

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

AN INTRODUCTION

FIFTH EDITION

ALISTER E. McGRATH

KING'S COLLEGE, LONDON

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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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 hold us in awe on account of the breathtaking views which they offer. Even the most distant perspectives seem so clear. Barth is but one of many theologians to have stressed the sheer intellectual excitement that the study of Christian theology can bring, 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 time 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 concerned 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 a quarter of a century, I became painfully aware that this sense of enthusiasm and excitement is 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 its seeming irrelevance to the practical issues of Christian living and ministry. As someone who believes that Christian theology is amongst 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 two 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 presented in this work, using student lecture audiences as testing grounds for the various approaches I tried out.

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. Everything has to be introduced and explained to these students, whose enthusiasm for their subject outweighs their lack of base knowledge. The present

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volume therefore assumes 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. While originality unquestionably has its merits elsewhere, in a work of this kind it is potentially a liability. 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*.

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 their historical origins, and enabling them to understand their 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 sketch 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 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 the reader knows no language other than English, and have explained and provided a translation of every Latin, Greek, or German word or 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 have been discussed – in the first edition of this work was based upon first-hand recent experience of teaching, and careful surveys of student opinion in many countries, to discover both what students think ought to be included in this volume and what they find difficult to understand, and hence requiring 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

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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 fifth edition retains the structure of the fourth edition, apart from a few minor changes to allow for a smoother presentation of the material. The entire text has been reviewed for clarity of presentation, while including a significant amount of additional material requested by many users.

It is my hope that this work will help its readers 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.

Alistair E. McGrath
King's College, London

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 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 teachers and students. The book is divided into three major sections.

The first section, entitled “Landmarks,” deals with the historical development of Christian theology. These four chapters give historical information which introduces key terms and ideas, 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 section of the book, which is also the longest, deals with the major doctrinal issues of Christian theology – what Christians believe about God, Jesus Christ, and heaven, to mention only three important topics. 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 where each specific discussion is to be found. If you have any difficulties, use the index.

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.

TO THE STUDENT

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. 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.

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*. 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, which includes extensive and detailed bibliographies for every chapter. This will be updated regularly, and will help you identify suitable material for further reading. This website is not password-protected. The address is: www.wiley.com/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 out at first hand with 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, which will be included in later editions of the work. The fifth edition of this work has benefited considerably from such suggestions; we look forward to receiving suggestions for the sixth and subsequent editions.

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 the 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, they 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. xxv) 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 your own teaching.

The work 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 goal in this book has been to introduce readers to the themes of Christian theology, and 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. Readers of this text who believe that any positions are misrepresented in any way 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

TO THE TEACHER

your students *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, have a good basic understanding of the issues.

You may like to note that the first four chapters offer an overview of historical theology; the next four chapters a brief overview of aspects of philosophical theology and questions of theological method; and the remaining ten chapters 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 360 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 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 of its 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, to be updated annually, 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 if 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/mcgrath

The author and publisher are committed to ensuring that this work remains as helpful and 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.