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## Getting Started: Preliminaries



Starting to study Christian theology involves exploring a whole range of issues. Some of these center on the identity and characteristics of theology itself. For example, what is theology? And how did it develop? How does it relate to other areas of life, such as philosophy or culture? How does our way of talking about God relate to our everyday language? To what extent – and in what ways – can the existence of God be proved?

The present chapter provides readings which explore all of these issues, some in depth. The following general themes are especially recommended for study.

- 1 The patristic debates over the relation of philosophy and theology. The early church witnessed an especially interesting and important discussion of the extent to which theology should interact with secular philosophy.

### **The Patristic Debate on the Relation of Philosophy and Theology**

- 1.1 Justin Martyr on Philosophy and Theology
- 1.2 Clement of Alexandria on Philosophy and Theology
- 1.3 Tertullian on the Relation of Philosophy and Heresy
- 1.4 Augustine on Philosophy and Theology

- 2 Since the Middle Ages, Christian theology has found itself dealing with the issue of whether God's existence can be proved. A number of approaches have been set forward, particularly by Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas. Exploring this debate is an excellent way of engaging with some issues of fundamental theological importance.

### **Can God's Existence be Proved?**

- 1.7 Anselm of Canterbury's Proof for the Existence of God
- 1.8 Gaunilo's Reply to Anselm's Argument
- 1.9 Thomas Aquinas on Proofs for the Existence of God
- 1.15 René Descartes on the Existence of God
- 1.16 Blaise Pascal on Proofs for the Existence of God
- 1.18 Immanuel Kant on Anselm's Ontological Argument
- 1.20 John Henry Newman on the Grounds of Faith
- 1.24 Ludwig Wittgenstein on Proofs for the Existence of God

- 3 A third area of considerable interest is the way in which theology makes use of language and imagery, including the question of whether theological language is analogical or metaphorical in character. The following readings introduce these important themes.

### **Theological Language and Images**

- 1.10 Thomas Aquinas on the Principle of Analogy
- 1.13 The Heidelberg Catechism on Images of God
- 1.23 Ludwig Wittgenstein on Analogy
- 1.26 Paul Tillich on the Method of Correlation
- 1.27 Sallie McFague on Metaphor in Theology
- 1.29 Brian A. Gerrish on Accommodation in Calvin's Theology
- 3.36 Jacques Ellul on the Theology of Icons

## 1.1 Justin Martyr on Philosophy and Theology

In his two apologies for the Christian faith, written in Greek at Rome at some point during the period 148–61, Justin sets out a vigorous defense of Christianity in which he seeks to relate the gospel to secular wisdom. Justin has an especial concern to relate the Christian gospel to the forms of Platonism which were influential in the eastern Mediterranean region at this time, and thus stresses the convergence of Christianity and Platonism at a number of points of importance. In particular, Justin is drawn to the pivotal concept of the “Logos” (the Greek term means “word”), which plays a key role in both Platonic philosophy and Christian theology – for example, see John 1: 14, which affirms that “the Word became flesh, and dwelled among us.” A central theme in Justin’s defense of the Christian faith is the idea that God has scattered “the seeds (*spermata*) of the Logos” throughout the world before the coming of Christ, so that secular wisdom and truth can point, however imperfectly, to Christ. See also 1.2; 1.3; 1.4.

We have been taught that Christ is the firstborn of God, and we have proclaimed that he is the Logos, in whom every race of people have shared. And those who live according to the Logos are Christians, even though they may have been counted as atheists – such as Socrates and Heraclitus, and others like them, among the Greeks. . . . Whatever either lawyers or philosophers have said well, was articulated by finding and reflecting upon some aspect of the Logos. However, since they did not know the Logos – which is Christ – in its entirety, they often contradicted themselves. . . . Whatever all people have said well (*kalōs*) belongs to us Christians. For we worship and love, next to God, the Logos, who comes from the unbegotten and ineffable God, since it was for our sake that he became a human being, in order that he might share in our sufferings and bring us healing. For all writers were able to see the truth darkly, on account of the implanted seed of the Logos which was grafted into them. Now the seed and imitation (*mimēma*) of something which is given on the basis of a person’s capacity to receive it is quite different from that thing itself, of which the communication and imitation are received according to the grace of God.

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### Comment

Note how Justin argues that Jesus Christ *is* the Logos. In other words, the foundational philosophical principle of the Platonic system, according to Justin, is

not an abstract idea which needs to be discovered by human reason, but something which has been made known to humanity in a specific form. What the philosophers were seeking, has been made known in Christ.

It follows that all true human wisdom derives from this Logos, whether this is explicitly recognized or not. Justin argues that philosophical contradictions and tensions arise through an incomplete access to the Logos. Full access to the Logos is now possible, however, through Christ.

Justin then asserts that anyone who honestly and sincerely acts according to what she knows of the Logos can be reckoned as being a Christian, including Socrates.

It thus follows that what is good and true in secular philosophy can be accepted and honored by Christians, in that it derives from the Logos.

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### Questions for Study

- 1 Why do you think Justin wanted to stress the convergence of Christianity and Platonism?
- 2 What attitude to secular philosophy results from Justin's understanding of the Logos?
- 3 What difficulties arise from the assertion that the pagan philosophers Socrates and Heraclitus can be regarded as Christians?

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## Clement of Alexandria on Philosophy and Theology

1.2

The eight books of Clement's *Stromata* (the word literally means "carpets") deal at length with the relation of the Christian faith to Greek philosophy. In this extract from the *Stromata*, originally written in Greek in the early third century, Clement argues that God gave philosophy to the Greeks as a way of preparing them for the coming of Christ, in more or less exactly the same way as he gave the Jews the law of Moses. While not conceding that philosophy has the same status as divine revelation, Clement goes beyond Justin Martyr's suggestion that the mere seeds of the Logos are to be found in Greek philosophy. See also 1.1; 1.3; 1.4.

Thus until the coming (*parousia*) of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it assists those who come to faith by way of demonstration, as a kind of preparatory training (*propaideia*) for true religion. For "you will not stumble" (Proverbs 3: 23) if you attribute all good things to provi-