PART I

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Introduction to Part One

Systematic theology explicates the content of Christian belief, often by expanding the trinitarian structure found in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. This content is normally termed *doctrine*. The doctrinal content sits in the center, usually preceded by a section on *methodology* and followed by a discussion of *ethics*. The section on methodology consists of a prolegomenon that is occasionally called “foundations” or “fundamental theology.” The discussion of ethics, which sometimes appears in a work separate from the systematic theology itself, attempts to discern what conduct should flow from doctrinal belief.

The explication of doctrinal content will occupy Parts Two, Three, and Four of the present work. The current situation—what I call *context*—is the first topic within Part One, the section on methodology. Here, the basic principles that will guide this systematic theology are laid out within the framework of the current context of emerging postmodern consciousness, a context that seems to require a new explication of Christian belief.

The fundamental assumptions and method of inquiry are additional preliminaries that need to be clarified in Part One. At the center of this method is a focus on the heart of Christian conviction: the gospel of Jesus Christ that establishes Christian theology’s purpose.
and provides the norm against which everything else is measured. The components of Part One are the methodological foundation upon which the systematic theology later builds.
Addressing the Postmodern Person

Aristotle says that philosophy begins with wonder; not as in our day with doubt.

—Søren Kierkegaard, Journals, 1841

We require nothing less than a paradigm shift to a holistic view of the entire human family now inextricably linked by our globe-girdling technologies.

—Hazel Henderson

Painted at the intersection of the longitudinal and transverse axes of the central nave ceiling in the little chapel at Wies in southern Germany is Jesus sitting on a rainbow. Below him, is the judgment seat. It is empty. Above and to the left, two angels are pointing to the empty cross, the cross upon which the judge himself made the sacrifice that frees the accused captives. The rainbow recalls the covenant sign given by God to Noah, revealing divine sadness at the sight of human destruction and promising a life forever secure from the ravages of deluge. Jesus is pointing to his broken heart. In front of
the church and above the altar, one finds the mother pelican, tearing open her breast in order to feed her young with her own living flesh. The viewer knows, then, that Jesus points to the divine heart, a heart broken so that the covenant could be sealed in blood. The entire scene displays the gospel in all its glorious color.

The artist, Johann Baptist Zimmermann (1680–1758), painted the Wieskirche ceiling in Bavarian rococo style, a style deeply imbued with the spirit of the Counter-Reformation and installed in part as a bastion of defense against the challenges of the Age of Reason. The symbols used to convey the gospel here are the ancient symbols, the biblical symbols. One of their duties is maintaining unbroken continuity with the ancient worldview, the only worldview that the Bavarian kings thought could give life its meaning. This part of southern Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became an island of naive, if not reactionary, faith that sought to protect itself from the strong currents of the modern world swirling about it.

In the twenty-first century, the island of safety has been sorely eroded. The tides of modern life are everywhere sweeping away traditional verities. So, like the Bavarian kings before them, many people of Christian faith throughout the world today wonder if there can be—or even if there ought to be—a safe island of belief that will not be washed away by the eroding eddies of the modern mind. One can identify the modern theologian as a person who is willing to jump off the island and attempt to swim amid the currents of modern consciousness. He or she is aware of the risks of leaving the dry land of biblical naïveté behind, but hopes that farther out at sea another island of meaning will appear. If none does appear, then perhaps with strong faith one can simply learn to enjoy the unending swim.
The Hermeneutical Question

What makes a modern theologian modern is knowing and accepting that the temporal currents have borne Christianity quite a distance from where it started its journey. This temporal distance, a distance of at least twenty centuries, is reflected in what I call “the Hermeneutical Question.” This question and its proposed answers are at the center of every theological enterprise that can be called modern. That question is this: 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?

This question provides the backbone and establishes the posture of a wide variety of schools of thought, whether it be Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologizing, Paul Tillich’s method of correlation, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s religionless Christianity, Vatican II’s aggiornamento, David Tracy’s revisionist theology, James Cone’s black theology of liberation, or Rosemary Radford Reuther’s feminist theology. Regardless of what answer is offered, this question makes modern theology modern and distinguishes it from what went before. Modern theologians seek to pour the nectar of an ancient faith into the cup of modern consciousness, a stiff cup of machined steel upon which is engraved the pattern of nonreligious thinking and living. Theologians have been careful and cautious because the fear is high that the new cup will change the taste or perhaps even poison the faith. But the pouring is taking place, and many have become quite used to the blended taste of modernity and Christianity.

Now, what happens when modernity gives way to something else? What happens when the cup is returned to the engraver and upon it is inscribed a new religious sensibility? Something like this seems
to be happening right now to the modern world. Complaints are being raised in many quarters about the narrowness of secularism, the limits of capitalist consumerism, and the dangers of scientism. Those complaining often ask for something more than modernity has been able to offer, for a renewed sense of transcendent meaning and personal wholeness. Struggling to be born in our time is a nascent postmodern consciousness, a postmaterialist vision that has the marks of a Romantic, if not outright religious, worldview. Should one try to pour the faith into this cup as well? This question will be addressed in the present work.

We find ourselves at what may be the first phase of a change in the overall theological agenda. Rather than modernity, we must inquire about the meaning of the Christian faith in the context of an emerging postmodernity. Without in any way abrogating the Hermeneutical Question as I have already stated it, I need to offer an amendment: 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?

Christian theology—especially systematic theology—is the explication of, and reflection on, the basic symbols found in scripture, appropriating them to the current context within which the theologian is working. This implies two things: theology is contextual and theology is apologetic. The Hermeneutical Question makes it obvious that I am working with the assumption here that Christian theology is contextual in character—that is, it attempts to make the symbols of the faith understandable in the context within which it is working. Because certain questions regarding the justification and validity of Christian beliefs rise up from any and every context, the theologian must carefully think through
appropriate answers. Answering theology is called apologetic theology (*apologia*). The apologist does not say, “I’m sorry.” Rather, he or she engages the questions which arise from the context: “The task of apologetics is to answer all questions understandably that relate to the understanding of the Christian life and its existential certainty, its content, and its ground.”¹ Or, according to Paul Tillich, “It is the task of apologetic theology to prove that the Christian claim also has validity from the point of view of those outside the theological circle.”² An apologetic note sounds within the larger symphony that is systematic theology.

To speak apologetically to the Hermeneutical Question, one must understand the present context, both modern and postmodern. It is to that context that I now turn.

**The Challenge of the Modern Mind**

“[W]hy is it so hard to believe in God in (many milieux of) the modern West, while in 1500 it was virtually impossible not to?”³ This is the question asked by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. It is our question too.

The modern mind poses a challenge to Christian theology because it makes assumptions that are essentially hostile to the symbols of the Christian faith. The most devastating assumption is that Christian symbols are old-fashioned and out of date. In fact, it is only because of modern thinking that one could even suggest the possibility that the Bible’s meaning is strange, anachronistic, or no longer valid. Augustine (354–430), in the fifth century, did not think the Bible was

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out of date. Nor did Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), in the thirteenth century, or Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564), in the sixteenth century, think of the Bible as old-fashioned. Only those who come after the rise of natural science and the Enlightenment pit what scripture says against what we learn from other sources. This distancing of ourselves from what was said in the ancient world of the Bible is due to a fundamental shift in our way of thinking, a shift that marks the difference between the premodern and the modern eras.

The Hermeneutical Question characterizes the modern era in terms of the prominent place it gives to natural science, secular self-understanding, and the worldwide cry for freedom. Let us look for a moment at the first two of these three, the role of science and its contribution to secular self-understanding.

That there has been an ongoing struggle between science and religion over the last three centuries, with science coming out the victor, is an interpretation of history preferred by the modern mind. The early pioneers of the new knowledge of nature—Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Descartes were all devoutly religious. But when they began to describe the movements of natural things in terms of calculable natural laws, the need for religious insight to understand our world appeared to become superfluous. The world came to be pictured as a great machine, as a cosmic Camry, so to speak, within which each part acts on the others in a way that engineers can understand and put into mathematical formulas. The world machine is now running properly on its own, so there is no need for a *deus ex machina*, a God outside the machine, or even for a God inside the machine. Thus, when it came to the relevance of God for explaining how the world works, the scientist Laplace could tell Napoleon he had no need of a divine hypothesis. Modern science
may not require outright atheism, but it does go about its business without reference to things divine.

This attitude among natural scientists spread so that modern people began to think that they could organize society without reference to religious beliefs or churchly authority. What emerged was secular self-understanding and the process of de-Christianizing Western culture and political life. No longer do we need to follow a transcendent model of the perfect society existing in heaven. The spread of democracy is assumed to be a human achievement. We moderns no longer count on angels to help us. Secularity is a way of understanding life that simply accepts the natural world to be the only world. It does not look behind or under things to find some spiritual realities. What is natural seems to be enough. We do not need or even want anything supranatural. The secular point of view is this-worldly, not other-worldly. It rejects the transcendent dimension of reality.

Turning the secular point of view into an anti-religious ideology with appeal to the authority of science is the agenda of Oxford University’s Richard Dawkins. Dawkins is a science educator who believes that Darwin’s theory of evolution requires a rational person to disregard religious explanations for any reality. This rejection of the divine applies to all gods, regardless of their religious lineage. As an equal opportunity nay-sayer, Dawkins says he is not attacking any specific divine figure such as Yahweh, Jesus, Allah, Baal, Zeus, or Wotan. Rather, he is attacking all of them at once. All belief in such divinities can be swept up into a single “God Hypothesis,” which Dawkins attempts to falsify: “I shall define the God Hypothesis more defensibly: there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.” According to the evidence, Dawkins concludes that such “a god most likely does not exist.” Note how he argues: the
existence of God is a scientific hypothesis. A scientific examination of the evidence fails to confirm the hypothesis. Therefore, any rational person should embrace atheism.

It is irrational to believe in God. It is also immoral. Religion is violent. Atheism is peaceful. Therefore, on behalf of world peace we should rid the world of the violent influence of religion. So goes the argument. Atheist Sam Harris believes that “religious faith remains a perpetual source of human conflict.”5 In order to bring global peace, we need to stamp out religion. The religions Harris particularly wants to eliminate are Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. These irrational and violence-prone holdovers from a pre-modern era must be dispensed with: “All reasonable men and women have a common enemy. . . . Our enemy is nothing other than faith itself.”6

If the evangelical atheists succeed in their crusade against outdated religious beliefs, then the gain will be a new form of freedom. Michael Shermer, publisher of Skeptic magazine, gives witness to the powerful attraction of atheistic liberty: “The conjuncture of losing my religion, finding science, and discovering glorious contingency was remarkably empowering and liberating. It gave me a sense of joy and freedom. Freedom to think for myself. . . . With the knowledge that his may be all there is, and that I can trigger my own cascading changes, I was free to live life to its fullest.”7 Note how science has replaced religion, for Shermer; and this has led to freedom of thought and control over his own life.

6. Ibid., 131.
changes. Religion oppresses. Science liberates. This is the message of evangelical atheism.

I must say that I appreciate something about the new breed of atheists, namely, their strong advocacy for natural science. The pursuit of scientific inquiry feeds the human soul hungry for knowledge. Yet, I object to the unnecessary ideology of materialism, which they attach to science. Rather than admit that their atheistic commitment is an act of faith, they attempt to borrow the prestige of science to advertise their cause. The problem is that science belongs to all of us, not merely to the atheists among us. Many of the world's leading scientists are lovers of God and cherishers of God's beautiful creation. Be that as it may, in our cultural context science and secularity masquerade as our liberators from allegedly outdated religion.

Christians need not defend generic religion over against secularity. Christian faith in God our creator and redeemer can thrive in both a religious and secular milieu. Secularity per se is no enemy to faith; and religion per se is not necessarily faith's friend.

Now, let us turn to the third defining trait of our modern heritage: the worldwide cry for freedom. Many modern people have rejoiced at the arrival of secular thinking because it seems to liberate them from outdated tradition and from demands to obey divinely decreed laws about human behavior. This has led to the modern world's reverence for freedom above all other values. What is freedom? Because the objective world is thought to operate like a Toyota Camry—that is, according to a closed system of fixed mechanical laws—the search for freedom turns to the inner world of the human subject. Even if the outer world is determined, the inner world is not. The locus of freedom has become the human self. We believe we are free to make decisions: we are free to vote, free to choose which brand of breakfast cereal to buy, free to decide what career we will
pursue. We moderns have come to believe that this freedom to decide puts us (not God) into the driver’s seat of the cosmic Camry. As these trends have proceeded, the more we have removed the sacred element from nature and from society, the more liberated has become our interior life, and the more direction we have exercised over the course of events.

Therefore, we have come to think of freedom as an achievement. For many Westerners, freedom is something our ancestors won for us in the eighteenth century when they liberated us from the power of the king to tell us what to do and from the power of the church to tell us what to think. We have come to identify freedom with the autonomy of the individual, with the release of external constraints so that we can think or act solely on the basis of subjective desires. Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Hobbes spoke of liberty as the absence of external impediments that keep us from doing what we wish.\(^8\) And Immanuel Kant spoke for the age when he defined freedom in terms of autonomy, as the property of the will to be a law unto itself.\(^9\) Liberation is the process of breaking the chains that constrain us; and freedom is the state of existing without encumbrances to self-expression.

The advance of psychotherapy has accelerated and extended the process of liberating the human subject. Modern culture has begun seeking to release the self from internal impediments right along with the external ones so that liberation becomes a continuing process of unbridling human passions. This has led to increasingly deeper understandings of just what the human self is, defining the self more and more sharply over against everything that is the non-self, or even defining the true self over against the inauthentic self. If there is a

\(^8\) Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), chapter 21, first paragraph.
mission in the modern world, it is a dedication to the advance of freedom by throwing off the external impediments of poverty and political oppression along with the internal inhibitions of a distorted self-image. All of this is done so as to realize the autonomy of the free and unencumbered human ego.

Postmodern critics are dissatisfied with these modern developments. They say they are individualistic and divisive. What is wrong is that they break up, separate, and fragment. A natural science and a secularism that are unable to comprehend spiritual realities are too narrow and restricted. Freedom understood as the autonomy of the individual ego divides the human reality into separated persons who distance themselves from the best interests of the race as a whole. Freedom understood as radical individualism destroys community. To de-center the self sits high on the postmodernist’s To Do list.

Postmoderns go on to charge that academic specialization prevents people from catching a glimpse of the whole of things, that the efficiency of large political and economic institutions destroys the personhood of the people involved, that unbridling individual human passions without regard to valuing human community let alone the ecosphere as a whole has led to wanton pollution of our environment and the competition that has put us on the brink of thermonuclear disaster. All of this—rightly or wrongly—is blamed on the modern mind, which postmoderns believe is essentially divisive in its mode of thinking.

When one looks back on all this, one can see that the divisiveness of the modern mind is due to a three-legged structure of consciousness that lies at the foundation of modernity—the three legs being science, secularity, and freedom. This structure stands at the heart of the challenge to premodern religious faith and at the heart of the postmodern critique. I call the modern mind: *critical consciousness.*
Critical Consciousness

The essence of critical consciousness is distance. Distance takes the forms of objectification, nonparticipation, and alienation. When theologians bump into it they call it the “hermeneutical gap,” referring to the interpretation gap between the ancient worldview of scripture and that of its modern readers today. When we today read the Bible objectively as one piece of literature among others, we become distantiated, uninvolved, non-participatory. As an object of study, the Bible begins to look like the literature of another culture now long out of date, even alien. The Bible no longer looks like an expression of our own beliefs.

This historical distance between the Bible and the modern reader is, however, only a symptom of a much larger problem, a problem that has left our whole culture in a state of alienation. The very structure of modern consciousness is founded on the principle of distanciation. Some have called it the “onlooker” or “spectator” consciousness, according to which we assume the real world consists in a drama onstage while we sit in the audience and watch it. We moderns have separated our subjective consciousness from the objective drama that constitutes what is real.

This distanciating structure is best illustrated by the work of René Descartes (1596-1650), who is considered to be the father of modern philosophy. The Cartesian approach has become so much a part of our education process that we no longer recognize it as just one form of thinking among others. Rather it is for us the only form of thinking a rational person would judge sane. Descartes has bequeathed two legacies that have greatly shaped our minds, the subject-object split and the principle of doubt. I will briefly review them in turn.
Descartes formulated the question of truth as if the truth had nothing to do with himself. He asked: How can I as a human subject be sure the ideas in my mind correspond accurately with the way the objective world out there really is? Just in posing the question this way he presumes there is a distance, a separation, an alienation between his own subjectivity and the real or objective world outside it. He implicitly cedes the content of truth to the objective world and not to himself as a subject.

This led eventually to the present widespread standard for truth—that is, the assumption that truth must be objective. Truth must be free of any subjective opinions or prejudices. Genuine knowledge is impersonal. One’s scientific research is considered valid only if the data can be verified independently by other anonymous scientists. Police investigators attempt to focus solely on the facts because they assume that only on the basis of objective knowledge can we judge someone guilty or innocent in a court of law.

Descartes, and the modern mind that followed him, taught us to objectify everything in the world. We have come to assume that nature is an agglomeration of disparate things that are related to one another by impersonal laws, and the goal of science is to learn what these laws are so that we can manipulate the world through technology. Social scientists over the last century have taught us even to objectify ourselves, to treat ourselves as things subject to statistical laws. The social sciences concern themselves not with persons but with concepts of persons. So now we can step out of ourselves and look at ourselves as objects. We can understand ourselves in terms of ethnic background, social location, demographic trends, or psychological principles. We can hear ourselves spoken about, even if not spoken to.

The flip side of this objectivity is unchained subjectivity. Such things as value and worth, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, and
importance and triviality are removed from the objective sphere and turned completely over to the subjective. Each of us individually can now decide on the basis of our own self-determined criteria what is valuable, beautiful, good, or important. Taste has become a private affair. It is not proper to say that the Mona Lisa is a beautiful work of art in any objective sense. One can only say, “I like it.”

This split between the subjective and the objective has had enormous consequences for theological reflection. The theologian has been expelled from the halls of objectivity. Like a leper shunned by the village, the once “Queen of the Sciences” has been cast out of the colleges of Natural Sciences in the universities and ghettoized in the Humanities. Any claims to objective truth offered by the theologian are dismissed, disregarded, even disdained. From its marginalized location, the theologian’s task, according to Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014), is to ask this question: “How can theology make the primacy of God and his revelation in Jesus Christ intelligible, and validate its truth claim, in an age when all talk about God is reduced to subjectivity.” For theology to survive in the context of modernity, it must address the Cartesian split between subject and object. Might postmodern consciousness help?

Pluralism: The Battle between Objectivism and Relativism

How can the theologian address the matter of the subject-object dichotomy? The matter is made more difficult due to a war in the wider culture, a war between the objectivists and the relativists.

This split between object and subject in the critical consciousness of the seventeenth century has led to a curious cultural tension, if not outright culture war, in our own century, namely, the battle between

objectivism and relativism. The objectivist believes that there exists an overarching framework of laws of nature and laws of reason and that rational thought consists in discovering what these laws are. The relativist disagrees, denying the existence of such an overarching framework. The relativist believes that what we think to be rational thought is relative to the specific context (or social location) within which we do our thinking. Because a plurality of such contexts exists, we can never escape speaking of “our” and “their” standards of what is reasonable. Because of urban living, mass media, and cyberspace, we live amid a pluralism of perspectives. Postmodernists, especially deconstructionist postmodernists, translate the perspectivalism of the individual subject into the perspectivalism of the social or cultural group, and then deny us access to any universal realm of objectivity. Deconstructionists are quite sanguine about living in the ghetto of subjectivity, now thought of as group subjectivity within a framework of relativism.

As the battle rages, the relativists accuse the objectivists of mistaking their own culturally determined perspective for what is universal or permanent, accusing objectivists of blindly purveying ethnocentrism. The objectivists counter by accusing the relativists of self-contradiction: if the relativists claim that their position is universally true, then the relativist position itself is said to transcend the limits of its own cultural conditionedness, and, hence, the position undermines itself. Although it may appear that these two positions are radically distinct, they are both children of the modern mind. The battle is a form of sibling rivalry. Most of us are likely to hold both positions, perhaps arguing one way on some occasions and the opposite way on other occasions. Some of us take the easy way out and make objectivist assumptions when dealing with matters of natural science and then support relativism when dealing with the social sciences, humanities, and the arts. This conceptual split reflects
the pressure toward dichotomous thinking that seems to be built into the critical consciousness of the modern mind.

We need to challenge such dichotomous thinking in the attempt to apprehend a more inclusive notion of truth. Critical distance through objectification has made us forget that there is only one reality that includes both external objects and human subjects in relation to one another. Our personal feelings, inclinations, perspectives, evaluations, and biases are just as real as the objects we study, and if truth is to be comprehensive, it must include the human subject and the cultural context as well as the natural world. Truth cannot be limited to objectivity; nor ought it be denied in the name of cultural relativity. I believe we need to think of truth comprehensively. Subjective feelings and cultural perspectives are not strictly epiphenomenal to an otherwise value-neutral cosmos. I recommend a holistic vision, inclusive of self-world-God.

Here is an implication: to think of freedom strictly in terms of individual autonomy is a delusion. Why? Because We are not autonomous monads. Rather, we are persons-in-relationship. Each individual is in fact granted what measure of freedom he or she has by the release of constraints by other free individuals in relational interaction. In other words, free or not, we are all in this together. It takes the whole human community for us to be who we are. The recognition of this fact has led some postmoderns to advance the theory of holism. But more about that later.

Doubt

Another Cartesian legacy that imbues the sciences as well as secular self-understanding is the principle of doubt. Doubt sounds like a negative principle. It is. Yet, over time it has led to a positive principle, namely, commitment to pluralism. If one can always doubt one’s own position—which is the heart of critical consciousness—,
then one must grant the possible truth of an opponent’s position. Nevertheless, as soon as this is done, the opponent ceases to be an opponent and becomes a fellow traveler along the path that takes us toward greater and greater uncertainty about everything except pluralism itself.

We tacitly believe doubt should be systematic and exhaustive. One should doubt everything except that which is shown to be indubitably true. Nothing could be exempt from doubt, said Descartes, nothing except the presence of the doubter. Hence, *Cogito, ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am. In order to doubt, one cannot doubt the doubting process. So, for there to be a doubting process there must be a doubter, a thinker, a human subject. Descartes’s own subjectivity was indubitable. Having passed the test of doubt, the indubitable knowledge of his own subjectivity provided Descartes with the foundation for his philosophy.

The principle of doubt has become the cutting edge of modern critical thinking. By honing the insights of relativism, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have sharpened the blade of doubt so that it cuts ever more deeply. Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud added subjectivity itself to Descartes’s list of things to be doubted. Knowledge of oneself is no longer indubitable. We ourselves cannot be fully aware of what constitutes our own consciousness. When we articulate beliefs about God's will, for example, Marxists suspect that we are unconsciously giving voice to middle-class or bourgeois economic interests cloaked in religious language. Freidians suspect that we are repeating parental or cultural values that we introjected into our superego prior to the age of five. Depth psychologists may say we have unconsciously created the image of a loving Father in heaven in order to overcome the

11. Although we are used to employing the Latin, *cogito ergo sum*, Descartes wrote this originally in French, *je pense, donc je suis*, in his *Discourse on Method* (1637).
shock of growing up and realizing that our earthly fathers are unable to protect us from the vicissitudes of life or from the fear of death. Feminists may say similarly that we have created the image of a heavenly Father who rules over Earth in order to garner religious sanction for a social structure of oppression in which earthly fathers rule over women, children, and households. Operating in all of these analyses is the principle of critical doubt, which some philosophers now dub the “hermeneutic of suspicion.” The hermeneuts of suspicion, in short, accuse religious people of having a false consciousness, of projecting their own quite mundane self-interests onto God and heaven, where they do not belong.

This critical consciousness accounts for the so-called death of God. The hermeneuts of suspicion invert the authorship of the divine-human creation. Instead of God creating us, they say we have created God. Thus, atheism has arrived full force in the modern mind. But it is not the assertion of an atheistic position per se that accounts for the alleged death of God. Rather, it is the critical consciousness that raises the specter that our language about God can be looked at in another way. It is the suspicion—whether proven or unproven—that our talk about heaven is a disguised form of talking about Earth. The net impact is that religious authority appears to have lost its transcendental grounding and, hence, is no longer for us an authority.

There is no longer any way to prove with certainty that what theologians say about God is true or false. Hence, one must doubt the validity of theological assertions by considering the possibility that what is said about God may have more than one meaning, more than one interpretation. So we find ourselves in a situation where there is always a plurality of interpretations of any statement about God, and there is no objective means for adjudicating decisively between them.
Pluralism has made its nest in the modern mind and plans to stay for the foreseeable future.

Thus, modern critical consciousness has proven to be a formidable challenge to religious people whose theological doctrines were first formulated in a premodern age. We can with the tools of suspicion take our belief systems and objectify them, analyze them, depersonalize them, and criticize them. We can compare them to what other people think. We can also doubt them, doubting not only their objective truth but suspecting false motives on the part of the faithful who hold them. In sum, modern consciousness distances us from the source of religious life found in the ancient Christian symbols.

**Hermeneutics as Theological Response**

How have Christian theologians responded to this challenge of the modern critical consciousness? The first thing has been to formulate the theological task in terms of the Hermeneutical Question. The Hermeneutical Question presupposes that the context has changed, and that theology consists primarily in a form of translation from one context to the next. Sometimes cast in terms of the “hermeneutic problem,” the task most modern theologians set for themselves is that of reinterpreting the original meaning of what the Bible says in light of the new situation. Much as a translator interprets meaning from one language into another, modern theologians have been seeking new formulations for apparently out-of-date symbols and beliefs. They seem to assume that the meaning of the Christian faith could be cut loose from its original situation. As a letter mailed to an overseas address passes from one country to another, so also the gospel has been thought to travel from one worldview to another and, when delivered, read and understood. Because the gospel can travel, the theologian could serve as the travel agent to arrange its jet-propelled
flight across the abyss that separates the time of the Bible from the
time of the modern world.

It is my position that the Hermeneutical Question has been the
proper question to ask over the last century or two and, furthermore,
that most of the assumptions made by modern theologians are worth
maintaining for the foreseeable future. As we move from modern
to postmodern consciousness, however, the value and role of these
assumptions become a good deal more subtle than first suspected.
This subtlety will require that we modify—if not abrogate—the
translation model for moving from the period of the biblical
experience to our own. I say this for two reasons. First, the language
of the Bible is not as foreign to our modern way of thinking as
is widely assumed. Yes, there is a difference between biblical and
modern worldviews, but when we seek the roots of modernity we
see that they reach back to the ancient world in such a way that
we moderns are deeply dependent upon what went before. The
revolution of the modern mind is not as radical as is sometimes
thought. What is needed is a theological method that assumes that
both ancient and modern understandings belong to a single and more
inclusive tradition-history—to a single story—and that this tradition-
history will eventually participate in the one comprehensive story of
humankind on Earth.

Second, although there is some validity to thinking that the
Christian faith is constituted by a linguistically independent meaning
that can be translated from one language to another, there are certain
basic symbols of the faith that are not translatable and simply must
be present wherever one finds the faith. The basic symbols that
are tied to the original experience of the revelation from God are
irreplaceable and even untranslatable. All one can do is continue
to interpret their meaning in light of new contexts. One cannot
translate them exhaustively into a new mode of discourse. The
symbol of the cross, for example, is requisite for Christian faith regardless of what language one speaks or what historical context one finds oneself in. If the cross is not present, the faith is not present. What permits the gospel to ride out the centuries, traveling from one age to another and one language to another, is not its translatability. It is rather the protean power of its symbols to emit new meaning in new contexts.

I will attempt to show how this is the case in the chapters that are to come. In the meantime, we need now to turn our attention to postmodern consciousness proper in order to note where it diverges from the modern mind, even while maintaining continuity.

**The Challenge of the Postmodern Mind**

Postmodernity as an independent mode of consciousness is not here yet, if it is ever to come to full term at all. It is at present a babe struggling to emerge from the womb of modernity, and as it does so its first cries are of protest. There is growing disenchantment with the brokenness and fragmentation left in the wake of modern objectivism, mechanicalism, technologism, and individualism. We moderns, say the postmodern critics, have separated human consciousness from the world of extended objects, separated value from truth. We have separated humans from nature, from God, and from one another; and should we finally detonate our nuclear weapons—weapons that represent the height of the modern achievements in technological thinking—then we may even separate ourselves from our own future. Our world continues to break into more and more pieces. Voices from many quarters can be heard crying out, “Enough of this! Let’s put the world back together again!”

I recommend we distinguish postmodernity from postmodernism. *Postmodernity* is a term that describes a cultural mood, a phase, a stage of reflection that modifies many of the assumptions we made
during the rise of modernity. *Postmodernism*, like other “-isms,” is an ideology. Postmodernism does not describe; rather it prescribes. Both postmodernity and postmodernism provide a context within which theological reflection takes place. Some theologians among us identify as postmodernists. Afoot today are two versions of postmodernism, the deconstructive and the reconstructive. To these we now turn.

**Postmodernity Type 1: The Deconstruction of Modernity**

Postmodernity starts by describing the broken pieces of modernity. Yet ideological *postmodernism* can prescribe at least two different ways of handling the broken pieces, the deconstructive and the reconstructive or holistic ways. We will begin with deconstructionist postmodernism.

Developing out of the deconstructionist school of literary criticism, postmodern thought type one is characterized by its relentless attack against the foundationalism and universalism of Cartesian modernity. All postmodern thinking keys from and goes beyond Descartes’ legacy, to be sure, yet deconstructionism emphasizes certain themes. First, it abandons all confidence that we can build human knowledge on the foundation of the *cogito*, the individual self saying, “I think.” The *dubito*, “I doubt,” overpowers it. Second, it abandons confidence in progress gained through applying science and technology. Nuclear warfare and mass death such as that at Hiroshima and Auschwitz undermine our trust in technoscience. Third, it abandons commitment to universal reason, to metanarratives or stories that are inclusive of all peoples or of the whole of reality, because such universal thinking only masks the perspectivalism of one group and its power interests over another.12
Postmodern philosopher John Caputo tries to lead us beyond Descartes’ reliance upon indubitable truth toward truth as a way of life, even the way of faith: “I think that postmodern theory is a way out of the modernist concept of truth, which kept everything locked up in boxes: religious and secular, public and private, subject and objective, fact and value. It opens up the space of truth and allows it to assume a more plastic form, a richer mind which is comfortable with ambiguity. Faith becomes a form of life, a way of doing the truth.”

Conceptual precision and rational certitude get replaced by comfort with ambiguity and tolerance for difference, according to deconstructionist postmodern philosophy and theology.

Deconstructive postmodernism includes a fundamental social critique. In the form of critical theory in the tradition of Karl Marx and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School of philosophy, postmoderns pursue interpretations and explanations that provide a better self-understanding for those who want to improve the social conditions of those victimized or marginalized by the dominant society. The postcolonial version of deconstruction aims at “decentering universal and transhistorical values of Western categories of knowledge. It questions the three mainstays of the Enlightenment: objectivity, rationalism, and universalism,” writes R.S. Sugirtharajah.

Rather than naively accept modern rational discourse as value neutral, the deconstructive critique exposes the perspectives and even biases imparted to judgments by social location. Black theologian

12. Jean-François Lyotard denies the credibility of “metanarratives or grand narratives” because of their “legitimating function,” which justifies “populicide,” such as that at Auschwitz. See Jean-François Lyotard The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982–1985 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 19.
Dwight Hopkins, for example, factors in class, gender, and race whenever engaging in a critical reading of theologians: “The content of one’s argument and choice of sources reflect class, gender, racial, colonial/neocolonial, and sexual-orientation privileging and preferences, especially when authors do not openly assert the context of their talk about God.”

We modern people might think that we are rational and value neutral, but this is delusional, according to the deconstructionists. Our context—including our social location and our power interests—indelibly skews our perspective and colors our perceptions. Deconstructionist thinking is critical thinking; it incorporates our own context-awareness and context-engagement.

More than awareness of context is called for by the postmodern and postcolonial theologian. We must be critical of our context; we must engage the injustices of our context. Specifically, the injustices associated with the colonial legacy require our attention. Hong Kong theologian Kwok Pui-lan carries postcolonial deconstruction beyond where previous liberation theologies had taken us: “Even progressive theologians in the United States—feminist, liberationists, and racial minorities among them—who have championed the use of critical categories such as gender, class, and race in their works, have not sufficiently addressed theology’s collusion with colonialism in their theoretical frameworks.”

The decentering of one’s own cultural context and perspective gives rise to a central ingredient in the deconstructionist recipe, namely, otherness (alterity). We live daily among a plurality of others, a diversity of others. Love, rather than domination, becomes the way a Christian relates to someone who is other.

Postcolonial theologian Vitor Westhelle treats the other as other with love under the umbrella of liberation theology. Postcolonial “liberation theologies” manifest themselves “in an array of theological expressions that, lato sensu, include along with third world theologies, North American black theology, feminist theology, womanist theology, and other adjectival or genitive theologies that challenge the dominant Western academic theological productions.” The central thrust of deconstructionist postmodern theology is the incorporation into the very heart of rational thought our moral obligation to pursue justice on behalf of the marginalized among us.

My own University of Chicago mentor, David Tracy, sees transformative hope for the Christian faith in the emerging postmodern context:

> We need the enabling reflections of the postmoderns to expose the unreality of the present and the death of the modern, self-grounding self in all its myriad forms. We need, above all, the ability of postmodern thought to allow the marginalized ones—especially the mystics—to speak once again. For the postmoderns are correct: many modern understandings of God, both philosophical and theological, are renderings of a transcendental signified; many anthropologies, including theological ones, are disguised anthropocentric humanisms where the theocentric reality of Christian faith is quietly disowned. . . . Part of what one can hear in the voices of these others, I believe, is the healing and transformative message of the Christian gospel alive once again.

The deconstructionist version of postmodern thinking celebrates diversity and plurality as an antidote to the hegemonic unity superimposed by modern Western rationalism. What appears to be value neutral reason is actually a repressive form of reason, say postmodern critics, because it snuffs out local traditions with their

particular self-understandings. What we need, say these postmodernists, is an affirmation of multiple perspectives and respect for those who see the world differently from one another. By accepting daily life with a plurality of perspectives coming from multiple social locations, deconstructive postmodernists fear holism. The problem with holistic postmodernism, deconstructionists would say, is that holism risks subordinating local perspectives to somebody’s metanarrative. To holistic postmodern thinking, we now turn.

Postmodernity Type 2: The Reconstruction of Wholeness

Although we will not avoid the critique of modernity put forth by deconstructive postmodernism, here in God—The World’s Future we will build primarily on developments in holistic postmodernism. Essential here, in the words of Nancey Murphy, is “a complex mutual conditioning between part and whole.” Murphy and her Fuller Seminary colleagues, neuroscientist Warren Brown and theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, apply the holistic model to the human person. We cannot account for who each of us is by appeal to autonomous freedom; because each of us is a person-in-relationship with our social context and our wider environment.

Nor can we account for who each of us is as a person by modernity’s objective method of identifying the biochemical processes that constitute our bodies. Reducing our human complexity to bottom-up biochemical causes would simply miss what is obviously the case: each of us is a whole human person who integrates, body, soul, spirit, relationships; and this integrated wholeness actually has an influence on what happens biochemically. We can decide to run or sit, eat or diet, visit the dentist or let

our teeth fall out. We exert top-down causation as well as respond to bottom-up causation. Only a holistic paradigm will allow us to perceive accurately who we are as human persons. Does this holistic principle apply more broadly?  

The cardinal doctrine of holistic postmodernism is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. By recognizing the decisive role played by the whole in top-down causation, we can see that the problem with the modern mind is that it looks exclusively at the parts while ignoring the whole.

An important corollary to the cardinal principle of holism is this: everything is related to everything else. The problem with us moderns is that we foolishly think we can operate as isolated individual egos and ignore everything else. This ignoring of the relation between our internal world and the whole of reality is being attacked as the root cause of the dichotomous thinking and fragmentation that are narrowing our vision and threatening to destroy our ecosphere. A philosophy of holism can overcome this tendency toward fragmentation by looking for relationality wherever it might be found.

Postmoderns of various types seem to agree that the fundamental cause of this fragmentation is the modern habit of divisive thinking. More precisely, we can say it is the destructive assumption that the fragmentary nature of human thought corresponds with an actual fragmentariness of reality itself. Because we are finite and our thoughts tend to seek out differences and draw distinctions, we get into the unreflective habit of assuming that these are real differences and real distinctions. We then experience the world as broken up in fragments. Hence, many people today believe the cure for the ills

wrought by modernity must begin with healthier thinking, relational thinking.

The first division that needs healing is epistemological. It is the gash that presumably separates objective reasoning from subjective feeling. A holistic understanding of human reasoning will recognize that love, compassion, trust, and faith are feelings that help compose knowledge. The category of imagination is inclusive of both thinking and feeling, and imagination places the human being in a context of intelligibility that spans the cleavage between subject and object.

But the wholeness and healing postmoderns seek are more than epistemological. They are also ontological. They apply to reality, to our cosmos. To illustrate, we note that the basic principles of holism in its current form were developed early in the twentieth century by the South African philosopher J. C. Smuts. Smuts sought to conceive of the whole of things according to the model of biological evolution. This means things move through time. They change and develop. What makes temporal movement significant, according to Smuts, is that it is accompanied by genuine creativity, by emergence, by epigenesis.

There are two basic and incompatible ways of conceiving creative activity within the cosmos. They are the unfolding view and the epigenetic view. According to the first view, everything is in one way or another given at the beginning. The universe consists in an unfolding or realization of potentialities already present at the starting point. This view assumes the created order was in principle complete and final at the point of origination, so that all subsequent events and changes consist only in rearrangements and reshufflings of the original material and forms. The present and future have been predetermined or at least delimited by the past. All fresh initiative, novelty, or creativeness are effectively banned from the universe. In
the course of this book, *God–The World’s Future*, I will refer to this as the *archonic view*, using the Greek root ἀρχή, which means both “beginning” and “rule.” Popular versions of postmodernity such as the human potential movement—which interprets human liberation as the unfolding of potential already existing within us—unknowingly espouse this more conservative of the two alternatives.

Smuts, in contrast, proffers the epigenetic view. Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory emerging from the nineteenth century rejects the notion of a completed beginning in the past. Instead, says Smuts, we have “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. . . Evolution is not merely a process of change, of regrouping of the old into new forms; it is creative; its new forms are not merely fashioned out of the old materials; it creates both new materials and new forms from the synthesis of the new with the old materials.”21 From this, arises the concept of evolutionary development as an epigenesis rather than an unfolding of a previously fixed genetic reality. Epigenetic movement is understood as creative of the new, as self-organizing, as opening up new paths and rendering possible new choices, as creating freedom for the future, and in a very real sense as breaking the bondage of the past and its fixed predeterminations.

When one combines essential temporality with this emergent creativity as Smuts does, it leads rapidly away from the holism indicative of premodern ontology. One could say that the metaphysics of the ancient Greeks was holistic in the sense that the monistic question was constantly raised: How are all things finally related to one another? Simplicity was the virtue. Plato argued that

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oneness was prior to plurality. Anything that is a composite of two or more elements is subordinate because it is dependent upon each of those elements for its reality. Therefore, what is simple, indivisible, and indestructible is ultimate. Plato was profound but premodern on this issue.

In contrast to premodernity’s emphasis on simplicity, what we are developing here is a concept of emergent holism, wherein composite actualities produce new wholes that are not simple but that represent higher levels of complex and integrated being. Whereas for premodern ontology the move from the simple to the composite is almost a degeneration, for epigenetic holism ever-new composites—if they become genuine wholes and not mere aggregates—constitute an achievement. The ancient metaphysics left virtually no room for change or development. It was a form of the unfolding view of creation. The evolutionary and epigenetic ontology, in contrast, incorporates temporal movement and foresees new and equally ultimate realities appearing in the future. “The pull of the future” is as essential to the life of an organism as “the push of the past,” and the new wholes that arise are the center and creative source of reality.22

In short, the postmodern thinking I applaud seeks to overcome the fragmentation of the modern mind by employing the concept of epigenetic holism.23 By giving priority to the whole, holistic postmodernists believe we can reintegrate thought with feeling, objectivity with participation. This means that we need to get beyond the machine model of the world. And we need to get beyond the archonic to the epigenic model of the world.

22. Ibid., 115–16; see also 102.
23. Please note that my use of the term, epigenesis, refers to ontological newness. This usage differs from that of contemporary molecular biology where the term refers to extra-genetic factors in gene expression.
It should be obvious that holistic postmodernism is not simply a return to the premodern understanding of things. The emerging postmodern worldview can be distinguished from the premodern because it seeks wholeness through synthesis, not through a return to the simple origin. It is dynamic. It recognizes that significant change takes place. It embraces creativity. Because the whole is both creative and synthetic, it has the potential for uniting what has been fragmented, for healing what has been broken.

Toward a Postmodern Theology

Now I must state that it is not my intention here to render a wholesale endorsement of things that bear the postmodern label. My primary motive for addressing postmodernity issues from the contextualization principle, according to which the church’s theology and ministry need to be made intelligible and effective in each context to which we are called to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Postmodernity belongs to our current context. This alone justifies addressing it theologically.\(^{24}\)

\(^{24}\) At present there is no single agreed-upon usage of the word *postmodern*. Many competing schools of thought are filing for a patent in the intellectual community. My approach here differs sharply from theologians who employ the deconstructionist literary criticism of Jacques Derrida and who substitute the literary text for the transcendent self. This approach, it seems to me, is a mere extrapolation of modern commitments to the point of producing nihilism. Holistic postmodernism, in contrast, is the recovery of meaning, not its dissolution. Therefore, my sympathies lie closer to those of process theologian David Ray Griffin, founder of the Center for a Postmodern World (located in Santa Barbara), and history of religions scholar Huston Smith, because these two wish to engage in constructionist or revisionary thinking and to do serious business with holism. I wish to start where these scholars start. However, my emphasis on eschatological ontology means I can borrow only meagerly from the Whiteheadian metaphysics Griffin espouses, and my emphasis on history as reality makes me reluctant to embrace the mysticism of Smith’s perennial philosophy. See David Ray Griffin, ed., *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988); Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-modern Mind* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); David Ray Griffin and Huston Smith, *Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989); and my own assessment in “Toward Postmodern Theology,” *Dialog* 24, no. 3 (1985): 221–26 and *Dialog* 24, no. 4 (1985): 293–97. I share a bit of affinity for the position of Hans Küng, who wants
Beyond its contextual significance, however, holistic postmodernism may have constitutive value for the theologian as well. The medium of postmodern thinking itself draws theological explication in directions of greater comprehensiveness and coherence than were possible during the modern period. The whole-part dialectic in particular provides systematic theology with a potent auxiliary concept for drawing out the implications of the Christian understanding of God, creation, eschatology, and ethics. In the pages to come, I hope to show how this might be done through the cultivation of a proleptic consciousness of the yet-to-be consummated whole of reality. By proleptic consciousness I am referring to our awareness and anticipation ahead of time of the future whole. Just as a whiff of something baking in the oven causes us to salivate and look forward to the soon-to-be-served dinner, so also the death and resurrection of Jesus cause us to look forward to the advent of God’s eschatological banquet. Such awareness and anticipation are based upon God’s promise and upon our faith in God’s faithfulness.

The blueprint for structuring such a proleptic theology will follow a destiny–wholeness–integration formula. We will see that the gospel of Jesus Christ is essentially a promise for the future. In fact, it is more than just a promise. It actually embodies, ahead of time, the future God has promised for the whole of creation, namely, new creation. If the gospel is the key to understanding reality, which I believe is the central Christian commitment, then it seems to follow that what is real is future-oriented. Destiny determines and defines what things are now. Further, only at the fulfillment of the divine promise will reality itself become a whole, and only with this whole of wholes will the true nature of all the participating parts including a postmodernity that preserves the critical consciousness of modernity while avoiding its reductionism (Theology for the Third Millennium [New York: Doubleday, 1988], 8–9).
ourselves be revealed. Only in light of the God-determined whole can we apprehend the purpose according to which all the cosmic processes and human enterprises will be integrated, according to which separated and fragmented parts will be transformed into an integrated unity.

Of course, that God-determined whole is not yet actual. It does not yet exist. But it has been revealed; it has been incarnated ahead of time in the life, death, and resurrection of the Nazarene. Hence, it is to Jesus Christ that one must look to find human destiny, to gain a vision of the whole, and according to which people can integrate the disparate elements of their lives. A life so integrated around Christ is a proleptic life. It is the future life actualized ahead of time. It is new life in the midst of the old life. It is beatitudinal life because it is true life. It is beatitude.

**Three Stages along Faith’s Way**

The very fact that I have posed the Hermeneutical Question and then followed with an attempt to identify the emerging postmodern consciousness raises the prospect of thinking about the Christian faith in terms of at least three phases: premodern, modern, and postmodern. One of the curious things about history is that it seldom really leaves anything behind. It accumulates. The premodern way of thinking has not been totally abandoned. It is still with us and continues to exist side by side with the more recent innovations.

There is another way to look at this matter. It may be helpful not only to think of these three phases as different chapters in the story of the western mind, but also as chapters in one’s life story. Using the tools of philosophical hermeneutics we can draw a fascinating parallel between the morphology of human consciousness in general and that of Western history up to this point. It may be more than just a coincidental parallel because we are becoming increasingly
aware that how we think is determined in large part by the language
and tradition within which we do that thinking. The history of our
culture lives and moves within us. Therefore, the pattern we follow
in developing modes for interpreting the symbols of our faith can
rightly be pictured as a microcosm of the development of our culture
as a whole, the macrocosm.

I suggest that we think of faith in terms of three levels or stages
of consciousness: (1) naive world-construction, (2) critical
deconstruction, and (3) postcritical reconstruction. These
characterize my own spiritual biography as described in the preface
to the first edition, just as I believe they characterize the discipline of
theology as it tries to respond to currents in our culture.

Each stage, I maintain, has its own integrity; and when we fail
to distinguish the stage in which we are thinking it may lead to
confusion. Therefore, let me invoke a couple cautions at this point.
First, the term naive connotes nothing pejorative. When it comes to
one’s belief in God, a naive faith is by no means inferior to a critical
faith. Hearing a child speak lovingly about Jesus is like listening to
the angels sing. Second, the three stages are not intended to establish
a hierarchy or a ladder to climb. We ought not be motivated to
scramble to the top and leave the previous two steps down below. I
suspect that it is possible for a person of faith to live simultaneously at
all three levels.

Let me say this again in a different way. It would be sophomoric to
race to postcritical consciousness and then feel superior to those we
left behind in premodern naiveté or in now out-of-date modernity. If
we become so proud of ourselves for having advanced to being post-
critical or postmodern or post-everybody else in the room, then we
inadvertently absolutize our own achievement to the denigration of
all those who are allegedly less advanced. We progressive Christians
can all too easily yield to the self-congratulation temptation, to pat
ourselves on the back for maturing beyond literalist fundamentalism, yesterday’s orthodoxy, and bigoted exclusivity. Locating ourselves at stage three risks self-absolutization, an advanced form of narrow-mindedness that does violence to great moments of truth in the past and fails to acknowledge the finite character of our own present knowledge.

Despite these cautions, we still need to employ the idea of three stages because it reflects the actual experience of faith in our own era. Here, I will insist that Christian faith can be authentic and fulfilling at each stage, and, further, I will contend that it is not the mission of the church to seek routinely to advance a person from one level to the next. The mission of the church is primarily to proclaim the gospel and encourage faith, and it can do so best if it takes into account the integrity of each stage of consciousness.

Naive World-Construction

The first stage is the one I experienced at home prior to attending the university. Let us characterize it in terms of compact consciousness and refer to it as the first naïveté or natural literalism. The first naïveté is that stage in which we exist in simple harmony with the symbols of our world of meaning, our lifeworld. It is characterized by immediacy of belief, by an unbroken ecology of meaning in which everything fits together and makes sense. There is no clear differentiation between one’s own basic concepts and those that are the common fund of the surrounding culture or subculture. It is the everyday swim in the stream of language and thought prior to critical consciousness, prior to stepping out of the flow and viewing it from the dry island of objectivity. One of my professors, Paul Ricoeur, describes the first naïveté as a sort of blindness in the very heart of seeing.
Our understanding of the world at this stage of compact or predifferentiated consciousness operates at the level of what we might call *naive realism*. We assume that the ideas in our minds and words in our mouths correspond with the world the way it really is. We assume that when scientists engage in research, they uncover the hidden mechanisms of the world of nature and show us what is actually there. We assume that when the Bible speaks of the kingdom of God, we can imagine God as wearing a crown, sitting on a throne, and being waited on by servants. It is life lived amid the objective world before it requires a doctrine of objectivism to justify itself. It is the feeling of being at home with our ideas and language.

For Christians at the level of the first naiveté, the word *God* is part of the everyday furniture of their symbolic home. This certainly was the case with people living in antiquity in general and with the writers of the Bible in particular. Visions of heaven and hell, interventions by angels and demons, miraculous cures, divine guidance in the course of events, and such matters were all accepted at face value as part and parcel of the world. The Bible did not need to argue for the existence of God. It assumed it, and so did the bulk of its first readers. Quite the same situation exists for children today who are raised in Christian families. The watchful presence of guardian angels, providential interpretations of tragedy, and thinking that deceased relatives are now happy in heaven and getting ready for the last judgment—all these make good common sense. This is the naive oneness with our symbolic world that Zimmermann relied on when painting the nave ceiling of the Wieskirche.

Essential to this lifeworld is an experience of tension. But it is not an intellectual tension. It is moral. Religion at the level of the first naiveté reflects the tensions of human existence through a set of dualisms that organize moral thinking and social awareness into categories that distinguish right from wrong. The paramount dualism
is the antagonism between God and Satan. The other more modest dualisms are variants of this: good versus evil, obedience versus disobedience, spirit versus flesh, commitment versus self-indulgence, virtue versus sin, confession versus denial, heaven versus hell. Individual thinking and acting have meaning because they participate in the cosmic contest between God and God’s enemies. The object of religious devotion is to make a willful choice—that is, to decide to commit oneself to the divine mission and to fight against the forces of evil at work within one’s own soul and in the exterior world.

Thus the fundamental existential issue at the level of the first naiveté becomes the degree of personal commitment. How much faith do I have? Does my conscience guide me to live rightly? Will I be brave enough to die for what is right and true? Am I really sincere in my belief? These are deep and conscience-gripping questions that lead the sensitive soul down under the surface of the culturally-shared Christianity and into the depths of spiritual turmoil. The inner pain of authentic faith coming to birth is a labor that can be faced only by the individual. No surrogate can walk that dark valley for you or me. Only when one has personally traversed that valley can there be a faith that is truly sincere and fully committed. The tension of human existence becomes articulated in terms of the struggle of faith versus unfaith; and the tension is thought to be relieved when one can say that “Jesus Christ is my personal savior.”

What is the role of theology at the level of the first naiveté? It is basically world-constructing. By “world” here I mean lifeworld or world of meaning, the realm of significication within which we understand ourselves. “A world is something which people inhabit. It gives the shape of what they experience, feel, opine, see, etc.,” according to Taylor.25 This world can be distinguished from what we ordinarily mean by environment, the universe as viewed through
the objective lenses of the scientific gaze. Our world is something to which we are personally related. It is usually prior to and inclusive of our objectified thinking and our subjective reflection. We are able to achieve self-understanding only through the language and symbols given us by our lifeworld.

This world is not the result of pure projection or individual imagination. It is shared. It is bequeathed to us by our intimate family, our surrounding culture, and our linguistic tradition. It provides the fundamental system through which we understand ourselves, external reality, and what is of ultimate importance to both.

For theology to serve the task of world-construction, then, means that it will seek to present, re-present, and think through the primary symbols of the Christian faith in terms of naive realism. By retelling the Bible’s stories and by reciting the creeds it will provide vocabulary through which we can bring to articulation our innermost thoughts and personal feelings in conjunction with a mental picture of how God’s world works. The very language and concepts we use to describe the world and to understand ourselves will connote and refer us constantly to the reality of God.

As I said before, thinking at the level of the first naïveté has its own integrity. It is not necessarily anti-intellectual, dishonest, or spiritually shallow. It is natural, an inevitable stage of consciousness from which some people never emerge but which all of us must go through. The gospel of salvation is as true and meaningful for children and naïve adults and was as true and meaningful for the people of antiquity as it is for anyone else.

Nevertheless, once a person undergoes the purging fires of modern critical consciousness there is no going back. Theology, as we shall see, is both challenged and immensely enriched by modern criticism.