



FOURTH  
EDITION

# THEOLOGY

THE BASICS

ALISTER E. MCGRATH

WILEY Blackwell



Theology  
*The Basics*

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# Theology

## *The Basics*

Fourth Edition

Alister E. McGrath

**WILEY** Blackwell

This edition first published 2018

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*Edition History*

Blackwell Publishers Ltd (1e 2004 and 2e 2008); John Wiley & Sons Ltd (3e 2012)

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9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this title*

ISBN 9781119158080 (pbk)

Cover image: Christ Pantocrator (encaustic on panel), Byzantine School, (6th century) / Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai, Egypt / Photo © Zev Radovan / Bridgeman Images.

Cover design by Wiley

Set in 10.5/13pt BemboStd by Aptara Inc., New Delhi, India

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## *Preface*

This short book aims to introduce you to the basics of Christian theology. The phrase “Christian theology” is used throughout this volume in the sense of the systematic study of the fundamental ideas of the Christian faith – in other words, a disciplined exploration of the contents of the Christian revelation. This way of thinking about theology is reflected in a number of definitions of theology offered by its leading practitioners, such as Karl Rahner (1904–84, Catholic), John Macquarrie (1919–2007, Anglican), and Karl Barth (1886–1968, Reformed).

“Theology is the science of faith. It is the conscious and methodical explanation and explication of the divine revelation received and grasped in faith” (Karl Rahner).

“Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available” (John Macquarrie).

“Theology is science seeking the knowledge of the Word of God spoken in God’s work – science learning in the school of the Holy Scripture, which witnesses to the Word of God; science laboring in the quest for truth, which is inescapably required of the community that is called by the Word of God” (Karl Barth).

Each of these descriptions of the nature and tasks of theology is helpful in getting a sense of its identity and focus. (Note that both Rahner and Barth are using the word “science” in the sense of an “intellectual

discipline.”) While they differ in their emphases, these three definitions have a lot in common. You might like to spend a few moments reflecting on them, as you may find them useful in developing your own views.

There are many reasons for wanting to think about the Christian faith in more detail. It allows Christians to have a deeper grasp of the foundations, contents, and consequences of their faith. As the eleventh-century theologian Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033–1109) once remarked, theology is basically “faith seeking understanding.” Part of the inner dynamic of the life of faith is a desire to understand what is believed. Theology can be thought of as the Christian’s discipleship of the mind. Yet theology is of importance beyond the Christian community. Those who are not Christians will be interested in learning what Christians believe, and why.

For Christians, theological reflection can lead to personal enrichment, and a deepened appreciation of their faith. For the great Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (354–430), there is a genuine intellectual excitement to wrestling with God. He spoke of an “*eros* of the mind” – a sense of longing to understand more about God’s nature and ways – and the transformative impact that this could have on people’s lives. Other Christian writers have stressed the practical importance of theology, noting how it is essential for the ministry of the church. Preaching, spirituality, and pastoral care, many argue, are ultimately grounded in theology. This business of “thinking about God” takes place at many levels – in church study groups, in Bible studies, through preaching, and in academic seminars. Yet the study of theology has relevance beyond the Christian church. At least a basic understanding of Christian theology will be invaluable to anyone studying western cultural history, literature, or art.

It is important to avoid thinking of theology in terms of the study of insulated intellectual compartments – such as the doctrine of creation, Christology, and eschatology. Christian beliefs are not a collection of individual, unrelated ideas. They are interconnected, like a web, held together by the coherent vision of reality that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Theology involves understanding the relationship between doctrines, not simply the doctrines themselves. For example, the Christian understanding of the identity of Jesus Christ has



considerable implications for thinking about God and salvation (to mention only two obvious connections, to which others could easily be added).

This short, basic introduction to Christian theology is aimed specifically at those who are approaching it for the first time, and who feel intimidated by the thought of studying theology. It introduces you to some of its basic themes, problems, and personalities, and tries to whet your appetite to know more. There are severe limits to what can be dealt with in a short book like this, and many readers will find themselves frustrated by the brevity of some discussions, and the omission of much material that is so clearly relevant to its topics. Happily, there are plenty of other works that will be able to take your studies further. This book, which is perhaps best seen as a “taster” in Christian theology, will make specific suggestions about what you can do next, once you have finished this introduction.

I do not advocate any one specific form of Christian theology. No attempt is made to settle the longstanding disputes of Christian theology. Instead, you are introduced to them, and helped to understand the points at issue. Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism are all represented in this work. The work tries to avoid any form of denominational bias, and aims to treat all positions examined respectfully and fairly. My task is to introduce you to a wide variety of approaches to theology, to help you make up your own mind. The work is generous, both in terms of the range of Christian opinions noted, and the positive attitude adopted towards them. The approach adopted in this book has been tested on student audiences at Oxford University and elsewhere over many years, and I am grateful to those who have helped me evaluate it.

This book *aims* to introduce you to the basics of Christian theology. It *assumes* that you know nothing about the subject. It *introduces and explains* the following aspects of Christian theology:

- some of its leading ideas, as they are found in the Apostles’ Creed – about which more presently;
- how those ideas were developed and justified;
- the basic vocabulary, especially technical terms, used in discussion of those ideas;

- some of the key debates that have influenced Christian thinking during the last two thousand years;
- some of the leading thinkers who have shaped Christian theology down the centuries.

It also encourages you to *interact* with these ideas, by helping you to engage with some texts dealing with these questions.

This is not a comprehensive textbook. It is selective, and focuses only on certain basic ideas. But by the time you have finished this book, you will be able to go on to deal with more advanced works in the field, including the two standard and comprehensive theological primers written by the present author: *Christian Theology: An Introduction* and *The Christian Theology Reader*. The former, now in its sixth edition, provides a thorough university-level introduction to Christian theology, including comprehensive coverage of the history of theology, the basics of theological method, and detailed engagement with ten major areas of theology. The latter, now in its fifth edition, provides more than 350 primary texts of relevance to the study of theology, along with individual introductions, commentary, and study questions. Although the present book is intended to be a brief introduction to the basic themes of Christian theology, you can also use it to lay the groundwork for a more detailed engagement with these two textbooks.

*Theology: The Basics* was written in response to many requests for a short and simple introduction to Christian theology. While many appreciated the comprehensiveness of *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, some found it too long and detailed. They wanted an overview, not a detailed analysis. The author and publisher both felt it was important to respond to these requests, and conceived *Theology: The Basics* as a sketch map of the landscape of Christian theology.

The scale of the success of this shorter work took both the publisher and author by surprise. When it became clear that the book was being much more widely used than we had anticipated, we decided as a matter of some urgency to commission detailed evaluation of the work by its end users. This has produced many helpful suggestions for improvements, some of which were incorporated into the second edition. As the numbers of users grew, a third edition was developed, which includes further significant improvements – most notably, a chapter dedicated to the theology of the Holy Spirit. It is our hope

that this fourth, further improved edition will prove to be an asset to those teaching and studying theology. We look forward to receiving feedback which will help us when the time comes to produce a fifth edition in due course. Please be assured that this work will continue in print for many years, and we will improve it steadily over time, while retaining its distinct characteristics of *brevity* and *simplicity*.

Users of this work may like to use it alongside a short collection of readings, designed to complement this textbook. *Theology: The Basic Readings*, now in its third edition, provides 68 readings, arranged in ten chapters, corresponding to the ten chapters of this work. This makes it an ideal resource to help you take your reflections further. Each reading is carefully introduced, to help you make sense of it and get the most out of engaging with it.

Alister McGrath  
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# *The Development of Christian Theology: A Short Historical Overview*

This short discussion gives you a basic overview of the main features of the development of Christian theology. It aims to help you get the most from the material in this work by highlighting some of the many themes of Christian theology over the last two thousand years – sadly passing over many topics, debates, schools of thought and topics that deserve inclusion here, yet have to be omitted for reasons of space. However, this sketch map of theological history will help you to get your bearings in the midst of this landscape of ideas.

The history of the first two thousand years of Christian thought is generally broken down into more manageable sections. While everyone has their own views about how best to divide Christian history, many use a framework which looks something like this.

## **The apostolic period**

The first hundred years is often referred to as the *apostolic* period. This is the period during which the works now included in the New Testament were written. During this time, Christianity was spreading throughout the Mediterranean region and beyond. The missionary journeys of St Paul, described in the Acts of the Apostles, are an excellent example of this activity. This book does not include readings from the New Testament, as this document is so readily accessible.

## **The patristic period**

The apostolic period is followed by what is still generally known as the *patristic* period (some now prefer to refer to this as the “period of the early church”), which is usually held to begin about the year 100. There is no firm agreement about when this period ended: some scholars suggest it ends in the fifth century, while others extend it by at least two centuries. The Council of Chalcedon (451) marked a landmark in Christian thinking, especially over the identity of Jesus Christ, and is seen by many writers as bringing this important period of theological development to a close. The unusual word “patristic” derives from the Greek word *pater* (“father”), and designates a group of writers who are often collectively known as the “fathers of the church.” (Sadly, there were very few women among them.) The major writers of this period include Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, the Cappadocian fathers, Athanasius, and Augustine of Hippo.

The patristic period witnessed important theological explorations of the relation of faith and classical culture, clarifying the place of the Bible in Christian theology (including establishing the New Testament canon), the identity of Jesus Christ, the doctrine of God (including the Trinity), the doctrine of the church, and the relation of grace and free will. In what follows, we will look at each of these in a little more detail.

### ***Faith and classical culture***

As Christianity expanded in its first centuries, it moved from a Palestinian context into the Greek-speaking world of the eastern Mediterranean, establishing a presence in the great cities of Alexandria and Antioch. It also began to grow in the western Latin-speaking Roman empire, including North Africa. This raised the question of how Christianity related to ideas already present in this region – for example, classic philosophy.

### ***The place of the Bible***

One of the most important achievements of the patristic period was establishing which books dating from the apostolic period were to be

regarded as “canonical” or “biblical.” Considerable attention was also paid to the question of how the Bible was to be interpreted, and especially the role of tradition in combating unorthodox interpretations of the Bible. During this period, “creeds” – such as the “Apostles’ Creed,” on which this textbook is loosely based – began to emerge as communally accepted and authorized summaries of the Christian faith.

### ***The identity of Jesus Christ***

The patristic period saw clarification of the identity and significance of Jesus as being of the utmost importance. Where was he to be placed on a theological map? The period witnessed growing acceptance of the “two natures” doctrine, along with exploration of how best to make sense of Jesus Christ being both divine and human. The Arian and Nestorian debates were of particular importance in clarifying this matter.

### ***The doctrine of God***

Classical Greek philosophy already had its ideas about what “God” was like. One of the most important tasks of Christian theology was to distinguish the Christian idea of God from its pagan and philosophical rivals. Many early debates concentrated on what it meant to say that God was creator, the role of the Holy Spirit, or how the existence of evil was consistent with a good God. However, the most significant discussions concerned the doctrine of the Trinity – the distinctively Christian idea of one God in three persons. How was this to be understood?

### ***The doctrine of the church***

Patristic writers initially paid relatively little attention to the doctrine of the church, tending to focus attention on developing a coherent understanding of the sacraments. The Donatist controversy of the fourth century forced the western church to reconsider the nature of the church, and who was authorized to administer the sacraments. These debates would break out once more during the Reformation period.

## ***The doctrine of grace***

Although the Greek-speaking church made significant contributions to early Christian reflections on human nature and grace, the most sustained engagement with these issues took place within the western church, largely as a result of the Pelagian controversy between Pelagius and Augustine of Hippo.

## **The Middle Ages**

The Middle Ages, or medieval period, is regarded as extending from the end of the patristic era to about the year 1500. This long period was immensely creative culturally, and productive theologically, producing theological classics such as Peter Lombard's *Four Books of the Sentences* and Thomas Aquinas's great thirteenth-century work, the *Summa Theologiae*. Peter Lombard's medieval theological textbook was the subject of many commentaries, which used its material to develop increasingly sophisticated theological ideas. Major theologians of this era include Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham.

Among the many issues to be explored in detail during this period were the relation between faith and reason, how to interpret the Bible, and the theology of the sacraments. Alongside this, there was continuing exploration of issues debated during the patristic period, such as the relation of grace and free will.

## ***Faith and reason***

The Middle Ages saw new attention being given to a whole range of issues concerning the relation of faith and reason, theology and philosophy. One reason for this was the emergence of universities in western Europe, particularly the University of Paris. The debates over whether God's existence could be proved are good examples of this concern.

## ***Biblical interpretation***

The rise of the monasteries led to a new interest in the correct interpretation of the Bible. The constant monastic use of the Bible in corporate

worship and private devotion led to reflection on how the Bible was best to be understood and applied.

### ***The institution of the church***

The rise of the papacy raised increasingly important questions about the church and its sacramental system. Major issues debated during the Middle Ages included the definition of a sacrament and the question of how Christ could be considered to be present in the eucharist.

### ***The relation of grace and free will***

In many ways, medieval theology can be seen as an extended commentary on Augustine's theology. It is therefore not surprising that the relation of grace and human freedom should emerge as important at this time.

## **The Reformation and post-Reformation period**

The sixteenth century marked a period of radical change in the western church. This period of *reformation* witnessed the birth of Protestantism, through writers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. Certain theological debates became especially heated around this time, especially the place of the Bible in theological reflection, the doctrine of the church, and the question of what it is necessary to do in order to be saved. The Catholic church also went through a period of reformation around this time, with the Council of Trent setting out the definitive Catholic position on issues of importance at this point. Many scholars also include the seventeenth century in this period of reformation, arguing that this represents the Protestant and Catholic consolidation of the developments that began in the previous century. It was during this century that Christians emigrated to North America, and began to establish that region as a major player in theological debates.

A number of significant theological developments take place during this period, most of which relate to Protestantism. Two new styles of theological texts make their appearance, both generally (though not exclusively) associated with Lutheranism and Calvinism



respectively – Philip Melanchthon’s *Loci Communes* (“Common-places”) and John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The “Catechism,” with its distinctive “question and answer” format, became of major importance at this time in theological education. The theological debates of this period were often quite intense, focusing especially on the interpretation and authority of the Bible, the nature of the church, and the doctrine of grace. In each case, Protestants and Catholics found themselves adopting very different positions.

### ***The authority of the Bible***

A major debate between Protestants and Catholics concerned whether, in the first place, the Bible had an authority independent of that of the church; and in the second, whether the Bible could be interpreted without the guidance of the church.

### ***The church***

Three major debates concerning the church became of particular importance around this time. In the first place, what were the marks of the true church? Was the church defined by institutional, historical continuity with the past – or by the faithful preaching of the gospel. Second, how many sacraments were there? Protestants tended to identify only two gospel sacraments; the Catholic church recognized seven. Third, in what sense, if any, was Christ present at the eucharist? The Catholic church maintained its commitment to the specific doctrine of transubstantiation, while various viewpoints emerged within Protestantism.

### ***The doctrine of grace***

The Reformation brought new controversy over the doctrine of grace. This was expressed in a number of ways, including Protestantism’s distinctive doctrine of “justification by faith alone,” which was strongly resisted by Catholicism. A further debate broke out within Protestantism over predestination, focusing on the teaching of John Calvin on this issue.

## The modern era

The period since about 1800 is often referred to as the “modern era.” This was a period of considerable instability in western Europe, especially following the French Revolution of 1789, and later through the rise of Marxism in eastern Europe in the twentieth century. Despite these anxieties, it was a period of remarkable theological creativity throughout western Europe and North America. In addition, a growing Christian presence in Africa and Asia during the twentieth century led to an increasing interest in developing “local theologies” in these new regions. These local theologies would be grounded in the Christian tradition, but be sensitive to their local situations. Although this textbook cannot hope to document the emergence of these distinctive theologies outside the west, there is no doubt that this has been a development of major importance, which will become increasingly significant in the twenty-first century.

A wide range of theological issues came to the fore during the modern period. Many traditional issues continued to be debated, including the relation of faith and reason, the authority and interpretation of scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity, the identity of Christ, the nature and grounds of redemption, and the nature of the church. In most cases, these debates were shaped by the concerns of the Enlightenment, which stressed the importance of reason, and was generally suspicious of theological arguments involving an appeal to church tradition or divine revelation. The decline of the Enlightenment and the rise of postmodernity has raised new issues for theology, which seem set continue to be discussed in the future.

A growing awareness of the existence of other religions led to a new interest in clarifying the relationship of Christianity and other faiths. This issue has been discussed to a far greater extent, and with far greater intensity, in the twentieth century than in any previous period of history.

The rise of rationalism within western culture led to a critique of a number of aspects of traditional Christian theology. The most important of these was the rise of the “historical Jesus movement” as a result of the belief that there was a massive gap between an essentially simple, rational “Jesus of history,” and the church’s rather more complex “Christ of faith.” Yet Enlightenment rationalism itself came under

critical scrutiny in the late twentieth century, as postmodernity challenged some of its core ideas – with important theological consequences. As rationalism began to lose its influence in the early twentieth century, Christian theology began to rediscover the importance of revelation, and to regain confidence in the doctrine of the Trinity as a means of expressing the distinctive identity of the Christian God.

A final factor of importance has been the growing realization of the significance of issues raised by feminist writers, who have pointed out the need to explore further issues relating to the traditional use of male language about God, the maleness of Christ as the central figure of the Christian faith, or essentially masculine approaches to biblical interpretation or theological concepts.

This very brief survey of theological history can only skim the surface of some of the great themes that were explored and debated during Christian history. It is hoped that it will help you appreciate and begin to engage with the issues considered in the ten main chapters.

# *The Apostles' Creed*

This book is loosely modeled on the Apostles' Creed, one of the most familiar and widely cited summaries of the Christian faith. It is regularly included in public worship, and is often the subject of sermons, textbooks, and study guides. Its simple structure creates an ideal framework for exploring some of the central themes of Christian theology. Many users of this book will be taking part in church or college study groups, making the Apostles' Creed an obvious reference point for discussion. Many colleges teach courses in basic Christian doctrine using the Apostles' Creed to frame the lectures.

Although many earlier versions of the Apostles' Creed are known, this creed reached its final form in the eighth century.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

## *Getting Started*

Theology is “talk about God”; Christian theology is “talk about God” from a Christian perspective. It begins by recognizing that Christians have quite distinct ideas about who God is and what God is like. We find these expressed in the Bible, which all Christians regard as being of immense importance to matters of faith, despite differences of interpretation and emphasis. Christian theology can be seen both as the *process* of reflecting on the Bible and weaving together its ideas and themes, and as the *result* of this process of reflection in certain ideas – ideas that are often referred to as “doctrines” (from the Latin word *doctrina*, meaning “teaching”).

There are also other documents which Christians regard with great respect, such as the “creeds.” The word “creed” comes from the Latin word *credo*, meaning “I believe.” A creed is basically a brief statement of the main points of the Christian faith. The best known of these are the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. (The term “Nicene Creed” actually refers to a slightly later modification of the creed set out by the Council of Nicea, more accurately known as the “Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.”) These ancient creeds set out some of the basics of the faith, and are often used widely for teaching purposes. Many theologians would argue that Christian theology is the exploration of the basic ideas of these creeds, investigating their basis in the Bible, and their impact on Christian thinking and living.