

Overview of Contemporary Theology

Introductory Comments

Because of divergent views about what contemporary theology encompasses, it might prove helpful at the outset of this article to comment about my understanding of the term. First, by *contemporary* I am referring to the time frame from about the end of World War I until the present. Therefore, contemporary theology does not focus on theological giants such as Calvin and Luther even though they are significant for understanding Protestant theology. It can be said that the following theologians are the ABCs of theology Augustine, Barth, Calvin, and Schleiermacher. However, other than Barth, such theologians are the proper focus of historical rather than contemporary theology.

Second, I infuse the singular format of the word *theology* with a plural meaning. *Contemporary theologies* might be a better term to use than *contemporary theology*. This is because there exists a wide array of theological options available in the world of contemporary theology, including both Protestant and evangelical contemporary theology. The discerning reader of contemporary theologies will therefore read critically.

Third, I understand contemporary theology to be a subject of study within the field of systematic theology. There is, of course, much contemporary literature available in other theological disciplines such as Old Testament and New Testament. But those developments are not the focus of this overview of contemporary systematic theology.

Fourth, there seem to be at least three lenses through which to view contemporary theology. The subject can be studied by focusing on theologians themselves, their theological ideas, or the theological methodologies which they follow. Each approach has its merits. Susumu Uda's recent book on contemporary theology touches on all three approaches.¹ This article also makes use of all three lenses.

Publication Speed of Contemporary Theology

Contemporary theology is being written and published at a very fast rate. This is probably due to the advent of the computer. Sometimes this fast speed undermines the thoughtfulness and thoroughness of the work. At other times it simply allows the authors to write their good ideas at a faster pace. For the one who wants to keep abreast of contemporary theology this speed of production means there is always another book to read. The task of reading never ends. For the one who writes contemporary theology this speed of production means that most theological works published with the word *contemporary* in the title will likely be irrelevant within ten years. Only the outstanding contributions will have a long life span. This judgment applies to this article as well!

The speed with which theology is now being written might also be due to the wide diversity of viewpoints within Christian theology. Due to technological advances all these viewpoints can quite easily be published, not only in print but also on the internet. For instance, Alister McGrath's introductory textbook on Christian theology, available in both English and

¹ 宇田進『現代福音主義神学：Contemporary Introduction to Evangelical Theology』いのちのことば社、二〇〇二年。

Japanese, includes a list of theological websites.² Even I have uploaded a theological website (<http://www.cptheo.net>). This diversity of opinion can be seen in some of the basic and foundational subjects of theology: God (theology proper), the identity and work of Jesus (Christology), salvation (soteriology). These subjects are the focus of much attention in contemporary theology, including contemporary evangelical theology.

The diversity also applies to methodological issues, such as theological sources and their relative degrees of authority. That is, how are the Bible, Christian tradition, the church, and culture weighted in their importance for “doing theology”? Historically, one major difference between Protestant and Roman Catholic theology was that Protestants insisted on the priority of the authority of the Bible (in its original autographs) whereas Roman Catholics understood the church to be the authoritative interpreter of both Christian tradition and the Bible itself. However, many contemporary Protestant, even evangelical, theologians seem to argue that more authority should be attributed to the church as a source for theology. These writers see the church as the community for which theology is written and therefore seem to imply that theology should be primarily accountable to the church. The community known as the church becomes authoritative over theology itself. It is no accident that the title of Stanley Grenz’ introductory theological textbook is *Theology for the Community of God*.³ But if the church becomes the primary evaluator of theology, is it possible for theology to hold the church accountable to the standards of truth and love revealed in the Bible? Is it possible for theology to speak prophetically to the church?

So contemporary theological material is readily available. Christians who do not have an awareness of the breadth of options available, and who are themselves uneducated in theology, will quite easily be impressed with the first theological viewpoint they happen to read. If what they read is well balanced, their faith will be enriched. But if what they read argues for a highly debatable point of view, they will be unable to evaluate the position taken by the author. Even if pastors and missionaries cannot keep up with the publication speed of contemporary theology, it is helpful for them to know the basics of theology, including at least an introductory awareness of some of the issues in contemporary theology, in order to guide their parishioners through the maze.

Contemporary Theology’s Suspicion of the Old

We humans seem to like things that are new. Contemporary theology displays the same tendency. This positive inclination toward newer ideas may be evident in the increasingly positive attitude evangelical contemporary theologians seem to have toward neo-orthodoxy. Conversely, it seems that contemporary theology’s search for new ideas leads it to take a critical stance toward old viewpoints and ideas. This lack of respect for historical theology generates the tendency within contemporary theology to describe the past using caricature. That is, contemporary theology tends to oversimplify the past. For example, it is not uncommon for both religious pluralists and religious particularists (exclusivists) to appeal to Iraeneus for support. Such shallow historical research can lead to revisionist historical theology. It seems that

² Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 589-92. アリスター・E・マクグラス (神代真砂実訳) 『キリスト教神学入門』教分館、二〇〇二年、xv-xvii頁。

³ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).

contemporary theology has a tendency to manipulate history in order to generate new and purportedly more attractive or appropriate theological constructs.

So contemporary theology seems to have a fascination with the new and a simultaneous suspicion or disrespect of the old. Even some contemporary evangelical theologians state that a particular viewpoint they oppose is mistaken simply because it is old. To be a contemporary theologian and yet champion the old viewpoints can bring a flood of criticism.

Fortunately, some theologians are prophetically calling contemporary evangelical theology back to a deeper respect for the theological positions of yesteryear. Thomas Oden is perhaps the best known.⁴ But there are other and younger theologians who also take church history seriously. As in Japan, young historical theologians are rare in the English speaking world. But it seems that the need for a careful appreciation of historical theology is beginning to catch the attention of some younger scholars. Perhaps this is due to the increasing awareness that theology is always done in a particular historical and cultural context. McGrath is one scholar who believes that history is important to theology. About thirty percent of his introductory theological textbook focuses on history.

Contemporary Evangelical Theology's Search for Identity

Perhaps this critical attitude toward the past, and the use of caricature, provide evidence that contemporary theology is in a state of confusion. There seems to be an identity crisis in much contemporary theology. This confusion is particularly evident in evangelical theology. When evangelicals read contemporary theology, they seem to read mostly non-evangelicals. However, as evangelicals we need to also study contemporary *evangelical* theology. The evangelical camp now includes theologians who hold theological viewpoints outside the parameters of what might be called the traditionally accepted evangelical norm. According to Millard Erickson, evangelical theologians can now be divided between the left and the right.⁵ The term *evangelical* is no longer understood in the same way by all theologians who claim to be evangelical.

For the last three years, the annual gathering of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS), a North American academic society, has debated how to view open theism held by a few of these theologians who are on the left. In 2001 the ETS issued a theological statement distancing itself from open theism. In 2003, the members of ETS discussed, but decided against, rescinding the membership of two of these theologians.⁶ This illustrates that stepping into the

⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003). Oden is the co-editor of the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, a series focusing on mining the biblical and theological resources of the ancient church.

⁵ Millard Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

⁶ Pinnock and Sanders were the two theologians whose ETS membership was discussed (see the membership challenge at <http://www.etsjets.org/>). Pinnock and Sanders are still members of ETS. Boyd is no longer listed as a member. See the following representative works: Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998); and Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: Does God Ever Change his Mind?*

world of contemporary evangelical theology can be a confusing experience because a vocal and popular minority within that world have declared it to be under reconstruction.

English as the Global Language of Contemporary Theology

The language of contemporary theology is English. In general, there is no important contemporary theological work which has not been written in English or translated into English. Whether a theologian is Japanese, Chinese, Indian, African, French, or German—if his work is considered important it will be translated into English or it will be written in English. If his work is not in English, it will not be studied by theologians around the world. This fact generates debate among academics who determine the graduation requirements for students of systematic theology at the academic doctoral level (Ph.D., Th.D.). A strong case can be made that it is no longer necessary to learn a modern language other than English in order to become proficient in contemporary theology.

Some Key Issues in Contemporary Theology

Issues in theological methodology have gained importance. For example, any recent systematic theology will devote considerable attention to what theologians call *prolegomena*, which literally means the “word before.” In that section of their work, theologians describe their theological methodology, including a discussion of their choice of theological sources. For instance, the first 175 pages of Erickson’s systematic theology in English, and the first 195 pages in Japanese, are about methodology.⁷ Older systematic theologies such as Thiessen and Hodge devote very little space to a discussion of methodology. However, many contemporary theological books are devoted entirely to theological methodology. This is especially true for works about postmodernity, as evidenced in the complex discussions concerning reader response theory.⁸

Since the time of neo-orthodox theologians Barth and Brunner, theology proper (theology of God) has taken center stage. Such theologians are understood to have described God as distant.⁹ Certain theologians of that era even declared God so remote as to be dead—“death of God” theology! Contemporary theology has inherited an emphasis on theology proper from these earlier theologies, but now tends to emphasize the personal aspect of God. So contemporary theologians tend to place limits on God, much like the limits we humans experience. For instance, God is often understood to be limited in knowledge about humanity’s free choices concerning the future (open theism). Or again, God is described as located within time rather than beyond it.

(Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). Responses to these theologians have come from several quarters. Perhaps one of the best is: Millard J. Erickson, *What Does God Know? The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). ミラード・J・エリクソン『キリスト教神学』第一巻、いのちのことば社、二〇〇三年。

⁸ For example, see Kevin VanHoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

⁹ A helpful book about modern theology’s portrayal of God is by the late Klaus Boockmuehl, *The Unreal God of Modern Theology* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1988).

Closely related to discussions in theology proper are the many contemporary writings which could be classified as focusing on theological anthropology. A theological understanding of humanity is central to the following key discussions within contemporary theology: liberation theology, feminism, role of women in the church, soteriology, general revelation, religions and cultures, global theology, dignity of humanity, biomedical ethics, and ecology.

Ecclesiology is also a subject of recent discussion.¹⁰ It draws upon a working knowledge of a number of pertinent issues in contemporary theology: soteriology, theological anthropology, and Trinitarian theology (theology proper). Historically, ecclesiologies have focused upon a study of the nature of the church. But greater attention is now being given to the purpose or mission of the church, the nature of leadership in the church, and the decision making structures of the church. Here is one sphere of contemporary theology which would benefit greatly from the contributions of non-Western theologians who seem to make church a priority.

Some Key Theologians of Contemporary Theology

Many theological movements over the past one hundred years have been associated with one or two theologians. Thus, a study of significant contemporary theologians can often be equivalent to the study of contemporary theologies. The following theologians, to name a few, are important for understanding contemporary theology: Barth, Brunner (neo-orthodoxy); Moltmann, Pannenberg (theology of hope); Gutierrez (liberation theology); Rahner, Kung (Vatican II and Roman Catholic theology); Whitehead, Hartshorne (process theology); Erickson, McGrath, Grenz, and others (evangelical theology).

Concluding Comments

The purpose of theology is related to the church. Theology teaches the church about its foundation—the Bible. But I also believe theology provides correct perspective for understanding the wider culture and the world in which the church is located. Theology operates between these two poles of the Bible and culture. For the evangelical theologian, the pole of revelation—the Bible—must always bear the emphasis. The same can be said for evangelical pastors and missionaries. This is because it is not only the theologian who “does theology.” To the degree that pastors teach the Bible and teach about living as believers in our world, they too are “doing theology.” Those who “do theology,” whether from the pulpit or with their pens, need to keep their theological balance in the midst of the myriad of options presented by contemporary theology. Those who are well balanced are those who prioritize the Bible. May God be pleased with the theological balance he sees in us.

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¹⁰ For example, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002); and Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).