



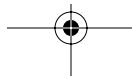
INTRODUCTION

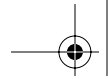
Many readers will perhaps be puzzled by the appearance of a book with this title. What exactly is Christian thought? And why should we be bothered about its history? We might think, after all, that most Christian doctrine is to be found in the Bible, especially the New Testament, and that all Christian writers have ever done is explain it to their contemporaries. Why study the ways in which they explained it in the past?

In fact, the study of the history of Christian thought is both important and fascinating in its own right. If you are a Christian yourself, then you should certainly be interested in why Christianity teaches the things that it does. It may be true that the essentials of Christianity are taught in the New Testament, but the way we read the New Testament today is the product of centuries of speculation and development. And the thought of those who have reflected on Christian faith in the past remains a treasury of inspiration to those doing the same thing now.

Even if you are not religious, the history of Christian thought is well worth knowing about, just like any other important historical subject. People like Augustine, Aquinas and Luther have shaped the very fabric of modern society. Even if many people no longer believe what they did, we are still, most of us, the heirs of the church fathers and the medievals; and because Christianity has spread across the globe, from South America to Japan, from Siberia to New Zealand, that is not just true of Europeans and North Americans. And this is quite apart from the inherent interest of the subject—many Christian writers lived through some of the most turbulent and exciting periods in history, even playing a leading role in those periods, and some of the things they said are worth hearing whatever your own religious beliefs are.

This book offers an introduction to the history of Christian thought for the completely uninitiated. I have assumed no knowledge in the reader of the people involved or the subjects about which they wrote, and I have aimed to avoid all the unpleasant technical jargon with which this subject, like every subject, tends to surround itself. There is also a glossary.





The study of Christian thought—its nature, its development and its content—is the study of theology; and the study of theology inevitably involves dealing, in one way or another, with theologians. If someone is called a “theologian,” that means one of two things: either they study theology, just as a historian studies history; or they actually contribute to it, reflecting on what the Christian faith means to them and writing down their thoughts in a more or less systematic way.

This book is largely the story of theologians in the second sense: the people who have made the history of Christian thought what it is. It focuses on their lives as well as their works. On the one hand, of course, we cannot really understand what they said if we do not know the context in which they said it; but on the other, their lives have often been as colorful and as inspiring as their writings. My aim has been to bring their personalities to life in a way that will help show why they said the things they said and why we should still care about them today.

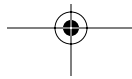
In order to do this, I have looked at the issues that confronted the great theologians of the past and the ways in which they dealt with them. Of course, many of the issues that they faced were each other, and so I have aimed to provide a sense of narrative and progression and to show that many theologians were tackling problems, or developing ideas, first raised by their predecessors. The constraints of space and need for clarity have meant that I generally focus on just the most important or relevant areas of people’s thought, rather than attempting to give a comprehensive account of everything that they said.

My goal throughout the book has been twofold. First, it has been to help the reader understand and sympathize with the characters in the book, even when disagreeing vehemently with what they said. If we can hope to understand properly what someone said and why they said it, then it is no great impoliteness if we choose to disagree with them.

Second, I have encouraged the reader to go beyond the claims of the great theologians. Throughout the book I present constructive criticism of the theologians under discussion, partly to explain their thought in a little more detail and partly as a springboard into more general considerations of the issues at hand. The reflections I offer are intended to help readers to think about those issues for themselves; I have sought to present them in as unbiased and objective a way as possible.

The main narrative of the book describes the theologians—their lives and their thought—and major movements in Christian thought in approximately chronological order. The text boxes that accompany the main text provide additional information on events, places and movements that do not quite fit into the main narrative but are relevant to it.

The book is divided into six parts, each dealing with one of the great ages of





Introduction

Christianity. In a work of this scope, it has not been possible to include every Christian theologian or movement of the past two thousand years, although I have tried to be as evenhanded as possible. As a general rule, I have included those figures whose contribution to Christian thought was especially original or especially influential.

In particular, I begin not with Jesus himself or the New Testament but with the developments that arose immediately afterward. The origins of Christianity is a fascinating subject but one that is far too large and complex to address in this book. I have assumed that most readers will be roughly familiar with who Jesus was and what the New Testament says about him; for those who are not, there is a bit of catching up to do, and there are many books available to help!

The attentive will notice that I have taken the 20th century separately from the modern era. That is not to say that I necessarily think we are living in a “postmodern” age but simply that the issues theologians faced in the 20th century and the answers they gave to them were indeed quite different from those of the two centuries that came before.

