

MODERN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY (CHAPTERS 1-9)

JAMES C. LIVINGSTON WITH FRANCIS SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA

Introduction

This essay will summarize the first nine chapters of the second volume of James Livingston's *Modern Christian Thought*, which deals with the twentieth century. Because of the wide variety of important theologians, philosophers, schools and movements in twentieth century theology, Livingston enlisted the help of some other specialists in the preparation of this volume: Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Sarah Coakley, and James H. Evans, Jr. Each of these scholars is important in his or her own right, but since the first nine chapters are authored solely by Livingston and Fiorenza we need only make a few brief comments about the latter.

Francis Schüssler Fiorenza is the Charles Chauncey Stillman professor of Roman Catholic Theological Studies at the Harvard Divinity School where he has taught since 1986.¹ The husband of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a major feminist theologian who is later discussed in this volume, professor Fiorenza's research and writing interests include nineteenth and twentieth century theology (both Protestant and Roman Catholic), fundamental theology, hermeneutics, and political theology. A prolific scholar, he has authored and edited several books, and has written more than 150 essays in his areas of scholarly expertise. In the present volume, he contributed chapters 7-9 and 11. These chapters deal, respectively, with contemporary Roman Catholic theology (chapters 7-8), political and liberation theologies (chapter 9), and history and hermeneutics (chapter 11). The first six chapters, as well as others in the second half of this volume, were written by James Livingston.

In the *preface* to this text, after briefly discussing how the book is organized and why, Livingston once again reiterates that the authors of this volume "see the Enlightenment and

¹ Harvard Divinity School, "Meet the Faculty: Francis Schüssler Fiorenza," <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/faculty/fiorenza.cfm> (accessed September 7, 2010).

modernity as a watershed in Christian history that has continued to have a profound influence in the twentieth century.²² Of course, it only makes sense that contemporary scholars would be particularly indebted to those who came immediately before them. In particular, Livingston mentions how the nineteenth century gave birth to “our modern historical consciousness” (xv). He observes how this was particularly important in spawning a whole new series of questions and concerns regarding the authority of Scripture, the development of dogma, and the historical figure of Jesus—issues which were of paramount importance for twentieth century theological scholarship (xv).

Although these issues continue to engage the thought and attention of scholars in the twenty-first century, Livingston is also sensitive to the postmodern shift, which began in the latter half of the twentieth. Postmodernism has been engaged in a serious and sustained critique of the thought and values of the Enlightenment and modernism. This has resulted in new emphases and concerns with issues in epistemology, religious pluralism, and multiculturalism—just to name a few (xv). All of these issues are important, but most of them will be specifically treated in the second half of this volume, and our concern is with the first.

Chapter 1: The Legacy of Modernity and the New Challenges of Historical Theology

Before launching into the story of twentieth century theology, Livingston pauses to remind us of what contemporary Christianity has “inherited from the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century” (2). Although he mentions several things (e.g. the rise of historical consciousness, the recognition of doctrinal development over time, etc.), the chief issue would seem to be the one with which he begins: the issue of authority. Immanuel Kant famously called upon people to have the courage to think for themselves. In the wake of his enormous influence, many Enlightenment scholars rejected “such heteronomous authorities as the Bible and the

² James C. Livingston et al., *Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), xv. *Please note: all future citations of this text will occur in parentheses in the body of the essay.*

Church,” and instead chose to put their faith in their own autonomous reason or religious experience (2). According to Livingston, “the entire nineteenth century can be viewed as an effort to resolve” this increasingly “problematic issue” (2).

As the nineteenth century drew to a close and the twentieth began to dawn, the growth of knowledge in fields such as archaeology, linguistics, sociology, and anthropology was accompanied by (and to some degree provided the impetus for) the study of “comparative religions” (11). One of the outgrowths of this newfound interest was the History of Religions school, a group of scholars who rejected the historical origins which Christianity claimed for itself, and viewed it instead as a “syncretistic religion” that had mixed ingredients from a variety of ancient religions and philosophies to create something new (14). According to Livingston, the school’s “most brilliant theoretician and theologian” was Ernst Troeltsch (14).

Troeltsch was an incredibly productive scholar whose written work addresses issues in philosophy, theology, history, sociology, and even politics (18-19). Unfortunately, however, Troeltsch seems to have been one of those scholars who was “always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth” (2 Tim 3:7 NIV). Critical and dismissive of the early church’s efforts to formulate a coherent and consistent doctrine of the two natures of Christ, Troeltsch seems to have found the notion of the deity of Christ incredible “in an age dominated by a historical way of thinking” (29). Although one can certainly find statements in which he describes Jesus as *in some sense* a revelation of God, it seems to me that Karl Barth was essentially correct in characterizing Troeltsch’s “historicism and doctrinal relativism” as a ““dead-end street”” (29).

Chapter 2: American Empirical and Naturalistic Theology

In this chapter Livingston surveys the thought of three American scholars whose “emphasis on experience” gave American theology “a distinctive empirical stamp and style” (34). The three scholars surveyed are William James, Douglas Clyde Macintosh, and Henry Nelson Wieman.

William James is probably best known as one of the founders of the American philosophy of pragmatism, but he was also extremely interested in both psychology and religion (34). In 1897 he published a rather controversial work entitled, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (35). In it, he takes issue with those (like W.K. Clifford) who argue that we should never believe anything without sufficient evidence (37). In James' estimation, this is wrong-headed, for there may in fact be cases in which we can *never* have sufficient evidence *unless we first believe* (38). For example, unless a scientist first *believes* in some theoretical entity, he may never take the time to try to experimentally verify its existence. James thinks this same principle may also apply in the religious arena; that is, one may first have to *believe* that God exists before one can verify this fact in one's *experience* (38). This is just one of the ways in which James' pragmatism influenced his thinking about religious matters.

According to Livingston, the religious views of D.C. Macintosh were strongly influenced by both his early "evangelical" upbringing and the thought of William James (42). His theology, which was intended to be strictly empirical and scientific, began by positing the existence of God "on the basis of religious experience" (43). But Macintosh did not think that this experiential knowledge of God should be "tied to the contingencies of a particular historical revelation" (46). Hence, when it came to the person of Christ, Macintosh believed that "Christianity" could still be true even if Jesus had never lived—and his view of Christ was essentially that of theological liberalism (46-7). In Livingston's estimation, Macintosh was basically reasoning in a circle, attempting "to prove experimentally" what had already been determined by his prior commitment to liberal Christianity (47).

H. N. Wieman was not really a *Christian* theologian at all, but something more akin to a religious philosopher. He conceived of God as "the creative event"—an impersonal, completely naturalistic "*process of events and their qualities*" (52). He rejected the deity of Christ and viewed Christian theology as positively harmful (51, 55). Although Livingston thinks that Wieman's "radical reconception" of Christianity "should be explored more carefully," it's difficult to imagine why anyone would be interested (57).

Chapter 3: The Dialectical Theology:

Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Friedrich Gogarten

The Dialectical theology of Barth, Brunner, and Gogarten had its origins in the early 1920's (63). One of the most important events to initially bring publicity to this new theology was the publication of the second edition of Barth's *Der Römerbrief* in 1922 (65). Battle lines were drawn and it soon became apparent that one of the major issues separating the new Dialectical theology from its older, more established, liberal counterpart was "the question of historical consciousness" (67). Liberal theologians (like Harnack) had great confidence in the historical-critical method and saw it as the only realistic way of gaining genuine knowledge about the persons and events recorded in Scripture (67, 70). Although the Dialectical theologians (like Barth) were not really opposed to biblical criticism, they also did not share the same degree of confidence that such a method could really lead one to "the truth of the Gospel" (70).

As it's developed in the theology of Barth, the dialectical method recognizes that "Christian theology is grounded in revelation . . . the union of the two worlds of eternity and time" (71). For this reason, it can only be spoken of "paradoxically" (71). One might, at one moment, affirm "the glory of God in creation." But in the very next breath, he must also emphasize how God conceals Himself from us in creation (72). Barth rejected the view of Liberal theology that God can be known "immediately." Instead, he conceived of God as "Wholly Other" (72-3). The only way in which God can be known is through a divine gift of faith in the revelation of Jesus Christ (72-3).

Within about a decade of its birth, infighting among those who had aligned themselves with the new theology caused the movement to unravel. Barth, and his good friend Thurneysen, began to look askance at the work of other members, like Bultmann and Gogarten. According to Livingston, "The crux of their growing conflict focused on the issues of revelation and history and especially on the place of anthropology in theology" (75). In spite of its brief lifespan, however, Dialectical theology served as "the creative incubator of several distinctive theological programs" (76).

Chapter 4: The Theologies of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Barth moved beyond the Dialectical theology, which he judged to be too infected with the categories and presuppositions of Existentialist philosophy, and began groping his way toward a theology that would be free of such philosophical impositions (97). Although he recognized the impossibility of reading the Bible without any presuppositions, he learned from Anselm to read it “Christianly,” in accordance with the faith of the Church (98, 105). This resulted in the production of Barth’s massive *Church Dogmatics*, which largely occupied the last thirty years of his life.

The central key to the whole of Barth’s theology is the person of Jesus Christ. According to Livingston, “Not only the doctrine of God, but the doctrines of creation, election, anthropology, and reconciliation all are now understood christologically . . . In Christ humanity is taken up into the very Godhead itself” (107).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 to a prominent German family. As Livingston observes, his entire adult life was “largely shaped by the rise of National Socialism and Nazism in Germany from 1930 until his death” (111). When Hitler became chancellor in 1933, Bonhoeffer, with Karl Barth and others, joined the Confessing Church (112). Between 1935 and 1937 he led the Confessing Church’s seminary in Finkenwalde, until it was shut down by the Gestapo (112-13). Shortly thereafter, he published what is possibly his most famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship* (113).

Barred from his academic post at the University of Berlin, Bonhoeffer devoted himself to ecumenical work, and also became involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler (113). In 1943 he was arrested by the Gestapo and he was executed on April 10, 1945 (113). While in prison he continued to write and these writings were later published as his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In this book, he reflects upon the fact that the Church “must not under-estimate the importance of human example. . . . It is not abstract argument, but example, that gives its word emphasis and power” (128). And it is largely because of Bonhoeffer’s courageous witness and example that he has gained such a wide readership today.

Chapter 5: Christian Existentialism

In this chapter Livingston examines how Existentialist philosophy influenced the theologies of Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann. Tillich famously described the object of theology as that which is of “ultimate concern for us” (142). But recognizing man’s penchant for idolatry, he further clarified this concept by writing, “Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being” (142).

So how, in Tillich’s opinion, are we to go about “doing” theology? We must recognize and apply the “method of correlation.” This involves, first, a careful analysis of man’s existential situation, his being-in-the-world. Such an analysis raises the truly important questions of life, questions about our being and not-being. In turn, the answers are provided by the “Christian message the revelatory events on which Christianity is based” (143). But as some theologians have observed, this “method” can create some real difficulties, “because the theological ‘answers’ that such theologies offer are substantively shaped by the ‘questions’ posed by the secular culture itself” (153).

Bultmann is primarily known for his project of “demythologizing the New Testament” (157-61). In his estimation, the primary difficulty which prevents modern man from appreciating the wisdom of the Bible is the fact that its message comes to us encased in a supernaturalistic, mythological worldview, which just seems incredible (157). Bultmann’s solution is to *interpret* the Bible’s mythology in order to grasp its essential (and non-mythological) message (157). The most appropriate vehicle for accomplishing this interpretative task is Existentialist philosophy, particularly as it finds expression in the work of Martin Heidegger.

Although Bultmann was criticized for imposing an alien philosophy on the content of the Bible, thus forcing its message into a Heideggerian mold, he maintained that such criticism was wide of the mark. In his view, by making my existence “my own personal responsibility,” Existentialist philosophy actually serves the useful purpose of making me more “open to the word of the Bible” (159).

Chapter 6: Christian Realism: A Post-Liberal American Theology

The brothers H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr were major contributors to a new movement in American theology called “Christian Realism.” This movement began in the early 1930s with the publication of two important books: 1) *Religious Realism*, a volume edited by D. C. Macintosh to which H. R. Niebuhr contributed an essay, and 2) Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1953). Although indebted in certain respects to theological liberalism and Neo-Orthodoxy, the movement sought to chart a course all its own “on a more *realistic* basis” (1953). In their view, the older liberalism had erred in its “optimistic doctrine of human nature and its naïve vision of the amelioration of evil” (1954). It was this *unrealistic* doctrine of human nature and human history that the Christian Realists were concerned to correct (1954-55).

H. Richard Niebuhr’s break with the older theological liberalism became clear with the publication of his book, *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937). It was there that he rendered his now famous verdict on the Social Gospel: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross” (1954). In Niebuhr’s view, such a theology would not do. It was absolutely necessary to recognize the reality of human sin against the one true God. Niebuhr conceived of sin in terms of *disloyalty*—“that is, the human failure to worship the true God, while giving one’s ultimate loyalty to something other than God” (1954). Like Luther, Niebuhr recognized that everyone has faith in something, and whatever our object of faith, that is our god. However, since faith can only be liberating when it is placed “in that reality which is the absolute and eternal ground of being,” Niebuhr was concerned to point people to just this reality (1956). According to Livingstone, we can see Niebuhr’s influence today in the thought of men like Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Stanley Hauerwas (1956).

Reinhold Niebuhr was educated at Yale, but dropped out of his Master’s program to pursue pastoral ministry at a small church in Detroit (1956). This experience profoundly affected him and he became extremely concerned with issues of social justice (1956). In 1928 he joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary, remaining there until his retirement in 1960 (1956). His

writings show him to be concerned with “demonstrating the relevance of biblical faith for understanding the hard realities of our human nature and history” (176). According to Livingston, his analysis “of human temptation and sin” is widely regarded as both profound and compelling (179). His writings on love, justice, and power are equally thought-provoking (186-91). Although there have been plenty of critics of Niebuhr, from all over the theological map, Livingston commends his prophetic ability “to confront the most complex social, political, and cultural problems of the mid-twentieth century with the wisdom of historical Christianity as no other Christian writer had done” (191).

Chapter 7: The New Theology and Transcendental Thomism

In 1879 Pope Leo XIII, in the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, commended the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas as the official philosophy of the Roman Catholic Church (197). This, along with other official pressures, led to the dominance of what is termed Neo-Scholasticism within late nineteenth and early twentieth century Roman Catholicism (197-98). Not everyone was pleased with this development, however. And from within the movement itself, certain scholars arose to challenge the reigning paradigm. Pierre Rousselot and Joseph Maréchal began this process by emphasizing the Augustinian strands of Thomas’ work, along with the ideas of more contemporary thinkers like Maurice Blondel (199-201). And Henri de Lubac and the new theology (*nouvelle théologie*) carried these initial criticisms even further (202-05). In *Le Surnaturel* (1946), de Lubac protested against the Neo-Scholastic separation of nature from grace, arguing that “its effect is to cut the Divine off from the human” (203). De Lubac’s views were influential both at Vatican II, as well as on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar (205). Taken together, these influences culminated in the further development of transcendental Thomism, which had begun with Maréchal.

Fiorenza comments upon the lives and work of three notable representatives of transcendental Thomism: Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, and Edward Schillebeeckx. Here we will only briefly comment upon Rahner, who is widely regarded as the “most influential Roman

Catholic theologian of the twentieth century” (207). Although Rahner studied for a time under Martin Heidegger, he credits Maréchal as having the more decisive philosophical influence on his own thought and work (206). Further developing Maréchal’s thought, Rahner emphasizes “transcendental experience” over “propositional . . . expressions of that experience in concrete doctrines” (208). This leads Fiorenza to observe that Rahner’s understanding of such transcendental experience of the divine is somewhat similar to Schleiermacher’s ideas regarding the nature and importance of religious experience (208). This led theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar to protest against what they perceived to be an undue emphasis on “human subjectivity” in Rahner’s work (213). In response, however, Rahner maintained that he did not view the human subject abstractly, but rather concretely and historically, as one “existing within a specific Christian tradition and history” (213).

Chapter 8: Vatican II and the Aggiornamento of Roman Catholic Theology

In addition to transcendental Thomism, a renewal movement focused on a “return to the sources” (i.e. biblical and patristic) also took hold within Roman Catholic theology in the post-World War II era (233). One of the key leaders of this movement was Yves Congar, a prolific author who was primarily interested in reforming the Church (233-36). Although initially censored, his work, *True and False Reform in the Church*, was influential in the decision of Pope John XXIII to convene Vatican II (234-36).

According to Fiorenza, “Vatican II (1962-1965) was the decisive religious, intellectual, and political event within the contemporary Roman Catholic Church (237). It was here that the *aggiornamento*, or “updating,” of Roman Catholicism took place. This “updating” was not intended to compromise the doctrine or tradition of the Church, but merely to *present a new face to the modern world*, so to speak. But not everyone agreed that this was what actually took place (237-38). For instance, the doctrine of the Church was a topic of significant discussion at Vatican II, but the Council’s documents are somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, the Church’s hierarchical structure is reaffirmed (in accordance with Vatican I). On the

other hand, one finds an emphasis on the importance of *communio*, along with an affirmation of “the collegial structure of the episcopacy and the role of all believers, including the laity” (237). In this sense, there was a return to a more ancient conception of the Church (240). An even more “significant shift” is seen in the Council’s statements on religious freedom and non-Roman Catholic Christians (245). Previously, the Roman Catholic Church had been opposed to religious freedom and had looked upon other Christian denominations as “sects” or “heretical groups” (246). At Vatican II, however, the Church affirmed both religious freedom and “the Christian reality of other Christian churches” (246).

In addition to Vatican II, this chapter also discusses the significance of such figures as Hans Küng, John Courtney Murray, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI). Prior to becoming Pope, Ratzinger had an impressive academic career and, between 1981-2005, had served as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (260). Fiorenza portrays him as an essentially conservative force for restoration in the Roman Catholic Church—a portrayal which would seem to fairly characterize his papacy as well (261).

Chapter 9: Political Theology and Latin American Liberation Theologies

European political theology arose in Germany in the 1960s through the work of Jürgen Moltmann and Johann Baptist Metz (273). Both men had been drafted into the German army during World War II, both had spent time as prisoners of war, both had witnessed the horrors wrought by German National Socialism, and both came to their theological work with questions about the appropriate relationship between church and state (274).

One of the key emphases to be found in the writings of both of these men concerns the issue of eschatology. Moltmann, particularly in his book, *Theology of Hope*, focuses on the notions of promise and hope. God makes certain promises to His people, and these promises become the appropriate basis for humanity’s expectations and hopes (277). In this sense, there is a communal or social aspect to the promises of God. Metz keys in on this issue as well and criticizes both “existential and transcendental interpretations of eschatology” for overlooking it

(277). Finally, since our hope is based on the promises of God, and not the social and political machinations of man, neither Moltmann nor Metz sees society as inevitably progressing toward some utopian state on the basis of an internal logic all its own. The Kingdom of God will be brought about by God, not by some collaborative effort between church and state (278). Indeed, this is one of the reasons that both men have been criticized by Latin American liberation theologians. The latter have argued that even if man cannot *completely* bring about the Kingdom of God through his own efforts, he can nonetheless help bring it about *in part* “whenever justice and love” are realized on the earth (287).

Latin American liberation theology arose in the 1960s as a reaction against the perceived problem of “developmentalism” (288). The stated goal of developmentalism was to help individuals and communities in Third World countries attain greater well-being (e.g. socially, economically, etc.). The problem, however, as Latin Americans saw it, was that developmentalism failed to get to the real heart of the issues and difficulties they were facing (288). Developmentalism sought to correct problems gradually. Increasingly, however, Latin Americans saw the need for a more radical solution; namely, liberation (288). A key event for bringing about a Latin American theology of liberation was the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopal Council, which met in Columbia in 1968. According to Fiorenza, the conference and the documents it produced “represent the crystallization point for Latin American liberation theology” (289). This brand of theology concerns itself predominantly with the ubiquitous conditions of poverty and dependency in Latin America (290).

Fiorenza concludes this section by briefly summarizing the work of three major liberation theologians: Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, and Leonardo Boff (292-300). He observes that while these theologians have certainly drawn attention to the social dimension of Christianity, and the need to care for the poor and needy, they have largely failed (at least, in the minds of their critics) to provide anything in the way of “concrete solutions to particular political issues” (300-02).