

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?
- G. Jones, *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, Oxford 2004 (Introduction)
- A. McGrath, *The Development of Modern German Christology: 1750-1990*, Zondervan 1994
- K. Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, New Edition, Grand Rapids 2002

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 be 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*.