Christian theology in this century has been immensely varied. This has not just been a matter of diverse approaches and conclusions, but also of fundamental differences about what theology is, what modernity is, and what Christianity is, and which questions within these areas are to be given priority. This makes an overview difficult, all the more so because many of the theologians are still alive and producing new works, and some of the movements are still young. This introduction attempts to give, not an integrating picture, but sufficient background and general understanding of the field to help readers approaching it for the first time to find their bearings, and to assist more experienced readers to explore it further. The Epilogue gives a more forward-looking assessment of the field at the turn of the millennium.

What Sort of Subject is Modern Christian Theology?

Between the European Middle Ages and the end of the nineteenth century there were many major events and transformations of life and thought, often originating in Europe but with global consequences. Chief among these have been the Renaissance and Reformation, the colonization of the Americas, the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, the rise of nationalism, the Industrial Revolution, and the development of the natural sciences, technologies, medical science, and the human sciences. There has also been the combined impact of bureaucracies, constitutional democracy, new means of warfare and of communication, mass education and public health programs, and new movements in the arts and in philosophy and religion.

Theologians have been members of societies, churches, and academic institutions through this innovative, traumatic period, and their theology has inevitably been influenced by it. That is how, in a minimal sense, their theology is modern: by taking account of such developments, even if sometimes in order to dismiss, criticize, or try to reverse them.

Some may wish to repeat a past theology, but this is not possible. The context
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has changed, and what is actually communicated and understood today can be very far from the original meaning. Yet Christian theology always requires some continuity with the past, so the question is how there can be appropriate continuity without simple repetition.

What is the significance of modernity for the content and method of theology? What is the importance of Christianity for a proper appreciation and response to modernity? And might it be that a religion with the discontinuity of the crucifixion at its heart enables a creative way of coping with the novelty and disruption of modernity? Such questions, which are broadly in the area of interpretation or hermeneutics, are inextricable from others about the nature of Christianity and of theology. All the theologians treated in these volumes have to handle them, and it might be helpful to note some of the main strategies they use. Imagine a line punctuated by five types of theology. At one end, the first type is simply the attempt to repeat a traditional theology or version of Christianity and see all reality in its own terms, with no recognition of the significance for it of other perspectives or of all that has happened in recent centuries. At the other extreme, the fifth type gives complete priority to some modern secular philosophy or worldview, and Christianity in its own terms is only valid in so far as it fits in with that. So, for this fifth type, parts of Christian faith and practice may be found true or acceptable, but the assessment is always made according to criteria which are external to faith and which claim superiority to it. Neither of these extremes is represented among the theologians studied in this book, the first because it is hardly modern in the sense intended, the fifth because it is hardly Christian.

That leaves three types in between. Type two gives priority to the self-description of the Christian community (which is, of course, by no means uncontroversial) and might be characterized by Anselm of Canterbury’s motto, “faith seeking understanding.” It insists that Christian identity is primary and that all other reality needs to be construed in relation to it, but also that Christian identity itself needs continually to be rethought and that theology must engage seriously with the modern world in its quest for understanding. Karl Barth is a leading representative of this approach, though this type-casting by no means exhausts his theology – and the same is true of attempts to pigeonhole most of the other theologians. Robert Jenson’s essay (chapter 1) takes as its leading theme how Barth responded to Enlightenment and later thinkers by refusing their terms and developing his own framework through Jesus Christ and the Trinity. Further examples of this type are Bonhoeffer (though some would dispute this, especially as regards his latest letters and papers), Jüngel, Congar, de Lubac, Balthasar, MacKinnon, the postliberals, those called conservative postmoderns in chapter 30, and some Evangelicals and Eastern Orthodox theologians. Peter Ochs in chapter 31 produces an original analysis of how this and other types relate to Judaism and Jewish theologies. Type three comes exactly at the middle of the line. It is a theology of correlation. It brings traditional Christian faith and understanding into dialogue with modernity, and tries to correlate the two in a wide variety of ways. It does not claim any overarching integration of Christianity and modernity – neither one that would subsume modernity within Christian terms nor one that would exhaustively present Christianity in specifically modern terms. In its classic modern representative, Paul Tillich, it takes the form of the basic
questions raised in contemporary life and thought being correlated with answers developed through interpretation of key Christian symbols. In a period of fragmentation and pluralism the method of correlation is especially attractive as a way of keeping going a range of open dialogues. It is a component in most theologies and is particularly important in Schillebeeckx, Küng, and many of those in both Britain and North America who could be called revisionist. James Buckley in chapter 17 defines revisionists as those “devoted to shaping Christian practices and teachings in dialogue with... modern philosophies, cultures and social pracuces.”

The fourth type uses a particular (or sometimes more than one) modern philosophy, conceptuality, or problem as a way of integrating Christianity with an understanding of modernity. It wants to do justice to both and sees the best way of doing this to be the consistent reinterpretation of Christianity in terms of some contemporary idiom or concern. Robert Morgan (chapter 4) sees Rudolf Bultmann in these terms, using existentialism as the key to interpreting the New Testament. Morgan’s critical comments suggest that Bultmann’s position would benefit by being opened up to the approach of the third type. Other examples of this fourth type might be Pannenberg, those Buckley describes as liberals, and some leading representatives of theologies which propose issues of gender, race, political liberation, or interreligious dialogue as the decisive integrators.

Such a scheme is too neat to fit the whole of any major theology, but it helps in mapping some of the main possibilities in relation to a central and unavoidable matter, the interaction of Christianity with modernity. It also enables us to notice some theologians in whom apparently no one type is dominant. Karl Rahner, as interpreted by Joseph Di Noia (chapter 7), is irreducibly pluralist, even though many standard readings of him make him seem, in his use of a particular philosophical anthropology, to fit the fourth type. It can be immensely significant for a theologian’s reputation and reception to liberate him or her from inadequate typing, and when a particular theology seems to fit well into one type there must be a special effort to discern the ways in which the type is also transcended. Christoph Schwöbel’s description of Pannenberg in chapter 11 does this for him. It may also be that, whatever one’s own preferred type, the quality of one’s theology is still linked to the depth of engagement with those who might be categorized under other types: Hans Frei, who developed this typology, saw himself doing theology between the second and third types, while intellectually and aesthetically participating in all five.

This leads into a final observation that many of the deepest differences about important matters, and even whole ways of doing theology, cut across the above types. This applies, for example, to the role of practice or of decision in Christianity, and to some conceptions of human freedom, divine action, the shape of the church and much else. There is no substitute for engaging with issues of content, and often in the intensive grappling with key questions the rather formal and abstract concern about mapping the types is swallowed up in the adventure of a particular intellectual, spiritual, and practical journey.
Key Modern Issues

What have been the main issues in twentieth-century theology? The following five sections explore what has been characteristic of the continuing importance of the inherited agenda of doctrines, the problem of how to integrate a theology, the recovery and criticism of the past, the special significance of the nineteenth century, and the conditioning of theologies by their contexts and interests.

The systematic agenda

The traditional topics of what is variously called systematic theology, Christian doctrine, dogmatic theology, or constructive theology are: God and revelation, predestination (or election), creation and providence, human being, sin and evil, Jesus Christ, atonement (or redemption or salvation), the Holy Spirit (or grace), and Christian living (including justification, sanctification, vocation, and ethics), the church, ministry and sacraments, and eschatology. These doctrines (or dogmas or loci) can be seen as a concentration of the main events and issues in the Christian overarching story from before creation until after the (consummation) of history. They continue to be important for modern theology, and even when a theologian has a very different framework the questions raised by these doctrines will have to be answered. Among those topics, there have been some characteristic modern emphases. At least until the 1960s the distinctive contributions of twentieth-century thinkers were in the areas of God (especially the reconception of the Trinity and the relationship of suffering to God), revelation (very different approaches, represented for example by Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, Rahner, and Pannenberg), Jesus Christ and salvation in history (closely tied to the previous two issues), human being, and eschatology.

Eschatology deserves special mention. The century opened with the rediscovery by academic theology of its importance in the New Testament. Secular eschatologies (of progress, socialist revolution, empire, or race) have had immense influence in modern times, but mainstream Christianity had largely ignored the eschatological dimension of its own origins. When it was widely recognized, partly under the pressure of secular alternatives and the crisis of European culture and society manifest in the First World War, then it gave a new standpoint for thinking through Christianity. There was a great variety of eschatologies, and the unavoidability of the question has been one of the distinctive marks of twentieth-century in contrast with nineteenth-century theology.

It becomes increasingly difficult to generalize or have any adequate perspective on more recent years. Certainly any neglect of sin and evil (especially in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the Gulag, and Hiroshima) is being corrected in recent theology. As the Pentecostal movement has spread, not only in new independent churches but also through millions in the traditional denominations, the Holy Spirit has also been a major topic, though some would see this as a variation on the typically modern preoccupation with subjectivity and immediate experience. Christian living and the church have also had increasing attention, in line with emphases on praxis and community. And the earlier concern with eschatology has been somewhat overshadowed by a (not unrelated) focus on creation and ecological matters.
Integrations

How is a theologian to relate these various topics to each other? One tendency (corresponding to the second type described above) is to see Christianity having a certain coherence in itself. The doctrines together are the intellectual description of this. So Lindbeck (see chapter 18) compares doctrines to the statement of the basic grammar of rules showing how a language or culture hangs together. This makes the Christian community the main home of Christian theology (cf. Barth’s Church Dogmatics) and asserts the priority of a distinctive Christian identity, as expressed above all in the Bible. The way theology is integrated in such an approach is through something internal to the tradition, usually the Bible or one or more key doctrines. Other worldviews and disciplines are discussed and may contribute, but not as equals or superiors.

Other theologians (in the third and fourth types) see integration with modernity as more important and even as essential to a modern theology. Typical concerns are to work out a theological method comparable with other disciplines, often trying to show that theology can justify its claims to rationality and knowledge (see Pannenberg, revisionists and liberals, and many participants in the debates about theology and the natural and human sciences outlined in chapters 33 and 35), or to affirm the relevance of Christian faith by reinterpretating it in relation to a modern philosophy (existentialism, process thought) or urgent issues (oppression, gender, race, nuclear war, ecology, relations between religions).

Overall, these theologies display a tension between the identity of Christianity and its relevance to modernity. At the international and institutional levels this has in the twentieth century been dramatized most publicly in ecumenical theology, as described by Michael Root (chapter 27), and it has been built into the World Council of Churches’ twin focus on “Faith and Order” and “Life and Work.” But Christianity in the twentieth century has also added hundreds of millions to its numbers in many parts of the world, and here the tensions of identity and relevance are often extreme. Theology of mission (chapter 28) is a direct attempt to cope with these issues.

Recovering and criticizing the past

A major feature of modernity has been its concern with history. Underlying this is a heightened awareness of change and innovation. The tools that have served this are new methods of research and new criteria for historical reliability. These, together with the greatly increased scale of historical work, have had the most obvious effects on theology. The Bible and the rest of the Christian heritage have been examined afresh and traditional opinions often challenged. But this has been just one manifestation of a more comprehensive problem.

Modern historical consciousness recognizes that meaning is closely bound up with changing contexts and that today we are also conditioned by many factors as we try to understand the past. Is the whole enterprise of “true” interpretation possible? For Christian theologians it has seemed unavoidable to attempt it, and the most fundamental reason for this is that Christianity (and it is not alone in this) cannot do without the authority of the past in some form. So a great deal of attention has been
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paid to what is often called hermeneutics, the art and theory of interpretation (chapter 26). How do we cope with the "hermeneutical circle," the problem that in understanding the past we tend to draw conclusions based on our own presuppositions, interests, and involvements? Is the meaning or truth of a text such as a gospel necessarily bound up with its being historically factual? There are very broad questions about language and self in relation to reality (there has been a great deal of reflection on metaphor, narrative, objectivity, and subjectivity), and other questions about genre, the intention of the author, or the relative roles of disciplines such as philology, literary criticism, sociology, psychology, comparative religion, philosophy, and history. And often there is a divergence between those who see much of the Christian past as on the whole worth recovering, and others who see it more as something from which liberation is needed and who use a "hermeneutic of suspicion" to do so.

The themes of suspicion, doubt, and radical critique are constantly present in modern thought, raising most sharply the issues of authority and reliability. For many the very discipline of theology has disintegrated and lost its intellectual integrity in the face of all this. So most theologians discussed in these volumes are engaged in a recovery of Christianity in the face of unprecedentedly devastating, sophisticated and widely disseminated dismissals of both Christianity and theology. That, at least, is the situation in the West and in those influenced by it. But some, such as Latin American liberation theologies (chapter 21), try to redefine the concerns and context of theology so that the confrontation with doubt, agnosticism, atheism, and the intellectual world of the modern West takes second place to serving a praxis of liberation.

In addition (and sometimes, as with Marx, accompanying a fundamental strategy of suspicion) there has been the challenge from modern overviews of history as alternatives to the much-criticized traditional Christian story stretching from creation to consummation. Does Christian theology need a renewed overarching conception of history? Pannenberg and Rahner would say so, but Bultmann would see such an idea as dangerously mythological, and many others too have serious reservations.

That and all the issues mentioned thus far can be seen as aspects of a pivotal modern theological concern: the relationship of faith and history. In continental European Protestant theology this was a fundamental matter dividing Barth and Bultmann. When they were found wanting by successors such as Pannenberg and Moltmann it was again this issue that was central. It has likewise been a dominant concern in much British, North American and Evangelical theology, and many new challenges in theology also focus on it in their own ways. It is perhaps in Roman Catholic theology that the implications of modern thinking about faith and history are most sharply underlined. This is partly because it was only in the third quarter of the twentieth century that Roman Catholic theologians could use modern historical methods without official disapproval. So since the Second World War there has been a hectic period of assimilation, reinterpretation, and controversy. It is symbolized in Schillebeeckx's journey from a tradition in which philosophy, not history, was the main partner of doctrine, through ressources and hermeneutics to a massive and controversial treatment of the main topic in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century debate about faith and history: Jesus Christ.
The nineteenth century: creativity and crisis

In the recovery and criticism of the past a theologian frequently gives a special place to particular periods or contributions. It is often more true to say that a theologian seems gripped in this way, and is immersed in texts and debates which have an authority that permeates his or her theology. The Bible is most widely treated in this way, and the patristic period is likewise usually privileged. The other two main reference points before the modern period are medieval theology and the Reformation. Periods, traditions, and theologies interanimate each other in subtle ways, and it is often crude to draw clear lines of influence. Yet it remains important to understand with whom a theologian finds dialogue most worthwhile.

One period, however, stands out as the most helpful in understanding what it means for twentieth-century theology to be specifically modern: the nineteenth century. That was the century in which the issues of modernity were tackled comprehensively for the first time, and most of the main Christian responses to them explored. So it is not surprising that the main dialogue partners for twentieth-century theologians outside their own period tend to be either nineteenth-century figures or movements of thought which were shaped then. Even though their theologies are, of course, deeply indebted to other periods as well, in their understanding of them the philosophical and historical habits of nineteenth-century thought are usually very influential. Barth, for example, who wanted to break with much of what he saw as characteristic of nineteenth-century theology, was steeped in it and has to be understood in relationship to it. The cost of ignoring the nineteenth century is often paid in energetically repeating the exploration of options which were developed and thoroughly discussed then, and most twentieth-century theologians know this.

It is therefore worth surveying the nineteenth century in its importance for this volume. The brevity of this can best be expanded through two capable treatments of this field, one by Claude Welch and the other edited by Ninian Smart and others. There were three thrusts in nineteenth-century thought which especially need to be appreciated in relation to twentieth-century theologians. The first was the rethinking of knowledge and rationality, and the accompanying need to reconceive theology. This will be treated below through Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel. The second was the development of a new historical consciousness joined with the application of critical historical methods to religion. This will be traced through Hegel and Strauss. The third was the challenge of alternative explanations of religion, as seen in Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim, and others. In the middle comes the awkward figure of Kierkegaard, and at the end the summing up of all the issues in Troeltsch.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) died just inside the nineteenth century and is the crucial figure linking it to the eighteenth century, especially its rationalist tradition. He offered an account of knowledge, and especially of the human knower in interaction with the object of knowledge, according to which claims to knowledge by both “natural theology” and “revelation” were disallowed. In place of his denial of knowledge he affirmed a faith which was practical and moral rather than theoretical, and which was not especially religious. The central notion is that of freedom. Its
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reality cannot be either proved or disproved by “pure reason,” but it is reasonable to postulate it in order to make sense of human action and morality. This is the realm of “practical reason,” through which Kant argues for the rationality not only of freedom but also of God and immortality. His own major theological work, Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, is a thorough “moralization” of religion, and in its pruning of Christianity to fit his philosophy is a good example of the fifth type of theology described above. Yet he is decisively theistic, with an austere conception of God as the “unconditioned” or “absolute,” whose reality is beyond all knowledge or experience but is mediated through our sense of moral obligation. We see in Kant the most influential statement of the modern tendency to distinguish fact (pure reason) from value (practical reason) and to categorize religion and morality together under the latter. We see also the emphasis, typical of so many modern theologies, on the practical or ethical content of Christianity, especially the centrality of freedom. Sometimes this is developed focusing on personal freedom and intersubjectivity as in existentialism’s concern for encounter and decision. In others, such as Moltmann and liberation theologies, the practicality takes a social and political form and is more affected by post-Kantian ideas of history and society.

It is worth reflecting on why Kant’s stress on the ethical, practical, and intersubjective in religion continued to be attractive. Partly it is because Kant shared common roots with many theologians in a Lutheran faith constituted by a dynamic interactive relationship between the believer and God. For those who came later it also represented an appealing response to the most dangerous threats which modernity posed, not only to theology but also to the whole realm of value, ethics, and the personal. These were the challenges of naturalistic and other “reductionist” explanations of religion, morality, and humanity which by the end of the century had been built up to massive proportions by such figures as Strauss (critical history), Feuerbach (philosophy), Marx (politics and economics), Durkheim and Weber (sociology), Frazer (comparative religion), William James (psychology), Darwin (evolutionary biology), and Nietzsche (philosophy). These have decisively shaped the “common sense” of many twentieth-century educated Western people about religion, and in the face of them the claim of Kant that the realm of freedom and practicality could not be reduced to any “objective” explanation offered theologians something which was both widely appealing beyond Christianity and a medium through which to express Christianity.

Kant’s ethical interpretation was challenged by two major alternative ways of conceiving Christianity and theology in the early nineteenth century, those of Hegel and Schleiermacher. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) is usually regarded as the outstanding theologian of the century. At the root of his achievement was a reconception of religion. For him it is primarily neither morality nor belief (knowledge) but is an immediate self-consciousness or feeling of absolute dependence on God. So the roots of faith are pre-moral and pre-cognitive, and this religious consciousness is common to all people, though very variously recognized and expressed. While in Kant God (the absolute or unconditioned) is present through our sense of moral obligation, in Schleiermacher God is present in an immediate dynamic relationship that grasps our whole being. Christianity is the specific form of this
God-consciousness shaped through Jesus Christ and the community of faith in him. This was a view of religion which had an integrity of its own in the subjective realm of feeling or consciousness, but which yet could be reflected upon and discussed intellectually in theology and could inform the whole of practical living. It offered an idiom through which all of Christian doctrine could be expressed afresh. *The Christian Faith* is his culminating work, offering a method of theology which relates it to other disciplines and working out the content of faith with central reference to Jesus Christ and the experience of those with faith in him.

Schleiermacher’s influence has been immense (see Jenson’s essay on Barth, chapter 1). Besides his powerful account of religion’s validity rooted in the dynamics of awareness of God, he pioneered modern hermeneutics; he maintained the importance of aesthetics in theology; he offered a “noninterventionist” account of God’s relation to the world, which included a critique of religious language; he suggested a restructuring of the whole theological enterprise which was, due to his advocacy, partly embodied in the new University of Berlin; and in his public ecclesiastical, cultural, and political life he represented a lively and effective integration of modernity and Christian faith. All this was seen by him as in continuity with the Protestant Reformation and its evangelical tradition.

The post-First World War twentieth century began with a reaction against him led by Barth, who yet always acknowledged his greatness. Schleiermacher is the grandfather of those who attempt to correlate or integrate faith with modernity, and particularly of those who see the point of contact in human interiority – Tillich’s “ultimate concern.” He is the principal creative sponsor of the whole revisionist and liberal enterprise, but he himself constantly eludes simple categories: in those used above he seems, according to interpretation, to oscillate between the third and fourth types.

The second major early nineteenth-century challenge to Kant came from G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). He criticized both Kant and Schleiermacher for having an inadequate notion of rationality. Both of them had left the concept of God (the absolute, or unconditioned) relatively untouched. Hegel developed a system in which the absolute was conceived as rational and dynamic, realizing itself through a dialectical process in history. He saw the Trinity as the supreme reality, in which God differentiates himself and becomes actual in Jesus Christ and enters into suffering and death on the way to the ultimate reconciliation of all in the Spirit. The system thus had a dialectical logic embracing history with its developments and conflicts, and Hegel surveyed all of history, including the religions, in order to show the basic forms of life, society, and religion in their evolution. He also saw himself as a Christian, Lutheran philosopher; recovering the truth of the basic doctrines of Trinity, creation, fall, incarnation, reconciliation, and the Holy Spirit. For him Christianity was religion in its absolute expression, but, while its content could not be surpassed, philosophy could give a more adequate conceptual expression of it as truth, uniting it with all other truth.

The nineteenth-century shift toward more historical, process-oriented ways of understanding reality was profoundly affected by Hegel. Kant had separated the self from other reality: Hegel offered a comprehensive, historical integration of subjectivity and objectivity in which reason and even logic took on dynamic form, and
Kant's restriction of theoretical reason in knowing God was overcome. Hegel daringly reconceived the idea of God and his involvement with the world (sometimes described as a type of "panentheism"); he placed the issue of truth, not religion, at the top of the agenda; and he encouraged rational and historical reconsideration of key doctrines.

The twentieth-century theologians who have wrestled most thoroughly with Hegel have often emerged deeply ambiguous about him as a Christian thinker – this is true in various ways of Barth, Jüngel, Rahner, Pannenberg, Balthasar, and Küng. One reason may be that, in so far as he can be related to our types, he, like Schleiermacher, oscillates according to the interpretation. But with him it is between the fourth and fifth types: some see him offering an appropriate modern conception of Christianity, others as absorbing it into his system on his own alien terms. But both by setting an agenda and in his contribution on specific issues (a way of conceiving the integration of history in the Trinity in Barth, Rahner, Pannenberg, and Moltmann; the death of God in Jüngel and Moltmann; Rahner's way of affirming reality as rational; Pannenberg's concepts of rationality and universal history; Küng's approach to incarnation) he is still shaping theological debate.

In addition, the reactions provoked by Hegel resonate through the rest of the nineteenth century and into our own. One of the most passionate, that of the Dane Søren Kierkegaard (1813–58), went virtually unnoticed in his own time, but exploded in early twentieth-century existentialism and especially influenced Barth, Bultmann and Tillich. Kierkegaard rejected Hegel's rational integration, accusing him especially of failing to take account of the existing, deciding individual, and he put forward a radical concept of Christian subjectivity which was not dependent on rational or historical justification. We live life forwards, with no neutral or overarching standpoints. We are faced with decisions and have to choose without any guarantees that we are right. We are constituted by such decisions and through them become different in ourselves. All ethical and religious existence is participated in in such self-involving and self-transforming ways. The gospel faces us with the most radical decision of all, which probes us to the depths and challenges us to go the paradoxical way of the cross. In this Kierkegaard is expanding the practical side of Kant and giving it more full-blooded Christian content. He denies both Kant's and Hegel's versions of how reason relates to faith and sees instead the paradoxical reality of incarnation and cross eliciting the leap of radical faith.

More typical of the nineteenth century was the development of Hegel's stress on history, but rejecting his tendency to give ideas and concepts primacy over empirical research. David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74) was the most controversial figure in this. He applied historical critical methods to the accounts of the life of Jesus, found a great deal that he called "mythical" (that is, religious ideas given in the form of historical accounts) and decided that there was little reliable factual information about Jesus.

The issue of the historical Jesus in relation to the Christ of faith was now firmly on the theological agenda. The rest of the nineteenth century saw many other developments in historical study which are part of the essential background to the twentieth century, especially in the fields of history of dogma and (more widely) historical theology (outstanding figures being Ferdinand Christian Baur and Adolf
von Harnack), but the controversial center of the field remained the figure of Jesus, a focus which has been a legacy to many theologians treated in this volume. British scholarship (especially after the volume Essays and Reviews in 1860) also increasingly joined in the research and discussion, beginning the tradition described by Stephen Sykes in chapter 13.

The middle third of the nineteenth century saw many attempts to rethink and restore orthodox Christianity in Germany, Britain, the United States and elsewhere, and many of these have continued to be influential, generally within particular churches or traditions (for example, biblical fundamentalism, Anglo-Catholicism, various types of confessionalism). It was also the time when new critiques of religion, such as those proposed by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), began to be developed. They multiplied as the century went on, as religion was scrutinized through the disciplines of history, literature, philosophy, geology, biology, physics, psychology, sociology, politics, economics, and comparative religion. These, as mentioned above, were to help cause a major intellectual and cultural crisis in Western Christianity in the twentieth century, but they have also been engaged in a variety of ways by theologians, and the critical dialogues with them are a major theme running through theologies in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries — for example, Bonhoeffer with sociology, Tillich with socialism, depth psychology, and much else; Balthasar with aesthetics and drama; Pannenberg, Moltmann, Küng, and Tracy with almost every area; Teilhard de Chardin and process thought with evolutionary biology; Moltmann and liberation theologies with Marxism; Torrance and others with physics; postmodern theology with Nietzsche; and theology of religions with comparative religion.

Finally, overlapping the two centuries is Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), who in many ways summed up the nineteenth century and is the indispensable background for the twentieth. He saw the Enlightenment, not the Reformation, as the genesis of modernity, and the main nineteenth-century development as that of a comprehensive historical consciousness. So, while constantly in dialogue with the theology of Schleiermacher and the philosophies of Kant and Hegel, he saw them all as needing to be criticized through a more thoroughly historical method. He was immersed in the nineteenth-century history of religions and sociology, and wrestled with the enduring problems raised by them, such as the absoluteness of Christianity, the role of the historical Jesus in Christian faith, and the inseparability of all religion from its social and historical context. He arrived at a complex critical and constructive position: resisting naturalistic, reductionist explanations of religion; emphasizing Christianity's distinctive values worked out through the centuries in interaction with different situations, and calling for a fresh, creative social embodiment of those values in twentieth-century Europe; and stressing the ambiguities of both Christianity and modernity. After the First World War, the dialectical theologians, especially Barth, tended to see Troeltsch's main achievement as negative, showing the cul-de-sac arrived at when theology tries to move from human experience, history, and religion to God. But Troeltsch has also been continually influential, as in Bultmann's historical critical approach to the Bible, the later Tillich's method in dealing with historical patterns and the world religions, Pannenberg's conception of a theology that is consistently and critically historical, North American attempts to work out a
practical and sociologically aware theology in a pluralist society, the widespread move to take local contexts more fully into account in doing theology, and the discussion in theology of religions about the uniqueness of Christianity.

The above account of the nineteenth century as it has affected twentieth-century theologians has been largely centered on Germany and oriented more toward the theologians discussed in Part I and toward others who have been in dialogue with them and their forebears. This is because that German tradition, while having many limitations, is the most sustained and intensive example of engagement in the enterprise of modern theology, as already defined, and is the most direct way of introducing historically the typical problems of modernity, such as knowledge and rationality, historical consciousness, and alternative explanations of religion. Other parts of this volume portray traditions which often approach theology very differently and in some cases are in critical confrontation with the methods and habits of the German academy.

Contexts and interests

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical and sociological insights urge theologians to take fuller account of the situation in which theology is done and for whom and by whom it is done. The history of ideas is not enough. Theology needs to be seen in relation to many forces and events helping to shape it through the centuries. The twentieth century has added its own conditioning, such as the Holocaust and concentration camps; the unprecedented scale of mass killing of fellow human beings in wars; the Russian, Chinese, and Iranian revolutions; the emergence of new, postcolonial societies; the collapse of Soviet and European Communism; the spread of mass communications, business corporations, technology, and science of many sorts; an unprecedented dialectic of the local and the global, especially in economics and culture; struggles against Fascism, racism, and sexism; the ecological crisis; and a vast expansion of professions and academic disciplines and institutions. More specific to religion have been the Pentecostal movement, Christian and interreligious ecumenism, the World Council of Churches, the Second Vatican Council, the spread of Islam and Christianity (especially in Africa), many armed conflicts with significant religious elements, an immense amount of religious persecution and martyrdom, new religious movements outside the main world religions, the multiplication of “basic communities,” liturgical reforms in Christian churches, and new translations of the Bible. Most of these feature in the theologies of this volume, though many are only implicit, or are ignored by theologians in ways that call for more explicit recognition.

More narrowly, there is the significance of the social and institutional context in which theology is produced. All of the nineteenth-century theologies mentioned above and most of the theologies in this volume, as well as the essays on them, were written in universities or, to a lesser extent, seminaries. They are therefore at home in an academic, largely middle-class “high culture,” which, in its main centers in continental Europe, Britain, and the United States, has been remarkably stable through a century of traumas. One of the main tensions in Christian theology has
been between its participation in this wider academic culture and its relationship to the Christian community. That has been sharpened by the growing professionalization of the clergy. In German-speaking countries academic theology and clergy education has long been integrated in state-financed universities, so that theology has been drawn both toward being an academic discipline on a par with others and toward serving the needs of a profession. These two easily conflict, and the results for theology are symbolized in the debate about the Jesus of history (academic emphasis) and the Christ of faith (clerical requirement).  

In Britain similar tensions developed, and, as Sykes describes in chapter 13, there was an attempt to separate institutionally the more "academic" from the more contentiously "ecclesiastical" subjects. In the United States the separation of church and state tied theology more exclusively to seminaries and divinity schools and therefore to the clerical profession. This has tended to polarize "theology" and "religious studies," often in different institutions. It has also contributed to the present situation in which religion is widely practiced and influential but theology tends to be seen as a specialized professional discipline and is marginal within both academic and wider culture.

The marginalization of theology has also happened in varying degrees in Britain, Germany, and elsewhere. It poses a problem for most of the traditions of theology dealt with in this volume: given the largely academic setting together with the academic marginalization of theology, what sort of academic discipline is it? The main temptation within academic life is clearly to become increasingly specialized and allied with other specialized disciplines. That is just the temptation to which the sort of theology covered in this volume cannot completely succumb, because it is about major issues and their interrelation, and inevitably crosses disciplines. But if theology does not fragment into specialties or become absorbed into other disciplines, how does it understand itself? Other related hard questions follow. What is theology's relation to religious communities and their need not only for professional training but also for critical and constructive thinking? How should it handle its own "ideological" tendency to serve the interests of a particular group, culture, class, religion, or profession? Does theology abandon or compromise or fulfill its academic commitments by fuller involvement in practical social and political matters, whether radical, moderate, or conservative?

Another way of looking at such questions is to ask how theology relates to its three main "publics": the academy, the churches, and society. Most of the theologians who are the subjects of this volume are members of all three but concentrate mainly on addressing two of them, usually the academy and church. Yet many (especially among the new additions since the first edition) question this in favor of more attention to addressing and changing society. But such an overview needs to be made more complex by noting major contemporary features of each public. The academy has become more pluralist and self-critical and, at the same time (especially in the West), more subject to pressures to serve the economy in short-term and direct ways. The pluralism of methods appropriate to different disciplines and the increasing awareness by other disciplines of their own often ideological character have somewhat undermined the self-confident positivism and secularism that contributed to theology being marginalized; while economic and political pressures have
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As for the public in the mainstream churches, there has been more corporate social and political controversy and involvement this century, especially in liberal and radical causes – two major instances are the World Council of Churches and post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism. In this context it has become harder for a “church” theologian to cover the major areas of Christian thought without grappling with social and political issues. For the “public,” that is society around the world, matters of religion or quasi-religion have been (often tragically) prominent this century, so that it has become less easy with integrity to privatize or cordon off religion and reduce its public significance. It has likewise become in some ways easier to make the case for the need for high quality public discourse within religions as well as about them.

The theologians treated in The Modern Theologians try to provide such discourse. They have worked at the leading edge of this century’s Christianity and contributed to the making of its history. They are of interest both as a “religious study” of twentieth-century Christian thought and also as examples and partners for those who follow them in their discipline. The coverage is not complete, but even including the omissions mentioned in the Preface it is worth remembering that the field of such theology is even wider. A great deal of theology is done by those who write little or who may not write it down at all. A lifetime’s theological wisdom may be channelled into teaching or other activity, or may issue in one powerful book. That sort of theology cannot be treated directly here, but it helps to keep the whole enterprise in perspective to remember that at the origins of the two traditions most influential on the theologies of these volumes are Socrates and Jesus, neither of whom left us any writings.

Notes

1 The typology that follows is drawn from the work of Hans W. Frei. In the first edition of The Modern Theologians I referred to his Edward Cadbury Lectures, in which he had partly developed it. A version of those lectures, together with other related material, has now been published posthumously in Hans W. Frei, Types of Christian Theology, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven and London, 1992). In the first edition the types are numbered in reverse order to that in Types of Christian Theology, and for the sake of consistency I have here kept my first edition’s order. For a brief account and discussion of Frei’s typology, see my review article, “On Being Theologically Hospitable to Jesus Christ: Hans Frei’s Achievement,” in Journal of Theological Studies, NS 46 (October 1995), pp. 532–46.


5 Cf. Hans W. Frei, Types of Christian Theology.


7 See Preface above, p. x.
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