

Mark J. Cherry  
St. Edward's University, Austin, Texas  
markc@admin.stedwards.edu

If modernity is characterized by the affirmation of the public forum as properly structured by a rationality that is secular, open to all, and able adequately to frame and guide the moral life, then modernity's roots in the West lie at the beginning of the second millennium. Modernity is grounded in part in Stoic, natural-law themes that characterized similar post-traditional periods in Hellenic culture and the late Roman Republic. At stake was a hope to secure moral direction and meaning without a particular, unique, and defining encounter with the transcendent. Such appeals to discursive rationality became salient again in the second millennium as early Western European thinkers attempted to frame a rational unity for their diversity of cultures, a unity not grounded in an encounter with God as Law-giver (e.g., God's giving seven commandments to Noah and his sons, the Gentiles, and 613 to Moses and the Jews) or dependent on theologians as mystics. Now, again, similar attempts are being undertaken in the name of human rights and towards the goal of establishing universal declarations of bioethics. Yet, in an age confronted by the ultimate meaninglessness of life, when life is regarded within the horizon of the finite, a fundamental moral vacuity and fragmentation are central. Modernity, like the attempts of the ancient world, discloses a polytheism of moral visions that we now characterize as post-modernity. This presentation explores the dialectic that binds Western thought with modernity, post-modernity, and the contemporary hunger for consensus in the face of irresolvable moral pluralism.