

# *The Teachers' File*

## POSTMODERNISM: WHAT ONE NEEDS TO KNOW

by *William Grassie*

*Abstract.* This essay is an introduction to postmodernism and deconstruction as they relate to the special challenges of scholarship and teaching in the science and religion multidiscipline.

*Keywords:* constructionism; deconstructionism; Jacques Derrida; epistemology; feminism; Michel Foucault; Sigmund Freud; hermeneutics; Thomas Kuhn; Emmanuel Levinas; Alisdair MacIntyre; Karl Marx; materialism; metaphor; modernity; postmodernism; poststructuralism; power/knowledge; pragmatism; Paul Ricoeur; science and religion; structuralism.

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Postmodernism and its philosophic cousin deconstruction are often misunderstood by their detractors and overstated by their proponents. On the one hand, postmodernism and deconstruction are celebrated as the end of philosophical self-delusion, a critical attack on all oppressive metanarratives, and the final dissolution of foundational thought. On the other hand, postmodernism and deconstruction are denounced as relativistic, nihilistic, irrational, and hyperrational. The inaccessible philosophic language of most postmodern thinkers and the heated confusion about what postmodernism represents make it difficult for the average professor teaching a science-and-religion class to acquire a working overview. And yet, at least a cursory understanding of these debates is essential to any discussion of science and religion in the late twentieth century. So in this short essay I will foolishly go where angels fear to tread and attempt to provide a brief overview of key postmodern

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issues, and relate these issues to the specific problems of scholarship and teaching in the science and religion multidiscipline.

#### AN ANTIDEFINITION DEFINITION

The first problem that needs to be confronted is that postmodernism and deconstruction represent a great range of philosophical points of view. What we have is a broad and elusive movement of thought that is as differentiated internally as it is generalizable externally as a new philosophical development. Indeed, deconstruction, which might be presented as an extreme form of postmodernism, is explicitly an antidefinition theory of thought. So my attempts to define these terms are necessarily self-defeating. Nor would postmodern theory and deconstruction's antitheory recognize that there is any human thought or experience that operates externally to the epistemological problem as they define it. There is a powerful, all-encompassing form of rationality that undergirds this movement, such that it might well be presented as a hyperphilosophical extension of scientific realism and logical positivism.

#### DECONSTRUCTING MODERNITY

If we are to understand what postmodernism means, we must first define modernity to which it claims to be the successor. Modernity is equated with the scientific worldview of the Enlightenment. This powerful and successful approach to nature and culture has come to dominate the modern university and our social, economic, moral, and cognitive structures. Human reason, as exemplified in the deductive thought of mathematics and physics, would come to replace the superstitious worldviews of religion and other forms of irrationality. Reason, science, technology, and bureaucratic management would improve our knowledge, wealth, and well-being through the rational control of nature and society.

The modernist attack on religion provides a paradigmatic case study for exploring the contours of emerging postmodern thought. Karl Marx introduced us to the metaphor of the base and superstructure in his discussion of the foundational economic laws of society and the consequent social institutions and philosophies built upon that materialist foundation. Religion was presented as part of the superstructure, merely an ideological mirror of the economic structure of a society.

Sigmund Freud also used a base-superstructure metaphor in his explication of the foundational structures of the human psyche from which the limits and possibilities of human life ensue. Religion, in Freud's view, is not true on its own terms but is a delusional reflection of some deeper psychic reality. Both Freud and Marx and their numerous successors

would argue that the reality of an individual or a society is rarely self-evident to that person or group. There are hidden meanings or structures that must be unveiled through new forms of social scientific analysis.

Claude Levi-Strauss also used the base-superstructure approach in his anthropological studies. So the roots of anthropology as a discipline are also in debt to this metaphor of hidden causative foundations. Even Charles Darwin's theory of evolution can be presented as a base-superstructure model, because all "higher" forms of life are necessarily based, in causative formation, on "lower" forms of life, which are all structured by hidden laws that are not self-evident.

A person's or group's self-understanding was not viewed as reliable knowledge, because it was distorted by psychological delusion, perspectival illusion, and ideological prejudice. Just as science was able to prove much in nature that was counterintuitive, like the earth moving around the sun, the new social sciences of economics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology would unveil the true nature of individual beliefs and social structures as causationally derived from some foundational base.

The structuralist fathers of critical economics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology were all antireligious. The modernists were and are mostly hostile to religion, because it represents a form of immovable unreason and dangerous irrationality. They envisioned a world freed of religious superstition. This vision has profoundly influenced the culture of modern science and the secular university. Indeed, the modernist project of demystification also has been embraced by religious thinkers, as evident in Protestant foundationalist-mode of biblical interpretation and its more recent manifestations in the critical-historical search for the "authentic" core of Scriptures.

While modernism, in both its scientific and religious manifestations, is open to serious and intellectually credible critique, it would be foolish not to recognize the extent to which that critique is parasitic on the real successes and accomplishments of modernity. Without the insights and metatheoretical claims of modernity, there would be no possibility of a postmodernity. As we shall see, at least within the history and development of human thought, there are no immaculate conceptions.

#### FROM STRUCTURALISM TO POSTSTRUCTURALISM: DECONSTRUCTING THE BASE

What began with Marx, Darwin, Freud, and Levi-Strauss continues as new disciplines and subdisciplinary schools assert their own foundational causative categories from which all else ensues. The way to deconstruct someone else's theoretical framework is to replace the foundational categories of analysis with some new base.

Philosophers and social scientists began to challenge the very possibility of such a base-superstructure metaphor for knowledge after some decades of dancing in circles. In Marxist theory, for instance, it was clear that elements of the superstructure could and must have causative influences on the economic base of a society. Further, Marxism, with its critiques of false ideology and its claim to be a true science of history, could easily be re-presented as itself an ideology in need of critique. To disprove a social scientific theory, one “deconstructs” the “base” by showing that the presumed “foundation” is really a product of some other causative phenomena. Thus, Max Weber’s famous study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, functions to reverse Marxist materialist categories and argue that the ideology of Protestantism changed the economic structure of society, though as an unintended consequence. Weber’s inversion of Marx’s base and superstructure can be reversed again in an ideological critique of Weber. This philosophical circularity has become a major problem in the social sciences, linguistic theory, and hermeneutics in recent history.

Poststructuralism, which is really synonymous with postmodernism, begins to challenge the possibility of such simplistic, unidirectional causative analyses, while continuing to argue that reality is in some significant sense hidden from direct observation and common sense. Poststructuralism removes all foundational categories by re-examining them as the causative products of some other factors. There are no available a priori on which to ground human reason, no Archimedean point of reference. What is reasonable in this neo-Kantian formulation is somehow a projection onto phenomena. There is no direct experience of reality without interpretation; and all interpretation is in some sense corrupted by the cultural and personal prejudices or prejudgments of the interpreter.

#### THE HERMENEUTICS OF REALITY

Hermeneutics is the philosophical discipline in which these theoretical problems of interpretation are confronted. The hermeneutical discipline grew out of problems confronted in scriptural studies, literary criticism, and jurisprudence; and it becomes the dominant paradigm for understanding postmodern thought and deconstruction. The problem of reading and understanding a “text” becomes a new metaphor for all kinds of understanding, including the understanding of social and biophysical phenomena.

At a simple level, the hermeneutical project of reading a text begins with the *author*, the *text*, and the *reader*. The text is radically influenced by the author’s intentional construction of the work but also has its own independence from the author, as a text always has a “life of its own.” A text also contains meanings that are independent of the author’s inten-

tions, as reflected in the personal psychological and social-cultural presuppositions in which the author unconsciously lives and writes. So the author's *context* is also a necessary and important element in reading and understanding a text.

Structuralist hermeneutics alternately sought to understand the text independent of the author or to understand the author's intentions better than the author understood himself. In either case, the structuralists believed that they possessed some critical theory that rendered the correct reading knowable.

The reader, however, also has personal psychological and social-cultural presuppositions that radically influence how the text is read and understood. So the reader also operates within a context. A critical theory is a contextual presupposition that predetermines the reading and the understanding derived. Further, a text also develops its own history of interpretation, which further prescribes its possible reading and rereadings.

So the hermeneutical dynamic quickly explodes in complexity. Hermeneutics presents itself as a profoundly circular problem, as *prejudgment* directs *explanation*, which determines *understanding*, which defines *prejudgment* again. This dynamic is seen as a description, not only of reading and understanding a text, but also of "reading and understanding" all social and biophysical phenomena (see Ricoeur 1976, 1986).

#### POWER-KNOWLEDGE

The criteria for determining which interpretation of a text is correct or better are often presented as reflections of some form of social power. What counts as knowledge is defined by power. Indeed, knowledge and power become synonymous in this view. Power-knowledge, however, is complex, multifaceted, and contradictory (see Foucault 1980). The trade of the postmodernist thinker is to expose temporarily these hidden power-knowledge constellations, without erecting a new explanatory hermeneutic that becomes reified as a new grand theory. These new metanarratives would become new instruments of delusion and oppression; so the challenge of postmodernism is to live in the flux of change without the crutch of artificially willed certainty (see Caputo 1987).

#### THE ONTOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS OF THE OTHER

In much of postmodern thought, the epistemological and hermeneutical role of the *Other* takes on central importance. Those experiences that are not within a dominant power-knowledge paradigm offer critical perspectives on reality. Michel Foucault, for instance, writes about prisons and mental hospitals in order to explicate some larger insight into how society

functions. Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida elevate difference and otherness to an ontological a priori. Real knowledge is not grounded in the rational ego but in the alienated *Other* that challenges the empowered projections of the Self. This reading of difference and otherness is where postmodernist thought often presents itself as having some ethical and emancipatory function in that it seeks to liberate subjugated knowledges within a dominant power-knowledge constellation.

#### THE LINGUISTIC MOVE: METAPHORIC REALISM

Postmodernism is also characterized by a linguistic movement in philosophy. Ludwig Wittgenstein came to reject his own earlier positivist theory of language, which provides an important transition in charting the move from modernism to postmodernism. Wittgenstein came to recognize that all languages, from the mathematical to our mother tongues, are internally self-referential. Language is understood as a kind of game theory, in which the rules are arbitrary to each particular user-group. What we can talk about is language games within the boundaries of rational, irrational, and other rational. Human reason is a polyglot. Crossdisciplinary and crosscultural translation projects result. Within the rules of their respective language games, an Orthodox Jew can be every bit as rational as a particle physicist; indeed, they can be one and the same person. There is, however, no master language of Truth, as the scientific positivists and religious fundamentalists had hoped.

Words achieve their denotative function only through connotative associations in established usage. Because the function of language is first established in connotation, we end up with a theory of metaphors as linguistically primordial. A metaphor achieves its effect by holding in tension two incompatible meanings that reveal some new insight. Metaphors can be simple or extended, overused or innovative. A metaphor expresses an "is/is not" tension that creates meaning.

By extension, it is possible to argue that models, symbols, and theories also function like complex metaphors. Whether we equate God with a father or evolution with a jungle, we are using metaphoric associations to create meanings that are literally untrue. These metaphors are powerful and productive in their ability to create meaning. Common metaphors are often taken for granted in our thoughts. The postmodern move involves exposing taken-for-granted metaphoric usage in some kind of deconstructive reversal.

While it is possible to reductionistically present all human knowledge as linguistically mediated and therefore also metaphoric in some primordial sense, postmodernism can take this too far. To say that language has no external reference renders much of human experience nonsensical.

Natural phenomena are not simply a blank slate for human metaphoric projection. Nature and our embodied natures present themselves as structured, limited, and frequently causatively determinative of human experience. If you don't think nature is real, try going without water for a few days and see how well you think.

Perhaps what we need is a metaphoric notion of reality in which we see metaphoric association as issuing from all of reality and not simply from the human subject. The periodic table of the elements is an extended metaphor of basic chemicals. Humans have discerned this grammatical guide to the elements after careful labors in "listening to" and "conversing in" the language "spoken" by atoms. The Genesis creation myth is also an extended metaphor spoken by the cosmogenesis and transcribed into human culture.

Indeed, it is possible and necessary also to understand human beings as a kind of metaphoric projection of nature and thus enact yet another postmodern reversal. Nature speaks its own reality, and it can be difficult to distinguish who is really dreaming of who in the bio-logical structuring of our bodies, psyches, and habitats. The ancient Taoist sage Chuang-Tzu wrote:

Last night Chuang Chou dreamed he was a butterfly, spirits soaring he was a butterfly (is it that in showing what he was suited his own fancy?), and did not know about Chou. When all of a sudden he awoke, he was Chou with all his wits about him. He does not know whether he is Chou who dreams he is a butterfly or a butterfly who dreams he is Chou. Between Chou and the butterfly there was necessarily a dividing; just this is what is meant by the transformation of things. (Koller and Koller 1991, 460)

#### PRAGMATISM

In eschewing foundational theories and focusing on the function of language, postmodernism tends toward philosophical and ethical pragmatism. The truth of a theory or interpretation is understood not through some direct correspondence to reality but through the practical consequences of its applications. In this sense, postmodernism can be seen as having deep affinities with some religious and scientific philosophies. The reluctance of physicists to draw metaphysical implications from quantum mechanics can be seen as a kind of pragmatism. Jesus' warning to judge the false prophets on the consequences of their ministry, to be wary of "rotten fruit" in "sheep's clothing," can also be seen as a pragmatist apologetic. In Buddhism, we encounter the notion of *Upaya*, effective teachings that are not necessarily true but that work nonetheless. Even if we cannot have foundational theories of knowledge, we might still find in lived experience some practical guidance (see Rorty 1982 and West 1989).

## SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SCIENCE

Starting with Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, there has been a major movement to apply social-critical theory to our understanding of scientific knowledge as socially constructed. Instead of accepting biophysical scientists' own self-understanding of their activity as a direct discovery of reality, historians and social critics enter the scientific discourse like anthropologists in a foreign land. They read the ethnography of the laboratory, the economics of the pharmaceutical research, the history of physics, and the metaphoric symbolism of genetic engineering in order to uncover hidden meanings that are not self-apparent to members of the "tribe." And Kuhn and his successors offer some enlightening insights into how the practice of science differs from the philosophy of science or the self-understanding of scientists.

That science is a socially constructed form of knowledge is in retrospect an obvious truism. That science is merely a socially constructed form of knowledge without reference to a "real" reality is a highly problematic assertion. The problem is compounded by the either/or, subjective/objective, rational/irrational dichotomies upon which the modernist worldview is founded. Here, too, an understanding of post-modernism is helpful to the science and religion multidiscipline. One benefit of negotiating this philosophical territory is that we discover herein a rigorous theory of religious realism, much to the horror of anti-religious modernism.

## RELIGION AND SCIENCE JOINED IN POSTMODERNISM

To look at science as in some sense socially constructed offers a way in through the back door to religion as an epistemological partner in the construction/discovery of nature and culture. Religion, long attacked and deconstructed as mythic delusion, can now claim some pragmatic parity with the scientific worldview that attacked it. On the other hand, many in the biophysical sciences today are like religionists of the recent past in their confrontation with Enlightenment. History, anthropology, psychology, sociology, gender studies, and literary theory have long been conversation partners in serious religious thought and inquiry, but they are now new dialogue partners for the biophysical sciences.

Once perceived as hostile to a committed life of faith, modernist critical theory has turned into a postmodernist helpmate in nurturing deep and intellectually vibrant religious belief. The fact that there are invisible social and symbolic processes that corrupt and distort our understanding of the divine (or nature), the fact that there are unconscious processes that critical theory and deconstruction can help to expose and demystify, is an occasion to reaffirm human finitude and



humbleness before the divine and the larger nature that contains our being-longing-ness. After all, in most faith traditions, such humility is prescribed. The Judaic prohibition against idolatry, the *Via Negativa* of medieval Christianity, the *Neti Neti* of Hinduism, and *Sunyata* of Buddhism, and the Islamic sense of divine transcendence are all rich affirmations of human epistemological finitude before the Ultimate.

Those in the biophysical sciences, however, tend to feel threatened by these social constructionist studies. Scientists believe that their theories, models, and measurements are in some sense directly related to reality and not simply an elaborate projection of social prejudice and power (see Gross and Levitt 1993). The strong social constructionist argument would render the predictive and explanatory power of science as nonsensically coincidental. The theory of relativity is more than just a matter of social construction, because, regardless of your belief system, “a single nuclear explosion can ruin your whole day.” And while belief in antibiotics or acupuncture will improve the effects of the remedies, they will work independent of belief systems. The truths of science, like the truths of religion, must surely lie somewhere between relativistic social constructionism and naive realism, though we are struggling to find a new philosophical language to account for this in-between knowing (see Krieger 1991).

#### FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGIES

One of the most exciting sources of case studies for the science-and-religion classroom is recent feminist scholarship on science and of course on religion as well. A great wealth of literature uses gender as a critical theory for assessing the content and culture of the modern biophysical sciences. Feminist case studies expose the hidden prejudice and oppression operating within the sciences. Feminist studies also help to explode the complexity of the nature-nurture interpretation problem as applied to sex-gender. And, of course, there is a similar body of feminist literature within religious studies to which one can turn. Finally, feminist philosophers and theologians are doing some of the most creative explorations of a new philosophical language for a postmodern epistemology.

#### PROCESS HERMENEUTICS: SPIRALS OF REVELATION

The relativistic tendencies of postmodern thought present a great challenge at a time in human history that also requires committed moral action in the face of intellectual and existential uncertainty. The hermeneutical dynamic may be unavoidable, but it need not be a self-confirming circle of prejudice. While unavoidable, the cultural biases of the interpreter are not necessarily bad. A tradition is also, paradoxical-

cally, the sustaining foundation upon which a deconstruction builds new meanings. All deconstructions are parasitic on some functional metanarrative. Nor does explanatory theory always necessarily confirm the prejudgments of interpretation. The trick will be, not to deny our hermeneutical finitude through some fundamentalist dogmatism or callous rhetorical will-to-power, but to honor the hermeneutical process and open the solipsistic circle into an evolving spiral. New and different voices in our social and biophysical ponderings can help provide powerful insights. An open conversation of tolerance and humility is an ethical and epistemological prescription for both science and religion as we confront the extraordinary problems of our time.

#### TEACHING SCIENCE AND RELIGION AS A POSTMODERN MULTIDISCIPLINE

So there is something about the juxtaposition of science and religion in the modernist university that is inherently postmodern or premodern or both. And the theoretical concerns of this essay up to now lead to some very practical problems as a professor confronts self and students in the religion-and-science classroom. Students, like professors, frequently assume as they approach the science-and-religion juxtaposition that certain truth claims are valid while others are questionable. Typically, some will claim that science is irrefutably real, while others will maintain that religion is the indisputable revealed truth. To believe in the foundational character of one of these conversants, either science or religion, is to silence the other.

To question and be questioned in one's foundational worldview is always unsettling and threatening. Yet, without such questioning of assumptions and truth claims it is unlikely that real dialogue and effective learning will occur. The postmodern move helps to throw into radical doubt all foundational claims to truth and therefore can help to open the door to a more engaging dialogue between science and religion.

The practical challenge to the professor in the science-and-religion classroom, whether it be in the secular university or a confessional college, is to create a safe environment in which students may explore their doubts and differences. For the professor, this means role-modeling not only a rigorous multidisciplinary grasp of the material but also an appropriate ignorance and humility before these difficult questions. In the classroom, the professor may need to talk less and listen more by providing a space for students to explore the topography and boundaries of their own worldviews. The science and religion multidiscipline is wonderfully and dangerously transformative in its power to challenge facile assumptions about what is "really real" on both sides of the religion and science divide.

## CONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERNISM: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Social and intellectual transformation is not unlike reading a text. Tradition always operates as a prejudgment in our reading of the present/ed moment. We adopt some critical lenses through which to interpret the present/ed structures and projected possibilities of some better future. Whatever change does occur is also always continuous with the past (see MacIntyre 1990). Though a tradition can be the repository of much thoughtlessness and harm, a tradition is never simply all bad. Nor is the dream of a utopic and epistemological break with the past ever really so immaculately conceived, as indicated by the real history of political and intellectual revolutions.

We have taken the metaphor of a house with a foundation upon which are built the superstructures of rooms. Modernist theory asserts that there exists a universal base upon which critical theory can be founded. Postmodernist theory asserts that there are *many* foundations and that those foundations that are unfamiliar may be most helpful to the architect-builder.

To build a house takes a long time. To deconstruct a house takes only a few reckless hours. Often deconstruction is a necessary part of restoring the old and building the new, but it would be irresponsible to use only the one tool of deconstruction or for that matter to ignore it. The critique of religion and science with the explosive tools of deconstruction does help to prevent the idolatrous equation of the partial with the divine. The modernist hubris of both fundamentalist science and fundamentalist religion needs such critique, but to totally reject and destroy the positive functions of tradition would also be social, intellectual, and moral suicide.

In the science and religion classroom, postmodernism provides many new insights and bridges for relating faith and reason in a dynamic interface. I prefer, however, to talk of “constructive postmodernism,” because it is an invitation to engage in the creative and productive intellectual and moral labors of relating science and religion with the hope that good can be accomplished, knowing that such labors must also fail.

Jesus of Nazareth told his disciples some two thousand years ago: “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places” (John 14 : 2). To build a great city on a hill will require many different laborers and many different foundations. With a combination of insights, like the blind men describing the elephant in the Jainist-Buddhist myth, we might gain a fuller understanding of science, society, self, and the sacred as we build a better city and a brighter future upon our many foundations.

## NOTE

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- This reference list includes not only sources cited in the text of this article but others to provide a brief introductory guide to a vast and rich literature that deals with postmodernism and deconstruction. In addition, I provide the addresses of several related sites on the World Wide Web.
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