



HPRS5905/6905

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MODERN
CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY

What makes theology modern?



WHAT MAKES THEOLOGY MODERN?

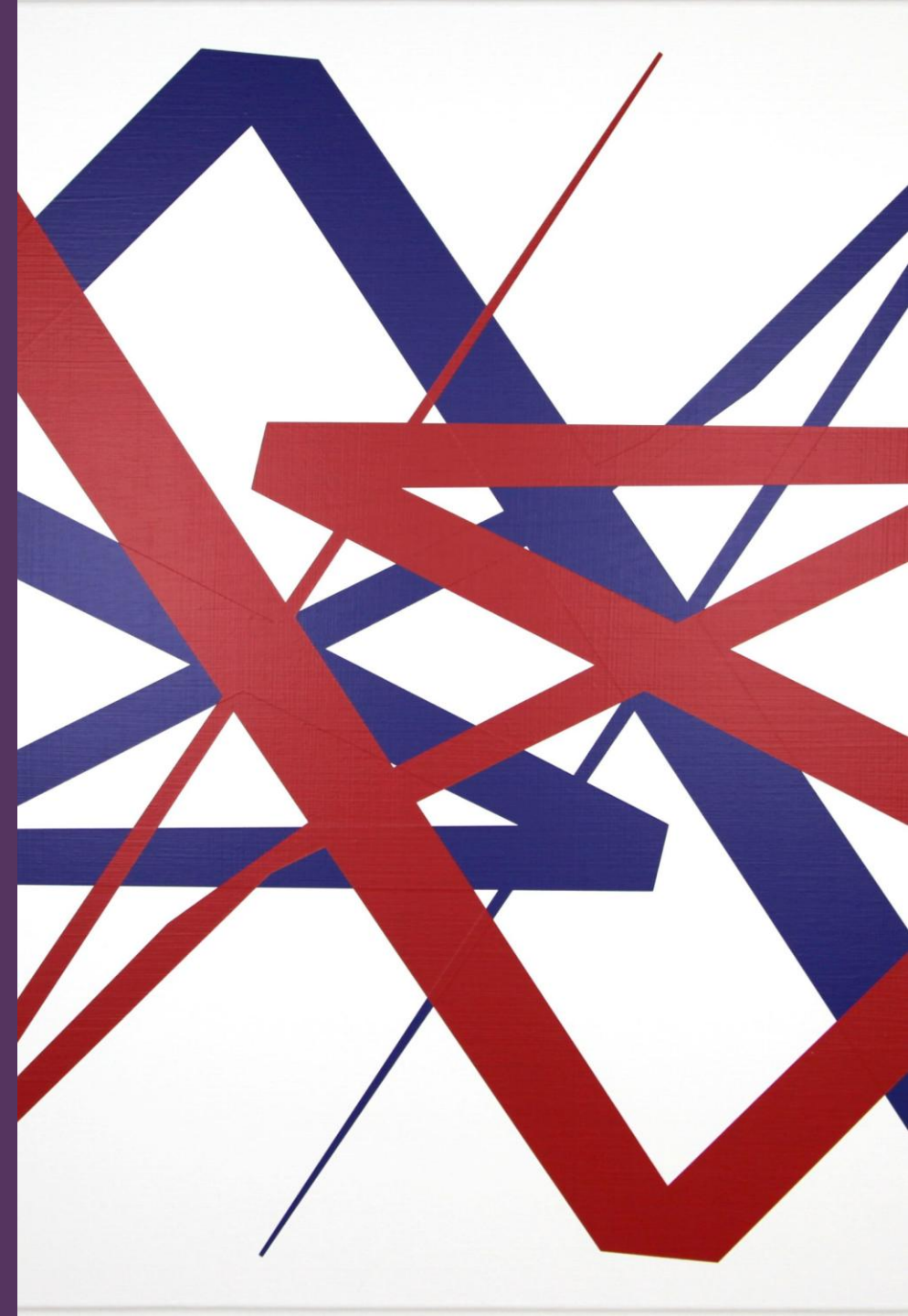
WHAT MAKES THEOLOGY MODERN?

The question that opens this course is deceptively simple:
What makes theology “modern”?

One might be tempted to answer: theology written in modern times as in the period stretching from the seventeenth century to the present. But this answer confuses a chronological category with an intellectual one.

This is because there is a great deal of theology written in the modern period that is not “modern theology”.

As an example, a manual of Catholic dogmatics composed in Rome in 1890 is clearly historically modern but theologically pre-modern in its methods, assumptions, and questions.

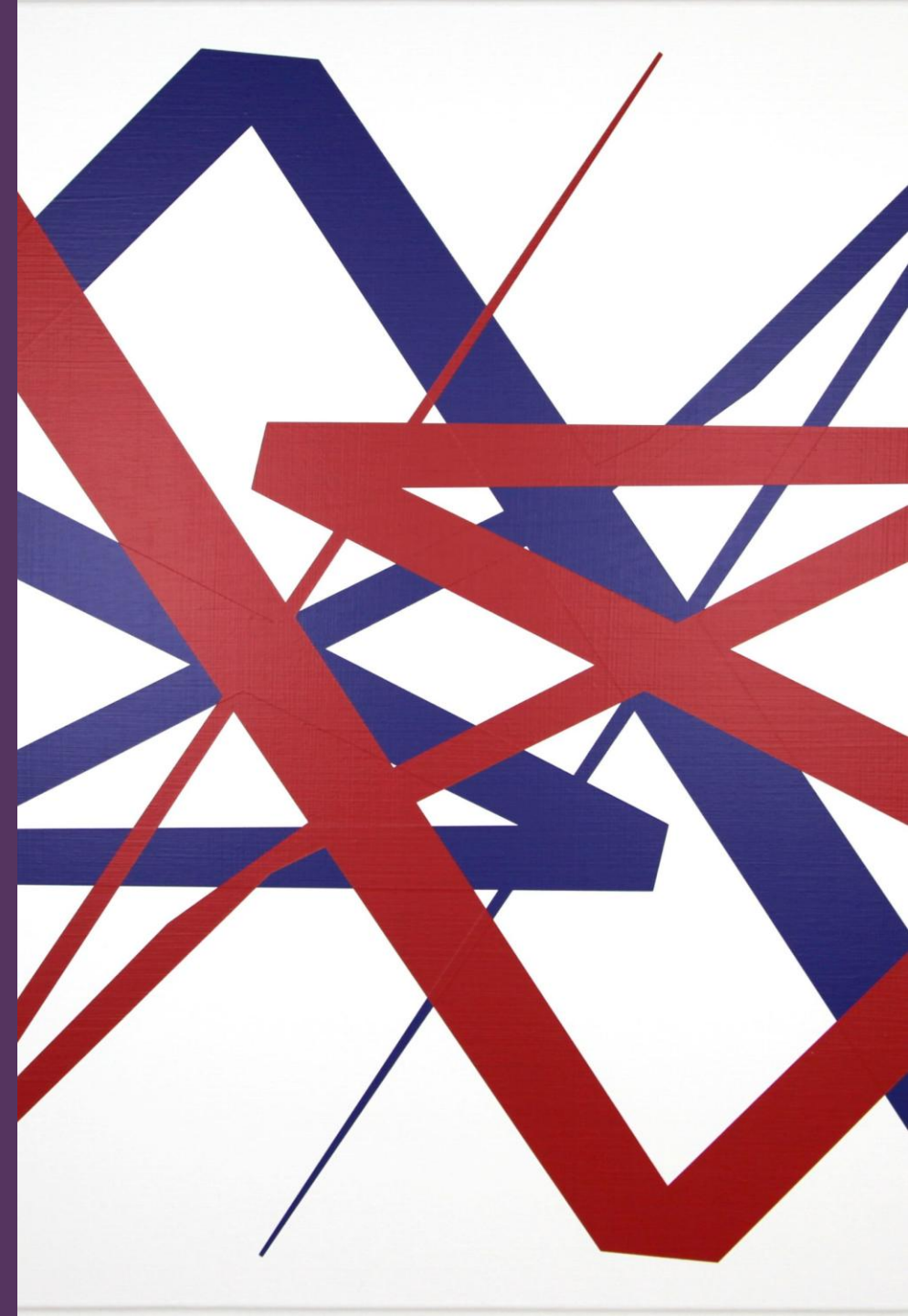


WHAT MAKES THEOLOGY MODERN?

“Modern theology” as a movement and descriptor, by contrast, names a particular way of conducting theology — a way shaped by a specific set of intellectual challenges, characteristic questions, and defining anxieties.

To study “modern theology” is not simply to study theology’s recent past, but to study theology’s encounter with modernity as an intellectual and cultural force.

This is what we will be looking at in this module over the next ten or so weeks!



MODERNITY

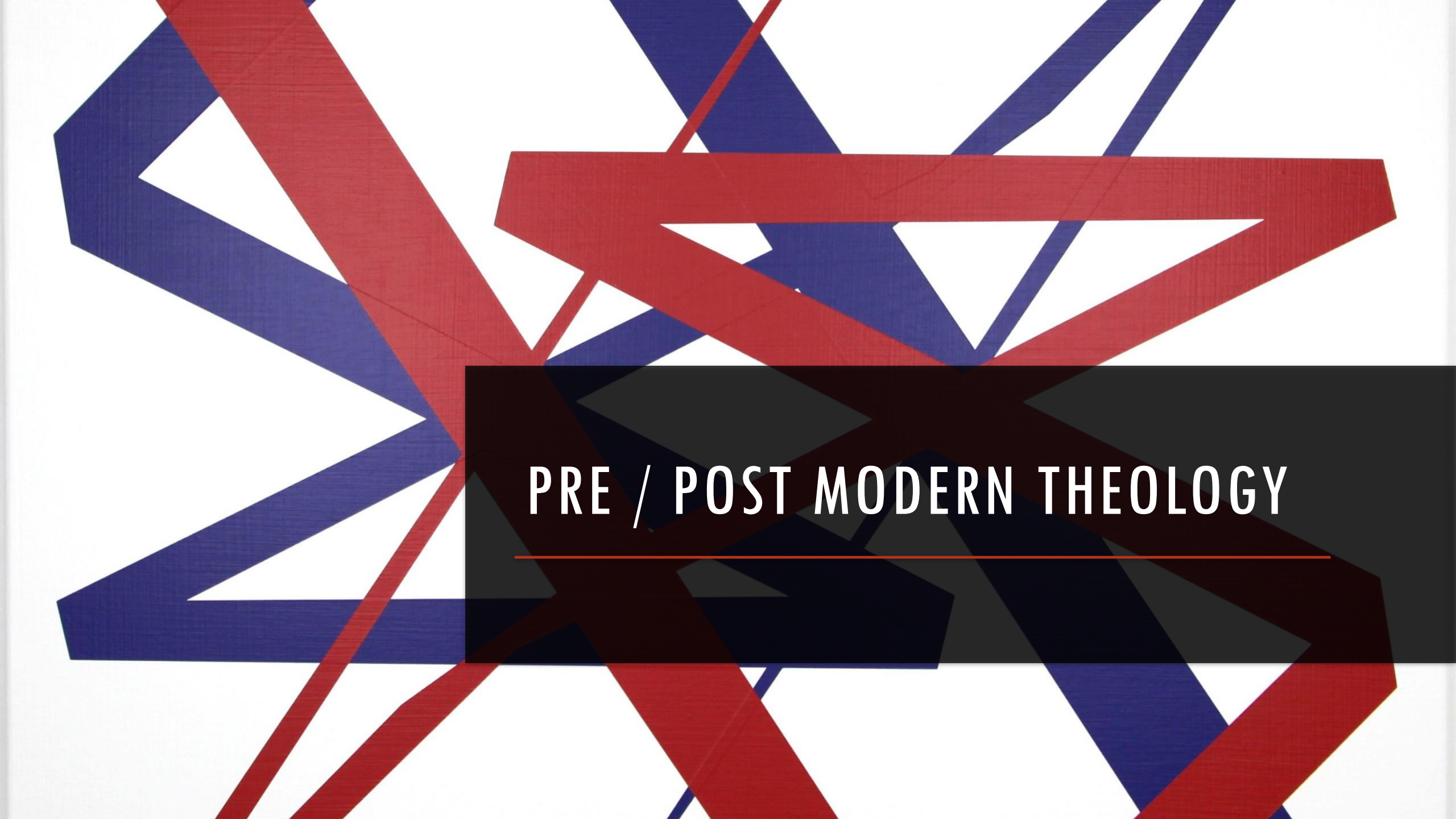
Modernity, in the relevant sense, is therefore best thought of not as a date but instead as a condition or a complex of intellectual, cultural, and social transformations that altered the conditions under which Christian theological reflection could be practiced.

None of these transformations happened overnight, and none affected all regions of European culture or the global community of Christianity simultaneously.

But together they constitute the condition to which modern theology is a sustained response and an attempt to grapple with.

MODERNITY

1. The rise of critical historical consciousness, which subjected the sources of Christian faith to the same scrutiny applied to any other historical artefact.
2. The emergence of the natural sciences as the alternative authoritative paradigm of reliable knowledge.
3. The Kantian critique of speculative metaphysics, which blocked the traditional routes of natural theology based on the world around us.
4. The valorisation of individual experience and individual moral autonomy as the proper ground of human self-understanding.
5. The gradual disenchantment of the natural world (Weber) and its evacuation of intrinsic religious meaning from it.



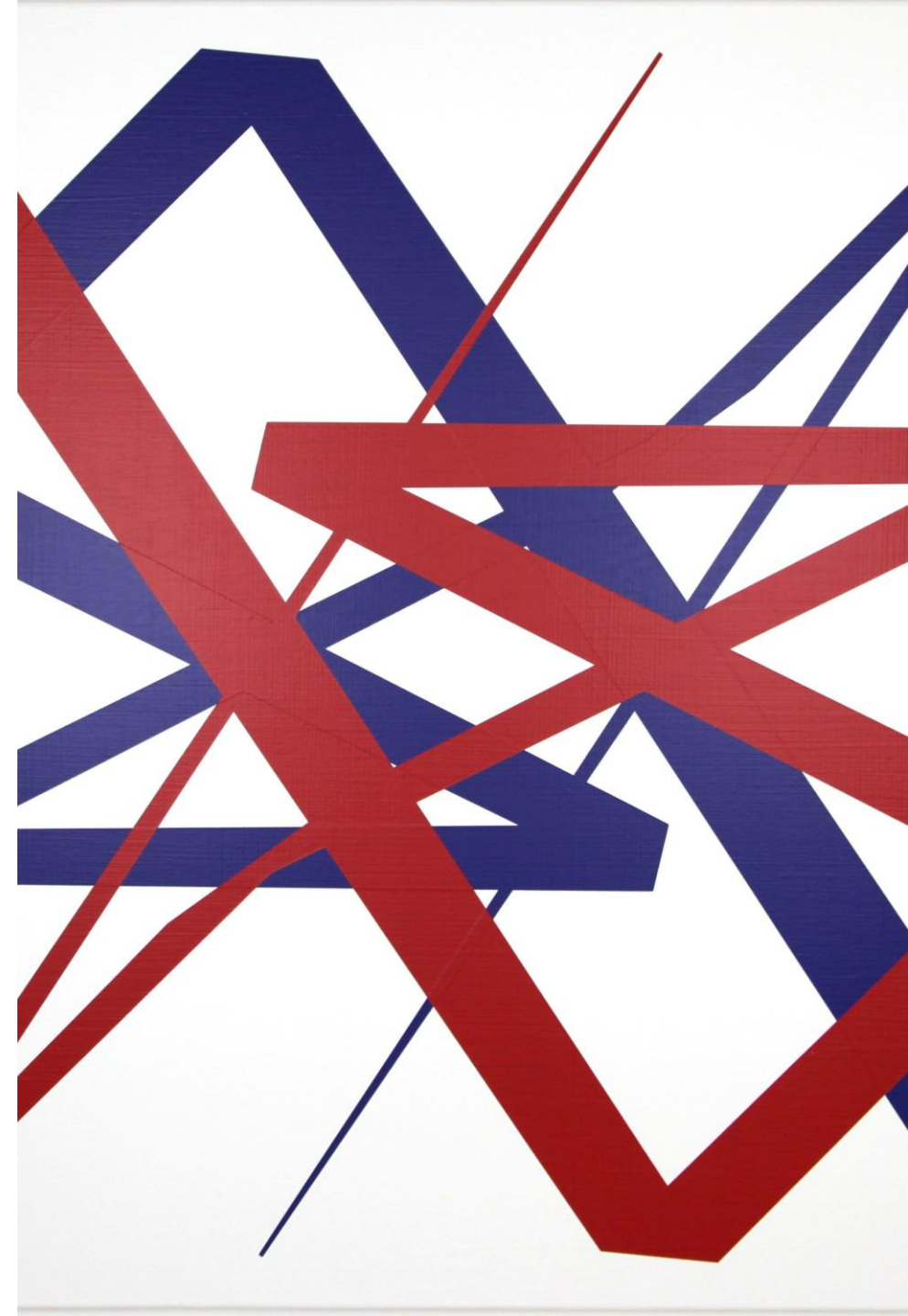
PRE / POST MODERN THEOLOGY

MODERN THEOLOGY AND EXPERIENCE

One of the most distinctive moves of modern theology is its appeal to experience as a theological category of primary importance.

In pre-modern theology, experience was typically ordered by and interpreted within a prior framework of doctrinal authority such as Scripture, council, or tradition.

Modern theology tends to reverse this priority. Under the influence of Schleiermacher's foundational work, experience becomes the foundation from which theological reflection then proceeds.



MODERN THEOLOGY AND EXPERIENCE

The appeal to experience is inseparable from what philosophers of modernity have called the turn to the subject.

This is the displacement of the ground of knowledge, meaning, and value from the objective structures of the world outside ourselves, to the activity of the knowing, feeling, willing subject, our inside knowing.

In philosophy, this turn is associated above all with Descartes and Kant who you may already be familiar with; in theology, with Friedrich Schleiermacher.



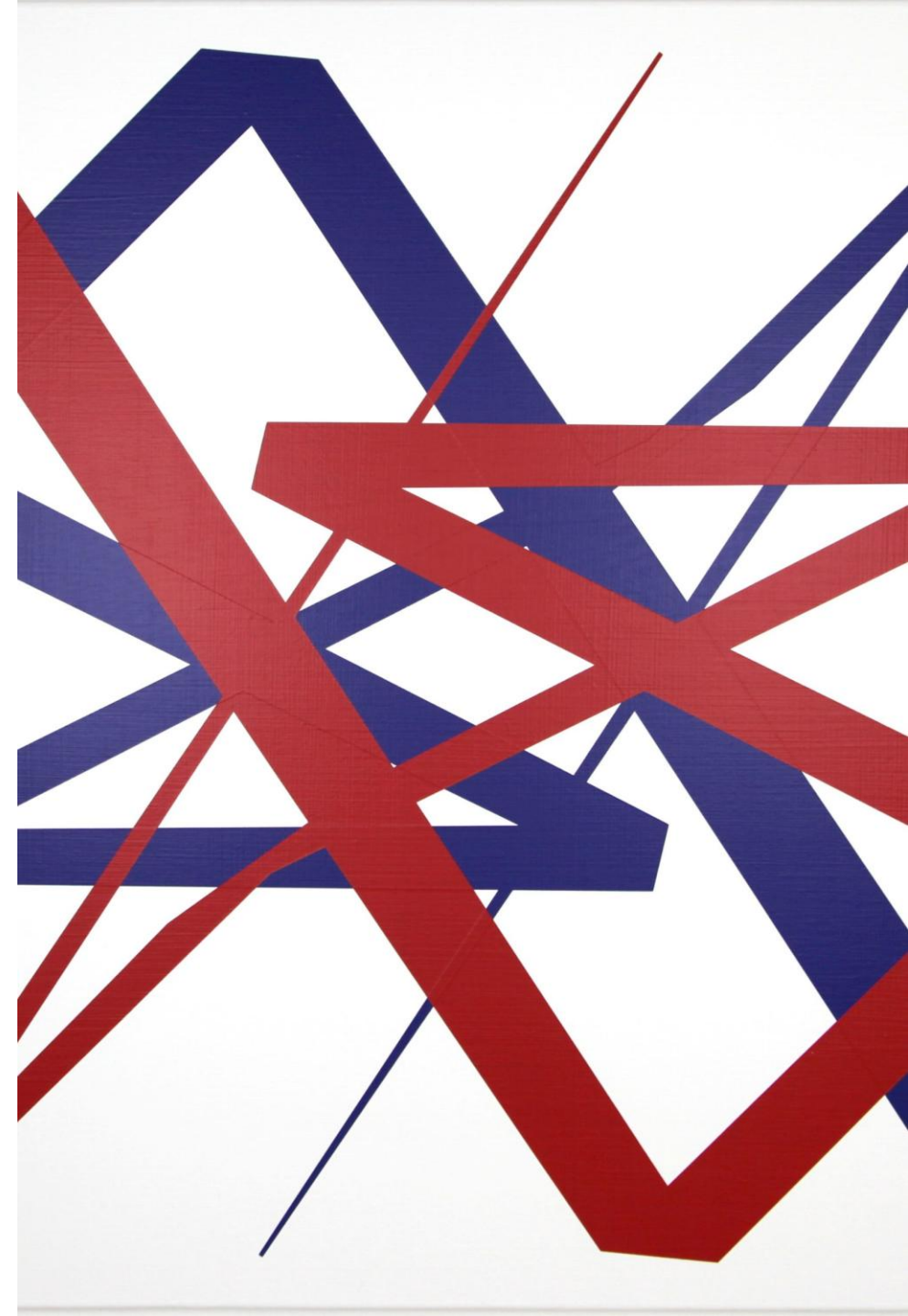
COGITO,
ERGO SUM

MODERN THEOLOGY AND EXPERIENCE

The theological implications of the subjective turn are really profound and far-reaching.

If the criterion of theological validity is no longer the objective outside authority of a text, institution, or tradition, but the inner testimony of the religious subject, then theology becomes answerable to a new authority – our self-understanding and experience.

Modern Theology attempts to answer this desire for theology that matches up with our self-experience and our self-understanding.

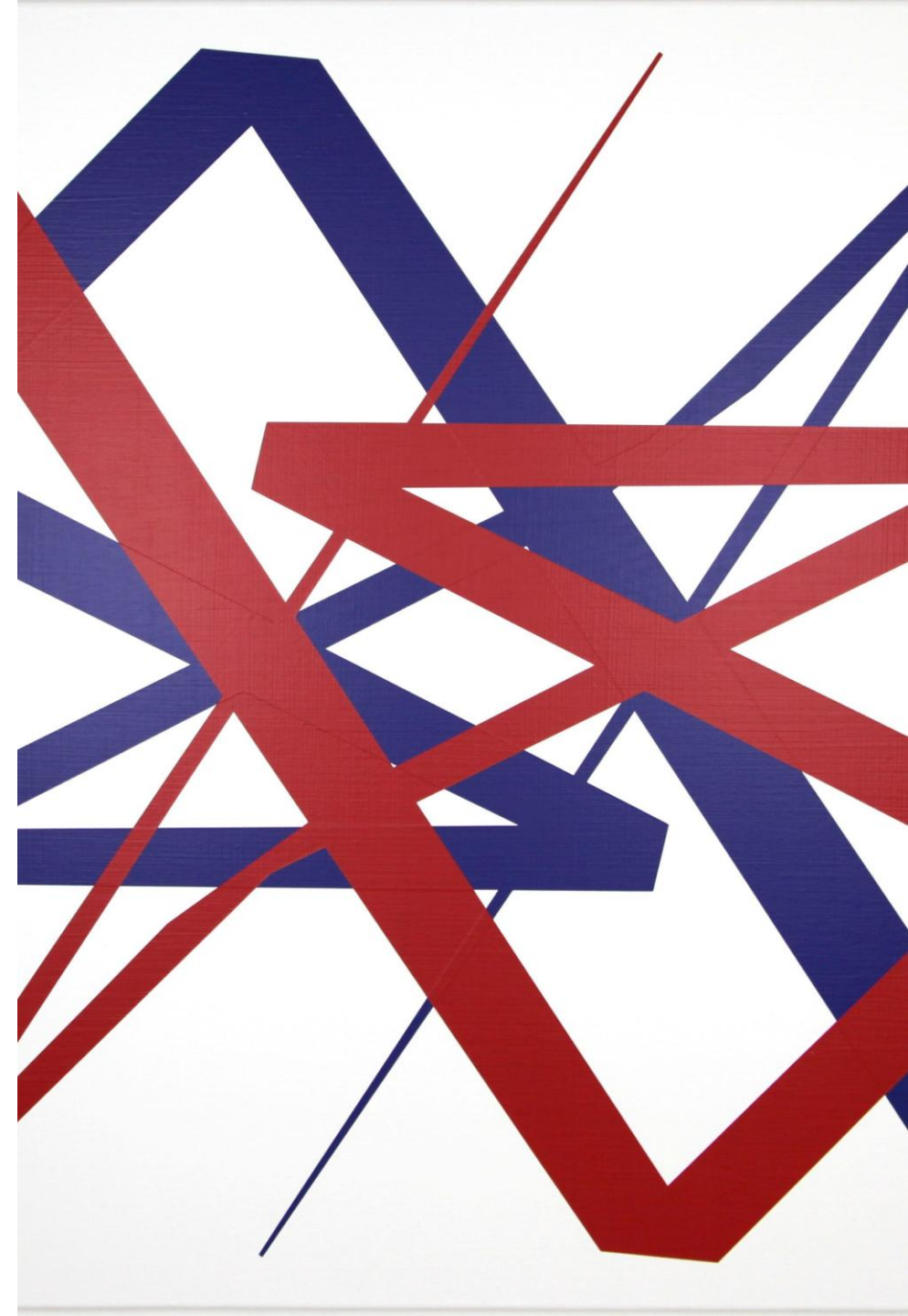


MODERN THEOLOGY AND EXPERIENCE

One of the most obvious places where this occurs is the modern awareness that all human thought, including religious thought, is shaped by its particular historical context and is therefore, in principle, relative.

The development of historical criticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demonstrated that the biblical texts were not timeless but historically produced, bearing the marks of their origins and subject to the same methods of inquiry applied to any ancient literature.

The recognition that Christianity had a contextual history made its documents and traditions the subject of historical enquiry and relativised its claims to universality.



PRE-MODERN

To understand what is distinctive about modern theology, it helps to characterise the pre-modern paradigm against which it defines itself.

Pre-modern theology operated within a framework of shared convictions: scripture was accepted as the inspired, authoritative Word of God, accessible through the interpretive guidance of the Church or the testimony of the Holy Spirit and the existence of God was assumed as the foundational reality within which all human inquiry proceeded, or argued to be demonstrable by natural reason etc.

POST-MODERN

Similarly, modern theology must be distinguished from postmodern theology – a more recent and more radical challenge to modernity's characteristic assumptions.

Postmodernism questions whether modernity's appeals to universal reason, historical progress, or the structures of human subjectivity are any more trustworthy than the pre-modern authorities they replaced.

Postmodern theology, informed by deconstruction, feminist critique, and postcolonial theory, pushes beyond modern theology's assumptions about the universal religious subject and the neutral authority of critical reason.



MODERN THEOLOGIANS

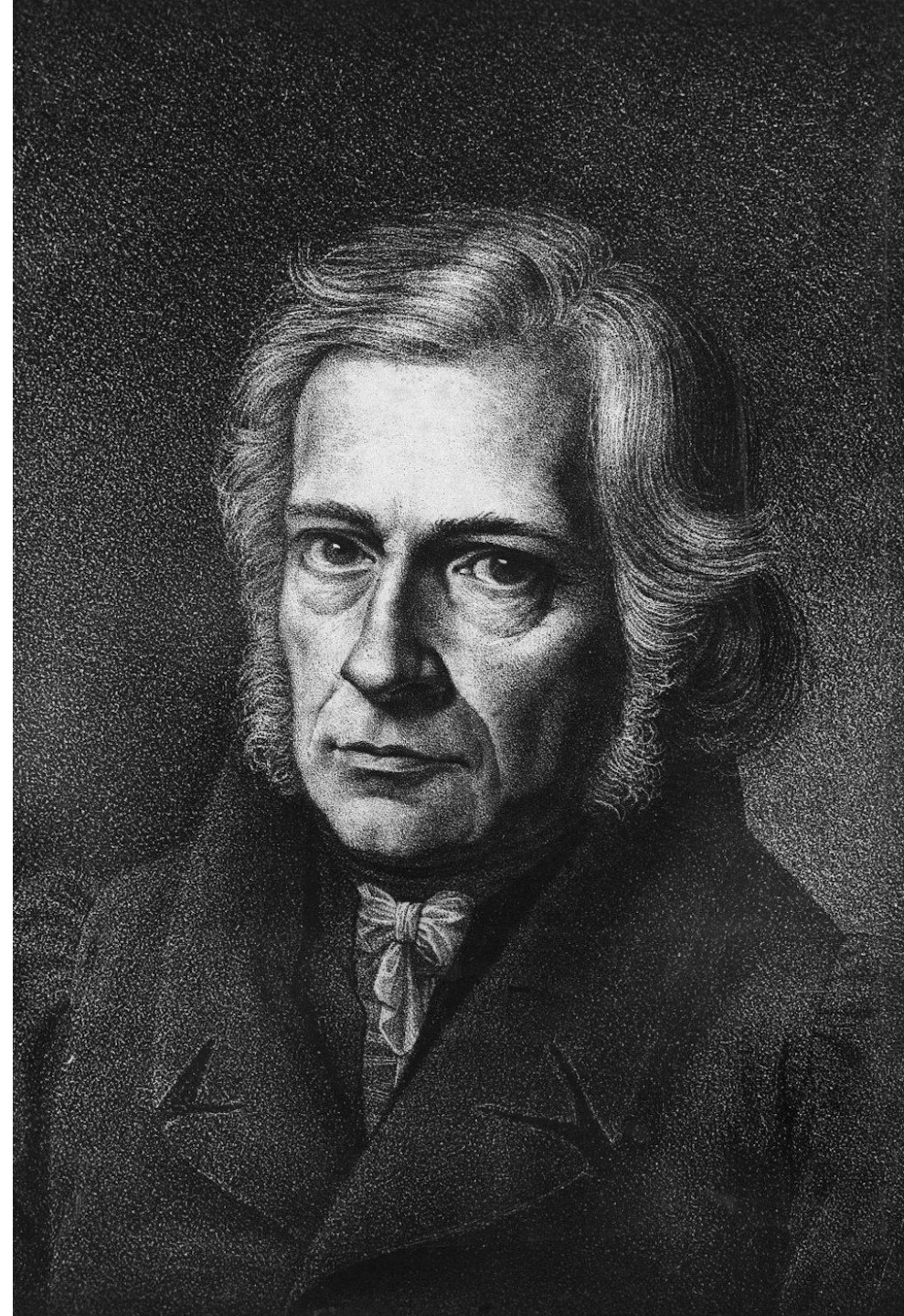
FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER (1768–1834)

No figure is more central to the founding of modern theology than Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834).

His “On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers” (1799) established the agenda for the entire subsequent tradition: relocating the ground of religion from metaphysics and morality to the irreducible religious dimension of human experience itself.

For Schleiermacher, religion is neither a theoretical system nor an ethical code but a distinct mode of awareness — the feeling of absolute dependence — that underlies and permeates all human existence.

Schleiermacher thereby inaugurates the characteristic modern theological strategy: grounding theology in the human subject’s experience of God rather than from the objective data of revelation.



ALBRECHT RITSCHL (1822–1889)

Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) is the defining figure of liberal theology's second generation.

He inherits from Schleiermacher the conviction that theology must be grounded in the lived experience of the Christian community, but he is dissatisfied with the specific form.

The grounding of theology in the feeling of absolute dependence seemed to Ritschl both philosophically unstable and theologically insufficient: it located religion's centre of gravity in an individual rather than in the active communal life of the Christian community.



ERNST TROELTSCH (1865–1923)

Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) represents modern theology's most direct confrontation with the implications of historical criticism.

For Troeltsch the assumption that past events must be understood as analogous to present experience and the assumption that all historical phenomena are interconnected in a web of natural causation, together undermine the traditional claims of Christian revelation.

Troeltsch ultimately concluded that Christian theology must accept its historical relativity, finding its normative claim not in supernatural uniqueness but instead in its capacity to orient human life toward the Absolute.



PAUL TILlich (1886–1965)

Theology, for Tillich, proceeds by correlating the questions that arise from the human experience with the answers provided by Christian revelation.

The human being asks questions about being and non-being for example; Christian symbols answer these questions.

Tillich represents one of the most sophisticated versions of the modern theological strategy of grounding theological reflection in the analysis of human existence. He provides a strong methodological focus for modern theology, asking that theology in response to modernity is for.



RUDOLF BULTMANN (1884–1976)

In a different way, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) represents modern theology's most systematic engagement with the hermeneutical problem, that is the problem of how the New Testament can speak meaningfully to modern human beings whose world is shaped by natural science and secular experience.

His proposal for the demythologisation of the New Testament argues that the cosmological framework of the New Testament is a mythological picture that the modern person can no longer really accept.

The task of theology is to translate that picture into terms that address the modern person's actual self-understanding and needs.



DIETRICH BONHOEFFER (1906–1945)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) occupies a unique place in modern theology not only because of his martyrdom at the hands of the Nazi regime in the concentration camp of Flossenburg, but also because of his theological radicalism.

His letters from prison contain some of the most searching and provocative questions in theology:

What does it mean to speak of God in a world after religion?

Can Christianity genuinely engage with the world without ceasing to be Christian?

He sought to develop a theology adequate to a world that no longer found the religious premises of Christian culture self-evident and to answer the difficult questions this raised.





COMMON THEMES IN MODERN THEOLOGY

A COMMON THREAD

What unites these very different thinkers is not a common set of conclusions, but a common set of questions and a common seriousness about the way that theology must be conducted these days.

Each takes seriously the central challenge of modernity, that is the impossibility of a return to biblical authority, the demands of historical criticism, and the need to speak to a humanity that has been shaped by the trends of subjectivity and individualism.

Each, in different ways, refuses both the simple rejection of modernity and the simple capitulation to it. It is this characteristic struggle that most defines the tradition of modern theology.

A COMMON THREAD

At the heart of modern theology lies a fundamental and perhaps irresolvable tension between revelation and reason.

Christian theology has always claimed to speak on the basis of a divine self-disclosure – that God shows us himself in Scripture, in Christ, and in the life of the Church.

But modernity has established critical reason as the universal tribunal before which all claims, including theological ones, must ultimately be answerable.

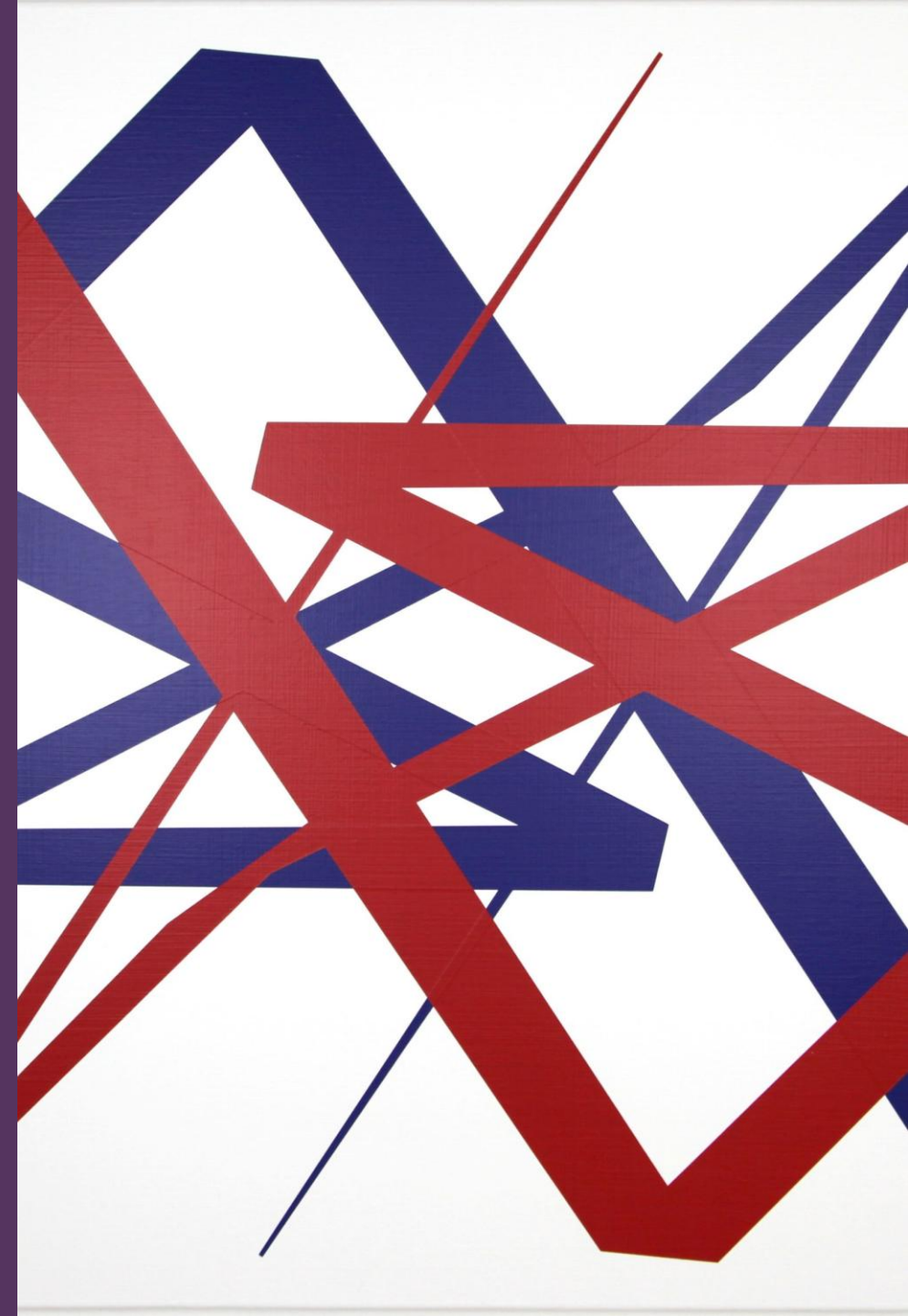
The history of modern theology is the history of different attempts to negotiate this tension – to honour the demands of critical reason without surrendering the specificity of the Christian faith.

A COMMON THREAD

Modern theology is, like all theology, an attempt to describe God.

But modernity has made the question of God peculiarly difficult. The disenchantment of nature, the privatisation of religion, and the rise of secular explanatory frameworks have collectively produced an age in which belief in God is one option among many, rather than the taken-for-granted background assumption.

This transformation does not resolve the question of God's existence, but it profoundly changed the conditions under which theological reflection needed to proceed.

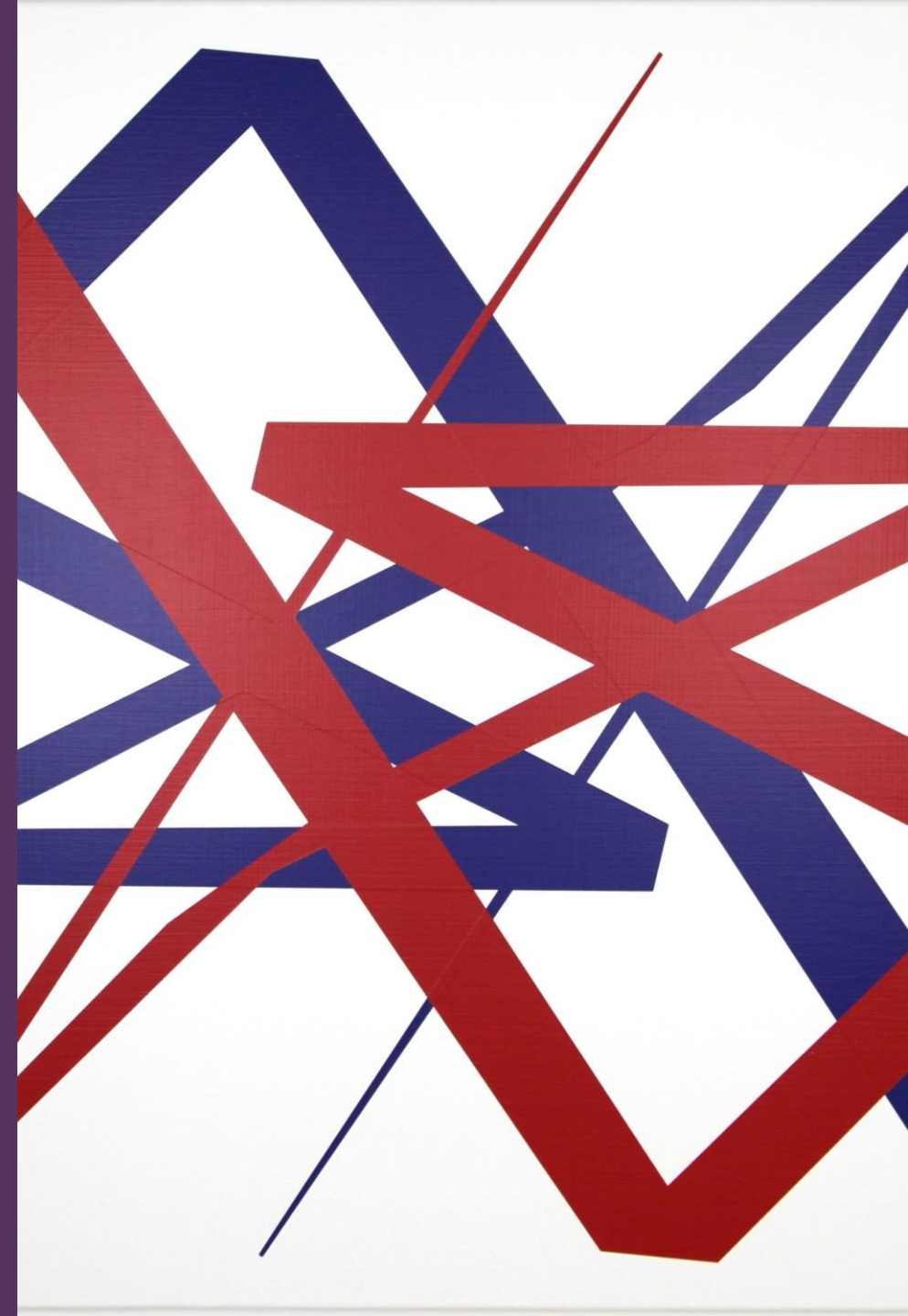


A COMMON THREAD

One of the most contested sites of modern theology is its relationship to Scripture and tradition.

Pre-modern theology, whether Catholic or Protestant, operated with a relatively stable account of scriptural authority: the Bible was the inspired Word of God, authoritative for faith and practice, and the tradition (whatever that was defined as!) was a reliable interpreter.

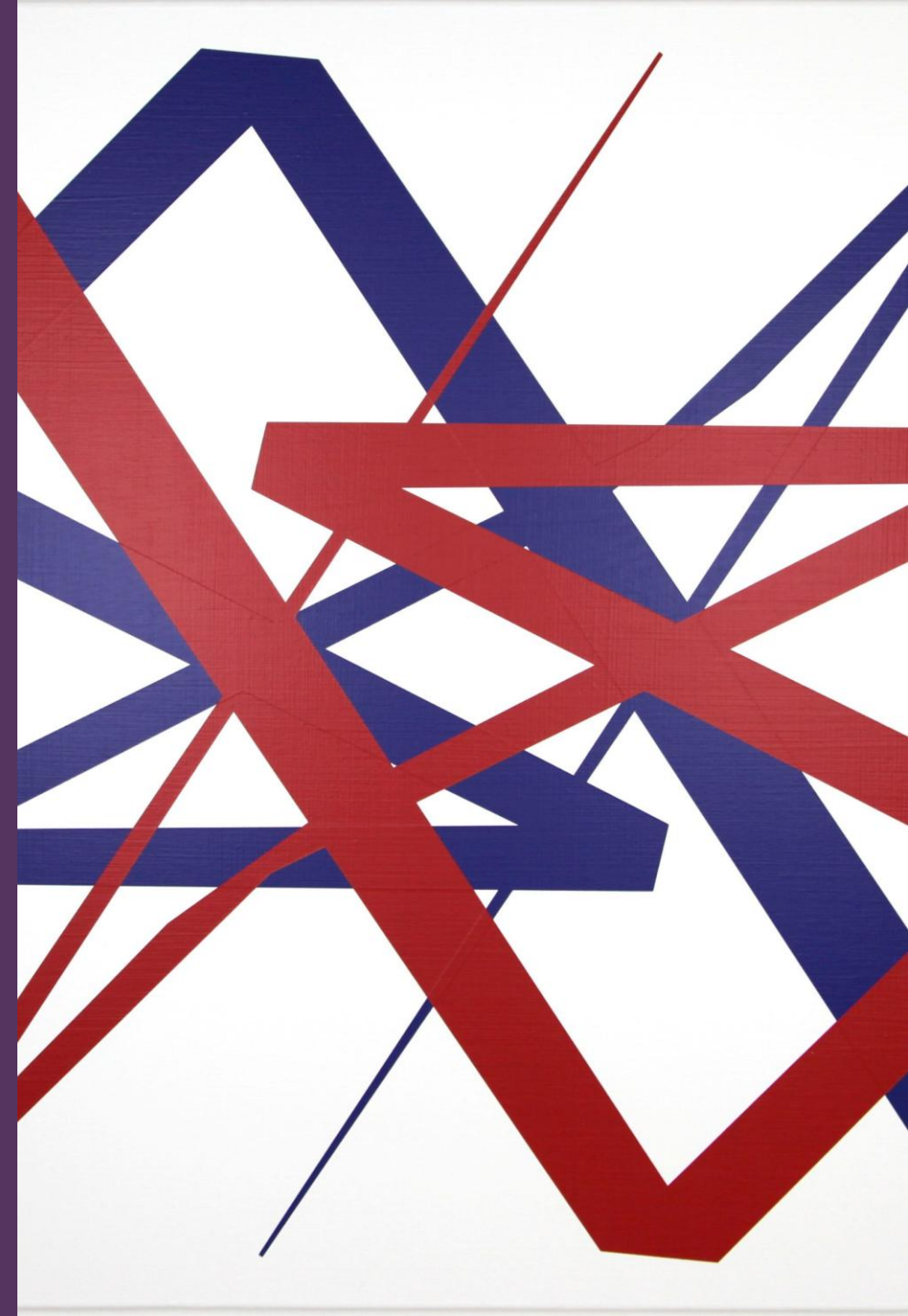
Historical criticism destabilised both elements of this account. The Bible came to be understood as a composite human document, produced over centuries, bearing the tensions, contradictions, and diverse perspectives of its many authors and editors.



A COMMON THREAD

The tradition revealed itself as a whole series of developments, driven by political contingency, cultural influence, and theological conflict rather than a static list of beliefs.

Modern theology responded to this destabilisation in a lot of different ways: by reconstructing a more limited account of scriptural authority, by emphasising the interpretive community as the locus of theological meaning, or by asserting the sovereignty of the Word of God over and against human interpretation.





WHY MODERN THEOLOGY STILL MATTERS

WHY MODERN THEOLOGY STILL MATTERS

One might ask, especially today where we like to think of ourselves as having moved beyond both modernity and theological anxieties, why modern theology still merits attention?

The answer is that the conditions which generated modern theology have not been resolved, but if anything, have intensified.

Relativism, individualism and subjectivity, the privatisation of religion, the plurality of religious and secular worldviews all remain perhaps *the* defining features of our cultural and political environment.

WHY MODERN THEOLOGY STILL MATTERS

Moreover, the figures of modern theology we are going to look at (e.g. Schleiermacher, Troeltsch, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Bultmann) are not just historical curiosities and black and white photos!

They are really good thinkers whose insights, methods, and formulations remain deeply influential resources for theological work today and for the way we conceive of the world more broadly.

To understand where theology is now, one must understand how it got there.

READINGS

Green, G “Modernity” in Jones, G (2004) *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Knight, JA “Liberal Theology in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries” in Knight, JA (2012) *Liberalism versus Postliberalism: The Great Divide in Twentieth-Century Theology*. Oxford Academic.