

Reflective Reviews: Five Set Readings

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Alister E. McGrath – Christian Theology

Alister E. McGrath's *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (5th ed., 2011) is a widely used introductory theology textbook in higher education. Written for students beginning theological study, the book aims to provide a clear and balanced overview of Christian theology by exploring its historical development, principal sources and central doctrines. Rather than promoting a single theological tradition, McGrath seeks to introduce readers to the breadth and complexity of Christian thought while equipping them with the knowledge necessary for further academic study.¹

McGrath presents Christian theology as a historically developed discipline rooted in God's revelation and shaped through centuries of reflection. McGrath begins by explaining what theology is and why it remains significant before examining its historical development from the early Church to the modern era. He then explores the principal sources of theology, including Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, demonstrating how these have been understood differently throughout Christian history. This foundation enables readers to appreciate why theological disagreement exists while recognising the common beliefs that unite the Christian faith. The second half of the book applies this historical and methodological framework to the major doctrines of Christianity, including the doctrine of God, Christology, salvation, the Church and eschatology. Throughout the volume, McGrath consistently presents differing theological viewpoints fairly before explaining their historical significance and theological implications. His approach encourages critical engagement rather than simple acceptance, allowing readers to understand the diversity of Christian theology.²

The significance of McGrath's work lies in its ability to demonstrate that theology is not merely a collection of abstract beliefs but an ongoing conversation shaped by Scripture, history and the life of the Church. By presenting theology within its historical context, McGrath shows how

¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th edn (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. xv–xvii.

² McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p.3 .

Christian doctrine has developed in response to biblical interpretation, philosophical ideas and changing cultural circumstances. This broad perspective enables students to appreciate theology as an academic discipline while recognising its continuing relevance for Christian belief and practice. His balanced treatment of different traditions, together with the book's neutral approach, makes it a valuable introduction for students beginning theological study.³

One of the book's greatest strengths is its clarity and accessibility. McGrath explains complex theological ideas without oversimplifying them and presents competing viewpoints with fairness and respect.⁴ His balanced treatment of differing theological traditions encourages readers to engage critically with theological debates rather than simply accepting a single perspective. However, McGrath's presentation of theology represents one influential approach to theological method rather than the only possible way of doing theology. As Karl Barth argues, theological reflection begins with God's self-revelation in the Word of God, illustrating that the starting point and method of theology remain matters of ongoing debate.⁵ Furthermore, the breadth of the book means that individual doctrines cannot be explored in great depth. Students wishing to specialise in particular areas of theology will therefore require further reading. Nevertheless, these limitations reflect the purpose of an introductory textbook rather than a weakness in its overall design.

Overall, McGrath succeeds in providing a comprehensive, balanced and engaging introduction to Christian theology that offers an excellent foundation for further theological study.

³ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 'To the Teacher: How to Use This Book'.

⁴ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, pp. xv–xvii.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. by Grover Foley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 9–18.

Karl Barth – The Word of God in its Threefold Form

In section 4 of Church Dogmatics I/1, "The Word of God in its Threefold Form", Karl Barth presents one of the defining doctrines of twentieth-century theology. Writing against approaches that grounded theology primarily in human reason or religious experience, Barth argues that theology must begin with God's own self-revelation. He develops this through his doctrine of the threefold form of the Word of God, demonstrating how God addresses the Church through revelation, Scripture and proclamation.⁶

Barth's central argument is that the Word of God is one reality encountered in three inseparable forms: the revealed Word in Jesus Christ, the written Word in Holy Scripture, and the proclaimed Word in the preaching of the Church. Rather than treating these as separate sources of divine authority, Barth argues that each derives its significance from God's sovereign act of self-revelation. He begins by arguing that authentic proclamation depends entirely upon God's initiative rather than human ability or religious insight. Preaching is not simply human speech about God but becomes the Word of God when God freely chooses to speak through it.⁷ Barth then turns to Scripture, arguing that the Bible is the Church's authoritative witness to God's past revelation. Scripture possesses its authority because it bears witness to Jesus Christ and serves as God's chosen instrument through which he continues to address the Church, rather than functioning merely as an expression of the Church's own religious consciousness. Finally, Barth explains that revelation is fundamentally God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. The Bible and preaching derive their significance from this revelation, yet neither should be identified directly with it. Instead, both serve as divinely appointed means through which God continues to address his people. Barth concludes by insisting that

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. by G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), pp. 88–89.

⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, pp. 89–98.

these are not three separate words but three forms of the one living Word of God.⁸

Theologically, Barth's doctrine places Jesus Christ at the centre of Christian theology. Rather than treating Scripture or preaching as separate sources of authority, Barth argues that both derive their authority from God's self-revelation in Christ. Revelation therefore remains God's free act rather than something controlled by the Church or discovered through human effort. Theology begins with God's initiative, not humanity's search for God, because Christian faith is grounded in God's gracious self-disclosure. Barth's understanding of the unity of revelation, Scripture and proclamation became one of the defining features of twentieth-century neo-orthodox theology and continues to influence discussions of revelation, biblical authority and preaching.⁹

One of Barth's greatest strengths is his consistently Christ-centred understanding of revelation, which preserves both God's freedom and the authority of Scripture without reducing Christianity to either human experience or a merely textual religion. However, Barth's language that Scripture becomes the Word of God has generated considerable debate. Kevin Vanhoozer argues that Barth's emphasis upon God's self-revelation tends to deverbilize the Word of God, risking an imbalance between its personal and verbal dimensions.¹⁰ John Webster, however, notes that Barth's account has often been misunderstood because of its emphasis upon God's sovereign freedom in revelation.¹¹ Nevertheless, Barth's intention is not to diminish Scripture but to ensure that biblical authority always remains grounded in God's active self-revelation rather than in the text considered independently.

⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, pp. 98–125.

⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, pp. 120–125.

¹⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), pp. 45–46.

¹¹ John Webster, *Barth* (London: Continuum, 2000), pp. 49–74.

In summary, Barth offers a profound and influential account of divine revelation that continues to shape contemporary Christian theology and the Church's understanding of the Word of God.

Athanasius - On the Incarnation of the Word

In the opening chapters of *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Athanasius explains why the eternal Word of God became human. Rather than beginning with Christ's birth, he begins with the doctrine of creation, arguing that the Incarnation can only be understood in light of humanity's original creation and subsequent fall into corruption. Athanasius presents creation, sin and redemption as one continuous theological narrative in which the same divine Word who created humanity also restores it through the Incarnation.¹²

Athanasius begins by introducing his purpose, arguing that the apparent humiliation of Christ's becoming human actually reveals his divine power and love rather than diminishing it.¹³ He insists that discussion of the Incarnation must begin with creation because "the renewal of creation has been the work of the self-same Word that made it at the beginning."¹⁴ He then rejects competing explanations for the origin of the universe, including the Epicurean belief that creation arose by chance, Plato's proposal that God fashioned the world from pre-existing matter, and heretical views that separated the Creator from the Father of Jesus Christ. Instead, Athanasius argues that God freely created all things out of nothing through his eternal Word.¹⁵

Having established God as Creator, Athanasius turns to humanity's unique place within creation. Human beings were made in the image of God and given the capacity to live in communion with him, together with the promise of

¹² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 1.1–4.

¹³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1.1–3.

¹⁴ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1.4.

¹⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 2.1–6; 3.1–3.

incorruption if they remained obedient.¹⁶ However, through disobedience humanity turned away from God and returned towards corruption and death. Since human beings were created from nothing, separation from God inevitably resulted in a gradual return towards non-being.¹⁷ Athanasius therefore concludes that the Incarnation was necessary because only the divine Word who originally brought humanity into existence could restore fallen creation. The Creator becomes the Redeemer, entering human history to reverse corruption and renew humanity from within.¹⁸ As Frances Young observes, Athanasius understands salvation primarily as the re-creation of humanity, with both creation and re-creation accomplished by the same divine Logos.¹⁹

These chapters establish theological themes that became foundational for later Christian doctrine. Athanasius presents salvation not merely as the forgiveness of sins but as the restoration of humanity to the life for which it was originally created. The Incarnation is therefore understood as the fulfilment of God's creative purpose rather than simply a response to human failure. This close relationship between creation and redemption forms a remarkably coherent theological framework in which Christ's identity and saving work cannot be separated. Modern scholarship has frequently recognised this unity as one of the defining strengths of Athanasius' theology, emphasising that doctrines of creation, Christology and salvation function together rather than as isolated themes.²⁰

One of the greatest strengths of Athanasius' argument is its internal consistency. Each stage of the discussion builds logically towards the necessity of the Incarnation, making the work both persuasive and theologically rich. Nevertheless, these opening chapters remain among the

¹⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 3.3–5.

¹⁷ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 4.4–6.

¹⁸ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 4.1–6.

¹⁹ Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon* (London: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 70–72.

²⁰ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 26–43.

clearest and most influential patristic explanations of why the eternal Word became incarnate for the salvation of humanity.

Amos Yong – I Believe in the Holy Spirit

In his chapter 'I Believe in the Holy Spirit: From the Ends of the Earth to the Ends of Time' in *The Trinity among the Nations: The Doctrine of God in the Majority World*, Amos Yong argues that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit should remain rooted in historic Christian orthodoxy while also engaging the diverse experiences of the global Church. Drawing on the Nicene Creed, Eastern Christianity, Majority World theology and modern Pentecostalism, Yong demonstrates how these perspectives together can enrich contemporary Trinitarian theology.²¹

Yong begins by observing that while the Holy Spirit has often been described as the "hidden" member of the Trinity in Western theology, world Christianity reveals a far richer story. To develop this argument, he surveys three major theological streams. First, he highlights Eastern Christianity, noting the Cappadocian defence of the Spirit's full divinity alongside the Syriac tradition's emphasis on baptism, sanctification and the Spirit's life-giving work, which inspired symbolic reflection on divine motherhood. Second, he engages Majority World perspectives, showing how Asian, African and Latin American contexts address cultural, ancestral and sociopolitical realities often neglected by Western theology. Third, he examines the global Pentecostal-Charismatic movement, arguing that its emphasis on the experience of the Holy Spirit encourages theologians to reconsider not only the doctrine of the Holy Spirit but Christian theology as a whole.²²

²¹ Amos Yong, 'I Believe in the Holy Spirit', in *The Trinity among the Nations: The Doctrine of God in the Majority World*, ed. by Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue and K. K. Yeo (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2015), pp. 13–33.

²² Yong, pp. 13–24.

Building upon this historical and global survey, Yong returns to the clauses of the Nicene Creed, arguing that each provides a theological framework for understanding the Spirit's work in creation, revelation and salvation. Rather than treating the Creed as a historical confession alone, he demonstrates how its language continues to inform contemporary discussions of materiality, interfaith encounter and Christology within a global context. In this way, the Spirit is presented not as an isolated doctrine but as the life-giving Lord whose work shapes the whole of Christian theology.²³

Theologically, Yong demonstrates that pneumatology cannot be confined to a single cultural setting or Western paradigm. By combining creedal orthodoxy with Majority World insights, he presents the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as a theological lens through which the whole of Christian doctrine may be reconsidered. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen similarly argues that contemporary pneumatology is at its strongest when it brings together ecumenical, global and contextual perspectives while remaining rooted in Trinitarian theology.²⁴ Likewise, Yves Congar observes that Western theology has historically given insufficient attention to the Holy Spirit, a diagnosis that reinforces Yong's call for a renewed and more comprehensive pneumatology.²⁵ Nevertheless, the breadth of Yong's survey inevitably limits the depth with which individual traditions and indigenous theological categories can be explored. Even so, his chapter succeeds in presenting a vision of theology that is simultaneously orthodox, ecumenical and globally informed.

Overall, Yong offers a compelling and accessible account of the Holy Spirit's role in Christian theology, demonstrating how historic orthodoxy and global perspectives together provide a richer framework for contemporary pneumatology.

²³ Yong, pp. 24–33.

²⁴ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 18–22.

²⁵ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans. by David Smith, 3 vols (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), I, pp. 3–12.

Thomas G. Weinandy – The Doctrinal Significance of the Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon

In *The Doctrinal Significance of the Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon*, Thomas G. Weinandy argues that the ecumenical councils did not merely resolve historical controversies but permanently defined the Church's understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. By tracing the doctrinal development of Nicaea (325), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451), he contends that these councils permanently defined the ontological reality of the Incarnation and therefore continue to provide the doctrinal norm for orthodox Christology today.²⁶

Weinandy structures his chapter around three incarnational truths which, he argues, guided the Church's doctrinal development: that it is truly the Son of God who became man, that the Son assumed complete humanity, and that the Son of God truly exists as man in one person. These three truths provide the interpretive framework through which Weinandy explains the doctrinal development of the ecumenical councils.²⁷

The Council of Nicaea addressed Arius' claim that the Son was a created being by affirming that Christ is *homoousios* ('of one substance') with the Father, thereby safeguarding his full divinity.²⁸ Weinandy then explains how the Council of Ephesus responded to Nestorius by defending the unity of Christ's person and affirming Mary as *Theotokos*, protecting the confession that the one born of Mary was truly the eternal Son of God incarnate.²⁹ Finally, Chalcedon brought these developments together by confessing Christ as one person existing in two complete natures, divine and human, 'without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation'.³⁰

²⁶ Thomas G. Weinandy, 'The Doctrinal Significance of the Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon', in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. by Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 549–567 (pp. 549–550).

²⁷ Weinandy, pp. 550–551.

²⁸ Weinandy, pp. 551–555.

²⁹ Weinandy, pp. 555–559.

³⁰ Weinandy, pp. 559–562.

Taken together, Weinandy argues that these councils represent a progressive clarification of apostolic faith rather than the invention of new doctrine. Their creeds and doctrinal definitions remain authoritative because they describe the ontological reality of the Incarnation itself rather than offering historically conditioned theological models. Consequently, authentic Christology continues to be measured against the doctrinal boundaries established by these conciliar definitions.³¹

The chapter demonstrates that doctrinal development serves to preserve rather than replace biblical revelation. Weinandy argues that the councils provided precise theological language to defend the Church's confession of Christ against misunderstanding while remaining faithful to Scripture.³² This reflects Lewis Ayres' contention that Nicaea should be understood as the culmination of sustained theological reflection within the early Church rather than as a departure from apostolic belief.³³ Likewise, Frances Young argues that the Christological controversies compelled the Church to refine its theological language without abandoning the mystery of the Incarnation.³⁴ Weinandy therefore argues that conciliar doctrine provides the Church with the authoritative theological grammar through which Scripture is rightly interpreted and Christ is faithfully confessed.

A major strength of the chapter is its clear theological organisation. Rather than presenting the councils simply as historical events, Weinandy demonstrates how each contributes to a coherent doctrinal understanding of Christ centred upon three incarnational truths. His emphasis upon the ontological character of the councils successfully demonstrates the coherence of doctrinal development across three centuries of Christological debate. However, the discussion gives relatively little attention to alternative contemporary Christological approaches, instead primarily defending the

³¹ Weinandy, pp. 562–566.

³² Weinandy, pp. 562–566.

³³ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 11–29.

³⁴ Frances Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background*, 2nd edn (London: SCM Press, 2010), pp. 1–18.

normative authority of classical conciliar doctrine. While appropriate to the chapter's purpose, greater engagement with contemporary Christological scholarship would have demonstrated more fully how the conciliar tradition continues to address modern theological questions.

Weinandy convincingly argues that the councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon remain foundational because they permanently define the Church's confession of the Incarnation and the identity of Jesus Christ.

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