

Neology

'Neology' denotes a group of German Protestant theologians who were active in the middle decades of the 1700s. These theologians embraced the ideas of the Enlightenment while remaining within the church and seeking to purify theology and defend Christianity. Leading representatives include Johann Friedrich Wilhelm Jerusalem (1709-1789), Friedrich Samuel Gottfried Sack (1738-1817), and Johann Joachim Spalding (1714-1804). Johann Salomo Semler (1725-1791) is also sometimes classed with the Neologians. The term 'neology' signified that this movement was a new teaching, presumably in contrast to the systems of orthodox theology prevalent at that time. However, this term is something of a misnomer, for Neologians were attempting to restore what they understood to be the original and pure form of Christianity, not to introduce a brand new teaching.

Influences on Neologians were many, for they tended to be philosophically eclectic. They were not system-builders but administrators and reformers. Their main concern was religious and pastoral, not philosophical. As a result, they borrowed selectively from G. W. Leibniz, Christian Wolff, and English deists, in spite of the fact that Leibniz and Wolff were, in most respects, far more theologically conservative than were the English deists and in spite of their anxiety about the tendencies of radical deists.

For this reason, it is important not to simply classify the Neologians as German deists, at least if deism means the philosophical agenda advanced by the radical French and English critics of Christianity or by Biblical critics such as Hermann Samuel Reimarus. Although the Neologians seemed radical and destructive enough to orthodox Protestant theologians, unlike the radical deists they were not anti-clerical and did not seek the elimination of the church. On the contrary, leading Neologians were ordained ministers and filled important roles in the church. For example, Johann F. W. Jerusalem served, in 1771, as vice-president of the consistory (the regional church council) of Wolfenbüttel. He also served for some years as court preacher and several times was offered the position of general superintendent of the state church in Magdeburg. Neologians, then, did not desire the end of the church. In fact, Neology may be regarded as an apologetic effort directed against the attacks of rationalist critics of Christianity. An example of their apologetic efforts was Spalding's 1756 translation of Bishop Joseph Butler's defense of revealed religion and critique of rationalism, *The Analogy of Religion*. At the same time, although loyal supporters of the church, they were sharply critical of some of its doctrines and practices. It is this criticism for which they are best known. However, even their critical program arose, not solely from rationalistic impulses but instead from their conviction that they were continuing the task of purifying religion that had been begun but, in their opinion, left incomplete by the sixteenth century reformers. Accordingly, their critical and reforming agenda must be seen in the light of their ecclesiastical commitments and their theological temperament, which was, in comparison with the radical deists, quite conservative.

Like the deists, Neologians affirmed the concept of natural religion. Natural religion was regarded as the original and universal religion of the human race at its beginning. However, in calling this original religion natural, Neologians did not intend to distinguish it from revealed religion. Natural religion was not, in their conception, a religion derived strictly from human reasoning. Instead it rested on an original revelation to humankind. Further, subsequent revelations (the religion of Moses and, later, Christianity) were necessary to restore this original religion. Neologians disagreed as to the historical function of Christianity in this scheme, some holding it to be merely a confirmation of the original religion, others regarding it as a further development of that religion. Nonetheless, Neology stood for the belief that Christianity does not in any way contradict natural

religion and is in fact another revelation of natural religion. Of course, what they understood by 'Christianity' differed somewhat from the orthodox conception. In their view, natural religion and Christianity are essentially a matter of moral duties toward God and neighbor, the promise of future blessedness, plus ancillary doctrines about God. However, they argued, to this simple, moral religion had been attached a great many doctrines, rites and practices that do not correspond to natural religion and that in fact obscure it. The sixteenth century reformers, they held, had made a good beginning in the return to natural religion; however, the return had been interrupted by the rise of Protestant orthodoxy. The task at hand, as they saw it, was to pick up where the reformers had left off.

It is important to keep this point in mind because it shows that Neology was part of a broader eighteenth century movement of reform and change in the Protestant churches, a movement whose other prominent member was Pietism. Although the specific aims of Pietists differed significantly from those of the Neologians, the overall goal of the two was ostensibly the same, namely to continue the reforming work of Martin Luther and the other reformers. Neology and Pietism were thus jointly opposed to the assumption of orthodox theologians that the church's main task was maintaining purity of doctrine. For the Neologians and the Pietists, on the contrary, the main concern was the Christian life and the need to promote sound practice. Although neither entirely discounted the importance of doctrine, both tended to judge its role and the validity of particular doctrines by their relation to the Christian life. Both were concerned to overcome what they saw as a deleterious separation between doctrine and practice at work in orthodox Protestant theology. Of course, Pietists and Neologians had dramatically different conceptions of the Christianity that would result from their reforming work. They also had correspondingly different interpretations of Luther and the reformation. Pietists took orthodox theology for granted and wished to emphasize practice as a necessary complement to pure doctrine. Neologians, on the contrary, were interested in a wholesale renovation of doctrines, some of which they regarded as obstacles to sound practice. As a result, Neologians generally proved to be more critical of specific doctrines than did Pietists. As the century progressed, Pietists increasingly came to see the danger of Neology's questioning and rejecting doctrines. Accordingly, they began moving in a more conservative direction and warmed to the interests of the orthodox theologians. However, in spite of these significant differences between the two movements, we understand Neology rightly only if we recognized its intention to do for its own generation what Luther did for his and only if we see the vital similarity between Neology and Pietism and their common struggle against the orthodox theological establishment. The lesson to be drawn is that the central theological issue in Germany in the 1700s was not, as it was in other countries, whether or not Christianity is the true religion. The Neologians affirmed the validity of Christianity as heartily as did the Pietists and orthodox theologians. The issue was instead about how best to understand Christianity and the role of doctrine in relation to practice.

The Neologians' critique of doctrine rested on their view of natural religion and revelation. In orthodox theology of all confessions in this period, revelation was understood to be a supernatural communication of truths that are beyond human comprehension. The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, was generally regarded as a doctrine that human reason could neither discover nor understand. It rests, it was held, on Biblical passages that reveal truths about God. Since the Biblical truths surpass human understanding, they must, it was argued, have been supernaturally communicated to the human authors of the Bible through an act of inspiration. Neologians rejected every aspect of this theory. They did not accept the premise that revelation is the impartation of incomprehensible truths, because in their view true religion is simple and moral. The doctrines of natural religion, they held, comprised a few tenets such as belief in God, in God's providential care,

in the immortality of the soul and future blessedness. Consequently, revelation contains only the doctrines required for obedience God's moral commands. The revelatory importance of Jesus Christ, then, was not that he disclosed hitherto unknown and intrinsically incomprehensible doctrines but that he demonstrated true religion in his own day and thus showed the way back to it. They also rejected the orthodox view of the Bible's inspiration. Since the Bible's truths are not supernatural, there was no need to believe in a supernatural mechanism for their transmission. This conviction was buttressed by the Neologians' involvement in the budding Biblical criticism of their day. Analysis of the various sources behind Genesis and other Biblical books tended to convince them that the Bible's composition was a completely natural process and not superintended by supernatural providence.

With such a view, Neologians were committed to the agreement between reason and revelation and to overcoming the opposition between the natural and the supernatural. This placed them in opposition both to orthodox theology and to extreme rationalists. In disagreement with orthodox theologians, Neologians did not hold that revelation is above human reason. Instead, they asserted, it is fully reasonable. At the same time, unlike the more extreme rationalists, they did not suggest that reason is autonomous and can replace revelation. Although the content of revelation is fully reasonable, revelation is not thereby rendered unnecessary. On the contrary, it was the means by which humankind had originally received the truths of natural religion and was subsequently needed to help humankind return to natural religion.

Their critical attitude toward revelation and inspiration did not induce the Neologians to reject the Bible's validity. Unlike Reimarus, for example, they did not question the truthfulness and honesty of the apostles. On the contrary, they saw in the Bible the perfect antidote to orthodox theology's proliferation of complex doctrines through the construction of creeds. The Bible, they held, although the product of human thought, bears witness to the simplicity of natural religion in contrast to the speculative and incomprehensible doctrinal edifice of orthodox theology, with its authoritarian and supernatural overtones. It is evident, then, that one of the underlying disagreements between Neology and orthodox theology was a hermeneutical issue, namely how the Bible is to be interpreted. Orthodox theologians insisted that the ecclesiastical creeds express the sense of Scripture and are therefore the only sure guide to its meaning. The Neologians contrasted the Bible and the creeds and argued that the creeds distort the meaning of the Bible. In place of the creeds they employed the notion of natural religion and its relation to the practical life as their hermeneutical guide. As a result, various Neologians began giving up such doctrines as original sin, atonement by penal satisfaction, and the Trinity, not only because of their reputed lack of significance for the practical Christian life but also because of their poor attestation in the Bible. In addition to this hermeneutical issue, the Neologians had ecumenical concerns. Like later theological liberals, they were convinced that creeds were inherently divisive, unnecessarily separating Christians on the basis of non-essential beliefs.

Not surprisingly, Neologians did not adhere to the orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ. In particular, the doctrine of the Trinity came in for special criticism. Jerusalem, for example, attacked the supposed continuity between the Bible and the tradition of Trinitarian thought. He drew attention to the diversity of opinion among early church leaders. Further, he argued that the statements of the early church fathers were so indefinite and vague that both proponents and opponents of the doctrine of the Trinity could appeal to them for support. Certain of them, notably Justin Martyr, were demonstrably not orthodox, at least by later standards. Finally, Jerusalem noted that, whereas the fathers most influenced by Plato are usually the ones called on to support the

doctrine of the Trinity, it was non-Platonic writings such as Clement, Barnabas, and Polycarp, writings that are reticent to attribute divinity to Christ, whose teaching most resembles that of the New Testament. Here Jerusalem was introducing the ideas of doctrinal development and diversity. They represented a potentially serious blow to the Trinity and other doctrines, for they suggested discontinuity between the Bible and the creeds, with unfavorable results for the creedal tradition.

With respect to interpreting the New Testament, Jerusalem was impressed by Jesus' statement that "The Father is greater than I." This functioned for him as a hermeneutical benchmark by which all other Christological statements were judged, for it clearly asserts the subordination of Jesus to God the Father. He also put great emphasis on the fact that Jesus did not expressly claim to be the Logos spoken of in the prologue to John's Gospel. Our understanding of the Logos, he argued, must be taken from the ancient Jewish way of thinking and not from Philo's Platonizing theology. If we understand it so, then the Logos of John's Gospel is seen to be not a pre-existent being but instead simply the message of Jesus about God the Father. Consequently, the orthodox view of the incarnation, involving the union of the second person of the Trinity with human nature, is judged to be without Scriptural warrant. Jesus is not the incarnate God but rather the supreme proclaimer of God. This example reveals the Neologians' strategy--profess allegiance to the Bible's true teaching, argue on historical and philological bases that the Bible often does not mean what orthodox theologians have proposed that it means, and then offer a revised interpretation that diminishes the supernatural dimension of the Christian faith and represents the Bible as agreeing with their conception of natural religion.

Neology's eventual demise was signaled by G. E. Lessing's critique. Although there are similarities between Lessing's theology and that of some Neologians, he opposed their understanding of reason and revelation. Discerning Lessing's own theology poses challenges to the scholar but it can at least be said that he objected to the Neologians' attempt at identifying the content of revelation with a core of simple moral truths and with their subsequent rejection of doctrines like the Trinity. Lessing's attitude toward such doctrines is somewhat complex; however, his overall approach is clear. Like the Neologians, he could not accept these doctrines at face value. But unlike the Neologians, he believed that the doctrines contain important truths that can be rescued through proper philosophical thought and rational comprehension. So, for example, he subjected the doctrine of the Trinity to an analysis that anticipates that of later idealists such as G. W. F. Hegel. The doctrine of the Trinity emerges from this analysis as a completely rational truth about the eternal being of God derived in an utterly speculative manner. In short, Lessing agreed with the Neologians about the impossibility of simply accepting orthodox doctrines in their customary sense. He disagreed with them in his unwillingness to simply reject them wholesale and to reduce revelation to a minimal rational and moral content. Reinterpretation, not rejection, was Lessing's strategy. In this way, it was Lessing and not Neology that pointed toward the main developments in Protestant theology in the nineteenth century.

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