

25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION



ALISTER E. McGRATH

HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

THIRD EDITION

WILEY Blackwell

HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

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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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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

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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, philosophical ideas about how knowledge is acquired and developed determine the way in which the theological material is arranged. This approach is of particular importance in the modern period, when a concern about theological method has become more pronounced.

In the classic period of theology, the subject matter of theology was generally organized along lines suggested by the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed, beginning with the doctrine of God and ending with eschatology. Classic models for the systematization of theology are provided by a number of writings.

The first major theological textbook of western theology is Peter Lombard's *Four Books of the Sentences*, compiled at the University of Paris during the twelfth century, probably during the years 1155–1158. In essence, the work is a collection of quotations (or "sentences"), drawn from patristic writers in general and Augustine in particular. These quotations were arranged topically. The first of the four books deals with the Trinity, the second with creation and sin, the third with incarnation and Christian life, and the fourth and final book with the sacraments and the last things. Commenting on this collection of sentences became a standard practice for medieval theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Duns Scotus.

A second approach can be seen in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, dating from the thirteenth century, which surveyed the totality of Christian theology in three parts, using principles similar to those adopted by Peter Lombard, while placing greater emphasis on philosophical questions (particularly those raised by Aristotle) and the need to reconcile the different opinions of patristic writers.

Two different models were provided by the Protestant Reformation during the sixteenth century. On the Lutheran side, Philip Melancthon produced the *Loci Communes* ("Commonplaces") in 1521. This work provided a survey of the main aspects of Christian theology, arranged topically. John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is widely regarded as the most influential work of Protestant theology. The first edition

of this work appeared in 1536 and its definitive edition in 1559. The final edition of this work is arranged in four books, the first of which deals with the doctrine of God, the second with Christ as mediator between God and humanity, the third with the appropriation of redemption, and the final book with the life of the church. Other more recent major works of Protestant systematic theology to follow similar lines include Karl Barth's massive *Church Dogmatics*.

In the modern period, issues of method have become of greater importance, with the result that the issue of "prolegomena" has become significant. An example of a modern work of systematic theology that is heavily influenced by such concerns is F. D. E. Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*, the first edition of which appeared in 1821–1822. The organization of material within this work is governed by the presupposition that theology concerns the analysis of human experience. Thus Schleiermacher famously places the doctrine of the Trinity at the *end* of his exposition of systematic theology, whereas Aquinas placed it toward the beginning.

Modern Catholic theology has developed in a number of directions. The great Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner surveyed the main themes of Christian theology primarily through a series of essays – now gathered together as the 23 volumes of his *Theological Investigations*. Hans Urs von Balthasar also developed a thematic approach. His seven-volume *The Glory of the Lord* engaged the question of "theological aesthetics," focussing on the contemplation of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Philosophical Theology

Theology is an intellectual discipline in its own right, concerned with many of the questions that have intrigued humanity from the dawn of history. Is there a god? What is this god like? Why are we here? Questions such as this are asked outside the Christian community, as well as within it. So how do these conversations relate to one another? How do Christian discussions of the nature of God relate to those within the western philosophical tradition? Is there a common ground? Philosophical theology is concerned with what might be called "finding the common ground" between Christian faith and other areas of intellectual activity. Thomas Aquinas' *Five Ways* (that is, five reasons for affirming the existence of God) are often cited as an example of philosophical theology, in which non-religious arguments or considerations are seen to lead to religious conclusions.

There is a long tradition within Christian theology of drawing on resources outside the Christian tradition as a means of developing a theological vision. This approach is usually referred to using the Latin phrase *ancilla theologiae* ("a handmaid of theology"). The basic idea here is that philosophical systems can be a very helpful way of stimulating theological development and enabling a dialogue to be opened up between Christian thinkers and their cultural environment. The two most important historical examples of this approach to theology are the dialogues with Platonism in the period of the early church and Aristotelianism during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that there exists a trend within Christian theology that has been severely critical of attempts to use secular philosophies in matters of theology. Tertullian raised the question in the second century: "What has Athens to do with

Jerusalem? or the Academy with the church?” Concerns were also raised about the philosophical underpinning of the eucharistic theology of Berengar of Tours during the ninth century, which seemed to some to reduce the question of the “real presence” to some kind of logical puzzle.

More recently, similar concerns have been raised in the writings of Karl Barth, who argued that the use of philosophy in this way ultimately made God’s self-revelation dependent upon a particular philosophy and thus compromised the freedom of God. Others, such as the Thomist writer Jacques Maritain, took a much more positive attitude to the theological role of philosophy. You can therefore expect to encounter, both in the past and in the present, a continuing debate concerning the scope and limits of philosophy within theology, with a variety of positions being taken.

Pastoral Theology

There is a strongly pastoral dimension to Christianity, which is generally inadequately reflected in the academic discussion of theology. Some scholars have argued that Latin American liberation theology represents an overdue correction of the excessively academic bias of western theology, with a healthy correction in the direction of social applicability. Theology is here seen as offering models for transformative action, rather than purely theoretical reflection.

This academic bias within theology is, however, a recent development. Puritanism is an excellent instance of a movement that placed theological integrity alongside pastoral applicability, believing that each was incomplete without the other. The writings of Puritan theologians such as Richard Baxter and Jonathan Edwards are saturated with the belief that theology finds its true expression in pastoral care and the nurture of souls. In more recent years, this concern to ensure that theology finds its expression in pastoral care has led to a resurgence of interest in pastoral theology. Theology is here seen at its best and most authentic when it is applied, for example, in preaching, worship, prayer, and pastoral care.

Church History

An understanding of the development of the history of Christianity, especially its institutional elements, is widely regarded as an integral part of the discipline of theology. Students who intend to minister in a particular Christian tradition, or who are interested in deepening their understanding and appreciation of their own tradition, will find the history of that tradition to be of particular importance. Many church history courses include elements of historical theology. For example, it is very difficult to understand the origins and development of the European Reformation without some understanding of Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone, just as a lack of knowledge of the issues surrounding the Donatist controversy will make it hard to make sense of the history of the church in North Africa during the fourth century.

Nevertheless, church history must be considered as a discipline with its own integrity, despite this clear overlap of interest with historical theology. The Toleration Edict of

Valerius (311) is of enormous importance in church history, in that it established Christianity as a legitimate religion within the Roman Empire and opened the way to numerical growth and institutional advancement. Yet the Edict has little importance to historical theology, in that it does not contribute *directly* to the development of theological reflection.

To deal with the history of the church is to study cultural, social, political, and institutional factors that have shaped the development of the church down the ages. It is to study the emergence of institutions (such as the papacy, the episcopacy, and lay fraternities) and movements (such as Methodism, Pentecostalism, and the Cathars). Christianity is set within the flux of history and church history aims to explore the particular place of Christian ideas, individuals, and institutions within that flux. That influence is two-way: Christianity both influences and is influenced by culture. The study of church history allows insights into history in general, as well as into theology in particular.

Historical Theology: Its Purpose and Place

Historical theology is the branch of theological inquiry that aims to explore the historical development of Christian doctrines and to identify the factors that were influential in their formulation and adoption. In particular, it aims to help us understand how theology was done in the past and how this was shaped by its historical context. So often misunderstood simply as the study of the history of theology, historical theology is also about grasping how theology has been done *in a specific historical context*. How does this context shape the questions that are asked and the answers that are given? For example, most western medieval theologians did not have access to the original Greek text of the New Testament. How did this affect their theological reflections? What were the theological implications of Erasmus publishing the first reliable edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516? Was it an accident that this coincided with the origins of the movement we call “the Reformation?”

Historical theology therefore has direct and close links with the disciplines of church history and systematic theology, despite differing from them both. The relationship may be clarified as follows:

1. *Church History* is of major importance to historical theology, in that it identifies factors within the history of the Christian church that are of importance to understanding the development of aspects of Christian theology. Historical theology is the branch of theology that aims to explore the historical situations within which ideas developed or were specifically formulated. It aims to lay bare the connection between context and theology. For example, it demonstrates that it was no accident that the doctrine of justification by faith first became of foundational significance in the late Renaissance. It shows how, for example, the concept of salvation, found in Latin American liberation theology, is closely linked with the socio-economic situation of the region. It illustrates how secular cultural trends – such as liberalism or conservatism – find their corresponding expression in theology. Church history and historical theology thus relate to each other in a positive and symbiotic manner.

2. *Systematic theology* aims to provide a contemporary statement of the leading themes of the Christian faith. A full understanding of the historical development of that doctrine is essential to its contemporary restatement. Yet historical theology does more than simply provide the background material to modern theological statements. It indicates the extent to which theological formulations are shaped by the environment in which they are developed. Contemporary theological statements are no exception to this rule. Historical theology also helps us to understand how some theological ideas that were actively appropriated by one generation come to be abandoned as an embarrassment by a later generation. Historical theology thus has both a *pedagogic* and a *critical* role, aiming to inform systematic theologians about what has been thought in the past (and why!), while identifying the factors that make some form of restatement necessary in the present.

Theology has a history. This insight is too easily overlooked, especially by those of a more philosophical inclination. Christian theology can be regarded as an attempt to make sense of the foundational resources of faith in the light of what each day and age regards as appropriate and reasonable methods of reasoning and norms of judgment. This means that local circumstances have a major impact upon theological formulations. Christian theology regards itself as universal, in that it is concerned with the application of God's saving action toward every period in history. Yet it is also characterized by its particularity as an experience of God's saving work in particular cultures and is shaped by the insights and limitations of persons who were themselves seeking to live the gospel within a particular context. The universality of Christianity is thus complemented with – rather than contradicted by – its particular application.

The Development of Historical Theology

The origins of the subdiscipline of historical theology are generally agreed to lie in the sixteenth century. The Reformation witnessed an intense debate over Christian authenticity, in which the continuity between both the Protestant and Catholic reformations and the early church came to be seen as critically important. As a result, writers on both sides of the debate found that they had to become familiar with both patristic theology and the modification of these ideas in the Middle Ages. Although this study was undertaken primarily for polemical reasons, it led to the production of a large number of works of reference in this field, including editions of the works of leading patristic writers such as Augustine of Hippo. Erasmus of Rotterdam, for example, produced a highly influential edition of the writings of Jerome, an important early Christian biblical translator and theologian.

A perhaps more important development took place during the eighteenth century, with the rise of the movement known as “the history of dogma,” usually known in its German form, *Dogmengeschichte*. The basic assumption of this movement was that the doctrinal formulations of the church (“dogmas”), especially during the early Christian period, were heavily conditioned by the social and cultural conditions of the era. This conditioning, which could be uncovered and subjected to critical scrutiny and evaluation by historical methods, made such doctrinal formulations inappropriate for the

modern church, which was obliged to develop restatements of these doctrines appropriate to the modern period. Historical research thus led to the “deconstruction” of such doctrines, allowing them to be reformulated in terms more suitable to the modern age.

This program can be seen in the writings of G. S. Steinbart (1738–1809), who argued that the Augustinian doctrine of original sin – foundational to traditional understandings of baptism and the work of Christ – was basically little more than a hangover from Augustine’s Manichaean period. It represented the intrusion of pagan ideas into Christianity and had no place in a proper Christian theology. Steinbart’s analysis, which extended to include Anselm of Canterbury’s doctrine of the satisfaction of Christ, represents a classic instance of the criticism of dogma by a critical study of its origins.

This program, extended by writers such as F. C. Baur (1792–1860) and A. B. Ritschl (1822–1889), reached its climax in the work of Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). In his *History of Dogma* (which takes up seven volumes in English translation), Harnack argued that dogma was not itself a Christian notion. Rather, it arose through the expansion of Christianity from its original Palestinian background to a Hellenistic context, especially in the Greek-speaking city of Alexandria. As a result, Christian writers absorbed the Hellenistic tendency to conceptualize and used a metaphysical framework to articulate the gospel. Harnack saw the doctrine of the incarnation as perhaps the most obvious instance of the influence of Hellenism upon Christianity and argued that historical analysis opened the way for its elimination. For Harnack, the gospel was about Jesus himself and the impact that he had upon people. The shift from soteriology to the abstract metaphysical speculation of Christology is, for Harnack, an unhelpful yet reversible theological development. Harnack singled out Martin Luther as someone who attempted to eliminate metaphysics from theology and commended him as an example to posterity.

Although Harnack’s thesis of the “Hellenization” of the gospel is now regarded as somewhat overstated, the general principles that he developed are still regarded as valid. The historian of dogma can still discern areas of Christian theology in which some assumptions appear to derive from Greek metaphysics. The modern debate about whether God can suffer (which we shall explore further below) has highlighted how the classical notion of the *apatheia* of God seems to have become entangled in some cases with the assumptions of Greek metaphysics, rather than the Old and New Testament witness to the acts of God in history.

Harnack’s particular interest in historical theology rested on his belief that history provided a means for the correction or elimination of dogma. This “critical” function of historical theology remains important and we shall explore it in more detail presently. Yet Harnack’s massive amount of writing in this field also caused growing interest in the field of historical theology as a subject worthy of interest in its own right.

Historical Theology as a Pedagogic Tool

Many students of church history neglect the role of ideas, in order to focus on the sociological, economic, and institutional aspects of this fascinating subject. Yet we can never hope to understand some of the most important episodes in that history without at least some understanding of the ideas that so influenced the course of church history. Just as

a historian of the Russian Revolution cannot ignore the ideas of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, V. I. Lenin, and Leon Trotsky, so the church historian needs to understand the ideas of Athanasius, Augustine, and Luther – to name just three writers whose ideas shaped the course of church history. Historical theology acts as a major resource to those studying church history, allowing them to understand the specific nature of the ideas that affected the church at critical periods in that history.

Historical theology does not, however, merely help us to understand the past; it is a resource for theology in the present. Some theologians offer what we might call a “presentist flattening of the past,” in which the past is seen as having little importance for the present. Many critics of modernist theologians have argued that these behave as if they were the first to deal with the issue in question properly, so that all previous attempts to wrestle with the issue could be disregarded completely. Yet it is virtually impossible to do theology as if it had never been done before. There is always an element of looking 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. The Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) argues that theology necessarily involves a dialogue with the past:

We cannot be in the church without taking as much responsibility for the theology of the past as for the theology of the present. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Schleiermacher and all the rest 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.

It is therefore of importance to become familiar with the rich legacy of the Christian past, which provides vital reference points for the modern debate.

Historical theology thus provides an essential pedagogical resource for the contemporary statement of theology. The following points are of especial importance in this respect:

1. Historical theology provides us with a “state of the question” report on major theological themes, allowing us to identify what has already been discussed.
2. By studying the discussion of theological issues in the past, an understanding may be gained of both the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches to questions.
3. Historical theology allows us to identify “landmarks” in the development of Christian thinking, which remain relevant and important today. Such “landmarks” include writers (such as Athanasius, Augustine, and Aquinas), debates (such as the Donatist and Arian controversies), and documents (such as the Nicene Creed).

In these ways and others, historical theology acts as an important pedagogical resource for systematic theology.

Historical Theology as a Critical Tool

The study of the history of Christianity provides a powerful corrective to static views of theology. It allows us to see:

1. That certain doctrines assume particular importance at various points in Christian history (for example, the doctrine of justification by faith during the sixteenth century).
2. That certain ideas came into being under very definite circumstances, using specific resources (such as the Vulgate Latin translation of the Bible), and that, occasionally, mistakes are made.
3. That theological development is not irreversible; the mistakes of the past may be corrected.
4. That theology adapts to its historical context, particularly in the way in which analogies or ways of thinking familiar to a particular group of people can be used to explore and explain theological ideas.

A specific example will illustrate the importance of this point and help to identify some of the factors that impact on the development of theology. Can God be said to suffer? Writers of the first major era of Christian history (often referred to as the “patristic period”) tended to answer this question in the negative. The answer that has tended to become the “new orthodoxy” since about 1945 has, however, been affirmative. So how is this difference to be explained?

The study of the history of theology suggests that Christianity can sometimes unconsciously absorb ideas and values from its cultural backdrop. Certain ideas that have often been regarded as distinctively Christian sometimes turn out to be borrowed from a secular context. The idea that God cannot suffer, or that suffering is a sign of imperfection, was well established in Greek philosophical circles. Early Christian theologians, anxious to gain respect and credibility in such networks, did not always challenge this idea rigorously. As a result, a commitment to divine impassibility became deeply embedded in the some sections of the Christian theological tradition.

The early Christian discussion of this question was deeply influenced by the idea that God is perfect. According to contemporary classical philosophy, to be perfect is to be unchanging and self-sufficient. It is therefore impossible for a perfect being to be affected or changed by anything outside itself. Furthermore, perfection was understood in very static terms within classical philosophy. If God is perfect, change in any direction is an impossibility. If God changes, it is either a move *away from* perfection (in which case God is no longer perfect) or *toward* perfection (in which case, God was not perfect in the past). Aristotle, echoing such ideas, declared that “change would be change for the worse,” and thus excluded his divine being from change and suffering.

This understanding passed into Christian theology at an early stage. Philo, a Hellenistic Jew whose writings were much admired by early Christian writers, wrote a treatise entitled *Quod Deus immutabilis sit*, “That God is unchangeable,” which vigorously defended the impassibility of God. Biblical passages that seemed to speak of God suffering were, he argued, to be treated as metaphors and not to be allowed their full literal weight. To allow that God changes was to deny the divine perfection. “What greater impiety could there be than to suppose that the Unchangeable changes?” asked Philo. It seemed to be an unanswerable question. For Philo, God could not be allowed to suffer or undergo anything that could be spoken of as “passion.” Anselm of Canterbury, influenced by this

idea, argued that God was compassionate in terms of our experience, but not in terms of the divine being itself. The language of love and compassion is treated as purely figurative when used in relation to God.

However, this consensus has been challenged in the modern period. In part, the challenge results from a realization of the extent to which patristic thinking on this question has been influenced by Greek philosophical notions; in part, it also results from a realization that the Old Testament appears to speak of the suffering of God more than was appreciated. There are thus solid theological foundations to this tendency to affirm that God is able to suffer. But it must be appreciated that there are other factors at work, helping to dispose Christian theologians to giving a positive answer to that question: Does God suffer?

One pressure is cultural and relates directly to the new cultural awareness of suffering in the world. The sheer horror of the First World War made a deep impact upon western theological reflection. The suffering of the period led to a widespread perception that liberal Protestantism was fatally compromised by its optimistic views of human nature. It is no accident that dialectical theology, a movement that was vigorously critical of liberal Protestantism, arose in the aftermath of this trauma. Another significant response was the movement known as Protest Atheism, which raised a serious moral protest against belief in God. How could anyone believe in a God who was above such suffering and pain in the world?

Traces of such ideas can be found in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's nineteenth-century novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. The ideas were developed more fully in the twentieth century, often using Dostoyevsky's character Ivan Karamazov as a model. Karamazov's rebellion against God (or, perhaps more accurately, against the *idea* of God) has its origins in his refusal to accept that the suffering of an innocent child could ever be justified. Albert Camus developed such ideas in *The Rebel*, which expressed Karamazov's protest in terms of a "metaphysical rebellion." This intensely moral form of atheism seemed to many theologians to demand a credible theological response – a theology of a suffering God.

A second pressure arises from a shifting understanding of a central idea – in this case, the idea of "love." Theologians rooted in the classical tradition – such as Anselm and Aquinas – defined love in terms of expressions and demonstrations of care and goodwill towards others. It is thus perfectly possible to speak of God "loving impassibly" – that is, loving someone without being emotionally affected by that person's situation. Yet the new interest in the psychology of human emotions has raised questions over this notion of love. Can one really speak of "love" unless there is some mutual sharing of suffering and feelings? Surely "love" implies the lover's intense awareness of the suffering of the beloved, and thus some form of sharing in its distress? Such considerations have undermined the intuitive plausibility (yet not, interestingly, the intellectual credibility) of an impassible God.

This very brief analysis shows how theology can be influenced by philosophical trends, cultural shifts, and changes in psychology. Theological reflection always takes place against a complex background and – whether this is appreciated or not! – incorporates aspects of that background into that reflection. Early Christian reflection on whether God could suffer was significantly influenced by the prevailing philosophical consensus that a perfect being could not change or be affected by outside influences. Modern discussion of that same question is influenced by a cultural pressure to respond

to the human experience of suffering and a growing sympathy for the philosophical idea of God as a “fellow-sufferer” (Alfred North Whitehead). Whatever the “right” answer to this question may be – and that debate continues in modern theology – it is essential to appreciate the factors that exercise a significant (and sometimes unacknowledged) influence over theology.

Historical theology both documents the answers given to the great questions of Christian theology and attempts also to account for the factors that have been significant in formulating those answers – whether those factors were noticed or evaluated by those formulating the answers or not. The study of historical theology is thus subversive, as it indicates how easily theologians are led astray by the “self-images of the age” (Alasdair MacIntyre). Nor is this something that is restricted to the past! Too often, modern trends in theology are little more than knee-jerk reactions to short-term cultural trends. The study of history makes us alert to both the mistakes of the past and the alarming way in which they are repeated in the present. “History repeats itself. It has to. Nobody listens the first time round” (Woody Allen).

It is for such reasons that the present volume aims to provide its readers with the maximum amount of historical background to theological debates, within the limits of the space available. All too often, theological issues are conducted as if the debate began yesterday. An understanding of how we got to be where we are is essential to an informed debate of such issues.

Historical Theology as a Resource for Systematic Theology

Finally, it is important to appreciate that systematic theology has much to learn from a detailed engagement with the history of the Christian tradition. As the more recent writings of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner make clear, some of the best contemporary theology can be thought of as *critical reappropriation* – in other words, retrieving the wisdom of the past and drawing on this in present theological debates. The resurgence of interest in the writings of Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas in recent decades is a telling sign of the growing realization of the theological richness of the Christian tradition.

Historical theology gives us new ways of seeing things. It allows us to see debates and issues from other perspectives, helping us formulate our own approaches. The English literary critic C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) perhaps helps us understand how it opens our eyes, offering us new perspectives for evaluation and reflection.

My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others. ... In reading great literature, I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see.

Reading great literature, for Lewis, enables us “to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as our own.” The same is true of theological classics, such as Athanasius *On the Incarnation*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, Aquinas’ *Summa contra Gentiles*, or John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. They offer us ways of seeing the theological task and its outcomes that help us to develop our own.