

Alister E. McGrath

Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought

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Alister Edgar McGrath is a contemporary historian and Christian apologist currently serving on the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford. In his book, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*, he seeks to introduce historical theology as an “important and interesting subject.” (xii) In the introduction, he defines the concept of theology, the architect of theology, and discusses the purpose and place for historical theology. “Theology” divided into Greek words simply means a discourse about God. The term *theologia* was introduced in the early patristic period by Clement of Alexandria referring to Christian truth claims about God. By the middle ages, polytheism was regarded as primitive and it was broadly assumed that there was one God. By the thirteenth century, as Thomas Aquinas argued for the existence of God, theology was “understood as systematic analysis of the nature, purposes, and activity of God” (2). Using the image of “cathedrals of the mind” to depict theology as beautifully crafted architecture, theology was presented as a complex discipline, bringing together a variety of disciplines including Biblical studies, systematic theology, philosophical theology, and pastoral theology. McGrath concludes his introduction by emphasizing the importance of Church history and the development of Christian doctrines as a part of the discipline of theology (11-15). Each chapter provides a concise overview of a historical period followed by case studies expanding upon the thoughts and views of the key theologians. For the purpose of this book review, I will primarily summarize the historical

background, main theological developments and identify key theologians of the periods presented in the chapters and encourage the reading of case studies in the book to supplement the overview.

Chapter one introduces the reader to the period just following the New Testament writings to the Council of Chalcedon and is referred to as the Patristic period. (c.100 – 451) (17). During this period the Christian Church did not have legal status and was subject to persecution to suppress its growth. Many of the places of worship were destroyed and books were burned until 311 when Galerius recognized this tactic led to hardening of Christians and issued an edict to stop the persecution (20). In 312 Constantine defeated Maxentius and was proclaimed emperor of Rome (21). Shortly thereafter, Constantine declared himself a Christian leading to a period of time where Christianity could flourish and establish itself as the religion of the empire. Theologians could participate actively in debates regarding doctrine to gain consensus. “In 367, Athanasius circulated his thirty-ninth Festal Letter, which identifies the 27 books of the New Testament, as we now know it, as being canonical.” (27). Tradition was seen as a legacy from the Apostles that was important to maintain. The Patristic Period established the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed as statements of belief and doctrinal consensus within the early church. Other major doctrines of the church established during this period include the doctrines of Jesus, the Trinity, the church, and grace. Key theologians involved in shaping the debate and doctrine during the Patristic Period include Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Origen, Tertullian, Athanasius and Augustine of Hippo (22-25).

The Middle Ages (c.500 – 1500) are defined in Chapter two as an “immensely creative and innovative period in Christian theology”. (78). During this period the courts, monasteries, and universities of Europe became “centers of excellence for theological reflection and the

forging of new approaches to the relation of Christian thought and life.” (78). By the eleventh century Byzantium Christians, Catholics and Islam dominated the Mediterranean region. During this period the Catholic west or “medieval theology” and the Orthodox east or “Byzantine theology” became strained and split. The major milestones of medieval theology include the Carolingian renaissance establishing religious monasteries and scholarly cathedrals (80-81). Monasteries and religious orders of the Dominicans, Franciscans and Augustinians flourished into the sixteenth century and influenced the ideas of Martin Luther (82). The cathedral schools were centers of advanced education and evolved into medieval universities. Two major milestones of the Byzantine theology include the iconoclastic controversy regarding destruction of Christian icons due to the perception that they were barriers to the conversion of Jews and Moslems and the hesychastic controversy that focused on “inner quietness as a means of achieving a direct inner vision of God” (87). During the middle ages, a major renaissance in theology took place and was influenced by key theologians introduced in McGrath’s writing including John of Damascus, Simeon, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus William of Ockham, and Erasmus of Rotterdam (88-93).

Chapter three discusses the Reformation and Post-Reformation periods (1500 – 1750). Early in the sixteenth century the western European church and Christianity was virtually landlocked within Europe and a movement began to “return the western church to more biblical foundations in relation to its belief system, morality and structures” (125). At the Diet of Speyer (February 1529), the church voted to end the toleration of Lutheranism in Germany. This vote initiated a “protest” by six German princes and 14 cities against this oppressive ruling and is how we came to name the “Protestant Reformation” (127). Initially led by this cluster of Protestant churches in Europe seeking to reform the Catholic church in the region, developed into broader

conflicts between Protestants and Catholics and within the various Protestant churches (125).

Theologians leading the moral, theological and institutional reformation movement were Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin (125). In response to this movement, the Catholic church responded at the Council of Trent in 1545 to clarify “Catholic thought and practice” and defend against evangelical opponents (126). The debates expanded beyond the initial evangelical “Protestant” reformation to include six named reformation movements in the church known by the geographical regions and religious agendas.

1. The German Reformation also referred to as the Lutheran Reformation was led by Martin Luther in 1522 and was primarily concerned with the doctrine of justification (127-128).
2. The Swiss Reformation emphasized morals and worship in a more biblical pattern that primarily followed John Calvin’s book *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* and practiced by the Reformed church, also called “Calvinism”. Pastors were formally trained at the Genevan Academy founded in 1559 (128-129).
3. The Radical Reformation also known as “Anabaptism”. Primarily known for rejecting infant baptism and “insistence that only those who have made a personal, public profession of faith should be baptized”, they also promoted a distrust of external authority, common ownership of property, pacifism and non-resistance (129).
4. The English Reformation also known as “Anglicanism” led by Henry VIII in 1509 replaced “papal authority in England with his own authority” in creating an English national church promoting political power and Protestant forms of worship (130).
5. The Catholic Reformation followed the Council of Trent in 1545 to clarify the Catholic teaching on the “conduct of clergy, ecclesiastical discipline, religious education, and

missionary activity” (131). The theological considerations focused on Scripture and tradition, justification by faith, and the sacraments.

6. The Second Reformation came as Lutheranism, Calvinism and Roman Catholicism galvanized their doctrinal positions in the 1560s and 1570s. Lutheranism and Calvinism were divided on the issue of predestination, but all three developed sophisticated and comprehensive accounts of Christian theology to support their arguments (131-133).

The Post-Reformation movements was characterized by consolidation within their respective movements. Catholicism focused on ending corruption and Catholic teaching on the central issues of their faith that were targets during the Reformation. From the Protestants emerged Puritanism and Pietism. Puritanism emphasized pastoral aspects of faith and teaching on “the death of Christ, and the divine sovereignty in providence and election” (134). Piety or “godliness” emphasized personal Bible study and personal relationship between Christ and the believer (135).

McGrath concludes this chapter with a summary of key theologians, theological developments and developments in theological literature. Key theologians during the Reformation period include Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, Teresa of Avila, Theodore Beza, Johann Gerhard, Roberto Bellarmine, and Jonathon Edwards (136-139). The key theological developments during the Reformation included the doctrine of Grace, doctrine of sacraments and the doctrine of the church. In an effort for the Protestant church to communicate and defend its ideas, the church developed the literature in genres of Catechisms, Confessions of faith, and Works of systematic theology (139-145).

The Modern period from 1750 to the present day begins with the colonization of North America by the western Europeans and religious revival led by Jonathan Edwards (1703-

1758). This period called the Great Awakening (c.1726-45) established seminaries of various denominations in the United States resulting in the United States becoming the global leader of Christian theological teaching and research in the mid-twentieth century (183). However, “the Enlightenment” movement, also called the “Age of Reason”, was based in English Deism and taught by Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727) challenged Christian theology (184). The Age of Reason would assert “Humanity is able to think for itself, without the need for an assistance from God” (184) and reason was regarded “firmly above revelation” (185). Enlightenment challenged Christian doctrines that the Bible is divinely inspired, questioned the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, the authenticity of Jesus’s miracles, the resurrection, original sin and existence of evil. This movement was countered by the Romantic Movement in the late 1700s to early 1800s which “replaced an appeal to pure reason with an appeal to human intuition, imagination, and feelings” (188). In the late nineteenth-century England had achieve great success, but Christian ideas were seen as “discredited, unattractive, and outdated by novelists, poets, and artists” (189). England was moving away from doctrines of sin, predestination and substitutionary atonement to a “religion of human sympathy” (189) where “we can be good without God” (189). Postmodern thought criticized the Modern thoughts of Reason, Truth, History and Self concluding that language was incapable of communicating meaning and everything is up for interpretation (191). Key theologians of this period include F.D.E. Schleiermacher, John Henry Newman, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jurgen Moltmann, and Wolfhart Panneberg (192-195). McGrath concludes this chapter with recent western theological trends and movements. He presents liberal thoughts that consider the doctrine of evolution, reconstruction of beliefs to contemporary culture, reconstruction of

Jesus, and religious experience as a human centered experience verses a God centered experience and conservative thoughts bring us back to Scripture, church history and truth consistent with doctrines of Christian faith. Some of the movements discussed include feminism and the gender of God, liberation theology that God is on the side of the poor, black theology promoting God is on the side of oppressed, and Radical orthodoxy that says that Christianity needs to establish alternative statements to replace secularisms in modernity and postmodernity (195-209).

McGrath concludes *Historical Theology* with encouragement to consider the particular theologians, historical period, Christian doctrine or ecclesiological tradition presented in this survey to grow your knowledge through further investigation and study (269-270). Targeted as an introduction to historical theology, this book was well organized and easy to read. It provided logical, concise overviews of the main events and thoughts of the period and an opportunity to dive deeper in the case studies. In presenting the history and key theologians of the periods, McGrath provided the right balance in covering the key points in the chapter and providing an opportunity to learn more on topics of interest in the case studies. This will be a book that I will keep as a reference tool and encourage others to use as well.