

25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION



ALISTER E. McGRATH

# HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE  
HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

THIRD EDITION

WILEY Blackwell

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# **HISTORICAL THEOLOGY**

## **An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought**

**THIRD EDITION**

ALISTER E. McGRATH  
Oxford University

**WILEY** Blackwell

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## How to Use This Book

This book aims to introduce you to historical theology as an important and interesting subject. It is also a very large topic; to do justice to it, at least five substantial volumes would be required. This book is an introduction to its aims and themes. It aims to pack as much useful information into a single volume as is realistically possible, using approaches that have been tried and tested in classrooms in Europe, North America, and Australasia. The book makes use of some material already presented in my best-selling work *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, which has been reconfigured for the specific purpose of introducing students to the discipline of historical theology. Although much new material has been added and some existing material rewritten, the basic approach and some contents of this earlier work have been retained.

The guiding principle that lies behind this volume is *selective attention*. It is like a map, giving you a good idea of the landscape, filling in enough detail to help you make sense of things, and making it easier to move on to a more detailed engagement with any of its features. It is assumed that you do not have the time to become familiar with every aspect of the history of Christian thought, but want a general familiarity with its most important aspects. The approach adopted is to begin by painting a scene using some very broad brush strokes and then filling in the fine detail in selected areas of importance (the 30 Case Studies). This will allow you to come away from reading this book with a good general understanding of the development of Christian theology. Despite its brevity, however, the work includes a lot of material – considerably more than is included in most introductions of this kind.

The book opens with an Introduction that tries to explain what historical theology is, how it fits into the study of theology as a whole, and why it is a subject worth studying. You are strongly recommended to read this before proceeding further, as it will help you get a sense of orientation as you approach the subject.

To break the material down into manageable sections, the history of Christian thought has been divided into four broad periods. While this division of history is useful, it is important to realize that it is slightly arbitrary at points. We need to heed the warning of the Cambridge historian G. M. Trevelyan (1876–1962) on this matter: “Unlike dates, periods are not facts. They are retrospective conceptions that we form about past events, useful to focus discussion, but very often leading historical thought astray.” These four divisions are:

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Chapter 1 | Early Christian Theology: The Patristic Period, c.100–451 |
| Chapter 2 | The Middle Ages and the Renaissance, c.500–1500           |
| Chapter 3 | The Reformation and Post-Reformation Periods, 1500–1750   |
| Chapter 4 | The Modern Period, 1750 – The Present Day                 |

These divisions, though a little arbitrary, have proved useful in a teaching context, in that they break a large body of material down into manageable segments, each with its own distinct historical “window.” Each chapter contains two major sections, as follows:

1. A general *overview* of the period in question, which identifies the historical background to the period and its main theological developments, individual

theologians, and schools of thought or theological movements that you need to know about. It also introduces the basic theological vocabulary that you will need to know to make sense of other theological works. You should read this overview before exploring the individual case studies that follow. If you need a very brief overview of the history of Christian thought, you are recommended to read only the four historical overviews and leave the individual case studies for study at a later date. These general overviews are useful in getting a general sense of what happened during these periods, what issues were discussed, and the identity of some significant theological voices at the time. However, they need to be supplemented by an in-depth and more detailed account of some of the theological developments of this period, which are provided by the case studies, to which we now turn.

2. This general overview is followed by a series of individual *case studies* that examine some of the theological themes or debates of the period in question in much greater detail. This allows you to supplement a general understanding of the period with a specific knowledge of some of its significant themes. In some cases, the case studies are text-intensive, allowing you to engage with primary texts of importance. Here, you will be given some guidance as to how to read the texts and gain the most from them. Other case studies may take the form of general surveys, aiming to pack as much information as possible into a limited space.

If you are using the book to teach yourself historical theology, it is recommended that you read the chapters in the order in which they are presented. If you want to do nothing more than gain an overview of each period, you need only read the historical overviews; the detailed

engagement with specific themes in the case studies can be left for another time.

This volume works on the basis of “explain it the first time round.” Thus the material on the medieval period assumes that you know about the patristic period, the material on the sixteenth century assumes that you know about the medieval period, and so forth. However, if you are using the book in conjunction with a taught course, you can easily work out which sections of the book relate to the ordering of material used by your teacher. If in doubt, ask for guidance. A substantial section entitled “For Further Reading” will allow you to identify books or articles that will be helpful to you if you want to follow up on anything that interested you and that you would like to explore in greater depth.

If you come across terms which you do not understand, you have two options. First, try the glossary at the end of the work, which may give you a brief definition of the term and refer you to a discussion of the relevant material in the text. Second, try the index, which will provide you with a more extensive analysis of key discussion locations within the volume.

Finally, be assured that everything in this book - including the contents and the arrangement of the material - has been checked out at first hand with student audiences and readers in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The work is probably about as user-friendly as you can get. However, both the author and publisher welcome suggestions from teachers and students for further improvement, which will be included in later editions of the work.

# Introduction

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[The Concept of “Theology”: A Brief Introduction](#)

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This volume is a basic introduction to the discipline of historical theology. So why is historical theology important? For a start, it helps us to understand that doing theology is about stepping into a conversation that has been going on for a very long time! We need to know how that conversation developed and what was discussed before we became part of it. Before looking at its themes in more detail, it is important to have a sense of the place and importance of this discipline within theology as a whole. To begin with, we shall consider the historical development of Christian theology as an academic subject and try to understand how the specific discipline of “historical theology” fits into this overall picture.

## The Concept of “Theology”: A Brief Introduction

The word “theology” is easily broken down into two Greek words: *theos* (God) and *logos* (word or discourse). Theology is thus “discourse about God,” in much the same way as “biology” is discourse about life (Greek: *bios*). If there is only one God, and if that God happens to be the “God of the Christians” (to borrow a phrase from the third-century writer Tertullian), then the nature and scope of theology is



relatively well defined: theology is a reflection upon the God whom Christians worship and adore.

The word “theology” is not itself biblical, but came to be used occasionally in the early patristic period to refer to at least some aspects of Christian beliefs. Thus Clement of Alexandria, writing in the late second century, contrasted Christian *theologia* with the *mythologia* of pagan writers, clearly understanding “theology” to refer to “Christian truth claims about God,” which could be compared with the fictional stories of pagan mythology. Other writers of the patristic period, such as Eusebius of Caesarea, also use the term to refer to something like “the Christian understanding of God.” However, it seems that the word was not used to refer to the entire body of Christian thought, but only to those aspects relating directly to God.

Yet Christianity came into existence in a polytheistic world, where belief in the existence of many gods was a commonplace. Part of the task of the earliest Christian writers appears to have been to distinguish the Christian god from other gods in the religious marketplace. At some point, it had to be asked which god Christians were talking about and how this god related to the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” who figures so prominently in the Old Testament. The doctrine of the Trinity appears to have been, in part, a response to the pressure to identify the god that Christian theologians were speaking about.

As time passed, polytheism began to be regarded as outdated and rather primitive, especially within the sophisticated intellectual culture of the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria. The assumption that there was only one god, and that this god was identical to the Christian god, became so widespread that, by the early Middle Ages in Europe, it seemed self-evident. Thus Thomas Aquinas, in developing arguments for the existence of God in the

thirteenth century, did not think it worth demonstrating that the god whose existence he had proved was the “god of the Christians”: after all, what other god was there? To prove the existence of god was, by definition, to prove the existence of the Christian god.

Theology was thus understood as a systematic analysis of the nature, purposes, and activity of God. Although “theology” was initially understood in a restricted sense to mean “the doctrine of God,” the term developed a wider meaning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as the University of Paris began to develop. A name had to be found for the systematic study of the Christian faith at university level. Under the influence of Parisian writers such as Peter Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers, the Latin word *theologia* came to mean “the discipline of sacred learning,” embracing the totality of Christian doctrine, not merely one of its aspects – namely, the doctrine of God.

There is no doubt that the introduction of theology into university circles in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries gave a new stimulus to the systematization of the subject. Medieval universities – such as Paris, Bologna, and Oxford – generally had four faculties: arts, medicine, law, and theology. The faculty of arts was seen as entry level, qualifying students to go on to more advanced studies in the three “higher faculties.” This general pattern continued into the sixteenth century, as can be seen from the educational backgrounds of two leading theologians of this period. Martin Luther initially studied arts at the University of Erfurt, before going on to study within the higher faculty of theology at the same university. John Calvin began his university life by studying arts at the University of Paris, before going on to study civil law at the University of Orléans. The result of this development was that theology became established as a significant component of advanced study at European universities. As more and more

universities were established in western Europe, so the academic study of theology became more widespread.

Initially, the study of Christianity in western Europe was focused on schools attached to cathedrals and monasteries. Theology was generally understood to be concerned with practical matters, such as issues of prayer and spirituality, rather than as a theoretical subject. However, with the founding of the universities, the academic study of the Christian faith gradually moved out of monasteries and cathedrals into the public arena. The word "theology" came to be used extensively at the University of Paris during the thirteenth century to refer to the systematic discussion of Christian beliefs in general, and not simply beliefs about God. The use of the word in this sense can be seen to a limited extent in earlier works, such as the writings of Peter Abelard. However, the work that is widely regarded as being of decisive importance in establishing the general use of the term appeared in the thirteenth century - Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*. Increasingly, theology came to be seen as a theoretical rather than a practical subject, despite reservations about this development.

Many early thirteenth-century theologians, such as Bonaventure and Alexander of Hales, were concerned about the implications of neglecting the practical side of theology. However, Thomas Aquinas' argument that theology was a speculative and theoretical discipline gained increasing favor among theologians. This alarmed many medieval spiritual writers, such as the fourteenth-century monk Thomas à Kempis, who felt that this encouraged speculation about God rather than obedience to God. At the time of the Reformation, writers such as Martin Luther attempted to rediscover the practical aspects of theology. The Genevan Academy, founded by John Calvin in 1559, was initially concerned with the theological education of pastors, oriented toward the

practical needs of ministry in the church. This tradition of treating theology as concerned with the practical concerns of Christian ministry would continue in many Protestant seminaries and colleges. However, later Protestant writers operating in a university context generally returned to the medieval understanding of theology as a theoretical subject, even though they usually made it clear that it had certain definite practical implications in the areas of spirituality and ethics.

The rise of the Enlightenment during the eighteenth century, particularly in Germany, called the place of theology in the university into question. Enlightenment writers argued that academic inquiry should be free from any kind of external authority. Theology was regarded with suspicion, in that it was seen to be based on “articles of faith,” such as those contained in the Christian creeds or in the Bible. Theology came increasingly to be seen as outmoded. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that university faculties of philosophy were concerned with the pursuit of truth, while other faculties (such as theology, medicine, or law) were concerned with more practical matters, such as ethics and good health. Increasingly, philosophy came to be seen as the academic discipline that was concerned with issues of truth; the continuing existence of a university faculty of theology would have to be justified on other grounds.

One of the most robust justifications of the need for university faculties of theology was provided in the early nineteenth century by the Protestant theologian F. D. E. Schleiermacher, who argued that it was essential for the good of both the church and state to have a well-educated clergy. In his *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology* (1811), Schleiermacher argued that theology had three major components: philosophical theology (which identifies the “essence of Christianity”); historical theology (which deals

with the history of the church, in order to understand its present situation and needs); and practical theology (which is concerned with “techniques” of church leadership and practice). This approach to theology had the result of linking its academic credentials with public agreement that it was important for society to have a well-educated clergy. This assumption was fine in early nineteenth-century Berlin, where Schleiermacher was based, but with the rise of secularism and pluralism in the west, its validity has come increasingly to be questioned.

In countries in which a strongly secular approach came to be adopted, Christian theology was virtually excluded from the university curriculum. The French Revolution of 1789 led to a series of measures designed to eliminate Christian theology from public education at every level. Most of the older universities in Australia (such as the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne) were founded on the basis of strongly secular assumptions, with theology being excluded as a matter of principle.

However, it is a pluralist rather than a secular approach that is now more widespread in the west, particularly in North America. Here, the distinctive position of Christian theology in public education has been called into question, in that it is held to privilege one religion over others. One result of this trend has been the formation of “faculties of religion” in state universities, in which a variety of religious positions are represented. Christian theology can therefore be taught in such a context, but only as one aspect of religious studies as a whole. For this reason, the most important centers of specifically Christian theological education and research now tend to be in seminaries, in which a more committed approach to the issues can be adopted.

In the last few decades, a new debate has opened up in North America and beyond over the proper function of theology. The original stimulus to this debate was a volume published by Edward Farley in 1983, entitled *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*. Farley argued that theology has changed its meaning from its classic sense of “a heartfelt knowledge of divine things” to the mastery of different and unconnected techniques. Theology has become fragmented into a collection of unrelated theoretical and practical disciplines, and lost any sense of coherence. No longer is theology a unitary discipline; it has become a loose collection of unrelated specialities. Although this is a fair point, it is widely agreed that disciplinary fragmentation is inevitable – whether in theology, philosophy, or biology. The important thing is to ensure dialogue and cross-fertilization across these boundaries. This raises some important questions about the “architecture of theology” – for example, the relationship between biblical studies and systematic theology or systematic and pastoral theology.

With this point in mind, we may now turn to explore the architecture of theology, as we consider its various components, before considering the discipline of historical theology as a subject in its own right.

## **The Architecture of Theology**

The great medieval scholar Etienne Gilson (1884–1978) liked to compare the great systems of scholastic theology to “cathedrals of the mind.” It is a powerful and striking image, which suggests permanence, solidity, organization, and structure – qualities that were highly prized by the writers of the period. The image of a great medieval cathedral helps convey the idea that theology is a complex discipline, bringing together a number of related fields in a

sometimes uneasy alliance. Our attention in this volume will focus on historical theology, which we shall explore in the following section. However, it will be helpful to introduce some of the other components of the discipline of theology at this stage in the work.

## **Biblical Studies**

The ultimate source of Christian theology is the Bible, which bears witness to the historical grounding of Christianity in both the history of Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Note that the word-pairs “Scripture” and “the Bible,” and “scriptural” and “biblical,” are synonymous for the purposes of theology.) As is often pointed out, Christianity is about belief in a person (Jesus Christ), rather than belief in a text (the Bible).

Nevertheless, the two are closely interlocked. Historically, we know virtually nothing about Jesus Christ, except what we learn from the New Testament. In trying to wrestle with the identity and significance of Jesus Christ, Christian theology is thus obliged to wrestle with the text that transmits knowledge of him. This has the result that Christian theology is intimately linked with the science of biblical studies and interpretation – in other words, with the attempt to appreciate the distinctive literary and historical nature of the biblical texts and to explore their significance for the community of faith.

The importance of biblical studies to theology is obvious across the spectrum of history. A good example of its importance can be seen with the rise of humanist biblical scholarship in the early 1500s. Erasmus of Rotterdam pointed out a series of translation errors in existing Latin versions of the Bible. As a result, pressure grew for the revision of some existing Christian doctrines, which were grounded in biblical passages that were once held to support them but that now turned out to say something



rather different. The sixteenth-century Reformation may plausibly be argued to represent an attempt to bring theology back into line with Scripture, after a period in which it had departed considerably from it.

The discipline of systematic theology (to which we shall turn in a moment) is thus dependent upon biblical scholarship, although the extent of that dependence is controverted. The reader must therefore expect to find reference to modern scholarly debates over the historical and theological role of the Bible in the present volume. To give an example, it is impossible to understand the development of modern Christologies without coming to terms with at least some of the developments in biblical scholarship over the last two centuries. Rudolf Bultmann's kerygmatic approach to theology can be argued to bring together contemporary New Testament scholarship, systematic theology, and philosophical theology (specifically, existentialism). This illustrates a vitally important point: systematic theology does not operate in a watertight compartment, isolated from other intellectual developments. It responds to developments in other disciplines (especially New Testament scholarship and philosophy).

## **Systematic Theology**

The term "systematic theology" has come to be understood as "the systematic organization of theology." But what does "systematic" mean? Two main understandings of the term have emerged. First, the term is understood to mean "organized on the basis of educational or presentational concerns." In other words, the prime concern is to present a clear and ordered overview of the main themes of the Christian faith, often following the pattern of the Apostles' Creed. In the second place, it can mean "organized on the basis of presuppositions about method." In other words,