - NARRATIVE

These over-arching stories that attempt to explain the entirety of society are called **meta-narratives**.

This term stems from its use in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by Jean-Francois Lyotard in 1979 where it is used to help clarify the difference between “modernity” and “post-modernity”.



MODERNITY - NARRATIVE

This raises a question for our consideration
— what is the binding story that brings
together the various characteristics and
processes of modernity into a cohesive and
convincing whole?

What is the meta-
narrative of
modernity?



MODERNITY - NARRATIVE

The metanarrative that Lyotard sees as having been most important in modernity is a belief that:

First, history is inevitably progressing towards social enlightenment

Second, knowledge is progressing towards totalisation

Jean-François Lyotard

The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge

Translation from the French by
Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi
Foreword by Fredric Jameson

MODERNITY - NARRATIVE

Lyotard identifies the assumptions within modernity that we have had quite accurately:

we tend to assume that the future will be better than the past

we tend to have confidence in our ability to control that future

we tend to believe in the moral neutrality of things like science

we tend to assume the ability and desire of everyone to be like us



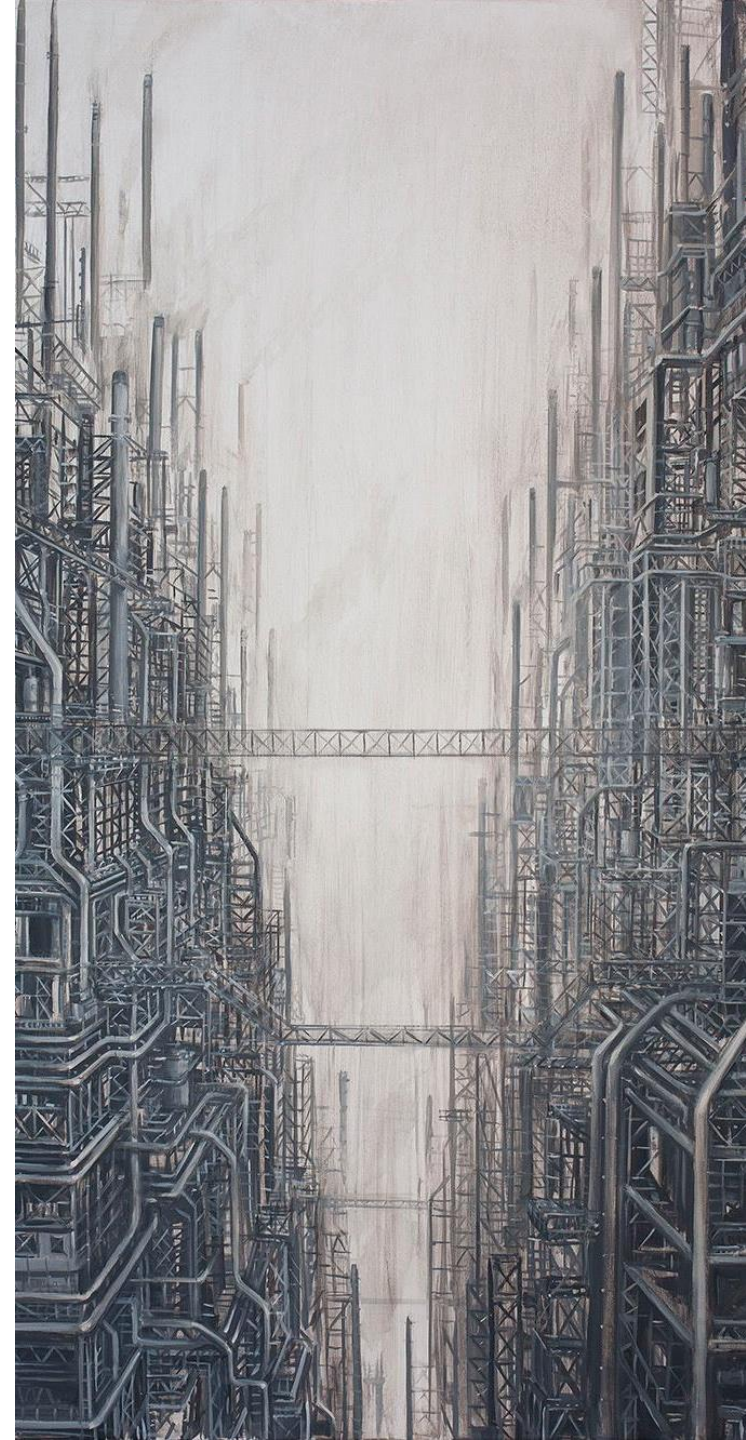
MODERNITY — NARRATIVE

Some of this might seem odd to you — after all many of characteristics identified by Lyotard no longer seem to be applicable to our contemporary society.

Does you think that the future is going to be better than the past?

Do you have confidence in our ability to control and shape that future?

Do you think that society is naturally going to become more equal or more just?



MODERNITY - NARRATIVE

The characteristic meta-narrative of modernity no longer seems to exert the same pull on our society as perhaps it once did – we have become cynical, jaded, and suspicious of attempts to present our current societies and the societies of the future as innately good.

This feeling is the root of our next section, which deals with what comes after modernity – post-modernity.



READINGS

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Cheetham, David. "The University and Interfaith Education." *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 15 (2005): 16-35
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FURTHER READING

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