



SECOND
EDITION



THEOLOGY

THE BASIC READINGS

EDITED BY

ALISTER E. MCGRATH

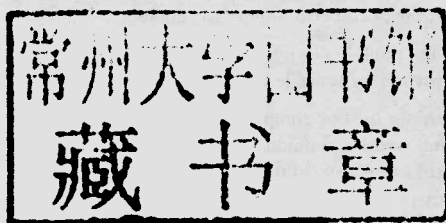
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Praise for the previous edition of *Theology: The Basic Readings*

"The extracts [here] have been clearly selected, and represent a good mix of classical and more modern writers, with an occasional rather less obvious choice. ... [The extracts] selected here fit well with the themes of the companion work, as one would expect." *Theological Book Review*

"Ample readings from the patristic, medieval, and Reformation eras give the reader a sense of the depth and breadth of each theme across the ages. Although brief, the volume packs surprising diversity into its pages: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant; feminist and liberationist; revisionist and conservative. It is hard to imagine a better basic introduction to Western Christian theology." *Religious Studies Review*

"The prolific Oxford professor has added to his bibliographic tapestry ... a good resource and [it] can be used effectively in an introductory course on theology." *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*

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How To Use This Book

Theology is “talk about God”; Christian theology is thus “talk about God” from a Christian perspective. Christian theology is one of the most fascinating subjects that you can hope to study. Yet most people find it an intimidating subject. It often seems to use words that nobody else uses or understands. Its ideas often seem strange or inaccessible. The demand for a short, simple and accessible introduction to this invigorating subject led to the production of my textbook *Theology: The Basics* in 2004. Now in its third edition, this short and highly accessible work has proved an invaluable resource to many who are starting the serious study of theology.

It is very helpful to have the basic themes, debates, and personalities of Christian theology introduced by a skilled and unbiased commentator. This, however, is only a starting point for the journey of theological reflection. It lays a foundation for something more helpful and important – namely, interacting with these theological themes, debates, and personalities at a deeper and more satisfying level *through reading and interacting with original texts*. Yet many students often find themselves reduced to despair, as they try to understand texts that they realize are important, but find impossibly difficult to understand. What are they meant to be looking for? What is the importance of these texts? This collection of readings is designed to provide a reliable, helpful and accessible way of engaging with original texts.

This collection of readings provides students with a substantial amount of help as they encounter primary sources. Much thought has been given to how best to do this. In the first place, the texts have been selected with great care, to make sure that they are not merely representative of the

debates, but are both *interesting* and *accessible*. This means that I have often chosen pieces from authors – such as G. K. Chesterton and Dorothy L. Sayers – who are lucid and engaging writers, yet who do not often find their way into more traditional theological anthologies. To allow a wide variety of theological voices, every item in this collection comes from a different theological source. The first edition of this collection, which was well received by its users, did not include a separate chapter on the theology of the Holy Spirit. In response to helpful feedback from those users, the second edition has included a chapter dedicated to this important topic.

In the second place, each reading needs to be introduced and explained to the reader, who then needs guidance about how best to interact with it. This book aims to do exactly that, by providing an introduction to each individual reading, followed by a commentary designed to enable readers to get the most from interacting with it. Although this book can be used to great effect in taught courses, it has been developed with the needs of those studying on their own particularly in mind. To allow easy correlation with *Theology: The Basics*, this collection of readings is divided into ten chapters which reflect the basic structure of the latest edition of this textbook.

Engaging with these readings is one of the best ways of understanding how Christians have tried to express their faith, develop its ideas, and weave its themes together into a systematic whole. Each reading is accompanied by an introduction, comment, and study questions, designed to make this process of engagement as straightforward, interesting and profitable as possible. I have made my own translations of Greek, Latin, and German texts written before 1800, aiming primarily at conceptual clarity, rather than literary elegance. My main concern is to allow readers to grasp the theological significance of these readings.

This collection of readings *aims* to introduce you to some key ideas, personalities, and schools of thought within Christian theology by direct engagement with original theological texts. It *assumes* that you know virtually nothing about the subject. It *provides* 62 readings, each from a different source, spread throughout the two thousand years of Christian history. Every attempt has been made to ensure that the work is broadly representative of the two thousand years of sustained critical reflection within western Christianity. Although this collection includes readings from every period of Christian history, it includes a very high proportion – nearly two in three – of readings dating from the last two hundred years. This ensures that students have access to classical approaches, while being introduced to more recent developments.

This book is deliberately pitched at an introductory level, and may well leave many readers longing for more after they have completed it. Such readers will find ample material in two more detailed and comprehensive textbooks from the present author and publisher: *Christian Theology: An Introduction* and *The Christian Theology Reader*. The former, now in its fifth edition, provides a thorough university-level introduction to Christian theology, including comprehensive coverage of the history of theology, the basics of theological method, and detailed engagement with ten major areas of theology. The latter, now in its fourth edition, provides more than 375 primary texts of relevance to the study of theology, along with individual introductions, commentary and study questions. Readers who enjoy the present collection of texts may want to move on to this larger collection, once they have mastered the contents of this shorter work.

It remains for me to thank my students at Oxford and London who have given me much advice and feedback on various readings under consideration for this collection, and Rebecca Harkin, my editor at Wiley-Blackwell, for her encouragement and guidance as it was developed. I hope it will enable its users to take their reading further, and to enjoy exploring the vast collection of theological resources now at their disposal. I am deeply grateful to users of the first edition of this work for their detailed feedback on the work, which has been invaluable in revising and expanding the material for this new edition, and welcome further feedback on this new edition.

Alister E. McGrath
London, April 2011

Engaging a Reading

How should you interact with a text? Many people find the idea difficult, even intimidating. Where do you start? What do you do? What are you meant to be looking for? This book assumes that you've never done this sort of thing before, and tries to make it as easy, interesting and rewarding as possible.

Let me begin by explaining how this collection of readings is arranged. The texts are arranged *thematically* by chapter and *chronologically* within each chapter. In other words, all the readings dealing with the doctrine of the Trinity are grouped together in a single chapter. Within this chapter the readings are presented in the order in which they were written. The earliest comes first; the most recent comes last.

The first chapter, dealing with some basic issues of faith, is introductory. It is designed to help you find your feet as you begin to engage with original sources. Not only does it provide more readings than the chapters which follow; it also offers a much greater degree of guidance and direction as you engage with the readings. This will help set you up for later chapters, where less direct guidance is provided. You are strongly recommended to work your way through this first chapter before moving on to explore other themes later in the work. It will help you work out how to interact with primary sources, and what to expect from engaging them.

The best way of using this book is simply to adopt a thematic approach and work your way through each chapter. Each reading has its own introduction, which will help you get an idea of what it's all about. Sometimes these are quite detailed; sometimes, they are short – it all depends on how

much background knowledge you need to make sense of the text. So read the introduction first, then move on to the text itself. After you've read it through, try interacting with it like this.

1. Make sure that you can identify the author. When did she live? In which part of the world was he based? There is much material available on the Internet that will be helpful here, particularly in providing full biographical details of writers.

2. Spend a little time thinking about the work from which the reading is taken. What kind of a work is it? For example, is it academic, polemical, pastoral, or popular? Who is the author writing for?

3. Try to summarize the passage, noting the flow of the argument and any assumptions which seem to be especially important. Make a note of any phrases used that you think are interesting – for example, by underlining or highlighting it in the text. If you come across words that puzzle you, try looking them up in the glossary at the end of this book.

4. Now close the book and see if you can summarize the reading. The more information you can retain, the better. In particular, try to recall the main points of any arguments used.

5. Write down your summary in a single paragraph.

This kind of exercise will help you test your own understanding of the passage, and also enable you to make the best possible use of the information for yourself.

You don't need to agree with a writer's perspective to benefit from exploring the approach they adopt. Sometimes the most useful texts to engage are those that take positions we disagree with. Why? Because they force us to ask ourselves why we take the position that we do, and how we would respond to the points they make. This collection of readings draws from a wide variety of sources, and will certainly force you to think about your own ideas. Nobody is asking you to change your mind about anything (though you may do so as a result of interacting with some of these texts). Hopefully, you will find these texts interesting and stimulating, opening up new ways of thinking or offering new illustrations or approaches that will prove to be helpful.

Christian Theology: An Historical Overview

This reader brings together a collection of readings drawn from the first two thousand years of Christian theology. Although two in every three of these readings are drawn from very recent sources, you will find material from each of the great periods of Christian history represented here. To get the most out of these readings, you need a basic understanding of the main features of the development of Christian theology. If you are using this reader alongside my textbook *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, now in its fifth edition, you will find that this provides you with a detailed road map which will allow you to get the most from this collection of readings. It will help you make much more sense of what you read, and allow you to appreciate the context in which they were written. The four introductory chapters of this larger work provide a survey of historical theology. The following four chapters deal with issues of sources and interpretation, dealing with material covered in the first two chapters of this reader. The remaining chapters present a detailed engagement with the major themes of Christian theology, providing an in-depth introduction to the readings.

However, not all will want to make use of this specific introduction to Christian theology. For those not using this companion volume, the brief section which follows will give you something of a panoramic view of the main landmarks of this process of development, and identify readings that will help you understand some of its features. While this can only highlight some of the many themes of Christian theology (passing over many topics, debates, schools of thought and topics that fully deserve discussion), it will nevertheless help readers to get their bearings in the midst of this vast landscape of ideas.

For the sake of convenience, historians of Christian thought tend to break its first two thousand years down into more manageable sections. While everyone has their own views about how best to divide Christian history, many use a framework which looks something like this.

The apostolic period

The first hundred years is often referred to as the *apostolic* period. This is the period during which the works now included in the New Testament were written. During this time, Christianity was spreading throughout the Mediterranean region and beyond. The missionary journeys of St Paul, described in the Acts of the Apostles, are an excellent example of this activity. This reader does not include readings from the New Testament, as this document is so readily accessible in traditional and digital forms.

The patristic period

This is followed by the *patristic* period, which is usually held to begin about the year 100. There is no firm agreement about when this period ended: some scholars suggest it ends in the fifth century, while others extend it by at least two centuries. The Council of Chalcedon (451) marked a landmark in Christian thinking, especially over the identity of Jesus Christ, and is seen by many writers as bringing this important period of theological development to a close. The unusual word “patristic” derives from the Greek word *pater* (“father”), and designates a group of writers who are often collectively known as the “fathers of the church.” (Sadly, there were very few women among them.) The readings chosen for inclusion here are representative of all the major writers of this period – such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Augustine of Hippo.

The patristic period witnessed important theological explorations of the relation of faith and classical culture, clarifying the place of the Bible in Christian theology (including establishing the New Testament canon), the identity of Jesus Christ, the doctrine of God (including the Trinity), the doctrine of the church, and the relation of grace and free will. Most of these are represented in this reader. In what follows, we will look at each of them in a little more detail.

Faith and classical culture. As Christianity expanded in its first centuries, it moved from a Palestinian context into the Greek-speaking world of the eastern Mediterranean, establishing a presence in the great cities of Alexandria and Antioch. It also began to grow in the western Latin-speaking Roman Empire, including North Africa. This raised the question of how Christianity related to ideas already present in this region – for example, classic philosophy.

The place of the Bible. One of the most important achievements of the patristic period was establishing which books dating from the apostolic period were to be regarded as “canonical” or “biblical.” Considerable attention was also paid to the question of how the Bible was to be interpreted, and especially the role of tradition in combating unorthodox interpretations of the Bible. During this period, “creeds” began to emerge as communally accepted and authorized summaries of the Christian faith.

The identity of Jesus Christ. The patristic period saw clarification of the identity and significance of Jesus as being of the utmost importance. Where was he to be placed on a theological map? The period witnessed growing acceptance of the “two natures” doctrine, along with exploration of how best to make sense of Jesus Christ being both divine and human.

The doctrine of God. Classical Greek philosophy already had its ideas about what “God” was like. One of the most important tasks of Christian theology was to differentiate the Christian idea of God from its philosophical rivals. Many early debates concentrated on what it meant to say that God was creator, the role of the Holy Spirit, or how the existence of evil was consistent with a good God. However, the most significant discussions concerned the doctrine of the Trinity – the distinctively Christian idea of one God in three persons. How was this to be understood?

The doctrine of the church. Patristic writers initially paid relatively little attention to the doctrine of the church, tending to focus attention on developing a coherent understanding of the sacraments. The Donatist controversy of the fourth century forced the western church to reconsider the nature of the church, and who was authorized to administer the sacraments. These debates would break out once more during the Reformation period.

The Middle Ages

The Middle Ages, or medieval period, is regarded as extending from the end of the patristic era to about the year 1500. This long period was immensely creative culturally, and productive theologically, producing

theological classics such as Peter Lombard's *Four Books of the Sentences* and Thomas Aquinas' great thirteenth-century work, the *Summa Theologiae* ("The totality of Theology"). Peter Lombard's medieval theological textbook was the subject of many commentaries, which used its material to develop increasingly sophisticated theological ideas.

Among the many issues to be explored in detail during this period were the relation between faith and reason, how to interpret the Bible, and the theology of the sacraments. Alongside this, there was continuing exploration of issues debated during the patristic period, such as the relation of grace and free will.

Faith and reason. The Middle Ages saw new attention being given to a whole range of issues concerning the relation of faith and reason, theology and philosophy. One reason for this was the emergence of universities in western Europe, particularly the University of Paris. The debates over whether God's existence could be proved are good examples of this concern.

Biblical interpretation. The rise of the monasteries led to a new interest in the correct interpretation of the Bible. The constant use of the Bible in corporate worship and private devotion raised important questions about how the Bible was to be understood and applied.

The institution of the church. The rise of the papacy raised increasingly important questions about the church and its sacramental system. Major issues debated during the Middle Ages included the definition of a sacrament, and the vexed question of how Christ could be present in the eucharist. The growing political power of the church raised important theological questions about the relation of church and state.

The Reformation and post-Reformation period

The sixteenth century marked a period of radical change in the western church. This period of *reformation* witnessed the birth of the Protestantism, through writers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. Certain theological debates became especially heated around this time, especially the place of the Bible in theological reflection, the doctrine of the church, and the question of what it is necessary to do in order to be saved. The doctrine of justification by faith alone became of especial importance around this time, rapidly becoming a characteristic of the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic church also went through a period of reformation around this time, with the Council of Trent setting out the