At the end of our last lecture we were describing the modern mindset, and we had first of all looked at the philosophical backdrop of modernity, and then we had seen some social and cultural themes and emphases of the modern period, and then we had just begun to sketch out the nature of modern theologies, all of this in preparation for looking at postmodern responses to Modernity. I want to pick up that description of the mindset of the modern era theologically, and then we’ll go on to postmodernity, but first we want to begin with a word of prayer.

Lord, we do thank you for the privilege of study, and we ask for the guidance and the teaching ministry of your Holy Spirit to help us understand the things that are presented. Help us, Lord, not only to understand intellectually but to see ways in which we can bring your Word to answer the problems and questions that people are raising today. So, Father, guide our time together as we study. For it’s in Christ’s name we pray it. Amen.

At the end of the last lecture, I had talked generally about early modern theologies and then late modern theologies, and I want to continue with a few more things that would be appropriate in sketching the modern mindset as to theology. We should say, beyond what we said in the last lecture, that central to the modern world is the death of the supernatural God; that is, the God of traditional Western, as some would call it, Augustinian Christian theology. On page 31 of Varieties of Postmodern Theology, our authors say, “Because the Western ideas of self, truth, history, meaning, and value implied this understanding of God, the end of belief in this God entails a rejection of all these correlative ideas. But modernity tried to retain those ideas while rejecting the God whom they presupposed. In fact, the denial of God was often made in the name of the ultimate of the human self, historical progress, truth, and/or morality, ideas whose very meaning was implicitly subverted by the denial of God.”
The God of classical theism—and when we were discussing process theology in particular we sketched the ideas associated there with God—this God was seen to be immutable, impassible, absolutely sovereign, the cause of Himself. This God of classical theism was replaced by the human selfhood as possessing these qualities. Again I quote from our authors on page 31, “The modern ideal of human selfhood resulted from transferring this twofold notion of deity as externally controlling and internally unrelated to the human self. The sovereign, impassible God was replaced by the sovereign, isolated self. This ideal of selfhood in which self-identity depends on inviolable boundaries has led to a possessive and competitive psychology and, thereby, society. The need to exclude otherness combined with the ideal of mastery has also led to totalitarian control.”

This attitude toward the self, we’re told, has led to a utilitarian, consumer-oriented society—whatever works, whatever is to our best benefit, let’s get more of it. Everything other than humans has no value in itself, but it exists solely for the benefit of the human race, it has utilitarian value in other words.

As to philosophy of history, premodern Christianity saw history as having an absolute beginning, a definite center (that was the incarnation), and then an absolute end. The modern view is essentially the same, except that the Christian form of this view has been rejected. What remains is the view of a single movement in history, namely, the modern West, which alone is meaningful and outside of which there is no salvation, but salvation here is understood as economic and technological progress. This ideology is very destructive of other forms of life, whether human or nonhuman. “The destructiveness of modernity is fueled in part by the skeleton of traditional eschatology,” our authors tell us. Traditional eschatology promised the ultimate and total writing of all wrongs in some future eschaton, and as a result of that it downplayed the importance of the present. The modern view of things has kept this relation of the present to the future and in so doing it sees the present as having only a utilitarian value for the future: we’re on the way to this bright and glorious utopia. The net result is that the modern self never really lives in the present because it awaits some future resolution to problems of the present, though, of course, a demythologized solution to those problems.

Our authors then state that one pervasive feature of modern theology has been a separation of systematic theology from
theological ethics, especially from social ethics. And as a result, modern theology has been abstract, and thereby it has seemed irrelevant to the social evils of our time; for example, the racism, the sexism, the social and economic injustice, the imperialism, the war, the nuclearism, the ecological destruction, these are all things that are contrary to the will of God as portrayed in theology, and yet modern theology has not said much of anything about these ills, and in so doing, it has separated systematic theology from social ethics and, some would say, even from a social conscience.

The separation of theology and ethics is again a further illustration of the intellectual fragmentation that is characteristic of modernity. Modern universities are organized into disciplines and subdisciplines, each with its own methodology, its own data, and its own theory. Separating theology, though, from ethics, we are told, has had the effect of sanctioning the status quo. As a result, a prime example of what’s wrong when you separate theology and ethics is the example of Nazi Germany. When German theologians of the 1930s and 1940s explicated the Christian faith with no negative references to Nazism whatsoever, they implied, our authors tell us, that the politics of the Nazis were not antithetical to the Christian faith, I might add, or at least the Christian faith said nothing about this that was worth hearing, and maybe it said nothing at all.

For Harvey Cox’s liberation theology, the modern worldview is the view of the capitalist. And the function of religion has been to legitimate this worldview. It does this in part by accepting a divorce between religion and politics so that religion is relegated to the inner life of individuals. Modern theology by definition seeks to “interpret the Christian faith in relation to the modern worldview.” Modern theology has taken as its main problem the doubts of the cultural despisers of religion, not the social problems of those who despise the modern world because they have been trampled by it. And you can tell our authors think that this is a deficiency of modern theology and the modern view altogether.

That gives you something of an idea of the modern mindset. Let’s turn now to begin to look at postmodern theological responses to modernity. I think it is safe to say that all of the major tenets of the modern world have been rejected in one way or another by postmodernists. And that’s not to say that every postmodernist has rejected every one of those tenets, but rather when you look at postmodernity generally, you’ll find somewhere a rejection of the major ideas in the modern mindset. And I think many of us
would say that there’s a lot of key ideas that you have heard at the early part of this lecture and the latter portion of last lecture, a lot of key notions of modernity that I describe that are objectionable. That doesn’t mean that all of them are, but there are some that are objectionable. Now having said that, though, we should not then come to the conclusion that postmodernists all agree about what should replace these central ideas, and we should not automatically say that because there are some problems with the modern worldview, that means that whatever postmodernists say, we should be happy with it. I think you will find that in many cases, the proposed cure seems worse than the disease, if I may put it that way.

Where do we go with postmodern theological responses to modernity? As Griffin and Beardslee and Holland show, there have been four different times of theological responses to modernity. More broadly, these theological responses suggest the general mindset, that is, theological and otherwise, of postmodernity. And what I want to do now is to describe each of these four theological responses and give you an example of each approach, and the way I will go in my description is that I will offer a description first of all of the most radical postmodern response, and then we’ll go to lesser and lesser and lesser radical responses. So we’re going to move from the most radical to the least radical responses as we look at these four different theological responses to modernity.

The first form of postmodernism that I want to look at, the first theological response, has been called deconstructionist or eliminative postmodernism. Let me begin here, if I may, with a general description of this approach, and then I want to pick up an example of a deconstructive theology, namely, Mark Taylor’s deconstructive theology.

First to a general description. Here let me read from page xii in the introduction of our authors’ book, Varieties of Postmodern Theology. “Philosophical Postmodernism is 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 four-stall totalitarian systems, this type of
postmodern though issues in relativism, even nihilism. It could also be called ultramodernism in that its eliminations result from carrying modern premises to their logical conclusions.”

Then on pages 3 to 4 of Varieties of Postmodern Theology, we read a further description of deconstructionism. Our authors say, “The term *deconstruction* properly belongs, of course, to the French-based movement in which Jacques Derrida is the most prominent figure and behind which stands Heidegger’s deconstruction of Western metaphysics. The term *eliminative* comes from a position that emerged in English language philosophy, sometimes called eliminative materialism, of which Richard Rorty has been a central advocate. This type of postmodern philosophy believes that an objective approach to the facts of experience proves paradoxically that an object of approach is not possible, and that this realization undermines the modern worldview along with every other worldview. It believes that we are moving into a postmodern age in which this relativistic outlook will increasingly undermine the modern worldview.”

I think probably all of us have experienced this creeping relativism. One of the areas, though, that we would have thought was impervious to it, to the claim of subjective relativity, was science, but it’s precisely in this area and in philosophy of science where philosophers have argued that even science is not the domain of pristine objectivity. Observations in science are themselves theory-laden, they are governed by our point of view, our theory that we bring to an examination of the data. The net result is that you cannot really know the truth about anything, not even about things that supposedly you know through sense experience. You can see how different this is from the sense of, say, empiricism of the modern worldview and the sort of positivistic belief that we could know things just as they are through our sense perception of them.

We can also add that one of the keynotes of deconstructive postmodernism is a need to be tolerant to all people and to all viewpoints. You see, since absolute truth is impossible to know and since it’s impossible to demonstrate one viewpoint as preferable over another, then there’s no room for excluding anyone or any position from the dialogue table. Nobody is more right or wrong than you are, but then if that’s the case, we should talk to everybody and be tolerant of everything.
In addition this general approach argues, taking its cue from the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, that our social and other norms are all conventional; that is, they cannot be proved right by reason or empiricism, they’re just the conventions of society. It just happened to adopt certain ways of doing things, and our norms all reflect the societies in which those norms were chosen. Anyone, then, is simply a product of his or her linguistic community and the language games of that society, but typically those societies, we’re reminded, were male-dominated and dominated by traditional religious beliefs. We moderns have inherited the basic mindset of these cultures, but we need to see that these foundational ideas that we have as a result of inheriting this culture are not theory independent, but they’re theory-laden. What is necessary, then, is to deconstruct our basic ideas of men and women and their relation to one another in societies, those ideas that have been handed down from generation to generation. We need to deconstruct them, identify societal notions that were generated by the underlying male-dominated, traditional religion-dominated mindset, and do away with such ideas. This should sound a whole lot like what you heard when we were discussing feminist theology.

Now if we do this, if we identify these ideas that were handed down to us as our way of thinking and we do away with them, that will leave us free of such biased views and open to all people and all viewpoints. It will allow us to be genuinely tolerant of one another and open to dialogue with people from all perspectives. So we have to deconstruct our views of the world, of people, of their relationships to one another, and sort of start anew.

That is a general description of deconstructive postmodernism. Let me turn to one specific example of a deconstructive postmodern theology, and here I am thinking of Mark Taylor’s deconstructive theology as portrayed by our authors in *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*. The book in particular that is the focus of the description of Taylor’s theology is entitled *Erring* (that is, to err or to make a mistake), *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984]. Taylor’s theology is based primarily on the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida, whose thought is based in Hegel, Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger. Taylor’s postmodernism eliminates various ideas from premodern Western thought that modernity had retained even after the death of God. As a result this theology is called eliminative postmodernism.
Earlier I outlined modernity’s view of the death of a supernatural God, the God of traditional Christian theism. In its place, we said, was raised man and man’s importance and man’s powers. However, the effort to magnify the self by eliminating God is self-defeating, and so there has really been a loss of the self, as well as a loss of God. Many postmoderns, including Taylor, carry this process through to completion. The ultimate loss of the self is seen by Taylor as a gain because it is the modern notion of self that has brought us to the brink of total destruction, and we described a little bit earlier all of the kinds of destructive forces in the modern world. The critique of the modern self, then, as all-controlling, manipulative of nature, consuming all things for its own ends, and as focusing on the future rather than on the present is a critique that many postmoderns, including Mark Taylor, agree with. But once you make this critique, what do you put in its place?

Taylor essentially takes the modern death of the idea of the traditional God to its logical conclusions. I want to quote here from page 32 in our book Varieties of Postmodern Theology as they describe what Taylor has done. Our authors say, “Taylor agrees with the death of the traditional God, but he does not replace Him with some less repressive notion of God. The idea of a unifying one or center of existence is eliminated altogether. A central perspective serving as the judge and criterion of truth is denied. What remains is a multiplicity of perspectives, none of which is more normative than the others.”

Given views like this, it also follows that there is no truth. Now we need to be clear here. This does not just mean that there actually is truth, but none of us in a position to know it. What this means is that there really is no true world. The death of God means absolute relativism. Anything goes; anything is possibly the case. There is no eternal truth. There’s only everlasting flux. I would also like to add that having adopted the postmodern epistemological pragmatism of people like Thomas Kuhn and Richard Rorty and the like, these are people working most specifically in philosophy of science who have undermined the idea of science as objective, and if science is not the domain of objectivity, then what other discipline would be objective? Those who have adopted this epistemological pragmatism would say that humans are not in a position to discover truth as correspondence in regard to even the more commonplace things of life, let alone matters of ultimate meaning and purpose. Now you remember that truth as correspondence is the idea that what we say about the world in
our language corresponds to or matches what we find true of the world. According to these views, there is no such thing as truth as correspondence.

With the disappearance of God also comes the disappearance of the self, we said. The enclosed, centered, isolated self that is so typical of modernism was really, we’re told, created in the image of the enclosed, centered, isolated God of traditional theism. Those ideas about God were simply transferred to human beings, but now once you get rid of that idea of God, then you can also throw out the notion of the self that imitates or pictures that notion of God. You see, what is being said here is that human beings, instead of being completely independent of relations, the self, the human self, must be regarded as thoroughly relational. Whereas the modern self was a substance in the Cartesian sense of substance that required no relations to anything else whatsoever in order to exist, the postmodern subject, we are told, is primordially relational. It is actually constituted by its relations. And I should add that this statement is intended quite radically. The subject, that is, a person, is not understood to be causa sui (cause of himself) in any sense. Besides not being prior to its properties, it is not even distinct from them; that is, the self is not even distinct from its properties. It is nothing other than the generative interplay of properties. Rather than in any way being responsible for its relationships, the self is a mere function of the intersection of impersonal structures. The subject, then, is not self-centered but is a cipher for forces that play through it. No inner transcendence is to be affirmed. The self is thus not only desubstantialized but also completely deindividualized, which means that the self has really disappeared. The word I can only be used with quotes around it. The death of the self means the end of the self as an intentional agent.

In a theology like Taylor’s, we find that also there’s the elimination of any translinguistic reference for linguistic signs. You say, What does that mean? If we were to say what does our language point to? Does it point to something outside of language, something in the real world outside of these marks on paper? According to this view, it doesn’t. Signs refer only to other signs. They are not interpretations of some real thing beyond language. They don’t point to something outside of language in reality. You see, with God gone, there is no ultimate reference point for any of our language, for there’s no one there to guarantee the stability of anything, and with that being the case, even if you were to utter a sentence today and utter the same sentence tomorrow,
you wouldn’t necessarily know that it was talking about the same thing, so the most you can get is that linguistic signs can refer to nothing more than other linguistic signs.

Here I quote from page 33 in Varieties of Postmodern Theology, where our authors say, “The denial of a translinguistic reference for language is also based directly upon an analysis of experience. This analysis reveals, it is claimed, that we have no raw experience, no experience of uninterpreted data, no access to a prelinguistic world which would provide a critical norm.” Let me inject at this point, this is clearly the rejection of a positivistic understanding of sense perception that you can get to the world as it is. You cannot know the thing in itself, to use Kant’s ideas and his terminology. This is carrying Kant to his ultimate extreme. Back to the quote: “Interpreting experience in terms of a criterion, a signified, which is external to and hence independent of consciousness, fails to do justice to the creativity and productivity of consciousness. Consciousness, therefore, deals only with signs and never reaches the thing itself. Or rather, the thing itself is itself assigned. The conclusion that truth does not exist can accordingly be derived by inspecting experience carefully, as well as by thinking through the implications of atheism.” That comes from page 33.

Since we can’t get beyond interpretation to reality itself, then as we’ve suggested, the notion of truth as correspondence makes no sense, and beyond that in discussing the meaning of a text of literature, for example, no fundamental meaning exists. We can’t talk about the intended meaning of the author, what the author intended to say when he or she wrote, to which interpretation should correspond. You see, the text in a real sense does not preexist its interpretations. The text and its interpretations arise codependently. Hence, an interpretation is actually intrinsic to the text’s own becoming.

Let me add as well that in this sort of theology without God, there’s also no notion of history as a directed process. The world is viewed as beginningless, and it has no end, no goal, to which it moves. There’s no Logos which directs the interplay of forces; history is to be understood as a random sequence of meaningless occurrences. The postmodern purpose then has no aim whatsoever, no goal toward which he is striving in terms of ultimate direction of things. The postmodern person is called then to a life of erring, which means to wander aimlessly and unprofitably, and that’s why Mark Taylor’s theology is called **Erring**. This is what the state of things is, that we’re left to wander from one thing to the next.
A quote from our authors on page 34 says the following: “If history is meaningless, the present cannot be compared unfavorably with the past or future in terms of a distinction between reality and ideality. The present involves no fall from primal perfection, nor is it headed toward a perfect end or even toward an increase in satisfaction. Because becoming need not be justified by reference to the past or future, it can be valued at every moment. Distractions from delight in present due to feelings of guilt and yearnings for transcendence, are silenced by rejecting the opposition between what is and what ought to be.” Removing the distinction between ought and is, what is the case and what ought to or should be the case, also means that we must live beyond good and evil. Those kinds of categories for assessing actions don’t even apply.

Again from page 34 our authors say, “Taylor’s postmodernist is called to follow Nietzsche in saying ‘yea’ to everything on the basis of his [that is, Nietzsche’s] analysis of reality. In the actual world in which everything is bound to and conditioned by everything else, to condemn and to think away anything means to condemn and to think away everything.” From the preceding, it should be clear that this theology that Taylor presents is nihilistic, and it is absolutely so. As our authors say, I quote again from page 34, “This complete nihilism also involves the denial of all meaning, all purpose, all moral, and aesthetic norms. Nevertheless, this postmodern a/theology is said to be affirmative. Rather than suffering these losses passively, it actively and willingly embraces nihilism and thereby overcomes it, or at least so we’re told.”

As David Griffin, one of the authors of our book says, as he notes, “With the radical relativism that is embodied in this viewpoint, it is very, very difficult to offer meaningful criticism of one perspective from the perspective of another. Inconsistencies can be noted, but there can never be the claim that one position doesn’t square with the facts of experience. And it is also possible that the form of deconstructive postmodernism with which one is dealing will say that logical consistencies, even if they were to be found, well they don’t matter! Because the concern to be logical is just a vestige of Western logic and who’s to say that Western logic is authoritative. If you’re going to deconstruct, you might as well deconstruct everything.”

That gives you an idea of Mark Taylor’s deconstructive postmodernism. Let me move now, if I may, to look at another example of deconstructive postmodernism. I’m thinking here of the theology of Jean-Francois Lyotard, and his work is entitled
A Report on Knowledge [The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)]. Lyotard’s focus is on knowledge, and he emphasizes the shift of knowledge and power into actual computerized information systems. This shift serves as well, he believes, as a metaphor for the wider human situation. In describing some of his views our authors say on page 65, “As compared to the centered self, which was a focus of creative energy and whose expressions were the treat cultural products, Lyotard offers us the image of the person as a node in a complex network of information exchanges. An isolated self is an impossibility, but equally important, different exchanges are carried on under the rules of different language games, so that the consistency of the self is eroded away. Lyotard reminds us that linguistic analysis has not been able satisfactorily to relate different language games, especially denotative games which describe situations and prescriptive games which set norms. Direction and norms were formally set by orienting narratives which did not have to be completing analyzed, but neither individual nor social life is any longer organized around a foundational narrative, Lyotard tells us, and most people no longer eve have a nostalgia for one of the old orienting stories which set the self and society in a history or a tradition.”

A disconcerting feature of this image of the person as a node in a noncentered web of exchanges of information is that the network or sociotechnological system has its own momentum. According to cybernetic theory, it works to increase its own efficiency of operation (in technical language, its own performativity). “It is almost a lost cause to try to impose some other goal upon the network itself,” our authors tell us.

Lyotard’s world is both post-Marxist and postexistentialist. His disillusionment with narrative is a disillusionment of the West European world with the secular kingdom of God in Marxism, which only seemed to so many in Western Europe as the only viable version of a forward-moving global narrative. A loss of hope resulting from the failure of radical protest movements in France in the 1960s, especially the failure of the radical student movement on the one hand and the narrow bureaucratization of life in Eastern Europe on the other, are powerful factors leading such a figure as Lyotard to move away from narrative to a directionalist view of human existence. This according to our authors on page 66. But interestingly, we’re told, despite his reactions based on European factors, Lyotard’s social analysis rests heavily on the work of American sociologists and their reflections upon society
in the US.

What you’re hearing may sound like a picture that is one of great despair, but Lyotard disagrees. He sees, instead, two different ways in which there is openness and freedom that exist in the web of relationships that constitute the person. The first of those relates to the work of the artist. And speaking about the avant-garde he says that their task is not to supply reality but to invent illusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. Lyotard takes this from Kant’s description of the sublime, and for Lyotard it suggests that what is known and what can be presented is already thereby evacuated of any decisive significance. Yet in spite of this, there is a more that cannot be presented, although it can be conceived that there is such. On page 66 our authors say, “The artist does not work in any trajectory or narrative, for instance by the use of traditional symbols, but tries to disclose what cannot be disclosed and to give in line with Kant’s analysis of the sublime, both pain and pleasure in the combined presentation of presence and absence. He or she does this, of course, in the mode of shock or irreverence.”

Lyotard’s second opening into freedom relates to his views on scientific knowledge. Here again I quote from our authors, pages 66 to 67. They say this: “In contrast to positivistic conceptions of science which do away with narrative symbolism altogether, Lyotard restores narrative to scientific method in the short story of scientific discovery. The new knowledge, which is the only thing of interest, is found by breaking the rules of the existing language game of the particular area of science in question. Freedom of knowledge and new discovery are made possible by what Lyotard calls ‘paraology.’ In traditional logic paraology is reasoning falsely unconsciously in contrast to sophism, which is reasoning falsely with intent to deceive. But in Lyotard’s postmodern vision, paraology acquires a slightly different nuance in that it is breaking the rules of the game and thus reasoning falsely. We are not talking here about a more adequate understanding of reality, to be sure, an overall understanding of reality is what this postmodernism relinquishes. Opening up a new possibility is purely a matter of renewing the game of keeping things from falling into a sheer state of repetition or entropy. The human creative impulse can be asserted only in these modest ways, Lyotard believes, under conditions of modern knowledge.”

You can see that this is a rather meager portrayal of reality, and I don’t know what your reaction to this is, but it sounds to me like...
a case of someone who really has very little hope, very little that he believes in, but is trying to fool himself that things are really pretty good anyway. That gives you something of the flavor of deconstructionist postmodern theology.

I next want to turn to the second form of postmodern theology, or if you will, a second postmodern response to modernity, and our authors offer to us liberationist theology. So the second form of postmodern theology is liberation or liberationist postmodernism. Let me begin, if I may, with some general comments. Our authors, incidentally, here use as their key figures Harvey Cox, the Harvard theologian, and Cornel West, and as well, Cox seems to get more of the attention.

Our authors, Griffin, Beardslee, and Holland begin this way in their book, pages 4 to 5, by saying this about liberation postmodernism. “Unlike the other types of postmodern theologians, Cox does not raise the issue of whether an objective analysis of the facts of experience undermines the modern worldview, but he does argue that theologians should not be constrained by the cultural mindset that has been shaped by this worldview. The primary concern of a postmodern theology in Cox’s view is to be liberationist, and for this purpose it can build most effectively upon the premodern piety of the religious communities. While Cox’s theology is clearly postmodern, in seeking to overcome the privatization of faith, it retains late modern theology’s rejection of the need for theology to be self-consistent and adequate to the various facts of experience.”

Unlike modern theology’s emphasis on totalitarian control, which sometimes tends to legitimize totalitarian governments and economic systems, whether they be capitalists or socialists, a systems which are oppressive to many people who live under them, liberation theologies, as we’ve already seen in this class, reject such systems and opt for freeing the oppressed. In addition, rather than separating theology from ethics, as is often done in modern theologies, liberation theologies opt for doing theology as praxis, as we’ve seen, and thereby they deliberately wed social ethics to theology. We’ve already looked at liberation theology in this course, so I’m not going to spend as much time on it as I am on the other postmodern responses to modernity. But I do want to at least share with you Harvey Cox’s liberationist postmodern theology. We’ll pick that up in the next lecture.