

Constructive Postmodern
Views of Modernity:
David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee,
Joe Holland, and Frederick Ferré

What is modernity? According to the black Atlantic scholarship instructed by Paul Gilroy and Charles H. Long (more about Gilroy and Long in chapter 2), one of the most distinguishing features of modernity has been the increasing commodification of creation, such that tens of millions of humans have had the distinctively modern experience of becoming a commodity, a private property purchased for utility and profit via free market transactions and shipped as cargo across the Atlantic ocean. This is not the usual scholarly view of modernity, not even among postmodern scholars.

David Ray Griffin

In the introduction to each of the books in the SUNY series in Constructive Postmodern Thought, series editor Griffin says, “postmodernism refers to a diffuse sentiment rather than to any common set of doctrines—the sentiment that humanity can and must go beyond the modern.” For Griffin, *modernism* is the worldview “developed out of the seventeenth century Galilean-Cartesian-Baconian-Newtonian science,” and *modernity* is “the world order that both conditioned and was conditioned by this worldview” (RSPP, x; VPT, xii).

Modern worldviews support and are supported by destructive aspects of modern existence. Griffin identifies some of modernity's destructive aspects in saying, "Going beyond the modern world will involve transcending its individualism, anthropocentrism, patriarchy, mechanization, economism, consumerism, nationalism, and militarism" (RSPP, xi; VPT, xiii). "Imperialism" and "nuclearism" are also named as destructive aspects of modernity supported by modern theism (GRPW, 132).¹ Griffin says contemporary postmodern movements differ most decisively from previous antimodern movements on account of present awareness that "*the continuation of modernity threatens the very survival of life on our planet*" (RSPP, xi; VPT, xiii).² Accordingly, postmodernism sees an urgent need to "go beyond the modern" (RSPP, x; VPT, xii).

Going beyond the modern includes going beyond modern theology. Postmodernism includes postmodern theology. Concerning modern theology, Griffin says:

Modern theology, it can be agreed, sought to articulate the essence of the biblical faith in a *context* in which the general cultural consciousness was assumed to be shaped by the *modern worldview*, and in which a *rational, objective approach to reality*, through the natural and social sciences, was assumed to support the modern worldview. The varieties of *modern theology* represented different strategies for "*doing theology*" *within that context*, which at first glance seemed to make theology impossible. (VPT, 1-2)

Modern theology adjusted to the context of modernity, especially to modern scientific views of the world. Going beyond the modern includes going beyond modern theological adjustments to modernity.³

In *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*, coauthored with William A. Beardslee and Joe Holland, Griffin identifies four basic types of postmodern theology, with two versions of each type. The four basic types of postmodern theology are "(1) constructive (or revisionary), (2) deconstructive (or eliminative), (3) liberationist, and (4) restorationist (or conservative)" (VPT, 3). Each type seeks to overcome "that noble and flawed enterprise called modern theology," but they differ significantly in their approaches (VPT, 1).

Griffin, Beardslee, and Holland favor the constructive type of postmodern theology. One version of constructive postmodern theology is instructed by the philosophies of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000). Another version is instructed by the philosophy of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Griffin and Beardslee are Whiteheadian. Holland is Teilhardian.

The constructive type of postmodern theology is, says Griffin, “the specifically theological dimension of the constructive postmodern thought to which this series is devoted” (VPT, 3). The constructive postmodernism to which the SUNY series is devoted “seeks to overcome the modern worldview . . . by constructing a postmodern worldview . . . a creative synthesis of modern and premodern truths and values” (VPT, xii–xiii). In accordance with this general constructive postmodern approach to all modern studies, a constructive postmodern approach to theological studies seeks to overcome the errors and inadequacies of modern theology by constructing a postmodern theology.

A similar view of modernity and postmodernism is presented by Beardslee and Holland.

William A. Beardslee

In “Christ In The Postmodern Age: Reflections Inspired by Jean-Francois Lyotard” (VPT, Chapter 4),⁴ Beardslee distinguishes between narrow and broad senses of “modern.” The narrow sense refers to early twentieth-century art and culture. The broader sense “refers to the period begun by Galileo, Descartes, and Newton, a period that continued into the nineteenth-century rationalism and scientism which are still so influential today” (VPT, 63). Beardslee identifies the “deterministic model of reality” derived from “Newtonian science” as the “single most pervasive factor” of the modern age (VPT, 64). Accordingly, the broad sense of postmodern means “breaking away from the determinism of the modern worldview” (VPT, 64).

Joe Holland

In “The Postmodern Paradigm and Contemporary Catholicism” (VPT, chapter 2), Holland identifies four stages in the historical development of Western culture: “primal, classical, modern, and postmodern” (VPT, 25, 98–108). Concerning the modern stage, he says, “The modern world as a coherent period of social history began seminally with the sixteenth century, matured after the eighteenth century, and now in the late twentieth century is coming to an end” (VPT, 10).

According to Holland, “the destructive side” of modernity became clear “[o]nly in the twentieth century” (VPT, 11). Holland identifies World War I as “the first major expression” of modernity’s clearly destructive side, and he identifies the rise of capitalist and socialist

totalitarian states, Nazi genocide, and World War II as subsequent twentieth-century expressions of that destructive side (VPT, 11). Other more recent expressions of modernity's destructive side identified by Holland include ecological, sociological, and nuclear destruction, poverty (including the creation of a "structural underclass"), and "deepening secularization" (VPT, 11–12). Holland concludes:

Thus, we see the negative climax of the modern scientific promise of freedom and progress: even more destructive wars, threats of nuclear annihilation, genocide, totalitarianism, ecological poisoning, erosion of community, marginalization of the poor, and public suppression of religious Mystery. . . . What emerged in the eighteenth century as a bold dream converts itself dialectically in the late twentieth century into a frightening nightmare. This is the cultural end of the modern world. . . . (VPT, 12)

The destructive side of modernity requires a search for a "postmodern vision" (VPT, 18). Holland perceives "postmodern patterns" and a postmodern paradigm "emerging in the praxis" of the Catholic Church (VPT, 19, 22–23).⁵

Frederick Ferré

In contrast to the theological varieties of postmodern thought identified by Griffin in *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*, some varieties of postmodern thought are not theological. To be sure, there is a non-theological version of constructive postmodern metaphysics in the SUNY series in constructive postmodern thought edited by Griffin—Frederick Ferré's *Being and Value: Toward a Constructive Postmodern Metaphysics*.

While not affirming or denying the existence of God, Ferré views modernity in ways similar to constructive postmodern theologians such as Griffin, Beardslee, and Holland. For Ferré, the founders and shapers of modernity were philosophers, logicians, mathematicians, astronomers, and other kinds of scientists, inventors, and technological innovators (BV).⁶ According to Ferré, the "influence of modern science" distinguished "European technologies" from other technologies, and "such new technologies have in turn transformed large portions of our world into what is sometimes, by extension, called *modern scientific civilization*" (SSPV, 133). Modernity's most distinguishing feature is the influence of modern science and science-based technologies.⁷

Theological and nontheological varieties of constructive postmodernism view modernity with major emphasis upon the influences of science, especially “seventeenth century Galilean-Cartesian-Baconian-Newtonian science” (RSPP, x; VPT, xii). I present a different view of modernity in the next chapter.⁸