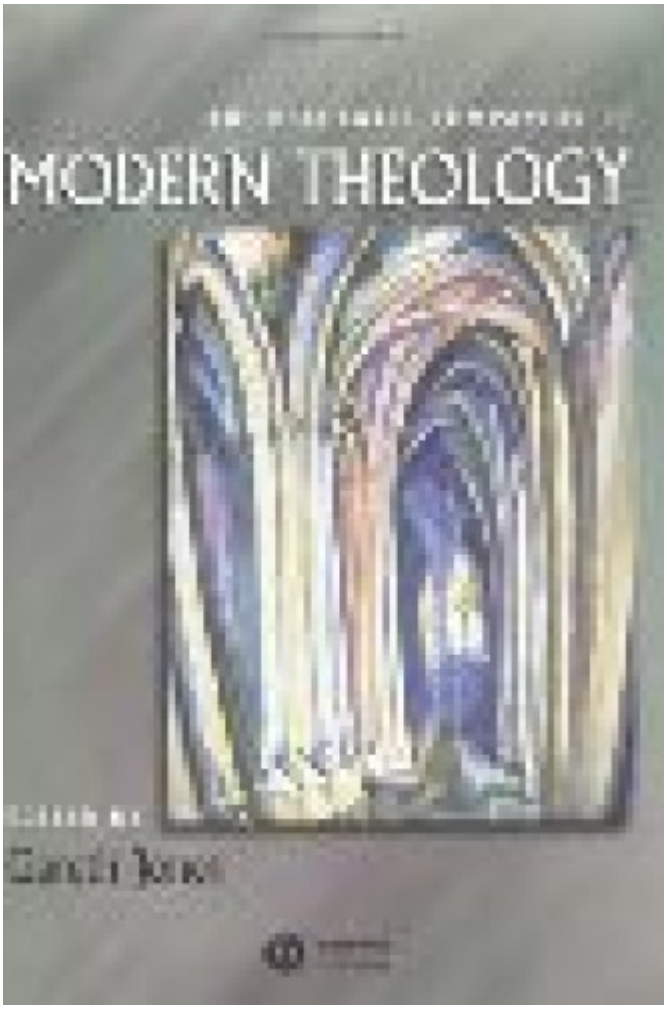
Mapping the modern

By Gary Dorrien in the March 22, 2005 issue

In Review



The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology

Gareth Jones, ed.
Blackwell

How does one define “modern theology”? Does “modern” refer to a historical period, a particular mode of thinking, or a conflation of both factors? Is “modern theology” a

confessional discipline, a public enterprise that eschews sectarian claims, or any form of “first order” religious discourse? This volume cuts through a tangle of conceptual problems by emphasizing critical thinking, minimizing questions of historical contingency, and giving remarkably little attention to the religious-studies challenge to theology as a discipline. Editor Gareth Jones defines his subject as the kind of theology that looks beyond the church for its answers.

Offering a composite series of arguments and models, the book’s 32 chapters begin with chapters on theology and the practice of faith (Robin Gill), biblical studies (John Barton), philosophy (David B. Burrell), culture (Charles T. Mathewes), social theory (Don Browning), anthropology (Ray Anderson) and history (William Dean).

Its second and third sections introduce models of other kinds, offering discussions of modern understandings of Christian history and doctrinal themes. The historical chapters are on patristics (G. R. Evans and Morwenna Ludlow), medieval theology (Stephen F. Brown), Reformation (Carl R. Trueman) and modernity (Garrett Green). The doctrinal themes are Trinity (Bruce D. Marshall), incarnation (John Webster), redemption (Esther D. Reed), eschatology (Andrew Chester) and church and sacraments (Gavin D’Costa). The burden of these chapters is to draw readers into modern arguments about basic topics, not to cover the history of the topics.

After 275 pages of introduction to the relation of modern theology to various disciplines, Christian history and classic doctrinal themes, the book offers eight chapters on key modern figures: Immanuel Kant (Gareth Jones), G. W. F. Hegel (Merold Westphal), Friedrich Schleiermacher (Dawn DeVries), Karl Barth (Mark Lindsay), Karl Rahner (Karen Kilby), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (John W. de Gruchy), Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich (James M. Byrne) and Hans urs Von Balthasar (Mark McIntosh). Apparently to explain the lack of recent or contemporary theologians, Jones explains that his criterion of selection was “highly significant figures [whom] no one would wish to omit.” He does acknowledge that all of them are dead, white and male.

The book’s final section on contemporary issues offers chapters on Christianity and other religions (Ian Markham), economics and social justice (Martyn Percy), feminism (Patricia Daniel), the renewal of mysticism (Ralph Norman), eco-theology (Laurel Kearns), drama, film and postmodernity (Richard Arrandale), race (M. Shawn Copeland) and science (Robert John Russell and Kirk Wegter-McNelly).

The chapters are uniformly well informed, clearly written, and to the point, and most do justice to their subjects by making them as interesting as possible. In a number of cases one gets the benefit of a prominent scholar's longtime engagement; the book's opening section on theology and the disciplines is especially notable in this regard.

Although the contributors generally follow Jones's directive to downplay history and emphasize arguments, Barton helpfully introduces readers to the history of biblical criticism, which makes a good deal of what follows more intelligible. Dean's account of the differences between the "witness" and "participant" theories of history also goes some way toward giving history its due.

Dean advocates a "new historicism" that takes its bearings from the first-generation Chicago School, while Green's essay on modernity similarly covers a pivotal subject with a definite viewpoint, in this case a neo-Barthian position. Green emphasizes that the cultural tide has turned against the Enlightenment modernist belief in inherent, universal structures of rationality and that a sizable group of younger theologians takes its cues from Barth's refusal to accommodate theology to modern culture and philosophy. To Green, Barth is the exemplar of how to think theologically from an antifoundationalist starting point.

Notwithstanding its position-taking essays from contrary standpoints, especially those by Dean, Daniel and Copeland, the volume gives privileged status to the "neo-orthodox" generation that turned from liberal Protestantism and Catholic neo-Thomism. Of the seven theologians who are featured, four represent the same generational, 20th-century dialectical revolt against liberal Protestantism; two represent an analogous movement in 20th-century Catholicism. Schleiermacher alone represents liberal theology and the entire 19th century. Thus the book perpetuates the notion that nearly all the important modern theologians belonged to the Barthian generation, despite the fact that for nearly two centuries modern theology *was* the liberal tradition.

The modern project of "looking beyond the church for answers" was almost entirely a liberal enterprise in the 18th century, throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century. The 18th- and 19th-century founders of modern theology were liberals, as were the founders of modern biblical criticism and historical scholarship. And it is simply not the case that Adolf von Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch were less important than Bonhoeffer and Bultmann.

Jones’s decision to overlook the period of liberal flourishing (1840 to 1925) was undoubtedly influenced by his decision to devote chapters to Kant and Hegel, but both were philosophers, and modern theology had barely begun in their time. By giving so little attention to the liberal tradition that actually developed modern theology—Harnack, Troeltsch and Albrecht Ritschl rate only brief mentions—the Blackwell companion inflates the importance of the dialectical group and fails to represent what it turned against.

There is a similar problem with the book’s representation of recent and current theological developments. The essays on various “contemporary issues” are supposed to offer current “challenges” to the kind of theology propounded by the giant figures of the 20th century, but Copeland’s nine pages on racial justice come awfully late (page 499) to have much impact on the whole, Daniel’s critique of “malestream” theology similarly hangs by itself, and major figures such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and James Cone are barely mentioned anywhere in the book.

So I wish that this important resource had given more attention to the early and recent history of modern theology, and a bit less to the mid-20th century. Yet it bears repeating that virtually all the essays in this book are well executed, offering stimulating discussions of a wide range of topics. It ends on a high note, with a wonderfully clear and detailed overview of recent theological literature on natural science.