

SUNY SERIES IN  
CONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERN THOUGHT  
DAVID RAY GRIFFIN, EDITOR

David Ray Griffin, editor, *The Reenchantment of Science:  
Postmodern Proposals*

David Ray Griffin, editor, *Spirituality and Society:  
Postmodern Visions*

David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World:  
Essays in Postmodern Theology*

David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee, and Joe Holland,  
*Varieties of Postmodern Theology*

David Ray Griffin and Huston Smith, *Primordial Truth and  
Postmodern Theology*

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— AND —  
POSTMODERN THEOLOGY

DAVID RAY GRIFFIN  
HUSTON SMITH

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

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*To Ann and Kendra,  
the loves of our lives.*

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D. R. G. AND H. S.

# INTRODUCTION TO SUNY SERIES IN CONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERN THOUGHT

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

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

Although there have been antimodern movements before, beginning perhaps near the outset of the nineteenth century with the Romantics and the Luddites, the rapidity with which the term *postmodern* has become widespread in our time suggests that the antimodern sentiment is more extensive and intense than before, and also that it includes the sense that modernity can be successfully overcome only by going

beyond it, not by attempting to return to a premodern form of existence. Insofar as a common element is found in the various ways in which the term is used, *postmodernism* refers to a diffuse sentiment rather than to any common set of doctrines—the sentiment that humanity can and must go beyond the modern.

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

Closely related to literary-artistic postmodernism is a philosophical postmodernism inspired variously by pragmatism, physicalism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida and other recent French thinkers. By the use of terms that arise out of particular segments of this movement, it can be called *deconstructive* or *eliminative postmodernism*. It overcomes the modern worldview through an anti-worldview: it deconstructs or eliminates the ingredients necessary for a worldview, such as God, self, purpose, meaning, a real world, and truth as correspondence. While motivated in some cases by the ethical concern to forestall totalitarian systems, this type of postmodern thought issues in relativism, even nihilism. It could also be called *ultramodernism*, in that its eliminations result from carrying modern premises to their logical conclusions.

The postmodernism of this series can, by contrast, be called *constructive* or *revisionary*. It seeks to overcome the modern worldview not by eliminating the possibility of worldviews as such, but by constructing a postmodern worldview through a revision of modern premises and traditional concepts. This constructive or revisionary postmodernism involves a new unity of scientific, ethical, aesthetic, and religious intuitions. It rejects not science as such but only that scientism in which the

data of the modern natural sciences are alone allowed to contribute to the construction of our worldview.

The constructive activity of this type of postmodern thought is not limited to a revised worldview; it is equally concerned with a postmodern world that will support and be supported by the new worldview. A postmodern world will involve postmodern persons, with a postmodern spirituality, on the one hand, and a postmodern society, ultimately a postmodern global order, on the other. Going beyond the modern world will involve transcending its individualism, anthropocentrism, patriarchy, mechanization, economism, consumerism, nationalism, and militarism. Constructive postmodern thought provides support for the ecology, peace, feminist, and other emancipatory movements of our time, while stressing that the inclusive emancipation must be from modernity itself. The term *postmodern*, however, by contrast with *premodern*, emphasizes that the modern world has produced unparalleled advances that must not be lost in a general revulsion against its negative features.

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

This series does not seek to create a movement so much as to help shape and support an already existing movement convinced that modernity can and must be transcended. But those antimodern movements which arose in the past failed to deflect or even retard the onslaught of modernity. What reasons can we have to expect the current movement to be more successful? First, the previous antimodern movements were primarily calls to return to a premodern form of life and thought rather than calls to advance, and the human spirit does not rally to calls to turn back. Second, the previous antimodern movements either rejected modern science, reduced it to a description of mere appearances, or assumed its adequacy in principle; therefore, they could base their calls only on



the negative social and spiritual effects of modernity. The current movement draws on natural science itself as a witness against the adequacy of the modern worldview. In the third place, the present movement has even more evidence than did previous movements of the ways in which modernity and its worldview *are* socially and spiritually destructive. The fourth and probably most decisive difference is that the present movement is based on the awareness that *the continuation of modernity threatens the very survival of life on our planet*. This awareness, combined with the growing knowledge of the interdependence of the modern worldview and the militarism, nuclearism, and ecological devastation of the modern world, is providing an unprecedented impetus for people to see the evidence for a postmodern worldview and to envisage postmodern ways of relating to each other, the rest of nature, and the cosmos as a whole. For these reasons, the failure of the previous antimodern movements says little about the possible success of the current movement.

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

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

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

David Ray Griffin  
Series Editor

# 1

## INTRODUCTION: HOW THIS DISCUSSION TRANSPIRED

David Ray Griffin and Huston Smith

This book is a dialogue between two people, both of whom are highly critical of the modern worldview. Both are keenly interested in the relation between science and religion, and between Christianity and other religions. And both, at some point in their odysseys, abandoned the position the other now holds for the one he presently espouses. This puts us in a favorable position, we felt, to work on the deep-lying differences between our two positions—one perennial, the other postmodern. Our discussion also held the prospect, it seemed to us, of bringing the outlines of our two positions into sharper relief by virtue of the contrasts we would be mainly focusing on.

We agree on far more than divides us, but in this book we only allude to our commonalities so we can get on with the differences. In this introduction, we enter the portions of our respective stories that bear on the discussion that ensues.

## DAVID GRIFFIN'S STORY

I grew up actively participating in a conservative church in a small town. After high school, I entered the University of Oregon in 1957 as a music major. I soon decided to become a minister, however, and transferred the next year across the street to Northwest Christian College, a Bible college of my denomination, where a conservative-to-fundamentalist theology was taught. During my final years I became restless with this outlook, particularly with its exclusivism conjoined with an Anselmian doctrine of atonement.

In the 1962-63 academic year, while I was back at the university getting a master's degree in counselling, I came into contact with a wider world of thought. I went to Berkeley to hear Paul Tillich give the Earl Lectures at Pacific School of Religion, and decided to focus on philosophical theology when I went to seminary instead of pastoral counseling. I took a class from Douglas Straton who introduced me to Reinhold Niebuhr, among others. In the class I met George Nordgulen, who praised the virtues of Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and various process theologians. His attempts to interest me were mainly in vain, but I do recall trying to read *God's Grace and Man's Hope* by Daniel Day Williams.

Later that year, however, George and I visited the School of Theology at Claremont. There I met John Cobb, and, on the basis of his paper "A Personal Christology," decided to attend Claremont.

I also encountered a quite different world of thought while still in Eugene that same year. A professor in a philosophy course mentioned "Flying Father Joseph of Copertino," who was a contemporary of Leibniz and allegedly levitated on a regular basis. Looking up the account of him in the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* was my first brush with that world of thought—and my only brush with the *academic* study of such phenomena for many years to come. A friend introduced me to peyote (which in those days he had to get from Texas), and to Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception*. Although I took peyote only twice, and belladonna once (this was several years before hallucinogenic drugs were made illegal), I did learn the meaning, before I knew the words, of "altered states of consciousness." I also learned of the existence of a Theosophy library in the neighborhood, and read quite extensively, especially books based on Edgar Cayce's "life readings" and other books about reincarnation. More generally, a Theosophical blend of Hinduism and Christianity became my world of thought. It seemed to be based on good evidence, and the doctrine of universal salvation through reincarnational evolution was ethically and rationally

much more satisfying than the exclusivistic Anselmian idea of atonement I had been taught since childhood. It seemed much more exciting and illuminating than not only the conservative theology I was fast leaving behind but also the new blend of Tillich, Niebuhr, and process theology that had been its initial replacement. I recall, while on the way to Claremont, trying to reread Dan Williams's book and finding it tepid fare, indeed, too dull to read. That experience provided a basis for understanding many years later Huston Smith's statement that, after he first came upon Vedanta, he found that his "interest in process theology dropped markedly." I felt the same thrill with the Vedantic world of thought, as I understood it, that he says he felt when he first encountered Whitehead.

Through these influences, I had decided to make Eastern religions my major field of study, and immediately enrolled in a history of religions course. This course happened to be at the same time as John Cobb's seminar on "Whitehead's Philosophy and its Religious Relevance," however, and I soon found myself skipping class about every other time to attend Cobb's seminar. I had not yet read Whitehead himself, but I found that his thought, as expounded by Cobb, spoke to my concerns. I remember, for example, Cobb's saying that this philosophy provided a way between the old supernaturalism, according to which God miraculously interrupted the normal causal processes now and then, and a view according to which God is something like a cosmic hydraulic jack, exerting the same pressure always and everywhere (which described rather aptly the position to which I had come). Through this influence, I returned to my plan to study philosophical theology, and started becoming a process theologian, eventually writing my dissertation on "Jesus, Revelation, and Truth," which, after some years and considerable revision, was published as my first book, *A Process Christology*, in 1973.

As that book reveals, my interests had shifted greatly. I saw process theology as providing a good basis for a social (and ecological) gospel, and treated the resurrection of Jesus as an optional feature of Christology and of Christian faith in general. Salvation was regarded, in good modern liberal fashion, as a this-worldly state. A future existence was not necessarily denied, it was simply ignored, as being too uncertain to be the focus of faith and too irrelevant to the main issue, which was to bring about the Kingdom of God, or at least a more just and survivable way of life, on this planet.

This change of interests and outlook was based partly on evidence. Edgar Cayce had been my primary authority for my semi-Vedantic convictions, and for not wholly bad reasons. When in trance, he apparently had remarkable clairvoyant powers, being somewhere near 90 percent

accurate with his medical diagnoses and prescriptions. But when, with more historical sophistication, I learned that it was very unlikely that Jesus, *contra* Cayce, had spent several years in India, I came to distinguish between the accuracy of his medical readings and that of his historical and theological assertions. While this distinction left the validity of clairvoyance intact, I quickly lost interest in that whole complex of ideas, having found a better, more sophisticated world of thought that seemed quite satisfactory, if not fully so (Easters were not glorious).

Sociological factors were important in this change. Liberal theological circles were dominated by Bultmannian and other antimystical schools of thought. More importantly, the general state of the culture during those years, between 1963 and 1968, can best be recaptured by recalling the assassinations of John and Bobby Kennedy at the beginning and the end, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the driving of Lyndon Johnson from office over the Vietnam war, in between. My focus, like that of the culture in general, was outward.

Several developments during the five years I taught in the theology department of the University of Dayton are relevant to this series on postmodern thought in general and to this dialogue with Huston Smith in particular. First, after the rise of ecological awareness about 1969, I devoted considerable attention to a process theology of nature, becoming convinced that anthropocentrism and dualism are errors that must be rooted out if we are to survive. Second, this was the heyday of the death-of-God theologies, and I focused on the ontological and epistemological sources of atheism in modern philosophy. Third, I began coediting a book on John Cobb's theology with Thomas Altizer (Mr. God-is-Dead himself), and entitled my introduction "Post-Modern Theology for a New Christian Existence," thereby picking up the key term in Cobb's 1964 response to the death-of-God theologies, "From Crisis Theology to the Post-Modern World." In my mind, both ecological and spiritual survival became associated with the possibility of a widespread adoption of a new worldview in which nonsensory experience is primary in us and in which experience is attributed to all individuals, even those without sensory organs. Fourth, a colleague who had organized a local conference on immortality asked me to write a paper. I wrote positively of "The Possibility of Subjective Immortality in Whitehead's Philosophy"; while I believed that life probably did not continue after bodily death, I thought it important for people not to think that philosophical reflection ruled out the possibility. The fact that I did not really believe was made abundantly clear by my reaction to the death of my then-wife's younger brother in Vietnam. The normal grief was greatly intensified by the fact that this delightful boy, after having been unhappy for a long period, had

just begun to find himself—having been found by love—and then before he had a chance to live was killed in a war he considered wrong. Fifth (moving right along), the opportunity arose to spend an entire year teaching nothing but Asian religions, and I jumped at it. This decision allowed for an immersion in the literature of Hinduism and Buddhism, and for some reflection about the relation of Whiteheadian philosophy to some of the philosophies produced by these traditions. Sixth, the invitation came to return to Claremont to establish, with John Cobb, the Center for Process Studies.

My major task for the center has been to plan conferences to relate Whiteheadian philosophy to various areas of thought. Most of the conferences have involved either Eastern religious philosophies or the natural sciences, especially physics and biology, which enabled me to become acquainted with some of the most creative thinkers in these areas. Through these interchanges in the latter part of the 1970s, I became more convinced than ever of both the possibility and the necessity of a postmodern worldview (although I was not yet using the word) based primarily upon a synthesis of Whiteheadian philosophy and the best of more recent thinking in these and other areas.

A research leave in 1980-81 provided the final stimulus to make the contrast between modernity and postmodernity central to my work. A semester at Cambridge University in England was crucial in several respects. I devoted much of my time to studying the emergence of modern ways of thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In studying the furor in England surrounding *The Myth of God Incarnate*, written by John Hick and others, I saw that the reaction was due not solely to supernaturalistic reactionaries maintaining a virtual identification of Jesus with God but also to the modern presuppositions of the authors, which led to a denial of divine presence in Jesus altogether. I delivered a paper at Cambridge speaking of the need for a postmodern christology. In discussions resulting from this and other presentations, I became even more convinced of the need to relate talk of nature, human nature, and divine action to contemporary sciences and philosophical reflection thereon, rather than simply presupposing the general adequacy of the Whiteheadian framework. In particular, the attempt to use the mind-brain relation as an analogue for the God-world relation failed to communicate because so many hearers assumed an identity between brain and mind. I began reading extensively about the mind-brain relation to see if identism really had the solid empirical support its advocates claimed for it. Besides seeing that it did not, this study brought me into contact, by chance (evidently), with parapsychology. This contact began my first study of serious parapsychological research (as distinct

from my earlier exposure to occult literature and psychical research of the softest kind).

I spent the second half of my leave in Berkeley (where Huston now lives, but did not at that time). I had decided to spend most of my time on physics (I went to Berkeley partly because Henry Stapp is there) and evolutionary biology, and to read parapsychology in the evenings. But I soon decided that the parapsychological evidence was not only more interesting but also more important for philosophical theology, partly because it was a largely untapped source. I was amazed to learn of the quantity of good work, the quality of the best work, and the number of first rate thinkers who had explored the evidence seriously and found it credible. Some of the evidence related to the question of life after death (this generally being considered, with extrasensory perception and psychokinesis, one of the three main areas of psychical research). I began reading this literature with the confidence that all the data could be explained, especially from a Whiteheadian perspective, in terms of extrasensory perception and psychokinesis ("the super-ESP-PK hypothesis"). But the quantity and quality of the evidence, and the complexity of the theories needed to explain it away, finally overcame me, and I, against my original intention (at least consciously), became a "believer." I did not become absolutely convinced of the truth of life after death, just as I had never been absolutely convinced of its falsity; but I came, intellectually and emotionally, to believe it about as strongly as I had previously disbelieved it. This inversion of probability involved no major change with regard to philosophical possibility; I had always recognized that Whitehead's philosophy allowed for the possibility of survival. But even here there was some change; I saw that the possibility was supported by more features of this philosophy than I had previously realized. I came to see these features, which are those features that support parapsychological influences in general, as among the distinctively postmodern features of this philosophy. My lecture at the Center for Process Studies' annual banquet after my return to Claremont was entitled "Parapsychology and the Need for a Postmodern Philosophy."

My next discovery involved more historical work in the seventeenth century. I learned that the mechanistic worldview associated with the rise of "modern science" was based less on empirical facts than upon theological-sociological motivations, and that the mechanistic worldview did not replace a decrepit Aristotelianism, as the textbooks had taught us, as much as a vibrant "magical" worldview, in which action at a distance, internal relations, and divine immanence were central, and which was the real cradle of most of those breakthroughs associated with the "rise of modern science," including Newton's theory of gravity as well as

Gilbert's of magnetism. I came to see that the modern worldview, as expressed in scientific, philosophical, and theological thought (which were then not separated), was most centrally a rejection of precisely those types of powers and influences that are now called parapsychological. And I came to see Whitehead's philosophy, especially when its support for these influences is emphasized, to be a twentieth-century recrudescence of that Renaissance worldview which spawned modern science only to be rejected in the name of reactionary theological and sociological interests. My sense of the Whiteheadian philosophy as a postmodern worldview thereby increased, along with my interest in stressing its distinctively postmodern features. In 1983, I started the Center for a Postmodern World in Santa Barbara.

It was in the context of all these developments that I received, after a brief conversation with Huston at a conference, a copy of his article, "Science and Theology: The Unstable Detente," which had been published in the *Anglican Theological Review*. It was inscribed: "David, admitting I might be wrong, this marked copy, p. 377, with regards, Huston." Turning to said page, I saw that his inscription was an allusion to a statement once made by Kennett Roshi that she was working on a new *ko'an*, "I could be wrong." Getting ready to criticize various forms of the "theological innovations of modernity" because of the loss that has been suffered through them, Huston said that he wanted that *ko'an* to apply to his remarks. After mentioning personalism, Bultmann's demythologizing, the theology of hope, and Teilhard de Chardin, he devoted most of his attention to process theology. His major criticisms were these: (1) process theology deprives God of ultimacy (giving it instead to creativity, eternal objects, and the structure of actual occasions); (2) it rules out a concrete, timeless perfection and divine simplicity; (3) it rejects life after death (in favor of objective immortality in God) on the basis of a naturalism it wrongly assumes to be forced on us by natural science. For these reasons, he said, process theology involves a great loss in comparison with the classical expressions of Christianity (which he found to include everything of importance he had discovered in the Upanishads). He asks, in fact: "Why, then is this loss—Process Theology—being inflicted on Christians? (That is a strong charge. I keep repeating to myself, like the Jesus Prayer, 'I could be wrong. I could be wrong!')"

I was convinced that he was wrong—to some extent about process theology in general, but especially about its more postmodern possibilities: It should not be classified as an example of *modern* theology. It does not deprive God of ultimacy. And it does not—which seemed to be the main criticism—accept a naturalistic worldview on the basis of modern science, at least not the type of naturalism that rules out life after

death, but criticizes that form of naturalism. I believed that my new theological position was sufficiently different from the image of process theology being rejected by Huston that, once he saw it, he would consider any remaining differences trivial. Knowing that he was keenly interested in parapsychological phenomena, I assumed that my Whiteheadian defense of such phenomena would especially win him over. I resolved to write a response, but then, being preoccupied with a host of other matters, did not.

When I became aware, somewhat belatedly, of his book *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*, and learned that the article he had sent me was reprinted therein, I renewed my intention to write a response, but now in the context of a response to his position as a whole. One important point to make was that the postmodern mind he wanted to get beyond is not the postmodernity I was advocating. More time passed, but finally an invitation was issued for Huston to come to Santa Barbara in January 1988 to lecture for the Center for a Postmodern World and to engage in a dialogue with me. I wrote the critique that appears here as Chapter 1 and sent it to Huston, who prepared a brief response. After our face-to-face exchange, we finished the dialogue through the mail. As is obvious, the unanimity I had at one time expected did not result. That it would not had become clear to me after I began a serious study of Huston's position, seeing that the differences were deeper than I had originally thought. I still hoped, nevertheless, that we might end up with more agreement than we thought we had when we began.

I now turn the floor over to Huston, but will return for a joint statement with him at the close of this introduction.

### HUSTON SMITH'S STORY

I was born of missionary parents, in China, and spent my formative years there. I don't suppose one ever gets over that.

Because we were the only Americans in our small town, my parents were my only role models, so I grew up assuming that missionaries were what Westerners grew up to be. When I left for college in America, therefore, it was with the settled expectation that I would be back as soon as I had my theological credentials in hand. I had not reckoned with the West's dynamism. Never mind that my West was initially Central Methodist College (enrollment 600), set in Fayette, Missouri (population 3,000). Compared with Changshu, China, it was bright lights and the big time. Within weeks, China had faded into a happy memory; it

would not be my future. The consequence for my career, however, was slight. Instead of being a missionary, I would be a minister.

My junior year in college brought another surprise: ideas jumped to life and began to take over. To a certain extent they must have slipped up on me gradually, but there was a night when, with the force of a conversion experience, I watched them preempt my life. Returning from a meeting of a small honor society, which met monthly for dessert and discussion in the home of its faculty sponsor, several of us lingered in a corridor to continue arguments the evening had provoked—as unlikely a knot of peripatetics as ever assembled. My excitement had been mounting all evening, and around midnight it exploded, shattering mental stockades. It was as if a fourth dimension of space had opened, and ideas—now palpable—were unrolling like carpets before me. And I had an entire life to explore those endless, awesome, portentous corridors! Unhappiness might return, but I knew that I would never again be bored. I wonder if I slept at all that night.

In retrospect it seems predestined, but at the time I could only see it as good fortune that the faculty sponsor of our discussion group was a protégé of Henry Nelson Wieman. Wieman was at The University of Chicago, so I naturally chose it for my graduate study. Having earlier shifted my vocational intent from missionary to minister, I now moved next door again by opting for the teaching rather than the pastoral ministry—administrative and promotional demands of the latter would leave too little time for ideas. Because these vocational adjustments were not only logical but small, they occasioned no soul-searching; but as I think back on the matter I am surprised that the collapse of my youthful supernaturalism seems to have caused no trauma either. I entered The Divinity School of The University of Chicago a convinced Wiemanite, which is to say, a naturalistic theist. Robert Maynard Hutchins, the university's president, had chosen as his motto for the university Walt Whitman's "Solitary, alone in the West, I strike up for a new world," and I responded to his idealism—with some smug elitism admixed. Hutchins insisted that the "The" in The University of Chicago be capitalized to underscore its distinctiveness, and we were fond of quoting William James's alleged observation that whereas Harvard University had thought but no school, and Yale University, a school but no thought, Chicago had both. Chicago was an exciting place, and despite World War II—I had ministerial deferment and was headed for the chaplaincy—the early 1940s were a heady time for me. Through naturalistic theism, the two most powerful forces in history—science and religion—were about to be aligned, and it would be my life's mission to help effect the splice. I was a very young man and fresh to the world's confusions.

I can remember as if it were yesterday the night in which that entire prospect, including its underlying naturalistic worldview, collapsed like a house of cards. It was five years later, in Berkeley—but before I relate what happened, I need to explain how I got there. Chicago proceeded as planned, with one major surprise. Although in my first year I would not have believed that such a thing was possible, in the second year I discovered something better than Wieman's theology, namely his daughter. Two years later we were married, and for forty-five years she has been a delightful and stimulating companion.

Having married into Wieman's family, I needed to find a new advisor, so Bernard Loomer, a newly appointed instructor, saw me through my dissertation. It was Wieman, however, who suggested its topic. Stephen Pepper at the University of California had followed his book on metaphysics, *World Hypotheses*, by focusing on pragmatism (or *contextualism*, as he called it), and, as that worldview underlay Wieman's theology, he was interested in having someone explore the fit. So with recent bride and more recent first child in tow, I set off for a year in Berkeley to write (under Pepper's guidance) "The Metaphysical Foundations of Contextualistic Philosophy of Religion."

That year, I bumped into the question of how a philosophy that placed the premium on quality that contextualism did would handle the quality called *pain*, and, having given pain little direct thought up to then, I set off to the library for instruction. Rummaging under *pain* in the card catalogue, I found four titles that looked as if they might be relevant. One of them—Gerald Heard's *Pain, Sex and Time*—carried the most interesting title of the four, so I began with it. It proved to be one of the two most important reading experiences of my life. By page two, I discovered the book had nothing to do with my dissertation, but I kept reading. When I finished, I made two resolves. First, I would not read another line by this author until I had completed my doctoral studies—I obviously feared that if I did, I might quit the university. Second, when my diploma was in hand, I would read everything Gerald Heard had written.

What "grasped" me that night, as Tillich would say, was the mystic's worldview. Never before—not during my four years as an undergraduate religion major, nor during the four subsequent years as a graduate student of philosophy and theology—had mysticism been sympathetically presented to me, and when it was, I instantly cathected. The naturalistic world I had loved and lived in since my mind's arousal was, with a single stroke, relativized. It was but part of the whole. An island—lush to be sure, but rimmed round about by an endless, shining sea.

The dissertation was completed, and I began to teach the philosophy of religion (at the University of Denver and then the University of

Colorado) in the framework of Pepper's *World Hypotheses*. Pepper argued that the things in the world look differently according to the worldview through which they are seen. In *The Basis of Criticism in the Arts* he applied this thesis to aesthetic criticism, showing how evaluations of poems and paintings differ according to whether the critic is a Platonist, a mechanist, a contextualist, or an idealist. My courses simply extended that approach to religion. Initially, Wieman provided my specimen of the way religion looks to a contextualist, but as Wieman turned from metaphysics to the social sciences, and Hartshorne and Loomer convinced me that Whitehead's "philosophy of organism" was the strongest worldview for a naturalistic theist, this philosophy replaced pragmatism (contextualism) in my metaphysical spectrum. Already I was suspecting that Pepper's dismissal of mysticism as an imprecise worldview was uninformed, but I was still too unschooled in that outlook to enter it as a fifth option in my metaphysical spectrum.

That changed when I moved to Washington University in St. Louis in 1948 at the beck of its chancellor, Arthur Compton, who somehow heard of me through Wieman, whom he had come to respect while the two of them were at The University of Chicago. Before the move placed more distance between us, I decided to visit Gerald Heard who I had learned was living in southern California. During the course of the visit, he introduced me to his friend and neighbor, Aldous Huxley, whose *The Perennial Philosophy* had been under my arm on the journey. On seeing me off for my return journey, Heard remarked: "So you're moving to St. Louis. There's a very good swami there."

Swami? I'm not sure I recognized the word. At that point, however, Heard and Huxley were my guiding lights, so I asked for the swami's name and looked up *Satprakashananda* in the St. Louis telephone directory the week that I arrived. He turned out to be with the Ramakrishna Order of Vedanta, which Swami Vivekananda had established in America after taking the 1893 Chicago Parliament of Religions by storm. Learning that he was conducting a Tuesday evening discussion group on the Katha Upanishad, I dropped in on a session and returned home with a copy of the text. It occasioned the second of the two distinctive reading experiences I alluded to above. I have met teachers of world religions who confess that after fifteen years they still do not understand the Upanishads. For me it was otherwise. Their teachings were self-evident, including their insistence that there was more to be comprehended than could be rationally conceived.

For ten years, my Western philosophy marked time as I apprenticed myself to my new-found mentor. In weekly tutorials he taught me the Vedanta and at the same time set me to work meditating. There was

a time—about five or six years into this regimen—when in return for a monthly sermon I was listed as associate minister of my local Methodist Church and while (less publicized) I served as president of the St. Louis Vedanta Society. While this might have seemed odd, I experienced no conflict. In addition to keeping my ancestral ties intact, my church connection kept me “in love and charity” with my ostensible community and offered outlets for good works. To add, though, that the theological concerns of my congregation did not run deep enough to satisfy me would be to put the matter mildly, and its spiritual exercises stopped with pietism—in Vedic idiom, *bhakti*. There was one day each year when the two poles of my religious life were sharply joined. The church pageant on Christmas Eve was pitched early to accommodate young children, and its magic regularly worked to rebind me to my family and heritage, for what can rival a “Silent Night” that is imprinted in memory’s deepest recesses? I could *sense* the mystery of the Incarnation in that service, but nothing in its ambience underwrote for me the ontological foundations of that mystery to the extent that Swami Satprakashananda’s annual meditation on “Jesus Christ, the Light of the World,” delivered late at night after the children were put to bed, did. That Christ was one of multiple avatars for him was incidental compared with his certitude that in Christ’s birth something ontologically dramatic had *happened*.

In my tenth year at Washington University, a bid came from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.). Its president, Carl Compton—brother of my own chancellor—wanted to strengthen M.I.T.’s humanities program, and felt that the time had come to add philosophy to its existing tracks in English and history. My St. Louis colleagues argued that the dream of humanizing scientists was romantic, but the task seemed worth attempting. Moreover, Cambridge was an intellectual magnet.

M.I.T. proved to be my longest tenure. Its fifteen years were intense, tumultuous, and above all instructive. The edge with science that it offered me was pure gain, but the edge with philosophy in the northeastern United States was ambiguous. Analytic philosophy was in its heyday then, and M.I.T. was in its Harvard/Princeton/Cornell “Bermuda Triangle”—likening it to that Caribbean trap, which is rumored to consume planes that unsuspectingly enter its mysterious vortex, seems quite appropriate. It was not the brand of philosophy that I—or for that matter the administrators who had brought me to M.I.T.—felt our students most needed, however. In time, I grew weary of the polemics and the need to justify my philosophical interests to my colleagues, so when Syracuse University came into an endowed chair that was more open to

those interests and would give me greater access to graduate students, I accepted the invitation to be its first occupant.

As for my Asian education, my move to the eastern seaboard added Buddhism to the Vedantic foundation St. Louis had laid down. Before leaving Washington University I had brought to its campus D. T. Suzuki and then a Zen priest, who was a Fulbright exchange scholar, with whom I taught a semester’s course on Zen. The experience “hooked” me and, because the priest insisted that Zen could not be grasped by the rational mind alone, I decided to go to Kyoto for a summer of meditation, *ko’an* training, and residence in Myoshinji monastery—Gary Snyder was my *dharma* brother there. Thus it was that Zen became my contemplative practice for my M.I.T. years. In switching, I did not feel as if I was deserting Vedanta. *Śūnyata* seemed very similar to nirguna Brahman and the Buddha-nature similar to Atman—so much so that I felt I was encountering the same truth in different idiom. Another sea-change of the same order—same sea—occurred a decade or so later when Seyyed Hossein Nasr introduced me to the mystical dimension of Islam in pre-Khomeini Iran. Again, it felt as though I was learning yet another language in which the same truths could be couched.

Only one more episode needs telling. In my Introduction to Frithjof Schuon’s *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, I relate how, while conducting students on an academic year around the world, I chanced in Japan, India, and Iran successively upon books of his that dramatically deepened my understanding of the religions at hand. Pursuing Schuon’s writings after I returned home, I discovered that he situated the world’s religious traditions in a framework that enabled me to honor their significant differences unreservedly while at the same time seeing them as expressions of a truth that, because it was single, I could absolutely affirm. In a single stroke, I was handed a way of honoring the world’s diversity without falling prey to relativism, a resolution I had been seeking for more than thirty years.

Turning from this account of “where I’m coming from” to the discussion with David Griffin that follows: although it is not one that I would myself have initiated, I am grateful to him for having brought it to pass. Because I am writing this concluding paragraph after our substantive discussion has been completed, I can say with knowledge of hindsight that I have learned vastly more from it than I expected I would—not only about David’s position, but about my own. And pleasures have accrued. Neither I nor my wife could have wished for more gracious hosts than David and his wife, Ann, during the Santa Barbara weekend to which he alludes, or for a more worthy and civil antagonist in this written dialogue that has ensued.

## JOINT STATEMENT

Although, in fact because, most of our attention in the book is devoted to our differences, we want here to emphasize our agreement, which we consider more fundamental. The central agreement is that we must, for individual, social, and planetary health and even survival, move beyond the modern worldview, including the relativistic, nihilistic postmodern mind-set that is indicated in Smith's book title, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*. The first section of Chapter 1, in which Griffin summarizes Smith's "Critique of the Modern Worldview," can for the most part be considered a joint critique (especially if the adjective *modern* is always inserted before *science*).

We also agree that, in spite of all our criticisms of each other's position, that other position is far superior to any version of the modern worldview and to any of the fully relativistic, nihilistic stances, sometimes called *postmodern*, that have resulted from taking certain modern presuppositions to their logical conclusion.

The major value of this book, we expect, is that it provides readers who are dissatisfied with modernity and relativistic postmodernity an inside look at two alternatives, or, we should say, two versions of two of the major alternatives available today. Each position is presented and defended by an advocate and criticized by a sympathetic critic—one who affirms its basic intention and wishes it well—in fact, wishes to help make it better! Through the process of response and counterresponse, the reader is enabled to observe a process that usually occurs in letters or private conversations. Occasionally, this type of extended interchange can be heard at academic meetings or read in scholarly journals, but even there the time or space is usually far too limited to allow more than a brief interchange on isolated issues. We have each tried to see the other's position whole and to show how our various criticisms come from our own position as a whole. Through this back-and-forth process of presentation, critique, clarification, defense, and countercritique, the reader should have a sufficient basis to evaluate the respective viability of these two alternatives to the dominant worldview of modernity.

Neither of us expects all readers to come down on one side rather than the other—and we know that some readers will say "a plague on both your houses!" We recognize that worldview is a matter not simply of logic and evidence but also of social conditioning. We recognize with William James that worldview is also partly a matter of temperament, and that, even beyond social conditioning, people have fundamentally different temperaments. We recognize with Whitehead that "others may

require a proportion of formulation different from that suitable for ourselves," so that our pet dogmas may not strike a chord with others. We offer our ideas for those who find them helpful.



PREMODERN AND  
POSTMODERN  
PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY:  
A RESPONSE TO  
HUSTON SMITH'S PROGRAM

David Ray Griffin

Huston Smith has become an important and influential critic of the modern worldview and of the relativistic postmodern outlook to which it has led. He is influential because he writes in an engaging manner and because he is an important critic. He is important partly because he is influential but also because he has a number of other virtues. As a philosopher of science who taught many years at M.I.T., he has an intimate knowledge of modern science, which has been at the root of the modern world. As a philosopher in general, he is conversant with the relativistic postmodernism that has resulted from taking the premises of modern thought to their logical conclusions. As a philosopher and historian of religion,