It’s complicated

by John Ottenhoff in the October 9, 2002 issue

The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture. By Mark C. Taylor. University of Chicago Press, 340 pp., $32.00.

Simplify, simplify, urged Thoreau, and that directive seems most timely in this age of explosive growth in technology. But Mark C. Taylor, professor of humanities at Williams College, argues persuasively in this learned and far-ranging book that simplicity is now an “idle dream.” Instead, we must understand and even embrace complexity. To do so, writes Taylor, we must “understand what makes this moment different from every other.”

Taylor makes his case by ranging over a host of related networks: modern architecture and art, critical literary theory, evolutionary theory, information systems and, perhaps most passionately, education. A prolific scholar of religion and philosophy, Taylor stays somewhat connected to the subjects of his previous works, which include *About Religion*: *Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture*, *Erring*: *A Postmodern A/theology*, *Deconstructing Theology* and *Journeys to Selfhood*: *Hegel and Kierkegaard*. But here his approach to religion is indirect; he asserts that “there is a religious dimension to all culture,” and “religion is often most intriguing and influential where it is least obvious.” In that sense, *The Moment of Complexity*, while having little to say about religious practice, is a most useful guide to contemporary beliefs and experience.

Complexity theory—not to be confused with chaos or catastrophe theories—takes as its starting point that “all significant change takes place between too much and too little order. When there is too much order, systems are frozen and cannot change, and when there is too little order, systems disintegrate and can no longer function.”

In repeatedly calling attention to systems that have become frozen—educational systems or contemporary critical theory, for instance—Taylor sounds notes of optimism. Toward the end of the chapter “Noise in Formation,” for instance, he writes, “Life is lived on the shifting margin, boundary, edge, between order and chaos, difference and indifference, negentropy [negative entropy] and entropy,

information and noise. The interplay of noise, which is informative, and information, which is noisy, creates the conditions for emerging complexity, which is the pulse of life." Calling upon Augustine as an exemplar for understanding "the paradoxes of subjectivity and dilemmas of thinking in emerging network culture," Taylor finds new "creative possibilities" opening up; network cultures are creating often unsettling changes in our ways of thinking and knowing, but he finds those changes ultimately invigorating.

Taylor's position as a humanities generalist will no doubt trouble some specialized scholars, but it affords the general reader an excellent entrée into several key conversations. Chapter one, "From Grid to Network," for instance, contrasts—perhaps too neatly—Mies van der Rohe's modernist grid, Robert Venturi's "postmodern" revolt, and Frank Gehry's "radical complexity" in buildings like the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Taylor convincingly argues that Gehry, using new software for new ways of conceptualizing and executing structures, epitomizes the "moment of complexity." Similarly, in another chapter he makes much of Chuck Close's complex paintings in which the closeup "noise" of individual pixel/grids gives way at a "tipping point" to coherent patterns and images. Close is of particular interest because he "subverts traditional binary oppositions: nonrealist/realist, universal/particular, general/detailed, flat/three-dimensional, purity/impurity."

The task of subverting binaries occupies Taylor through much of the book, seemingly connecting him to Jacques Derrida and deconstruction. But Taylor presents a trenchant critique of Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard. "Deconstruction changes nothing"; Derrida cannot fathom new network cultures and thus cannot imagine a "nontotalizing system or structure that nonetheless acts as a whole." Creative possibilities opened through new network culture are "transforming rather than destroying differences and oppositions that long seemed secure." Network culture cannot be understood unless we find new modes of criticism: we must "move beyond the struggle to undo what cannot be undone as well as the interminable mourning of what can never be changed."

Taylor's examination of information systems further exemplifies his approach. "Information," he points out, has become more obviously material, and "matter is informational." As a result, the Information Age is not simply about increasing abstraction or "dematerialization," as some have claimed. Instead, "the line between the material and the informational [has] become permeable" as "information processes become considerably more extensive." Further, getting back

to the fundamental definition of complexity, information can be seen as existing in the domain between too little and too much difference: “Information, in other words, is inversely proportional to probability: the more probable, the less information; the less probable, the more information. The definition of information in terms of improbability establishes its difference from redundancy.”

While *The Moment of Complexity* is often difficult going, Taylor usually writes with clarity and a good sense of his audience. He also writes with an agenda that seems at times both transcendental and utopian. To a great extent, that agenda is to shake his audience into understanding that we have to abandon “one of humankind’s most ancient dreams”—of reducing “complexity to simplicity.”

While pointing out that “the religious belief in simplicity does not die easily,” Taylor, unfortunately, does not explore the implications of his agenda for traditional Christian thought. More radically, “all the oppositions like form/matter, pattern/substance, culture/nature, virtuality/reality, which have structured thinking for centuries, must be reconceived. . . . What thinking requires is a new architecture of complexity that simultaneously embodies and articulates the incarnational logic of networking,” he writes. “Incarnational” seems an odd word here, but not if one embraces Taylor’s sense that in the breakdown of old binaries “mind is distributed throughout the world.”

Taylor’s vision of a world more thoughtful about complexity includes a transformed educational system, one that doesn’t eschew technology or simply embrace it simple-mindedly in the form of distance or distributed education. Universities must change, breaking down old binary notions of what’s useful or useless, unprofitable or profitable, pure or impure, belonging to the arts and science or the realm of professionalism.

Taylor himself has shown the way, working with the deep-pocketed investment banker Herbert Allen in creating the Global Education Network. “Try to imagine a university modeled on the architecture of a Frank Gehry rather than a Mies van der Rohe building. Is it possible to create an educational institution whose structure and function more closely approximate Nasdaq than a Ford assembly line?” Taylor asks.

And, in the end, Taylor urges, educators and critics must realize that “criticism that is not constructive is not adequate. If ‘No’ does not harbor ‘Yes,’ it should remain unspoken. In the moment of complexity, emerging network culture is creating not only perils but, more important, opportunities for individuals, and institutions who,

without losing their critical edge, are willing to say ‘Yes.’”