Introduction to Modern Theology

Four Lectures in Trinity Term 2015

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Week 1: Theology in Modernity. Challenges and Responses

- A: What is Modern Theology?
What is Modern Theology?

- Theology in a pluralistic context: no single answer or position can automatically be taken for granted.

- Theology in response to radical challenges:
  
  1) Philosophical, psychological and other critiques of religion; historical criticism.

  2) Competition from non-religious models of explaining the world as a whole (science; scientism)

  3) Radical transformation of all aspects of society (modernisation)
B. Origins of Modern Theology

- Reformation? While the 16th century was a crucible of religious ideas, the plurality it created was mostly limited as Churches remained established and politically controlled.

- The 17th century saw more radical developments in England and the Netherlands: with religious toleration came a waft of new ideas: historical criticism, critique of doctrines and the detachment of theological speculation from church authority.

- 18th century saw the Enlightenment with more fundamental queries to the Christian tradition as such.
Origins of Modern Theology II

- All the ideas characteristic of modern theology had been developing for several centuries.

- Still: Modern Theology as we consider it today is a product of the turn of the 19th century.

- Period of great upheaval: French Revolution; Industrial Revolution.

- In a word: the beginning of modernisation.

- All the big questions that are with us even today take their shape at that time: democracy and human rights; capitalism; religion
C. Problems of Modern Theology

- 1) Does God exist?
- Atheism had not previously been a respectable intellectual option.
- There is little evidence it was a practical option before modernity.
- *Theo*-logical debate thus had to engage with the question of God’s existence with new urgency.
- Can God’s existence be proved? KANT famously said no.
Problems of Modern Theology II

2) How can we retrieve truth from history?

Given the problems of historical criticism how can we trust Scripture and Church tradition to be guardians of truth?

3) Church and individual believer

Faith becomes increasingly a matter of personal decision: how does this relate to its communal dimension?

4) What is man?

5) What is religion? How is Christianity related to other religions?
D. Modern Theology: directions of travel

1) The liberal option (Schleiermacher, Tillich):

- Modernity is seen as a new paradigm to which Christianity must (and will) adapt.

- Theology has to facilitate this process:
  - By taking into account contemporary philosophical, scientific, cultural ideas.
  - By demonstrating their compatibility with traditional Christianity
  - By showing that modern critique of Christianity only concerns its husk, not its kernel.
Modern Theology: Directions of Travel

• 2) The conservative option (Barth, Milbank)

• In the face of the modern challenge theology has to articulate and defend its traditional tenets.

• By offering a critique of modernity.

• By continuing the intellectual tradition of orthodox Christianity.

• By emphasising how especially in the modern world the Church offers an attractive alternative.
E. The End of Modern Theology?

- For about thirty years people have spoken of post-modernity to indicate that ‘modernity’ has come to an end.

- Theologians therefore speak of their work as ‘post-modern’ theology.

- The idea is mostly that modernity has also been highly normative: certain ideas, such as individualisation or secularisation, have been identified with social and cultural progress.

- Modernity is also seen as Eurocentric and therefore incompatible with globalisation.
End of Modern Theology?

- The crisis of these normative assumptions, it is said, makes a return to pre-modern ideas easier: hence theology has seen a renaissance of engagement with medieval and Patristic figures.

- While it is true that the past decades have once again brought a massive cultural and social shift, it seems less clear that it signals the ‘end of modernity’.

- In Britain, e.g., secularisation seems taken to a new level. No apparent ‘return of traditional religion’.

- Other regions of the world are attracted by the ideas of Western modernity.
The end of Modern Theology?

- Most importantly, Modern Theology has never been a fixed concept but a project in response to a world which challenges fundamental Christian assumptions.

- This continues (arguably increases), as does the plurality of religious and theological viewpoints.

- Hence Modern Theology is still really modern.