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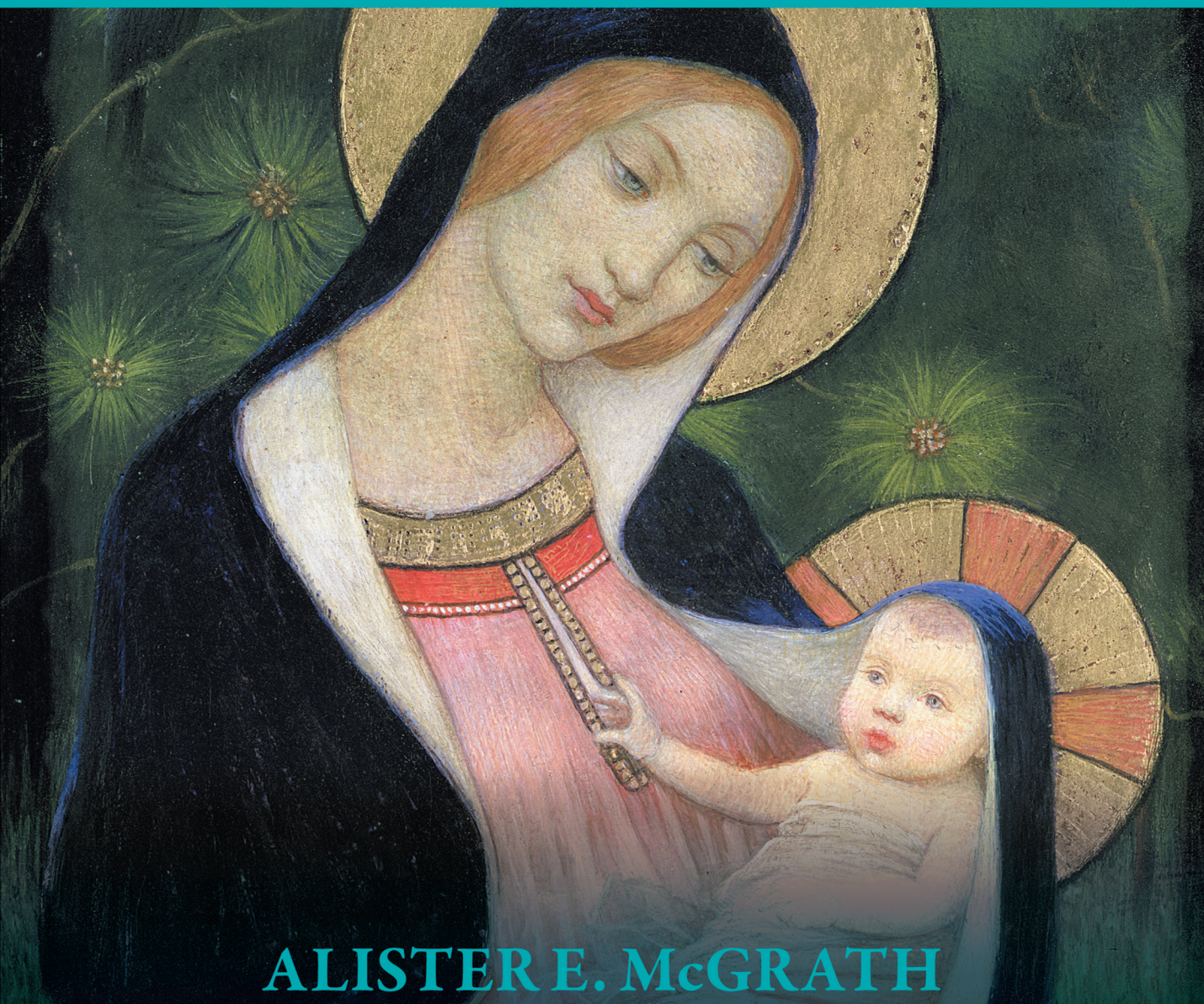

ALISTER E. McGRATH

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

AN INTRODUCTION

SIXTH EDITION

WILEY Blackwell

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Praise for previous editions of *Christian Theology: An Introduction*

"This book is an extraordinary achievement, a *tour de force* which will introduce thousands of students to theology as a discipline with a rich heritage, a clear sense of its own methods and norms, and an elusive yet articulate understanding of Christian language." *Reviews in Religion and Theology*

"'Introduction' is perhaps too modest a word for a book which gives a basic introduction to almost every aspect of the history and theology of Christianity. It is clearly written, fairly argued, and very reasonably priced. McGrath has set a standard that will not be broken for a very long time." *Theology*

"There is much to admire in Dr. McGrath's skill as a pedagogue. The range of issues he deals with is marvellously broad, and he says a great many things which are important, beautiful, true and worth knowing." *Church Times*

"McGrath has surpassed even himself in … *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. His assumption that the reader has little theological expertise and reads only English makes the book extremely valuable to beginners in theology. … His purpose is not to pre-scribe but to de-scribe Christian Theology." *Trinity Journal*

"This is an admirable textbook which will soon grace many shelves." *Expository Times*

"[McGrath] lets the Church and its classic traditions speak for themselves, rather than expostulating on his own arguments and opinions. His own constructive work takes the form of addressing, in light of Scripture and tradition, some of the burning issues in the Church today. The happy result is that the shape of the questions is contemporary while the substance of the answers is deeply traditional." *First Things*

"This publication is a seminal text for the student or teacher of Christian Theology. Its readability and general presentation make it a very accessible text for those with a general interest in this area of academic endeavor. In essence this is a text which would be a useful and valuable resource for the teacher or student of theology. For school-based practitioners it is a very sound teacher reference text. It contains in one volume a very thorough treatment of the key developments in Christian Theology over the past 2,000 years." *Religious Education Journal of Australia*

Also by Alister E. McGrath from Wiley Blackwell

The Christian Theology Reader, 5th edition (2016)
Darwinism and the Divine (2011)
Theology: The Basic Readings, 2nd edition (2011)
Theology: The Basics, 3rd edition (2011)
Science and Religion: An Introduction, 2nd edition (2010)
The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology (2008)
Christianity: An Introduction, 2nd edition (2006)
The Order of Things: Explorations in Scientific Theology (2006)
Luther's Theology of the Cross, 2nd edition (2005)
Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life (2004)
A Brief History of Heaven (2003)
The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism (ed., with Darren C. Marks, 2003)
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The Future of Christianity (2002)
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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

AN INTRODUCTION

25th Anniversary Sixth Edition

ALISTER E. MCGRATH

WILEY Blackwell

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Preface

The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) offers us a vision of Christian theology at its finest. It is, he suggests, like the great landscapes of Tuscany or Umbria, which move both our heads and our hearts, holding us in awe on account of the breathtaking views which they offer. Even the most distant perspectives seem incredibly clear. Barth is but one of many theologians to have stressed the sheer intellectual excitement that the study of Christian theology can impart, not to mention its capacity to bring new depth to the life of faith. To study theology is to set out on a voyage of discovery that is at times enriching, at times challenging, but always profoundly interesting.

This book is written in the conviction that Christian theology is one of the most fascinating subjects anyone can hope to study. As Christianity enters into a new phase of expansion, especially in the Pacific Rim, the study of Christian theology will continue to have a key role to play in modern intellectual culture. It also remains of seminal importance to anyone wishing to understand the central issues and preoccupations of the Middle Ages or the European Reformation, as well as many other periods in human history.

Yet, as a professional teacher of Christian theology at Oxford University for more than thirty years, I have become painfully aware that this sense of enthusiasm and excitement seems rare among university and seminary students of theology. They are more often baffled and bewildered by the frequently confusing vocabulary of Christian theology, the apparent unintelligibility of much recent writing in the field, and that writing's seeming irrelevance to the practical issues of Christian living and ministry. As someone who believes that Christian theology is among the most rewarding, fulfilling, and genuinely *exciting* subjects anyone can ever hope to study, I have worked hard to try to remedy this situation. This book, which arises out of more than three decades of teaching theology to undergraduates and seminarians at Oxford University and beyond, is a response to that concern. It took me ten years to work out how best to present and explain many of the ideas conveyed in this work, using student lecture audiences as testing grounds for the various approaches I conceived.

I wrote this book back in 1993 because it was obvious that there was an urgent need for an entry-level introduction to Christian theology. Too many existing introductions of that age made what experience shows to have been hopelessly optimistic assumptions about how much their readers already knew. In part, this reflects a major religious shift within western culture. Many students now wishing to study Christian theology are recent converts. Unlike their predecessors in past generations, they possess little inherited understanding of the nature of Christianity, its technical vocabulary, or the structure of its thought. Theology thus needs to be introduced and explained to these students, whose enthusiasm for their subject outweighs their lack of base knowledge. This book is a genuine introduction, assuming that its readers know nothing

about Christian theology. Everything is introduced clearly, and set out as simply as possible. Simplicity of expression and clarity of exposition are the core virtues that have been pursued in writing this work.

For some, this will mean that the resulting work lacks sophistication and originality. Those qualities are certainly valuable in other contexts. They are not, however, appropriate to a book of this kind. Originality implies novelty and development; in writing this book, I have deliberately avoided imposing my own ideas as if these were of any interest or importance. Educational considerations have been given priority over everything else. My aim in this work has not been to persuade, but to *explain*. I have no interest in imposing my own views on anyone; my hope is simply to provide a gateway to the riches of Christian theology.

This book is therefore descriptive, not prescriptive. It does not seek to tell its readers what to believe, but rather aims to explain to them what has been believed, in order to equip them to make up their minds for themselves. It does this by describing options available to them, and those options' historical origins, and enabling them to understand the options' strengths and weaknesses through a process of analysis and reflection.

As the title and contents make clear, this is an introduction to Christian theology, rather than any specific form or school of Christian theology. It engages with the core themes of the great tradition of Christian thought down the centuries, which are common to all Christian denominations and groups. Recent years have seen the emergence of a "theology of retrieval and reappropriation" across the entire spectrum of Christian thought, as theologians have realized the importance and usefulness of theological dialogue with the past. This book is ideally placed to help its readers gain an appreciation of the rich resources of the Christian tradition. Although this is not a work of Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant theology, great care has been taken to ensure that Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant perspectives and insights are represented and explored.

Inevitably, this approach means that the discussion of many questions of Christian theology – especially questions of method – is somewhat limited. If my own notes are anything to go by, it would take a volume nearly five times the size of this one to do anything even approaching justice to the complexities of many of the issues raised. Readers therefore need to appreciate that what is being offered is an introduction, a sketched map, in order that they can pursue these questions in greater detail, having at least gained some understanding of what is at stake. My own experience strongly suggests that students stand a far better chance of understanding and appreciating seminal issues if someone is prepared to take the trouble to explain the background to the discussion, the nature and significance of the questions being debated, and the terminology being used. I have assumed that my readers will know no language other than English, and have explained and provided a translation of every Latin, Greek, and German word and phrase that has become an accepted part of the theologian's vocabulary.

Sadly, there is not space to discuss every theological development, movement, or writer which one might hope to include in a work of this sort. Time and time again, pressure on space has forced me to leave out some material which many readers will feel ought to have been included, or give a less full account of some questions than I would have liked. I can only apologize for these shortcomings, of which I am only too painfully aware. The selection of matters to be discussed – and the manner in which they were discussed – in the first edition of this work was based upon first-hand recent experience of teaching and on careful surveys of student opinion in many countries that aimed to discover both what students thought ought to be included in this volume and what they find difficult to understand, and hence what requires extended explanation.

This survey was extended for the purposes of subsequent editions to include a large number of those involved in the teaching of systematic theology; wherever possible, their suggestions for alterations and improvement were included. The fourth edition involved more extensive consultation than usual, and led to a major rewriting of the text, with substantial changes being made at several points. The "Acknowledgments"

section details those who were kind enough to assist in this way. It is clear that these improvements were widely welcomed. The entire text was reviewed for clarity of presentation, while including a significant amount of additional material requested by many users. After twenty years, however, it became clear that the structure of the work needed modification to reflect more accurately the way in which theology was being taught in colleges and seminaries. The sixth edition includes a new chapter on the Holy Spirit, which many readers have requested. This welcome development means that some material has had to be rearranged to allow the best possible presentation of ideas. Readers who are interested in these changes might like to consult the brief section of this work which sets them out fully and clearly (see "The Structure of the Book: The Fifth and Sixth Editions Compared").

It is my hope that this new edition of this work, published to mark the 25th anniversary of its original publication, will help its readers to discover the intellectual and spiritual riches and riddles, delights and debates of Christian theology. I count it a privilege to be your guide as you begin the exploration of the vast territory of the mind that lies ahead. Both the publisher and I would be delighted to have any suggestions you might like to make about how this journey of discovery might be made easier, more interesting, or more worthwhile.

Alister E. McGrath
Oxford University

To the Student: How to Use This Book

Christian theology is one of the most fascinating subjects it is possible to study. This book aims to make that study as simple and as rewarding as possible. It has been written assuming that you know nothing about Christian theology. Obviously, the more you already know, the easier you will find this volume to handle. By the time you have finished this work, you will know enough to be able to follow most technical theological discussions and arguments, benefit from specialist lectures, and get the most from further reading.

Precisely because this book is comprehensive, it includes a lot of material – considerably more than is included in most introductions of this kind. You must not be frightened by the amount of material that this volume includes; you do not need to master it all. Considerable thought has been given to the best way of organizing the material. Grasping the structure of the work – which is quite simple – will allow it to be used more effectively by both students and teachers. The book is divided into three major parts.

The first part, entitled "Landmarks," deals with the historical development of Christian theology. These four chapters give historical information which introduces some key terms and ideas that you will encounter in your study of theology, some of which will not be explained again. This volume works on the basis of "explain it the first time round." To understand fully the key theological issues you will encounter later in this work, you need to know a little about their historical background.

You also need to know something about the debates over the sources and methods of Christian theology – in short, where Christianity gets its ideas from. The second part of the work introduces you to these issues, and will equip you to deal with the material covered in the third part.

The final part of the book, which is also the longest, consists of ten chapters dealing with the major doctrinal issues of Christian theology – what Christians believe about God, Jesus Christ, and heaven, to mention only three of the important topics covered in this section. This material is organized thematically, and you should have no difficulty in finding your way to the material appropriate to your needs. The "Contents" pages will give you a good idea of where each specific discussion is to be found. If you have any difficulties, use the index. The order of presentation of the material in this section has been altered from that in the fifth edition, in response to extensive consultation with users: for details, see the section "The Structure of the Book: The Fifth and Sixth Editions Compared."

However, there is no need to read every chapter in this book, nor need you read them in the order in which they are set out. Each chapter can be treated as a more or less self-contained unit. The book includes internal cross-references, which will ensure that you can follow up related matters which arise in the course of each and every chapter. Once more, it must be stressed that you must not let the sheer length of the book intimidate you; it is *long* because it is *comprehensive*, and gives you access to all the information

that you will need. It aims to be a one-stop freestanding reference book which will cover all the material that you are likely to need to know about.

If you are using the book to teach yourself theology, it is recommended that you read the chapters in the order in which they are presented. You will find the video and audio material available on the publisher's website helpful in introducing the overall approach of this textbook and how to get the most out of using it; these materials also provide introductions to each chapter. However, if you are using the book in conjunction with a taught course, you can easily work out how the sections of the book relate to the materials used by your teacher. If in doubt, ask for guidance.

If you come across terms which you do not understand, you have three options. First, try the glossary at the end of the work, which may give you a brief definition of the term. Second, try the index, which will provide you with a more extensive analysis of key discussion locations within the volume. And, third, you can carry out a search on the Internet for a definition and discussion of the term in question.

Full references are provided to the sources of all major quotations within this work. The "Sources of Citations" section will allow you to track down the quotation and study it at length in its proper context. Full extracts of many of these texts are provided in the widely used companion volume to this introduction, *The Christian Theology Reader*, now in its fifth edition. Appropriate cross-references will allow you to take things further if you want to, without placing you at a disadvantage if you do not.

A dedicated website has been established for this work, and it includes extensive and detailed bibliographies for every chapter and video and audio resources (including podcasts) that will help you begin to study theology and use this textbook. This website will be updated regularly, and will help you to identify suitable material for further reading. This website is not password protected. The address is: www.wiley.com/legacy/wileychi/mcgrath.

Finally, be assured that everything in this book – including the contents of this work, the way in which the material has been arranged, the style of writing used, and the explanations offered – has been checked by student audiences and individual readers in Australasia, Canada, China, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The work is probably about as user-friendly as you can get. But both the author and publisher welcome suggestions from teachers and students for further improvement, and these will be included in later editions of the work.

To the Teacher: How to Use This Book

Christian theology is a subject which ought to excite students. In practice, both student and teacher often find the teaching of the subject to be difficult, and occasionally rather depressing. The student is discouraged by the vast amount of material it is necessary to grasp before "getting to the interesting bits" – as one Oxford student once put it to me. Teachers find the subject difficult for two main reasons. First, they want to introduce and discuss advanced ideas but find that students are simply unable to appreciate and understand these, due to a serious lack of background knowledge. Second, teachers find that they lack the time necessary to introduce students to the substantial amount of basic theological vocabulary and knowledge required.

This book aims to deal with both these difficulties and to liberate teachers from the often tiring and tedious business of teaching entry-level theology. This book will allow your students to acquire a surprisingly large amount of information in a short time. You may find it helpful to read the advice given to students (p. xxvii) to get an idea of how the book can be used. From your perspective as a teacher, however, the following points should be noted.

The contents of this book can be mastered without the need for any input on your part. Every explanation which this book offers has been classroom-tested on students at university and college level in Australasia, Canada, China, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and the United States and refined until students reported that they could understand the points being made without the need for further assistance. For example, we know that students as young as 16 years are using this work in the United Kingdom, and finding it intelligible and interesting. You should be able to invite students to read this book as essential background to your own teaching, thus enabling you to deal with more advanced and interesting themes in classroom time. The hard work has been done for you, to allow you to enjoy and develop your own teaching without having to spend valuable time on basic introductory issues.

A new feature provided for this latest edition of this work will make your task much easier. A series of video and audio resources have been developed especially for this work, and in them I introduce the textbook and its approach, as well as give students an overview of many of the issues that will be covered in the textbook. These resources have been designed to be very informal and accessible, and ought to help your students gain both confidence and familiarity with the material more rapidly than would otherwise be possible.

If you have used previous editions of this work for your teaching, you should note the rearrangement of material in Part III, resulting from the introduction of a new chapter on the Holy Spirit. This new chapter has been requested by many users and fits in well with many lecture courses in colleges and seminaries. Some material in adjacent chapters has been rearranged to allow for a smooth flow of presentation. You

will find the changes set out more fully in the section "The Structure of the Book: The Fifth and Sixth Editions Compared," which will allow you to compare the structures of the two editions and make any necessary changes to your lecture notes or accompanying materials.

This textbook is theologically neutral; it does not advocate any denominational agenda. It reports criticisms made of positions but does not itself criticize those positions. It does not tell its readers what to think but tells them what has been thought. My primary goals in this book have been to introduce readers to the themes of Christian theology and to enable them to understand them. This means that I have included discussion of many theological positions that are not my own, and tried to present them as accurately and fairly as possible. We know that this feature of this textbook is hugely valued by its readers, and it is our intention to maintain it. Readers of this text who believe that any positions are misrepresented are invited to write to the author or publisher, so that appropriate corrections can be made in future editions.

Because it aims to be clear, fair, and balanced, this textbook will allow you, as the teacher, to build your own distinct approach or understanding on the foundations which it lays. Thus the work will help your students to *understand* Aquinas (or Augustine or Barth or Luther) but it will not ask them to *agree* with Aquinas (or Augustine or Barth or Luther). The book aims to put you, the teacher, in the position of interacting with the classic resources of the Christian tradition, on the basis of the assumption that your students, through reading this book, will have a good basic understanding of the issues.

You may like to note that the first four chapters (Part I) offer an overview of historical theology; the next four chapters (Part II) a brief overview of aspects of philosophical theology and questions of theological method, including many questions usually described as "fundamental theology"; and the remaining ten chapters (Part III) deal with the leading themes of systematic theology. The work aims to include a fair and representative selection of the contributions of Christian theologians over two thousand years.

You will notice that the work includes generous quotations from the original works of theologians. This is a deliberate matter of policy. It is important that your students get into the habit of reading theologians, rather than just reading what has been written about them. The work aims to encourage students to interact with original texts, and offers them help in doing so. If you find this practice valuable, you might like to think of using the companion volume to this work, *The Christian Theology Reader*. This work offers its readers the opportunity to engage with more than 350 original sources – substantially more than any other such textbook – while providing far more help with this process of engagement than is normally found. Each reading in *The Christian Theology Reader* is provided with its own individual introduction, commentary, and study questions, and is fully sourced so that it can be followed through to its original context without difficulty.

If you are teaching a course on the basic themes of systematic theology, it is strongly recommended that you ask your students to read the first *eight* chapters before the course commences. This will give them the background knowledge that they will need to get the most from your teaching. You will find the questions at the end of each of those chapters helpful in judging whether the students have understood what they were asked to read – or, indeed, whether they read it at all!

Because this work is introductory, from time to time certain issues are introduced or explained more than once. This is a deliberate matter of policy, resting on the observation that some readers skip chapters in their haste to get to the bits that they think are really important – and, in doing so, miss out on some relevant material. The book works at its best if the chapters are read in the order in which they are presented; however, it is sufficiently flexible to permit other approaches to using it.

Additional teaching aids for this volume will be provided through its dedicated website, maintained by the publisher, which includes full bibliographies for each chapter (which will be updated regularly), dedicated video and audio resources (including podcasts), and links to theological resources on the Internet. This supersedes the older practice of providing printed reading lists, which date quickly and are often not

particularly comprehensive. In addition, this site is being developed to include lecture outlines, test questions, and answers. Please visit this site to see whether it offers anything that might be useful to you. You are welcome to suggest additional readings, links, or other resources that would make this website more useful. This dedicated website is not password protected, and can be used by anyone with access to the Internet. The website address is: www.wiley.com/legacy/wileychi/mcgrath.

The author and publisher are committed to ensuring that this work remains as helpful and as thorough as possible, and welcome comments or suggestions for improvement. In particular, we welcome being told of any approaches to teaching any aspect of Christian theology that you have found helpful in the classroom.

The Structure of the Book: The Fifth and Sixth Editions Compared

Both the author and publisher take feedback very seriously, and have introduced many improvements over the six editions of this work to ensure that it meets the needs of its many users, both students and teachers. During the past five years, we have received many requests for a separate chapter to be introduced that is dedicated specifically to the Holy Spirit. This reflects changes in the way in which Christian theology is now taught, and also the growing profile of the charismatic movement, especially within mainstream Christian denominations. In earlier editions, the material relating to the Holy Spirit was contained in sections of the chapter discussing the doctrine of the Trinity. The sixth edition now includes a new chapter dealing specifically with the theology of the Holy Spirit, and it includes expanded discussion of this important theological theme.

This has led to some related changes, designed to make the book as easy to use as possible. For pedagogical reasons, the chapter dealing with the doctrine of the Trinity (which originally followed immediately after the chapter dealing with the doctrine of God) has been moved so that it follows the new chapter on the Holy Spirit. It is much easier for readers to grasp some important aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity if they are already familiar with the theology of the Holy Spirit, especially the classic patristic debates concerning the divinity of the Spirit. A secondary change, again reflecting user feedback, is to reduce the amount of material relating to the "quest for the historical Jesus," and relocate this at an appropriate point in the major chapter dealing with Christology.

These changes can be summarized as follows. No changes have been made to the order of presentation of material in Part I and Part II of this work; the topics and order of the first eight chapters remain unaltered. The order of the ten chapters which make up Part III of this work have been changed, for the reasons indicated above.

Fifth Edition

9 The Doctrine of God
10 The Doctrine of the Trinity
11 The Doctrine of the Person of Christ
12 Faith and History
13 The Doctrine of Salvation in Christ
14 The Doctrines of Human Nature, Sin, and Grace

Sixth Edition

9 The Doctrine of God
10 The Person of Jesus Christ
11 The Nature and Basis of Salvation
12 The Holy Spirit
13 The Trinity
14 Human Nature, Sin, and Grace

15	The Doctrine of the Church
16	The Doctrine of the Sacraments
17	Christianity and the World Religions
18	The Last Things: The Christian Hope

15	The Church
16	The Sacraments
17	Christianity and the World Religions
18	Last Things: The Christian Hope

Video and Audio Resources

To mark the 25th anniversary of this textbook, we have introduced a feature that we believe will be hugely welcome to its users. A series of video and audio presentations (including podcasts) have been specifically developed for the sixth edition of *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. All have been written specially for this purpose by Alister McGrath, and are presented by him. These can be accessed directly and free of charge from video and audio file-sharing websites, through the page devoted to Alister McGrath's theology textbooks at the publisher's website:

www.wiley.com/legacy/wileychi/mcgrath

These resources can also be used for earlier editions of *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, although changes in the presentation of the material (see pp. xxxiii–xxxiv) have led to alterations to chapter titles and contents at several points in Part III of this volume.

The video presentations are offered in two formats, differing in image quality. These files include on-screen material to help you follow the presentation. The audio presentations have been scripted and recorded with the specific needs of audio users in mind, allowing you to study theology while driving or jogging.

The author and publisher will be delighted to receive further suggestions for material, which will be added to the website from time to time.

PART I

LANDMARKS

Periods, Themes, and Personalities of Christian Theology

Introduction

Anyone who thinks about the great questions of Christian theology soon finds out that a lot of them have already been addressed. It is virtually impossible to do theology as if it had never been done before. There is always an element of looking back over one's shoulder to see how things were done in the past, and what answers were then given. Part of the notion of "tradition" is a willingness to take seriously the theological heritage of the past. Although this emphasis on taking the past seriously is mainly associated with Catholic and Orthodox theologians, many Protestant writers would concur. The great Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) is one of many to note and affirm the continued importance of the great theological luminaries of the past in today's theological debates:

> With regard to theology, we cannot be in the church without taking responsibility as much for the theology of the past as for the theology of our own present day. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Schleiermacher and all the others are not dead but living. They still speak and demand a hearing as living voices, as surely as we know that they and we belong together in the church.

Most works of Christian theology – whether Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox – engage with major writers from the past, simply because those writers remain such an important resource for Christian theological reflection today. It is therefore important to become familiar with the main voices and conversations of the Christian past, which are interesting in themselves and also provide vital reference points for the debates of our own time.

In practice, there is widespread agreement over the broad division of the history of Christian theology for teaching purposes. In this brief (but important) survey of the development of Christian theology, we shall consider four periods of thought, as follows:

- the patristic period, c.100–c.700 (chapter 1);
- the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, c.700–c.1500 (chapter 2);
- the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, c.1500–c.1750 (chapter 3);
- the modern period, c.1750 to the present day (chapter 4).

There is always going to be debate about these divisions, which may seem a little arbitrary. When did the patristic age end? Or the Middle Ages begin? The great Cambridge historian George Macaulay Trevelyan (1876–1962) wisely reminds us that historical "periods" are best seen simply as helpful constructions, rather than as well-defined realities. "Unlike dates, periods are not facts. They are retrospective conceptions that we form about past events, useful to focus discussion, but very

Christian Theology: An Introduction, Sixth Edition. Alister E. McGrath.

often leading historical thought astray." Trevelyan's point is well taken. Nevertheless, we still need to try to organize the material into workable blocks or sections, rather than rambling aimlessly through the vast amount of theological discussion of the past two thousand years.

This opening section of this textbook provides an introductory panorama of some landmarks in theological reflection. It surveys some of the most important developments associated with these four eras, including:

- the geographical location of centers of Christian thought;
- the main theological issues under debate;
- the schools of thought associated with theological issues;
- the leading theologians of the period, and their particular concerns.

So let's get started. The first major era of Christian thought is often referred to as the "patristic period." So what is meant by this? And what happened during this period? Let's find out.

1

The Patristic Period, c.100–c.700

Christianity has its origins in Palestine – more specifically, the region of Judea, especially the city of Jerusalem – in the first century. Christianity saw itself as a continuation and development of Judaism, and initially flourished in regions with which Judaism was traditionally associated, supremely Palestine itself. However, it rapidly spread to neighboring regions, partially through the efforts of early Christian evangelists such as Paul of Tarsus.

THE EARLY CENTERS OF THEOLOGICAL ACTIVITY

By the end of the first century AD, Christianity had become established throughout the eastern Mediterranean world and had even gained a significant presence in the city of Rome, the capital of the Roman empire. As the church at Rome became increasingly powerful, tensions began to develop between the Christian leadership at Rome and at the great cities of the eastern Roman empire, such as Alexandria and Antioch. By the fourth century, the Roman empire had effectively split in two. The western empire was now ruled from Rome, and the eastern from the great new imperial city of Constantinople. This foreshadowed the later schism between the western and eastern churches, centered on these respective seats of power.

In the course of this expansion, a number of regions emerged as significant centers of theological debate. Three may be singled out as having especial importance, the first two of which were Greek-speaking and the third Latin-speaking.

1 *The city of Alexandria, in modern-day Egypt, which emerged as a center of Christian theological education*. A distinctive style of theology came to be associated with this city, reflecting its long-standing association with the Platonic tradition. The student will find reference to "Alexandrian" approaches in areas such as Christology (the area of theology dealing with the identity and significance of Jesus Christ) and biblical interpretation (see pp. 115–16, 220–1), reflecting both the importance and the distinctiveness of the style of Christianity associated with the area.
2 *The city of Antioch and the surrounding region of Cappadocia, in modern-day Turkey*. A strong Christian presence came to be established in this northern region of the eastern Mediterranean at an early stage. Some of Paul's missionary journeys took him into this region, and Antioch features significantly at several points

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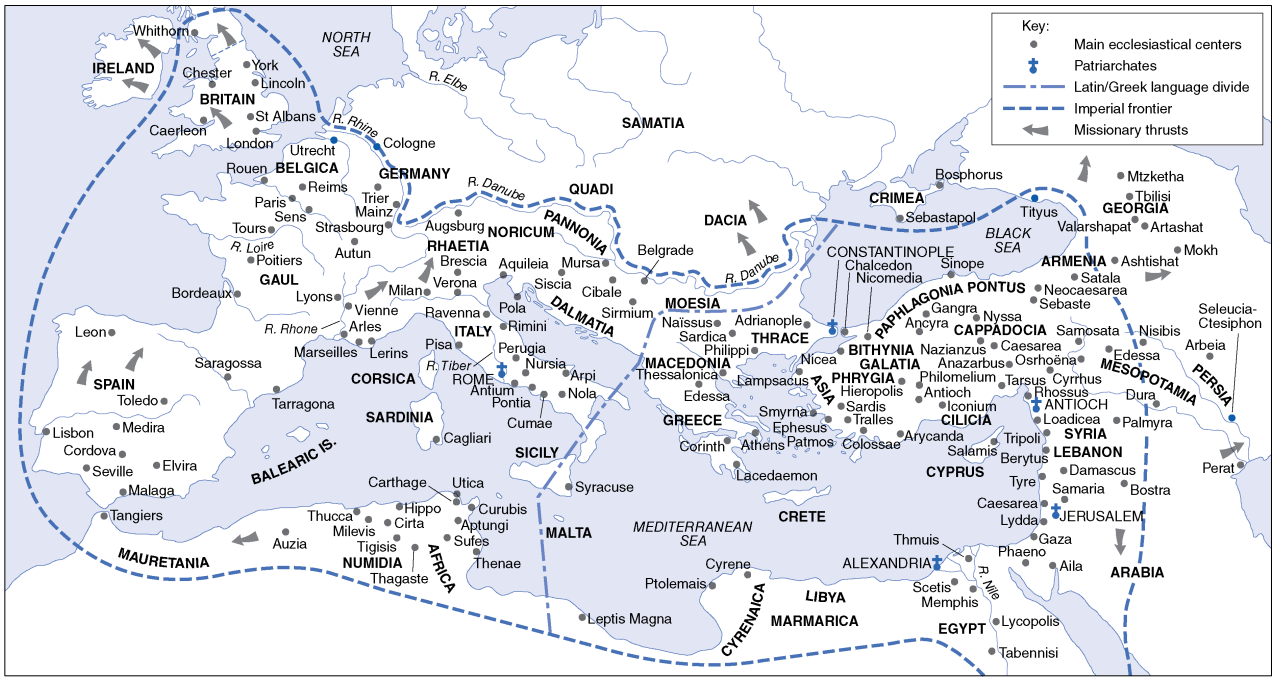

Map 1.1 The Roman empire and the church in the fourth century.

Figure 1.1 The ancient city of Carthage.
Source: photo © WitR / Shutterstock.

in the history of the very early church, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Antioch itself soon became a leading center of Christian thought. Like Alexandria, it became associated with particular approaches to Christology and biblical interpretation. The term "Antiochene" is often used to designate this distinct theological style (see pp. 115–16, 200–1). The "Cappadocian fathers" were also an important theological presence in this region in the fourth century, notable especially for their contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity.

3 *Western North Africa, especially the areas of modern-day Algeria and Tunisia*. In the classical period, this was the site of Carthage, a major Mediterranean city and at one time a political rival to Rome for dominance in the region. During the period when Christianity expanded in this region, it was a Roman colony. Major writers of the region include Tertullian (c.160–c.220), Cyprian of Carthage (died 258), and Augustine of Hippo (354–430).

With the passing of time, some other cities around the Mediterranean – such as Rome, Constantinople, Milan, and Jerusalem – also became significant centers of Christian life and thought.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PATRISTIC PERIOD

The patristic period was one of the most exciting and creative periods in the history of Christian thought. This period is also of importance for theological reasons. Every mainstream Christian body – including the Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed churches – regards the patristic period as

a definitive landmark in the development of Christian doctrine. Each of these churches regards itself as continuing, extending, and, where necessary, criticizing the views of the early church writers. For example, the leading seventeenth-century Anglican writer Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626) declared that mainstream Christianity was based upon one canon, two testaments, three creeds, four "general councils," and the first five centuries of Christian history.

A clarification of terms

The term "patristic" comes from the Latin word *pater*, "father," and designates both the period of the church fathers and the distinctive ideas that came to develop within this period. The term is noninclusive; no generally acceptable inclusive term has yet to emerge in the literature. For this reason, some prefer to talk about "early church theologians" rather than "patristic theologians." We shall retain the term "patristic" in this work, as it is still widely used to refer to the theology of this formative period. The following related terms are still frequently encountered, and should be noted.

- *The patristic period*: This is a vaguely defined entity, often taken to be the period from the closing of the New Testament writings (c.100) to the definitive Council of Chalcedon (451).
- *Patristics*: This term is usually understood to mean the branch of theological study which deals with the study of "the fathers" (*patres*).
- *Patrology*: This term once literally meant "the study of the fathers," in much the same way as "theology" meant "the study of God" (*theos*). In recent years, however, the word has shifted its meaning. It now refers to a manual of patristic literature, such as that of the noted German scholar Johannes Quasten (1900–87), which allows its readers easy access to the leading ideas of patristic writers and to some of the problems of interpretation associated with them.

The theological agenda of the period

The patristic period was of major importance in clarifying a number of issues. One issue that had to be sorted out at an early stage was the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. The letters of Paul in the New Testament point to the importance of this question in the first century of Christian history, as a series of doctrinal and practical issues came under consideration. Since circumcision was obligatory for Jews, should Gentile (that is, non-Jewish) Christians be obliged to be circumcised? Did Christians have to observe Jewish food laws? And how was the Old Testament to be correctly interpreted?

However, other issues soon came to the fore. One which was of especial importance in the second century was that of *apologetics* – the reasoned defense and justification of the Christian faith against its critics. During the first period of Christian history, the church was often persecuted by the state and people were forced to worship

Figure 1.2 The Roman emperor Constantine (272–337; reigned 306–37).

Source: photo: akg-images.

secretly, often in private homes. Apologists such as Justin Martyr (c.100–c.165) tried to explain and defend the beliefs and practices of Christianity to a hostile pagan public. Although this early period produced some outstanding theologians – such as Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130–c.202) in the west and Origen (c.185–c.254) in the east – serious theological debate really began once the church had ceased to be persecuted.

These conditions became possible during the fourth century, with the conversion of Constantine (272–337; reigned 306–37), who went on to become Roman emperor. During his period as emperor (306–37), Constantine succeeded in reconciling church and empire, with the result that the church no longer existed under a siege mentality. In 321, he decreed that Sundays should become public holidays. As a result of Constantine's influence on the empire, constructive theological debate became a public affair. Apart from a brief period of uncertainty during the reign of Julian the Apostate (330–63; reigned 361–3), the church could now count upon the support of the state.

Theology now emerged from the hidden world of secret church meetings to become a matter of public interest and concern throughout the Roman empire. Increasingly, doctrinal debates became a matter of both political and theological importance. Constantine wished to have a united church throughout his empire, and was thus concerned that doctrinal differences should be debated and settled as a matter of priority. One of the most important outcomes of this was the convening of the Council of Nicea (325) to resolve potentially divisive debates within the church over the best way of express the identity and significance of Jesus Christ.

As a result, the later patristic period (from about 310 to 451) may be regarded as a high-water mark in the history of Christian theology. Theologians now enjoyed the freedom to work without the threat of persecution and were able to address a series of issues of major importance to the consolidation of the emerging theological consensus within the churches. Establishing that consensus involved extensive debate and a painful learning process, in which the church discovered that it had to come to terms with disagreements and continuing tensions. Nonetheless, a significant degree of consensus, eventually to be enshrined in the ecumenical creeds, can be discerned as evolving within this formative period.

The patristic period is obviously of considerable importance to Christian theology. It is, however, found to be very difficult by many modern students of theology. There are four main reasons for this.

1. Some of the debates of the period seem hopelessly irrelevant to the modern world. They were viewed as intensely important at the time, but it is often very difficult for the modern reader to empathize with the issues and to understand why they attracted such attention. It is interesting to contrast the patristic period in this respect with the Reformation era, during which many issues were addressed which are of continuing concern for the modern church. Many teachers of theology find that their students are able to relate to the concerns of this later period much more easily.
2. Many of the patristic debates hinge upon technical philosophical questions and only make sense if the reader has some familiarity with the philosophical debates of the period. Whereas at least some students of Christian theology have some familiarity with the ideas found in Plato's dialogues, these ideas were subject to considerable development and criticism in the Mediterranean world during the patristic period. Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism differ significantly from one another, and from Plato's original ideas. The strangeness of many of the philosophical ideas of this period makes it difficult for students beginning in theology to fully appreciate what is going on in some of the patristic debates.
3. The patristic period was an age of flux, during which landmarks and standards – including documents such as the Nicene Creed and dogmas such as the two natures of Christ – emerged gradually. The fixing of the canon of Scripture, of major importance to theological debates,