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# A short overview of the modern eras of historiography in church history: Modernity, postmodernity, and metamodernity

## ABSTRACT

*This article offers a concise overview of the eras of the three modernities, namely modernity, postmodernity, and metamodernity, tracing developments from roughly 1500 CE to the present day. Each of these eras includes the term "modernity", reflecting the continued influence of ideas first shaped in the 16th century, which still persist in the metamodern world. This article invites church historians – particularly those focusing on the African continent – to engage with and apply the diverse tools and insights offered by these historiographical periods. In doing so, they can contribute to the transformation, decolonisation, and Africanisation of the disciplines of Church History and Theology.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Christianity, founded during the Roman period, was shaped by the prevailing philosophical trends[1] of the time, as well as by those that emerged thereafter and went on to influence the development

1 Philosophy forms part of both historiography and church history, as it is "an activity of thought ... the most critical and comprehensive manner of thinking which the human species has yet devised" (Pecorino 2000:n.p.).

of historiography.[2] From its inception, Christian theology has consistently intersected with the philosophy of its age. Church historians,[3] among others, identify these philosophical trends within historical documentation and sources, drawing on their underlying principles in contemporary research. Theology, therefore, frequently grounds its conceptual apparatus within the dominant philosophical framework of its time (Richardson 2005:552). Some philosophical systems have exerted such a profound influence on Christianity that new theological models were developed to accommodate them. Notable examples include the social gospel, liberation theology, black theology, and feminist theology – all of which are embedded within the tradition of progressive critical theory. It is thus no surprise that distinctive philosophical trends and perspectives mark the historical eras discussed in this article.

Parallel with philosophy, the trajectory of world history, especially contemporary developments, also significantly influences the practice of church history. Denis (2019:1) notes that church history is shaped by both the "quality of the historical sources at our disposal [, and] by the world we live in". He describes historical research as "the result of a process of knowledge construction" (Denis 2019:1). It is, therefore, impossible to refer to church history as "definite Christian history [because] history is always in the making", even though it happened long ago (Denis 2019:1-2). This is why church historians can be called "awakeners", indicating to their readers to look at history with new eyes (Denis 2019:2).

Before the mid-18th century (that is, prior to the modern era), the study of church history was generally conducted uncritically and predominantly from a confessional standpoint (Bradley & Muller 1995:11). It was only in the early 19th century in Germany that church history was established as a scientific discipline (Denis 2019:3). Two key developments contributed to the emergence of a modern, critical historiographical approach. First, an increased scientific concern for the analysis of original documents, and secondly, the growing liberty to interpret these sources without being bound to predetermined or ideologically driven conclusions (Bradley & Muller 1995:13).

The advent of postmodernity brought further transformation to the discipline. Southgate (2000:x) contends that postmodernism itself assigns a moral role to history, asserting that historical understanding is essential for

2 Historiography, according to Vann (2018), comprises of the "writing of history ... based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particular details from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those details into a narrative that stands the test of critical examination".

3 Kollman (2004:342) defines church history as a rendition of past events in addition to applying, understanding, and interpreting it in the present, thereby indicating the ongoing relevance that church history has for the present world.

envisioning the future, thus placing the responsibility on individual historians to help shape that future. In the words of Wriedt (2004:23),

> [n]othing is more fruitless than a piling up of historical learning which neither serves any practical purpose nor offers anything for the use of others in its presentation.

This observation is equally relevant to the study of church history.

Although both postmodernity and metamodernity are deeply rooted in modernity, their application of earlier philosophical ideas often diverges significantly. This article focuses on historiographical developments following the close of the post-classical era (c. 500/600-1450/1500 CE).

The article concludes with brief reflections on African historiography and issues a call to incorporate African history and historiographical perspectives as essential components in the ongoing efforts toward transformation, decolonisation, and Africanisation within the academic disciplines of History, Theology – particularly church history – and Philosophy.

## 2. THE MODERN ERA

The modern era commenced in roughly 1500 and, to some extent, continues into the present day (Wiener Ensemble 2023):

> Modernism reflected the rapid changes in society and technology during the Modern Era, and it continues to influence contemporary culture and thought.

This period is characterised by a growing scepticism towards religious belief systems (Duchesne 2023:52), and a pronounced emphasis on reason, analysis, and individualism. According to the Wiener Ensemble (2023),

> [d]efining characteristics [of the modern era] include the rise of nation-states, the growth of science and technology, the spread of democracy and human rights, and the development of global trade and communication.

During this era, historians maintained the conviction that historical truth could indeed be established, primarily through two forms of critical analysis, namely external and internal criticism (Denis 2019:3). External criticism focused on authenticating a document and verifying its origin and accuracy, whereas internal criticism was concerned with determining the meaning and credibility of the document (Denis 2019:3). Three questions were central to this method. Who authored the document? In what context was it written (*i.e.* where)?

For what purpose was it composed? Repetition of facts was also regarded as significant; when the same information appeared across independent sources, its credibility increased accordingly (Denis 2019:3). This approach was underpinned by Thomas Aquinas' classic definition (*dictum*) of truth in his *Questiones disputatae de veritate* (Aquinas 1952), where he defined truth, among others, in Question 1, Article 1, Reply, paragraph 7, as *adaequatio rei et intellectus* ([*truth is*] *the conformity [alignment] of [between] thing and intellect*). From this foundation emerged a critical tradition in which the validity and authenticity of historical documents were scrutinised and assessed (Denis 2019:3).

Among the most significant intellectual developments of the modern era was the Enlightenment, from which the historical-critical method emerged.

## 2.1 Enlightenment or modern philosophy

The Enlightenment was both an intellectual and a philosophical movement (Wiener Ensemble 2023). It emerged during the 17th and 18th centuries and opposed traditional doctrine and religious beliefs. Decisive for the debates of the Enlightenment period was rationalism – the emphasis on reason as the main determinant and test of knowledge (Blanshard 2023). Specific rational principles are currently still fundamental to humankind and are found in logic, mathematics, ethics, and metaphysics (Blanshard 2023).

Both rationalism (intellectualism) and empiricism are focused on knowledge. The latter, though, adds sense experience to the equation, arguing that knowledge originates from, and should be tested by sense equation (Blanshard 2023). Rationalism opposes esoteric knowledge, whereas empiricism is an epistemological vision describing true knowledge and justification as the results of one's sensory experience and observation (Awati 2024).

A well-known proponent of rationalism is René Descartes (1596-1650). His works depict four innate ideas. First, the idea of God, followed by the idea of a finite mind and the idea of an indefinite body, and finally the idea of a union of the mind and body. These ideas act as the bond between Descartes' ontology and epistemology (Zalta & Nodelman 2021). Descartes' ontology includes substances, attributes (things that make an existing substance understandable to the mind of a human being), and modes (ways of being something). According to his *Principia philosphiæ* (*Principles of philosophy*) 1.53, a mode "presupposes" an attribute, while an attribute "presupposes" an existing substance (Descartes 1646:19-20).

Descartes' rationalism influenced the philosopher Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677) (Pollock 1899:1). Spinoza is regarded as a major proponent of the Enlightenment and a pioneer of the historical-critical method of Bible exegesis (Marrama 2019). According to Marrama (2019:21), Spinoza's so-called substance monism, his identification of God with nature, his strict necessitarianism, his unique account of the mind-body relationship and of human affects, as well as his passionate defence of religious freedom and of freedom of thought are still a source of inspiration.

In line with the development of experimental science that requires the testing of theories and hypotheses against observations, empiricism bloomed during the 17th and 18th centuries by the hands of people such as John Locke (1632-1704), George Berkeley (1685-1753), and David Hume (1711-1776).

Locke, an early Enlightenment philosopher, was the most notable empiricist. In his well-known book, *An essay concerning human understanding*, Locke ([1690] 1836) criticises innate knowledge (Book 1 – Locke [1690] 1836:1-50), after which he describes how ideas and knowledge originate from experience, sensation, or reflection (Book 2 – Locke [1690] 1836:50-289). Then he proceeds to explain language (Book 3 – Locke [1690] 1836:289-384), and concludes with the nature and scope of knowledge (Book 4 – Locke [1690] 1836:385-550; see Meyers 2014:9). Berkeley, a "theistic idealist" (Duignan 2024a), opposed Locke's arguments, stating that one's senses only produce ideas, leading to the conclusion that "physical objects are simply collections of perceived ideas" (Duignan 2024a:n.p.). His view led to phenomenalism, arguing that "propositions about physical reality are reducible to propositions about actual and possible sensations" (Duignan 2024a:n.p.).

Hume, called "the archive-dwelling researcher" by Woolf (2019:143), was a sceptical philosopher. The influence of science is clearly visible in the empiricism and scepticism that Hume implemented as he compiled the history of England (Hume 1858). He took the best from both Locke and Berkeley and constituted his philosophy around that. First, he simplified Locke's arguments, claiming that

> there can be no more to the concepts of body, mind, and causal connection than what occurs in the experiences from which they arise (Duignan 2024a:n.p.).

Secondly, he agreed with Berkeley, stating that perceptions involve no constituents that would be able to exist separately from the said perceptions. However, over against Berkeley who claimed that "only minds and their ideas exist", Hume argues that only perceptions exist, making it difficult to form ideas of things that are not (a complex of) perceptions (Duignan 2024a).

François-Marie Arouet, named Voltaire (1694-1778), was a key figure of the Enlightenment and a famous writer in France in the 18th century (Quastana 2019:1). Being a follower of Locke, his empiricism acted as the basis of sensationalism, posing that all the components of a human being's mental life should only be studied by means of sensations (Duignan 2024a). He made worthwhile contributions to the philosophy of law and social philosophy and was an advocate for religious tolerance and freedom of speech (Quastana 2019:1). Central to his philosophy was scepticism. Voltaire composed history that included every aspect of human life and he is, therefore, known as "the father of total histories" or the history of everyday life, that became popular in the later part of the 20th century.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) can be regarded as the central figure in modern philosophy:

> He synthesized early modern rationalism and empiricism, set the terms for much of nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy, and continues to exercise a significant influence today in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, aesthetics, and other fields (Zalta & Nodelman 2020a:n.p.).

Kant's lifetime can be divided into two periods. The first period is labelled his dogmatic period up until 1770. From then on until his death, he followed the philosophy of Hume (Weber 1908:1). Being a critical philosopher, he wrote three critiques. First, his *Critique of pure reason* (Kant [1781] 1890),[4] followed by his *Critique of practical reason* (Kant [1788] 1956), and lastly his *Critique of judgement* (Kant [1790] 1914). The basic idea of his philosophy was human autonomy (Zalta & Nodelman 2020a). In his *Critique of pure reason*, Kant defended his view on transcendental idealism, which was one of his most important sets of claims, where he combined rationalism and empiricism (see Kant [1781] 1890:21ff). Karampatsou ([*s.a.*]:n.p.) notes:

> According to this famous doctrine, we must distinguish between appearances and things in themselves, that is, between that which is mind-dependent and that which is not.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) can be regarded as the most significant theologian of the 19th century (Ballard 2022:137) and as the "father of modern/liberal theology and religious experience" (Hoffecker 2001:1064). He is well-known for his doctrine on religious experience (deriving doctrine from religious experience), where he referred to a "schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl" (feeling of absolute dependence) (see Thimme 1927:365). He also attempted

4 This book depicts a "difference between the noumenal (the world as it is 'in-iteself') and the phenomenal (the world as it appears to us)" (Dolphijn 2016).

to reconcile enlightenment criticism with Protestant Christianity (Ballard 2022:140).

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) joined philosophers J.G. Fichte (1762-1814) and F.W.J. Von Schelling (1775-1854) as German idealists following Kant. Hegel was the "most systematic of the post-Kantian idealists" (Zalta & Nodelman 2020b). He implemented a teleological account of history that was later adopted by Marx and adapted into his materialist theory that led to communism (Marx 1867). Based on Plato's use of dialectics, Hegel employed dialectics as "a contradictory process between opposing sides" (Zalta & Nodelman 2020b). However, instead of using human interlocutors, Hegel's opposing sides were anything contradicting something else, such as arguments and definitions of logical concepts. Hegel's dialectics directed him to the "absolute", which can be defined as the "last, final, and completely all-encompassing or unconditioned concept or form in the relevant subject matter under discussion" (Zalta & Nodelman 2020b). The absolute is active and contains nature and mind successively. It is unconditioned – containing "everything" about an argument; therefore, it is not necessary to say anything more (Weber 1908:498).

Karl Marx (1818-1883) can be regarded as the philosopher, historian, and social theorist with the most influence in modern times, having an impact on world affairs like no author before or after him (Barnett 2009:1). His aim was a "socialist utopia", but this reality did, in fact, not last long and made capitalism more durable than ever (Barnett 2009:2). However, his influence was still visible in many communist regimes in the 20th century (Zalta & Nodelman 2020c). The thoughts of Marx were groundbreaking, stimulating arguments in subjects such as history, philosophy, economics, and politics (see Pollard 2022). One of his famous books, co-written by Friedrich Engels, is his *Manifesto* (Marx & Engels [1848] 1955).

Marx built upon the ideas of Hegel who saw history as a process of dialectic change, but contrary to Hegel who saw the driving force of history as the conflict of ideas. Marx described nature's driving force as the conflict between social classes (Weil 1958:43). Marx also formulated historical materialism

> centred around the idea that forms of society rise and fall as they further and then impede the development of human productive power (Zalta & Nodelman 2020c:n.p.).

## 2.2 Modern historiography

Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) was a well-known English Enlightenment and rationalist historian. His book, *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire* (Gibbon [1776] 1906) is one of the most influential books of all times,

> reaching far beyond the field of history and inspired many important works of art in the field of popular culture (Bamyaci 2023:98).

According to Gibbon, Rome's decline was based on the increasing amount of Christians in the city and its decay in traditional civic values (Cartwright 2023). Interestingly, Gibbon wrote most of his documents in French (Hampson 1990:56; Law 2024). He used primary sources where available, wrote with a pen dipped in irony, and did not hesitate to criticise organised religion (Woolf 2019:142; see Womersley 2002).

In the same vein as Voltaire, Johann Gottfried Von Herder (1744-1803) – a disciple of Kant – successfully turned the focus of history away from politics and war towards social, cultural, and intellectual history (Forster 2022). Forster refers to him as a "philosopher of the first importance" (Forster 2022:n.p.) was a number of philosophers based their philosophy on Von Herder's ideas (Forster 2022): Hegel, with specific reference to history, the mind, language, and God; Schleiermacher, with reference to art, interpretation, language, translation, the mind, and God, and Nietzsche, concerning history, the mind, language, and values. Other philosophers who built on Von Herder's ideas include Wilhelm Dilthey, with reference to history; John Stuart Mill, with reference to political philosophy, and Goethe, who was – "beyond philosophy" – influenced by Von Herder's writings and ideas to become a great artist. Von Herder's interest in literature and art influenced the next generation of Romantics, specifically Friedrich, Schlegel, and Hegel.

Leopold Von Ranke (1795-1886), "[j]ustly regarded as the father of modern historical scholarship" (Novick 1988:26), was the leading German historian of the 19th century, using specific methods to present his writings in history. These methods changed the way in which scholars of his time understood academic writing. His greatest contribution was his application of documentary and philosophical methods being developed for the study of antiquity to modern history. He wrote objective history and used source criticism – "the critical analyses of sources" (Boldt [*s.a.*]). The "first generation of modern professional historians" that he trained included Georg Waitz and Jakob Burckhardt. His way of writing history largely influenced Western historiography (Boldt [*s.a.*]).

Von Ranke was involved in the professionalisation of history as academic subject. The attempt by historians to determine "what actually happened" was initiated by the work of this modern-era historian (see Novick 1988:27). He assigned academic status to the craft of historiography, established the historical-critical method, and combined critical reading with careful attempts to the reconstruction of historical events from an objective point of view – *wissenschaftliche Objektivität* (Novick 1988:26). Unfortunately, he focused

too much on the political aspect and tended to neglect economic and social influences on historical events, while he also failed to understand that real reconstruction is impossible (see Vierhaus 2023).

Auguste Comte (1798-1857) was a French philosopher growing up in the wake of the French Revolution (1789-1799). He is regarded as the "father of sociology" (he renamed social sciences to sociology) as well as positivism (Barnes & Fletcher 2024). As the "father of positive philosophy", he provided a three-stage theory of progressive historical evolution, namely theological, metaphysical, and scientific (Munslow 2000:187). He derived his conception of positivism from Hume and Kant. Positivism is a theory arguing that both theology and metaphysics act as previous imperfect modes of knowledge, while he based positive knowledge on natural phenomena together with their properties and relations, verifying it through the empirical sciences (Barnes & Fletcher 2024). Like Marx, he argued that the "revolution in modern culture and society had not yet reached its final destination" (Gane 2017:1).

Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-1884) is depicted as one of the greatest historians of Germany (Nees [*s.a.*]). His two works, *History of Alexander the Great* (1892) and *History of Hellenism* (1836) are classic works in Germany, which have "almost never been out of print" (Nees [*s.a.*]:n.p.). Being a historical theorist, Droysen created the basis for the "methodology of modern historical studies" (Nees [*s.a.*]:n.p.). He reacted on the work of Von Ranke, arguing that the literary brilliance of Von Ranke and his utilisation of the critical method shielded his faulty theistic interpretations (Vann 2018). Droysen further indicated that one set of facts can actually be used in different ways by historians. He identified at least four ways of the interpretation of a single event such as the French Revolution, which are investigative, narrative, didactic, and discussive, or a mixture of these, which is often the case in historical writing (Vann 2018).

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a German philosopher.

> His writings on truth, morality, language, aesthetics, cultural theory, history, nihilism, power, consciousness, and the meaning of existence have exerted an enormous influence on Western philosophy and intellectual history (Wilkerson [*s.a.*]:n.p.).

According to him, religion and metaphysics would disintegrate. In his *Gay science,* section 125, he endorsed it with the *dictum* "God is dead" (Nietzsche [1882] 1974). He did, in fact, picture the (eventual) death of Christianity and its moral code (Wilkerson [*s.a.*]).

Max Weber (1864-1920) was a German sociologist, historian, political economist, and philosopher. He gained recognition through his protestant ethic,

in which he related Protestantism to capitalism. He was also well-known for his *Bureaucratic theory* (Mitzman 2024). In line with remarkable philosophers such as Hegel, Dilthey, and Heinrich Rickert, he argued that, in order to practise sociology, one needs an understanding of what is being studied, otherwise the study would be futile. He then took these philosophical ideas and developed them into a methodology. This led to Weber's theory of ideal types. He specifically applied this theory in his book, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (Weber [1904-1905] 2015). His ideal types referred to the three forms of authority (traditional, rational, and charismatic) and included the theory of the market in economics (Winch 1967, original emphasis).

Ted Carr (1892-1982) was a sceptical relativist who opposed empiricism within historiography. In his book *What is history?*, Carr distinguishes between "facts of the past", which include historical information that historians deem unimportant, and "historical facts", which include the information that historians use and interpret as being important (Carr 1961:12-13). He accused historians of deciding which "facts of the past" are to be treated as "historical facts according to their personal agendas and bias opinions" (Carr 1961:22-25).

## 3. THE POSTMODERN ERA

John Watkins Chapman was the first person to use this term in 1870, when he referred to a "postmodern style of painting", something totally different from French impressionism (see Welsch & Sandbothe 1997:76). Both the period and definition of postmodernism differ from scholar to author to academic to institution, some giving this movement a short time span, from 1970 to 1990 (Victoria and Albert Museum 2024), others referring to it as a late (not too long) 20th-century movement (Duignan 2024b), or giving it a longer existence – from 1940 until at least 2001 (Preceden 2024), or from 1972 to at least 2011 (Jeffries 2011), while the Icon Group International (2009) gives it a lifespan from 1892 to 2007. According to Denis (2019:2-3), "postmodern history became influential in … academia in the 1980s and 1990s, especially after the publication of Peter Novick's essay *That noble dream: The "objectivity question" and the American "historical profession*" (see Novick 1988).

According to Patton (2001:11872), certain philosophers have the view that postmodernism originated from Nietzsche, while others ("cultural theorists") opine that this movement resulted from a late 20th-century capitalist restructuring. However, it only appeared in philosophy and social theory during the 1980s in the works of philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Lyotard (Patton 2001:11872). Scholars started to associate this movement with a view that postulated a

> crisis [in] representation, abandonment of correspondence theories of truth, universal reason, and unitary schemas of progress inherited from the Enlightenment (Patton 2001:11872).

Duignan (2024b:n.p.) depicts postmodernism as a movement characterised by

> broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power.

Postmodernism is a wide reaction against modernism, specifically with reference to the intellectual assumptions of modernism regarding the history of Western philosophy (17th to 19th century) (see Denis 2019:3), stating that there is no such thing as truth, that objective natural reality is a kind of naive realism, and that reason and logic are conceptual constructs and only have value when used within established intellectual traditions (Duignan 2024b). Postmodernism opposes the modernists' idea of human progress that postulates that future societies would be more civilised, with higher moral values, and more enlightened. Against the modernist view, postmodernism argues that "language is semantically self-contained", and does not represent a reality outside itself (Duignan 2024b:n.p.). "Postmodernists reject philosophical foundationalism" like the dictum of Descartes, *Cogito, ergo sum* (Duignan 2024b:n.p.). Postmodernists regard human psychology as a social construct. It also questions the "objectivity" which modernism claimed as a premise to do history, as Kelly (2011:109) argues: A "view from nowhere" is, in fact, impossible. With reference to reason, Vanhoozer (2003:15) states that "postmoderns do not reject reason per se but merely the totalizing and universal reason posited by Descartes". In addition, it also counters metanarrative, approaching teleological discourses with suspicion (see Denis 2019:3).

Karl Raimund Popper (1902-1994) had a huge influence on this period as a falsificationist, being an opponent of dogmatism in all its appearances (Horgan 2018). Falsification is a means whereby one differentiates between pseudo-scientific theories, including Freudian psychoanalysis and astrology, and genuine theories such as quantum mechanics and general relativity (Horgan 2018). According to him, it is impossible to prove a pseudo-scientific theory to be true through empirical testing. There is thus no unique methodology when one works with science, as the latter is only a way of problem-solving (Zalta & Nodelman 2022).

Post-World War II, a new pre-occupation with objectivity arose together with a questioning of the validity of the historical method and a new quest for meaning and ethics in writing history. The development of postcolonialism

and postmodernism forced historians to be more aware of their biases, presuppositions, and personal world views. Green (2018:48) explains that postmodernism challenged the validity of texts in terms of presenting objective information, while postcolonialism addressed the dynamics of racism and third-world politics, and challenged historians in terms of their one-sided and Eurocentric world view and the incomplete and partisan archival sources they used.

Postmodernism critically reconsidered the process of how historians construct the past as history (Munslow 2000:189). Postmodernist theorists include Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and Michel Foucault (1926-1984) who questioned the traditional truth claims of humanities and social sciences. Postmodernism acknowledged that society and culture are in a state of constant transformation, in which traditional assumptions concerning aspects such as objectivity, truth, and socio-economic metanarratives are no longer viable. Grand narratives of privileged centres such as Anglo-centric, ethno-centric, gender-centric, and logo-centric frameworks were replaced by a

> multiplicity of discourses and language games, a questioning of the nature of knowledge and a dissolution of the idea of truth, and problems of legitimacy in many fields (Jenkins 2009:67),

unfortunately, through an overly advocated political agenda. On the positive side, postmodernism assisted historians to speak to wider audiences, by addressing important issues such as discrimination, exploitation, the predicaments of women and minority groups, racism and gender issues, as well as the plight of previously colonialised nations. In line with the ground-breaking work of Droysen (1836; 1892), it is no longer acceptable to transmit a single version of the past – different conceptual frameworks can be used to report on the past that may contradict, compete with, or complement one another.

Postcolonial theorists include Edward Said (1935-2003), Homi Bhabha (1949-), Stuart Hall (1932-1914), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942-), who also worked on feminist topics, as well as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1938-) (Green 2018:48). The main impact of postcolonialism became clear in the 1980s through the work of the "subaltern studies" from Southern Asia. Building on the work of Derrida, these scholars voiced narratives from formerly colonised nations, in order to reconstruct indigenous knowledge and history that are not included in colonial archives and narratives. The African historian, Jan Vansina (1929-2017) showed the importance of oral history to preserve indigenous knowledge and perspectives (Bernault 2019). Postcolonialism broadened the resource bases to include alternative voices, as it interpreted archival sources in ways different from Western universalism.

Already in 1977, Ihab Hassan (1925-2015), through posthumanism, moved away from the anthropocentric approach and Cartesian dualism of philosophy. Posthumanism consists of a large array of theories: Ferrando (2023) distinguishes antihumanism; cultural posthumanism; philosophical posthumanism; posthuman condition; transhumanism; artificial intelligence take-over, and voluntary human extinction theory.

Postmodernity was characterised by two major trends in philosophy, namely the analytic and continental schools of thought.

## 3.1 Analytic school

The analytic school was led by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) on phenomenology (the study of structures of consciousness, as experienced from the first-person point of view) and Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) on the analysis of language *via* modern logic. This "linguistic turn", as Gustav Bergmann first called it (see Glock & Kalhat 2018), describes "the shift in historical explanation toward an emphasis on the role of language in creating historical meaning" and the question if objectivity and truth are possible in constructing historical descriptions (Munslow 2000:151). The analytics built upon traditional philosophy, as embodied by Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant and applied logical techniques to achieve conceptual clarity that is in line with modern science.

## 3.2 Continental school

The continental school housed numerous theories, including deconstruction, existentialism, phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism, new historicism, neo-Marxism, Western Marxism, speculative realism, and critical theory.

### 3.2.1 Deconstruction

This theory is a kind of philosophical and literary analysis, with its main origin in the French philosopher Derrida in the 1960s. It calls to question the fundamental conceptual distinctions or oppositions that existed in Western philosophy, by closely examining both the language and the logic of these philosophical and literary texts (Augustyn 2024).

### 3.2.2 Existentialism

According to this philosophy, everyone has a free will to act. This characteristic of humankind is intricately linked to their relationships with each other and with other things in nature (Marshall 2023). Existentialism originated in the 19$^{th}$ century through the works of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Nietzsche, focusing on individual existence, freedom and choice, as well as personal responsibility.

### 3.2.3 Phenomenology

According to Armstrong (2005:n.p.),

> [p]henomenology is a philosophy of experience. For phenomenology the ultimate source of all meaning and value is the lived experience of human beings. All philosophical systems, scientific theories, or aesthetic judgments have the status of abstractions from the ebb and flow of the lived world.

This is done through a first-person point of view (Smith 2013). The German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), is the modern founder of phenomenology. He aimed to make philosophy a "rigorous science", thereby returning its focus "zu den Sachen selbst" (translation: back to the things themselves) (Armstrong 2005:n.p.).

### 3.2.4 Structuralism

This philosophy focuses on human behaviour and how it is determined by culture, society, and psychological structures (Mambrol 2016a). Together with poststructuralism, it forms the most controversial intellectual movement of critical theory, originating in the 1950s (Mambrol 2016a). Ferdinand de Saussure (1847-1913) founded modern linguistics and semiology. He also laid the foundation for both structuralism and poststructuralism. According to him, things have meaning within the language system in which they are operating, called structuralism. This premise was later opposed by poststructuralism in the late 20th century (Mambrol 2016a). The anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), and the literary critic, Roland Gérard Barthes (1915-1980), first mentioned the concept that the world should be perceived in terms of structures (Mambrol 2016a). Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Foucault were called the "Gang of Four" of structuralism (Hurst 2019).

### 3.2.5 Post-structuralism

This movement diverted from structuralism in the 1960s (or 1950s – Hurst 2019) and 1970s (up to the 1980s – Hurst 2019), and criticised the latter's

> reliance on centers and binary oppositions; they questioned the soundness of ontology and demonstrated the emergence of Truth regimes; and they developed new ways of thinking about difference and identity that are anti-essentialist rather than grounded or fixed *a priori* (Woodward *et al.* 2009:397, original emphasis).

According to Stoev (2022:1), poststructuralism "deprived theory of grand categories, generalisations, and the sense that objective truth is attainable". Although Barthes, Lacan, and Foucault belonged to structuralism's "Gang of Four", they gradually moved over to poststructuralism (Hurst 2019). Other

poststructuralist scholars were Umberto Eco, Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Julia Kristeva (Hurst 2019).

### 3.2.6 Feminism

Being an intellectual commitment *cum* political movement, feminism opposes every form of gender-based oppression (McAfee *et al.* 2023). Whereas the term "feminism" was used in the mid-1800s as a reference to the qualities of women, the First International Women's Conference in Paris (1892) changed the meaning of the term to refer to the equality of all sexes and the advocacy of equal rights for all (McAfee *et al*. 2023). Pertinent feminists are Mary Astell (1666-1731), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), Rose Scott (1847-1925), Jane Addams (1860-1935), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), and Grace Lee Boggs (1915-2015). Mary Wollstonecraft already laid a modern foundation for feminism in 1792, while the second wave of gender justice hit the United States of America between 1960 and 1980 (McAfee *et al*. 2023).

### 3.2.7 New historicism

This school of thought, developed in America, argues that "all reality is the product of the evolution of historical events" (Knapp & Farley 2023:n.p.). In 1982, the American, Stephen Jay Greenblatt (1943-) developed the new historicism theory, an approach to literary criticism that examines historical evidence within the context in which it was written (Pallardy 2023). New historicism opposes both the theories of new criticism – postulating that a text is an autotelic artefact – and liberal humanism, claiming that every text has a timeless significance and a universal value (Mambrol 2016b). Two proponents of this school of thought are the historian, Lynn Avery Hunt (1945-) and Foucault. Foucault's radical perspective on history led him to develop new historicist strategies and redefine the established humanist understanding of literature (Faysal 2021).

### 3.2.8 Neo-Marxism

Developed in the 1960s, Neo- and Western Marxism are the 20$^{th}$-century extension of Marxist ideas in Europe, built upon the value of an individual's freedom (O'Hagan 2001). According to Neo-Marxism, modern capitalism delivers liberty to everybody in at least three important ways (O'Hagan 2001). First, all members belonging to a capitalist society are legally free; secondly, every individual worker is legally and economically free to abandon the proletariat and become a "petty bourgeois" or a capitalist, and lastly, apart from the freedom of commerce, every member of society has the right to "freedom of speech, assembly, worship, publication, movement, [and] political participation".

GA Cohen (1941-2008) was a proponent of this movement with his book *Karl Marx's theory of history* (1978). According to Callinicos (2006:252), Cohen's book

> itself displays an ambivalent attitude towards *Capital* [*Das Kapital* – book of Marx 1867], simultaneously basing itself on a close reading of Marx's economic writings and seeking to make ever more explicit Cohen's rejection of the labor theory of value.

However, Wolff (2017:n.p.) argues that Cohen's book was "probably the first major contribution to what has become known as 'analytical Marxism'", as discussed above.

### 3.2.9 Western Marxism

One of the main reasons for the inception of Western Marxism, already in the 1920s, was the fact that the socialist revolution that took place in the Western world was a failure. This movement was not really interested in the politics and economics of Marxism, but rather in its philosophical interpretation, with specific focus on cultural and historical studies (Chambre & McLellan [*s.a.*]). Proponents of this movement were the Hungarian Marxist philosopher, György Lukács (1885-1971); the German Marxist theoretician and political philosopher, Karl Korsch (1886-1961); the Italian Marxist philosopher, politician, journalist, writer, and linguist, Antonio Francesco Gramsci (1891-1937); the French philosopher and sociologist, Lucien Goldmann (1913-1979); the German theorists through whom the Frankfurt School was established (see also "critical theory" below), including the German philosopher and sociologist, Max Horkheimer (1895-1973); the German-American philosopher, political theorist, and social critic, Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979); the German philosopher and social theorist, Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969); the German philosopher and social theorist, Jürgen Habermas (1929-); the French Marxist philosopher and sociologist, Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991); the French philosopher and playwright, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), who was also one of the main proponents in the philosophy of existentialism and phenomenology, and Maurice Jean Jacques Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), a French phenomenological philosopher (Chambre & McLellan [*s.a.*]).

### 3.2.10 Speculative realism

In 2007, a controversial group of four men (Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux) started this movement at a conference at the University of London (Dolphijn 2016). They pointed out that, since the publication of Kant's book, *Critique of pure reason* (Kant [1781] 1890), European thinking did no longer abound with reality. This was also based on Foucault's book, *The order of things* (Foucault 1960), where he

criticised Kant, seemingly without much success (Dolphijn 2016). Speculative realism includes a number of unrelated theories all opposing the post-Kant philosophy or "correlationism" – the idea that all existence is reducible to the human experience thereof.

### 3.2.11 Critical theory

Horkheimer (already mentioned under "Western Marxism" above) was the first philosopher to define critical theory. He did this in his 1937 chapter, *Traditional and cultural theory* (Horkheimer 2002). The extension of Marxist ideas in Europe was kept alive through New and Western Marxism movements of the 20th century. During the interwar period, the Germany-based Frankfurt School of Philosophers built mainly upon the Marxist tradition to bring philosophy and social sciences together into critical theory that aims to increase freedom at all levels of society. Horkheimer sought "human emancipation" through critical theory that must be simultaneously explanatory, practical, and normative (Celikates & Flynn 2023:n.p.).

Critical theory by the Frankfurt School (1953) under Horkheimer aimed to advance (Western) Marxism. Critical theory intended to improve the physical living quality of people through transformation that promotes social democracy, eliminating inequality and discrimination. This theory questioned everything that is normally taken for granted, be it perceptions, actions, or culture and religion. It was also called the "paranoid hermeneutics of suspicion" (Sedgwick 2003:4).

Critical theory (including progressive critical theory that focuses on promoting social change) includes a wide variety of theories, comprising media theory, feminist theory, queer theory, race theory, post-colonial theory (originated in India), and decolonial theory (originated in Latin-America). It refers to "several generations of philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School" (Celikates & Flynn 2023: n.p.).

## 4. THE ERA OF METAMODERNITY

We are currently living in the era of metamodernity (sometimes called post-postmodernity – see Bentley 2018:723), where historians no longer want to focus so much on what happened, but are rather aiming to construct connections between the surviving traces from history and the results and implications of these events, in order to construct meaning for both current readers and for what happened in the past. The writer and researcher, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, allegedly coined the term "metamodernism" in 1975, thereby describing an upcoming cultural trend in the literature of America (Le Cunff

1922; Abramson 2015). Kersten and Wilbers (2018:719) argue that two documents coined the term much later, namely *Notes on metamodernism* by Vermeulen and Van den Akker (2010) and *Metamodernism: Narratives of continuity and revolution* by James and Seshagiri (2014).[5]

Vermeulen and Van den Akker (2010:1) claim that metamodernism is "oscillating between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony" – thus some kind of a "resurfacing" modernism (Kersten & Wilbers 2018:719) with a "typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment" (Vermeulen & Van den Akker 2010:2). Stoev (2022:2) adds that "metamodernism" is a heuristic term pinpointing the

> amalgamation of characteristics from previous periods and movements that make up the current sensibility of our times. It does so by implying the very concept of intuition with the term 'structures of feeling' and by considering the formation of something grand. That is why it is both radical and an example of its own subject – it dares to posit, in a modernist fashion, a big idea. Simultaneously it cautiously refuses, in a postmodernist fashion, to state the order of category it discusses.

James and Seshagiri (2014:88) suggest a clash instead of an oscillation between the two eras:

> The dominant postures of this literary corpus [metamodernism], therefore, clash with the current academic understanding of modernism as a temporally and spatially complex global impulse.

The literature of metamodernity does not deviate from postmodernity on an aesthetic basis, although it is linked to metamodernity as a "significantly different philosophical outlook" (Kersten & Wilbers 2018:720). However, Kersten and Wilbers (2018:721) regard metamodernity as a demise of postmodernity and a resurfacing of modernity.

Le Cunff (2022) refers to its two preceding eras (modernism and postmodernism) as the ages of the *radio* and *television*, respectively. Modernism was focused on the dictum "Make it new". Her time slot for postmodernism is 1945 (after the second world war) to 2005, filled with an attitude of scepticism, irony, and moral relativism:

> [T]he postmodernist generation [w]as disillusioned: They rejected the possibility of reliable knowledge, denied the existence of a universal reality, and framed aesthetics as arbitrary and subjective (Le Cunff 2022:n.p.).

5 In fact, this was the time when the term entered "common parlance" (Abramson 2015:n.p.).

She describes the "post-postmodernist world" not as a cultural philosophy, but as an era containing a collective search for what has to follow:

> [A] quest for a more balanced world-view which would take into account the optimism of modernism and the pluralism of postmodernism (Le Cunff 2022:n.p.).

The cultural philosophy that appeared to have answers is called metamodernism, which Le Cunff (2022:n.p.) associates with the *age of the internet*, "embracing the polarising nature of human beings". The polarity lies in the fact that opposite elements are independent of each other:

> Doubt cannot exist without hope. Failure cannot exist without experience. Life can bring emotion and apathy, sincerity and irony, excitement and melancholy (Le Cunff 2022: n.p.).

She takes her queue from two cultural theorists, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, who have already argued, in 2010, that metamodernity "can be conceived of as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism" (Vermeulen & Van den Akker 2010:5).

## 5. AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Fage (1981:24) explains that Africa forms part of global historiography, as North Africa was included in both the historical works of the ancient Mediterranean world such as Herodotus, Manetho, Pliny the Elder and Strabo, some ancient religious and other texts, the Church Fathers from Carthage, Alexandria, and Hippo (Hinson 2021), as well as the medieval Islamic civilization[6] and

> continued to be part of the mainstream of Western historical studies until the advance of the Ottoman Turkish empire in the sixteenth century

and returning to the world stage after Napoleon's expeditions to Egypt in 1798 and European colonising activities in other parts of Africa. Kenneth Onwuka Dike (1917-1983) is known as the "father of African historiography". Apart from founding the National Archives of Nigeria and the Historical Society of Nigeria, he is known for his pioneering contributions to the study of African cultural and historical heritage.

Jan Vansina, a Belgian historian and anthropologist, mentioned earlier, was a pioneering figure with reference to the study of Africa. He can be considered as one of the main founders of the study of African history in

6 See the works of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), who developed one of the earliest nonreligious philosophies of history, as well as a definitive history of Muslim North Africa (Britannica 2024).

the middle of the 20th century. He countered the Western view that cultures without documentation had no history. His major contributions were centred around central Africa (mostly Rwanda) and the early history of the continent of Africa (Bernault [*s.a.*]).

However, African historiography is still a vast open field to be explored. First, Africa is the only continent with proven endogenous cultural development through its unbroken chronological sequence of all stages of human development (Olderogge 1979:26). This provides researchers with archaeological findings, oral traditions, chronicles and annals, geographical works, legal documents, literary works, archival sources,[7] private documents, and more resources to engage with from all over the continent. Secondly, these resources are "flexible in scope" and topics which open up exciting opportunities for inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary research as well as innovation on the combination of various resource types (Obenga 1981:72). Thirdly, comparative studies can provide research that focuses on Africa as a whole to counter regional fragmentation. Fourthly, research should go beyond a political and economic focus to include civilisations, institutions, and structures such as structured agrarian and metallurgical techniques, arts and crafts, trade networks, the conception and organisation of power, religion, as well as religious and philosophical thought (Ki-Zerbo 1981:16-23). Fifthly, keeping in mind that "[a]ll history is historiography" (Maylam 2001:1), Africa's past must be written and rewritten free from the existing "masked, faked, distorted, mutilated accounts" that speak of ignorance, biasness, and/or self-interest (Ki-Zerbo 1981:7). It must be told with an innovative focus on transformation, decolonialisation, and Africanisation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

There is a significant increase in historiographical developments in the period after the Renaissance, and while the three "moderns" follow a pattern of succession on the one hand, there is also an interdependency, on the other. The scepticism, reason, analysis, and individualism of modernity underlines both postmodernity and, to some extent, metamodernity.

Modernity has put new tools in the church historian's toolbox. These include source criticism, the historical-critical method, liberation theology, and the teleological lens. Modernity also brought religious freedom and tolerance, the freedom of thought and speech, critique of organised religion, and the focus on religious experiences and total histories.

7 "The archival documentation for Africa is the oldest in the world: Whereas the Ravenna papyri, the oldest archival records preserved in Europe, date from the early sixth century of our era, the papyri of the Egyptian New Kingdom go back twenty centuries before that" (Djait 1981:93).

Post-modernity reacted against the intellectual assumptions of modernity and emphasised that society and culture are subjected to constant transformation and change. The role that language plays in historiography was acknowledged and numerous theories were developed, including deconstruction, structuralism, feminism, and the current popular progressive critical theory that aims to promote social change.

Metamodernity moved away from investigating past events to exploring the connections between the surviving traces from history and the results and implications of these events in order to construct meaning for both current readers as well as for what happened in the past.

Acknowledging that African historiography cannot be confined to a paragraph or two, a few lines are drawn to acknowledge Africa's contributions, on the one hand, and to point towards the role the continent can and should play in current and future global historiographical, philosophical, and historical endeavours, on the other.

Church historians have the obligation and privilege to ensure that they are aware of the different historiographical frameworks and development and to use the appropriate tools and principles in their research.

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