

# A Post-Modern Primer: A Guide for Perplexed Theology Students

By Ted Peters

Are you perplexed in conversations where terms such as *modernity*, *postmodernity*, *alterity*, *metanarrative*, *postcolonialism*, and *hybridity* are bandied about? Do you feel like everyone else is enjoying a party to which you did not receive an invitation? If so, this little *Theological Brief* may get you to the buffet table.

The first edition of *God—The World's Future* (GWF), published in 1992, included a reader line: “A Systematic Theology for a Post-Modern Era.” Because postmodernism seemed to lose votes during its midterm election, the publisher dropped this “postmodern” reference in the 2000 edition. It seems that our emerging global culture is orienting itself increasingly to the modern worldview, not the anticipated post-modern. Nevertheless, even if the postmodernists seem to be slipping behind, they’re still in the race. We still have time to vote before the election is over.

## From the Modern to the Post-Modern

What makes modern theology modern, among other things, is its appeal to the contextualization principle. Recall what we find in GWF: “Theologians explicate the meaning of Christian symbols with conscious attention to the understanding of reality regnant in the particular context within which they are working. The term *context* refers to the concept of reality dominant in a given cultural situation.”<sup>1</sup> Now watch out for the double-take: the context within which the modern and emerging postmodern theologian works today is the modern and emerging postmodern context, the very context which has given rise to the contextualization principle. Got it? This leads us to the Hermeneutical Question.

*How can the Christian faith, first experienced and symbolically articulated in an ancient culture now long out-of-date, speak meaningfully to human existence today as we experience it amid a worldview dominated by natural science, secular self-understanding, and the worldwide cry for freedom? GWF. 7.*

Every theologian is finite, unable to deal with each and every meaningful detail of a given cultural context. So, to narrow the scope of the theologian’s responsibility, we ask the theologian to address the “understanding of reality regnant in the particular context.” Not everything. Just the understanding of reality. This requires studying the worldview (*Weltanschauung*) or set of beliefs about reality regnant in a micro-context

<sup>1</sup> Ted Peters, *God—The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2000) 75; hereinafter GWF.

such as an organization or an academic discipline, or a macro-context such as an ethnic tradition, a language, an ideology, a national crisis, or the worldview prevalent of an age or aeon. The age or aeon of modern theology includes the modern European or Western context from the seventeenth century to the present.

We distinguish between gospel and culture. We also distinguish between theology and worldview. We distinguish them even if we cannot separate them. The paradox is that the gospel is independent of every culture; but it can only be expressed theologically through the language of one culture or another. Theologians too are cultural beings, just like the rest of us. Yet, we know that the gospel can travel from culture to culture, context to context, worldview to worldview, aeon to aeon. And the theologian operating at the level of critical consciousness can choose which worldview to identify with, or even to eschew every worldview on behalf of a concept of reality that is under theological construction. The theologian lies in a cultural bed, to be sure; but he or she can rise up at any point and remake the bed.

Modernity is one cultural context among many. Today's theologian can elect to think theologically in modern terms or not. Pre-modern worldviews sit in rows on intellectual shelves like brands of lap tops waiting for purchase. At least two brands of postmodernism—maybe three—are also being advertised. Neither has the software for theology pre-programmed. The theologian will have to install it.

The three brands of postmodernity we'll sample here are Type 1: deconstructionist postmodernism; type 2: holistic postmodernism; and type 3: emerging church postmodernism. The first two are treated in GWF, with the holistic brand billed to its theological credit card.

When reviewing these we need to keep in mind the hyphens and the "...isms." First, the hyphens. Steed Davidson observes that the term *post-modernity* with a hyphen suggests an era, the era which follows the pre-modern and modern eras. Without the hyphen, in contrast, *postmodern* is the adjective for *postmodernism*, a philosophical system or an ideology with a specific set of doctrines. This brings us, secondly, to the "...ism." If you find an "...ism" at the end of a word, you know it refers to an ideology, a scheme of thought, a doctrinal system. The more innocent terms, such as "modern consciousness" or "post-modernity," refer to a cultural wind, a *Zeitgeist*, a spirit of the times. In some cases, the post-modern cultural breeze has whipped up an ideological hurricane, leaving intellectual debris in its wake. In such cases, the "...ism" fits. [See David Wells on the distinction between post-modernity and postmodernism: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=us3AOS-OjCg&feature=related> .]

Each of the first two types of postmodern consciousness begins at the same historical juncture, namely, the split of the subject from the object in the philosophy of René Descartes (1596-1650). This split is identified frequently by postmodernists with a sneer and the words, "Cartesian dualism." Since Descartes' splitting of subject from object, Western culture has constructed a dualistic worldview which places thought forms and institutions under two separate categories, objectivity and subjectivity. Under

objectivity we place rationality, natural science, technological progress, value-free thinking, and such. Under subjectivity we place emotion, feeling, values, morality, art, and religion. We divide our universities into one college for the sciences and the other for the humanities. When theologians have become modern, they have found themselves restricted to the subjective side of the ledger and relegated to the humanities division in higher education. Modern theologians have accepted their ghettoization into subjective perspectivalism; and they respect the “no trespassing” signs protecting the objective rationality of the sciences. The modern Western mind is divided, fragmented. Humpty Dumpty got broken during the rise of the Western Enlightenment. Who will put Humpty Dumpty back together again? Can the postmodernists do it? If so, should the theologian try to work from within a postmodern worldview?<sup>2</sup> [See Bishop N.T. Wright on modernity and postmodernity: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4P3noKr2T1A> .]

### Postmodernity Type 1: The Deconstruction of Modernity

Along with the Statue of Liberty and croissants, the French have sent to North America their latest model of ennui, deconstructionist postmodernism. After all, it was a Frenchman, René Descartes, who originally broke apart our naive world of coherent meaning by splitting the subject from the object; so perhaps we should ask the French to put subjectivity and objectivity back together again. They have. Well, sort of. They reunited the two like a cheetah becomes united with a gazelle: subjectivity gobbled up objectivity. More precisely: social subjectivity gobbled up scientific objectivity.

Just how did they do it? What ingredients go into the deconstructionist recipe? Here is a list.

1. *Critique of Objectivity.* The Enlightenment heirs of Descartes sought to be rational, to treat scientific and other matters of truth objectively. To be rational or objective meant to rid objective judgments of one’s subjective preference, bias, prejudice, and vested interest. Detective Jack Webb’s famous line, “just the facts, madam,” sums it up. For modernists, objective truth should be public truth; whereas subjective preference or perspective should remain individual or private. In contrast, postmodernists claim that objective knowledge and unbiased public rationality do not exist in any pure form. The subject’s biases and prejudices cannot be expunged from rational deliberation. Objectivity is a delusion. Neutral observers do not exist. Descartes’ subject-object split is overcome by denying the possibility of objectivity, by folding the object back into the subject. The subjectivity into which objectivity is collapsed is not that of an individual person, however; but rather, it is the subjectivity of the group—that is, the vested interests of the cultural, linguistic, sociological, political, and economic group. What masquerades as public rationality is in fact the vested interests of one’s race, class, or social location.

Note the subtle de-centering of the self operative here. According to deconstructionist postmodernism, your and my self is a conduit for a linguistic tradition or social location to express itself through us. Our very individual subjectivity is

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<sup>2</sup> GWF, 17-22.

determined by our surrounding cultural context. Type 1 postmodernists shift their locus of subjectivity away from the individual self toward the group, the community.

2. *Truth as Particular, not Universal.* The Western European Enlightenment assumption was that the entire natural world is a single rational system and that, with the help of science, we could divest our selves of subjective prejudice and together apprehend the single set of universal truths. Postmoderns, in contrast, deny that what passes as facts and knowledge belong to a single universal and objective truth about reality. Rather, what we think of as facts or truth belongs to the particular cultural and social context within which we live and understand things. Science belongs to Western European culture, not to the diversity of cultures. Truth is relative, relative to our particular context. People living in different cultural contexts do not view the world in the same way. So, no single universal body of knowledge can count as a single universal truth. If members of Western society claim that their scientific picture of reality is objective and universal and that the worldviews of other societies may be dismissed as mere pre-scientific myths, then what appears as scientific knowledge functions hegemonically to repress if not oppress the apparently non-scientific societies. The recognition that all claims to truth are relative to their particular cultural context pulls the rug out from under the global hegemony of science.

3. *Non-Foundationalism.* Clear and distinct ideas, claimed Descartes, could be trusted because they were thought to correspond to objective reality. Reality provides the foundation. And reality can be accessed through perception and reason. However, “ideas that were clear and distinct to Descartes appear to others hopelessly vague or just plain false,” says philosophical theologian Nancey Murphy.<sup>3</sup> Perceptions vary, and reasoning is not uniform. Facts are context dependent, even theory dependent. The foundation for reliable truth is eroding. The result is a plurality of truths, separate truths for separate theories and separate cultural contexts. What!? Moderns retort in confusion: a plurality of truths is not truth at all; it’s only a collection of perspectives or opinions.

The question of truth is an important one. When we turn to holistic postmodernity, we will see how Descartes’ *correspondence* theory of truth has been replaced by postmodernists with a *coherence* theory of truth. For Descartes, the subjective ideas in his mind could be trusted as true if they correspond with reality, reality as objectively perceived. For the scientists who followed Descartes, empirical facts provide the foundation for these clear and distinct ideas. By pulling the rug out from under the objectivity of science, postmoderns must appeal to something other than unbiased reality to justify their own claims. They appeal instead to coherence, to the mutual implication of a web of ideas. This is a holistic strategy. Nancey Murphy puts it this way: “the new strategy differs...by recognizing *a complex mutual conditioning between part and whole.*”<sup>4</sup> Constructing a web of mutually cohering claims or beliefs replaces seeking truth through asking ideas in our minds to correspond to empirical

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<sup>3</sup> Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity* (Boulder CO: Westview, 1997) 20. “There appears to be an epistemological corollary of Murphy’s law at work: whenever the foundations are suitably indubitable, they will turn out to be useless for justifying any interesting claims; when we do find beliefs that are useful justifying the rest of the structure, they always turn out to be questionable.” Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 34.

reality. The new approach gets along quite well without a foundation in objective reality, thank you very much.

4. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Reality is not perceived. Rather, it is constructed. Modern consciousness mistakenly assumes that our language refers to an objective reality out there, beyond our subjectivity. Instead, says Jacques Derrida, our language is a self-contained subjective system that fosters the delusion that we understand the world out there. To say it another way, our language is not a photograph of the objective world; rather, it is our own work of art. The ‘logocentrism’ of the Enlightenment sought a clear transcendent reference represented by our words; but, says Derrida, it’s time to give that up and acknowledge that the picture of reality we draw linguistically is just that, a picture we ourselves have constructed.

Objective reality is not perceived and accounted for by our subjective minds, contend the postmodernists. Rather, it is constructed by our minds. And not by our individual minds alone. Rather, our subjective picture of reality is a projection shared by various members of a social group, a linguistic group, an ethnic group, a cultural group. Each culturally conditioned group tells its own stories, its own narratives, through which each generation understands itself within its own cultural context. If such a culturally particular narrative claims to be universal in scope—if it claims to be a narrative describing the whole of reality inclusive of differing cultures—then it is called a *metanarrative*. Constructing a metanarrative is a “no, no” for a deconstructionist postmodernist. This is because one group’s metanarrative unavoidably tramples on the particularity of other cultural groups. The telling of a metanarrative is a form of cultural hegemony or social imperialism, because it denies the right of each individual ethnic group to tell its own story and formulate its own self-understanding. “Metanarratives or grand narratives” may seem rational, argues Jean-Francois Lyotard; but in fact they provide a “legitimizing function” that justifies “populicide” such as that at Auschwitz.<sup>5</sup> [Check out a YouTube tape taking a stand in opposition to grand (meta)narratives: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9EsvykB8sY&feature=related> .]

5. *Deconstruction of the Social Construction of Reality*. The critical consciousness developed during the modern period is pressed into the service of postmodern deconstruction. The postmodernist points out the unacknowledged biases and prejudices and vested interests hidden in modern worldview construction. Deconstruction tries to unmask the power of dominant groups who sponsor worldviews that have been masking their illegitimate authority. What appears objective and rational to the modern mind is dismantled by showing that the rational picture of the natural world is actually perspectival; scientific theories are value-laden; secular political positions are not neutral but ideological; metanarratives are forms of intellectual imperialism; and religious missionaries violate the integrity of indigenous cultures. “Power and knowledge directly imply one another,” says Michel Foucault.<sup>6</sup> The revelatory questions the deconstructionist poses to each worldview and each truth claim include, who benefits?

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1992) 19.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977) 27.

who stands to gain if this is believed? [See Jacques Derrida on defining deconstruction: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgwOjjoYtco&feature=related> ; A Comedian on Postmodernism..... <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTSKU0FgZts&feature=related> .].

6. *Alterity and Hybridity.* Type 1 postmodernists express a strong ethical concern for the *other*, for the other person and the other culture. The problem with metanarratives is that they sweep up others into one's own story and deny them roles as the other, the stranger, the different one. *Alterity* or 'otherness' alerts us to our responsibility to treat the other with his or her contextual integrity in tact.

This leads to the postcolonial notion of hybridity, which refers to dialogical partnerships between representatives of differing cultural contexts joined together for creative enterprises. Hybridity requires that partners retain their individual or contextual uniqueness while working together. When representatives of previously colonized peoples work with their former colonizers, they can deconstruct the former ideology of colonization and create a new partnership characterized by equality and justice. This method includes fostering the speaking of many voices without prejudging which speaks the single universal truth. Each voice is listened to and respected for its truth, its respective contextual truth.

Postcolonial hybridity poses a special challenge to modern rationalists, especially scientists, for whom the language of science establishes a global metanarrative. Many peer reviewed scientific papers in journals such as *Nature* or *Science* will have multiple authors, because experiments are frequently team efforts. It is not unusual for a single scientific paper to list a dozen names of scientists working together from the UK, Europe, North America, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Australia, Egypt and countries in other climes. Yet, this does not count as hybridity; because these international collaborators do not represent their respective cultural contexts. Rather, they participate in a single global sub-culture of scientific researchers.

Have you ever seen a conniption fit? If you'd like to, try this. Enter a physics laboratory and tell the physicist that the equations you see on the chalk board are culturally biased. Or, enter a microbiology laboratory and tell the geneticist that the results of the experiments he or she has just written up are a social construction. Be ready to run for the door, because flying petri dishes and test tubes will be coming after you.

7. *Liberation.* Socially constructed metanarratives enslave the underclass while privileging those in authority, say Type 1 postmodernists. After asking about who benefits, the oppressors can be identified and challenged. Deconstruction is here pressed into the service of liberation, the reconstruction of a revolutionary contextual narrative that includes equality and justice. Theologian Pamela Cooper-White describes the inner logic of the postmodern position: "truths should only be accepted *as* true to the degree that their explanatory power is liberative of the marginalized and the oppressed, rather than reinforcing existing structures and institutions of power that continue to harm people, creatures, and the planet through self-serving paradigms of domination and control."<sup>7</sup> Here we discern two sets of truths: first, the truths indigenous to the original

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<sup>7</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, *Many Voices: Pastoral Psychotherapy in Relational and Theological Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 16.

cultural context plus, second, the granting of truth status only to those within the first set of truths that are deemed liberative.

### Type 1 Postmodernism and Theology

It is difficult for me to imagine just how a Christian theologian could explicate the classic Christian faith within the conceptual framework of deconstructive postmodernism. The Christian's commitment to belief in a single God responsible for the wellbeing of the entire creation inherently surges toward a metanarrative, toward universals rather than particulars. The late Stanley Grenz makes this point forcefully. "Because of our faith in Christ, we cannot totally affirm the central tenet of postmodernism...the rejection of the metanarrative....There *is* a single metanarrative encompassing all peoples and all times....We simply cannot allow Christianity to be relegated to the status of one more faith among others. The gospel is inherently an expansive missionary message. We believe not only that the biblical narrative makes sense for *us* but is also good news for *all*."<sup>8</sup>

Still, we must ask whether the theologian should flirt with the type 1 postmodernist. The fashionable postmodernist might appear attractive because deconstructionism represents an interpretation of reality, albeit a strictly human or subjectivist reality. To their credit, some contemporary thinkers are attempting to marry Christian commitments with the deconstructionist perspective. We'll identify briefly four examples: Jesus as deconstructionist; distinguishing an idol from the true God; gift theology; and postmodern pastoral care.

The first example is that offered by Syracuse University philosopher John D. Caputo. Caputo wants to employ our memory of Jesus to deconstruct the contemporary church, to render a form of prophetic judgment against church authority and middle class bias. Deconstruction becomes here "the hermeneutics of the *kingdom* of God...an interpretive style that helps get at the prophetic spirit of Jesus."<sup>9</sup> What Jesus would deconstruct, says Caputo, is "the whole commercial operation of spiritual and very real money-making Christian capitalists."<sup>10</sup> The church should foster love for the 'other' and serve justice, he contends. Deconstructive theology "announces the good news about alterity, which it bears to the church. It has prophetic resonances that call for justice to flow like water over the land."<sup>11</sup> [Watch "What Would Jesus Deconstruct" discussion: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hro\\_IWXNjSE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hro_IWXNjSE) ].

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 164-165, author's italics.

<sup>9</sup> John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2007) 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. This prompts me to register some thoughts about justice. For Plato, for St. Anselm, and for the European Enlightenment, justice was a reality built into the rational structure of the universe. Justice was not merely one value among others, relegated to the ghetto of subjectivity. For deconstructionist postmodernists, however, justice cannot have objective status let alone exist as a metaphysical reality. "Justice in itself does not exist but it is something we demand and something that is demanded of us. Justice is what we call for and something that calls on us." *Ibid.*, 64. Justice is an impossible dream that calls us toward it. "Justice in itself is an unconditional demand, but of itself it has no flesh and bones, no force, no teeth." *Ibid.*, 63. Justice is undeconstructible. Evidently, what is deconstructible is any human attempt to approximate justice that falls short of justice. Exactly why type 1 postmodernists hold over the

Our second example is the employment of deconstruction to distinguish a socially constructed image of God—an idol—from the truly transcendent God. Luther previously said that faith (our subjectivity) makes both God and idol; because as human subjects we can place our trust and devotion in rather mundane this-worldly things, treating them as if they were the ultimate God. Jean-Luc Marion puts it this way: ‘the gaze alone makes an idol...the gaze makes the idol, not the idol the gaze.’<sup>12</sup> It is impossible for us to grasp conceptually the God who transcends the deity of our socially constructed and linguistically constructed scheme. God cannot be expressed as being, Being, essence, or even via a divine name. We must first approach the God “who reveals himself as agape in Christ” in silence and then allow our speech to be reborn.<sup>13</sup>

Our third example is gift theology, a school of thought which is especially attractive to European Lutheran theologians who place a high priority on God’s unconditional grace in both creation and redemption. The argument begins with the postmodern deconstruction of the practice of gift-giving and gift-receiving. Jacques Derrida, among others, identifies the aporia: if I give you a gift, then I look good and put you in debt to me. However, if this is to be a genuine gift, there cannot be any reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or enduring debt. By my giving you a gift, my social standing increases and you are placed into a situation where you owe me gratitude.<sup>14</sup> In sum, there are no free gifts.

Well, what’s a befuddled theologian to do? Isn’t God’s grace the premier example of a free gift, exempt from human debt or reciprocity? Ouch! “Even God giving freely to the creatures is, in terms of this interpretation, attempting to win support or exercise power over creatures through creating relationships of obligation and dependence,” pines Helsinki’s Risto Saarinen. “The language of gift giving has thus become vulnerable.”<sup>15</sup> What to do? Saarinen turns his attention to the recipient, to us who are receivers of divine grace. Rather than describe our reception of divine gifts as passive, he tries to follow a path led by this observation: “giving is only meaningful when there is active receiving.”<sup>16</sup> Where might this path lead?

Our fourth example comes from pastoral theology. Pamela Cooper-White pursues her craft “from a postmodern, relational-psychoanalytic perspective.”<sup>17</sup> Decisive here is her reliance upon the principle of contextualization and her rejection of the metanarrative. “All truths must be evaluated in light of the particular context out of which they arise, and their generalizability to other contexts must be explicitly questioned and evaluated in light of the other truths that may already exist in these other contexts. As a pastoral

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modern commitment to justice as a universal rather than consign it to contextual particularity is not made clear, at least to my reading.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Risto Saarinen, *God and the Gift* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2005) 18. See: Marion, *God Without Being*, 100-107.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, *Many Voices: Pastoral Psychotherapy in Relational and Theological Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 3.



theologian, moreover, I maintain that this is a spiritual discipline at heart, a *habitus*, in which there is a recognition that all truths must be continually evaluated in the light of post-Holocaust, post-Apartheid ethics.”<sup>18</sup>

### Postmodernity Type 2: The Reconstruction of Wholeness

Recall how in GWF we offered a postmodern amendment to the Hermeneutical Question: *how can the Christian faith be made intelligible amid an emerging postmodern consciousness that, although driven by a thirst for both individual and cosmic wholeness, still affirms and extends such modern themes as evolutionary progress, future consciousness, and individual freedom?* Note two things. First, post-modernity continues and extends certain modern themes without dismissing them. Second, the agenda of GWF includes the contextualization of its constructive theological scheme within type 2 post-modernity, holistic postmodernism.

The cardinal doctrine of holistic postmodernism is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. This key observation applies especially to living organisms, where a living being is much more than the collection of chemicals constituting its physical body. Each of us human persons cannot be reduced to the biological materials and processes that make us up; nor can we be reduced to a mere representative of our social location, our language, ethnic heritage, race, class, or whatever.

How do holists intend to overcome Cartesian dualism, especially the split between subject and object? Recall that the deconstructionists virtually eliminate objectivity, leaving us to attend strictly to subjectivity, in this case group subjectivity. The holists, in contrast, maintain both terms, subject and object; but they try to reunite them. If the Enlightenment broke Humpty Dumpy, holistic postmodernists want to put all the parts of Humpty Dumpy back together again.

Holist postmodernists seek a way to overcome dichotomization, division, separation, fragmentation, estrangement, alienation, all of which they blame on the Cartesian dualism of the modern period. The root division is between objective reason, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, subjective feeling, emotion, valuing, love, compassion, perspective, and such. The holist presses the point that what happens within our subjectivity belongs properly to knowledge, even objective knowledge. Agreeing in part with the deconstructionists, holists say it is a delusion to think that we can divest objective knowledge of its subjective component. No neutral or unconditioned standpoint for viewing reality exists. No one approaches knowing denuded of presuppositions, prejudices, or biases. Nevertheless, objective knowing is affirmed as a process of growing understanding. Here is the key observation: subjective prejudices in the form of pre-judgments make it possible to launch an experiment to confirm or disconfirm this pre-supposition. It takes pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*)--even if it comes in the form of a pre-judgment (*Vorurteilung*)--to construct a hypothesis and to launch an inquiry in which understanding can grow into knowledge. In short, subjective prejudice actually contributes to the growth of objective knowledge.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

What about emotions? Values? Beliefs? Convictions? Caring? These too contribute to human insight and understanding. Sometimes love and compassion actually make understanding certain truths possible. Only a mother who cares about her child will suspect that certain symptoms require a trip to the hospital urgent care center. Sometimes her worried suspicions are confirmed and her race to the hospital justified.

In sum, holist postmodernists want a more nuanced and subtle analysis of the interaction between human subjectivity and the acquiring of inter-subjective or objective knowledge. Objective reasoning and scientific knowing are not obliterated by the holists. Rather, they are taken up into a more complex understanding of the interaction of subjects and objects.

### Constructive Holism

In one way or another, the holists assert that subject and object are united at a deep level, one deeper than the level on which they appear to be separated. Despite the appearance that subject and object are separate, they in fact belong to a single encompassing reality, holists contend. How can this be the case? Here we will look briefly at three schools of thought, each with its own way.

One way is spiritual. Human subjectivity and the objective world are both said to be aspects of a single more encompassing oneness or unity that can be known only through mystical experience. This is the path taken by retrievers of the perennial philosophy such as Huston Smith<sup>19</sup> and by New Age spirituality.<sup>20</sup> The latter, New Age spirituality, draws a picture of cosmic wholeness undergoing enhancement through a convergence of biological evolution and mental involution leading to a future point wherein all will realize their unity with the All. Accordingly, the alienation or estrangement we feel in our daily life is only superficial, because the deeper reality is that we are all one with one another and with the whole of reality. Ecstatic experiences or meditation or ritual help us to get in touch with the healing whole that lies below the surface.

A second way is metaphysical. Whiteheadian process philosophers construct a postmodern metaphysical scheme in which the most basic elements--actual occasions--already have a mental and a physical pole and are internally related to one another. Everything is related to everything else. There is no metaphysical reason to individuate, divide, separate, or alienate. "No feature of postmodern spirituality is emphasized more than the reality of internal relations," writes process theologian David Griffin. "An individual does not first exist as a self-contained entity with various qualities on the basis of which he or she then has superficial interactions with other beings which do not affect his or her essence. The relations one has with one's body, one's larger natural environment, one's family, and one's culture are instead *constitutive* of one's very identity."<sup>21</sup> Process thinkers use organic metaphors rather than mechanistic metaphors to

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<sup>19</sup> Huston Smith, *Beyond the Postmodern Mind* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

<sup>20</sup> Ted Peters, *The Cosmic Self* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> David Ray Griffin, editor, *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions* (Albany NY: SUNY, 1988) 14.

describe reality. “A second feature of postmodern spirituality is its organicism, through which it simultaneously transcends modern dualism and modern materialism.”<sup>22</sup> All of reality is an organic whole, and each of us is internally related to each other and the whole. This leads Griffin to reject both supernaturalism and atheism. In its place he affirms “*naturalistic panentheism*, according to which the world is present in deity and deity is present in the world.”<sup>23</sup>

A third way is that followed by the hermeneutical philosophers, according to whom the subject and object are linguistic abstractions from our more concrete human experience of being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-sein*, or *Dasein*). Our primal experience of being-in-the-world comes first to expression in the symbols of our respective historical tradition. As linguistic beings, our primal human experiences are meaningful in large part because they are co-extensive with the meaning we have inherited in the language we are learning to speak. No retrodictive analysis can get to a level of human understanding prior to, or more basic than, our symbolic self-understanding, a self-understanding that is already informed by our tradition. To understand our subjectivity in an objective fashion, we need to analyze the history of the symbols which convey our self-understanding. This is the task of hermeneutics, the art of interpretation.

The hermeneutical school of thought begins in Germany and moves to France. It begins with Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer and moves through Paul Ricoeur to his Parisian students including, among others, Jacques Derrida. Curiously, both the hermeneutical philosophers and the deconstructionists are leaves sprouting from the same Heideggerian tree. Perhaps by this time you have noted how the method of explicating the Christian symbols pursued in the second chapter of GWF relies upon the hermeneutical holism of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur.

In our postmodern amendment to the hermeneutical question we note that some modern themes hang on and don't go away: evolutionary progress, future consciousness, and individual freedom. Evolutionary biology and our concept of holism have come together like ice cream in a waffle cone. The concept of holism as we employ it today originates with a 1926 book by South African philosopher Jan C. Smuts, *Holism and Evolution*. Smuts distinguished two distinct understandings of cosmic process or progress, the unfolding view and the epigenetic view. The first presumes that the essence of reality already existed at the beginning, at the *arche*. Like a seed sprouting, the expansion of the universe and the growth of life on our planet unfolds its original potential. In contrast, the epigenetic view sees genuinely new realities emerging over time. New and more complex biological organisms emerge from previous more simple materials. Whole beings emerge in time from chemical parts.

The natural world is creative, epigenetically creative. Our world is “a real progressive creation still going forward in the universe” so that “the sum of reality” is not constant but is “progressively increasing in the course of evolution...its new forms are not merely fashioned out of the old materials; it creates both new materials and new

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 17.

forms from the synthesis of the new with the old materials.”<sup>24</sup> This cosmology combines essential temporality with emergent creativity. This is a dynamic or emergent holism, not a static mystical one. Without endorsing the doctrine of progress which relies upon some entelechy built into natural processes, GWF embraces emergent holism as a way to describe God’s ongoing creative work in, with, and under the ever transforming cosmos.

The theologian’s work, according to GWF, requires ecumenic interaction with regnant views of reality outside the church. Modern Science is given pride of place in Western society for painting our inherited picture of reality. Type 2 postmodernism provides an opening for dialogue between theology and science. Even though David Ray Griffin operates out of a specifically Whiteheadian metaphysical scheme, what he says about holistic postmodernism and science applies more generally. “This postmodern worldview provides the basis for a new alliance between science and theology. While modern science was necessarily at odds with theology, postmodern science will be supportive of postmodern theology.”<sup>25</sup> Under postmodern assumptions, the Cartesian gulf between the sciences and the humanities can be readied for a bridge to connect both sides of the chasm.

GWF insists on making this point: the Christian gospel can be proclaimed and theology can be constructed within the context of any of our historic worldviews: pre-modern, modern, or post-modern. From a theological point of view, each of these three options have equal value. Our focus is on the God who transcends our worldview, not on the worldview itself. There is no specifically theological reason for preferring modernity or post-modernity over pre-modernity.

Even though the theologian must interpret the gospel in the language and conceptuality of one or another worldview, the gospel is not simply stuck in one or the other. In order to speak meaningfully to persons in our age or aeon, it is prudent stewardship for the contemporary theologian to formulate Christian commitments in the language of modern and emerging post-modern culture.

### Postmodernity Type 3: The Emerging & Emergent Church

What does “postmodern” mean in today’s evangelical Christian community? It appears on the surface to mean an LCD screen, six electric guitars plus a drum, and a preacher with an open collar. But, it is more. Evangelicals are asking conscientiously how to live the life of faith within an emerging postmodern—deconstructionist—culture. A fight is breaking out, just like the fights over doctrine during the Inquisition and the Reformation. Does a theology which is articulated within a Type 1 postmodern context constitute heresy?

Where is the boxing ring located? Here’s what Wikipedia says about the ‘emerging’ or ‘emergent’ church.

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<sup>24</sup> J.C. Smuts, *Holism and Evolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1926, and CapeTown: N. & S. Press, 1987) 89.

<sup>25</sup> David Ray Griffin and Huston Smith, *Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology* (Albany NY: SUNY, 1989) 48.

The *emerging church* (sometimes referred to as the *emergent movement*) is a [Christian](#) movement of the late 20th and early 21st century that crosses a number of theological boundaries: participants can be described as [evangelical](#), [post-evangelical](#), [anabaptist](#), [liberal](#), [post-liberal](#), [reformed](#), [charismatic](#), [neocharismatic](#), post-charismatic, [conservative](#), and post-conservative. Proponents, however, believe the movement transcends such "modernist" labels of "conservative" and "liberal," calling the movement a "conversation" to emphasize its developing and decentralized nature, its vast range of standpoints, and its commitment to dialogue. Participants seek to live their faith in what they believe to be a "[postmodern](#)" society. What those involved in the conversation mostly agree on is their disillusionment with the organized and institutional church and their support for the [deconstruction](#) of [modern](#) Christian [worship](#), modern [evangelism](#), and the nature of modern Christian [community](#). [ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerging\\_church](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerging_church)]

The debate within American evangelicalism is over this question: should Christian leadership draw Type 1 postmodernism into the church and interpret theological commitments from within this context? The fight is heating up. To watch the fight take some time to access the internet. Try these below.

On hermeneutics and a blast against biblical inerrancy in the name of postmodern thinking, see the Biologos website, especially Kenton Sparks' "After Inerrancy: Evangelicals and the Bible in a Postmodern Age." <http://biologos.org/blog/after-inerrancy-evangelicals-and-the-bible-in-a-postmodern-age-part-1/>

Check out Mark Driscoll on "how to do church in a postmodern world." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcCUDlBaZig&feature=related> .

Reformed evangelical critics of creeping Type 1 postmodernism sound off in "Let's Talk Post-Modernism in the Emergent Church." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gV6uxCch7oc> .

Beware! Avoid danger! Watch: "10 Signs You Have Just Entered a Postmodern Church," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59Fr-FBstaE&feature=related> .

### Conclusion

The intention of this *Theological Brief* is akin to that of a Sunday Morning worship bulletin, namely, to outline what is happening. Hopefully, this outline aids you in singing at the right time.

