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## Introduction

The purpose of this volume is to provide college students with an introduction to contemporary Christian theology. It is my hope that this book will meet three specific goals.

First, I hope to acquaint students with some of the leading thinkers and schools of thought within contemporary Christian thought. I have selected ten of the leading thinkers and the movements they represent, but given the rich diversity within current Christian thought, others certainly could have been included. The ten thinkers are all prolific writers, and so for each I have focused almost exclusively on one of his or her texts or a small selection of his or her essays to provide students with a manageable list of readings for study.

Second, an introductory text needs to demonstrate how theology is done to help prepare readers for future study in the field. Whether this future study includes other academic courses, personal reading, or simply thinking about one's own beliefs, an introductory text should provide readers with the tools to help them continue to enrich their theological understanding. In each chapter I focus on one theological question that arises from theological work under consideration and offer some of the assessments other theologians have made of the thinker's argument.

Third, for students who identify themselves as Christians, a theological text should offer some means by which they can better understand the Christian way of life. For Christians, this is the ultimate purpose of studying theology. To that end, the biblical narrative provides the overarching framework for current study. It is the biblical narrative that underlies Christian thought and practice.



As the Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck observes, the scriptural world “supplies the interpretive framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality.”<sup>1</sup> The biblical narrative contains countless events and persons, but I focus on ten particular moments: creation, exodus, conquest, exile, restoration, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, Pentecost, and the end of time. While arguments certainly could be made to include other moments, I believe there is a general consensus that these ten provide an adequate understanding of the whole of the biblical narrative.

We will, therefore, proceed with our survey of contemporary Christian thought in the following manner. In each chapter, we will highlight one important theological work that is representative of a school of thought within contemporary Christian theology, focus on a theological question raised by that work, and critically evaluate the argument advanced in the text.

### ***An Overview of Wrestling with the Questions***

In chapter 1, we focus on the biblical claim that humans are created in God’s image. The meaning and implications of this essential theological contention have been the source of much debate in feminist Christian circles, and so we concentrate on the argument advanced by Rosemary Radford Ruether (1936–) in her work *Sexism and God-Talk*. Ruether directly confronts the issue of patriarchy in both the biblical writings and the Christian tradition.

In chapter 2, we highlight the plight of the oppressed. Proponents of *liberation theology* insist that a viable contemporary theology needs to address the social, economic, and political inequalities in the world, especially those on the international level. We will examine a foundational work in liberation theology, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation*, by the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928–).

In chapter 3, we view the problem of social injustice from a unique angle. We examine the problem not from the vantage point of the powerless but rather from that of those who possess the power to effect social change. In the throes of the Depression, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), who had recently left his church ministry in Detroit to accept a position at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, published *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Niebuhr's groundbreaking work combined critical social analysis with an unyielding call for justice. These characteristics would come to define the movement known as *Christian realism*.

In chapter 4, we examine a collection of letters and occasional writings by the jailed German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), who would eventually be hanged by the Nazis for his participation in an assassination plot against Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* contains his thoughts about, among other things, "a world come of age" that inspired many thinkers in the movement known as *secular theology*.

In chapter 5, theologian Sallie McFague (1933–) addresses the urgent ecological problems that are presently confronting our world and proposes an understanding of God that she believes moves us toward survival, rather than annihilation. To accomplish this, McFague asks us to critically evaluate the received Christian tradition and to revise some of its claims about God, human beings, and the natural world. This approach carries on the long tradition of *liberalism* in Christian thought.

In chapter 6, we deal with one of the leading developments in contemporary Roman Catholic theology. Grounded in the theology of the thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas, yet conversant with modern philosophy, *Neo-Thomists* offer an analysis of human subjectivity that provides the categories for an understanding of Christ that is relevant to modern Christians. Karl Rahner (1904–1984),

whose work we will explore in this chapter, might well be the most influential Catholic theologian of the twentieth century.

In chapter 7, we focus on a modern theology that draws out several implications from the death of Christ for topics ranging from our understanding of God to our involvement in political affairs. In *The Crucified God*, theologian Jürgen Moltmann (1926–) speculates theologically about the provocative question of the effect of the Son's suffering on the Father and develops a political theology based on the meaning of the crucifixion for contemporary Christians.

In chapter 8, we examine the thought of Stanley Hauerwas (1940–). Blazing a new path in the field of contemporary Christian thought, Hauerwas asserts that Christian theology has allowed the assumptions of the wider culture to distract us from the gospel message. In this way, he calls for a postliberal theology that summons us to the way of life preached by Christ and confirmed by his resurrection. The hallmark of this way of life, according to Hauerwas, is a life of Christian nonviolence.

In chapter 9, we address the challenges presented by the conflicting claims of the world's religions. How does Christianity relate to other religions? John Cobb Jr. (1925–) tackles this question in *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* and represents one of the most influential attempts to craft a Christian theology that addresses the radically pluralistic world in which we live.

In chapter 10, we conclude our discussion by considering the end of the world. Is there a final goal for human history? If so, what is the Christian expectation regarding this final state of affairs, and how does this hope impact Christians' understanding of the present? Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–) addressed these important questions in the 1983 Ingersoll Lecture on Immortality that he delivered at the Harvard Divinity School. This lecture will be the basis of our exploration of his thought. Such an



investigation also requires that we translate biblical claims about the end of the world into categories that are meaningful for contemporary Christians. This endeavor is known as *hermeneutical theology*.

These ten influential theologians have identified some of the critical theological questions of our day and offered proposals for dealing with those questions that have generated a great deal of interest in theological circles. By engaging in a critical study of their work, not only can we gain a greater knowledge of contemporary Christian thought, but we can also formulate our own assessment of their positions and enter into the conversation that is Christian theology.

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© **Note**

1. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 117.



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**© Suggested Readings**

For background on contemporary theology, see David F. Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997); Stanley J. Grenz and Roger Olson, *20th-Century Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992); Gregory Baum, ed., *The Twentieth Century* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999); Donald W. Muser and Joseph L. Price, eds., *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996); Ed. L. Miller and Stanley J. Grenz, *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994); and James Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

For a fine example of a theological investigation structured along narrative lines, see Gabriel Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997). See also chapter 14 of Clark H. Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).