

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



# CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Edited by  
**Colin E. Gunton**

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## CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Constructive Christian doctrine was for a long time in the doldrums, its contents progressively brought into question by representatives of intellectual modernism. But recent years have seen something of a revival in its fortunes. This is due to a number of factors, among them the critique of modernism and a stress on the particular and relative independence of the distinctive intellectual disciplines.

Theology has always taken a shape related to the culture in which it is set, and *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* is no exception. The fourteen chapters, written by established theologians from Britain and America, attempt to develop the promise inherent in the changed intellectual situation, while at the same time introducing some of the central topics of theology. The book is divided into two parts, with the first six chapters examining Christian theology in its current setting, and the second eight treating major topics among those traditional in Christian doctrine. While it has not been possible to include an account of everything, there has nevertheless been built a framework within which detailed treatment of other doctrines could be developed. The advantage of the compression is that topics are brought into relation which might be worse treated in relative isolation.

New readers and non-specialists will find this an accessible and stimulating introduction to the content of the main themes of Christian doctrine, while advanced students and specialists will find a useful summary of recent developments which demonstrates the variety, coherence and intellectual vitality of contemporary Christian thought.

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
**CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE**

Edited by Colin E. Gunton

*King's College London*



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# Contents

*Notes on contributors* vii

*Preface* xi

*Glossary* xiv

*Chronology* xviii

## **Part one** *Christian doctrine in the late twentieth century: the historical and intellectual context*

- 1 Historical and systematic theology 3  
COLIN GUNTON
- 2 On doctrine and ethics 21  
STANLEY HAUERWAS
- 3 The basis and authority of doctrine 41  
GERARD LOUGHLIN
- 4 The scope of hermeneutics 65  
FRANCIS WATSON
- 5 Christ and the cultures: The Jewish people  
and Christian theology 81  
BRUCE D. MARSHALL
- 6 Christ and the cultures: Christianity  
and the arts 101  
JEREMY BEGBIE

## **Part two** *The content of Christian doctrine*

- 7 The triune God 121  
RALPH DEL COLLE
- 8 The doctrine of creation 141  
COLIN GUNTON
- 9 Human being, individual and social 158  
KEVIN VANHOOZER
- 10 Redemption and fall 189  
TREVOR HART
- 11 The church and the sacraments 207  
ROBERT W. JENSON
- 12 Eschatology 226  
DAVID FERGUSON
- 13 Jesus Christ 245  
KATHRYN TANNER
- 14 The Holy Spirit 273  
GEOFFREY WAINWRIGHT

*General index* 297

*Index of biblical references* 303



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## Preface

Recent years have seen something of a revival in the fortunes of constructive Christian doctrine. Long in the doldrums by virtue of the apparent victory of 'criticism' – the ideology that everything before the modern era was almost by definition to be treated with heavy suspicion – its contents were progressively brought into question by representatives of intellectual modernism. The assumptions underlying modernism are that those things that cannot be justified at the bar of a particular kind of reason and a particular conception of what it is to be 'scientific' are thus far not justifiable as respectable intellectual exercises. Christian theology is particularly susceptible to a critique at the hands of this ideology, because its pretensions were among the first objects of Enlightenment criticism. As the Christian church has progressively lost its hold on Western social order, so its intellectual arm has appeared less essential a part of the universe of letters.

That things are changing is due to a number of factors, among them the critique of criticism and a stress on the particularity and relative independence of the distinctive intellectual disciplines. But the continuing vitality of Christian thought has made a contribution, from the engagement by theologians like Karl Barth with the cultural crises associated with both world wars to the part played by Christian faithfulness and sometimes intransigence both before and in the changes to the former Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. That does not mean that the tasks of constructive Christian theology can be taken up as if nothing had changed. Theology has always taken a shape related to the culture in which it is set, and this volume is no exception. It is a collection of papers by British and American writers dedicated to an attempt both to develop the promise inherent in the changed intellectual situation – what is sometimes called the postmodern world – and at the same time to provide an introduction for students and others to some of the central topics of theology. It is divided into two parts, with the first six chapters examining Christian theology in its current setting, the second eight treating major topics among those traditional in Christian doctrine.

Part one is dedicated to the nature of Christian theology, both historically and in the present, and with its relations to other forms of culture and religion. The first four chapters engage, chiefly but by no means only, with problems internal to theology, and of them two remarks can be made: that their authors belong to four different ecclesiastical traditions, as will be sometimes evident; and that, so far as content is concerned, the second and the fourth are particularly indicative of the contemporary situation. That ethics is here given a prominent place is to signal the fact that in Christian doctrine we are not engaged in 'mere' theory – with 'theology' in the pejorative sense once famously used by the former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson – but with truth claims that interact with life in its full breadth. Similarly, that the discussion of the interpretation of the Bible takes the form that it does indicates both that it is criticism of the Bible that is at the heart of the Christian encounter with the modern world which has so dominated recent years and that it is time for attitudes to change.

## *xii Preface*

The latter two chapters in Part one consider the relation of Christianity first to Judaism and then to the arts. Judaism is chosen as a way of engaging with the question of the relation of Christianity to 'other religions'. In so wide-ranging a volume it is not possible to discuss all the problems in this area, but it is hoped that by taking one closely related faith the essay will throw some light on the broader questions that arise. Another of the matters it is no longer possible to avoid is the relation of Christianity to the often secular or atheistic culture that forms its context in the modern world, and the paper on the arts enables some focusing of this question.

Part two begins with an account of how the characteristic form of Christian belief in God as Trinity took shape, and it is succeeded by two chapters giving some account of this God's creative work, first with reference to the world as a whole, then of the human creature in particular. After that come two chapters showing how the triune God comes into relation with the created world with specific reference first to the fulfilment of the human destiny in Christ, understood as it must be against the background of sin and fallenness, and second as that destiny takes historical shape in the community of belief and practice known as the church. Finally there are three chapters which treat doctrinal questions consequent on the creative and redemptive activity of God. Eschatology is concerned with an understanding of the final outcome of the divine action; christology with the way its historical centre, Jesus Christ, is to be understood, especially in the modern world when traditional doctrines have come in for so much criticism; and the book comes to an end with an account of the doctrine of the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit, to whom is attributed the perfecting or completion of the work of God in relation to the world.

While it has not been possible to include an account of everything that would be included in a full treatment of the content of Christian doctrine, there has nevertheless been built a framework within which detailed treatment of other doctrines – for example, those of justification and sanctification – could be developed. Similarly, even in topics that have been treated, the constraints of space make some truncation inevitable, with fall and salvation in the same paper, when it might be argued that they need a full treatment of their own, and likewise with the church and the sacraments. The advantage of the compression is that topics are brought into relation which might be worse treated in relative isolation. In any case, it is hoped that any isolation that occurs will be no more than relative, for all the papers bear in some way upon all others. Sometimes it is the case that papers complement each other, as with the papers on the Trinity and christology, with one concentrating on the historical development of doctrine, the other on problems characteristic of the modern era. All in all, the claim is that here there is a beginning of exploration for those who would engage with this rich and diverse, yet common stream of tradition and thought.

It remains for the editor to thank, first, the contributors to the volume both for their papers and for their courtesy and co-operation; and second, Alex Wright, formerly of the Cambridge University Press, whose brainchild the volume is.

The theological world is immensely indebted to him for his enterprise and initiative over recent years.

Colin Gunton  
King's College London.  
Epiphany, 1996

## Glossary

A word in italics refers to another glossary entry.

**agnosticism** ‘unknowing-ism’: the view that one cannot decide for or against the truth of some, especially theological, claim

**analogy** distinguishing between different and related meanings of the same word

**anthropocentric** centred on the human; contrast *theocentric*

**Apocalypse** a way of speaking of the last book of the Bible, the Revelation of St John the Divine

**Apologists** early Christian theologians, notably Justin Martyr, concerned with the defence of Christianity

**apophaticism** a method of characterising divine qualities by ‘speaking away’ their finite associations

**apostolic proclamation** the Christian faith as expressed in the preaching of the first apostles

**Arianism** generally for any teaching that Jesus Christ is less than fully divine

**Armageddon** a symbol of the final battle between God and the powers of evil

**atonement** literally, ‘at-one-ment’, a way of characterising the work of Jesus Christ in reconciling God and the world

**canon, canonical** literally, ‘measuring rod’. The officially recognised texts – the Bible – which act as the measure of Christian truth.

**charism** a human talent or capacity, understood as a gift of the grace of God

**chiliastic** associated with the *millennium*

**christology** the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ

**Constantinian** to do with the Roman emperor, Constantine, who gave recognised status to the Christian church in the fourth century. Generally, of any tendency to make Christianity conform to contemporary conditions.

**covenant** God’s commitment of himself to Israel and all humankind, particularly involving the calling of people into relationship with himself; sometimes distinguished into the old and new covenants (the contents of the Old and New Testaments)

**Decalogue** the Ten Commandments

**deism** the doctrine that God, having created the world, has no continuing interaction with it

**diachronic** happening over a period of time; contrast *synchronic*

**dogma** the formal teachings of an institution, particularly the church

**doxology** an ascription of glory to God

**ecclesiology** doctrine of the church

**Emmaus road** an allusion to the story related in Luke 24

**Enlightenment** a movement of thought, chiefly centred on the eighteenth century, stressing human reason at the expense of authority and tradition

**epistemology** the theory of knowledge

**eschaton** the end of the world

**filioque** Latin for, 'and from the Son'. A chief cause of division between Eastern Orthodox and Western churches is the Western addition of 'and from the Son' to the credal confession that God the Spirit proceeds 'from the Father'. See chapter 14 for a discussion.

**Gnosticism** a religious teaching or system in which the stress is on the communication of knowledge, often knowledge available only to the initiated. It is contrasted in Christian theology with the public gospel centred on God's act in Christ.

**Golgotha** the place where Jesus was crucified

**grace** a way of characterising the action of God towards and in the world, and particularly the human agent

**immanent** within the world; contrast *transcendent*. For its technical use in connection with the Trinity, see chapter 7.

**Immanuel** 'God with us', usually a way of describing the presence of God in Jesus Christ; see *incarnation*

**incarnation** the teaching that in Jesus of Nazareth the eternal Son of God takes to himself 'flesh' – complete human being

**Johannine logos** the teaching of the gospel and letters of John that Jesus is the divine word

**kerygma** proclamation, particularly of the Christian gospel; see also *apostolic proclamation*

**kyrios** 'Lord'. A translation of the Hebrew word for God, but also attributed to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in the New Testament.

**levitical sacrifices** rites performed by the official Jewish priests

**liberal theology** a school of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology; more generally, theology oriented to the *Enlightenment*

**logion** saying, especially one attributed to Jesus

**logos** word; often a way of describing Jesus Christ; see also *Johannine logos*

**Manichaeism** the teaching that evil, often attributed to the material world, is of near or equal power, to good

**Messiah** literally, 'the anointed one', a title for Jesus Christ and others expected or believed to inaugurate a new historical era in Israel

**metaphysics** 'after physics'; a philosophical theory of the nature of reality

**metaphilosophy** a theory of the nature of philosophy

**millennium** a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth

**modalism** see *Sabellianism*. Forms of modalism are defined in chapter 14.

**monotheism** belief in one God

**natural theology** theology developed by means of intrinsic human capacities, apart from divine revelation

**nominalism** the teaching, developed in opposition to Platonist and Aristotelian theories about the reality of universals or forms, and associated particularly with the late-medieval William of Ockham that only particular things exist

- ontology**, **ontological** thought or theory about the nature of being or reality
- Palamite** to do with Gregory Palamas, fourteenth-century Orthodox theologian
- pantheism** the doctrine that the universe as a whole is God
- Paraclete** advocate; one of the words for the Holy Spirit in the gospel of John
- parousia** 'coming'; usually of the second coming of Christ in glory at the end of time
- perichoresis** the teaching that each of the three persons of the Trinity is completely involved in the being and acts of the others
- phenomenological** to do with descriptions of how things appear
- pietism** an approach to Christian faith seeing it as centred in the responsive side of the person – the heart, emotions and moral seriousness
- pneumatological** to do with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit
- polytheism** belief in many gods
- postmodern** 'after the modern', often used to refer to a recent tendency of thought, which stresses the plurality and variety of cultures and philosophies
- predestination** the doctrine that God has ordained in advance the destiny of human beings
- pro me*, *pro nobis* Latin for, respectively, 'for me', 'for us'
- Qur'an** (sometimes written **Koran**) the sacred text of Islam
- redactor** a writer or editor who is held to have arranged the biblical texts into their final form
- Sabellianism** the teaching that the three persons of the Trinity are manifestations or modes of a single underlying reality
- salvific** to do with salvation
- Second Temple** the temple built after the return of the Jews from exile in 538 BC
- Septuagint** the Greek translation of the Old Testament, probably done in the third century BC
- Shema** the central confession of the Old Testament faith, expressed in Deuteronomy 6.4
- Socinian** associated with Faustus Socinus (1539–1604), and generally of the denial of the divinity of Christ, of his atoning death and of the doctrine of the Trinity
- soteriological** to do with the doctrine of salvation
- synchronic** happening at the same time; contrast *diachronic*
- synoptic gospels** the first three gospels, because they, in contrast to John's gospel, supposedly give a summary of the story of Jesus
- telos** Greek for 'end' or 'purpose'
- theocentric** centred on God; contrast *anthropocentric*
- theophanies** appearances of God or the divine
- Thomist**, **thomistic** of the school of Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274)
- Torah** the Jewish law
- transcendent** outside or other than the world; contrast *immanent*
- Trent** the council held by the Roman Catholic Church, 1545–1563, to consolidate its response to the Reformation
- Tridentine** to do with the council of *Trent*

**typology, typological** interpreting a thing or event in the light of a foreshadowing 'type', as when baptism is illustrated by reference to Noah's flood

**univocal, univocity** treating different meanings of a word as the same; contrast *analogy*

**via moderna** 'the modern way'; a term used for a school of late medieval theology; see also *nominalism*

**Westminster Confession** A confession of faith written by the Westminster Assembly of 1643 and one of the authoritative statements of the Christian faith for Presbyterian churches

**Wisdom traditions** a way of speaking of the writings such as Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes which are known as the Wisdom writings in the Old Testament

**wisdom christology** interpreting Jesus as the embodiment of divine wisdom

# Chronology

- 427–347 BC Plato
- 384–322 BC Aristotle
- c. 15 BC–c. 50 AD Philo of Alexandria, Jewish scholar
- 37–c. 100 AD Flavius Josephus, Jewish historian
- d. c. 160 Marcion, theologian who rejected the authority of the Old Testament and some books of the New
- d. c. 165 Justin Martyr, theologian and ‘Apologist’
- d. c. 180 Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons. *Against the Heresies*
- c. 150–220 Tertullian of Carthage, theologian
- d. c. 215 Clement of Alexandria, theologian
- 204–70 Plotinus, Neoplatonist philosopher
- d. c. 253 Origen of Alexandria. *On First Principles*
- d. 258 Cyprian of Carthage, bishop and theologian
- c. 250–336 Arius of Alexandria, theologian (see *Arianism* in glossary)
- c. 295–373 Athanasius of Alexandria, bishop and theologian. *On the Incarnation*
- 325 Council of Nicaea. The divinity of Christ
- c. 330–379 Basil of Caesarea
- c. 330–c. 389 Gregory of Nazianzus
- c. 335–394 Gregory of Nyssa
- 381 Council of Constantinople. The divinity of the Holy Spirit and the doctrine of the Trinity
- 354–430 Augustine, theologian and Bishop of Hippo, Africa
- d. c. 444 Cyril of Alexandria, bishop and theologian
- 451 Council of Chalcedon. The doctrine of the person of Christ
- c. 480–524 Boethius, philosopher and theologian
- c. 490–575 John Philoponos, theologian and scientist
- 580–662 Maximus the Confessor, theologian
- c. 675–c. 749 John of Damascus, theologian
- c. 1033–1109 Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury. *Cur Deus Homo*
- 1079–1142 Peter Abelard, theologian
- c. 1095–1160 Peter Lombard, theologian. *The Sentences*
- c. 1123–1173 Richard of St Victor, theologian
- 1126–1198 Averroës, Islamic philosopher
- c. 1225–1274 Thomas Aquinas, theologian. *Summa Theologiae*
- 1266–1308 John Duns Scotus, theologian
- c. 1285–1347 William of Ockham, theologian
- 1296–1359 Gregory Palamas, Eastern Orthodox theologian
- 1483–1546 Martin Luther. The Reformation
- 1509–1564 John Calvin. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*
- 1545–1552
- 1562–1563

} ‘Cappadocian Fathers’

} Council of Trent

- 1564–1642 Galileo Galilei, scientist  
1596–1650 René Descartes, ‘Father of modern philosophy’ – and of the Enlightenment  
1632–1677 Baruch Spinoza, pantheist philosopher  
1632–1704 John Locke, philosopher  
1642–1727 Isaac Newton, scientist and theologian  
1703–1791 John Wesley, Methodism  
1711–1776 David Hume, philosopher  
1724–1804 Immanuel Kant, philosopher of the Enlightenment  
1768–1834 Friedrich Schleiermacher, theologian. *The Christian Faith*  
1770–1831 G. W. F. Hegel, philosopher  
1801–1890 J. H. Newman, Anglican, later Roman Catholic, theologian  
1809–1892 Charles Darwin, biologist  
1813–1855 Søren Kierkegaard, writer and theologian  
1848–1921 Peter Taylor Forsyth, theologian  
1851–1930 Adolf Harnack, historian of doctrine  
1884–1976 Rudolf Bultmann, New Testament scholar and theologian  
1886–1968 Karl Barth, theologian. *Church Dogmatics* (1932–1967)  
1886–1965 Paul Tillich, theologian  
1889–1951 Ludwig Wittenstein, philosopher  
1904–1984 Karl Rahner, theologian  
1905–1988 Hans Urs von Balthasar, theologian



## **Part one**

*Christian doctrine in the late twentieth century:  
the historical and intellectual context*



# 1 Historical and systematic theology

COLIN GUNTON

Historical and systematic theology are disciplines concerned with the content of Christian teaching. Historical theology is that discipline whose task is to expound the course of Christian theology through time, within its different historical and cultural contexts. Systematic theology's distinctive character derives from its responsibility for articulating the meaning and implications of the church's claims for the truth of the Christian gospel. In some conceptions of its task, systematic theology is simply a fashionable way of speaking of what used to be called dogmatic theology; in others, a more conscious orientation to the characteristic conditions of the modern world is in view. We shall return to that question at the end of the chapter.

Despite their differences, however, the two studies do not follow entirely different courses, for their tracks cross in many places. One example will introduce what is meant. To study the *history* of the development of Christian theology in its formative years, the student needs to be aware not only of the *systematic* interconnections of – above all – the doctrines of God and of the person of Christ but also the relation of the Christian world of thought to other aspects of ancient culture, perhaps especially Greek philosophy and religion. To understand the history requires a measure of systematic awareness. The relation with classical civilisation is of particular importance, because there exist very different views of the interaction of the two worlds, a feature of the literature which helps to make historical theology the interesting and complicated study that it is. Conversely, what we make of questions of history will often have a bearing on how we see the faith today. We might ask, for example, whether the formation of Christian theology in the early days with the assistance of concepts borrowed from Greek philosophy is helpful or harmful as we attempt to articulate Christian theology systematically today. In sum, historical theology cannot be understood without some awareness of the nature of systematic theology; while systematic theology, particularly in view of the historical character of Christianity, cannot take shape without considerable historical awareness.

One other preliminary question concerns the distinction between theology and doctrine. It is sometimes suggested that doctrine is what is taught by the church, as the officially agreed teaching of the institution, while theology is a more open-ended activity, whose efforts may or may not be accepted as doctrine in the course of time. That is a useful distinction because it enables us to understand the nature of both ancient and modern discussions. Parts of the teaching of Origen came to be accepted as the doctrine of the church; other parts were condemned as heretical; but all he wrote was theological. Similarly, many modern systematic theologians have questioned some of the doctrines of the creed, for example that concerning the divinity of Jesus Christ, although no representative church body has yet accepted the validity of their contentions. But, like the distinction between historical and systematic theology, that between doctrine and theology cannot be treated as absolute, because Christian doctrines are theological, while theology is often centrally concerned with the church's official doctrine.

## HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

### *A theological discipline*

Historical theology is a characteristically modern form of theological thought. Jaroslav Pelikan notes that the history of doctrine emerged as a discipline only in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> While it would be false and patronising to suggest that earlier eras had no historical sense at all, it is with the Renaissance that there first develops a definite sense that the form which Christian teaching takes varies with the era in which it is formulated. This understanding was deepened with the Reformation, whose claims to restore something truer to the original form of Christianity involved making historical judgements about the development or distortion of theology over the previous centuries.

Later, with the Enlightenment, the critical stance to the past became more pronounced and it was often assessed in the light of what were then claimed to be absolute standards of reason, objectively and impartially applied. While such claims are now no longer plausible, the belief that it is a primary duty of the present interpreter to be above all *critical* of the past leaves its traces in many accounts of the history of theology. Against this, the fact that there is available a wide range of approaches to the history of doctrine shows that interpretation is often coloured by theological and other beliefs. Here again systematic and historical questions are inseparable, so that the way in which the past should be approached is an open question,

at least in the sense that there is room for discussion about which interpretation most faithfully accounts for the direction in which the Christian tradition developed.

The way in which interpretation of the past is ideologically or theologically loaded can be illustrated by the judgements made by different commentators about the history of theology. The work of the great nineteenth-century historian of dogma, Adolf Harnack,<sup>2</sup> which is still in many respects an excellent guide to much of the thought he describes, provides one clear example of the effect which his framework of interpretation has on his exposition of the sources. According to him, theological thought in the early centuries achieved the transformation of the straightforward gospel into a philosophy of religion in which a dogmatic Christ obscures the historical Jesus. Doctrinal developments are thus broadly characterised as accretions which distorted the faith. An altogether different picture had been produced earlier in the nineteenth century by J. H. Newman, who argued that later developments should be understood as being like the growth of an organism from a seed, so that additions to the creed are not necessarily foreign accretions but may be the unfolding of what was already implicit in the original faith.<sup>3</sup> Most more recent interpreters, for example Pelikan, would understand the development of Christian doctrine in a way which falls somewhere between those two. In all cases, the interpretation of history is closely bound up with a view of what theology ought to be and do.

The account which follows is similarly based on a number of assumptions. The first is that there is no such thing as pure objectivity, but that all interpretation involves some kind of provisional judgement that arises from the personal involvement of the scholar in the subject matter. This is not the same as a subjectivism which holds that all that we know is driven by mere prejudice, but a view that some form of personal commitment to that which is being studied is necessary if it is to be understood at all.<sup>4</sup> Study of the material in conversation with others who have also reviewed it will enable the initial judgements to be confirmed or refuted – most likely confirmed in some respects, refuted in others – but at any rate in such a way that understanding is broadened and deepened, and the judgements modified. The (objective) truth about our theological past emerges when the past is taken seriously and our theories about it laid out for public debate.

A second assumption is that historical theology is a theological discipline. That is to say, our doctrinal past is best understood if its representatives are taken seriously as living voices with whom we enter into theological

conversation. We shall sometimes agree and sometimes disagree with what they say, and that is what it means to take them seriously. In his *Church Dogmatics* Karl Barth is able to treat even opponents of the Christian faith as theological partners in conversation.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly it can be argued that historical theology should be a *theological* discipline not because we have decided in advance what to find, but because we approach our predecessors as theologians who have something to teach us.

### **The beginnings of theology: from the Bible to the Fathers**

What we call theology emerged out of the biblical writings which, as the record of revelation, provide the source and criterion of Christian theology. But as soon as that is said, qualifications have to be made. Are not the biblical writings themselves theology? The answer is that in so far as there is speech about, from or involving God, there is theology, so that we can speak of the theology of the book of Genesis or of the writer of Revelation. There are other continuities, too, with later theology. The Bible contains and presupposes much doctrine or teaching, often as summaries or confessions of belief.

Yet there is a relative although not absolute difference of both style and content between the Bible and the theology found in later writings. For the most part, the New Testament writings, to concentrate on them, are occasional rather than systematic in their teaching. Although, in common with later theology, they hold that Jesus is the source of salvation, there is relatively little extended exposition or defence of Christian doctrinal teaching. Doctrine tends to be assumed or cited in the service of particular concrete concerns of the writers, often encouragement or exhortation, and so has to be teased out of scripture. For example, although the Bible contains the basis of the doctrine of creation its systematic expression as creation 'out of nothing' emerges only out of sustained engagement with *both* the biblical teaching *and* the challenges to articulate it in the world in which the early church was set.<sup>6</sup>

It is chiefly the change of situation which brought about the development of Christian theology proper. The transition appears to have been made through the development of the 'rule of faith'. This was a confession of faith which summarised, although not always in quite the same form of words, the heart of the Christian faith: belief in God the creator, Jesus Christ the saviour and coming judge, the Holy Spirit, and the church and the Christian life. The rule of faith is essentially a rehearsal of those central affirmations which make Christianity what it distinctively is, and is thus a

precursor of the later, more formal creeds. By the end of the second century claims are made that this rule is universal in the church. Like the Bible, however, while it contains theology and doctrine, it is not yet theology in the sense we are approaching.

Theology as a rational or systematic discipline develops when elements of the rule are perceived to be denied or challenged from within or without the church. Internal challenges are those offered by heresy, which means a distortion of the gospel by church teachers of such a kind that it endangers the faith's integrity. External challenges come chiefly from opponents of the claims made by the church. But what from the point of view of the church of the time were dangers, to the historical theologian are seen to be opportunity, for it is through responding to the challenges – by being compelled to think hard about the content of the gospel – that the achievements of theology become possible. The unique significance of the first few centuries of Christian theology – the 'Patristic' period, the era of the early Church Fathers – is that there are then developed the main responses to two challenges in particular: the distinctively Christian doctrine of God and the understanding of the nature of Jesus Christ.

For the content of these two developments, the reader is directed to the articles devoted to them. In summary it can be said that both developments are consequent on the church's understanding of Jesus as the unique agent of divine salvation. It was this that led the Fathers to redefine what was meant by God, and so necessarily to come into conflict with the way in which God was understood in both Judaism and contemporary philosophy. The doctrine of the Trinity was thus developed in order to identify the God who made himself known in the way that Christians believed, so that a direct, if sometimes unsteady, line can be drawn from the baptism of early believers into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and the work of the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine of Hippo several centuries later.

Similarly, the struggle in the early years was so to articulate the doctrine of the person of Christ that, without any denial of his unity, he could be understood as at once divine – for otherwise he could not save – and human – for otherwise he could not save *us*. The development of christology came to a kind of closure in 451 AD, when the Council of Chalcedon produced the Definition that has remained unquestioned in most parts of the church as a general expression of Christian belief until the modern era. Its central concern was to defend the unity of the person of Christ against those teachings which were suspected of endangering it, but at the same time to affirm that Jesus Christ was both God and man, and fully so.

**'The Age of Faith': the age of the schools**

The Middle Ages was, in both Eastern and Western parts of the church – that is, on those communions centred on the rival authorities of Byzantium and Rome, a period when beliefs were relatively settled. That is not to say that there were no theological developments; on the contrary, the era was one of great intellectual achievement. But it was an age in which the character of theology, shaped as it was in a particular society, was marked by a number of distinctive features. First, it was a Christian society in the sense that the Christian religion had been adopted as its official basis, so that we are not now so much concerned with the forging of a theology in a hostile intellectual environment as with its further articulation in the particular conditions of the time.

Second, just as the age saw a close combination of church and state, so intellectually it was a synthesis of creed and philosophy – the era of 'Christian philosophy'.<sup>7</sup> Theologians performed their tasks with the help of an almost universally adopted method, 'of discovering and illustrating philosophical truth by means of a dialectic based on Aristotelian logic ...'<sup>8</sup> Although some scholastic thinkers were more indebted to Plato and some to Aristotle, they were all concerned to perform in different ways the task set for the era by Boethius in the sixth century, to combine faith – the creeds of the church – with reason, the discoveries of philosophy.<sup>9</sup> The difference of approach is to be seen in the fact that while platonisers tended to begin their thought with a God whom they conceived to be intuited directly through a process of divine illumination, the heirs of Aristotle – who was held in deep suspicion until rather late in the Middle Ages – reached the deity by arguing 'from below', from features of the experienced world.

Third, the character of the theology of the time can be understood in the light of the fact that it was by and large a credally static era. It was an age when it was for the most part taken for granted that certain questions had been settled beyond dispute, so that much thought was exercised on the method of theology and on the elaboration of generally acknowledged truths. It is not wholly the case that theologians were more concerned to elaborate and defend doctrines taken on the church's authority than to strike out in original ways, as is shown by the contributions made to the theology of the atonement by Anselm, Abelard and Aquinas. But in general it can be said that the Patristic period is that in which the doctrines of the great creeds are being hammered out, the Middle Ages that in which they are taken for granted, while the modern world that in which they come again into question.

The theology of the era is no better illustrated than by the character and

fate of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, a textbook on which hundreds of later theologians wrote commentaries. There were four books of *Sentences*, written around 1150 AD, and they took the form of a compilation rather than what we would call an original theological treatise. Their author applied the scholastic method of question and debate to a series of doctrinal propositions, which were discussed not so much by argument as by citing for or against them various authorities, ranging from scripture, through the Councils and Canons (the official rulings of the Church), to the Fathers, especially Augustine. While this writer did in the course of the discussion develop his own interpretation of the tradition, his approach shows why 'scholasticism' later came to serve as a pejorative term. Theology in this form can easily appear as an unimaginative rearrangement of ideas, at the expense of the deeper penetration into the subject matter that always distinguishes the work of the greatest theologians, many medievals among them.

Just as the work of Lombard dominated developments in the West, so in the East did the achievements of John of Damascus and Gregory Palamas. The former's work in the eighth century achieved a kind of formalisation of the work of those Fathers who preceded him, while the latter in the fourteenth century gave the doctrine of the Trinity the form that it now takes in most theologies of Eastern Orthodoxy. While it would be an exaggeration to say that the Enlightenment and other modern movements have had no effect on Orthodox theology, it is the case that there has been no serious attempt to move beyond John and Palamas, who are themselves understood as authoritative interpreters of the Fathers, particularly the Cappadocians and Maximus the Confessor. Their work in the fourth and seventh centuries defined, and still provides a final measure of, Eastern teaching on the Trinity, the heartbeat of the Eastern understanding of the faith.

### **Reconstruction and upheaval: the Reformation and beyond**

Martin Luther's breach with the Roman Church in the early sixteenth century was the catalyst for the division of the Western Church into two main blocs. The Reformation is significant for the historical theologian for two reasons: it both represents the recovery of dimensions of theology that had tended to be neglected and begins the fragmentation of the Christian church and theology whose results remain with us today. It is here especially that our presuppositions will affect our interpretation of history. Those with Catholic sympathies will stress the latter, destructive, effects, while more Protestant thinkers will emphasise the reappropriation of what they believe had been neglected elements of the faith.<sup>10</sup>

What is notable about the Reformation is the change in form and atmosphere of its theological writings. First, they reveal a widespread belief that many of the writings of their predecessors had strayed into realms of abstract speculation which had little bearing on the life of the Christian believer. They set out to reverse the trend. Second, and consequently, there is a more directly biblical orientation to their writings. For example, while Aquinas had treated the doctrine of creation rather as a philosophical basis for the rest of theology, barely making use of the Bible except in rare and general references to Genesis and other texts, Luther and Calvin gave their teaching a more directly biblical form. Third, the churches become again theologically innovative – too innovative in the view of Rome – in a number of senses. The writing of credal confessions to teach and defend the faith begins again, as does a move towards a more direct engagement with earlier traditions of doctrine and with scripture. The Fathers are searched for their theology rather than for citations, while in its seeking to be primarily an introduction to scripture Calvin's *Institutes* could not present much more of a contrast to the *Sentences*. In place of the textbook of theology is a determined attempt to relate theology to the life of the ordinary believer and the church.

The real scandal of the way that the Reformation turned out was that it appeared to lead to ruinous quarrels and wars, and they in turn led many observers to the view that Christian dogma, authority and ecclesiastical tradition were the root of most evil. The modern age, therefore, begins with a sustained assault on pillars of traditional Christian doctrine that the Reformers had not questioned, particularly the doctrines of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ and his atoning death. Human individuality and freedom were elevated over the authority of the institution (the church), while reason came in the writings of many critics of Christianity to be opposed to revelation and church authority as the source of human wisdom.

The assault came on many fronts. The authority of the Bible came under attack from philosophical critiques of miracle and theories of interpretation which treated it as essentially the same as other ancient religious literature. Leading philosophers attacked the proofs of the existence of God which had been inherited from the Middle Ages, while in the writings of rationalist opponents of the faith science was exalted over religion as a way of knowing about the truth of the universe. In particular, although Isaac Newton, possibly the greatest of modern scientists, was a religious believer, the mechanist philosophy his discoveries suggested was developed by some of his disciples in a way that tended to exclude God's interaction with the world as the doctrines of the creeds, the atonement and the sacraments required. All this

appeared to make theology of a traditional kind, if not impossible, then at least possible only on very different terms.

The question of what such terms should be was explored in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by a series of theologians of genius. Just as the early period was one of construction and the middle one of consolidation, so now the challenge is of reconstruction or reformulation. Many modern theological discussions concern the relationship of Christianity with modern culture in all its forms. The challenge of rationalist philosophy and science threw into the centre the problem of knowledge, so that much modern theology is exercised with systematic questions about the relation between Christian truth claims with those of other disciplines and forms of life. One can place the different approaches on a spectrum, at one end of which would be attempts to make Christian theology conform to the patterns of enterprises which appear to be successful – history or science, for example – at the other a determination to preserve above all the distinctive content of Christian faith.<sup>11</sup> But it has to be said that the overall picture is more one of confusion than of a rich diversity, because the different responses to the challenges of modernity are often incompatible with one another. A number of guides to modern systematic theology, in which the developments are treated in detail, are available.

## SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

### **Some complexities**

To be systematic in some enterprise, whether the activity be laying a table, planting a garden or organising a body of thought, is to engage in it according to some rational order. When it comes to theological thought, however, the matter becomes complicated, because there are a number of different ways in which one might claim to be systematic. Someone, and, as we shall see, Irenaeus is a good example, may be considered a systematic thinker in the sense that he is aware of the implications of one aspect of belief on another, but never succeeds in ordering those thoughts in what could be called a system. In Brunner's words, he was able 'to perceive the connections between truths, and to know which belongs to which... No other thinker was able to weld ideas together which others allowed to slip as he was able to do.'<sup>12</sup> Or one may be systematic, as the philosopher Spinoza was systematic, in ordering all his thoughts on a topic in a tightly arranged and geometrically argued circle, which could be entered in any place and followed round back to the starting point.