

Faith Seeking Understanding: God and Philosophy in the Middle Ages

Philosophy & Theology: A Complicated History

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Philosophy & Theology: A Complicated History

- The term *theologia* did not really refer to an academic field of inquiry until the High Middle Ages.
- Though sometimes used in Christian contexts, “theology” was more commonly used in reference to paganism. It referred to a personal, even mystical knowledge of God — the kind that one might acquire in prayer or contemplation.
- Knowledge of God was, of course, an important part of Christianity. But this was mediated by the the teachings of Christ and the apostles.
- For most of the early church, what we regard as “theology” today would have been described as study of the “sacred page” (*sacra pagina*), Scripture, or “divinity”.



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- The relationship of the early church to philosophy was complicated. It could sometimes be adversarial. St Paul warns the early Church: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col. 2:8, NIV).
- The church fathers not uncommonly set philosophy in explicit opposition to Christian teaching.
- Clement of Alexandria argued the Greeks corrupted teachings they learned from the Prophets. It was not uncommon said that Plato learned philosophy from Jeremiah, Moses, or Abraham (Evans, p. 15).
- “Philosophy” comes to represent the vain and ultimately fruitless endeavour of humans trying to achieve their end without divine grace or revelation.

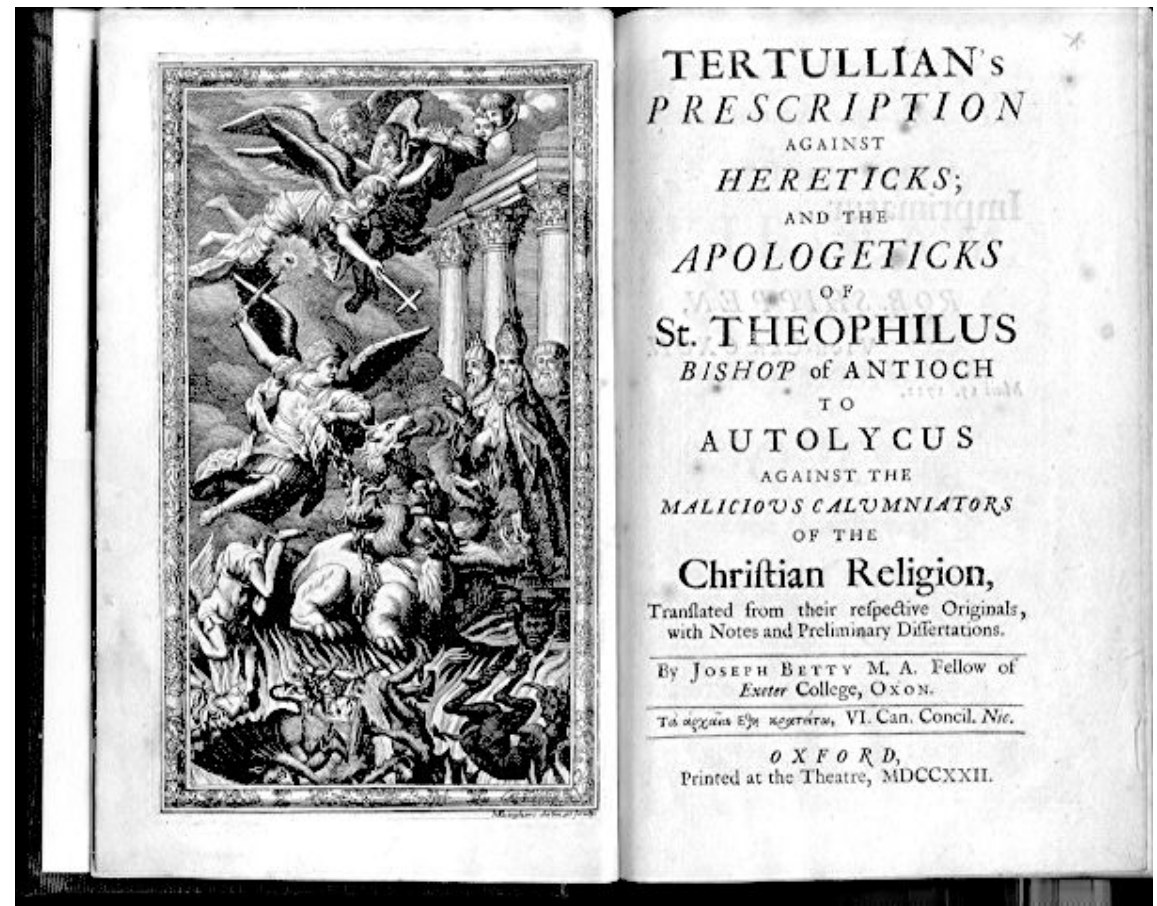


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The Gospel Against Philosophy

- Tertullian famously describes the ancient philosophers as “the patriarchs of heretics”.
- “Worldly wisdom culminates in philosophy with its rash interpretation of God’s nature and purpose. It is philosophy that supplies the heresies with their equipment. From philosophy come the aeons and those infinite forms — whatever they are — and Valentinus’s human trinity. He had been a Platonist. From philosophy came Marcion’s God, the better for his inactivity. He had come from the Stoics. The idea of a mortal soul was picked up from the Epicureans, and the denial of the [resurrection] was taken over from the common tradition of the philosophical schools . . .

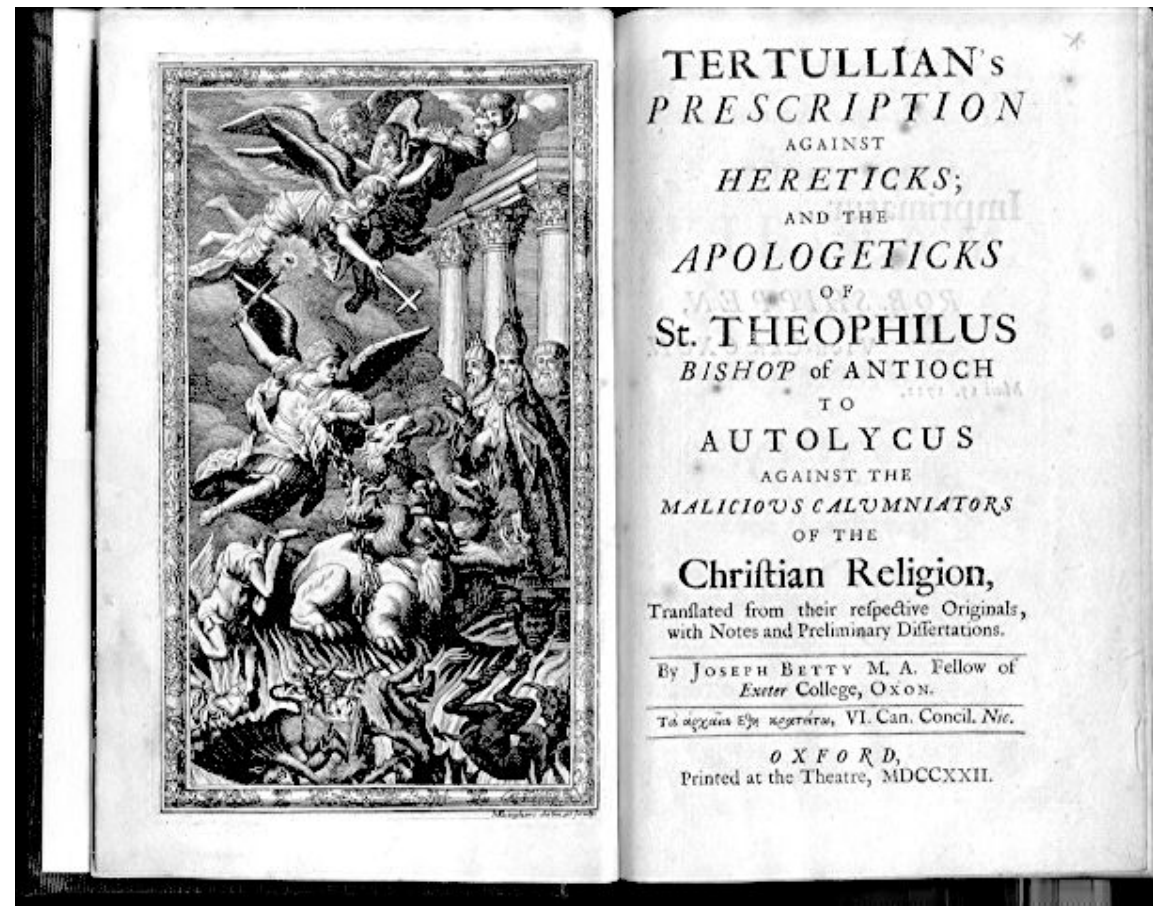


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The Gospel Against Philosophy

- “A plague on Aristotle, who taught them dialectic, the art which destroys as much as it builds, which changes its opinions like a coat, forces its conjectures, is stubborn in argument, works hard at being contentious and is a burden even to itself . . . What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the Porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation.” — Tertullian, *Prescription*, VII.



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The Influence of Augustine

- Still, some early Christian apologists, like Origen, were celebrated for their knowledge of philosophy.
- The early church was sometimes identified as a philosophical sect, and even encouraged the comparison.
- Augustine's *Confessions* and *Dialogues* popularised a vision for the contemplative life occupied with a kind of *philosophia Christiana*.
- In his *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine compares pagan philosophy to the spoiling of the Egyptians, as the Israelites are said to have done in the Exodus (Ex. 12).



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Philosophy the Birthright of the Gospel

- “Like the treasures of the ancient Egyptians, who possessed not only idols and heavy burdens, which the people of Israel hated and shunned, but also vessels and ornaments of silver and gold, and clothes, which on leaving Egypt the people of Israel, in order to make better use of them, surreptitiously claimed for themselves . . . similarly all the branches of pagan learning contain not only false and superstitious fantasies and burdensome studies that involve unnecessary effort, which each one of us must loathe and avoid as under Christ’s guidance we abandon the company of pagans . . .



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Philosophy the Birthright of Theology

- “... but also studies for liberated minds which are more appropriate to the service of the truth, and some very useful moral instruction, as well as the various truths about monotheism to be found in their writers. These treasures — like the silver and gold which they did not create but dug, as it were, from the mines of providence, which is everywhere — which were used wickedly and harmfully in the service of demons must be removed by Christians, as they separate themselves in spirit from the wretched company of pagans, and applied to their true function, that of preaching the gospel.”
— *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.40.



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Reason and Revelation

- The Church has traditionally maintained that there are two means of knowing God: Reason and Revelation.
- We can know some things about God *naturally* — that is, by making use of reason in the observation of God's effects. Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero are examples of those who discerned the existence, unity, and priority of God, all simply by reading “the book of nature”.
- But some things cannot be discerned from nature alone. These truths are “above” reason. They must be *revealed* to us and accepted on the basis of faith. These include teachings like the Triune nature of God, that God is provident, and that God is the Creator of all things. These can be known only through the “book of Scripture”.
- Reason, in this way, offers a kind of *preambula fidei* — a preparation and questioning of the mind which comes to rest in faith.



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Reason and Revelation

- Anselm of Canterbury combined both of these in his treatises *Monologion*, *Proslogion*, and *Cur Deus Homo*.
- Each of these treatises attempts to demonstrate the truth of some Christian doctrine by appeal to reason.
- This isn't "pure reason" in the Enlightenment sense of the term — reason divorced from any appeal to authority or tradition.
- Each treatise begins with a prayer, invoking divine help, and presupposes the coherence of faith and reason. It also often takes some explicit teaching of Scripture as its starting point.
- However it does presuppose its ambition that logic might be used to establish articles of faith on separate grounds. Anselm describes his writings as attempts to provide additional support for the faith of troubled minds.



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Philosophy & Theology in the High Middle Ages

- By the High Middle Ages, “philosopher” was no longer a term used in opposition to “Christian” for the simple reason that all philosophers in Europe were Christian.
- With the institution of the University, however, philosophy comes to be situated in the “lower” Arts faculty so that the remit of philosophers and divines are firmly distinguished.
- The subordination of philosophy to theology had been a source of frustration for the more rationalistic members of the University.
- Abelard, the most famous logician of his day, chaffed when told he would not be permitted to lecture in divinity.
- Abelard’s book *Theologia*, which would later be burned, may be responsible for popularising the term, which implied a kind of *rational* approach to divinity — theos [God] + logos [reason].



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Aristotle and the Conflict of the Faculties

- Translations of Aristotle's works, coming largely from Constantinople, Venice, Toledo, and Sicily began appearing in Latin b/w 1130-1270.
- Philosophers using the works of Aristotle began to challenge and reformulate Christian doctrine, sometimes in unorthodox ways.
- In 1215, papal legate Robert Courson bans the teaching of Aristotle at the University and institutes requirements on the qualifications of lecturers in the arts (21 y/o and 6 years of *artes liberales*) and theology (35 y/o and 8 years of study w/ 5 in theology).
- This was ineffective — people continued to read Aristotle, just not in the University. The new University at Toulouse marketed itself as a place where Aristotle's *naturales libris* might be read.
- By 1228, the reins were loosening but Gregory IX sent a letter to the Masters at Paris that warned "Vessels of gold and silver are to be received by the Hebrews from the Egyptians, so that they might grow rich, not so that they should become their slaves in payment" (Evans, pp. 15-16, 19-20).



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The Subject of Metaphysics

- As the conflict between the theology and the arts faculty grew, the question of the “subject” of metaphysics became more pressing.
- At different points, Aristotle had suggested that metaphysics is the study of 1) causes, 2) God, 3) being as being.
- Medieval philosophy was largely divided between the second and third options. Averroës defended the 2nd, arguing that God was the subject of metaphysics as he is the *causa motus*. Avicenna, on the other hand, argued that *being as being* was the object of metaphysics.
- A number of philosophers preferred the reading of Averroës because it afforded a more direct engagement between theology and metaphysics.
- Theologians, on the other hand, argued that metaphysics had a much more limited function — it is concerned more narrowly with *being as being* (*ens in quantum est ens*).

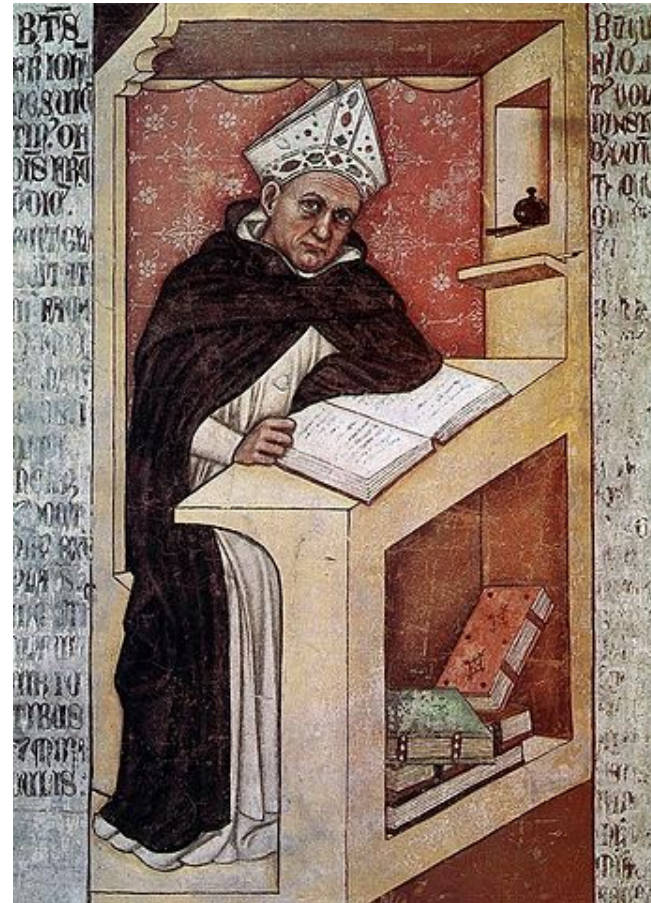


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The Subject of Metaphysics

- Albert the Great (right) and his student Thomas Aquinas, would each argue that metaphysics is concerned only with *ens commune* — “common being”.
- Of course, we exist, and God exists, and so in that respect, metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that seeks out the *existence* of God.
- Creatures can exist or not exist, because they are composition of essence and existence. God is the *source* of their existence — the cause which brings them into being.
- But unlike creatures, God cannot not exist. Existence is identical with his nature. God is *ens simpliciter* — “being itself”. In that respect, God’s existence is entirely unlike our own.
- Metaphysics might be able to teach us *that* God exists and that his existence is unlike our own, but we cannot know the *nature* of God by reason — to know him as the omnipotent and wise Creator is ultimately an act of *faith*, that requires revelation.



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