

CHAPTER 1

Histories and Contexts

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

It has become axiomatic in the late twentieth century to acknowledge that human beings are neither residents of everywhere nor nowhere but are situated within particular locales demarcated by distinctive languages, worldviews, political and economic structures, and social, religious, and ethical configurations. Moreover, this acknowledgment of the localized character of experience and knowledge has contained the recognition that our current context is the product of the vagaries of complex and varied historical processes that have preceded our era and of our own contemporary responses to and transformations of these processes. Human historicity, thus, entails both being constituted by our past and context and being agential contributors to new historical realities.

This book is about the present-day theological setting and the theological alternatives that have been taking shape in recent years. In particular, it is a volume about those theological trajectories that have emerged precisely out of this consciousness that we are historical beings, situated in particular contexts, products of specific historical lineages, and constructors of new possibilities, and from the attempt to think through what historicity entails for how we understand theology, its status and tasks. But in order to understand how we construe historicity today and what it implies for theology, we must, in good historicist fashion, understand something of how we got here; we must grasp something of the historical developments that have brought us to our late-twentieth-century situation. This opening chapter has as its purpose the tracing of these historical influences both as they have positively funded the stances we hold today and as that which we now repudiate and seek to move beyond.

The attainment of such historical knowledge and insight has not, however, proven to be an easy matter. For as our awareness of the importance of historical understanding has grown, so has the cognizance of the complexities, ambiguities, and even contradictions of the historical events and developments to which we are heir. The history we must

sort out and comprehend no longer appears, as for many it once did, as singular, linear, and driven by an indefatigable telos. Instead, we confront our historical lineage today as plural, convoluted, and multidimensional, “with no single theme and no controlling plot.”¹ Moreover, not only does history appear comprised of multiple, interacting processes—sociopolitical, economic, intellectual, religious, cultural, and so on—but these processes now can be seen more clearly to be both shaped by and the effective vehicles for the deployment of power. And, as the analysis of such deployment of power has become more central in a variety of historical interpretations, groups, and perspectives negatively affected by these arrangements and thereby often excised from earlier historical accounts are now increasingly visible and challenging prior renderings of the past.

But our understanding of the importance of history has not only been chastened by the complexities of the past and by the history of negative effects that has attended it. We, as we enter a new century, continue to be confronted by not only the ambiguous quality of history but by events of such enormous negative proportion that they seem lacking in all meaning or appear to have endless meanings and hence are without comprehensibility or closure. These events of holocaust and genocide, nuclear warfare and environmental destruction, too, are part of the history we must face and trace, products not of some extrahistorical reality breaking into the human plane but of the varied processes that have produced the rest of contemporary reality. Events of such magnitude also are part of the lineage that has brought us forth, reminding us that contemporary theological efforts are carried out not only in the face of positive historical potential but also before the horrors that human beings have wrought in history.²

Running through the recognition that we are products of historical processes that we both inherit and transform and that, therefore, we are thoroughly situated beings located within particular strands of history, has been the further insight that such history never comes to us in any self-evident or uncontroversial manner. How we conceive of the past, delineate its processes, and evaluate its effects are always matters of interpretation that are infused with our understandings of the present and fraught with values, power, and commitments; how we read the past has a great deal to do with what purposes we pursue in the present. Thus, the pictures we draw of who we are today and of our current situation, and the renderings we offer of how we got here are profoundly interconnected and neither construals of the present nor those of the past are neutral or value-free.

While the difficulties of making sense out of the chaos of the past and discerning order in the confusion of the present are immense, such

tasks are, nonetheless, imperative for thought and action. Hence, we employ what historian Peter Novick calls “regulative fictions” to organize periods of time, distinguish and systematize issues and events, and thematize trends and movements.³ These are always artificial to some extent and, by virtue of generalizing and abstracting from the welter of concrete details of lived history, impose upon time and events an order they do not clearly have. Yet by so doing they allow us to define our historical location and to formulate the responses and initiatives that are possible at this particular time and place.

Currently, one of the most prominent regulative fictions western thinkers are utilizing to interpret our contemporary situation is to understand our own time in radical contrast, indeed opposition, to the preceding era that we call “modernity,” a period that stretches from the Enlightenment through most of the twentieth century. Many western thinkers have, thus, come to characterize our historical moment as post-modern. What postmodernity entails varies from thinker to thinker with no common definition except that it is the “not modern.” Increasingly a more nuanced rendering of modernity as culturally and cognitively pluralistic is emerging, replacing the monomythic interpretations of the modern period that tended to reduce the whole age to the Enlightenment and its assumptions and practices. Nonetheless there has continued a widespread tendency to define the present moment as a repudiation of the modern epoch. The analysis set forth in this chapter will suggest a less “pure” reading of our historical lineage and of its relation to our current situation.⁴ It will reflect contentions made later in the book that we are inescapably shaped by our past, even when we reject it, and that past is not singular or univocal but always plural, consisting of multiple, diverse, and even conflicting elements. By calling for this impure rendering of our historical inheritance, this chapter will suggest that our present situation continues, albeit in a transformed manner, a number of the developments that preceded our era and simultaneously scrutinizes, challenges, and rejects other assumptions and projects of modernity. We are both constituted by our pasts and ever the transformers of that inheritance.

What follows in this chapter is a brief, and obviously selective, version of the infinitely more complex historical happenings that compose the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries in Europe and North America.⁵ It focuses on those developments that have had continuing impact upon western, especially Christian, North American theology, and most pertinently upon reflection about the nature of theological discourse. And in particular it is concerned with those developments that have influenced, either positively or negatively, the historicist theologians dealt with in this book. Other theological trajectories might well

have differing historical lineages, including nonwestern ones, and other kinds of relationships to the period in western culture that has preceded our own. Certainly non-Christian theologies have their distinctive historical narratives and relation to this period. Thus this section traces the background of a particular set of historicist theologies, not that of all theologies, even all Christian theologies, abroad in the contemporary world. Moreover, this chapter, because of the limits of space and the training and skills of the author, deals mostly with intellectual developments and less fully with the political, economic, and cultural lineages that immediately predate our own age. As many of the arguments that will take shape in this book suggest this focus is ultimately inadequate in itself and requires supplementation by more detailed analysis of the historical context within which these intellectual claims and arguments emerged; for finally, no intellectual positions stand alone, fully comprehensible outside of their concrete setting. The purpose of this chapter is not to provide such a detailed depiction but a more self-consciously limited one of highlighting, in a more or less panoramic sweep, those elements of modernity that form the most prominent backdrop for the theological trajectories engaged in this volume, especially those currents that have contributed to making "historicity" a central issue and, thus, "historicism" a viable, even inescapable, perspective. As such it seeks to set the stage for what follows while fully aware of the need for other types of analysis to supplement these efforts.

PLURALISTIC MODERNITY

One of the ways of demarcating historical periods is to interpret them as significant cultural, political, economic, and intellectual shifts that are responses to both crises in which previous order and consensus have broken down and significant changes in which new modes of existence or historical directions have emerged. Modernity has frequently been depicted as that seismographic set of changes that grew out of the demise of the medieval world and the developments commenced during the Renaissance and Reformation. Numerous elements contributed to these shifts: the dissolution of a Catholic Europe and with it the breakdown of ecclesiastical authority; the advent of Protestantism and the religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the rise of modern science and the scientific method; the emergence of national states and centralized governments; technological advances; widespread exploration and global colonization, including the ongoing conquest of the Americas; alterations in commercial patterns and economic organization; even the reorganization of the family.

The results of such developments were profound. On the one hand, the breakdown of authority and of societal consensus, especially in the arena of religious conflict, indicated increasingly the need for public norms and criteria, not tied to particular traditions, that could be utilized to resolve conflicts among groups and individuals representing different perspectives, be they religious or political. On the other hand, advances in science, especially in mathematics, suggested that precise forms of knowledge, accepted broadly, could be formulated and demonstrated to be true. Thus, while old forms of authority and adjudication fell asunder, resulting in widespread cultural crises, concurrently new possibilities for secure knowledge and clear norms gained ascendancy.

The quest for a new certitude, now based on reason, not authority, found its fullest expression in the Enlightenment, generally taken to commence with René Descartes in the seventeenth century and culminating with Immanuel Kant in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Its two main strands, rationalism, deriving from Descartes and his followers, and British empiricism, defined by Locke and those who followed him, identified the location for securing sure knowledge differently, the rationalists in the innate ideas of the mind and the empiricists in sense experience. Yet, despite offering conflicting arguments for where rational reflection should begin and what yielded indubitable grounds for further claims to knowledge, both the rationalists and empiricists evidenced an overwhelming confidence in reason's capacities and a conviction that it was human reason that led to liberation from superstition and the dismantling of stifling authoritarian structures, whether religious, political, or economic.

This confidence in reason's capacities did not stand in isolation but was part of an interlocking set of ideas that took compelling shape during the Enlightenment. Such complementary notions included the scientific-inspired conviction that the world was harmoniously ordered and that this natural order was accessible to human reason and knowledge and, hence, open to manipulation for human ends. Moreover, there was a strong confidence that human history was also capable of rational organization and direction and, hence, that progress, deliberately pursued, laid within the grasp of an enlightened humanity. Modern notions of the autonomous individual also took definitive shape during this era and with them the sense that humans should not capitulate to unexamined authority but should heed the rational or natural rules to be discovered within each human. And not only were human beings taken to be rational, capable of knowing the world and themselves and of directing history's future course, but increasingly, following John Locke, humans were understood to possess self-evident rights and it was upon such natural unbridgeable rights that the modern political order was to be established.

Hence, rationality, with its liberating impulses, was to govern all arenas of human activity and reflection. Theoretical rigor and clear and precise argument were the goals in scientific, philosophical, political, and even moral reflection. All that continued to embody earlier forms of so-called superstition or unreflective acceptance of authority was to be critically scrutinized and jettisoned. Ambiguity in thought or language and hence subsequent obscurity were ruled problematic. Religion, an obvious prime candidate for critical examination, was either denounced or made rationally acceptable in the forms of deism or a Lockean-type natural religion with its highest expression in a reasonable Christianity. Political and social philosophy also embodied the convictions of the Enlightenment with thinkers such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Diderot developing ideas that would impact later events such as the French Revolution. Even poetry, especially during the eighteenth century, sought, according to sociologist Donald Levine, scientific precision and became "plain" and "straightforward," devoid of allusions and ambiguities.⁶

If reason was interpreted as the vehicle or means by which all else was critically scrutinized, it was not unexamined itself. David Hume and Immanuel Kant were the clearest examples of critical consciousness making reason its own object of analysis. Hume's skepticism concerning knowledge of causal relations in the physical world, knowledge of God, and knowledge of the self exemplified both the encompassing range of critical consciousness and the limitations of reason. Kant, taking seriously Hume's critique of reason, sought to articulate fully its scope and outer boundaries. Combining the insights of both rationalism and empiricism, Kant argued that knowledge entails not only sensations but most importantly the active contribution of the mind that orders these sensations according to innate and universal forms or patterns of knowing. Moreover, knowledge was limited to the sphere of humanly ordered sensation and the categories or forms that were assumed to be necessary to the ordering of such sensory data. Thus *knowledge* of God and of any nonsensory realm became, in this schema, impossible.

The repercussions of Kantian philosophy reverberated throughout modernity and have influenced numerous disciplines, not the least theology. From the perspective of contemporary historicism, much of Kantian thought has had a deleterious effect, leading western thought in misguided directions. The Kantian dualistic portrayal of a reality divided between a phenomenal realm accessible to human knowledge and a noumenal sphere of things-in-themselves that escapes reason, the reduction of religion to morality and of God to a moral adjunct or alternatively a regulative ideal and the universal character of the categories of reason all have contributed to a dehistoricized view of reason. Impor-

tantly, for us, Kant's interpretation of religion and God removed them from arenas of empirical and historically defined knowledge and argument. Thus, Kant figures largely in the criticisms of the modern period offered by present-day historicists, more notably in historicists' depictions of modernity as that which should be rejected than as part of the lineage continued today.

Despite the anti-Kantian rhetoric of many present-day historicists, it is the contention of this rendering of our historical lineage that Kant has also played a substantively positive role in influencing both the historicism that emerged in the nineteenth century and the historicism of our current scene. In particular, Kant's insistence upon the active character of human knowing and his critical tracing of the *limits* and *scope* of reason and knowing have left a rich inheritance that continues in the thought of significant historicists engaged in this work. While the ahistorical categories structuring the knowing process have given way to interpretations of reason that are less universal and more contingent and localized, the recognition that the human knower is not only a passive recipient but an active participant in the construction of knowledge contributed immeasurably to the eventual historicizing of knowledge itself. And, while many thinkers, especially theologians, have resisted the Kantian reduction of religion to morality, it has become almost axiomatic that human reason cannot justify theological claims concerning God's existence or character in the manner that pre-Kantian thinkers assumed was possible, at least not the existence or character of a God assumed to transcend the natural and human spheres.

Kant represents, in significant ways, both the high point and the closure of Enlightenment modernity. For while the nineteenth century certainly saw the continuation of many of these concerns and the extension of the Kantian project, it also witnessed the intensification of the sense of historicity that was incipiently found in Kant's own work and that had been incubating in the thought of other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers and that would eventually question reason's universality, neutrality, and capacity for objectivity.

Numerous developments in the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century embodied this growth of historical consciousness. These included the flourishing of biblical scholarship, the emergence, with thinkers such as Dilthey, Schleiermacher, and Ranke, of hermeneutics as philosophically and theologically important, the increase of interest in nonwestern religious traditions, the expansion of the emerging social sciences, the Hegelian historicizing of reason and Geist, and the Darwinian historicizing of the natural order in the theory of evolution. Moreover, the masters of suspicion—Marx, Nietzsche, Feuerbach, and Freud—all made their appearance, linking knowledge and claims to

truth not to a neutral rationality functioning publicly and without distortion but to often hidden economic and psychological processes and operations of power. While all of these developments contributed to the simultaneous erosion of early modernity and the growth of historical consciousness, I will highlight those lines of thought that had the most significant influence upon theology as it has taken shape in the twentieth century.

Perhaps most significantly for theology there emerged during this period what is termed Romantic modernity or the counter-tradition to the Enlightenment. Disenchanted by the prioritizing of a reason that seemed to exclude the Spirit, nature, except as that which was to be utilized, and history, the Romantics stood in protest against the ruling tenets of the Enlightenment. Manifested in art, literature, poetry, music, philosophy, and theology, Romanticism emphasized the immediate, the aesthetic, the feeling dimensions of experience and the dynamic processes of life. Romanticism, moreover, embodied a turn toward nature in which the natural world was not viewed as merely a valueless realm suitable only for human manipulation, but as a dynamic, alive context, characterized by both beauty and tragedy, wherein humans have their home. Thus against the intellectualism of the Enlightenment, Romanticism proclaimed the truths of particular histories, nature, and the immediacies of experience.

Friedrich Schleiermacher was the most important theological exemplar of this counter-Enlightenment tradition. Schleiermacher accepted the Kantian strictures on reason in relation to God, acknowledging that rational argumentation failed to establish either God's existence or a clear knowledge of God's nature. However, he rejected the Kantian relegation of religion to morality and of God to the adjunct status of a postulate of moral reason. Instead he embraced two central tenets of Romanticism—the centrality and immediacy of feeling and the historicity of human existence—and out of these Schleiermacher fashioned what has come to be known as modern liberal theology. According to Schleiermacher, all experience entails a dual form of consciousness: The one consists of a consciousness of other finite creatures like ourselves characterized by the recognition that humans are both shapers and creators of that world and beings dependent upon and created by it. The other form of consciousness, never existing in isolation from the first but always a dimension of finite experience, consists in the immediate awareness of our absolute dependence upon that which is not finite for our very existence at all. This latter—the feeling of absolute dependence—is the source of religious feeling and awareness and it is by extrapolation from this immediate, indeed apparently preconceptual and prelinguistic, “unstructured by thought” mode of experience that

humans come to speak of God at all.⁷ As reason was universal, common to all humans for Enlightenment thinkers, so for Schleiermacher this immediate form of consciousness was also universal, a dimension of every human experience, shared by all human beings, exhibiting a common singular character. But while the feeling of absolute dependence was universal in scope and character, it also came, Schleiermacher argued, to express itself in particular historical communities, beliefs, and rituals that were unique to their time and place. Hence, religion, born in the foundational affective dimensions of life, issued forth in concrete, distinctive, nonuniversal forms of historical existence. Schleiermacher, thus, found a way to affirm the historicity of human existence, including its religious expressions, while maintaining a universal, affective dimension of experience and at the same time maintain the strictures placed upon claims about God and religious experience by critical reason.

As the effects of Kantian thought were far-reaching, so, too, were those of Schleiermachian liberalism, most especially for theological reflection. Though Schleiermacher rejected Kant's relocation of religion to the moral arena, he himself carried out a parallel move by locating religious feeling, at least in origin, in the sphere of the affective, and then construing that sphere in noncognitive and nonlinguistic terms. Thus, religious feeling and the theology that purported to reflect upon it, were removed from the scrutiny of critical consciousness and rendered no longer accountable to the canons of scientific inquiry and explanation. In a world increasingly dominated, even in the Romantic era, by the model of scientific knowledge, Schleiermacher appeared to provide a safe haven for religion and for claims about God, assuring them a secure place in the modern world.

Schleiermacher's work, thus, sought a way to honor historicity while maintaining universality. However, it did so at great cost. Increasingly, religion and theology were marginalized, relegated to the private and subjective dimensions of life, away from what would come to be known as the public sphere. Such "protective strategies," as Wayne Proudfoot designates the theological maneuvers carried out by Schleiermacher and the liberal theology that followed him, may have momentarily protected religion but eventuated in the twentieth-century world, and now into the twenty-first century, in making religion and theology culturally extraneous.⁸ While they continue to influence society, they do so with no clear or legitimate public role to play. While safe from the criticism of scientific reason, religion has, thereby, also forfeited a legitimized public function in culture.

Not only did many theologians follow the protective strategies suggested by Schleiermacher, they often *failed* to embrace his interest in

concrete, particular communities of faith. Thus Schleiermachiian universalism won out in much liberal theology over against the historicist tendencies also present in his thought. Schleiermacher's heritage, like Kant's, therefore comes to us in an ambiguous fashion, representing emphases that historicists strongly repudiate today while simultaneously turning to paths that Schleiermacher himself proposed.

While Schleiermacher turned to the depths of human subjectivity and to the historical realm as the sphere in which humans give concrete expression to that depth, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel set forth the most ambitious philosophical system of the century, arguing that history itself was the arena within which the divine and the absolute came to self-consciousness and realization. History, in Hegel's schema, thus took on a significance heretofore not imagined; it no longer stood in complete opposition to Geist but was the very province of its self-actualization. So, too, human subjectivity could no longer be understood except in reference to its dynamic becoming in history. Though many twentieth-century thinkers have questioned Hegel's historicism as illusory, deterministic, infected with untenable assumptions about historical progress, and finally as unable to accept and contend with otherness, nonetheless, he moved philosophical and theological thought toward the serious consideration of history as the central reality of human concern and reflection.

If central theologians such as Schleiermacher carried out maneuvers that removed religion from the critical scrutiny of science and philosophers like Hegel developed architectonic visions of religion as a moment in the process of divine self-actualization, there were thinkers from the sixteenth century onward and with ever greater intensity in the nineteenth century who proffered "naturalistic" interpretations of religion.⁹ These interpretations sought to explain religion according to the canons by which all other cultural phenomena were analyzed and explained. From Jean Bodin in the sixteenth century to the towering nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century figures of Müller, Durkheim, Troeltsch, Marx, Feuerbach, and Freud, increasingly religion was something to be examined, not protected or located in grand metaphysical schemes. Its origins, supposed essence, functions, and forms were all open to investigation and religion more and more appeared to be a cultural phenomenon that could be made to yield to critical inquiry. Moreover, the understanding of religion seemed to require less and less that its investigators be believers or participants but that they be equipped with appropriate explanatory methods and theories; thus understanding and belief were severed. And Christianity, treated by so many as superior whether by virtue of a purported ahistorical uniqueness or evolutionary development, more and more came to be seen as one among the plurality of religions in the world.¹⁰

Of all these developments, Ernst Troeltsch's legacy has been of particular importance for contemporary theology. Bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Troeltsch focused attention upon the spreading canons of historical inquiry, the historical character of religious traditions and the resultant problematizing of apologetic practices that had asserted the superiority and absoluteness of certain religions on nonhistorical or pseudohistorical grounds. While early Troeltsch sought to identify norms *within* history by which religious traditions could be compared and judged, by the end of his life even these efforts seemed illegitimate. In their place, Troeltsch emphasized the discrete particularity of traditions, linking them to specific cultural locations and heritages. And, opening the specter of relativism that has haunted historicism ever since, Troeltsch questioned whether judgments indeed could be made across religious traditions and suggested that all such considerations were finally intrasystematic affairs, a question of what was valid "for us."

This brief sketch clearly indicates that pre- and early-twentieth-century modernity was no monolithic affair, but was, in the words of philosopher Thelma Lavine, "cognitively pluralistic" as well as religiously, politically, and culturally diverse. For there was not only Kantian rationality or Lockean empiricism but also Romanticism and Hegelianism; there was not only "reasonable Christianity" but religion of the heart, of Lutheran pietism and Wesleyan Methodism; there was the poetry of the eighteenth century of Pope, Addison, and Johnson and of the nineteenth-century Romantics, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats. It was also the era of Napoleonic adventurism in the name of a French universalism and Bismarckian nationalism in the name of the distinctive and "local" character of Germanic culture. For many such as Lavine, the contrasts within modernity are so great that the period must really be characterized as divided within itself. Thus on one side there is found an emphasis upon scientific rationality, the conviction that sure and indubitable grounds can be ascertained upon which universal claims to knowledge and truth could be built, the elevation of the autonomous individual as the site of knowledge and value, a belief in indefatigable progress, the repudiation of traditional authorities, and the demystification of religion. On the other side is found a celebration of history and the natural, the conviction that insight exceeds the rational, an appreciation of the aesthetic and the affective, a growing sense of the historicity of human existence and knowledge, and an identification of religion with the realm of feeling. Thus Lavine accordingly claims that "[m]odernity is the conflict and confluence of two diametrically opposed cognitive styles, each subverting, demystifying and delegitimizing the other's conception of human nature, truth, morality and politics and the appropriate methodology for knowing them."¹¹

But while it is the case that conflicting strands can be identified within modernity, it is also true that many thinkers espoused elements of various perspectives at the same time. That is, thinkers of these centuries did not always reside neatly within only one trajectory of modernism but commingled various strands. Thus, Schleiermacher did not repudiate Kantian rationality in any wholesale sense but instead sought to delineate a distinctive space for religious experience. Or again, Schleiermacher certainly did not deny all forms of universalism but relocated them in the noncognitive realm, a realm that provided as indubitable grounds for claims as did any rationalist arguments. And Romantic modernity, no less than the Enlightenment, evidenced a disdain for unexamined acceptance of authority. Thus the search for secure foundations, the universalism of the Enlightenment, and the rejection of authority, while greatly transmuted, were not merely foregone by theological liberalism.

Importantly, it must also be stated that while much of what is designated theological liberalism is understood to descend from Schleiermacher and his Continental followers, there also developed a strand of North American theological liberalism that evidenced a somewhat different relationship to the Enlightenment and sought to reconcile religious and theological assertions with the positions of modern knowledge, especially the sciences and historical inquiry. In the United States, both liberal religious leaders and academics attempted to demonstrate that commitment to Christianity and fidelity to the modern world were not incongruent with or dependent upon, as Schleiermacher's reconciliation of the two appeared to be, the subjectivizing and privatizing of religious experience. There, therefore, appeared, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries an ethically oriented liberalism, including the "social gospel movement," more akin to Ritschl's mode of liberalism than to Schleiermacher's, and a sociohistorical method, associated with the early Chicago School, that utilized the insights and methods of the social sciences and historical fields of inquiry to analyze religious experience and life.

Of special importance to our project is the work of the early Chicago School. For it is not only from and in reaction to Continental developments that the contemporary historicist theologians we will focus upon, including Gordon Kaufman, William Dean, and Delwin Brown, have fashioned their work but also from this American strand of theological reflection and argument. Working out of sociohistorical methods and advocating a self-conscious historicism North American scholars of religion such as Shailer Mathews and Shirley Jackson Case set a strong direction for religious thought that deviated considerably from their European counterparts. They treated religion, Christianity

included, as a social and cultural phenomenon that developed over time. They tended to reject notions of some unchanging core or essence that was thought to characterize all religions or even a core that was present within a particular religious tradition that gave it identity and continuity. They argued that religious ideas and doctrines and practices cannot be understood outside of their historical context but only in relation to "the social setting in which they have been used."¹² And they stood in opposition to forms of authoritarian theology that thought they had uncovered timeless truth or located unquestioned authority in the past. Instead, as Shirley Jackson Case so bluntly put it, the historicist thinker would "make no pretensions at uncovering either in the past or the present a quantum of dogma absolutely valid for all time."¹³

Parallel to these developments in religious and theological studies in the United States was the articulation of a distinctively American philosophical trajectory. With roots all the way back to Emerson and Edwards, thinkers such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey presented positions that were the forerunners of contemporary historicism and pragmatism. This American philosophy stressed an openness to science and the scientific method, a strong sense of history, a spirit of experimentation, a pragmatic interpretation of truth, a belief, especially in James, that reality exceeds the linguistic and the conscious and, especially in Dewey, a confidence in and loyalty to democratic processes. Just as we will see that contemporary historicists of the sort advocated for in this work resonate with persons such as Shirley Jackson Case and Shailer Mathews so we will hear echoes of James and Dewey in the pragmatic historicism of today as well as responses, criticisms, and continuations of Continental philosophy and theology.

This is all to say that our intellectual lineages are often, like our biological ones, quite mixed. Many contemporary western historicists, including especially the postliberal theologians we will discuss in the next chapter, have set forth their own positions in relation to the developments of European modern thought discussed above. Others, including some of the pragmatic historicists treated in this book, have claimed a more exclusively American background. But the analysis that follows suggests that for many theologians our inheritances are more pluralistic. In particular, the position that will take shape and be advanced in this book freely acknowledges that it comes from a complex lineage and has been influenced both by European predecessors and by these early Chicago thinkers and their philosophical counter-parts. Thus the reader will hear strains of Continental thought in contemporary theology from Kant's insistence on the knower as active to Marx's concern for power and Durkheim's assertion of the social function of religion, and Troeltsch's loyalty to the canons of critical inquiry. There will equally

important be echoes of the earlier American contribution to historicist thought. The turn to the social sciences, the move away from essentialism, the dynamic notions of religious change, the critical stance toward religious beliefs and practices and inherited philosophies, and the commitment to ongoing reconstruction and democratic conversation all will emerge again in the form of pragmatic historicism that centers this work.

Thus while contemporary historicism certainly distances itself from certain elements of the modern project we must acknowledge that modernity itself was plural and important dimensions of it have animated and continue to be represented on the current scene. Moreover, thinkers today, as one suspects thinkers always did, have garnered from differing perspectives bits and pieces out of which to conceive a contemporary vision. We cannot so easily cut perspectives off from each other. Thus even as we acknowledge, along with philosophers such as Thelma Lavine, the dimensions of modernity that stood in tension with one another, we must simultaneously recognize that sometimes thinkers creatively appropriate varied and even seemingly contradictory elements to fund new positions not heretofore considered.¹⁴

DIRECTIONS IN AND CHALLENGES TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY THEOLOGY

By the early twentieth century varied forms of liberal theology dominated in both Europe and the United States, with European Christian theology working out of modes of Schleiermachian thought and, at least in certain circles of American religious thought, theologians in the United States articulating a more firmly sociohistorical perspective. However, both these forms of liberalism were to lose their hold as the twentieth century unfolded. The theological liberalism that grew out of the Schleiermachian trajectory came under severe attack from Barthian neo-orthodoxy and as that critique gained ground in the United States the American form of theological liberalism was also eclipsed. The liberalism of the Chicago School with its belief in science and reason, its focus on social forms of Christianity, and its attention to experience all were called into question by neo-orthodoxy's advance just as surely was Schleiermachian liberalism. Moreover, the pragmatic philosophy that resonated with and supported theological liberalism also lost ground as logical positivism ascended to dominance. According to some accounts this Barthian assault on theological liberalism was a temporary interruption or detour in modern theology. However, this reading of neo-orthodoxy misses the fact that Barth and his fellow thinkers undercut

any easy turn to experience as decisively as Kant repudiated the theological uses of reason and critical historical studies problematized the return to the past. As such, neo-orthodoxy is significant not only because it undermined directly the varied forms of Schleiermachian theological liberalism and indirectly American liberalism but also because it set the problematic with which much of contemporary theology has had to struggle, that is, what can theology have to say after reason, tradition, and experience have all been called into question as reliable guides to truth and what substantive visions can be articulated when traditional sources have been eroded.

Barth and his compatriots carried out their undermining of earlier sources for theological claims, especially the liberal appeal to experience, through several maneuvers. They concurred with the Kantian limitation of knowledge to the human realm, thus denying reason's capacity to know God. However, they simultaneously rejected the Schleiermachian turn to a noncognitive religious experience, asserting that such experience did not yield legitimate knowledge of God but was only the reflection of humanity. Hence, according to Barth, neither in the depths of experience nor by virtue of the reaches of reason was knowledge of the divine to be ascertained. Yet Barth did not conclude that thereby human beings were condemned to ignorance concerning God. Instead, he argued that God makes Godself known in an act of radical revelation in Jesus Christ and that in this revelation the true natures of God, the human self, and the world are disclosed. Barth, on the one hand, undermined all human attempts to make true claims about God, indeed about human nature and the world, be they located in experience or rationality. But, at the same time, he offered a new foundation, located not in a fallible human reason or experience, but in the self-disclosing act of an omnipotent and transcendent deity. It was God, in Godself, who funded and insured legitimate claims to knowledge.

Liberal theologies, both in their Schleiermachian form and in the American mode, were deeply damaged by the onslaught of neo-orthodoxy with its simultaneously negative evaluation of human capacities and its triumphant belief in an omnipotent but gracious and self-revealing God. As the twentieth century unfolded not to an era of peaceful progress and clear advancement but to "the pity of war" (Wilfred Owen) and to atrocities unimagined before this century, neo-orthodoxy appeared as both an insightful diagnosis of a dangerously hubristic modernity gone awry *and* a new, chastened hope, grounded not in the delusions of a sinful humanity, but in the love and power of God.

But, if neo-orthodoxy appeared at first as the antidote for the presumed failures of modernity, its own fatal weaknesses gradually grew more apparent. For revelation, grounded solely in God's decision,

proved elusive. It became difficult to discern who was the recipient of such revelation or how to conceive of a revelation totally distinct from other forms of human knowing. And an utterly transcendent God, while presumed gracious, increasingly appeared remote and irrelevant. Moreover, the sweepingly negative evaluation of human capacities appeared to many to be a prescription for quietism and noninvolvement in the world. And finally, the neo-orthodox concentration upon Jesus Christ as the central site of revelation and the resultant assumption that Christianity was, though a sinful religion, the location of true faith, became less and less compelling in light of historical studies and the growing awareness of other, equally ancient and profound religious traditions.

Thus by the 1960s, neo-orthodoxy's hold on theology had greatly weakened. However, its critique of liberalism remained. Its demise, therefore, did not signal a ready return to the options of the earlier centuries. Instead, especially in the United States, the discipline of theology entered an uneasy and conflicted period reflecting widespread doubts about theology's task and object. In turn, reason, experience, and now revelation had each been deposed as reliable grounds for theological claims. Whether talk about God or religious experience or theology made sense, at least to growing numbers of intellectuals, was no longer clear at all.

One radical reaction to the decline of neo-orthodoxy was the death of God movement. Thinkers such as Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton assailed traditional and neo-orthodox notions of God, declaring them either morally reprehensible (Hamilton) or ontologically suspect (Altizer). Thus the idea of an omnipotent, all-ruling God was rejected as detrimental to human freedom and responsibility. And the Barthian independent and utterly distinct deity was proclaimed dead, emptied of transcendence and reinterpreted, at least by Altizer, as fully incarnate in the finite world.

While the death of God movement was certainly a cultural event and though the work of Altizer is having a renewed impact upon theological reflection, especially upon today's deconstructionists, for the most part theologians did not pursue that direction. Instead, North American theology took several different courses. In the United States, process theologians, who had never succumbed to the lure of neo-orthodoxy, continued their constructive endeavors, working out of perspectives more American than Continental, still committed to the liberal belief that theology should and could coexist with other contemporary forms of knowledge. Others, primarily theologians Gordon Kaufman, David Tracy, and Edward Farley, led the discipline in an intense re-examination of its nature and task. Fascination, indeed obsession, with questions of method consumed much of the attention of theologians

during the 1970s and 1980s. Though such methodological fixation issued forth neither in consensus concerning the nature and task of theology nor in clarity about what direction substantive theological work should go, it has been these reflections that have set the immediate stage for contemporary historicist theology and determined the parameters within which contemporary proposals have been ventured.

But although this methodological work has been extremely important there have been other elements, as well, in our immediate past that have shaped the milieu within which contemporary theology has emerged. Significantly, while the dominant theological perspectives spent much energy on method and wondering what theology might consist in today, other theologians found a good deal to say. In particular, there arose in the late 1960–1970s voices of those who had heretofore been absent from the theological scene—African Americans, women, Latin Americans, and representatives of other oppressed groups or geographical locations. These thinkers and activists, including most prominently James Cone, Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, argued that so-called mainstream theology had attended almost exclusively to the issues emerging from the affluent and powerful forms of modernity while being blind to the realities of oppression, imperialism, poverty, and patriarchy that modernity had produced or abetted. Moreover, liberation, black, and feminist theologians indicted the dominant white male theology as complicit in such oppression, not only by virtue of ignoring it, but by often providing religious and theological sanction for it. Liberation thinkers explicitly claimed their perspectives were grounded not in the debates unleashed by the Enlightenment or nineteenth-century liberalism but in the concrete historical struggles for liberation of the poor, women, and persons of color. Thus, Gutiérrez could state that liberation theology focused on the question of the non-person in the modern world, not on that of the nonbeliever, and that it emerged out of and issued forth from the concrete realities of contemporary struggles.

The insistence on the part of liberationist theologians that not all contemporary theology emerges out of the same concerns or commitments is an important historicist reminder of the concrete and particular location of all thought, including theology. But as this chapter has insisted, historical lineages are complex and contemporary theological options have developed not out of singular lines of inheritance but in response to many. Thus while many liberation, African American and feminist theologians proclaimed their distance from the dominant modes of theologizing, they nonetheless altered the entire theological scene in profound ways. For they introduced, in a manner previously unheard of in theology, the issue of power and how it was deployed throughout reli-

gious worldviews and theological symbol systems. The seeming innocence of theology, for everyone, was over. Moreover, they opened the way for multiple other perspectives, of Asians and Africans and Native Americans and gays and lesbians, to begin to articulate their understanding of the nature, task, and criteria of late-twentieth-century and now early-twenty-first-century theology. And while the issues that emerged from modernity's rise and its current, not too clear, state have continued to vex contemporary theologians—liberationists no less than others—they have now been joined permanently by the challenge of those who seek not only viable intellectual stances but pursue just and equitable social, political, and economic systems. And finally, just as was the case in nineteenth-century Europe, there are increasingly theologians whose work and identity cannot be clearly separated into one of these categories rather than another but who are the product of and whose theological proposals have emerged from the multiple developments that confront us. Thus there are thinkers dealt with in this volume, such as myself or Cornel West, who trace our constructive stance not only to feminist or black thought but also to American pragmatism and sociohistorical perspectives as well as the influences of Continental thought.¹⁵

The importance of liberation perspectives has not only been their intellectual challenge but that those challenges self-consciously emerged out of and in solidarity with particular communities of the dispossessed and concrete struggles for transformation. This self-conscious location has pushed theology's awareness of historicity, contextuality, and of the political and social roles all theologies play. Moreover, as part of broader social and political movements, liberation theologies have functioned as theological indicators of widespread social change and upheaval. Not only have they pointed us to the internal dynamics of theology, they have been theology's access to developments beyond the academy and church. In particular, they represent an intense and prevalent repudiation of western social, political, sometimes economic, religious, and intellectual ideals. Both in its capitalist and now apparently in its socialist forms, western culture is under attack and in many areas of the world, its influence is being contested, even as its impact continues. Moreover, even within western contexts, representatives of oppressed groups have increasingly located the sources of their oppression within the western cultural tradition and especially within its modern manifestations. Thus, western theologies today, insofar as they embody or respond to liberationist concerns, now must work within a more global context that brings to bear nontheological factors and that evidences a conflicted attitude toward the western tradition.

If liberationist perspectives in theology are part of wider cultural

developments, so, too, are other challenges especially to the legacy of Enlightenment modernity that have appeared recently.¹⁶ While these challenges do not necessarily coincide with liberationist commitments, they, too, represent repudiations of certain elements of our modern heritage. In particular, across many disciplines from literary criticism to philosophy of science, from political theory to anthropology, and within nonacademic and even popular culture, the understanding of reason espoused by the Enlightenment has been thoroughly criticized and, by many, rejected. Assumptions of neutrality, of the capacity to ascertain sure and indubitable foundations, of reason's transcendental character and universal nature, shorn of historical particularity all seem problematic today. Moreover, the accompanying notions of the self as autonomous, independent of tradition and transparent to itself, are equally under attack. And language, once presumed to be capable of adequately representing reality, now appears multivalent, obscure, and infused with ideological commitments. As Peter Hodgson has stated, relativizing reason born in the Enlightenment is now itself relativized.¹⁷

While the assault on Enlightenment reason is epidemic and its defenders are few, there is little consensus about what this critical stance toward Enlightenment modernity signifies. For some it is the clearest embodiment of a decisive cultural and intellectual shift from at least Enlightenment modernity to a postmodern era. For others, especially certain religious and theological thinkers, it signals the end not only to Enlightenment pretensions but also to the expectations of nineteenth-century liberalism. And for others, in contrast, it is the extension and radicalization of historical consciousness as it developed in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century.

Theologians, no less than other thinkers, have offered varied, indeed disparate, responses to this cognitive crisis, ranging from postmodern deconstructionism to postliberalism to a critical revisionism to, as I will argue, a pragmatic historicism. Yet, whatever the theological response, it is clear that for contemporary theology to have credence within contemporary western culture, it must attend not only to the challenges of liberation perspectives but also to the sweeping intellectual indictment of the early modern era while forthrightly acknowledging the ways in which that heritage continues to shape us. Both acknowledgment of the problems with the early modern period and of its continued relevance in such things as the assumption of human rights and ongoing commitments to democratic reforms are required if theologians are to understand our situation.

These developments signal, in complementary and sometimes disparate ways, challenges to modernity and hence indicate significant moves *away* from at least Enlightenment assumptions and projects. But

if they embody drifts away from the Enlightenment, they are moves *toward* new assumptions and projects, especially historicist ones. From Altizer's incarnational theology, to Kaufman's antisupernaturalism, to liberationists' commitment to concrete struggles and the tracing of historical causes and effects to postmodernists' assertions of the local, temporal, and culturally specific character of subjectivity and knowledge, there has been a decisive turn to the historical and to thinking about humanity and the broader context through the lens of historical consciousness. While there are great differences among all these perspectives, they share to some extent not only the negative assessment of certain aspects of our inheritance, but a common historicist direction that is broadly influencing the tenor of our times.

These political, socioeconomic, and intellectual shifts have been part of broad cultural developments that have both impacted theology and been contributed to, albeit in mostly insignificant ways, by theologians and religious thinkers. There have also been concurrent developments that have been specifically religious and have, therefore, been peculiarly important to theology. And these, too, share the historicist tendencies of the broader cultural and intellectual shifts examined above. One such development has been the growth in awareness of the religiously plural nature of modern society. The world has always been religiously diverse but we have today a far greater sensitivity to religious pluralism and, especially for members of western societies, a recognition that pluralism is not a world away but constitutes, in an ever greater fashion, the fabric of western culture itself.

For western Christians, these realities hold particular significance for other religions, most markedly Islam, are growing rapidly both in the West and beyond. Meanwhile, Christianity, tied in modernity to the fortunes of western culture, has been challenged as the West's power and influence have declined. Though Christianity continues to grow, its major areas of sustained increase have been outside of the West and signal a decisive shift within Christianity as it becomes ever less of a European and North American religion but an internally pluralistic tradition no longer dominated by western conceptualities or ideological interests. And, even within the West, Christianity has become increasingly polyglot and multiple, with little cohesion. Moreover, all this is taking place while western Christians of various perspectives demonstrate, despite conservative resurgences, a good deal of alienation from their religious traditions and a seeming inability, especially in the United States, to conceive of how these traditions can contribute to the moral and public spheres. Hence, western Christian theologians are confronted simultaneously with the realities of religious pluralism, which mock traditional Christian claims to superiority, and with the contemporary challenge of