

# **The Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern Approaches to Truth**

**Quote of the Day:**

**“We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality.”**

**-- novelist Iris Murdoch**

**First paper assignment**

**Pol S/LSJ/JSIS/GWSS Writing Center:**

**<https://depts.washington.edu/pswrite/>**

**Next segment of the course**

**Readings for next time**

**Postmodernism is still disproportionately left-wing, but people on the right have started invoking its core ideas in recent decades:**

- **Rejection of the science of climate change. Deniers say things like:**

**“Those scientists are just in it for the grants.”**

**“Those scientists want power so they can control your life.”**

- **Assertions that the people pushing mask-wearing as a public health measure against Covid-19 are trying to control you.**

- **Rejection of the science of evolution. Young earth creationists say, “the position you take flows directly from your starting assumptions.”**



- **Individualized understandings of what the Bible means**

- **Kellyanne Conway: “alternative facts”**



- **Rudi Giuliani: “truth isn’t truth”**



**The premodern approach to truth has a strong presence through religion, which has not faded away.**

- **Many people take a premodern approach with respect to certain questions (e.g., the existence of God, his revelation through scriptures, etc.).**
- **Attempts to blend the premodern and modern approaches. Ben Shapiro as an example.**

**Most religious thinkers vigorously oppose postmodernism (e.g., Albert Mohler) for undermining religious authorities and scriptures.**

**However, a few religious thinkers have embraced postmodernism for elevating subjective experiences—e.g., an evangelical says they know the Christian God exists because they feel him in their heart, or they feel his presence when they pray.**

**Postmodernism has an increasing number of adherents across three domains: science (least), texts (more), and morality (still more).**

**Within the broad realm of texts, in turn, someone might be more inclined to take a postmodernist approach to some of them than others. One possible way to proceed:**



**Religious scriptures span across all these genres**



**Someone also could take a postmodern approach to works of art and music, possibly varying across types (songs, chants, instrumentals, dance, musicals, films, plays, sculpture, painting, photographs, etc.)**

**Many people take a postmodern approach to morality.**

**Moral relativism: “The truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons.”**

**Moral relativism is often paired with a second claim, that you should not impose your morals on other people.**

**Moral relativism is more common on the left than the right, possibly because of the left's historical commitment to tolerance and the prominence of abortion and homosexuality as moral issues in recent decades.**

**Smith: Nobody really believes in moral relativism. Some people claim to, but only because they haven't thought it through.**

**Some concluding comments on the three approaches to truth:**

- **Most classes in political science (and many other disciplines) are modernist in orientation, though generally not labeled as such.**
- **The rest of this class will take a modernist approach.**

## **Smith's overall assessment of postmodernism:**

- It starts with legitimate observations (people often make claims based on their interests, powerful people can win wide acceptance for their version of truth, texts are subject to multiple interpretations, etc.).**
- Postmodernists then take those observations to ridiculous extremes, or make it hard to figure out what they are saying (motte and bailey fallacy).**
- Postmodernists are better at highlighting problems than offering solutions.**

**What can result if you push the principles within each approach to truth to the limit:**

**premodern**



**Tomás de Torquemada  
1420-1498**

**modern**



**Patricia Steere  
1963-**

**postmodern**



**Mike Cernovich  
1977-**

**Let's start with the premodern approach. To enforce it, authorities must control the flow of information and deal harshly with dissenters.**

**Catholic Church's list of prohibited books ("Index Librorum Prohibitorum"). Built on efforts as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Formalized in 1559, abolished in 1966.**



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_authors\\_and\\_works\\_on\\_the\\_Index\\_Librorum\\_Prohibitorum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_authors_and_works_on_the_Index_Librorum_Prohibitorum)

**Nevertheless, through the Middle Ages, the Church's greatest threat wasn't books (few people were literate and books were expensive) but rather proselytizing by heretics.**

**Let's return to the question of how to deal with heretics. Most of you, if you have religious beliefs at all, hold them with some uncertainty—which rules out the very possibility of heretics.**

**But what if you were absolutely certain of the following propositions:**

- The devil is real**
- Some human beings collaborate with him**
- Heaven and hell are real**
- A person's beliefs and behaviors determine whether they go to heaven or hell**



**Furthermore, let's suppose you want only the best for your family, friends, and the members of your community.**

**Now suppose a heretical group emerges in your region and starts attracting followers, thus jeopardizing their eternal salvation. Are you going to stand back and do nothing?**

**Heretics in the Middle Ages could face a range of punishments, including harassment, social ostracism, expulsion, and execution.**



**Historically, heresy has been just one of hundreds of offenses that could get you executed in particular times and places.**

**The “Bloody Code” in Great Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century included 214 offenses eligible for capital punishment.**

<https://www.news.com.au/world/europe/the-bloody-code-the-worst-ways-to-be-executed-in-britain-in-the-18th-century/news-story/27a617a6e79ea14b0bdd09b6c0e60f8c>

**But why burning at the stake as punishment for heresy, particularly during the Middle Ages?**



**A possible reason for burning at the stake: it symbolized removing the person (and their ideas) from the community by reducing the person's body to ash.**

**In overseeing executions of heretics, Tomás de Torquemada surely thought he was implementing God's will. Torquemada is an example of where the premodern approach can lead when pushed to the limit.**

**Now on to the modern approach to truth. Is the earth round or flat? How do you know?**



<https://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/5-8/features/nasa-knows/what-is-earth-58.html>

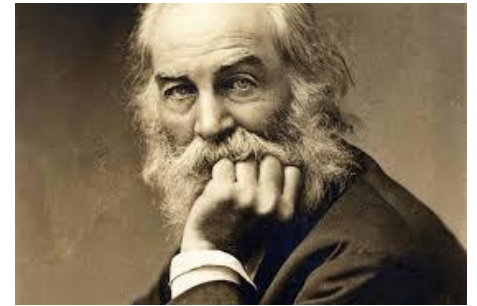
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spherical\\_Earth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spherical_Earth)

**Let's examine some of the historical background that brings us to Patricia Steere and other believers in a flat earth.**

**As it developed, the modern approach to truth went hand in hand with individual rights. Within broad legal limits, you could (and still can) believe and say whatever you want.**

**The modern approach to truth often involves challenging authorities. In earlier centuries, that meant political and religious authorities. Now it can include scientific authorities.**

**Remember Walt Whitman's advice (1855):  
“re-examine all you have been told at  
school or church or in any book, dismiss  
whatever insults your own soul.”**



**The modern approach to truth involves using logic,  
reason, and evidence. What if you think you're  
following those tools but reach different conclusions  
than scientists do?**



**Filmmaker: “What sources do you trust?”**

**Patricia Steere: “Myself, that’s it. I’ve jokingly said if there’s an event like a, I’ll just use the Boston bombing again, I’m not going to believe any of the events are real unless myself, I get my leg blown off.”**

**“Anyone can believe whatever they want to believe about me, but I wonder if in your hearts people who do that know they’re lying, or are they so conspiratorial that they actually believe it? Then it makes me worry maybe about things I believe in, am I like another version of them? But I know I’m not.”**

**You can draw a line from Martin Luther through Galileo, the American Revolution, and Walt Whitman, and then to Patricia Steere.**

**At various points later in the course, we'll examine the ways in which someone can take a skeptical attitude toward authority without become a Patricia Steere.**



**Dangers of the postmodern approach to truth. If all truth claims are disguised bids for power, how can you avoid:**

- **nihilism**
- **the ends justify the means**
- **Why should you be the chump who upholds ethical standards while everybody else is playing dirty?**

**Wikipedia: Mike Cernovich is “an American social media personality, anti-feminist, men’s rights activist, author, political commentator, and conspiracy theorist and political extremist.”**



**Some Cernovich highlights:**

- **Said date rape does not exist**
- **Spread fake news in 2016 about Hilary Clinton having a seizure disorder and Parkinson’s disease**
- **Promoted Pizzagate through tweets, blog posts, and a YouTube video**

**Cernovich: “Look, I read postmodern theory in college. If everything is a narrative, then we need alternatives to the dominant narrative. . . . I don’t seem like a guy who reads Lacan, do I?”**

**Twitter banner:**

**Hoaxed  
Everything They Told You Is A Lie**

**Cernovich may or may not actually be a postmodernist. In any case, postmodernism helped create an environment in which people like him can thrive. If postmodernism is the best approach to truth, why not act like Cernovich?**