At the end of our last lecture, we were describing David Griffin’s constructive postmodernist theology, and I want to return to that and conclude our description of that, and then turn to a fourth and final form of postmodern theology. But before we do that, let’s begin with a word of prayer.

Father, we thank you again for the privilege of study. We thank you for the opportunity that we’ve had in this course to look at some of the great theological movements of our day. Now, Lord, as we complete this course, we pray for your guidance and direction, as well as for your understanding. We pray all these things in Christ’s precious name. Amen.

You remember that at the end of our last lecture, we were sketching David Griffin’s postmodern theology, and we noticed that he holds a view that he calls neo-animism, that’s an ontological position in contrast to what he calls the non-animism of modernity. And right at the end I had noted that he says that in contrast to the dualism of first-stage modernity that treats human experience as virtually supernatural, revisionary postmodernism of his sort refuses to place human nature outside of nature, so it’s not supernatural; we can explain it by natural processes.

Let me continue from this point on. Griffin says that “because some level of experience is attributed to all actual individuals whatsoever, the avoidance of dualism doesn’t require the assumption that the mind or soul is strictly identical with the body (or the brain).” You might think that this kind of philosophical materialism of mind was necessary, but he says no. He says, “The mind or soul can be thought of as a series of occasions of experience.” Here you see the language of Whitehead’s process metaphysics. “Each of which unifies” (each of those occasions of experience) “the manifold experiences of the body” (and the remainder of the past world) into a central experience of enjoyment and purpose.
“This doctrine avoids the substantial, isolated self of early modernity. There is no underlying enduring unchanging subject of change for which relations to changing events are merely accidental. The things that endure,” Griffin says, “such as minds and molecules, ‘are not the completely real things.’ The completely real individuals do not endure, they occur. They are occasions of experience which arise out of their relations to prior occasions of experience and include them in their own constitutions. This view is in fact so relational,” Griffin says, “as to insist that the whole past is included in each occasion of experience. Each atom,” he says, “is a system of all things. This view radically undermines the early modern independent self which had no kinship with nature, and no essential relations to nature or other selves.” This from pages 42 to 43 of *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*.

Griffin adds to this that this lack of an enduring substance doesn’t mean that there is no responsible centered self altogether. Each actual entity, he notes, does have the power of self-causation, and it exercises the self-creativity and freedom. I’m sure as I’m describing this you not only note the incorporation of process theology into all of this, but you note how this echoes some of the major themes of New Age thinking; the unitedness of everything, the interconnectedness with all of nature and all of creation.

As to the other doctrine of modernity, sensate empiricism, the revisionary postmodernism that Griffin is offering us, a postmodernism based on Whiteheadian philosophy, has a different answer than sensate empiricism. Here I again quote from Griffin. He says, “The other premise of modernity that is rejected by revisionary postmodernity is the tacit identification of perception with sense-perception. Whitehead argues that sense-perception must be a high-level derivative form of perception. It is derivative from a primordial type of perception called *prehension*.” (We’ve heard that word before, and you know what it means.) “It’s derivative from a primordial type of perception called *prehension*, which we share with all other individuals whatsoever. This doctrine, that human beings share nonsensory perception with all other individuals, is simply the epistemological side of the ontological doctrine that all individuals are occasions of experience which arise out of their relations to (that is their prehensions of) previous individuals.
“Whitehead uses this doctrine of presensory perception to explain our knowledge that there is a real world beyond ourselves. Sensory perception by itself does not provide this knowledge.” That shows he has rejected modernity and bought into the postmodern idea that through sense perception we are not able to get in contact with the real world because all sense perception is theory-laden, it’s based on our way of seeing things so we don’t necessarily see what’s really there. “So our sensory perception by itself does not provide this knowledge of the world beyond us. This knowledge also cannot be due to a high-level judgment because dogs and their fleas seem no less convinced of the reality of other things. This universal realism can be explained by a primitive form of perception shared by human, canine, and insect occasions of experience alike. The fact that this doctrine is implied by a view of the elementary constituents of nature that dissolves the mind-body problem is another point in its favor,” says Griffin. This is from page 45.

So instead of just sensate empiricism, we are getting “yes” sense perception, but a more primitive kind of perception, a nonsensory perception known as prehension, and that’s going to again get us to feel everything that is there and to be connected with everything. According to Griffin, this distinction between sensory and nonsensory perception also explains the distinction between our interpretation of a text and its author’s meaning. “This distinction is simply a version,” he says, “of the more general distinction between a symbol on the one hand and its referent on the other. For Whitehead,” Griffin says, “symbolic reference is involved in all human perception. This symbolic reference is a combination of two pure modes of perception which can be abstracted from it. Those modes are sensory perception and the more primitive nonsensory prehension already mentioned.”

Griffin also thinks that this nonsensationist doctrine of perception or this prehensive type of perception also combines with the neo-animistic ontology to explain on the relation that we call truth, which we all presuppose in practice, can indeed exist. So you see what Griffin is saying is why do you have to go to such a radical approach as deconstructionists have, for example, to reject the idea that there’s any such thing as truth. We’re not going to return to the idea that truth is exactly what modernity, especially those who believe in sensate empiricism alone, we’re not going to return to that idea of truth as correspondence, but we are still going to be able to talk about truth and truth as correspondence at that. What Griffin is saying is you don’t have to be premodern
or modern, but you don’t have to be radically postmodern. I can show you a way to solve everything, or so it seemed.

So he says when you combine this nonsensory notion of perception with the neo-animistic ontology, you can explain how the thing that we call truth can indeed exist. The idea of truth as relation of correspondence between idea on the one hand and thing on the other presupposes that we can speak of things as existing prior to and, hence, independently of our ideas about them. The recognition that human perception involves symbolic reference provides support for this presupposition of truth as correspondence, which had been, in fact, undermined by the premises of modern and eliminative postmodern philosophy.

A further implication of these two types of perception is that we can now support, and I quote him from pages 47 to 48, “We can now support the universal conviction that some things, whether physical condition, social arrangements, beliefs, attitudes, or other states of mind, are really better than others and that beliefs about better and worse, good and evil are cognitive beliefs which can be true or false. One of the reasons for the modern denial of cognitive status to moral beliefs, even in circles where truth as correspondence is not rejected in general, has been the conviction that moral beliefs could not be rooted in perception. Sensory perception, of course, gives us information only about physical things, not nonphysical things such as values. If all genuine perception is sensory, moral beliefs must therefore have been fabricated out of nothing (or rather, out of ideological interests and the will to power). As we have seen,” Griffin says, “however, even those who hold this view cannot avoid presuppositions about good and evil—for example, that it is good to know the truth about the relativity of all ideas of good and bad. Revisionary postmodernism,” he says, “helps us avoid such self-contradictions by pointing to the nonsensory mode of perception through which we learn all sorts of truth, such as those about an actual world, causal efficacy, and the distinction between past, present, and future. We can therefore, without an ad hoc notion of special moral faculty, speak in terms of a direct intuition or perception of moral values.”

You can see what’s happening with this. You now are able to reinstate ethics. You’re going to be able to reinstate theology and all of that and put it creditably, he believes, into public discourse because you’ve got a theory about perception and a theory about the neo-animism of nature that allows people to see you’re not
just speaking about abstractions. It’s not wishful thinking. It’s something that really seems to be there.

Specifically, where is God in all of this? Griffin says that “revisionary postmodernism agrees with deconstructive postmodernism, that the supernatural God of premodern and early modern theology cannot be believed in,” but this doesn’t mean that we all become atheists. Instead, it opts for a God who is naturalistic, not supernaturalistic. Yes, the supernaturalistic God is dead, but as we saw when we studied process theology, one of the modern periods, the most contemporary modern period’s proposals for resurrecting God is that you resurrect a totally empirical God and as such He is naturalistic. Of course, the empiricism that’s involved is not the traditional kind of empiricism. It’s an empiricism that adopts and incorporates not only sensory perception but presensory, nonsensoryprehension.

What we get here is obviously the adoption of Whitehead’s process God. In supernatural theism, all power and creativity belongs to God alone; in this naturalistic theism, it belongs inherently to the world of finite existence, existing creatures, and occasions of experience more accurately we would say, as well as it belonging; that is, power belonging to God. Griffin goes on to explain how such a God allows us to escape moral relativism. You find that on pages 49 to 50. He also explains how this God allows us to speak about the truth of things (that’s page 50), but he still notes that this God does not know the truth about the future, nor can we (that’s, of course, consistent with the process view of allowing creatures to be free).

Finally Griffin speaks about a meaning and purpose to history, but it is not one that includes the supernaturalistic theism’s commitment to a center of history or some eschatological destiny toward which everything is moving.

Then, in his further article on Cornel West and liberation theology, Griffin takes up again the issue of truth as correspondence. He notes that deconstructive postmodernism has rejected truth as correspondence. It has opted for a pragmatic notion of truth based on conventionalism. Philosophers of science such as Thomas Kuhn have argued that all knowledge is theory-laden. It’s colored by our preconceptions, our biases, what we already know, and not only is all knowledge theory-laden, but so is all observation of the world. Hence, it’s really impossible for any of us to gain a mind independent, totally objective perspective of the world so that we
can see it correctly as it is in itself. But now this just means that it is impossible, according to this approach to things, to know how the world really is and this means that truth as correspondence must go.

Griffin says, “I reject that negative view toward truth as correspondence.” But before we get too excited to think that he’s really going to reinstate truth as correspondence in the way you’ve traditionally understood it, we need to see what he means. Griffin begins with a distinction that I think is very important. He agrees that there can be no theory independent observation statements. I quote him here on page 134. He says, “To make this idea an essential element of the correspondence theory of the meaning of truth is to equate the meaning of an idea with its mode of verification, which is to hold on to one of the pillars of logical positivism.” In other words, Griffin is saying you have to distinguish between meaning and verification. And as Griffin says, “To hold to a correspondence meaning of truth does not require that you hold the naïve idea that one can test a proposition by comparing it with our observations of the world, for the world is somehow or other mirrored on our minds by means of our sense perception.” We can’t get that idea of the correspondence meaning of truth.

Then what are we talking about? On page 135 he tells us as he again appeals to Whitehead. He says, “For Whitehead the correspondence theory of truth applies only to the meaning of the truth and falsehood of propositions, not to the testing of a judgment about a proposition. A proposition is a theory about particular actualities. It is either true or false all by itself, independently of whether it is thought to be true by anyone; that is, independently of how it is entertained in a propositional feeling by anyone.” Then again he says, pages 136 to 137, “The Whiteheadian account of the meaning of truth as correspondence applies to propositions, it should be stressed, not to judgments. It involves only the question of what it means to say that a proposition is true or false, not also the epistemological question of how to test whether a particular proposition is true. The latter question presupposes the former, but is not presupposed by it. When Whitehead turns to this epistemological question, he does not speak naively about comparing theories with the world as it is in itself, apart from our interpretive experience of it. Has indeed any serious philosopher spoken in this naïve way, or is this a strawposition created by those who reject correspondence? In any case, when Whitehead speaks of testing, he speaks of ‘pragmatic’ tests
and of ‘coherence.’”

So, yes, correspondence—you talk about what it would mean to say that a proposition is true or false, but you’re not talking about how you would go about testing whether a proposition really is true or false, and whether you could really say it’s true or false in a correspondence sense; when it gets to actual testing, the only test that we have are pragmatic tests. Doesn’t seem to work. Coherence tests don’t fit without contradicting the other kinds of things that we believe. So, this is not, in fact, what is traditionally meant by correspondence theory of truth.

We might ask, given what Griffin says about no theory independent observation, how does he know at all that there even is a real world out there after all? The line of argument that Griffin offers us is reminiscent of G. E. Moore’s “Defense of Common Sense.” If you’ve never read that article, you would want to get ahold of it. Griffin’s basic point is that there are certain hardcore commonsense beliefs that we all have. And to deny those beliefs is really self-defeating. For in the very act of denying them, we show that we presuppose them after all. But even granting this, it means that we are likely right that our language is really about something independent of our language, but how can we know exactly how things are in the world? It seems that Griffin’s basic answer here is again to rely on what Whitehead calls pragmatic tests and coherence, but I hope you know that this just means that ultimately we cannot know exactly how the world is.

Griffin further discusses the idea of a world beyond our words in terms of a doctrine that many postmoderns have rejected: the idea of givenness. This is the idea that there is a world beyond our experience that is not the creation of our mind and our experience. In other words, there is a world that is just there. It is given to us as our mind interacts with that which is outside of our mind. Now to make sense of all of this, especially in regard to the idea that there is no theory-neutral observation, Griffin says we need to distinguish three questions. The first one is can theory-neutral observation statements be made? The second one, does preinterpretive conscious perception occur? And third, is any element in experience given to it, prior to its interpretive response?
Now Griffin says that most people would answer the first two questions negatively. That there is no theory-neutral observation and that there is no such thing as preinterpretive conscious perception; in other words, nothing prior to sense perception. And as a result of answering those negatively, most people would thereby assume that a negative answer to the third question of necessity follows, but Griffin says a negative answer to the third question only follows if there is no prelinguistic experience and no preconscious, presensory experience. But you know what Griffin thinks about that. He believes that the answer to the second question about presensory perception is yes. It rests on what he calls “perception in the mode of causal efficacy.” This is really equivalent, though, to what he called earlier “nonsensory perception or prehension.” Now about this, he says the following. This is on page 138 of Varieties of Postmodern Theology. He says, “Causal efficacy is the most primordial mode of perception, the mode we share with all other actual things. It is in this mode that the past world of actual things is given to us. It is called ‘causal efficacy’ because the other things are perceived as actual and is thereby exerting causal efficacy upon the perceiver. Through this perception of givenness, we know about William James’ stubborn fact which cannot be avoided. Even the most extreme solipsist gets out of the way when he sees an automobile bearing down upon him.” At that point you leave all of your philosophizing in the closet and you get out of the way. You don’t stand there and say, Well, I can’t really know whether there’s a car coming upon me because I can’t know anything other than my internal sensation.

This is all really very interesting. What it means is that our guarantee that our language really corresponds to something out there beyond our language and beyond our mind is that there is a world that is external to our mind that is given to us; that is, we find it there as our mind begins to interact with things external to the mind. But now someone might say, Yes, but how do you know that there really is something out there rather than that you’re just hallucinating? Or that maybe there’s something but our theory-laden observation totally skews what is really there so that we don’t know accurately the external world. Griffin’s response is that we can be sure that there is such a given world because there is nonsensory perception which assures us of that.
So we can be sure that our language corresponds to something real, but given a negative response to the first of three questions about theory-ladenness and theory-independent observations, we cannot by observations alone be sure of the exact nature of that world by mere sense perception. The best we can do is come to a judgment based on pragmatic tests and coherence. And what I would say to you is that I find this to be extremely interesting. What it means is that you’re getting the impression that our nonsensory perception, that there is a real world out there, that nonsensory perception is infallible, whereas our sensory perception is not because when it comes to sense perception, we really can’t be sure we’re getting much of anything right.

At any rate, you can surely see that this constructive postmodernist theology tries to answer an awful lot of questions to try to reinstate an awful lot of things like truth as correspondence, the significance of ethics, etcetera, etcetera, that deconstructionism and other postmodern approaches are rejecting.

Let me move now as we come toward the end of this lecture to the fourth and final form of postmodern theology that our authors describe, and they call it restorationists or conservative postmodernism. And the individual that they give as an example of this is Pope John Paul II. On the one hand, there is a liberal postmodernism which arises out of modern sources, and it is most akin to the constructive or revisionary postmodern approach that we’ve just been talking about, but on the other hand, there is a conservative postmodernism which arises more out of premodern sources, and it is this latter position that is now under discussion. It’s this position of which Pope John Paul II is a very able expositor. Let me say something generally about conservative postmodernism, and then we’ll look more specifically at Pope John II’s conservative postmodernism.

This postmodern school grows out of classical resistance most oftentimes religious at that, classical resistance to modernity. Its roots are to be found in the aristocratic critique that accompanied modernity’s own birth and development; for example, the Romantic movement and its historical links to Catholicism. Conservative postmodernists see the classical critique of modernity being vindicated by the modern breakdown and the postmodern breakthrough. Now tending toward a cyclical rather than a linear view of history, these constructive postmodernists are naturally drawn toward a return to classical roots. In turn they are appalled by the appeal to primal roots, which these people
see as out and out pagan, but the conservative consciousness does more than look for a return just to classical form, classical theology. Only, we are told, if it is truly open to new possibilities, along with the continuity of tradition and the authority of structure does it warrant the name postmodern. Now these possibilities need to be more than simply a new classical modern synthesis, as is proposed by late modern neoconservatives. The new possibilities must instead embrace something beyond both the classical and modern imaginations. For example, something like John Paul’s imaging of a new global human solidarity and his ecological concern for the fate of the earth—neither of those things would you find in the classical or in the modern period, or so the story goes.

This conservative postmodern school grows more formally out of religious sources and so it tends to draw less on new developments in science. It tends, in fact, to address late modern technological life in ethical rather than mystical terms. The conservation exploration of postmodernism hungers for a science that is infused with wisdom but tends to resent and scold the new mystical consciousness actually emerging within postmodern science—the view that everything is one in some nonempirically observable way. The scientific side finds it difficult to come to terms with its religious parallel and vice versa. The scientific side fails to recognize its origins in classical religion and the classically rooted religious side fails to see the new mystical energy rooted in postmodern science. And so this rivalry continues. That’s something by way of a general description of this conservative postmodernism. Let me, if I may, turn now in the time that remains to speak about Pope John Paul II’s conservative postmodernism as our authors describe it.

The pope claims that modern culture is in crisis and needs to be overcome by a fresh, postmodern, yet past-rooted culture. His critique of modern culture is deeply rooted in his own experiences of personal and social suffering. As to the critique, it involves a number of items, and here let me quote what our authors say. “For John Paul,” this is from pages 11 to 113 of Varieties of Postmodern Theology, “modern culture is revealing itself as a mechanistic civilization of Faustian destruction, fundamentally threatening human dignity and ultimately human life. The main expression of this degradation is the instrumentalization of humanity by its own modern technological tools. This technological instrumentalization of humanity is seen as flowing from modernity’s loss of spiritual transcendence, leading to
a loss of human transcendence, called secularization, and of
human creativity. Obvious structural signs of this modern
instrumentalization are communism’s political oppression of the
second world; that is, the communist nations, and capitalism’s
economic oppression of the Third World—Africa, Asia, and
Latin America. But apparently, more fundamental for his view,”
our authors say, “is the cultural seduction of the first world.
Perhaps, especially in the United States, because America is the
propagandizing center of modern culture and thereby the crucial
key to the entire modern project. In other words, for John Paul
modernity’s economic and political oppression is derivative from
its cultural seduction.”

Then on page 113, let me again quote from our authors. They
say, “John Paul describes this seduction of self as the ideology
of consumerism. By this he means not simply that the affluent
sector of the first world consumes too much, but more profoundly
that the first world is losing the spiritual transcendence of its own
creativity.” Consequently, in his view; that is, Pope John Paul, the
First World fabricates a shallow, plastic, even destructive culture
of manipulative instrumentalization whose artifacts it then
hedonistically worships. A key to cultural seduction, according
to John Paul, lies in the experience of sexuality. He sees the
consumer ideology beginning in the deepest recesses of the self,
convincing the self that sexuality is no longer a bipolar, fertility-
creating community in which the family transmits life to future
generations. He sees sexuality having become from modernity,
at worst a trivial instrument for instantaneous gratification or at
best, a source of personal fulfillment, both of them detached from
familial bonding across time and space.

“In John Paul’s view the attack on sexuality quickly becomes an
attack on the regeneration of human life. A contraceptive culture
emerges. Human conception is uprooted from marriage and
becomes the manipulative object of technological control, and
abortion turns into the rallying cry for liberal female liberation.
For this culture with sexuality uprooted from familial fertility
and reduced instead to a valueless manipulation, family and its
outgrowth in community erode. For this reason, he evidently
fears the liberal vision of the liberation of women, which appears
to promote the liberation of woman from family and procreation.
The liberal vision of female liberation is seen as destroying the
feminine symbol and as collapsing society into the sterility of an
aggressive, but nonregenerative mechanism grounded solely on
the masculine symbol.”
With those kinds of views, you can see why feminists such as Elizabeth Johnson, who’s Roman Catholic herself, are not particularly pleased with the pope in his views of women and their appropriate places in society and in the church. To further describe John Paul’s views, we can say, quoting our authors from page 114, “Arising directly from John Paul’s cultural analysis is his apocalyptic spirituality. At once highlighting the crescendo-like power of historical evil and announcing the joyful healing of Jesus’ cross. For John Paul, the cultural crisis is at root a spiritual crisis. The struggle is not simply with a misguided technology, but with death-dealing forces of evil taking on a demonic character. Linking this theme of the demonic to the symbol of the fertile woman, he powerfully alludes to the book of Revelation’s passage about the dragon pursuing the woman and seeking to devour her child.” You’ll remember that comes from Revelation 12. “The apocalyptic dimension is further heightened by his strong references to the impeding third millennium as if it marks and ultimate moment in human history.”

Overcoming such deep pessimism, this is a rather negative view of the way things are; is there any hope? Overcoming such deep pessimism is John Paul’s belief in the power of the cross to regenerate personal and social life amid the modern personal and social death. The modern civilization of death, he believes, can be healed by the new life of the gospel. Christians, as a new humanity, can help to create a new civilization of love. John Paul places great hope in the personal and social power of conversion. For his view, regrounding the civilization in recognition of divine transcendence at the personal and social levels is the strategic spiritual response to the crisis of modernity. For him the construction of a postmodern civilization flows first from an act of faith. Following the recovery of transcendence in this view, the task of cultural reconstruction then entails linking the scientific skills of modernity with the traditional spiritual wisdom of the classical European Christian past. John Paul, we need to understand, is not suggesting that society can return to a classic European model, but he is proposing a creative encounter between the future-oriented modern scientific project and the tradition-rooted heritage of classical European Christianity, and he thinks that that kind of a creative encounter is the precondition of creating a postmodern civilization.

Key in restoring past wisdom, he believes, is to recall the classical European interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. In contrast to the modern world, where the material world triumphs
over humanity to its destruction, the picture in Genesis is of man as master and as the one who dominates and is dominant over the material world. In all of this John Paul sees the laity as serving a crucial purpose and having a critical role. It is the laity who should permeate society with the leaven of the gospel. It is they who are to assist society in recognizing divine transcendence. The clergy and the religious are the sign of that divine transcendence, but it is the laity who are called to work out the implications of transcendence in society and to make recognition of transcendence permeate the institutions of society.

As we've already suggested, John Paul is concerned with the reorientation of science toward spiritual transcendence and the reorientation of work toward human transcendence, and he's concerned with the biological renewal of human lifecycles. He believes that each of these tasks takes programmatic expression in two strategic structures; namely, work and family. And so key for John Paul in regard to labor and the family is the principle of humanity’s calling to be co-creator with the Creator. Here let me quote from page 118. Our authors say, “Through work and family in this view, humanity becomes with God co-creator of its own species and of its material production. This co-creativity seen as rooted in the symbolically masculine transcendence of the humans over the rest of creation and flowing from the symbolically masculine transcendence of the divine over the human, is at the heart of John Paul’s lay spirituality. His approach to lay spiritually thereby links the principle of premodern transcendence with the postmodern principle of co-creation, but each of these expressions of co-creativity with the Creator is linked with a distinct sexual symbol. The sphere of work, meaning the historical transformation of nature, is viewed in symbolically masculine transcendent terms, analogous to the rule of God over creation. The sphere of family, meaning the cyclical renewal of human life across the generations of time and across the kinship of space, is viewed in symbolically feminine, receptive, and generative terms, revealing the role of humanity as creature open to God’s creativity.” You can see again why feminists would not be particularly wild about John Paul II.

Further we can say that John Paul sees the social mission of the laity for the sphere of work to be the restoration of the foundational social principle of the priority and solidarity of labor. John Paul thinks that both capitalism and socialism failed in this respect. Capitalism, on the one hand, treated labor as merchandise to be bought and sold according to the laws of supply and demand with no inherent rights in themselves. It saw labor as simply the tool
of technological production. Socialism, on the other hand, sought to give control of production to the workers but only wound up shifting domination of labor from capital, on the one hand, to a totalizing state on the other.

Now let me quote here again from our authors—pages 119 to 120. “Restructuring the work process according to the priority and solidarity of labor is seen to imply many things. It means exploring a cooperative economics, perhaps marked by worker-ownership, a share by labor and management and profit-sharing. It also means recognizing that the person is more than a cog in the machine and bears economic rights; for example, the right to employment, a just raise, healthcare, rest, a pension and insurance, a safe environment, and the right to form unions. The State, the indirect employer, has real responsibility for the common good and needs to promote economic planning. In addition, the scale of the work question is no longer simply one of classes within a nation, but is now truly global. Finally, the structure of work should not undermine the family. It should pay the head of the family a family wage so that the wife will not need to work outside the home. In this way, John Paul proposes mothers can fulfill their primary mission to the children. ‘Yet even where women work outside,’ he says, following the model of classical transcendence, ‘it should be in accordance with their nature, the receptive feminine symbol. The advancement of women should be structured in such a way that they do not have to abandon what is specific to them at their own expense and at that of the family.’”

As to the social mission of the laity for the family, John Paul says that “the mission is to restore the priority and solidarity of the family. Modern society is increasingly misfounded on a vision of autonomous individualism, rooted in a quest for autonomous self-affirmation, which is a corruption of the idea and experience of freedom. The result of this atomization is that life is increasingly extinguished or prevented from beginning and the loving bonds of community erode.” But John Paul insists the individual is not the starting point for society; family is. Family is not a contract among individuals but the context within which persons have their identity constituted. The family precedes the individual. It is the first and vital cell of society.

Society, in turn, is family blown large. The mission of the family, according to John Paul, is to serve life and love. The family creates life, nourishes it across its cycles, and passes life on for future generations. The primary and irreplaceable expression of family
is the procreation and education of children set in the context of responsible fertility. But the role of the family doesn’t stop here. The family also forms community and spins the web of community ever wider up to the human family. Families are to be communes of love and life beginning in intimacy yet reaching out to society. The family needs, either singly or in associations, to devote self to society and especially to the poor. A first step in this work, he believes, is to make sure that social policy grounds itself on the principle of family. In particular, proclaiming a declaration of the rights of family and especially of his priority to the State would be very helpful. Because of the social question today being global, the social mission of families itself takes on a global character.

This is something of the postmodernism, the conservative postmodernism of John Paul II, and you can see how it is a wedding, a blending, of postmodern and classical kinds of themes.

This completes what I wanted to say in our description of postmodern theological responses to modernity. As we’ve said at various points, you can see how most, if not all, of what we have studied in this course is postmodern or presupposes a postmodern backdrop. I think we can applaud the desire to reinstate God as relevant, as opposed to saying that God is irrelevant and dead, but clearly the God that we are being given is not the God of Scripture. And I think that more and more as we are told that we need to be tolerant of all people, that no one really knows the truth, and that everybody is really trying to get to the same God, we’re just doing so in different ways, it behooves each of us to go back to Scripture and to see what God’s Word says about God and about the human race and our relationship to God, and to recognize how Christianity is distinctive and how Christ the only Savior, and that He and He alone is to be found within the context of Christianity. And the He is ultimately the divider. We cannot simply amalgamate all theologies as one. We need to see the distinctiveness of Christianity.

I trust that our study in this course and in the preceding one has helped you to gain a clearer grasp upon the modern scene and to have a feel for what people are thinking and to a certain extent how we as those who hold to an inspired and inerrant Scripture can respond.