Postmodernism and Public Policy
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POSTMODERNISM
AND
PUBLIC POLICY

Reframing Religion, Culture, Education, Sexuality, Class, Race, Politics, and the Economy

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Preface

In the twentieth century, in connection with changes in the sciences, in religion, and in the wider culture there emerged a movement that David Griffin has well labeled “constructive postmodernism.” A number of philosophers have contributed. Of these, some of us believe that Alfred North Whitehead has provided the most systematic and profound conceptuality. Those who follow these philosophers remain on the fringe of the philosophical community, but some of their central ideas have emerged independently through the ecological and feminist movements, the encounter with primal and Eastern religious traditions, and the new physics. If these developments continue, the new century may see something like constructive postmodernism emerge as a strong, even dominant, force.

Like other comprehensive ways of thinking, this one has important implications for thought and action in all fields. Because constructive postmodernism is quite different from earlier philosophies such as Cartesian and Kantian forms of dualism, so are its implications. As one whose understanding has been captured by this kind of thinking, I have for many years been interested in exploring these implications.

David Griffin suggested that I write a book for this series that would summarize some of the proposals I have made in more detailed consideration of various topics in other books. A good deal of this book does just that on such topics as Christian theology, religious pluralism, ecology, and economics. Griffin has argued that theology in the constructive postmodern mode must be “public” in two senses: “it must make its case in terms of the criteria of self-consistency and adequacy to generally accessible facts of experience, and it must be directly relevant to matters of public policy.”1 This book intends to be that kind of theology.

Seeking to be public in the second sense led me to treat topics to which I have not given sustained attention in the past. These include education, gender, and race. On these topics I turned for help to Mary
Elizabeth Moore, Catherine Keller, and Thandeka. I am greatly indebted to all of them for careful reading of portions of the manuscript and for their criticisms and suggestions. Although the discussion of race still includes features with which Thandeka disagrees, her rigorous and insightful comments on several previous drafts have led me to fresh thinking and new formulations. My debt to her is particularly large, and I have yet much to learn from her.

I am also indebted to David Griffin. He read an early version of my manuscript and made many valuable criticisms and suggestions. He gave me special assistance in the chapter on governance. Because of his counsel, this is a very different book from what I first wrote. The staff of the Center for Process Studies, including a visitor from Hungary, Gabor Karsai, gone the second mile in helping me.

One of Griffin’s reasons for inviting me to write this book was interest on the part of some Chinese constructive postmodernists. A translation into Chinese is in process. Being aware of this has also made me aware of how parochially American much of the book is. Several chapters deal only with the specifically American situation, and all reflect a perspective shaped by an American’s experience. Perhaps, however, this is as it should be. The problems people face differ from culture to culture. To write chiefly about what is common to all cultures would lead to a level of high abstraction that might still remain distorting when applied to a different culture from one’s own. The task is for all of us to approach the issues that face us in terms of the reality of our own communities. Often we can be stimulated and informed by what thinkers in other communities are doing. Perhaps, therefore, these examples of how an American works with a postmodern perspective can be of help in encouraging Chinese to find value in constructive postmodernisms in their quite different situation.

Although my suggestions on the various topics discussed in this book are heavily shaped by my appropriation of Whitehead’s postmodern worldview, this does not mean that the implications I draw are dictated by that vision. Other thinkers who belong to the same general stream of thought will properly challenge the implications I have drawn for the topics discussed. The ensuing discussions should sharpen, clarify, and deepen our collective thinking.

Much is at stake. From my point of view as a constructive postmodernist, the major orientations that now dominate the university and the general culture—namely, early modernism with its doctrine of separate realms, late modernism with its materialism and atheism, and de-
constructive postmodernism, which does not go far to provide a constructive alternative to these modernisms—are not helpful in treating some of the most critical issues of our time, especially human relations with the natural world. Unless a larger part of the cultural elite, as well as popular thinking and feeling, give much more attention to our internal relationships with one another and the wider world, the prospects for future life on this planet are bleak. To make clear that constructive postmodern thought makes a real difference in how we view our world, I have written this book. Perhaps some who are not interested in the philosophical debates as such may still join in supporting the practical and political implications of constructive postmodernism. Perhaps, also, some who appreciate the need to move beyond the modern world, but who have thought that move involved the rejection of every type of metaphysics, will see that there is an inclusive vision of reality that is supportive of many of their concerns and insights.
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Introduction to SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought

The rapid spread of the term postmodern in recent years witnesses to a growing dissatisfaction with modernity and to an increasing sense that the modern age not only had a beginning but can have an end as well. Whereas the word modern was almost always used until quite recently as a word of praise and as a synonym for contemporary, a growing sense is now evidenced that we can and should leave modernity behind—in fact, that we must if we are to avoid destroying ourselves and most of the life on our planet.

Modernity, rather than being regarded as the norm for human society toward which all history has been aiming and into which all societies should be ushered—forcibly if necessary—is instead increasingly seen as an aberration. A new respect for the wisdom of traditional societies is growing as we realize that they have endured for thousands of years and that, by contrast, the existence of modern civilization for even another century seems doubtful. Likewise, modernism as a worldview is less and less seen as The Final Truth, in comparison with which all divergent worldviews are automatically regarded as “superstitious.” The modern worldview is increasingly relativized to the status of one among many, useful for some purposes, inadequate for others.

Although there have been antimodern movements before, beginning perhaps near the outset of the nineteenth century with the Romanticists and the Luddites, the rapidity with which the term postmodern has become widespread in our time suggests that the antimodern sentiment is more extensive and intense than before, and also that it includes the sense that modernity can be successfully overcome only by going beyond it, not by attempting to return to a premodern form of existence. Insofar as a common element is found in the various ways in which the

1. The present version of this introduction is slightly different from the first version, which was contained in the volumes that appeared prior to 1999.
term is used, *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.

Beyond connoting this sentiment, the term *postmodern* is used in a confusing variety of ways, some of them contradictory to others. In artistic and literary circles, for example, postmodernism shares in this general sentiment but also involves a specific reaction against “modernism” in the narrow sense of a movement in artistic-literary circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Postmodern architecture is very different from postmodern literary criticism. In some circles, the term *postmodern* is used in reference to that potpourri of ideas and systems sometimes called *new age metaphysics*, although many of these ideas and systems are more premodern than postmodern. Even in philosophical and theological circles, the term *postmodern* refers to two quite different positions, one of which is reflected in this series. Each position seeks to transcend both *modernism*, in the sense of the worldview that has developed out of the seventeenth-century Galilean-Cartesian-Baconian-Newtonian science, and *modernity*, in the sense of the world order that both conditioned and was conditioned by this worldview. But the two positions seek to transcend the modern in different ways.

Closely related to literary-artistic postmodernism is a philosophical postmodernism inspired variously by physicalism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, a cluster of French thinkers—including Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Julia Kristeva—and certain features of American pragmatism.² By the use of terms that arise out of particular segments of this movement, it can be called deconstructive, relativistic, or eliminative postmodernism. It overcomes the modern worldview through an antiworldview, deconstructing or even entirely eliminating various concepts that have generally been thought

2. The fact that the thinkers and movements named here are said to have inspired the deconstructive type of postmodernism should not be taken, of course, to imply that they have nothing in common with constructive postmodernists. For example, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Derrida, and Deleuze share many points and concerns with Alfred North Whitehead, the chief inspiration behind the present series. Furthermore, the actual positions of the founders of pragmatism, especially William James and Charles Peirce, are much closer to Whitehead’s philosophical position—see the volume in this series entitled *The Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy: Peirce, James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Hartshorne*—than they are to Richard Rorty’s so-called neopragmatism, which reflects many ideas from Rorty’s explicitly physicalistic period.
necessary for a worldview, such as self, purpose, meaning, a real world, givenness, reason, truth as correspondence, universally valid norms, and divinity. While motivated by ethical and emancipatory concerns, this type of postmodern thought tends to issue in relativism. Indeed, it seems to many thinkers to imply nihilism. It could, paradoxically, also be called *ultramodernism*, in that its eliminations result from carrying certain modern premises—such as the sensationist doctrine of perception, the mechanistic doctrine of nature, and the resulting denial of divine presence in the world—to their logical conclusions. Some critics see its deconstructions or eliminations as leading to self-referential inconsistencies, such as “performative self-contradictions” between what is said and what is presupposed in the saying.

The postmodernism of this series can, by contrast, be called *revisionary, constructive*, or—perhaps best—*reconstructive*. It seeks to overcome the modern worldview not by eliminating the possibility of worldviews (or “metanarratives”) as such, but by constructing a postmodern worldview through a revision of modern premises and traditional concepts in the light of inescapable presuppositions of our various modes of practice. That is, it agrees with deconstructive postmodernists that a massive deconstruction of many received concepts is needed. But its deconstructive moment, carried out for the sake of the presuppositions of practice, does not result in self-referential inconsistency. It also is not so totalizing as to prevent reconstruction. The reconstruction carried out by this type of postmodernism involves a new unity of scientific, ethical, aesthetic, and religious intuitions (whereas poststructuralists tend to reject all such unitive projects as “totalizing modern metanarratives”). While critical of many ideas often associated with modern science, it rejects not science as such but only that *scientism* in which only the data of the modern natural sciences are allowed to contribute to the construction of our public worldview.

3. As Peter Dews points out, although Derrida’s early work was “driven by profound ethical impulses,” its insistence that no concepts were immune to deconstruction “drove its own ethical presuppositions into a penumbra of inarticulacy” (*The Limits of Disenchantment: Essays on Contemporary European Culture* [London: New York: Verso, 1995]. 5). In his more recent thought, Derrida has declared an “emancipatory promise” and an “idea of justice” to be “irreducible to any deconstruction.” Although this “ethical turn” in deconstruction implies its pulling back from a completely disenchanted universe, it also, Dews points out (6–7), implies the need to renounce “the unconditionality of its own earlier dismantling of the unconditional.”
The reconstructive activity of this type of postmodern thought is not limited to a revised worldview. It is equally concerned with a postmodern world that will both support and be supported by the new worldview. A postmodern world will involve postmodern persons, with a postmodern spirituality, on the one hand, and a postmodern society, ultimately a postmodern global order, on the other. Going beyond the modern world will involve transcending its individualism, anthropocentrism, patriarchy, economism, consumerism, nationalism, and militarism. Reconstructive postmodern thought provides support for the ethnic, ecological, feminist, peace, and other emancipatory movements of our time, while stressing that the inclusive emancipation must be from the destructive features of modernity itself. However, the term \textit{postmodern}, by contrast with \textit{premodern}, is here meant to emphasize that the modern world has produced unparalleled advances, as Critical Theorists have emphasized, which must not be devalued in a general revulsion against modernity’s negative features.

From the point of view of deconstructive postmodernists, this reconstructive postmodernism will seem hopelessly wedded to outdated concepts, because it wishes to salvage a positive meaning not only for the notions of selfhood, historical meaning, reason, and truth as correspondence, which were central to modernity, but also for notions of divinity, cosmic meaning, and an enchanted nature, which were central to premodern modes of thought. From the point of view of its advocates, however, this revisionary postmodernism is not only more adequate to our experience but also more genuinely postmodern. It does not simply carry the premises of modernity through to their logical conclusions, but criticizes and revises those premises. By virtue of its return to organicism and its acceptance of nonsensory perception, it opens itself to the recovery of truths and values from various forms of premodern thought and practice that had been dogmatically rejected, or at least restricted to “practice,” by modern thought. This reconstructive postmodernism involves a creative synthesis of modern and premodern truths and values.

This series does not seek to create a movement so much as to help shape and support an already existing movement convinced that modernity can and must be transcended. But in light of the fact that those antimodern movements that arose in the past failed to deflect or even retard the onslaught of modernity, what reasons are there for expecting the current movement to be more successful? First, the previous anti-
modern movements were primarily calls to return to a premodern form of life and thought rather than calls to advance, and the human spirit does not rally to calls to turn back. Second, the previous antimodern movements either rejected modern science, reduced it to a description of mere appearances, or assumed its adequacy in principle. They could, therefore, base their calls only on the negative social and spiritual effects of modernity. The current movement draws on natural science itself as a witness against the adequacy of the modern worldview. In the third place, the present movement has even more evidence than did previous movements of the ways in which modernity and its worldview are socially and spiritually destructive. The fourth and probably most decisive difference is that the present movement is based on the awareness that the continuation of modernity threatens the very survival of life on our planet. This awareness, combined with the growing knowledge of the interdependence of the modern worldview with the militarism, nuclearism, patriarchy, global apartheid, and ecological devastation of the modern world, is providing an unprecedented impetus for people to see the evidence for a postmodern worldview and to envisage postmodern ways of relating to each other, the rest of nature, and the cosmos as a whole. For these reasons, the failure of the previous antimodern movements says little about the possible success of the current movement.

Advocates of this movement do not hold the naively utopian belief that the success of this movement would bring about a global society of universal and lasting peace, harmony and happiness, in which all spiritual problems, social conflicts, ecological destruction, and hard choices would vanish. There is, after all, surely a deep truth in the testimony of the world’s religions to the presence of a transcultural proclivity to evil deep within the human heart, which no new paradigm, combined with a new economic order, new child-rearing practices, or any other social arrangements, will suddenly eliminate. Furthermore, it has correctly been said that “life is robbery”: A strong element of competition is inherent within finite existence, which no social-political-economic-ecological order can overcome. These two truths, especially when contemplated together, should caution us against unrealistic hopes.

No such appeal to “universal constants,” however, should reconcile us to the present order, as if it were thereby uniquely legitimated. The human proclivity to evil in general, and to conflictual competition and
ecological destruction in particular, can be greatly exacerbated or greatly mitigated by a world order and its worldview. Modernity exacerbates it about as much as imaginable. We can therefore envision, without being naively utopian, a far better world order, with a far less dangerous trajectory, than the one we now have.

This series, making no pretense of neutrality, is dedicated to the success of this movement toward a postmodern world.

David Ray Griffin
Series Editor
Introduction

We live in an era of “posts.” We speak of post-liberal, post-industrial, post-Western, post-Constantinian, post-Christian, post-colonial, post-nationalist, post-humanist, post-patriarchal, and, most paradoxically and importantly, postmodern. Although there are faddish elements involved in this rhetoric, it should be taken seriously. The sense of a radical break with the past, partly observed and partly hoped for, comes to expression in this language, and the language sharpens the observation and fuels the hope. The choice of terminology also suggests that there is greater clarity about what is being superseded than about the new affirmations that are to replace it.

Most of the terms are reasonably clear, at least in specific contexts, in the sense that that which is being superseded is fairly definite. We know that much of Africa and Asia was ruled in the first half of this century by European powers and that, politically speaking, this is no longer true. Most former colonies in Africa and Asia are now independent countries. Yet the marks of colonialism still shape them. To say that their situation is post-colonial can be given quite exact meaning.

In a broader sense the value of the rhetoric in each case, and in this case in particular, may be disputed. One may argue that the former colonies are not really free from colonial rule, that that rule has simply changed form. Whereas once their governments were directly controlled by European nations, now their elected officials must do the will of transnational corporations and transgovernmental financial agencies such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary
Fund, and the World Bank. One may argue that the situation is not so much post-colonial as neo-colonial, and that “post-colonial” obscures this important historical fact.

“Post-patriarchal” is also fairly clear. Feminists have made us keenly aware of the extent to which society for thousands of years has been based on the control of women by men. Our recorded histories are of the thoughts and acts of men. The few women who figure in this history have played roles largely shaped by the male culture.

The difficulty in understanding what is meant by post-patriarchal, then, is not with the meaning of “patriarchal.” The difficulty is with the sense in which that world is being superseded. Is a post-patriarchal world an object of hope? Or is it claimed that in some measure it is being realized here and now? In the realm of thought, much literature in many fields has changed. At the very least many have been conscientized with respect to the patriarchal character of inherited habits and customs and modes of thought so that these are now topics of critical discussion rather than simply taken for granted. Perhaps that situation itself can be called post-patriarchal even if, through vast stretches of culture, patriarchy still reigns.

The ambiguities of the term “postmodern” are far greater. Given the dominant usage of the term “modern” until recently, “postmodern” is paradoxical. In common speech “modern” often still means whatever is most advanced, most up-to-date, most current. This changes as culture changes, so that it is never superseded. Given that usage, “modernists” may be opposed by conservatives or traditionalists; they may be opposed by those who emphasize the importance of recovering some features of the past by calling themselves “neo” this or that; but they cannot be opposed by “postmodernists.”

The serious use of “postmodern” depends on freezing the “modern” in terms of some of the dominant features of the recent past. This has happened in various fields. Alfred North Whitehead contributed to this development in his book *Science and the Modern World.* Here he objectifies “modern” thought as an historical phenomenon, noting its strengths, but also discussing developments that break its boundaries. For him the modern world is most clearly that of the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Of course, when he published the book in the 1920s he knew that the habits of mind he described as modern were still widely prevalent.

Whitehead undertook to present a convincing alternative to modern ways of understanding the world. In place of the material substances
posited by early modern thought, he proposed that events are primary. The unit events of which the world is composed are like organisms in that they are internally related to their environments, which are made up of societies of other unitary events. Each such event is a subject in the moment of its occurrence, receiving the past into itself and actively constituting itself so that it will, in turn, affect its future. As soon as it has fully become, it is an object of which subsequent events take account. Thus Whitehead overcomes the dualism of subjects and objects.

Similarly, human experiences are examples of the events that make up the world. They do not stand aside from the others. There is no dualism of humanity and nature. And finally, every event has both physicality and mentality in some incipient degree. The world is not made up of minds and bodies but of events that have both mental and physical characteristics in varying degrees.

Whitehead did not use the term “postmodern,” but by the 1960s some of his followers were doing so. By that term, we meant the full implications of twentieth-century developments in science, philosophy, and other fields. The new beginning to which Whitehead pointed in philosophy was William James, who rejected the starting point of modern philosophy in sense experience and the reification of consciousness. In science the new beginning was relativity and quantum theory. Whiteheadians continue to use “postmodern” in this sense. This book follows this pattern. Above all it investigates the implications for a variety of current issues of Whitehead’s vision of a world of internally related events.

Histories of “modern” philosophy typically begin with Descartes in the seventeenth century. Whitehead locates Descartes in an ongoing movement of scientific-philosophical thought originating a century earlier. But he recognizes the important role of Descartes in restructuring philosophy on the basis of the thinking human subject. For Whitehead, as for philosophers generally, Descartes is the father of modern philosophy.

“Modern” as a philosophical label goes back to the fourteenth century. William of Ockham’s nominalism was called the via moderna, and a continuity can be traced between that and the dominant styles of modern philosophy. But it is probably better to call this a foreshadowing of modern philosophy than its full appearance.

Although the “modern” period in philosophy has been understood to have a beginning, until very recently it had no end. Standard texts brought the story of modern philosophy as close to the time of the