

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

## **Quote of the Day:**

**“Postmodernism was a reaction to modernism. Where modernism was about objectivity, postmodernism was about subjectivity. Where modernism sought a singular truth, postmodernism sought the multiplicity of truths.”**

**-- novelist Miguel Syjuco**

**2<sup>nd</sup> response memo due today at 10:00 PM**

**Readings for next time**

**Where can we see instances of each of the premodern, modern, and postmodern approaches to truth in America today?**

**Smith: the modern approach to truth has the most overall influence. However, individuals do not necessarily take a consistent approach to truth. Some people will use each framework depending on the subject at hand.**

**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.**

**Let's examine prominent areas of modernism.**

- **Most people spend large amounts of time at work. Corporations and small businesses operate according to the principles of accounting, marketing, finance, management, and so forth. Heavy emphasis on analysis and data.**
- **Yes, but what if you work for a nonprofit? The nonprofit world also increasingly focuses on measuring results (GiveWell, Gates Foundation, etc.).**

**The modern approach to truth is ingrained in American society and politics in other ways:**

- **widespread use of personality and related tests in hiring, dating sites, the military, etc.**
- **standardized tests in education**
- **“Moneyball” and systematic training in sports**
- **Cultural cachet of science. Appeals to science to support particular beliefs and policies.**

- **evidence-based medicine**
- **attempts to persuade using facts, logic, evidence, and data**
- **Can you think of other examples of the modern approach to truth?**

**American society and politics also has elements of postmodernism:**

- **References to “your truth” or “your story” emphasize subjectivity and thus arguably have a postmodern dimension.**



**When people reject particular scientific claims, they often use postmodern arguments**

- **Example: 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 various measures to address Covid-19 are trying to control you.**

- **Rejection of the science of evolution. Exhibits at the Creation Museum, supporting young earth creationism: the position you take flows directly from your starting assumptions.**



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



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



**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.**

**Similarly, a tendency toward postmodernism is evident in individualized readings and interpretations of the Bible.**

**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.**

**Postmodernism has a foothold in certain parts of academia, though the claim that universities have been “taken over” by postmodernism isn’t accurate. Smith’s best estimate of the amount of postmodernism in particular disciplines:**

**high** { **gender studies**  
**English, other languages/literature**

**medium** { **education**  
**anthropology**  
**sociology**  
**history**

**low** { **philosophy**  
**psychology**  
**political science**

**zero** { **economics**  
**natural sciences**  
**business**  
**engineering**  
**medicine**

**Your reaction to  
this list,  
especially in  
other political  
science courses  
you have taken?**



**Premodern, modern, and postmodern approaches to truth in social justice writings and activism:**