

•
A GUIDE TO
CONTEMPORARY
THOUGHT
AND CULTURE
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POST

CHRISTIAN

GENE EDWARD VEITH JR.

“*Post-Christian* is a provocative overview of the challenges Christians at the whipping post face. As the sea of faith temporarily recedes, fewer people have the confidence to debate ideas, raise children, and build institutions. Gene Veith explains the problems of constructing our own worlds, exalting barrenness, and building society without community. Some leaders say we’ll survive by secularizing the church, but this book shows a better way: pray and work for a new reformation.”

Marvin Olasky, Editor in Chief, *World* magazine

No one has taught me how to think like a Christian more than Gene Veith. *Post-Christian* just may be the magnum opus of a writer and thinker who has already contributed a body of work of immeasurable worth to the church. This book is a library in miniature for the Christian who wants to navigate the post-Christian world biblically, thoughtfully, and faithfully. It should be on the shelf in every Christian home.

Karen Swallow Prior, author, *On Reading Well* and *Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More: Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist*

“Gene Veith’s *Post-Christian* is a logical, cogent, sensible, no-spin, facts-based, unapologetic analysis of the zeitgeist in Western culture. Which is to say, it’s not very politically correct. But that’s a good thing! In this posttruth, reality-denying cultural moment, we need the grounded sanity this book provides. Highly informative and well-researched, *Post-Christian* is a treasure trove of wisdom and a valuable resource for the church’s revitalization.”

Brett McCracken, Senior Editor, The Gospel Coalition; author, *Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community*

“In the barrage of books attempting to make sense of our particular cultural moment, few authors exhibit the range of thought and clarity of mind that is on display in *Post-Christian*. Gene Veith is a competent guide through the maze of exhausted ideas that characterize late modernity. Science, technology, sex, politics, religion—nothing has escaped the corrosive effects of the attempt to abandon Christianity. This is, however, not a book of despair but of hope. As Veith reminds us, the truths of the Christian faith continually reassert themselves, for they are rooted in reality itself.”

Mark T. Mitchell, Dean of Academic Affairs, Patrick Henry College

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A Guide to Contemporary
Thought and Culture

Gene Edward Veith Jr.

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Post-Christian: A Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture

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To my grandchildren
Anastasia, Dorothea, Elizabeth, Evangeline, Hannah, John,
Lucy, Margaret, Mary, Michael, Samuel, and Thomas

Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows. . . .
Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey
And last eat up himself.

William Shakespeare (1601)

Troilus and Cressida,

Act 1. Scene 3. Lines 109–110, 122–27

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My *Cranach* blog, named after the Reformation artist and vocation exemplar Lucas Cranach, made me have to pay close attention to cultural developments. Thanks to Patheos for hosting me (<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/geneveith/>). Readers of my blog will notice certain themes and topics that we discussed online showing up in this book. I appreciate the commenters on my blog who helped me think through some of these issues.

Above all, I want to thank my wife, Jackie, for encouraging me to take on this project, though it interrupted our already busy retirement.

1. Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994).

Introduction

After Postmodernism

On September 11, 2001, when the World Trade Center in New York City collapsed, I thought that postmodernism was over. I was wrong.

I had written a book entitled *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*, which came out in 1994.¹ I had drawn on Thomas Oden's milestones for the phases of Western thinking. The premodern era, he said, the age in which both classicism and Christianity were dominant, came to an end on July 14, 1789, with the fall of the Bastille: the French Revolution enthroned the Goddess of Reason in Notre Dame Cathedral, ushering in the Age of Modernism, with its trust in science, progress, and social engineering. That era, in turn, came to an end two hundred years later, on November 9, 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Communism was the ultimate expression of modernist ideology, but it led not to liberation and the elimination of all our problems, as promised, but to tyranny, economic collapse, and mass murder. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire, according to Oden, marked the beginning of the postmodern era.²

Oden saw postmodernism in a different light than I did. He saw it as a reversion to the sensibility of the premodern times, marking the

1. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994).

2. Thomas C. Oden, *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992). See also Oden's book *After Modernity—What?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).

end of theological liberalism and making possible a return to Christian orthodoxy. Oden wrote from the perspective of a mainline theologian, and, indeed, the collapse of modernistic, rationalistic liberal theology has been one of the great contributions of postmodern thought, though other kinds of liberal theology would rise up in its place. I, however, wrote from the perspective of an academic in the humanities, in which postmodernism had to do with moral, cultural, and intellectual relativism. This worldview, which Oden called “hypermodernism,” was manifesting itself not just in the academic world but in popular culture, the arts, literature, politics, and religion.

But immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, I thought I was witnessing another of Oden’s milestones, a building’s demolition that marked the end of an era and the beginning of something new. Postmodernists believe that reality is a *construction*—of the mind, the will, the culture—rather than an objective truth. But those planes flying into those skyscrapers, taking everyone by surprise, were no mental constructions. Nor were the deaths of nearly three thousand victims. Nor was the heroism of the firefighters, police, medics, and ordinary people caught up in the horrors of that day. This was all objectively *real*.

And as the dust was still settling, I was hearing on television, reading in the press, and listening to conversations that were distinctly *non*-postmodern. In considering the terrorists, their background, and their ideology, no one sounded like a relativist. What the terrorists did was *evil*, people were saying, and what the first responders did who ran into the buildings as they were collapsing to rescue people was *good*. It sounded as if not all cultures are equally valid after all. Maybe not all religions are equally beneficent. Meanwhile, the notoriously jaded and cynical New York arts scene was proclaiming “the end of irony”—that signature quality of postmodern expressions—and promising works of sincerity and human values.

Above all, in the aftermath of 9/11, there was a palpable sense of transcendence. The tribalism encouraged by postmodernism gave way to a deep experience of national unity. And even notable secularist journalists were saying to the families of victims, “God bless you,” and “You are in our prayers.”

But after the shock faded, so did the moral clarity. Moral, cultural, intellectual, and religious relativism surged back. But there was a difference.

Before, all religions, in elite opinion, were considered to be equally good. Afterward, all religions were considered to be equally bad. Terrorism began to be defined not as a moral transgression but as what you get when a group of people believe that “they have the only truth” and that “theirs is the only valid religion.” The terrorists were Islamic “fundamentalists,” so not Islam but fundamentalism was to blame, with Christian “fundamentalists” being considered, in many circles, as no better. Religious pluralism used to mean that different beliefs and traditions were allowed to exist side by side. But with the interfaith services that became ubiquitous after 9/11 and the reaction against every kind of fundamentalism, pluralism became something more like polytheism. You must accept all of these deities and religious traditions, but you are not allowed to believe in one of them only. Alternatively, you could reject all of those organized religions. Modernist atheists argued that God does not exist because anything supernatural has no place in their scientific, materialist worldview. Postmodernist atheists argued that God is simply a cultural construction. But the New Atheists launched *moral* criticisms of God, arguing that religion—particularly the Christian religion—is to blame for the world’s problems. Many more Americans held on, in the postmodernist way, to their own private, interior, personal religions, constructing their own theologies and claiming to be “spiritual, but not religious.”

The brief, shining moment of national unity was also shattered. Thirsting for retaliation, America went to war, only to find that the American ideals of democracy, liberty, and human rights might not be so universal after all, at least in societies that lack our classical and Christian infrastructure. The political divisions that go back to the Vietnam War reasserted themselves. So did the moral equivalence that is a corollary of relativism: Is our attacking the Taliban any different from Al Qaeda attacking us?

Postmodernism did not end with the fall of the World Trade Center. Rather, it hardened, becoming more political and less playful, more dogmatic and less tolerant. As we have moved deeper into the

twenty-first century and new issues and new developments have come to the fore, postmodernism has mutated, taking on new forms and adapting to new conditions.

After Postmodernism, What?

In 1994, when *Postmodern Times* was published, the technological medium I discussed was television. I said some things about computers and how they could be interconnected to form a kind of “cyberspace.”³ The Internet was just starting to get off the ground when I was writing my book, but it was nothing like the all-pervasive information universe that it has become, with its social media and fake news. I knew something big was coming, referring to the “as yet unimagined electronic technology” on the horizon.⁴ I did imagine the advent of virtual reality technology. I said, “The much-heralded union of computers, television, and video games will enable us to put on a helmet that will create the illusion that we are in the middle of a computer-generated world.”⁵ I then turned this, as yet unrealized, technology into a metaphor for the postmodernist worldview:

According to the postmodernists, all reality is virtual reality. We are all wearing helmets that project our own separate little worlds. We can experience these worlds and lose ourselves in them, but they are not real, nor is one person’s world exactly the same as someone else’s. We are not creating our own reality, however. Rather, we accept a reality made by someone else. Just as the corporations that manufacture the virtual reality technology program the fantasy, the so-called objective world that we experience is actually programmed by large, impersonal social institutions. Despite our heroics in fantasy land, zapping space aliens and freeing the holographic princess, we are only playing a game. We are actually passive and at the mercy of our programmers.⁶

Contemporary culture has changed from what it was in 1994, with new issues to consider and new ways of thinking to understand. But

3. Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 82.

4. Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 204.

5. Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 61.

6. Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 61.

many of these changes are developments from earlier trends and consequences of what came before.

Postmodern Times discussed the sexual revolution in terms of extramarital sex; now the issues are homosexuality, pornography, and sex robots. In the 1990s we were deconstructing literature; in the twenty-first century we are deconstructing marriage. In the 1990s we were constructing ideas; in the twenty-first century we are constructing the human body. In the 1990s we had feminism; in the twenty-first century we have transgenderism. In the 1990s we were urged to embrace multiculturalism; in the twenty-first century we are warned about committing cultural appropriation. Pluralism has given way to identity politics. Relativism has given way to speech codes. Humanism has given way to transhumanism, the union of human beings and machines.

Not all of the new movements and developments are exaggerations of postmodernism, though many of them are. Hardcore postmodernists had denied the existence of the self, insisting that our experience of individual consciousness is itself a cultural construction. But today the self is back in vogue, along with its related values of autonomy and identity, to the point that we are hearing things like, “I was born in the wrong body”—a distinction between the soul and body that sounds almost Platonic, though today it accounts for transgenderism. Postmodernism used to be cynical and ironic. Today, emotion and sincerity are prized. Realism in art and fiction is back in fashion, sort of. According to one critic, irony has given way to the aesthetics of “trance,” the zoned-out concentration of someone playing a video game or immersed in social media.⁷

These new developments and fashions mean, some are saying, that postmodernism is dead. So what shall we call whatever is taking its place? We must “embrace post-Postmodernism,” says one scholar, “and pray for a better name.”⁸ Proposed alternatives include metamodernism, transpostmodernism, postmillennialism, altermodernism,

7. Alan Kirby, “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond,” *Philosophy Now* 58 (November/December 2006), accessed June 10, 2019, https://philosophynow.org/issues/58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond.

8. Tom Turner, *City as Landscape: A Post Post-modern View of Design and Planning* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), 10.

cosmodernism, digimodernism, performatism, pseudomodern, postdigital, posthumanism.⁹ These proposed terms refer to different movements, though they are mostly variations and extensions of postmodernism, with some twists.

This book is not an update but a sequel to *Postmodern Times*, offering a new “Christian guide to contemporary thought and culture.” My approach will not be to trace down all of these oddly named movements, many of which are highly transitory and have already faded from history. Rather, I will look at our times as being post-Christian, what we are left with when we try to abandon the Christian worldview. Modernism, with its scientific materialism and trust in evolutionary progress, is post-Christian. So is postmodernism, which accurately recognizes the failures and weaknesses of modernism, but which has turned to alternative but equally non-Christian ways of approaching life. We still have modernists around today, as well as postmodernists and digimodernists, posthumanists, and the rest. They are all post-Christians.

The problem with that term, *post-Christian*, is that it implies that Christianity is somehow over. It is not. In fact, the various alternatives throw the superiority—and the truth—of Christianity in high relief. And some of the most cutting-edge observers are heralding the emergence of something completely different: the postsecular.

The Universal Wolf

Our contemporary secularist thought and culture are not nearly as formidable as they may seem. Post-Christian ways of thinking and living are running into dead ends and fatal contradictions.

William Shakespeare in 1601 wrote about the course of social, moral, and spiritual disorder in words that read like a prophecy of our own times:

Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows. . . .
Then everything includes itself in power,

9. See the catalog of alternatives in “Post-postmodernism,” Wikipedia, accessed June 10, 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-postmodernism>. See also Alison Gibbons, “Postmodernism Is Dead: What Comes Next?,” *Times Literary Supplement*, June 12, 2017.

Power into will, will into appetite;
 And appetite, an universal wolf,
 So doubly seconded with will and power,
 Must make perforce an universal prey
 And last eat up himself.¹⁰

The lines are from Shakespeare's strangely neglected tragedy *Troilus and Cressida*, a twisted rendition of the Trojan War. They are part of a larger speech by the wise and crafty Ulysses lamenting the disorder displayed by *both* the Greeks *and* the Trojans. *Degree* here means not just social hierarchy but, as the editor of the modern edition, Virgil K. Whitaker, explains, "the cosmic order" of God's creation—his moral, social, and natural laws.¹¹ We are used to thinking of the Trojan War in terms of Homeric heroism and the virtues of classical civilization, but Shakespeare focuses instead on the characters' pride, unbridled passions, and discord. Similarly, we may look to Shakespeare's own times as representing the pinnacle of Western art and literature. But, clearly, Shakespeare has his own society in mind as he, a Christian poet, fiercely criticizes the rampant sinfulness of his age.

Post-Christians of every variety reject *degree*, as we hear in common statements such as "life has no meaning," "the universe is absurd," "there are no absolutes." But what makes these lines from Shakespeare so uncanny, so startlingly relevant to our own times four centuries later, is that they zero in on the three major preoccupations of contemporary thought and culture: power, will, and appetite.

For both post-Marxists on the left and Nietzscheans on the right, all institutions, all governments, all art, all moral beliefs, and all religions are nothing more than *a mask for power*. All of culture—the family, social institutions, philosophical systems—is nothing more than one group exercising power over another group (men over women, whites over racial minorities, heterosexuals over homosexuals, humans over animals, etc.). Thus, every dimension of life is politicized and critiqued as part of a system of oppression. The only way to resist this

10. Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, act 1, scene 3, lines 109–10, 122–27. Quoted from *The History of Troilus and Cressida*, ed. Virgil K. Whitaker, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (New York: Penguin, 1969), 986.

11. See Whitaker's introduction to the play, 978–79. He observes that this cosmic order and the disastrous consequences of violating it are continual themes in Shakespeare.

oppression is to be *transgressive* and to seize power for your own group, which will include exercising oppression against your enemies (silencing them, marginalizing them, and otherwise punishing them).

Nietzsche stressed not just power but the “will to power,” so the human will also has a central role today. Those who believe in abortion call themselves “pro-choice.” *Whatever the woman chooses is right for her.* If she *chooses* to have the baby, then the child has value. If she *chooses* not to have the baby, then the child is nothing more than a growth in her womb that can be removed, with no qualms of conscience. If the woman is forced to have the baby *against her will*, by pro-life Christians and the patriarchal power structure, this and the groups that oppose her decision are evil. But in every case, *the will* is what bestows moral meaning. The left makes much of the will in its various “liberation” movements, but often so does the right, stressing the fulfillment of the individual’s will in the distinctly libertarian understanding of freedom.

But as Christians have always known, the completely unfettered will is not free; rather, it becomes a slave to sin and to the *desires of the flesh* (John 8:36; Gal. 5:16–24). Desire is a function of what Shakespeare calls *appetite*. Traditionally and in all cultures, our appetites need to be controlled. But today’s assumption is that we have a right to the satisfaction of our appetites. We see this most dramatically in the new sexual ethos. Young people have sexual desires, so they cannot be expected to wait until marriage to fulfill them. And if some people have sexual desires for someone of their own sex, there can be no moral objection. Having sexual desire for someone other than one’s spouse is considered a valid reason for divorce and for abandoning one’s children. Appetite supersedes all other considerations. Appetite also governs our economic lives, serving as the engine of consumerism, advertising, and our debt-based economy.

For Shakespeare, the coming together of power, will, and appetite forms a “universal wolf” that devours *everything*. As we have been seeing in contemporary thought and culture, this wolf is eating up universities, laws, technology, the family, the arts, the media, and churches. But, having done so, there comes a point, says Shakespeare, when the wolf starts eating up himself.

Modernism unleashed skepticism against all traditions and authorities, all in the name of reason; whereupon postmodernism unleashed that skepticism against reason itself. All that remains now is to be skeptical about skepticism. Universities have taken academic freedom so far that they now censor dissenting views, impose speech codes, and in other ways inhibit academic freedom. Humanism has advanced to the point of becoming antihuman. Progress has evolved to become neoprimitivism.

But when the universal wolf has finished devouring himself, his predation will be at an end. Life might start to flourish again. The course of post-Christian culture, when it ends in self-contradiction and catastrophe, may herald cultural rebirth. For example, the universal wolf of sexual permissiveness now has to face the #MeToo movement, in which women are rising up against their exploitation by the sexual revolution. Men and the society as a whole are realizing that the sexual appetite must be restricted and controlled after all. Whether this insight will lead to a renaissance of the family remains to be seen, but it demonstrates how the contemporary condition is making the Christian worldview and traditional values highly relevant again. Similarly, progressive education is failing so obviously and on such a vast scale that it has inspired a revival of classical education. Scholars from across the ideological spectrum, troubled by the nihilistic dead end that the universal wolf has brought them to, are trying to find ways to recover truth, community, morality, beauty, nature, and meaning.

To be sure, such efforts may, perhaps more likely, lead to new bad ideas and false worldviews rather than a return to biblical realism. But Christians should be undaunted at the post-Christian onslaughts, knowing that such onslaughts are ultimately doomed, in this world as well as the next.

In fact, some scholars and observers are seeing something genuinely different emerging after modernism and postmodernism and their offspring have devoured themselves. They are calling it “postsecular.”

This Book

This book is divided into four parts, addressing four major facets of contemporary thought and culture: (1) how we relate to reality,

including chapters on constructivism, science, and technology; (2) how we relate to our bodies, focusing mainly on issues of sex and having children; (3) how we relate to other people, including issues of culture and politics; (4) and how we relate to God, with discussions of the persistence of religion (or spirituality) even among those who claim not to be religious.

Each of these sections has an “arc,” a consistent sequence of development. In each of these four sections, I describe the current picture and give its historical and cultural context. I also show the problems with the current state of affairs that even today’s secularists are admitting. The last chapter in each section suggests how Christians can offer solutions to those problems.

The entire book also has an arc, a movement from the consequences of secularism to the prospects for a postsecular society.

PART 1

REALITY

Constructing Our Own Worlds

The Ptolomaic Counterrevolution

One of the greatest achievements of the last few centuries has been the rise of science. The systematic empirical study of the objective universe has opened up new vistas of knowledge, and applying this knowledge has given us technological marvels. The success of science has led many people to believe that religion is no longer necessary, either to explain existence or to solve our problems. Many people, so impressed are they with science, believe that the physical realm—what science can study empirically—is all that exists, a philosophy known as naturalism or materialism.

And yet a dominant worldview today rejects the very possibility of objective knowledge. There is no “nature,” in the sense of an external physical order of which we are a part and to which we are subject. And the material realm is wholly subordinate to the mind, which shapes it at will.

Historically, from ancient times all the way through the age of science, human beings in the West have sought to understand reality by using their minds to discover the truth about things. Postmodernists and their successors, however, are *constructivists*. Truth is not something we discover, they say, but something we *construct*. Morality is

not something built into human *nature*; rather, it is an individual or cultural *construction*. Knowledge comes not so much from a passively receptive intellect, but from the will; specifically, the will to power. And since different cultures and individuals can construct different truths, truth is relative.

It is difficult to imagine how science can continue to flourish in a climate of constructivism. Already, science is being “interrogated,” as they say, for its patriarchal, imperialistic, and racist biases. While postmodernists and their successors continue to invoke science as a bastion against religion, they are mostly interested not so much in science but in technology. That is, what can be *constructed* from science.

Meanwhile, the public has drifted into what is essentially a gnostic worldview, in which the material universe is considered to be void of any significance. That the natural function of sexuality is to engender children must not be allowed to limit our sexual behavior. And if a man desires to be a woman, or vice versa, the body itself is subject to reconstruction.

With constructivism, human beings attempt to take on the role of creator. But when they do, they end up repudiating reality itself.

Reason, Empiricism, and the Self

So how did the Age of Reason dissolve into constructivism, relativism, and the conviction that we can never know any kind of absolute truth?

The classical thinkers of the ancient world, such as Aristotle and Plato, had already taken reason about as far as it could go. The scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages managed to Christianize that heritage, making reason foundational to Christian theology. Read Saint Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologica* balances reason and revelation in a web of logical *sylogisms* on everything from the existence of God to the nature of the soul. His logical proofs have been compared to the buttresses that support the soaring walls of a Gothic cathedral, buttresses that are also supported by flying buttresses of their own.

The role of human reason was so great in medieval theology that, according to the Reformers, it took the place of God’s revealed Word in Scripture. Subjecting revelation to reason made human beings, not

God, the authority in Christianity, a human centeredness that the Reformers also saw in the institution of the papacy. The Reformers made the Bible the authority in Christianity, not the pope and not reason, but they did not reject reason altogether. They put reason in its place, as it were, that place being nature, as a function of God's orderly creation. Nature includes human nature. The human capacity for reason is a facet of God's image, so that reasoning is an important tool for problem solving, earthly government, and carrying out one's God-given vocations. So how could the Enlightenment of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries be more of an "Age of Reason" than that?

The medieval church insisted that they too believe in Scripture, faith, grace, and Christ, but the Reformation insisted on the "solus"—authority in the church is by Scripture *alone*, as opposed to the Roman formula of Scripture plus the church magisterium plus church tradition; we are saved by faith *alone*, not faith plus works; this is possible by God's grace *alone*, not grace plus our merits; our hope is in Christ *alone*, not the meditation of Christ plus the mediation of the saints plus the meditation of the church.

Similarly, the Enlightenment took a "solus" approach to reason. Disillusioned with the carnage of the seventeenth-century wars of religion, many thoughtful Europeans embraced "reason alone." Not by reason plus revelation, but what we could call *sola ratione*.

But this made the human mind, once again, the measure of all things and the authority over everything. Reason was once grounded in God and in nature; "logic" comes from the classical/Christian concept of *logos*, the cosmically ordering Word of God that underlies all creation and which became flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:1–18). But then reason, while claiming the ability to determine objective truth, became grounded in human subjectivity. What the Enlightenment really promoted in its exaltation of reason and of "rational" values such as liberty, equality, and fraternity was a new humanism. *Sola humanitate*. This, in turn, led to the exaltation not so much of human beings in general but of the individual self. *Ego solus*.

Baylor theologian Ralph Wood traces this unmooring of reason from the objectivity of God and of nature, focusing on the pivotal

role of the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650). Descartes sought absolute certainty, which rationalists insist upon to this very day (“prove to me *for certain* that God exists”; “I won’t believe unless I can be absolutely *sure*”), even though achieving such certainty is impossible for our limited minds. So Descartes launched upon a mental experiment, systematically doubting *everything*, until he found something that could not be doubted. That bedrock truth, the only certainty, is that I exist: “I think, therefore, I am.” I can doubt your existence, but not my own. Now upon this foundation, Descartes went on to prove the existence of other minds and of God himself. But his legacy is the radical skepticism that has come to characterize the post-Enlightenment world, in which every authority, institution, custom, truth claim, moral principle, and religious teaching is questioned and usually found wanting. (Notice today how logic, which is based on the notion of the objective *logos*, has been replaced by critical thinking, which in school curricula simply means learning to criticize.)

In making the thinking self the basis of certainty, Descartes separated reason from God and from nature. This sent the mind, the soul, and the body running in different directions. As Wood says:

It is safe to say that, prior to Descartes, human reason seated itself either in the natural order or else in divine revelation. In the medieval tradition, reason brought these two thought-originating sources into harmony. Thus were mind, soul, and body regarded as having an inseparable relation: they were wondrously intertwined. So also, in this bi-millennial way of construing the world, was the created order seen as having multiple causes—first and final, no less than efficient and material causes. This meant that creation was not a thing that stood over against us, but as the realm in which we participate—living and moving and having our being there, as both ancient Stoics and St. Paul insisted. . . .

After Descartes, by contrast, the sensible realm becomes a purposeless thing, a domain of physical causes awaiting our own mastery and manipulation. Nature no longer encompasses humanity as its crowning participant. The soul drops out altogether and is replaced by disembodied mind. Shorn of its spiritual qualities, the mind becomes a calculating faculty for bare, abstract thinking. To

yank the mind free from the body is also to untether it from history, tradition, and locality. After Descartes, the mind allegedly stands outside these given things so as to operate equally well at anytime and anywhere. Insofar as belief in God is kept at all, it is an entailment of the human. Atheism was sure to follow. Marx made truth itself a human production, whether social or economic. Nietzsche went further, insisted that nothing whatever can stand over against the human will to power, not even socially constructed truth.¹

So, beginning with reason, the Enlightenment soon led to romanticism, with its exaltation of the self, and to constructivism, with its insistence that the mind creates what it perceives.

Though the Enlightenment is called the “Age of Reason,” it was never about reason, as such. We already had reason. The main reason that the period of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century is hailed as the beginning of modernism is that it coincided with the rise of modern science. Deductive reason, with its abstractions and logical syllogisms, played an important role during this period, but it soon gave way to inductive reason, that is, to empiricism. Human beings not only knew reality by the intellect but *experienced* reality by means of the senses. Careful observation of nature led to one discovery after another. The observer, detached from nature, can now force nature to give up its secrets.

Kant’s “Copernican Revolution”

There is a subjective element even in empirical observation. Our senses can deceive us. Direct perception falls short of capturing the full truth. Someone who says, “I only believe what I can see,” must believe that objects get smaller when they are farther away. Or looking down a highway, the empiricist must conclude that the two sides of the road grow ever closer together until they meet on the horizon. This is what we perceive. But our *reason* tells us that despite what we see, the parallel sides

1. Ralph C. Wood, “Walker Percy’s Funny and Frightening Prophecy,” *American Conservative*, May 18, 2018, accessed June 10, 2019, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/walker-percys-funny-and-frightening-prophecy/>. Prof. Wood is discussing Percy’s novel *Love in the Ruins* (1972), which explores the consequence of this “untethering” of mind, soul, and body and this alienation of human beings from God and from nature. In contrast to the way the Christian worldview reconciles them.

of the road will never intersect and that objects at a distance are the same size that they would be up close. Our intellect makes this analysis very rapidly so that we can go so far as to estimate how far away something is by how small it seems. Our senses take in data from the outside world, but then our minds shape it into a meaningful form.

This was the insight of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Hailed as the pinnacle of Enlightenment thought, Kant reconciled rationalism and empiricism. In doing so, Kant became the father of constructivism.

According to Kant, the human mind receives sense impressions from outside itself. It then actively organizes those impressions according to innate mental categories. These include *space*, so that we can orient ourselves with the perceptual illusion that objects seem smaller the greater their distance. Also *time* and *cause and effect*. Other fundamental concepts according to which the mind makes sense of reality include *quantity* (unity, plurality, totality); *quality* (reality, negation, limitation); *relation* (subsistence, causality, dependence, community); *modality* (possibility-*impossibility*, existence-nonexistence, necessity-contingency).²

Although we receive data from the outside world, Kant insisted that we can never know the “thing-in-itself.” All we can know is *phenomena*; that is, the perceptions that the mind forms.

Kant was no relativist. He believed the objective universe exists, just that we cannot perceive it directly apart from the mental constructs that we impose upon it. He was a moralist, seeking to establish principles of morality in terms of innate mental categories rather than external laws or considerations. Kant the ethicist did much with “duty.” He taught that we should always treat others as “ends” rather than “means.” He formulated a version of the Golden Rule that he called the “categorical imperative”: “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”³ In other words, judge your action by asking, “What if everyone did this?” (Killing is wrong because if everybody killed, there

2. Derk Pereboom, “Kant’s Transcendental Arguments,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018), ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2018), accessed June 10, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/kant-transcendental/>.

3. Quoted in Robert Johnson and Adam Cureton, “Kant’s Moral Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed June 10, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/kant-moral/>. See their entire discussion of Kant’s ethics.

wouldn't be anyone left! We could apply this to abortion: if everyone committed abortion, the human race would die out. Conversely, you should be honest in your business dealings because you should want everyone's business dealings to be honest.) As for religion, Kant did not think we could know for certain that God exists or know him directly; then again, he did not think we could know *anything* outside ourselves certainly and directly. But since believing in God and practicing religion help to keep us moral, Kant thought it was rational to do so. (Notice, however, that Kant confuses religion with morality, with little to say about revelation, Christ, grace, salvation, prayer, or other tenets of a faith that comes from outside the self.) Kant was interested in finding "universals," not diverse "truths."

Nevertheless, Kant laid the groundwork for constructivism. He still looms large in contemporary philosophy. "Trying to summarize Kant's influence on philosophy is like trying to summarize Newton's influence on science," says Oregon State philosopher Jon Dorbolo in an online philosophy class. "The most accurate summation in either case may be: after Newton/Kant the entire approach to science/philosophy had changed. . . . Kant changed the entire world by providing a new way of thinking about how the human mind relates to the world."⁴

Kant is said to have brought about a "Copernican revolution." Just as Copernicus turned the model of the universe inside out by showing that the earth revolves around the sun, rather than vice versa, Kant changed the center of human thought. He wrote, going on to allude to Copernicus:

Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them a priori through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition.⁵

4. Jon Dorbolo, "Immanuel Kant," *InterQuest: Introducing Philosophy*, Oregon State University, accessed June 10, 2019, <https://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Kant/kant.html>.

5. From Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, 10:130–31, quoted and discussed in Michael Rohlf, "Immanuel Kant," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed June 10, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/kant/>.

No longer must our thinking conform to the objective world; the objective world must conform to our thinking. The center shifts away from objects to the mind that perceives them, away from external reality to the self.

But this is not a Copernican revolution! The error of the Ptolemaic model of the universe, in which the sun, planets, and stars revolve around the earth, is that it makes man the center of the universe. But man cannot be the center of the universe. Dante recognizes this when, after exploiting all of the symbolic possibilities of the geocentric universe, he turns the universe inside out after his character breaks through to heaven and sees the universe as it truly is. He looks back at where he has come from and sees that *God is the true center*.⁶ Copernicus taught us that the universe is not as we perceive it to be—with the sun “coming up” every morning, traversing the sky, and “going down” in the evening—but that the reality is quite different. We human beings think that we are stable and that the universe revolves around us—indeed, this is how we experience our lives—but, in reality, *we* are the ones spinning, in constant motion, hurtling through space. But Kant has placed at the center of his cosmology the human mind. Once again, man is the center of the universe. We are back to Ptolemy’s model. Kant has not given us a Copernican revolution. He has given us a Ptolemaic counterrevolution.

Constructing Our Own Realities

Kant’s successors made their own contributions to Kant’s revolution. The Romantic movement took the centrality of the self even further, emphasizing not just perception but the creative power of the mind to shape reality. Nietzsche stressed the creative power not just of the intellect but of the will. Specifically, the will to power.

This exaltation of the self, coupled with the continuing success of science (nevertheless), led to the attempt to study human beings scientifically. Thus arose the field of psychology. Also the social sciences, which began to discover the role of culture in determining how human beings act and think. What we consider to be reality began to be thought of as not just the construction of an individual’s mind but

6. See Dante’s *Paradiso*, Canto 28.

of the culture that formed that individual. Our beliefs, customs, and worldviews began to be seen as social constructions.

Indeed, the very concept of worldview, which has proven so helpful for Christian analysis, was first articulated by Kant. The term that he coined for the concept, *weltanschauung* (literally, worldview), was taken up by a host of psychologists and social scientists, as well as philosophers and theologians such as Abraham Kuyper.⁷

Social constructivism was weaponized by Karl Marx and his followers. Marx took Nietzsche's "will to power" and applied it to social institutions, particularly economic classes. He taught that cultural values and the institutions and artifacts that support them are the products of the dominant social class and are designed to facilitate their oppression of the other groups. Thus, for Marx and Marxists, art, literature, laws, political ideologies, morality, and religions are all "masks" of power, hiding the repressive agenda of the ruling class and making it palatable for those who are oppressed. For example, in the Middle Ages, the tales of knightly chivalry and heroism cause the peasants to admire their feudal masters. In our era dominated by the middle class, the political ideals of individualism, democracy, and liberty are "masks" to validate capitalism and to keep the wealthy bourgeoisie in power. For Marx, religion is the "opiate of the people," keeping the masses fixated on a future life and anesthetizing their suffering so that they will cooperate in their own exploitation.⁸

Today the post-Marxists adopt Marx's analysis but apply it not just to economic classes but to other dominant and oppressed groups. The rich still oppress the poor, as in classical Marxism, but other groups also "construct" reality to advance their will to power. Whites oppress blacks. Men oppress women. Heterosexuals oppress homosexuals. Humans oppress animals. And "intersectionality" unites the disparate victim groups, as they ally with each other to form a common front against the oppressors.

On university campuses today, much academic research is devoted to "deconstructing" these power relationships. Thus marriage, the

7. See David K. Naugle, *Worldview: History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 58. He cites Kant's first use of the term in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

8. See Derek Layder, *Understanding Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2006), 44–45.

nuclear family, sexual morality, and opposition to abortion are unmasked as being constructions of the patriarchy, means by which men control women. Activists, in turn, on and off campus, employ post-Marxist analysis and rhetoric in their own causes.

If you are among the oppressed, you can repudiate the social constructions that bind you by purposefully transgressing the norms and by constructing your own alternatives. In the long run, though, the goal must be for *your* group to gain power. This might happen in an inevitable Marxist revolution, in which the workers will overthrow the middle-class property owners, or in the particular communities and social spaces that your group controls (campuses, political parties, professions, social media sites, etc.). Thus, the much-discussed political correctness is, for the most part, a post-Marxist version of Marxist social control, as seen in the former Soviet Union, in which certain ideas and ways of expressing them were not permitted. In such contexts, appeals to freedom of speech or academic freedom do not carry much weight, since those are more “bourgeois” ideals that are masks for capitalism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, or other oppressive ideologies.

Editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the custodians of English language usage, declared that the 2016 Word of the Year was *post-truth*. We are said to be living in the post-truth era.⁹ This has become a matter of alarm, as political parties from across the spectrum turn out “fake news” to promote their agendas. But this should not be surprising. According to constructivists, journalists and other ostensibly objective writers choose particular bits of information from the avalanche of data available to them. They then construct an interpretive paradigm to connect those bits of data and to give them meaning. Guiding their selection of data and their interpretation is the writer’s agenda, including the journalist’s political beliefs, personal motivations, and “will to power.” The pretense of objectivity is itself a construction, created by a particular rhetorical style. For the constructivist, all news is “fake news.”

One of the latest phrases in the academic field of education and in the teaching profession is *constructivist education*. Instead of learning

9. See, e.g., Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004); and Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

objective knowledge, children are taught to “construct” knowledge for themselves. They write their own reading textbooks by dictating stories, which the teacher writes down and which they then learn to read. They create their own math rules. More advanced students study different people’s perspectives and then formulate their own. While much of the constructivist curricula is actually just “discovery learning,” in which students discover information for themselves—an educational technique that is quite classical—that teacher training programs are latching onto the philosophy that children create their own truths and need to be taught how to do so is certainly telling.

Another popularized example of constructivism is the notion that moral principles are not objective standards that transcend the individual or the culture. Rather, morality is a contingent and relative human construction. This appears, as with other types of constructivism, in two forms: social constructivism and personal constructivism.

Many people today believe that morality is a social construction, simply a matter of culture. Since there are many different cultures, with no basis for saying that one is better than any other, morality is relative. Some Westerners excuse even the atrocities of Islamist terrorists by saying, “But that’s their culture.” That different cultures, in fact, show a high agreement on moral teachings is overlooked; and that traditional cultures tend to be quite conservative when it comes to morality, particularly sexual morality, is an embarrassment to progressive Westerners. So we are seeing now a different kind of cultural relativism, a temporal perspective emphasizing cultural change. Yes, sex outside of marriage used to be looked down upon, but the culture has changed. Our morality needs to change accordingly. Also we are seeing individual groupings—such as by generation, affiliation, or post-Marxist “identity”—exalted as “culture.” Thus, we hear, “I can do that because that’s my culture!”

The clearest example of constructivist ethics on a personal level can be seen in the abortion debate. Again, as was said in the introduction, abortion advocates do not say that they are pro-abortion but that they are pro-*choice*. The *content* of the decision does not determine its moral significance; only the authenticity of the decision as a free, noncoerced choice.

This mind-set is also evident in other issues. The killing of sick people, euthanasia, is justified if the person *chooses* to die. We may have sex with someone we are not married to as long as there is *consent*; that is, as long as there is a *choice*.

The exaltation of choice easily morphs into the libertine definition of *freedom*. Whereas the Bible defines freedom as liberation from the enslaving power of sin (John 8:34–36), and political freedom means that the state will not violate our God-given rights, libertines define freedom as the right to do whatever I want, whatever I *choose*. Thus, arguments for the legalization of prostitution, drugs, and the like tend to be framed in terms of “freedom of choice.”

Constructivism at its most extreme can be seen in the transgender movement, which teaches that the self is so untethered to objective reality as to become disembodied. One’s personal identity is distinct from one’s body. A person might have been “born in the wrong body,” a woman in the body of a man, or a man in the body of a woman. In those cases, the person is free, with the help of medical technology, to reconstruct his or her body accordingly. But even such reconstruction is not necessary, since the physical body has no bearing on sex or gender, only the individual’s self-constructed identity.

We will discuss this phenomenon—another Kantian term—in a further chapter. We will also explore in greater depth other issues raised by constructivism: the tension between science and constructivism; the rise of technology and the loss of nature; identity politics; and the newly constructed religions that are emerging.

For now, notice what this particular post-Christian revolution means. Rejecting God, human beings are attempting to place themselves in his role as creator, lawgiver, and savior.

UNDAUNTED HOPE IN A POST-CHRISTIAN WORLD

We live in a post-Christian world. Contemporary thought—claiming to be “progressive” and “liberating”—attempts to place human beings in God’s role as creator, lawgiver, and savior. But these post-Christian ways of thinking and living are running into dead ends and fatal contradictions.

This timely book demonstrates how the Christian worldview stands firm in a world dedicated to constructing its own knowledge, morality, and truth. Gene Edward Veith Jr. points out the problems with how today’s culture views humanity, God, and even reality itself. He offers hope-filled, practical ways believers can live out their faith in a secularist society as a way to recover reality, rebuild culture, and revive faith.

“Veith explains the problems of constructing our own worlds, exalting barrenness, and building society without community. Some leaders say we’ll survive by secularizing the church, but this book shows a better way: pray and work for a new reformation.”


MARVIN OLASKY, Editor in Chief, *WORLD* magazine

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BRETT MCCRACKEN, Senior Editor, The Gospel Coalition; author, *Uncomfortable* and *Hipster Christianity*



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