It is my intention to discuss the role that the term "the modern age"—or *Neuzeit* in German—plays in theology in this century. My title sounds like an assembly of several items. I almost think of myself as a performer in a circus who is juggling many balls at the same time, except that the act is still in need of practice. To help you understand the game, I shall state two of my basic assumptions.

The first assumption relates to theology. Theology in this century can be seen as an ongoing conflict about the meaning of the modern age—*Neuzeit*. This continuous strife, I think, forms the real core of the intellectual history of theological thought and, at the same time, lies at the heart of many of its practical efforts. The period is marked by deep contrasts and controversies; nonetheless, the quest for the theological meaning of the modern age serves as a continuum for all parties involved. I understand this quest to be the legacy of historical consciousness to present-day theology.

* This article was written for a public lecture at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. It represents my attempt to include the important strands of North American theological thought in the reconstruction of the intellectual history of theology in this century. It is my conviction that the work of Ernst Troeltsch can serve as the most important starting point for fruitful research on the relations between European and North American theology in this period. Recently, English-speaking theologians have contributed immensely to a new endeavor of Troeltsch research. In Germany, the first complete Troeltsch bibliography has been published (F. W. Graf and H. Ruddies, *Troeltsch—Bibliographie* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1983]), and the first volume of Troeltsch studies is dedicated to his theological biography (H. Renz und F. W. Graf, *Troeltschstudien* [Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1982]). Thus, the comparison between Ernst Troeltsch and the older Chicago School, as referred to in this article, marks a further step in a larger field of research dedicated to the structural continuity of "liberal" thought in theology and to a theological understanding of the modern age (*Neuzeit*). This research is supported by the

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The second assumption relates to the modern age. In the course of this conflict and within this century a deep change has made itself known. The self-awareness of the modern mind has undergone a transformation, shifting from progressive self-confidence to a deeper concern for the complexity of humankind in the world. And that, of course, has preoccupied the intellectual elite. Aporetic terms like "posthistoric man," "postscientific age," or "postmodern era" are thrown around. However one feels about that, to think about it theologically means to reevaluate how theology relates to the modern age and how this relation has been altered. Questions that were once modern are now losing their bite—questions such as, Will the modern age grant a future to Christianity? Will religion cease? Can theology be upheld under present conditions?

Other questions have to be raised. One is, Can the modern age—Neuzeit!—be understood as a chapter within and embraced by the history of Christianity? This is the direction of the more constructive part of my argument. Holding both of these assumptions together, I suggest that we have to revise our historical notion of modernity. And since historical consciousness is the critical, and above all the self-critical, element in theological thought, this revision may have far-reaching consequences. This may be the time to come to grips with Ernst Troeltsch's visionary word "to overcome history by history," spoken at the end of his huge volume on "historicism."2

The two assumptions in my title sound, I dare say, sufficiently complex or confusing to call at once for a more exact explanation. That is precisely what I have in mind to give. But since I am still practicing my juggling game, I shall do so by means of a number of case studies that might help to describe the vision to which I am trying to give birth.

Ernst-Troeltsch-Gesellschaft, founded in 1981 (see the proceedings of its first congress, Protestantismus und Neuzeit [Gütersloh: Mohr, 1984]). I want to express my gratitude to the Divinity School of the University of Chicago for the support and encouragement given me during my short stay in Chicago in February 1984. All translations from non-English sources are mine. I want to thank Marcia Bunge, who helped with the translation of this article and made my English readable, and also James Duke, who went over the final version. Both of them discussed the material of this article with me and contributed to further clarification of many points.


2 Ernst Troeltsch, Der Historismus und seine Probleme, vol. 3 of Gesammelte Schriften (Tübingen: Mohr, 1922). This volume, as I understand, has not been translated into "the world's leading language" today. There is, however, an unpublished translation at the Meadville/Lombard Theological School, Chicago.
ON THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN EUROPE AND AMERICA

While preparing this article I felt encouraged by Paul Tillich, who once reflected on his experience of America in general and of American theology in particular. In 1952 Tillich gave an address entitled “The Conquest of Theological Provincialism.” This title pointed specifically to German theologians and their tendency to equate Protestant theology with German theology. He called this a “mixture of narrow-mindedness, presumption, and something true.”

Tillich’s warning still belongs in the luggage of any German theologian who comes to America, not in order to exchange a German for an American provincialism, but in order to understand the exchange between the provinces as a dialogue about the common concerns of theology in this epoch. Of course, I do not want to veil my European or German perspective; it probably already sticks out in the kind of questions I am trying to discuss. Yet the “morality of historical knowledge” is to regard and not to fear this perspective, not to be afraid of the outcry “subjectivism” or “historicism.”

This is especially true when one tries to view a whole epoch in its systematic-historical structure. In this case what counts is not so much the subjectivity of an individual’s viewpoint but rather the subjectivity inherent in specific traditions. Awareness of this kind of perspective is a significant part of historical consciousness. I will demonstrate this by citing three examples.

First of all Tillich again. What impressed Tillich in America was the pragmatism of American thought, even in theology—forward moving, horizontal, directed toward action and conquest of the world, and connecting itself with the empirical methods of the sciences. Tillich called pragmatism a way of thinking that differs entirely from the prevailing vertical thought in Europe. He said that historical consciousness was, above all, what “we, the emigrants, brought to America from historically minded Europe” (Tillich, Gesammelte Werke, 8:26).

Well, such statements arise out of comparison, and comparison is one of the sources of historical consciousness. It is done by travelers, or, to pick up another phrase from Tillich, it takes place “on the boundary.” Being on the boundary arouses different feelings within us. One feeling is that we are losing something. Comparison becomes the font

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of relativism, the way to learn about the relativity of one's own position; by this means we lose our "matter-of-course" attitude. Yet another feeling is that we are gaining something. Relativity has to do with relations. And here something is gained. Relativity, when it springs from comparison, can have a productive and enriching significance by establishing new relations.

Tillich's own comparison was intended to promote mutual understanding between Europe and America. Pragmatism and historical thinking represent differences and relations but do so within traditions of thought that distinguish modernity. Tillich wanted to bring historical thinking to America, but in fact over here there already existed a kind of historical thinking that was pragmatic. So when European thinkers sought to learn something from American pragmatism, they could have also learned a different way of historical thinking. That, I guess, is a still-untold story.5

Under different conditions, however, the same stereotypes of comparison used by Tillich may reveal nothing but contrast. "There are no people so hostile to the spirit of pragmatic philosophy as the Germans," Dewey said in 1915, and quoting him may introduce my second example.6 John Dewey published in that year his lectures on German philosophy and politics, which led him into the famous dispute about the philosophy of World War I as a cultural war, the "Ideas of 1914," as this dispute was later called. In his case, the comparison between American and European thought did not promote common understanding; instead it identified an irreconcilable contrast with almost religious depth. We find Dewey saying, "In Europe, generally speaking, Americanism is a synonym for rude empiricism and a materialistic utilitarianism."7 And in Germany, Dewey finds the might of a philosophy of history that provided German politics with "an intellectual looking glass... for its own historic evolution as an organic instrument of the accomplishment of an absolute will and law"—a philos-

5 Although I shall discuss in this article only some aspects of the older Chicago School of theology, one also has to think of H. Richard Niebuhr, who combined historical consciousness, as developed through Troeltsch, with pragmatic thought, as represented by George H. Mead (see H. Richard Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion" [Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1924]. i → "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," Journal of Philosophy 42 [1945]: 352-59).
7 Dewey, p. 125.

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In his own way, Dewey was reflecting on a discussion that simultaneously occupied theologians, philosophers, and historians all over Europe. In this discussion similar concepts were used to describe the contrast between "German" and "Western" thought. Ernst Troeltsch, among others, published several articles on the philosophy of World War I, describing the elements of the cultural struggle in terms analogous to Dewey's (one article was reprinted in an August 1915 ed. of the New York Times).

But unlike others, Troeltsch stated with remarkable firmness, "Regarding the main problems at stake, the leading European thinkers today [in his view the United States was not yet engaged in this intellectual battle] are converging in a significant way. Because of our philosophies, we would not need to make war."9

At the center of the intellectual debate after 1914 was obviously the meaning of the modern age. While Dewey speaks with a satisfied sense of being in intellectual accord with the modern mind as represented by an experimental philosophy of "trial and error," Troeltsch is moved by the quest for the intellectual conditions under which the development of modernity may be acknowledged in terms of philosophy, theology, and politics. Arguments from all sides point to the spiritual, philosophical, moral, and political understanding of the modern age.

My third example arises from the shadows of World War II. It brings new actors on to the scene. Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth met one another for the first time at the first assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948. Reflecting on their meeting there, Niebuhr came to the following conclusion: "Besides the traditional differences between the confessions, the most remarkable difference in Amsterdam was between a theology that people tried to grasp with the notion 'Continental theology' and a theology that people roughly called an 'Anglo-Saxon approach to theology.'" In Barth's warning that "the sorrows of the world should not be ours, the church's sorrows," Niebuhr recognized a theology that was not prepared to enter into an open discussion with secular culture and that tended to refuse engagement with modern civilization. After acknowledging the Kirchenkampf, Niebuhr ironically said: "Yesterday they discovered that the church is an ark in which a flood can be survived. Today they seem to

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8 Ibid., p. 127.
be so in love with the special function of the church that they decided to rebuild the ark into a house on the mountain Ararat and to spend the rest of their lives in it.”10

Barth responded to this criticism by claiming that he, too, noticed the contrast between Anglo-Saxon and Continental theology. But he countered the irony of Niebuhr by claiming that Anglo-Saxon theology fails to acknowledge “the authority of the Bible as a timeless authority and as founded in the exclusive history of God’s revelation.”11 This third example comes from a period in which neoorthodoxy is supposed to have reigned unquestioned on both sides of the Atlantic. And here they are, the familiar concepts of contrast between ethical pragmatism and historical consciousness.

In summary, all three examples show the following: First, the conflict over the meaning of modernity is obviously brought about by “nontheological conditions” inherent in modern thought. What one needs here is a “historical attitude,” to use a phrase from Schleiermacher; that is, one has to look at Christianity and at theology both from “within” and from “without.” Second, different attitudes do not appear in a diachronic sequence; what we must learn to observe is the contemporaneity of different approaches. The dispute in theology (and in philosophy, I may add) takes place within modernity; the meaning of modernity is discussed by observers who are at the same time participants. Third, the participants, being theologians, have to ask themselves how modernity can be identified theologically. Here questions arise that cannot be addressed simply to biblical studies or to dogmatics. They are questions for theologians within the history of Neuzeit, and yet these questions reach beyond it. All three conclusions suggest an understanding of theology as historical or empirical theology and, at the same time, as constructive theology.

THE STRUCTURE OF “LIBERAL THEOLOGY” AS HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

In this section I shall look more carefully at historical consciousness as it has structured theological thought in this century. To anticipate, the

10 K. Barth, J. Danielou, and R. Niebuhr, *Amsterdamer Fragen und Antworten*, Theologie Existenze heute, Neue Folge, 15 (1949), pp. 25 ff. As early as 1935, Niebuhr used the metaphors of flood and ark when he wrote, “In Europe Christianity has been definitely reduced to the proportion of an ark which cannot prevent the flood of communistic and nationalistic spiritual anarchy. It can only preserve the highest treasures of Christian spiritual life in samples of two and two of each species until the floods abate and a Mount Ararat arises out of the receding waters” (“Christianity in Its Relation to the Perennial and the Contemporary Man,” *Religion in Life* 4 [1935]: 558).

11 Barth et al., p. 34.
argument is that since about 1900 a new and distinct epoch began, bringing new passion to the quest for the meaning of the modern age.

The issue itself, of course, is not new. Since the Enlightenment it has received constant attention. And liberal theology saw the Enlightenment as the legitimate heir to the sixteenth-century Reformation. What the Enlightenment meant to theology, to make a long story short, may well be described—to borrow a phrase from Edward Farley—as a shift from “within” to “without the house of authority.” Theology “within the house of authority” stands for what Kant already critically called the Kirchenglauben (“church faith”), a theology founded on the threefold authority of Bible, dogma, and Church. Led by these authorities, theology developed an explanation and interpretation not only of faith but of reality as a whole, human and secular, historical and natural. In contrast, the phrase “outside the house of authority” stands for a critical attitude that undertakes the same task, theologically or philosophically, in a way that replaces or even surpasses authority with reason and insight. The change here was a change in comprehension. As Kant said, it is a revolution in the way of thinking itself (Revolution der Denkungsart). This change in the way of thinking went together with an assumption that there is a timeless identity of human reality as such. The assessment of this change is not now my topic.

About 1900 a different kind of change was perceived. The term “historicism,” although most often judged negatively, sums up a new awareness that focuses on the experience of historical change. Historicism implies more than the historical criticism that has been celebrated in biblical studies. It expresses the experience of reality as a reality of continual change. It is this almost ontological implication of historical consciousness that has determined the main stream of theological reflection in this century.

In order to illustrate a few aspects of this new historical consciousness I turn to Ernst Troeltsch, the most powerful prophet of its understanding. I shall clarify my argument by letting Ernst Troeltsch enter our discussion by way of five catchwords.

The first catchword is “relativism.” In “The Dogmatics of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” Ernst Troeltsch explained the concept of religious history that he had developed earlier, at the beginning of the century. Here the decisive term is the “universal historical compari-

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13 Ernst Troeltsch, “The Dogmatics of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” American Journal of
The point is this. It is the logic of comparison to relativize every claim to absoluteness. Historical relativism is not only a method but also a constructive task. This task, theologically speaking, is that of systematic theology as distinguished from dogmatics. The outcome of historical relativism is a new constructive program for theology. And the effectiveness of the historical outlook must prove itself in constructive results. Troeltsch did not intend to weaken the claim of Christian theology but to strengthen it in such a way that theology could take into account the entire reality of religion in its manifold relations. In this respect it is totally wrong to speak of Troeltsch in derogatory tones as only a historical relativist.

The second catchword is “historical world.” This new constructive task has to be undertaken in terms of history. Thus theology cannot be limited to the normative answers of tradition. Therefore in his debate with Harnack and others Troeltsch refuses to replace the old dogmatics with a new authority called the “essence of religion” or the “essence of Christianity.” Constructive thought must comprehend the whole of history as representing the reality of religion. The affirmative or even confessional language of theology that stimulates dogmatics is not to be ignored; rather it must be related to the total historical world. Theology, as a reflection on the language of Christian faith, must become engaged with the “historical foundations of the European-American world.” To quote Troeltsch, “We must shape our religious future on the basis of this foundation of our common spiritual being.”

Historical faith refers not to a faith that is historically fixed once and for all but to a faith that is historically realized and carried out in the medium of its historical change. Change stands for lived experience. Therefore the present challenge to theology is to perceive the present life of religion in its historical world.

This leads us to the third catchword, “sociality.” In biblical studies it is generally accepted that the sacred texts and the teachings of the Church are products of the Christian community or, to put it a bit more crudely, that christology is a social function of the society of believers. The focus of historical thought, therefore, is not religious individualism but the social world, the sociality of a Christian com-

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14 Troeltsch, Der Historismus und seine Probleme (n. 2 above), p. 69.
munity.\textsuperscript{15} And the sociality of Christianity has to be discovered in the reality of its empirical, cultural, and religious history. Thus today the history of contemporary society becomes the criterion for the validity of Christian teaching. Insights that have been tested methodologically in biblical studies are now at stake in the present history of society. We find here the real problem of modernity as it is put to theology.

Here we come to the fourth catchword, “the modern age.” Troeltsch no longer trusted the notion of an unquestionable continuity granted by history. His sharp distinction between the “old” and the “new” Protestantism opposed the notion that the modern age is in unquestioned continuity with the “heritage of the Reformation.” This traditional argument was the common conviction of most theologians from the Enlightenment to the late nineteenth century, including many contemporaries of Troeltsch. His \textit{Social Teachings} ends, at this point, with an open question.\textsuperscript{16} For him the nineteenth century was the beginning of the modern age in a narrow sense and, at the same time, the end of European Christianity as generally and officially accepted.

I cannot take time to show how Troeltsch in this important thesis agreed with Max Weber. For both of them, reflection on the Protestant roots of modernity was initiated by a present experience, an experience of disconnection from these roots. Weber’s work has to be mentioned in this context because henceforth the sociology of modernity, which grew out of the sociology of religion, has an important word to say within theology. Troeltsch attached little value to the attempts to defend faith on the basis of its premodern heritage simply by adding some modern expressions. The quest for the present significance of historical faith touches the heart of theology. Building up theology becomes an activity to be spelled out in the language of ethics.

“Ethics,” then, is the fifth catchword. Ethical thought becomes the tool of theological construction. Ethics, according to Troeltsch, is neither moral guidance for the individual nor rules and norms for social life. For Troeltsch, ethics gives theology its foundations; that is, it guides the theological mind in its vision of the entire reality to come.\textsuperscript{17} Its goal is to design the future historical world, including the world of religion. As can be shown in detail, this conviction is behind

\textsuperscript{15} This is the point in Troeltsch’s “The Significance of the Historical Existence of Jesus for Faith” (1911), in Morgan and Pye, eds., pp. 182 ff.


\textsuperscript{17} This is the case in his discussion of ethics as “Grundwissenschaft” (see Ernst Troeltsch, “Grundprobleme der Ethik,” in \textit{Gesammelte Schriften} [n. 2 above], 2:552 ff.).

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Troeltsch's program of "culture synthesis" (*Kultursynthese*) and the ethics of "cultural values" (*Ethik der Kulturwerte*). His ethics appeal not to necessities in history but to spontaneous and free decisions, decisions not only about deeds but even more so about thoughts—thoughts that conceive of the future. Decision, then, represents the present moment of history. The theme of ethics is the future of history; ethics establishes a new continuity and overcomes "historicism."

In this sense, for Troeltsch, modernity is of utmost concern to theology as ethics. Theology receives its agenda from the experience of present history. In this sense, it is historical theology. Was Troeltsch a lone wolf in this undertaking? What parallels are found among contemporary theologians between 1900 and 1930? Here it is time to speak of the Chicago School and to compare what we have heard with one of its representatives, Shailer Mathews.

### Liberal Theology in the Chicago School—A Comparison

In approaching this comparison I hesitate, cautioned by the reminder of Ernst Troeltsch, the master of comparison, not to underestimate the difficulties in penetrating the thought of others; but I also feel encouraged by his assurance that the "notion of the great Anglo-Saxon people provides a most important source for the knowledge of ourselves"—that is, the Germans.

The older Chicago School, represented by Mathews, Case, G. B. Smith, and others, shaped American theology during the same period in which Troeltsch and the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (together with Harnack and the *Ritschianismus*) did their work in Germany. Space constraints do not permit me to go more deeply into the historical circumstances. In short, there were no direct relations between Troeltsch and the Chicago School. This is surprising in the light of their astonishing similarities. Anyhow, I shall refer to Mathews only with regard to the five points of Troeltsch just mentioned. In general, Mathews too was determined to step out of the "house of authority" (even though it has been reported that there was a clear distinction between Mathews in the pulpit and Mathews in the academic chair). Mathews was under the impression that there was a profound change

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18 See Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, pp. 694 ff.
20 However, representatives of the older Chicago School were fully aware of the contemporary debate among German theologians, including Troeltsch (see Gerald B. Smith, "The Field of Systematic Theology," *Biblical World* 32, no. 2 [August 1918]: 113-23, esp. 119 ff.; and Foster, pp. 3 ff.).
in the experience of reality. He viewed this change as an experience of social and scientific change. He explicitly called his own theology “modernism.” This indicates that his aim was to find a faithful approach to modernity. In his own words: “Religious faith must ultimately be vindicated by being shown to be in accord with reality...to describe the scientific conditions in which religious faith must live, if it is to remain a possession of intelligent persons.”

Let me turn now to the catchwords already discussed and, first, to “relativism.” The sociohistorical method in Chicago was the child of historical relativism. For Mathews, every generation should understand religion in relation to its social environment. But using this method theologically means to use it constructively. Historical knowledge, for him, did not bring with it the dread of “relativism,” for it was related to a clear concept of social-historical evolution. His theory of evolution freely made use of Darwinian assumptions about reality. This theory of evolution allowed him to hold together change and esteem for religion. For Mathews, evolution was trustworthy because religion intentionally strives to be a resource for social evolution. From this first point it is already clear that, for Mathews, historical consciousness is formed into a theory of evolution, thus allowing for a direct grasp of the pragmatic ends of the religious process.

Looking then at the “historical world,” my second catchword, the constructive task is not to be oriented to the form of the seventeenth century's dogmatic. The theologian has to use “the material which theologies of the past have employed,” not throw it away, for this material indicates “the process by which we may bring the gospel to our modern life,” as former generations of theologians have done in their age. Shaping doctrine, then, is doing theology purposefully. The task of constructive theology within historical evolution is to pave the way for


an adjustment appropriate to the present. It is the function of Christian doctrine “to meet the religious needs of an age by such an adjustment and development of generic Christianity as will enable that age to realize its possibilities.”

The criterion for adjustment is its effect. Thus the historicity of the Christian life is described by the function of religion. By discovering the function of early Christianity in its world, the historian is already on the way to becoming a systematic theologian. Mathews calls this “positive theology,” a phrase reminiscent of Schleiermacher. Such a positive theology is shaped by redefining theology as a “representation as will do for today what the various concepts of the New Testament did for their day.” “Doing theology” for today demands that the theologian be a learned historian: “Theological teachers cannot hope to have modern significance if they force their followers first of all to think as did men of the past and to express truth as did men of the past. Theologians, of all men [and women, we have to add!], should not be anachronistics.”

This leads to the catchword “social world.” Historical studies state that expressions of faith are formed by the community of believers. If it is true that Christianity is a social movement, then historical change itself is the only adequate form of the religious social movement. Social movement is the pragmatic concept of history, and, as such, it is an element of change and progress. The ecclesial structure of theology can be understood to be in full accordance with the social process of modernity.

Speaking of the “modern age,” the modern age can thus be regarded, in Mathews’ view, as the new, welcome “house of authority” that orients theology. Here I find the most noteworthy difference between Troeltsch and Mathews. Concepts such as “democracy” or the “scientific age” are used by Mathews not so much to signal a conflict as to show the proper direction. The theological assessment of the present time strikes a note of accord as dissonance. Christianity can step into

foresee the meaning of the social-historical approach for the study of Christian doctrine” (see “Whither Historicism in Theology,” in Krumbine, ed., p. 64). However, for Mathews, the constructive meaning of this method became quite clear. 


25 “Positive evangelical theology,” for Mathews, is closely linked to the development of theological method, and it is the discussion of this method that builds a mainstream in his thought (see The Gospel and the Modern Man, pp. 3-7).


27 Ibid., p. xvi. The practical and even religious value of historical-critical studies at the university level seems to have been the common conviction of scholars in Germany and in the United States. For Mathews, this includes the study of social history and sociology.
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this chapter of modern history without losing its identity. The new house seems to be appropriate to living faith.

With regard to “ethics,” to take up the final catchword, the task is not Troeltsch’s enormous project of shaping a “future ethics of culture.” Instead, for Mathews, it is no doubt a present ethics of culture, of sociality. Both Mathews and Troeltsch were heavily engaged in practical politics. Yet for Mathews, if I am right, ethics does not bear the heavy burden of shaping a totally new future; as Christian ethics it is in close and immediate contact with what ethics means to common sense. And it promotes and stimulates the Christian life in the present context; it “revitalizes faith,” as Mathews prefers to say, in its activities.

To summarize, the sociohistorical method is informed by a theory of social evolution analogous to the theory of evolution in nature. One may easily assume that this theology, like that of the Chicago School as a whole, addresses questions that point toward an understanding of reality as a process of the total reality, including nature and cosmos, and in this way it already opens the door for “Whitehead ante portas.” This openness does not exclude, I hasten to add, great differences in methodology between the old and the new schools of thought in Chicago. In comparison to Troeltsch, the difference is less one in methodology than in the experience and interpretation of the modern age.

In the following period, the theological interpretation of modernity is heavily discussed and becomes anew the central focus of a fervent battle that is carried on mostly by European theologians. But again, since this was a battle not only within theology, it is worthwhile to look at it from both sides.

NEOORTHODOXY — ANTILIBERAL RESTORATION?

In this section I shall comment on the period after 1920 or 1930 in regard to a theological understanding of the modern age.

The poisoned arrows that dialectical theology shot at liberal theology were effective because they carried a strong criticism of the modern mind. Let me give a few examples. Emil Brunner in 1921 said, “The modern world is there, in spite of all protests of its opponents, as a creation and expression of the modern mind.” This modern world results from a movement of “world-historical dimension” whose theme is “man, the measure of all things.” This fact of the modern world, Brunner goes on to say, corresponds to another fact, that the modern

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world has entered into a crisis of life and death. This situation begs for an interpretation of present events as events of crisis.

It has often been claimed that dialectical theology as a movement discovered this crisis while the liberals still moved on in a self-complacent modern spirit. But this is historically wrong, at least with respect to Germany. Neither the vocabulary of crisis nor the phenomena to which it points was actually new. In the years before World War I we find a broad tradition of this type of crisis vocabulary in Europe. Thus it would be much more true to say that “crisis consciousness” is part of modern consciousness.

What is new is that theology thinks of itself as the elected spokesman of this crisis and that it perceives its mission to be consummating this crisis. Barth, Bultmann, Gogarten, and others took over the heritage of the modern mind by giving theology its place in this crisis. This was done without much regard for the empirical or actual situation of the present. It was this religious attitude that allowed theologians to take a leading role in this crisis mentality. They were under the impression that theology could regain a long-lost position of authority. How then is the religious language of crisis linked to the modern mind?

Brunner himself names two roots of the crisis of modern thought, “icy historical relativism” and a “pragmatic-moralistic” concept of religion. As you will notice, both are well-known terms that we find in Troeltsch and Mathews, only now they are set out in a language of disdain. The weapons of historical criticism, however, were put to further use by the new theological thought. Brunner himself makes full use of historical relativism, namely, in the ways he judges the entire four centuries after the Reformation as a period of permanent crisis, thereby relativizing modern thought as a function of subjectivism. The spirit of relativism comes to almost unrestricted reign by way of a theology of crisis that, as it developed, was uncontrolled by historical methods.

This overall criticism of the modern age, then, was influential in constructive theology as “neoorthodoxy.” It is well known that the school of dialectical theology broke apart over this constructive task of theology. The reasons for this split are still debated. They have to do, I think, with the dependence of this theology on its criticism of the modern age. The crucial point was, and still is, whether the situation meant, for theology, a return to orthodoxy, that is, a return to the “house of authority,” however it might be newly furnished. The term “neoorthodoxy,” as commonly used in North America, points in this direction—


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and with good reasons. No matter what one thinks of Karl Barth (whose influence is appropriate to the term "neoorthodoxy"), his theology, in all its major elements, is a function of his critique of modernity. It is, so to speak, the dogmatic form of unconditioned autonomy. The dogmatic form into which his theology has been shaped has a transitory character. Its theological and religious impulses press beyond its dogmatic form. The dogmatics, finally, serve pragmatic ends.

Anyhow, to restrict my remarks to this aspect, all theologians of this epoch have tried, after a period of pure dichotomy, to come into a more positive relationship to the modern age and to make constructive use of this relation. Karl Barth, for example, did so in connection with his christology, in his doctrine of the prophetic office of Christ, when he describes, although only in small print, how the Christian Church since the Reformation gained a new openness toward the secular world and in accord with modern history. Karl Barth here picks up an aspect of Troeltsch’s writings on the meaning of Protestantism for the rise of the modern world. Bultmann did this by making modern secularity the cornerstone of his program of demythologizing the New Testament. I need not mention any other examples now. The quest for the theological meaning of the modern age persists, even under dramatically changed conditions. What, then, is the contribution of theology to the self-understanding of modernity?

Before I look into this question more closely, I want to compare what I have said about European theology with North American theology in the 1920s and 1930s. Since I feel much more like a student than a teacher of the history of North American theological thought, I shall support my comments with some authorities. Evidently, a change of the general theological mood took place in North American theological thought that corresponded to the change in Europe. This change in North American theology was partly influenced by impulses that go back to Karl Barth and that were reflected in the term “neoorthodoxy.” John Cobb has recently described this change, and I quote him because of his direct reference to the Chicago School: “The influence of continental European theology led to sweeping rejection of ‘liberalism’, and the whole of the Chicago School was classified that way. The touchstones of acceptable theology became the authority of the Bible, the rejection of natural theology, the central focus on sin and redemp-

30 For Karl Barth, see my “Radikale Autonomie Gottes,” in Theorie des Christentums (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1972).
31 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 4.3.1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1961), pp. 18 ff.
tion, the utter uniqueness of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the encounter with God as transcendent person, and the absence of meaning in human history except as it is supernaturally given meaning. To all representatives of the Chicago School, these motifs appeared authoritarian, supernaturalist, exclusivist, and incredible. Hence Chicago, which had been in the forefront of shaping American theology, became a ghetto in a theological world shaped by new European modes of thinking.\footnote{32}

This sounds very familiar to the German reader, particularly to one who feels attached to "liberal" theology. Yet recalling the meeting between Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth in Amsterdam and noting the fact that theologians in North America speak of a "revival of liberalism" in the 1960s reflected in a lively methodological debate in theology, one has to ask whether John Cobb has told the complete story. One element of a likely difference between European and North American theology can be illustrated by quoting John C. Bennett. In an article bearing the significant heading "A Changed Liberal, but Still a Liberal," he looked at his own experience of this change. There he writes, "Theological liberals have been among the severest critics of liberal Christianity; yet, most of them cling to it in spite of their criticism."\footnote{33} Among "most of them" one has to count the two Niebuhrs, to mention two names that have become especially well known in German theology. Anyhow, I am under the impression that a strong element of continuity with the older liberal theology is dominant in North American theological thought. Can one give other than accidental reasons for this difference? Do we have to look at this period of theology with different eyes? These are the questions I am asking myself from a European perspective.

These questions become even more important when one reflects on how Whitehead's philosophy has been received in Chicago since the late 1920s and how it has been used in theology and in philosophy of religion. The process of this reception, I am convinced, is what may be called the "liberal counterpart" to the thought of dialectical theology, as has been observed here in Chicago but not, as far as I can see, in Europe. It is the temporal analogy that first comes to mind. And if this

analogy holds, then the relationship between “liberal” and “neoorthodox” theology is not, to say the least, a relationship between “earlier” and “later” or of “before” or “after” the change in theology, but it is the relationship between different theological ways of theology that reflect on what is of common concern—the historical change within modernity.

I come now to my main authority. Bernard Meland has spoken of the older liberal thought as one of “immediacy shorn of imagination and depth,” and he did so after having studied Wieman and Whitehead, not to abandon liberal thought but to promote it. And it has been Meland who has very clearly evaluated the relationship between his own liberal approach and the European movement toward neoorthodoxy. He used the term “the new realism in religious inquiry” to indicate “a new frontier of realism in Christian thought.” His main argument, which I want to underline, is this: “The significant issues in theological study that were posed are not to be seen as issues between liberalism and neo-orthodoxy.” Instead of a contrast he sees a structural mutuality in a line of “inquiry, extending from Barth, Tillich, and Niebuhr to Whitehead and Wieman in the nineteen-twenties,” forming a “new frontier of realism.”

All this may be self-evident in American theological thought. But it has not yet been a matter of reflection in the self-estimation of European theological thought. To draw the conclusion from this comparison, different types of theology in different areas are dealing with a common issue posed to us by the present stage of modern age. They give expression to an experience of change within modernity. Thinking about this common issue may throw new light on the task of theology. And that is what my last section will be about.

THE MODERN AGE—A CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY?

In this concluding section I will reflect on the intellectual challenge to theology in relation to the present experience of the modern age (Neuzeit). Theology presents itself as a cluster of neoliberal and neo-orthodox theologies. But names of this kind do not tell us very much. The many methods and concepts competing nowadays no longer suggest a pattern of overcoming of the “old” by the “new”—a pattern used by both progressive thought and its orthodox counterparts. This sug-

35 Reinhart Koselleck has outlined the history of the use of the idea of Neuzeit in “Neuzeit: Zur Semantik moderner Bewegungs begriffe,” in Vergangene Zukunft (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979), pp. 300 ff.
gests not so much the "imperative" of alternatively exclusive positions as the "comparative" of different perspectives on the same basic experience. One may call this the present state of historical consciousness in theology. But even this still sounds rather vague as long as the acknowledgment of different perspectives carries with it the spirit of indifference.

One possible explanation leads to the old and yet ever-new riddle of historical understanding. As G. H. Mead said, "We are continually reconstructing the world from our own standpoint. And that reconstruction holds just as really with the so-called 'irrevocable' past as with reference to the future; the past is just as uncertain as the future. We do not know what the Caesar or the Charlemagne of the next century will be. We look over histories which have dealt with Caesar, but we find a different Caesar portrayed in each one. A dozen Caesars have crossed the Rubicon. We are continually reconstructing the world, and that is what our consciousness means; it means the reconstruction from the standpoint of the individual."36 If one puts "Jesus" or "Religion" or "Christianity" in place of "Caesar," the result would be something like this: theology would actually be the expression of contemporary change; the history of modern theology would be the history of modern consciousness in theological form. This answer is not necessarily false, and, as a matter of fact, it has often been used in judging the theology of someone else, be it our predecessors or our colleagues. But it is neither a sufficient nor a satisfying answer.

The inherently skeptical undertone resounding within the subjectivism of a given time or epoch may be somehow lessened if we think about its constructive premise, as again G. H. Mead has put it: "The place of the individual as an important, extremely valuable thing comes into our thought by way of religion."37 And why should that not be true even for theologians?

But one has to go beyond this. Here at the Divinity School I feel again like using Meland's phrase the "new realism" to comprehend what is common to the different theological voices of this period. Of course, "realism" is not a very distinct or precise term; it has a number of connotations.38 But when it is used over against the subjectivity of pragmatic and historical thought, "realism" carries the meaning of

37 Ibid., p. 410.
"otherness." To speak of realism is to conceive of enduring experiences that cannot be sublated into a purely pragmatic attitude of mastering and shaping reality; enduring experiences are those experiences that occur in historical change and yet withstand the historical changes that are brought about by human beings. This, I take it, gives voice to a basic experience of the epoch. This experience opposes the optimistic modern faith in progress, and it challenges the motifs of self-realization that govern the modern mind.

This experience has much to do with the experience of unintended and unwanted consequences of human action; thus it occurs, in the first place, within the realm of ethical reflection. But beyond that it points to reality as something given to us and something to which we must respond. Reality is not thought of as trustworthy when it is thought of only in terms of construing things and submitting them to our ends.

The experience of reality as given to us is, in itself, a religious experience that theology must address. But it is, at the same time, the experience of the historicity of the modern age. Let me try to explain this argument and my definition of historicity.

Die Neuzeit is what it is in relation to religion or, to be more specific, in relation to historical Christianity. In answer to the question, What is Enlightenment? Kant “emphasized the main point of enlightenment, that is, of man’s release from his self-caused immaturity, primarily in matters of religion.”39 His critical writings on religion were at the heart of all his critiques. And Marx begins all his critiques of society with the critique of religion. And what was true for the genesis of modern philosophy and sociology became significant for psychology through Sigmund Freud.

Generally speaking, the modern concept of human reality includes—in its very historical structure—a notion of religion either as something to be overcome or as something to be fitted into the process of self-determination. The terms “new” and “modern” draw their emphatic persuasiveness, above all, from this perspective of religion. And it is through this historical constitution of modern thought that the “old,” the “hitherto,” of what religion stands for has had its say in the process of modernity.


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I call this the historicity of modernity (Historizität der Neuzeit) as specifically related to Christianity.

Historicity then, as I want to use it, does not mean that the modern age, like every epoch, has its time and is finite and that consequently we are about to step into another epoch, say, the “postmodern age.” That would make everything too easy and would be a kind of self-betrayal. Nor should historicity be understood as bringing welcome sighs of relief to theologians because of the fortunate survival of religion over against all its conquerors. I use the term “historicity” in a structural sense; secular thought has been structured by being intentionally “not religious.” Thus secular thought finds its own shape in relation to the otherness of religion; the relation to religion is then one of reflected distinction. This structural relatedness has been disguised somehow by notions of a temporal sequence that extends from a once religious “past” to a now secular “present” (this sequence, by the way, has been empirically falsified). And as a result misleading questions have been asked, such as whether religion and theology are “still” possible under modern conditions or whether they are “no longer” valid.

To speak of the historicity of “the modern age” (Neuzeit) in a structural sense may be followed up by evaluating its intellectual history as an abbreviation of “real” history. To give one example, historians have said again and again that there is no one religion as such. But here, in modern intellectual history, religion in the singular had a very clear, distinct meaning. In the self-explication of modern thought, religion in the singular represented the “other.” What we must now think about is the fact that there has been no real success in sublating or integrating “religion” into the categorial or conceptual field of modern scientific thought. The formal and ahistoric concept of “religion” in the singular may not say much about religions, but it tells us a great deal about modern thought. This concept of religion in the singular represents a functional scheme of reality. By losing sight of the historical determinedness of Christianity, modern thought has also lost sight of its own historical character. To speak of the historicity of the modern age (Neuzeit), then, indicates a rediscovery of the dimension of otherness as a necessary dimension of reality—a dimension from which secular thought departed.

To conclude, the historical relatedness of modern thought to Christianity has not really been dissolved. And this is shown to be true within its intellectual history. But this does not lead to the reestablishment of the apparent loser as the actual winner and to a call for theology in its old glory. In my judgment theology now has two main options. Theology can try to outbid the modern endeavor of assimilat-
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ing religion functionally by way of a theological counterconcept that seeks to outdo modern thought. One witness to this attempt may be the monument of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, for it represents a counterworld in itself. Another may be the attempt of the new eschatology to reach beyond all historicity and to link itself with a religious enhancement of secular activities. Yet another may be a theology that conceives of "cosmos" as an all-encompassing process of totality. Or, if you like, there may be a combination of all these attempts.

Here one could raise at least one question. Can it really be the mission of Christian theology to think away, so to speak, the human person, as acting, responsible, and suffering? Can theology deny subjectivity as the main reference point for theological reflection?

The other option could be to acknowledge the historicity of the modern age (*Neuzeit*) in its relationship to Christianity and to think of theology as "historical" theology. To elaborate the experiences of our epoch theologically does not necessarily imply the need for an independent theological system that stands by itself or, if you like, for itself alone. The experiences that gather around the new awareness of the historicity of modernity manifest themselves in a specifically secular, empirical way. They impress with the practical and theoretical endeavor for complete self-sufficiency the stamp of negativity, of destruction and threat to life. They manifest themselves in the realm of economical, political, psychical, and natural history. They provide no new proofs for an "absoluteness" of religion or Christianity, but they do prove that there is an enduring relatedness of humankind to recourses of life that cannot be controlled but that ask for a receptive attitude. All this takes place within the context of the history of Christianity: these new experiences of reality address the enduring responsibility of human persons, a responsibility that cannot be turned over to someone else.

It is the task of what I call ethical theology to promote ways and means by which contemporary experience may be disclosed in its wider historical context. Religion is not what one has or possesses. Religion offers specific and concrete ways to enter into a relationship with that reality that bears and contains all life. The tradition of Christian theology informs us that this reality is one of ultimate freedom that grants people a firm stand in history beyond history. This entire task has to be carried out within the medium of contemporary experience.

It is in this sense that the words of the old liberal Ernst Troeltsch may be quoted again: "Das Jenseits ist die Kraft des Diesseits."

When Karl Barth was here in Chicago some twenty years ago, he ended his public discussion, in Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, by chal-
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lenging Americans to develop a "theology of freedom." Theological thought should be guided by the "authority of freedom," which has shaped the historical profile of Christianity in this world. Consciousness of this freedom has given birth to the modern age, but, as we can now clearly see, it has also made us aware of its limits, which call for theology to view the modern age as a chapter within the history of Christianity.

"The question may now be put: Do we live at present in an enlightened age?" And Kant, who asked this in 1784, goes on to say: "The answer is: No, but in an age of enlightenment." What theology owes us is the light of Christian enlightenment.