

CHAPTER 11

Modernity

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Any attempt to understand the relationship between theology and modernity involves the interpreter in a fundamental ambiguity from the outset, for the two are by no means independently identifiable quantities but rather are interlinked in a complex history. Such, at any rate, is the case for the tradition of modern Christian theology, which will be our primary concern here. From one perspective modernity itself might plausibly be interpreted as the product of Western Christian culture, springing from sources in Renaissance and Reformation Europe that blossomed into maturity in the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But if that is the case, how do we account for the radically anti-Christian character of some of the most important writings of that very Enlightenment, not to mention its aftermath in the secular thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? One of the most dramatic and influential of those later thinkers, Friedrich Nietzsche, argued explicitly that both were in fact true: modernity is the inevitable outcome of Christianity and is at the same time its dissolution. The event that he calls “the death of God” does not result from the assault of some external enemy on the fortress of Christian theology; rather, it is the ironic outcome of Christian belief itself – what he calls its morality. “What it was that really triumphed over the Christian god,” Nietzsche writes, was “Christian morality itself, the concept of truthfulness that was understood ever more rigorously . . . translated and sublimated into a scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price.” The history of Christian thought on this account is the history of its progressive dissolution: “After Christian truthfulness has drawn one inference after another, it must end by drawing its *most striking inference*, its inference *against itself*” (Nietzsche 1967:161, 1974:307).¹ One need not share Nietzsche’s jaundiced view of Christianity in order to agree with him that the seeds of secular modernity are contained within its history.

The term *modern* is one of those unavoidable but elusive terms we employ in order to organize the vast and complex flow of historical time into manageable chunks, and to identify the broad patterns that enable us to distinguish one age from another. Since

the seventeenth century in Europe, the word *modern* has become the favored designation for our own time in contradistinction to the *ancient* and *medieval* periods. It had been used in a variety of ways in the history of Western culture, beginning as early as the fifth century CE, when Latin Christians called their new age *modernus* to distinguish it from pagan antiquity. Recent historians have variously associated the origins of modernity with the European Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, or the Enlightenment. In our present context – the relationship of theology and modernity – the most useful point at which to locate the beginnings of modernity is in seventeenth-century Europe. It was during this period that a new sensibility and new cultural forms first emerged that were no longer based on ecclesiastical authority or religious tradition. These emerging modern ideas and institutions, however, were not simply anti-religious; rather, they represent an attempt to ground religion itself in a new way, to build culture on a new and modern foundation and to know God and to justify belief in him without recourse to the authoritarianism of the previous age. The twentieth-century theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a prison cell in the waning days of the Third Reich, seized upon a phrase from the seventeenth-century philosopher and statesman Hugo Grotius to capture the essential feature of modernity: *etsi deus non daretur*, to be modern is to live one's life, to do one's thinking, and to organize society "as if there were no God." For Bonhoeffer this motto came to represent *die mündigge-wordene Welt*, the modern world that has "come of age," the era of cultural adulthood when we no longer seek the solace and support of traditional authority but strive to live in a this-worldly (secular) manner, relying on our own resources as human beings.

The Origins of Modernity

Dating modernity from the seventeenth century implies that the Protestant Reformation – the most plausible alternative candidate for the origin of the modern world – is essentially premodern, still part of the Middle Ages. The clearest way to state the relationship is to say that the Reformation of the sixteenth century created the preconditions for a modernity that first emerged on the stage of history a century later. Or, expressed in different metaphor, modernity was conceived in the Reformation but born in the Enlightenment. Protestantism represents the fracturing of the "one holy order" that had held the imagination of Western European civilization in thrall throughout the Middle Ages. That ideal unity, of course, was never fully realized in practice; yet its powerful hold over the medieval imagination is one of the defining characteristics of premodern Christian civilization. By its rejection, in both theory and practice, of the unitary authority of the Roman Church, the revolt of the Protestants brought to an end the ideal of an ecclesiastically centered civilization of Christian peoples. The immediate political consequence was the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), in which Catholic and Protestant forces, marching under the banners of competing religious absolutes, wreaked havoc over much of Europe and left Germany, in particular, in physical and cultural ruins. A similar lesson about the consequences of confessional strife was meanwhile being learned in Britain as the forces of a Puritan Protestantism succeeded in breaking the hold of the old ecclesiastical–political order. The fact that the traditional

institutions of Church and State were restored did not erase the rift in the hearts and minds of the Anglo-Saxon cultural elite, many of whom assumed leadership in the emerging modern world. The concrete symbol of the end of the old order and the new religious and political pluralism in Europe was the formula at the heart of the Peace of Westphalia (1648) that put an end to the wars of religion: *cuius regio eius religio*. Henceforth every principality would worship according to the religious convictions of its prince. This new order ought not to be confused with freedom of religion, which still lay in the future. Rather, it legitimated a system of juxtaposed “absolutes” in which rival claimants to ultimate authority coexisted side by side: unmistakable evidence that the era of religious uniformity had passed into history.

A good way to conceptualize the radical disjuncture between the modern world and its ancient and medieval predecessors is to start at the level of world-view in the most concrete sense of the term: the picture of the world that every age carries in its imagination, and which functions as a means of physical, psychological, and religious orientation. Historians and philosophers have long associated the “Copernican Revolution” (the label was coined by the modern philosopher Immanuel Kant) with the origins of modernity and its break with the past. To understand why it was revolutionary, one must look at the image of the world that it displaced, which can be called the Aristotelian–Christian world-view.² As the name suggests, this picture of the world originated in Greek antiquity, specifically in the philosophy of Aristotle, and was subsequently elaborated in the astronomy of Ptolemy (second-century CE). It was appropriated by Christian thinkers early in the Church’s history and served as the common assumption of Christian civilization until it was dislodged in early modernity by the heliocentric schema of Copernicus and his successors. In the Aristotelian–Ptolemaic world-view the earth was located in the center of a finite universe and enclosed within the concentric spherical shells of the seven planets (the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn), which were in turn enclosed by the sphere of the fixed stars. From Aristotle on, a sharp distinction was made between the heavens, the realm of perfection and harmony, and the “sublunary” region including the earth, characterized by corruption and change. Aristotle thought of God, the prime mover who imparted motion to the universe, as surrounding it nonspatially. In the Christianized version of this world-view the invisible heaven was conceived spatially as identical with, or beyond, the outermost firmament. This heaven, the abode of angels and saints, was counterposed to its opposite, hell, located in the center of the earth at the point of farthest remove from God. The ascension of Christ, as well as the blessed, was accordingly thought of as an upward movement through the lower heavens to the highest heaven beyond the spheres.

The Aristotelian–Christian world-view was thus far more than an astronomical theory, comprising the stage or framework for the whole divine–human drama of creation and redemption. For just this reason, its replacement by the new Copernican picture of the heavens was a “revolutionary” event for theology as well as astronomy. On the one hand, it represented the displacement of man from the center of the universe. (As the Old Cardinal in Bertolt Brecht’s play *Galileo*, puts it: “Mr. Galilei transfers mankind from the center of the universe to somewhere on the outskirts. Mr. Galilei is therefore an enemy of mankind.”) The other side of the coin, however, is that the new

world-view has been discovered by human reason, so that in a different and more important sense, man is more than ever at the center of things: the old *geocentric* world has been replaced by the modern *anthropocentric* world. The old Aristotelian–Christian world-view persisted in the Catholic theology of the Counter-Reformation, but its hold gradually loosened in the new Protestant theologies, especially among Lutherans. Lutheran orthodoxy, following Luther himself, ceased to think of heavenly glory in spatio-temporal terms at all; even Christ’s ascension took spatial form only until he disappeared into the clouds, and then only for the sake of the disciples’ limited understanding. This doctrine was attacked by Reformed theologians, who as late as the early eighteenth century were still opposing the teachings of Copernicus as unbiblical. The original appearance of Copernicus’s *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* was due to a Lutheran theologian and reformer of Nürnberg, Andreas Osiander, who first published it in 1543 together with his own preface. Despite this promising start, however, the Lutheran universities were among the slowest to adopt the new Copernican theory, primarily because of the opposition of Luther’s leading associate, Philipp Melanchthon, who attacked it on scientific grounds in his textbook on physics.

The theological revolution represented by the destruction of the old Aristotelian–Christian world-view is epitomized in an exchange that allegedly took place between the Emperor Napoleon and the modern astronomer Laplace. To the monarch’s pious query, “Where is God in your system of the universe?” the scientist reportedly retorted, “Sire, we have no need of that hypothesis!” The papal astronomer in Brecht’s play *Galileo*, after learning of Galileo’s discoveries, makes the comment, “Now it’s for the theologians to set the heavens right again” – which can be taken as a motto for the task of modern theology.

The modern world that appeared on the scene in the course of the seventeenth century – the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 makes a useful symbolic date of birth – can be seen as the outcome of three factors, two negative and one positive.

The first was the new awareness of plurality that was the unintended legacy of the Reformation. The result of the Thirty Years War was to legitimize confessional multiplicity and to provide it with a constitutional basis. Henceforth Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic Christians – each claiming supreme religious authority – were forced to coexist in mutual proximity and animosity, a situation that spoke louder to the European peoples than the voices of their several theologians and creeds. The lesson inevitably drawn by many from this arrangement was the skeptical one that none of the confessions had a monopoly on the truth, and this realization undermined the authority of the churches and eventually the doctrines they taught. The classic statement of this modern attitude toward religious doctrines is expressed in the play *Nathan the Wise*, by the eighteenth-century German poet and philosopher G. E. Lessing (1729–81). His parable of the three rings epitomizes the twin attitudes of the Enlightenment toward religion: tolerance, along with an underlying skepticism about religious orthodoxy.

A second factor in the birth of modernity is closely related to the first: a growing weariness over religious wars and persecution. Not only had confessional division undermined the authority of religious institutions, but it had also eventuated in mutual hatred and violence. The wars of religion had awakened a deep yearning for unity and

peace, the very qualities once guaranteed by religion but now seemingly destroyed by confessional strife. And the happy exception of the Netherlands also seemed to offer a lesson: tolerance pays. Here was a nation that permitted religious freedom and was thriving economically!

In addition to the negative incentives of competing ultimate authorities and religious warfare, emerging modernity was given positive encouragement by a third factor, the rise of what was then called the “new science” and has come down to us as *modern science*. The full impact of the change that had been heralded by Copernicus was brought home in the work of Galileo (1564–1642), who produced actual evidence for the heliocentric theory, firmly linking celestial with terrestrial reality. Using the new-fangled technology of the telescope, he was able to demonstrate that the same principles applied “up there” as “down here.” It is surely no accident that the most notorious clash between the official church and modern science was occasioned by Galileo’s discoveries, which brought into stark contrast the incompatible paradigms of the old world picture and the new. The new science reached its culmination in the work of a man born the same year that Galileo died, Isaac Newton (1642–1727), whose *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* first exhibited the new world-view in all its glory. It appeared as a vast cosmic machine in which space and time are the infinite and uniform containers of material bodies, which move according to universal laws. The most powerful feature of the Newtonian theory was its contention that those laws are written in the language of mathematics, and are thus universally applicable and knowable in principle by all men on the basis of their natural endowments. Newton was also prepared to say where God was located in his system – namely, external to it as its creator, who had originally set it in motion and now intervened only occasionally in order to make minor adjustments to the mechanism. It was not long, however, before even this weakened notion of divine providence withered away, leaving the “watchmaker” God of the Deists.

Paralleling the new science was an equally revolutionary shift in philosophy. The thinker usually acknowledged to be the founder of *modern philosophy*, René Descartes (1596–1650), likewise belongs to seventeenth-century Europe. The essence of the revolution he brought about is the concept of methodological doubt. (Brecht’s Galileo: “The millennium of faith is ended, said I, this is the millennium of doubt.”) But Cartesian doubt is not an indication of unbelief but rather a doubting for the sake of certainty. By making doubt the first principle of philosophy, Descartes intended not to undermine religion but rather to set it on a new and secure foundation. The method bears a striking resemblance to the science of this day, to which he was also a notable contributor. His thought experiment rests on a simple premise: if one employs doubt as a kind of epistemological acid to dissolve away all doubtful propositions, one will be left with the indubitable core of experience, which Descartes expressed in that most famous of philosophical utterances, *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”). The sheer awareness of my own existence, he is saying, I can by no means doubt away. And this survivor of doubt, this *cogito*, then becomes the foundation for a new philosophical program, in which the philosopher is able to establish even belief in God with new certitude. Beyond the question of whether the Cartesian method is plausible, however, is the new “metaphysical” quandary in which it leaves philosophy. For Descartes was

forced to acknowledge two “substances,” two kinds of fundamental reality, which he called *res cogitans* (“thinking substance”) and *res extensa* (“extended substance”). This situation leads to the infamous “Cartesian dualism” of mind and matter, much lamented by modern philosophers because it apparently leaves the thinking subject isolated from the world of material objects. Descartes’ achievement, on the other hand, is considerable, for he has provided an answer to the question of Laplace by finding a place in the modern world for God, a secure place within the human subject. Less successful is his attempt to relate God to the external world machine of modern science, for he was the first thinker to compare the creator to a fine watchmaker, who plays a necessary role in the origin of the world but then has no apparent job to do in its ongoing history.

Enlightenment: the Religion of Reason

Proposals to ground religion, not on the specific claims of one historic tradition or another but rather on universal reason, found a ready audience among Europeans wearied by a century of confessional strife. The analogy with science was powerfully suggestive: just as there is a *natural science* based on universal mathematical laws that are transparent to reason, might there not be a *natural religion* likewise knowable by all without regard to time, place, or historical tradition? As the seventeenth century unfolded, a number of thinkers answered this question in the affirmative. An early example appears in the work of Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), a veteran of the Thirty Years War and brother of the poet George Herbert. Seeking a common basis for religion that could be acknowledged by all human beings, Lord Herbert concluded from his study of ancient and modern religion that God had endowed his human creatures with certain Common Notions (*notitiae communes*) that are sufficient to ground the essentials of religious faith in all times and places. There are five such innate ideas, he contended: (1) that God exists, and (2) ought to be worshiped, (3) that virtuous living is the best way to honor God, (4) that all people abhor evil, and (5) that there will be rewards and punishments after death. This teaching, put forth in his book *De veritate* (1624), has earned him the label “Father of Deism,” a movement that ignited a religious controversy that was to dominate England for the next century and more.

The Deist Controversy sprang from the tension between a universal *natural* religion and the specific teachings of the historical traditions, called *positive* religions by the Enlightenment rationalists.³ Even if philosophers like Descartes or Herbert of Cherbury could succeed in making room for a kind of general theism, the specific claims of Christian (and by implication, other) revelation would still need to be brought into harmony with the world-view of modernity. This question focused attention on the Bible, whose meaning and status has been one of the most persistent and controversial issues of modern theology. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain this issue divided religious rationalists into two camps: rational supernaturalists, who acknowledged the importance of reason but affirmed the necessity of revelation as well, and the Deists, who either rejected revelation outright or reduced it to a mere accommodation

to the masses of the same rational religion obtainable by philosophers through reason. The position of those who argued for the necessity of revelation is epitomized by the philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), widely known for his empiricism and for his contributions to modern theories of toleration and individual liberty, but also the author of the classic work of rational supernaturalism, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). The book's argument presupposes Locke's tripartite distinction among propositions "above, contrary and according to reason." The latter two cases present no difficulties, since any claim that is contrary to reason is false on its face while claims shown to be in accord with reason are obviously true. The heart of Locke's argument for Christianity, however, is that it teaches essential revealed truths that are *above* reason, and thus neither contradicted nor supported by it. Primary among them is Jesus's claim to be the Messiah. Locke argues that we are justified in accepting this central Christian doctrine "above reason," since it is warranted externally by the fact that Jesus fulfilled prophecies and performed miracles. Such "outward signs" confirm the reasonableness of Christianity.

Locke's opponents, who came to be called Deists, denied the possibility of supra-rational truth and insisted accordingly that genuine religion be purged of all mystery. The two most important Deists were John Toland (1670–1722), author of *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696), and Matthew Tindal (1655–1733), the Oxford scholar who in 1730 published *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, destined to become known as the "Deists' Bible." Toland's subtitle tells it all: . . . *a Treatise Shewing, That there is nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor Above it: And that no Christian Doctrine can be properly call'd a Mystery*. Christian revelation, he argues, can be shown to agree in all its essentials with natural religion (for which no revelation is necessary). "What is once reveal'd," he maintains, "we must as well understand as any other Matter in the World, Revelation being only of use to enform us, whilst the Evidence of its Subject perswades us" (Toland 1969:146). Revealed and natural religion thus differ only in form and not in content. Deism culminates in Tindal's claim that, since biblical revelation merely recapitulates natural religion, Christianity is "as old as the creation." Once again the subtitle gives the gist: . . . *the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature*. The warrants for believing the propositions of Christianity are thus not external, as in Locke, but internal: "there can be no other Distinction between Morality and Religion, than that the former is acting according to the Reason of Things consider'd in themselves; the other, acting according to the same Reason of Things consider'd as the Will of God" – a distinction that effectively reduces religion to morality and later provides Kant with his definition of religion (Tindal 1967:298).⁴ Joseph Butler (1692–1752) wrote the most telling rejoinder to the Deists in *The Analogy of Religion* (1736), in which he argues that nature is not nearly so uniform and rationally accessible as the proponents of natural religion assume but is, rather, as ambiguous and recalcitrant as revelation. But this argument proved to be a two-edged sword, for though it convinced some to accept revealed mystery it provoked others – like David Hume – to reject both Deism and rational supernaturalism.

The philosophy of Hume (1711–76) marks the end of an era in religious thought, for his devastating attacks on miracles and the fulfillment of prophecy undermined the external warrants on which the rational supernaturalists based their case. But his

equally compelling critique of the argument from design, the favorite prop of the Deists, represented the end of their appeal as well. The effect of this double assault was to undermine the common assumption of both sides, the rationality of religious belief. Hume thus drives a wedge between faith and reason, challenging his contemporaries either to acknowledge that religion is based on a wholly irrational faith (a position he claimed not to oppose) or to abandon it altogether. His challenge was heard in far-off Königsberg, where Kant credited Hume with awakening him from his “dogmatic slumbers.”

Before turning to the culmination of the Enlightenment in the thought of Immanuel Kant, we need to look briefly at the quite different situation that obtained in France. The French Enlightenment differed from its British and German counterparts primarily because the relationship of modernity to the past was fundamentally different in France. King Louis XIV (1643–1715) set out to unify the French nation and culture under the banner of the Counter-Reformation, which entailed the suppression of Protestantism by force, most dramatically in the destruction of the Huguenots through exile, repression, and conversion. The French state remained the dutiful servant of the Roman Church until the Revolution of 1789. This situation helps to explain why even so bitter an enemy of the Church as Voltaire, on his deathbed confessed to a priest and issued a written apology. (Under prevailing law, bodies of those who died refusing the sacramental ministry of the Catholic Church were to be dragged naked through the streets and thrown unburied on the dump; and despite his confession, Voltaire narrowly escaped this fate when he died two months later.) The French *philosophes*, though they borrowed arguments from the English Deists, were thus far more outspoken in their rejection of superstition and religious persecution. The epitome of the French Enlightenment, Voltaire (1694–1778; born François Marie Arouet), often sought to disguise his true views, but he was evidently a Deist, who relied on the argument from design and appealed to the analogy of the watchmaker God. But he reserved the most scathing of his rapier prose for attacking the Church, delighting in the motto *écrasez l'infâme* (“crush the infamous thing”). Voltaire was the mentor and inspiration for a group of younger French intellectuals who called themselves “the philosophers” and came to typify the Enlightenment in France. The most visible fruit of their work was the *Encyclopedie* (*Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 28 volumes, 1751–72), under the editorship of Jean d’Alembert (1717–83) and Denis Diderot (1713–84), which was marked by a militant atheism and materialism. Thus under Louis XIV both the Church and unbelief paradoxically flourished (Hirsch 1949, vol. 3:60).

Beyond Enlightenment: Kant

The thinker who offered the most famous definition of Enlightenment,⁵ Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), also marks its culmination and is thus the one most responsible for bringing it to an end and ushering in a new era in the relationship of theology and modernity. His critical philosophy is the watershed of modern thought, the prism through which the earlier lines of modernity are gathered up and refracted in new

patterns that set the course of religious thought for the coming century – and beyond. Kant is the quintessential modern thinker, the one whose contribution is so definitive that without taking him into account no adequate understanding of theology and modernity is possible. He is the author of two interrelated revolutions in modern thought, one philosophical and the other theological. In the former role Kant takes up where Hume had left off, extending and systematizing the critique of natural theology; in the latter he lays the foundation for a whole new way of doing theology – one that sets the pattern for the liberal theologies of the next two centuries. He announces his intentions in the preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “I have . . . found it necessary,” he writes, “to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*” (Kant 1965).

The first, or philosophical, task (“to deny *knowledge*”) Kant carries out in his *Critique of Pure Reason* by proposing a bold new model of reason as inherently active, not simply the receptive *tabula rasa* of earlier empiricists such as Locke. But neither does Kant take the other extreme, exemplified by rationalists like Herbert of Cherbury, who see reason itself as a source of knowledge. His middle way he calls *critical*, proposing that reason works “synthetically” to produce knowledge by applying *a priori* rational concepts to data supplied by the senses *a posteriori*. “Critique” is his name for the philosophical analysis of experience that seeks to factor out the implicit *a priori* concepts by which we organize and categorize sense data in order to synthesize knowledge. As far as theology is concerned, the results of this analysis are largely negative, for we can in principle have no knowledge of transcendent *noumena* such as God but only of the *phenomena* that appear to our senses. On the other hand, we not only can but must conceive of God, a concept that Kant calls “the Ideal of Pure Reason.” So we are left at the end of the First Critique with not an atheism but an agnosticism, in which we are unable to have knowledge of that which we must necessarily conceive.

But Kant’s project for reconstructing theology is not yet complete, for in the second volume of his critical philosophy, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he carries out his constructive theological task (“to make room for *faith*”). Here it is essential to note that it is *knowledge*, not *reason*, that he has excluded from theology. Although he is convinced that we can have no *theoretical knowledge* of God, he argues in the Second Critique that we can nevertheless have a *practical faith*, and that this faith is *rational*. Indeed, it is not too much to say that rational faith in God is not optional but necessary. Our moral experience, our conscience, Kant is saying, *demand*s the reality of the objects of religious belief – freedom, immortality, and God (Kant calls these the “postulates of pure practical reason”). Do we therefore have knowledge of these objects? No (for all the reasons given in the First Critique). Is it rational to accept them? Yes – moreover, it is irrational not to do so (for all the reasons given in the Second Critique)! Kant spells out this rational theology in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), which is simultaneously a brief for what he calls “pure rational faith” and an apologetic argument for the Christian religion as the one that most nearly exemplifies that ideal. For the same reason, however, the book also contains a polemical rejection of the “positivity” of Christianity – meaning all of its concrete historical specificity – so that in the end little is left of the historic faith of the Church except an abstract shell of rationalized ethics.

Kant’s solution to the problem of theology and modernity can be seen in retrospect as a powerful model that has been repeated in numerous variations in the liberal

theologies and philosophies of religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In each case the religious thinker first identifies one aspect of human experience (practical reason in Kant's case), which is at the same time both the definitively human characteristic and the essence of religion. A case can then be made for the truth of the Christian religion, understood to be one expression or symbolic embodiment (typically the highest or best) of the essential *humanum*, which is also the religious *a priori*. The price for such accommodation of Christianity to modernity, however, comes high; for the "positive" elements of the gospel – those concrete particulars that have historically counted as essential features of the faith – must be sacrificed to the universally human and religious aspects. Religious thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be read as a dialectic in which successive variations on Kant's program compete with one another, punctuated periodically by forceful attempts to reject the liberal model and return theology to its orthodox roots.

The Nineteenth Century: Romanticism, Idealism, and Their Critics

The most influential of those variations comes from the other figure most often credited with setting the course of liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) who, unlike Kant, was a theologian and churchman. Typically called the "father of modern Protestant theology," he was raised in a pietistic home and came of age as part of the early Romantic movement in Germany. His two major accomplishments, both concerned with the relation of theology to modernity, are associated with two quite different books. In 1799, while a part of the circle of young Romantic poets and philosophers, he published *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, in which he proposed a radically new view of religion as an immediate (pre-reflective) relation to the *Universe* or All that manifests itself in feeling – which he called the "feeling of absolute [or utter] dependence." This religious intuition is available to every human being; but in sharp contrast to the natural religion of the Enlightenment and to Kant's ethical religion, it is located in neither the intellect nor the will but in the affections. This universal experience of religion is to be distinguished from all the specific historical religions, including Christianity, yet at the same time it is the essential root of them all. In keeping with this view of religion, the *Speeches* are rhetorical and apologetic in style, seeking to evoke ("conjure") that spirit of religion in the hearts of his skeptical fellow Romantics, the "cultured despisers" of his subtitle.

Two decades later, as a professor in the newly founded Humboldt University of Berlin, Schleiermacher published a work of a very different style, his theological magnum opus titled *The Christian Faith* and known informally as the *Glaubenslehre* or "doctrine of faith." Despite the stylistic shift, *The Christian Faith* can be seen as Schleiermacher's attempt to interpret the doctrines of Christianity in accordance with the new concept of religion developed in the *Speeches*. In a lengthy introduction he classifies Christianity in relation to the other major religions of the world, from which it is differentiated by relating its experience of religion specifically to "the redemption accomplished in Jesus of Nazareth." Christian doctrines, on Schleiermacher's terms, are not

metaphysical descriptions of supernatural reality but rather, verbal accounts of the uniquely Christian religious experience. This revolutionary turn in modern theology means that for the followers of Schleiermacher doctrines are descriptive not of God but of faith, or religious experience – though these theologians remain convinced that such theology is still *indirectly* descriptive of God.

Along with Kant and Schleiermacher, the third towering figure from this fertile period in German thought, G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), gave a different but equally influential twist to the relationship of theology and modernity. A colleague and critic of Schleiermacher at the University of Berlin, Hegel represents the culmination of German Idealism, a movement that has its roots in Kant's practical philosophy, and which J. G. Fichte (1762–1814) and F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854) developed into full-blown Idealist systems. By rejecting Kant's notion of a *Ding an sich* – the “thing in itself,” which has reality apart from our knowledge of it – they argued in effect that all reason is practical reason, since it constructs its objects of knowledge, which can thus be accounted for without recourse to an ineffable and paradoxical *Ding an sich*. This move dissolves the dichotomy of subject and object into a concept of the absolute ego (*das Ich*, the “I” or self), which the Idealists identify as the first principle of philosophy. In Hegel's mature system, the culmination of German Idealism, ultimate reality is interpreted as the dialectical unfolding of God, or Absolute Spirit, through history in a process that is at the same time God's self-revelation and self-realization. To understand Hegel's view of theology and modernity, it is necessary to look at the final stages of this historical dialectic, which Hegel calls Absolute Spirit and distinguishes into the three domains of art, religion, and philosophy. Each of these, as a form of Absolute Spirit, contains the entire truth as its *content*; but only in the final transformation (*Aufhebung*) of art and religion into pure philosophy does the truth attain its perfect *form*. Art expresses the truth in sensuous forms; in religion, the next stage, the truth is expressed in ideas, but they take shape in imagination – sensuous images that represent the truth metaphorically or symbolically. Only at the pinnacle of the system does the truth achieve its purified expression in the pure translucent Concept, in which all traces of sensuality are left behind. Viewed from the perspective of Hegel's philosophy of religion, Spirit manifests itself in a history of different religious forms culminating in the Absolute Religion, which Hegel identifies with Christianity. By working out this vast and intricate system, Hegel sought to do for modernity what Thomas Aquinas had done for the medieval world: to produce a “modern synthesis” that would reconcile the truth of historic Christianity with the thought forms of the modern world. Not many subsequent thinkers are convinced that he succeeded, yet nearly all have been influenced by his way of thinking. And the immediate successors of Hegel, disagreeing about the meaning and significance of his philosophy, took modern religious thought in important new directions.

The Hermeneutics of Suspicion and the Problem of History

Some of Hegel's immediate followers, who became known as the Hegelian Right, believed that his Idealist system had indeed achieved the reconciliation of Christian

truth and modernity; but their influence was short-lived. Far more important in the long run were those on the other side of the split, the so-called Young Hegelians on the Left, of whom three are especially crucial for later religious thought.

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) has been called “Hegel’s Fate,” since he begins from the Hegelian system, learns from it how to think dialectically, but then inverts the whole enterprise into an historical materialism that denies rather than justifies the truth claims of Christian theology. In *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), his best-known work, Feuerbach reduces theology to anthropology, arguing that religion is based on an illusory reversal of subject and object in which the essential attributes of humanity are projected onto an imaginary divine subject. Like Hegel, he sees the incarnation of Christ as the decisive historical turning point; but he inverts its meaning, interpreting it as the moment in which the projected attributes of “God” are reclaimed by alienated humanity. Feuerbach thus develops a “theological” atheism that does not attack theology from without but turns its own implicit logic against it. In his later work, Feuerbach leaves Hegel behind entirely and develops a critique of religion as a misinterpretation of the forces of nature by an illusory imagination.

Feuerbach’s early dialectical critique of religion was politicized by Karl Marx (1818–83), who interprets religious projection not simply as a theoretical error but rather as the practical means by which the economically dominant classes have kept the dissatisfaction of the oppressed classes in check by diverting their energies to unrealistic otherworldly goals. He too claims to have inverted Hegel’s system – not, as is sometimes reported, by “turning Hegel on his head” but rather by finding the Idealist Hegel already standing on his head and returning him to a firm footing on the earth. Like Feuerbach, Marx learns to think dialectically from Hegel but then uses the method to produce the opposite outcome: what Marx calls dialectical materialism, a philosophy that offers the key to history and the motivation for the oppressed classes to rise up and transform social reality. Religion is thus at the same time crucially important to the historical process and wholly negative in its effects, the opiate that drugs the oppressed into harmless dreams of another world, the flowers that disguise the true nature of the economic chains that bind them. Religious critique is therefore the opening wedge in the original Marxist program for socio-political transformation. There have been others – especially the Liberation Theologians of the twentieth century – who have nevertheless believed that a modified Marxist analysis is a useful tool that can be employed on behalf of theology. There are signs, however, now that the great political empire that claimed Marx as its prophet has faded from the stage of history, that the influence of his thought, whether positive or negative, is waning as the new century unfolds.

The kind of critical thought exemplified by Feuerbach and Marx has come to be called the hermeneutics of suspicion, and it constitutes one of the most powerful intellectual and moral factors in religious thought since the middle of the nineteenth century. The other thinkers most commonly associated with this movement are Nietzsche and Freud, but others in the past century and a half might also be usefully understood as practitioners of hermeneutical suspicion. An example is the third major figure among the Young Hegelians, David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74), who can be thought of as the originator of the historical critique of Christianity. After studying theology, Strauss came under the influence of Hegel. He taught philosophy briefly before

publishing his *Life of Jesus* (1835), which became one of the most influential and controversial books in modern religious thought, among not only scholars but also the general public. Strauss is responsible for introducing a new interpretive key into biblical scholarship, which he called mythological criticism, intended as a mediating position between rationalistic interpretation (which took miracle stories to be either misinterpretations of scientifically explainable events or deliberate frauds), on the one hand, and orthodox interpretation (which assumed that the gospels present wholly reliable eye-witness accounts of supernatural occurrences), on the other. Strauss thus undercuts the common assumption of both sides, that the biblical account provides factual information about the real Jesus. He was convinced that whatever facts could be established are insufficient to give us a Jesus worthy of religious faith. Strauss does not maintain that the individual authors fictionalized the facts, but rather that the biblical narratives are the product of an unconscious myth-building power of the early Christian community, by which it expressed the truth it apprehended in the form of its stories about Jesus. The storm of protest in response to the book ended Strauss's academic career and unleashed a public controversy not only in Germany but also in Britain after *The Life of Jesus* appeared in a translation by the novelist George Eliot, who was also responsible for the English version of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*.

The controversy about Strauss's Jesus represents the most dramatic chapter in the struggle over one of the major issues of theology and modernity, the problem of the historical reliability of the Bible. The issue first emerged in the eighteenth century when G. E. Lessing published posthumous fragments by the radical Deist Hermann Samuel Reimarus challenging the historical truth of central biblical narratives. After Strauss the arguments generally focused on attempts to distinguish myth from history, with liberals typically arguing that the biblical writers presented their ideas in the form of mythical stories, and conservatives insisting on the factual accuracy of the texts. A new chapter in the battle over faith and history unfolded in the twentieth century after Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) proposed that scripture be *demythologized* by means of what he called “existential interpretation,” a method heavily influenced by the early thought of the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Bultmann believed that his approach made it possible to distinguish the essential message of the New Testament proclamation (*kerygma*) from the mythic form in which it was expressed by the ancient authors. His opponents, especially Karl Barth (1886–1968), charged that demythologization distorts the essential message of Scripture, which cannot be isolated from the historical narrative in which it is embedded.

Dissenting Voices in Modern Theology

Before leaving the nineteenth century behind it is important to remember that not all Christian thinkers followed the path of accommodation to modernity blazed by Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel. There were, first, those representatives of traditional orthodoxy who tried their best to remain staunchly unaffected by modern ideas. In addition to Catholic traditionalists, this group includes various restoration movements among European Protestants; but of all the attempts to restore the Church to its historical

confessions none was more influential than the Princeton Theology, which flourished for more than a century at Princeton Theological Seminary. The leading theologians of this movement, especially Charles Hodge (1797–1878) and his successor, Benjamin Warfield (1851–1921), combined a doctrine of direct verbal inspiration of Scripture with a commitment to conservative Calvinist confessionalism. Although they saw themselves as simply re-stating orthodox doctrine, they were in fact modern thinkers in their stress on the use of reason and their insistence that theology is a science in the modern sense of the term. The Princeton theologians also defended Christian orthodoxy against modern secular and scientific ideas, especially Darwin's theory of evolution. Their struggle with liberal theologians led in the early twentieth century to the Fundamentalist–Modernist controversy, which split the Presbyterians and some other mainline churches into separate liberal and fundamentalist or evangelical denominations.

Not all those who rejected theological accommodation to modernity, however, were confessional restorationists. Two towering figures from the second half of the nineteenth century – Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) – though in some ways direct opposites, offer powerful critiques of Enlightenment and Idealist rationalism while attacking modern acculturated Christendom, which they see as incompatible with New Testament Christianity. And both are masters of irony and indirection, deliberately making it difficult to pin down their precise positions.

Kierkegaard, reacting strongly against the Hegelianism of the leaders of the new Danish People's Church founded after the revolution of 1848, employed irony and a complex pattern of pseudonymous writings to challenge the bourgeois Christianity of his times with the strangeness of the New Testament gospel. He ridicules and parodies the systems of the Hegelians while using Socrates as a foil for presenting the radicality of true Christian faith, which he sees as discontinuous with rational argument, a “scandal” that can only be appropriated by means of a subjective “leap.” His influence was not felt beyond Denmark until the twentieth century, when his writings began to appear in German and English.

Nietzsche is equally scathing in his rejection of modern bourgeois society and religion, but his alternative is not Christian faith, against which he hurls vehement arguments. No phrase better epitomizes the modern challenge to theology than the “death of God,” Nietzsche's name for the defining experience of modernity. His attitude towards Christianity is complicated, however, for he occasionally expresses sympathy for genuine Christians, and his rather contradictory view of Jesus seems sometimes to want to separate him from the vengeful “Christianity” created in his name by his disciples and St. Paul. On the one hand, Nietzsche can be seen as the heir to the atheism of the Enlightenment (Voltaire was one of his heroes); but on the other hand he is the prophet of postmodernism, who seems to reject all objectivity, leaving us with an unresolved interplay of competing interpretations.

Catholic Theology and Modernity

So far the drama of theology and modernity appears as a largely Protestant story. One reason, of course, is the role played by the Protestant Reformation in the emergence of

the modern world. Another reason is the historical fact that the earliest confrontations between emerging modernity and traditional theology occurred in Protestant countries, especially Germany and Great Britain. But the historical connection between Protestant Christianity and modernity by no means implies that the story should be of interest only to Protestants, for the issues that they first encountered and to which they responded came eventually to confront other religious communities as well: Jews as they gradually emerged from the ghettos of Europe, starting in the eighteenth century, and Roman Catholics beginning in the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century, the globalization of European and North American culture meant that all of the world's religious traditions faced similar challenges. Although each religious community obviously comes to terms with modernity in its own way, there are nevertheless significant parallels among them, and the experiences of European Protestants from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries are therefore instructive for others as well.

Roman Catholic theology remained largely insulated from the winds of secular modernity until the early nineteenth century, when revulsion in France against the excesses of the Revolution combined with the spirit of the rising Romantic movement to produce the Catholic Traditionalism of such figures as the Viscomte de Chateaubriand (1768–1848), Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821), Félicité de Lamennais (1782–1854), and Louis Bautain (1796–1867). Meanwhile in Germany a newly founded Catholic theological college became in 1817 the Catholic Faculty of the University of Tübingen, which already had an ancient and distinguished Protestant Faculty. This unique situation, a century and a half before the ecumenical movement of the late twentieth century, led to the formation of the Catholic Tübingen School under the leadership of J. S. Drey (1777–1853) and J. A. Möhler (1796–1838). Encouraged by the association with their Protestant colleagues, these Tübingen Catholics began to respond to the modern ideas of Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel. Although their early works were largely indebted to the Romantic movement, they remained wary of Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute dependence," and through study of the Church Fathers and later Catholic tradition they developed a new, more dynamic understanding of the Church and its doctrine.

Hopes that the new theology might lead the way to a revitalization of the Catholic Church were dashed by the wave of revolutions that swept across Europe in 1848. Pope Pius IX, who had begun as a theological progressive, was forced to flee Rome and leave power to the revolutionaries until he was rescued by French troops. His reaction was swift and dramatic, leading to what has been termed the Fortress Mentality that was to characterize the Roman Church for more than a century. The Roman hierarchy came to see the Church as a citadel to defend the faithful against the forces of modernity; and as the secular authority of the Church decreased, its claims to spiritual supremacy increased as though in compensation. The retrenchment reached a climax in the Vatican Council of 1870–1, the first since the Reformation, which redoubled the Roman Church's rejection of everything Protestant and modern, and proclaimed the doctrine of the Pope's infallible teaching authority on matters of faith and morals.

One further development in Catholic theology in the nineteenth century deserves to be mentioned – one that had consequences for both Roman Catholics and Anglicans. The Tractarian or Oxford Movement originated in the Church of England in the 1830s

in response to political developments, and rapidly captured the attention of the public, especially after the appearance in 1841 of the famous Tract 90 by John Henry Newman (1801–90), the most important theologian associated with the movement. The Tractarians sought to re-establish the authority of the Church, reverse the trend toward rationalism in religion, and renew a sense of religious mystery and “reserve.” Several of its leaders were outspoken in their rejection of Protestant ideas and influences, a tendency that appeared to be confirmed by Newman’s dramatic defection to the Roman Church in 1845. The Oxford Movement, though shaken, nevertheless continued to influence not only Anglicans but also other denominations at home and abroad. Meanwhile Newman continued his influence, now as a Roman Catholic theologian and eventually as a cardinal. Of his many significant writings, the one most noteworthy for the relationship of theology and modernity is his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, written while he was still an Anglican but which he later reaffirmed; it played a major role in the ongoing Roman Catholic debate about history and doctrinal change.

The Twentieth Century and Beyond

Most of the issues affecting theology and modernity that had been raised since the seventeenth century continued to challenge thinkers in the twentieth century. Since those developments are treated in detail elsewhere in this volume, all that remains for us is to indicate in a few broad strokes the range of alternatives and to diagnose our situation as a new century unfolds.

The opening years of the twentieth century appear in retrospect as a kind of coda to the nineteenth, the calm before the storm that was about to break over Europe. Protestant Liberal Theology was in the ascendancy, led by Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89), Wilhelm Herrmann (1846–1922), and Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), whose 1900 Berlin lectures on the “Essence of Christianity”⁶ epitomized the movement. They also drew the fire of Alfred Loisy (1857–1940), leader of the Catholic Modernists, whose attempt to break down the walls of the Fortress Mentality in Rome was quashed by papal condemnations in 1907.

The mood changed, and with it theology, after the First World War (1914–18). The Dialectical Theology of Karl Barth and his associates, inspired by Kierkegaard among others, attacked the “culture Protestantism” of Harnack and the Liberals and began a new era in Protestant theology. Over the next two decades, controversies between Barth and Bultmann, then Barth and Emil Brunner, brought the unity of the original group to an end and sowed the seeds of the various theological options that were to dominate theology in the coming decades. Bultmann and Paul Tillich (1886–1965), each in his own way, appropriated existentialist philosophy in order to bridge the gap between Christian faith and modernity. The most important work of Protestant theology in the twentieth century, Barth’s monumental *Church Dogmatics*, began to appear in the early 1930s, just as a second great crisis overwhelmed the nations of Europe and eventually much of the world. One could argue that the great challenge of modernity was posed in the twentieth century not by new philosophies or even by science but rather by Adolf

Hitler and the Holocaust. Most of the theologians who set the course of theology in the first half of the century were affected, often in fundamental ways, by the encounter with National Socialism and the crisis it represented for theology.

The latter half of the twentieth century is more difficult to characterize (perhaps for lack of sufficient hindsight), but the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) was surely the defining event for Roman Catholic theology, as the Fortress Mentality of the Tridentine Church gave way to the *aggiornamento* of Pope John XXIII. The council also helped to launch the ecumenical movement, which has deeply affected Christian theology of all types. At about the same time a different theological response to modernity appeared in the various politically focused theological movements from the 1960s onward: Liberation Theology, first in Latin America and later elsewhere; Black Theology; and Feminist Theologies of several kinds.

The Postmodern Question: the End of Modernity?

At the start of a new century and a new millennium, one of the questions that theologians, along with many other intellectuals, are asking is whether the increasing influence of “postmodern” thought represents the end of the modern era and the advent of a new age. Though it is surely too soon to know for certain, most commentators seem to agree that postmodernity is best understood as the latest chapter in the ongoing history of modernity, now spread from Europe to virtually the entire world. Whatever the labels one chooses, it is evident that something basic has changed about how (post)moderns think about their world. Fewer and fewer thinkers are prepared to accept what would once have been the bedrock of modernity, the assumption that there are enduring standards of rationality inherent in human experience that transcend differences of time, place, and culture. Antifoundationalism in philosophy has spread rapidly to theology, and the pressing issues now have to do less with the alleged undermining of religion by science and more with the threat of relativism. Throughout the modern era there have periodically been voices of protest against the assumption that a common rationality can provide a foundation for theology – for example, in the Counter-Enlightenment of J. G. Hamann, F. H. Jacobi, and J. G. Herder in the eighteenth century; in Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century; and in Karl Barth in the twentieth. In the past, such figures have often been labeled “irrationalists” or dismissed by critics as merely “confessional.” In the postmodern environment of contemporary theology, such criticisms are less persuasive, and these thinkers are being read with renewed attention. The generation of theologians that once dismissed Barth as “neo-orthodox” is giving way to younger scholars who see in Barth’s refusal to accommodate Christian theology to the requirements of an earlier “modernity” a possible model for revitalizing theology in a postmodern environment.

Meanwhile, the great problems of theology and modernity will continue to challenge religious thinkers of the twenty-first century: the relationship of religious faith to modern science, the historical particularity of the Bible, the authority of Scripture, the proper use of philosophy in theology, the truth of Christianity in a religiously pluralistic world – and many others, whose shape we can only begin to imagine.

Notes

- 1 For an analysis of Nietzsche's interpretation of Christianity and a Christian theological interpretation of it, see my book *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination* (2000: chs. 5 and 8).
- 2 The following account of the Aristotelian–Christian world picture is based on Emanuel Hirsch (1949:113–28).
- 3 For an explanation of the concept of positivity and the distinction between positive and natural religion, see Green (2000:26–30).
- 4 According to Kant, "Religion is (subjectively regarded) the cognition of all our duties as divine commands" (Kant 1956:153; emphasis as in original); cf. Kant (1960:142).
- 5 "*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! ['Dare to be wise!']. Have courage to use your own understanding!*" (Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" (1991:54).
- 6 They are published in English as *What is Christianity?* (Von Harnack 1957).

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