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The Patristic Period, c. 100–451



Christianity had its origins in Palestine – more specifically, the region of Judea, especially the city of Jerusalem. Christianity regarded itself as a continuation and development of Judaism, and initially flourished in regions with which Judaism was traditionally associated, supremely Palestine. However, it rapidly spread to neighboring regions, partially through the efforts of early Christian evangelists such as Paul of Tarsus. By the end of the first century, Christianity appears to have become established throughout the eastern Mediterranean world, and even to have gained a significant presence in the city of Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. As the church at Rome became increasingly powerful, tensions began to develop between the Christian leadership at Rome and at Constantinople, foreshadowing the later schism between the western and eastern churches, centered on these respective seats of power.

In the course of this expansion, a number of regions emerged as significant centers of theological debate. Three may be singled out as having especial importance, the first two of which were Greek-speaking, and the third Latin-speaking.

- 1 The city of Alexandria, in modern-day Egypt, which emerged as a center of Christian theological education. A distinctive style of theology came to be associated with this city, reflecting its long-standing association with the Platonic tradition. The student will find reference to “Alexandrian” approaches in areas such as Christology and biblical interpretation (see pp. 22; 360–2), reflecting both the importance and the distinctiveness of the style of Christianity associated with the area.

- 2 The city of Antioch and the surrounding region of Cappadocia, in modern-day Turkey. A strong Christian presence came to be established in this northern region of the eastern Mediterranean at an early stage. Some of Paul's missionary journeys took him into this region, and Antioch features significantly at several points in the history of the very early church, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Antioch itself soon became a leading center of Christian thought. Like Alexandria, it became associated with particular approaches to Christology and biblical interpretation. The term "Antiochene" is often used to designate this distinct theological style (see pp. 22; 362–4). The "Cappadocian fathers" were also an important theological presence in this region in the fourth century, notable especially for their contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity.
- 3 Western north Africa, especially the area of modern-day Algeria. In the late classical period this was the site of Carthage, a major Mediterranean city and at one time a political rival to Rome for dominance in the region. During the period when Christianity expanded in this region, it was a Roman colony. Major writers of the region include Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, and Augustine of Hippo.

This is not to say that other cities in the Mediterranean were devoid of significance. Rome, Constantinople, Milan, and Jerusalem were also centers of Christian theological reflection, even if none was destined to achieve quite the significance of their rivals.

A Clarification of Terms

The term "patristic" comes from the Latin word *pater*, "father," and designates both the period of the church fathers, and the distinctive ideas which came to develop within this period. The term is non-inclusive; no generally acceptable inclusive term has yet to emerge in the literature. The following related terms are frequently encountered, and should be noted.

- *The patristic period* This is a vaguely defined entity, which is often taken to be the period from the closing of the New Testament writings (c. 100) to the definitive Council of Chalcedon (451).
- *Patristics* This term is usually understood to mean the branch of theological study which deals with the study of "the fathers" (*patres*).
- *Patrology* This term once literally meant "the study of the fathers," in much the same way as "theology" meant "the study of God" (*theos*). In recent years, however, the word has shifted its meaning. It now refers to a manual of patristic literature, such as that of the noted German scholar Johannes Quasten, which allows its readers easy access to the leading ideas of patristic writers, and some of the problems of interpretation associated with them.

An Overview of the Patristic Period

The patristic period is one of the most exciting and creative periods in the history of Christian thought. This feature alone is enough to ensure that it will continue to be the subject of study for many years to come. The period is also of importance for theological reasons. Every mainstream Christian body – including the Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic churches – regards the patristic period as a definitive landmark in the development of Christian doctrine. Each of these churches regards itself as continuing, extending, and, where necessary, criticizing the views of the early church writers. For example, the leading seventeenth-century Anglican writer Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626) declared that orthodox Christianity was based upon two testaments, three creeds, four gospels, and the first five centuries of Christian history.

The period was of major importance in clarifying a number of issues. A primary task was sorting out the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. The letters of Paul in the New Testament bear witness to the importance of this issue in the first century of Christian history, as a series of doctrinal and practical issues came under consideration. Should Gentile (that is, non-Jewish) Christians be obliged to be circumcised? And how was the Old Testament to be correctly interpreted?

However, other issues soon came to the fore. One which was of especial importance in the second century is that of *apologetics* – the reasoned defense and justification of the Christian faith against its critics. During the first period of Christian history, the church was often persecuted by the state. Its agenda was that of survival; there was limited room for theological disputes when the very existence of the Christian church could not be taken for granted. This observation helps us to understand why apologetics came to be of such importance to the early church, through writers such as Justin Martyr (*c.* 100–*c.* 165), concerned to explain and defend the beliefs and practices of Christianity to a hostile pagan public. Although this early period produced some outstanding theologians – such as Irenaeus of Lyons (*c.* 130–*c.* 200) in the west, and Origen (*c.* 185–*c.* 254) in the east – theological debate could only begin in earnest once the church had ceased to be persecuted.

These conditions became possible during the fourth century, with the conversion of the emperor Constantine. In 311, the Roman emperor Galerius ordered the cessation of the official persecution of Christians. It had been a failure and had merely hardened Christians in their resolve to resist the reimposition of classical Roman pagan religion. Galerius issued an edict which permitted Christians to live normally again and “hold their religious assemblies, provided that they do nothing which would disturb public order.” The edict explicitly identified Christianity as a religion, and offered it the full protection of the law. The legal status of Christianity, which had been ambiguous up to this point, was now resolved. The church had no longer to fight for its life.

Christianity was now a legal religion; it was, however, merely one among many such religions jostling for influence within the Roman world. The conversion of the

emperor Constantine brought about a complete change in the situation of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. Constantine was born to pagan parents in 285. (His mother would eventually become a Christian, apparently through her son's influence.) Although he showed no particular attraction to Christianity in his early period, Constantine certainly seems to have regarded toleration as an essential virtue. Following Maxentius' seizure of power in Italy and north Africa, Constantine led a body of troops from western Europe in an attempt to gain authority in the region. The decisive battle took place on October 28, 312, at the Milvian Bridge, to the north of Rome. Constantine defeated Maxentius and was proclaimed emperor. At some point shortly afterwards he declared himself to be a Christian.

During his period as emperor (306–37), Constantine succeeded in reconciling church and empire, with the result that the church no longer existed under a siege mentality. In 321 he decreed that Sundays should become public holidays. As a result of Constantine's influence on the empire, constructive theological debate became a public affair. Apart from a brief period of uncertainty during the reign of Julian the Apostate (361–3), the church could now count upon the support of the state. Theology thus emerged from the hidden world of secret church meetings, to become a matter of public interest and concern throughout the Roman Empire. Increasingly, doctrinal debates became a matter of both political and theological importance. Constantine wished to have a united church throughout his empire, and was thus concerned that doctrinal differences should be debated and settled as a matter of priority.

As a result, the later patristic period (from about 310 to 451) may be regarded as a high-water mark in the history of Christian theology. Theologians now enjoyed the freedom to work without the threat of persecution, and were able to address a series of issues of major importance to the consolidation of the emerging theological consensus within the churches. Establishing that consensus involved extensive debate and a painful learning process, in which the church discovered that it had to come to terms with disagreements and continuing tensions. Nonetheless, a significant degree of consensus, eventually to be enshrined in the ecumenical creeds, can be discerned as evolving within this formative period.

The patristic period is obviously of considerable importance to Christian theology. It is, however, found to be very difficult by many modern students of theology. Four main reasons can be given for this experience.

- 1 Some of the debates of the period seem hopelessly irrelevant to the modern world. Although they were viewed as intensely important at the time, it is often very difficult for the modern reader to empathize with the issues and to understand why they attracted such attention. It is interesting to contrast the patristic period in this respect with the Reformation era, during which many issues were addressed which are of continuing concern for the modern church; many teachers of theology find that their students are able to relate to the concerns of this later period much more easily.
- 2 Many of the patristic debates hinge upon philosophical issues, and only make

sense if the reader has some familiarity with the philosophical debates of the period. Whereas at least some students of Christian theology have some familiarity with the ideas found in Plato's dialogues, these ideas were subject to considerable development and criticism in the Mediterranean world during the patristic period. Middle Platonism and neo-Platonism differ significantly from one another, and from Plato's original ideas. The strangeness of many of the philosophical ideas of the period acts as another barrier to the study of it, making it difficult for students beginning in theology to fully appreciate what is going on in some of the patristic debates.

- 3 The patristic period is characterized by a considerable degree of doctrinal diversity. It was an age of flux, during which landmarks and standards – including documents such as the Nicene creed and dogmas such as the two natures of Christ – emerged gradually. Students familiar with the relative stability of other periods in Christian doctrine (such as the Reformation, in which the person of Christ was not a major issue) often find this feature of the patristic period disconcerting.
- 4 The period saw a major division arise, for both political and linguistic reasons, between the eastern Greek-speaking and the western Latin-speaking church. Many scholars discern a marked difference in theological temperament between theologians of the east and west: the former are often philosophically inclined and given to theological speculation, whereas the latter are often hostile to the intrusion of philosophy into theology, and regard theology as the exploration of the doctrines set out in Scripture. The famous rhetorical question of the western theologian Tertullian (*c.* 160–*c.* 225), “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Or the Academy with the church?,” illustrates this point.

Key Theologians

During the course of this work, reference will be made to a significant number of theologians from the patristic period. The following six writers, however, are of especial importance, and deserve to be singled out for special mention.

Justin Martyr (*c.* 100–*c.* 165)

Justin is perhaps the greatest of the Apologists – the Christian writers of the second century who were concerned to defend Christianity in the face of intense criticism from pagan sources. In his “First Apology” Justin argued that traces of Christian truth were to be found in the great pagan writers. His doctrine of the *logos spermatikos* (“seed-bearing word”) allowed him to affirm that God had prepared the way for his final revelation in Christ through hints of its truth in classical philosophy. Justin

provides us with an important early example of a theologian who attempts to relate the gospel to the outlook of Greek philosophy, a trend especially associated with the eastern church.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–c. 200)

Irenaeus is believed to have been born in Smyrna (in modern-day Turkey), although he subsequently settled in Rome. He became Bishop of Lyons around 178, a position which he held until his death two decades later. Irenaeus is noted especially for his vigorous defense of Christian orthodoxy in the face of a challenge from Gnosticism (see p. 297). His most significant work, “Against Heresies” (*adversus haereses*), represents a major defense of the Christian understanding of salvation, and especially of the role of tradition in remaining faithful to the apostolic witness in the face of non-Christian interpretations.

Origen (c. 185–c. 254)

One of the most significant defenders of Christianity in the third century, Origen provided an important foundation for the development of eastern Christian thought. His major contributions to the development of Christian theology can be seen in two general areas. In the field of biblical interpretation, Origen developed the notion of allegorical interpretation, arguing that the surface meaning of Scripture was to be distinguished from its deeper spiritual meaning. In the field of Christology, Origen established a tradition of distinguishing between the full divinity of the Father, and a lesser divinity of the Son. Some scholars see Arianism as a natural consequence of this approach. Origen also adopted with some enthusiasm the idea of *apocatastasis*, according to which every creature – including both humanity and Satan – will be saved.

Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225)

Tertullian was originally a pagan from the north African city of Carthage, who converted to Christianity in his thirties. He is often regarded as the father of Latin theology on account of the major impact which he had upon the western church. He defended the unity of the Old and New Testaments against Marcion, who had argued that they related to different gods. In doing so, he laid the foundations for a doctrine of the Trinity. Tertullian was strongly opposed to making Christian theology or apologetics dependent upon extra-scriptural sources. He is among the most forceful early exponents of the principle of the sufficiency of Scripture, denouncing those who appeal to secular philosophies (such as those of the Athenian Academy) for a true knowledge of God.

Athanasius (c. 296–c. 373)

Athanasius' significance relates primarily to Christological issues, which became of major importance during the fourth century. Possibly while still in his twenties, Athanasius wrote the treatise *De incarnatione Verbi* ("On the incarnation of the Word"), a powerful defense of the idea that God assumed human nature in the person of Jesus Christ. This issue proved to be of central importance in the Arian controversy (see pp. 357–60), to which Athanasius made a major contribution. Athanasius pointed out that if, as Arius argued, Christ was not fully God, a series of devastating implications followed. First, it was impossible for God to redeem humanity, as no creature could redeem another creature. And second, it followed that the Christian church was guilty of idolatry, as Christians regularly worshipped and prayed to Christ. As "idolatry" can be defined as "worship of a human construction or creation," it followed that this worship was idolatrous. Such arguments eventually carried the day, and led to the rejection of Arianism.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

In turning to deal with Aurelius Augustinus, usually known as "Augustine of Hippo" – or just plain "Augustine" – we encounter what is probably the greatest and most influential mind of the Christian church throughout its long history. Attracted to the Christian faith by the preaching of Bishop Ambrose of Milan, Augustine underwent a dramatic conversion experience. Having reached the age of 32 without satisfying his burning wish to know the truth, Augustine was agonizing over the great questions of human nature and destiny in a garden in Milan. He thought he heard some children singing *Tolle, lege* ("take up and read") nearby. Feeling that this was divine guidance, he found the New Testament document nearest to hand – Paul's letter to the Romans, as it happened – and read the fateful words "clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13: 14). This was the final straw for Augustine, whose paganism had become increasingly difficult to maintain. As he later recalled, "a light of certainty entered my heart, and every shadow of doubt vanished." From that moment onward, Augustine dedicated his enormous intellectual abilities to the defense and consolidation of the Christian faith, writing in a style which was both passionate and intelligent, appealing to both heart and mind.

Possibly suffering from some form of asthma, Augustine left Italy to return to north Africa, and was made Bishop of Hippo (in modern Algeria) in 395. The remaining thirty-five years of his life witnessed numerous controversies of major importance to the future of the Christian church in the west, and Augustine's contribution to the resolution of each of these was decisive. His careful exposition of the New Testament, particularly the letters of Paul, gained him a reputation which continues today, as the "second founder of the Christian faith" (Jerome). When the Dark Ages finally lifted over western Europe, Augustine's substantial

body of theological writings would form the basis of a major program of theological renewal and development, consolidating his influence over the western church.

A major part of Augustine's contribution lies in the development of theology as an academic discipline. The early church cannot really be said to have developed any "systematic theology." Its primary concern was to defend Christianity against its critics (as in the apologetic works of Justin Martyr), and to clarify central aspects of its thinking against heresy (as in the anti-Gnostic writings of Irenaeus). Nevertheless, major doctrinal development took place during the first four centuries, especially in relation to the doctrine of the person of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Augustine's contribution was to achieve a synthesis of Christian thought, supremely in his major treatise *De civitate Dei*, "On the City of God." Like Charles Dickens's famous novel, Augustine's "City of God" is a tale of two cities – the city of the world, and the city of God (see p. 556). The work is apologetic in tone: Augustine is sensitive to the charge that the fall of Rome was due to its having abandoned classic paganism in favor of Christianity. Yet as he defended Christianity against such charges, he inevitably ended up by giving a systematic presentation and exposition of the main lines of Christian belief.

However, in addition, Augustine may also be argued to have made key contributions to three major areas of Christian theology: the doctrine of the church and sacraments, arising from the Donatist controversy (see pp. 478–80); the doctrine of grace, arising from the Pelagian controversy (see pp. 443–9); and the doctrine of the Trinity (see pp. 331–4). Interestingly, Augustine never really explored the area of Christology (that is, the doctrine of the person of Christ), which would unquestionably have benefited from his considerable wisdom and acumen.

Key Theological Developments

As we have already noted, the patristic period was of immense importance in shaping the contours of Christian theology. The following areas of theology were explored with particular vigor during the patristic period.

The extent of the New Testament canon

From its outset, Christian theology recognized itself to be grounded in Scripture. There was, however, some uncertainty as to what the term "Scripture" actually designated. The patristic period witnessed a process of decision-making, in which limits were laid down to the New Testament – a process usually known as "the fixing of the canon." The word "canon" needs explanation. It derives from the Greek word *kanon* meaning "a rule" or "a fixed reference point." The "canon of Scripture" refers to a limited and defined group of writings, which are accepted as

authoritative within the Christian church. The term “canonical” is used to refer to scriptural writings accepted to be within the canon. Thus the Gospel of Luke is referred to as “canonical,” whereas the Gospel of Thomas is “extra-canonical” (that is, lying outside the canon of Scripture).

For the writers of the New Testament, the term “Scripture” meant primarily a *writing of the Old Testament*. However, within a short period, early Christian writers (such as Justin Martyr) were referring to the “New Testament” (to be contrasted with the “Old Testament”), and insisting that both were to be treated with equal authority. By the time of Irenaeus, it was generally accepted that there were four gospels; by the late second century, there was a consensus that the gospels, Acts, and letters had the status of inspired Scripture. Thus Clement of Alexandria recognized four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, fourteen letters of Paul (the letter to the Hebrews being regarded as Pauline), and Revelation. Tertullian declared that alongside the “law and the prophets” were the “evangelical and apostolic writings” (*evangelicae et apostolicae litterae*), which were both to be regarded as authoritative within the church. Gradually, agreement was reached over the list of books which were recognized as inspired Scripture, and the order in which they were to be arranged. In 367, Athanasius circulated his thirty-ninth Festal Letter, which identifies the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, as we now know it, as being canonical.

Debate centered especially on a number of books. The western church had hesitations about including Hebrews, in that it was not specifically attributed to an apostle; the eastern church had reservations about Revelation. Four of the smaller books (2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude) were often omitted from early lists of New Testament writings. Some writings, now outside the canon, were regarded with favor in parts of the church, although they ultimately failed to gain universal acceptance as canonical. Examples of this include the first letter of Clement (an early bishop of Rome, who wrote around 96) and the *Didache*, a short early Christian manual on morals and church practices, probably dating from the first quarter of the second century.

The arrangement of the material was also subject to considerable variation. Agreement was reached at an early stage that the gospels should have the place of honor within the canon, followed by the Acts of the Apostles. The eastern church tended to place the seven “catholic letters” (that is, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude) before the fourteen Pauline letters (Hebrews being accepted as Pauline), whereas the western church placed Paul’s letters immediately after Acts, and followed them with the catholic letters. Revelation ended the canon in both east and west, although its status was subject to debate for some time within the eastern church.

What criteria were used in drawing up the canon? The basic principle appears to have been that of the *recognition* rather than the *imposition* of authority. In other words, the works in question were recognized as already possessing authority, rather than having an arbitrary authority imposed upon them. For Irenaeus, the church does not *create* the canon; it *acknowledges, conserves, and receives* canonical Scripture

on the basis of the authority which is already inherent to it. Some early Christians appear to have regarded apostolic authorship as of decisive importance; others were prepared to accept books which did not appear to have apostolic credentials. However, although the precise details of how the selection was made remain unclear, it is certain that the canon was closed within the western church by the beginning of the fifth century. The issue of the canon would not be raised again until the time of the Reformation.

The role of tradition

The early church was confronted with a major challenge from a movement known as Gnosticism. This diverse and complex movement, not dissimilar to the modern New Age phenomenon, achieved considerable influence in the late Roman Empire. The basic ideas of Gnosticism do not concern us at this point; what is of relevance here is that Gnosticism appeared very similar to Christianity at many points. For this reason, it was viewed as a major challenge by many early Christian writers, especially Irenaeus. Furthermore, Gnostic writers had a tendency to interpret New Testament passages in a manner which dismayed Christian leaders, and prompted questions about the correct manner of interpretation of Scripture.

In such a context, an appeal to tradition became of major importance. The word “tradition” literally means “that which has been handed down or over,” although it can also refer to “the act of handing down or over.” Irenaeus insisted that the “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*) was faithfully preserved by the apostolic church, and that it had found its expression in the canonical books of Scripture. The church had faithfully proclaimed the same gospel from the time of the apostles until the present day. The Gnostics had no such claim to continuity with the early church. They had merely invented new ideas, and were improperly suggesting that these were “Christian.” Irenaeus thus emphasized the continuity of the teaching and preaching office of the church and its officials (especially its bishops). Tradition came to mean “a traditional interpretation of Scripture” or “a traditional presentation of the Christian faith,” which is reflected in the creeds of the church and its public doctrinal pronouncements. This fixing of the creeds as a public expression of the teaching of the church is of major importance, as will become clear in the following section.

Tertullian adopted a related approach. Scripture, he argued, is capable of being understood clearly, provided that it is read as a whole. However, he conceded that controversy over the interpretation of certain passages was inevitable. Heretics, he observed gloomily, can make Scripture say more or less anything that they like. For this reason, the tradition of the church was of considerable importance, as it indicated the manner in which Scripture had been received and interpreted within the church. The right interpretation of Scripture was thus to be found where true Christian faith and discipline had been maintained. A similar view was taken by Athanasius, who argued that Arius’ Christological mistakes would never have arisen if he had remained faithful to the church’s interpretation of Scripture.

Tradition was thus seen as a legacy from the apostles, by which the church was guided and directed toward a correct interpretation of Scripture. It was not seen as a “secret source of revelation” in addition to Scripture, an idea which Irenaeus dismissed as “Gnostic.” Rather, it was seen as a means of ensuring that the church remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, instead of adopting idiosyncratic interpretations of Scripture.

The relation of Christian theology and secular culture

One of the most important debates in the early church concerned the extent to which Christians could appropriate the immense cultural legacy of the classical world – poetry, philosophy, and literature. In what way could the *ars poetica* (“the poetic art”) be adopted and adapted by Christian writers, anxious to use such classical modes of writing to expound and communicate their faith? Or was the very use of such a literary medium tantamount to compromising the essentials of the Christian faith? It was a debate of immense significance, as it raised the question of whether Christianity would turn its back on the classical heritage, or appropriate it, even if in a modified form. In view of its importance and interest, we shall cite extensively from some of the most important writings offered as contributions to this debate.

One early answer to this important question was given by Justin Martyr, a second-century writer with a particular concern to exploit the parallels between Christianity and Platonism as a means of communicating the gospel. For Justin, the seeds of divine wisdom had been sown throughout the world, which meant that Christians could and should expect to find aspects of the gospel reflected outside the church.

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 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.

For Justin, Christians were therefore at liberty to draw upon classical culture, in the knowledge that whatever “has been said well” ultimately draws upon divine wisdom and insight.

Important though Justin’s argument may have been, it received a somewhat frosty reception in most sections of the Christian church. The main difficulty was that it

was seen to virtually equate Christianity with classical culture by failing to articulate adequate grounds for distinguishing them, apparently suggesting that Christian theology and Platonism were simply different ways of viewing the same divine realities. Justin's pupil Tatian (born *c.* 120) was skeptical concerning the merits of classic rhetoric and poetry, both of which he regarded as encouraging deception and a disregard for matters of truth.

The most severe criticism of this kind of approach was to be found in the writings of Tertullian, a third-century Roman lawyer who converted to Christianity. What, he asked, has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What relevance has the Platonic Academy for the church? The manner in which the question is posed makes Tertullian's answer clear: Christianity must maintain its distinctive identity by avoiding such secular influences.

Philosophy provides the material of worldly wisdom, in boldly asserting itself to be the interpreter of the divine nature and dispensation. The heresies themselves receive their weapons from philosophy. It was from this source that Valentinus, who was a disciple of Plato, got his ideas about the "aeons" and the "trinity of humanity." And it was from there that the god of Marcion (much to be preferred, on account of his tranquility) came; Marcion came from the Stoics. To say that the soul is subject to death is to go the way of Epicurus. And the denial of the resurrection of the body is found throughout the writings of all the philosophers. To say that matter is equal with God is to follow the doctrine of Zeno; to speak of a god of fire is to draw on Heraclitus. It is the same subjects which preoccupy both the heretics and the philosophers. Where does evil come from, and why? Where does human nature come from, and how? . . . What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the church? Our system of beliefs comes from the Porch of Solomon, who himself taught that it was necessary to seek God in the simplicity of the heart. So much the worse for those who talk of a "stoic," "platonian" or "dialectic" Christianity!

This wholesale rejection of every aspect of pagan culture had the advantage of being simple to understand. Christianity, according to Tertullian, was basically a counter-cultural movement, which refused to allow itself to be contaminated in any way by the mental or moral environment in which it took root. Yet there were difficulties with this consistently negative approach. It seemed to deny Christians access to or use of any of the intellectual and cultural heritage for a thoroughly laudable purpose – namely, the preaching of the gospel. Many early Christian writers studied classic rhetoric as a means of improving their preaching and writing, and thus facilitate the communication of the faith to those outside the church. Was Tertullian excluding this?

Alongside this pragmatic approach could be found a more theological issue. Does not all true wisdom have its origins in God? And if so, should not Christians honor that truth where it is to be found? To his critics, Tertullian seemed to offer little in the way of response to these questions.

The matter became of greater significance with the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine, which opened the way to a much more positive evaluation of

the relation of every aspect of Christian life and thought to classical culture. In view of the importance of this development, we need to explore the background to it in a little detail. Since it first established a significant presence at Rome in the 40s, Christianity had had a decidedly ambiguous legal status. On the one hand, it was not legally recognized, and so did not enjoy any special rights; on the other, it was not forbidden. However, its growing numerical strength led to periodic attempts to suppress it by force. Sometimes these persecutions were local, restricted to regions such as north Africa; sometimes, they were sanctioned throughout the Roman Empire as a whole.

Under such conditions it is hardly surprising that many Christians felt negatively towards classic Roman culture. This was the culture of an oppressor, determined to eliminate Christianity. It was easy to see the force of Tertullian's arguments under these circumstances. To adopt Roman cultural norms was tantamount to betrayal of the Christian faith. Yet if the relation of classical culture to Christianity were to change, the force of Tertullian's arguments might be weakened significantly.

With the conversion of Constantine, the issue of the interaction of Christianity and classical culture assumed a new significance. Rome was now the servant of the gospel; might not the same be true of its culture? If the Roman state could be viewed positively by Christians, why not also its cultural heritage? It seemed as if a door had opened upon some very interesting possibilities. Prior to 313, this situation could only have been dreamt of. After 313, its exploration became a matter of urgency for leading Christian thinkers – supreme among whom was Augustine of Hippo.

It is no surprise that the answer which would finally gain acceptance was set out by Augustine, and can perhaps be best described as the "critical appropriation of classical culture." For Augustine, the situation is comparable to Israel fleeing from captivity in Egypt at the time of the Exodus. Although they left the idols of Egypt behind them, they carried the gold and silver of Egypt with them, in order to make better and proper use of such riches, which were thus liberated in order to serve a higher purpose than before. In much the same way, the philosophy and culture of the ancient world could be appropriated by Christians, where this seemed right, and thus allowed to serve the cause of the Christian faith. Augustine clinched his argument by pointing out how several recent distinguished Christians had made use of classical wisdom in advancing the gospel.

If those who are called philosophers, particularly the Platonists, have said anything which is true and consistent with our faith, we must not reject it, but claim it for our own use, in the knowledge that they possess it unlawfully. The Egyptians possessed idols and heavy burdens, which the children of Israel hated and from which they fled; however, they also possessed vessels of gold and silver and clothes which our forebears, in leaving Egypt, took for themselves in secret, intending to use them in a better manner (Exodus 3: 21–2; 12: 35–6). . . . In the same way, pagan learning is not entirely made up of false teachings and superstitions. . . . It contains also some excellent teachings, well suited to be used by truth, and excellent moral values. Indeed, some truths are even found among them which relate to the worship of the one God. Now

these are, so to speak, their gold and their silver, which they did not invent themselves, but which they dug out of the mines of the providence of God, which are scattered throughout the world, yet which are improperly and unlawfully prostituted to the worship of demons. The Christian, therefore, can separate these truths from their unfortunate associations, take them away, and put them to their proper use for the proclamation of the gospel. . . .

What else have many good and faithful people from amongst us done? Look at the wealth of gold and silver and clothes which Cyprian – that eloquent teacher and blessed martyr – brought with him when he left Egypt! And think of all that Lactantius brought with him, not to mention Marius Victorinus, Optatus and Hilary of Poitiers, and others who are still living! And look at how much the Greeks have borrowed! And before all of these, we find that Moses, that most faithful servant of God, had done the same thing: after all, it is written of him that “he was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7: 22).

The fundamental theme is that of taking a way of thinking – or writing, or speaking – which had hitherto been put to pagan use, and liberating it so that it might be put to the service of the gospel. Augustine argues that what are essential, neutral yet valuable ways of thinking or self-expression have been quarried in “the mines of the providence of God”; the difficulty is the use to which they were put within pagan culture, in that they had been “improperly and unlawfully prostituted to the worship of demons.”

Augustine’s approach thus laid the foundation for the assertion that whatever was good, true, or beautiful could be used in the service of the gospel. It was this approach which would prove dominant in the western church, providing a theological foundation for the critical appropriation by Christian writers of literary genres whose origins lay outside the church. In addition to literary forms already known within the church, and widely recognized as entirely appropriate in Christian usage – such as the sermon and the biblical commentary – might be added others, whose cultural pedigree was thoroughly secular. Examples would include drama and – to anticipate a later development – the novel.

The scene was thus set for the creative interaction of Christian theology, liturgy, and spirituality with the cultural tradition of the ancient world – unquestionably one of the most interesting and fertile examples of cultural cross-fertilization in human intellectual history.

The fixing of the ecumenical creeds

The English word “creed” derives from the Latin word *credo*, “I believe,” with which the Apostles’ creed – probably the most familiar of all the creeds – begins: “I believe in God . . .” It has come to refer to a statement of faith, summarizing the main points of Christian belief, which is common to all Christians. For this reason, the term “creed” is never applied to statements of faith associated with specific denominations. These latter are often referred to as “confessions” (such as the

Lutheran *Augsburg Confession* or the Reformed *Westminster Confession of Faith*). A “confession” pertains to a denomination, and includes specific beliefs and emphases relating to that denomination; a “creed” pertains to the entire Christian church, and includes nothing more and nothing less than a statement of beliefs which every Christian ought to be able to accept and be bound by. A “creed” has come to be recognized as a concise, formal, and universally accepted and authorized statement of the main points of Christian faith.

The patristic period saw two creeds achieving increasing authority and respect throughout the church. The stimulus to their development appears to have been the felt need to provide a convenient summary of Christian faith suitable for public occasions, of which perhaps the most important was baptism. The early church tended to baptize its converts on Easter Day, using the period of Lent as a time of preparation and instruction for this moment of public declaration of faith and commitment. An essential requirement was that each convert who wished to be baptized should declare his or her faith in public. It seems that creeds began to emerge as a uniform declaration of faith which converts could use on such occasions.

The *Apostles’ creed* is probably the most familiar form of the creed known to western Christians. It falls into three main sections, dealing with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. There is also material relating to the church, judgment, and resurrection. The historical evolution of this creed is complex, with its origins lying in declarations of faith which were required of those who wanted to be baptized. The twelve individual statements of this creed, which seems to have assumed its final form in the eighth century, are traditionally ascribed to individual apostles, although there is no historical justification for this belief. There are slight differences between the eastern and western versions of this creed; the statements concerning the “descent into hell” and the “communion of saints” (printed below within square brackets) are not found in eastern versions of the work.

The Apostles’ creed

- 1 I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of the heavens and earth;
- 2 and in Jesus Christ, his only (*unicus*) Son, our Lord;
- 3 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary;
- 4 he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; [he descended to hell;]
- 5 on the third day he was raised from the dead;
- 6 he ascended into the heavens, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
- 7 from where he will come to judge the living and the dead.
- 8 I believe in the Holy Spirit;
- 9 in the holy catholic church; [the communion of saints;]
- 10 the forgiveness of sins;
- 11 the resurrection of the flesh (*resurrectio carnis*);
- 12 and eternal life.

The *Nicene creed* is the longer version of the creed (more strictly known as the “Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed”), which includes additional material relating to the person of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. In response to the controversies concerning the divinity of Christ, this creed includes strong affirmations of his unity with God, including the expressions “God from God” and “being of one substance with the Father.” As part of its polemic against the Arians, the Council of Nicea (June 325) formulated a short statement of faith, based on a baptismal creed used at Jerusalem.

This creed was intended to affirm the full divinity of Christ against the Arian understanding of his creaturely status, and includes four explicit condemnations of Arian views, as well as its three articles of faith. As the full details of the proceedings of Nicea are now lost, we are obliged to rely on secondary sources (such as ecclesiastical historians, and writers such as Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea) for the text of this creed.

The Nicene creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty (*pantocrator*), the maker of all things seen and unseen. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God; begotten from the Father; only-begotten – that is, from the substance of the Father; God from God; light from light; true God from true God; begotten not made; of one substance with the Father (*homoousion to patri*); through whom all things in heaven and on earth came into being; who on account of us human beings and our salvation came down and took flesh, becoming a human being; he suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens; and will come again to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Spirit.

As for those who say that “there was when he was not,” and “before being born he was not,” and “he came into existence out of nothing,” or who declare that the Son of God is of a different substance or nature, or is subject to alteration or change – the catholic and apostolic church condemns these.

The development of the creeds was an important element in the move toward achieving a doctrinal consensus within the early church. One area of doctrine which witnessed considerable development and controversy related to the person of Christ, to which we may now turn.

The two natures of Jesus Christ

The two doctrines to which the patristic period may be argued to have made a decisive contribution relate to the person of Christ (an area of theology which, as we noted, is generally designated “Christology”) and the nature of the Godhead. These two developments are organically related to one another. By 325, the early

church had come to the conclusion that Jesus was “of one substance” (*homoousios*) with God. (The term *homoousios* can also be translated as “one in being” or “consubstantial”.) The implications of this Christological statement were two-fold: in the first place, it consolidated at the intellectual level the spiritual importance of Jesus Christ to Christians; in the second, however, it posed a powerful challenge to simplistic conceptions of God. For if Jesus *is* recognized as “being of the same substance” as God, then the entire doctrine of God has to be reconsidered in the light of this belief. For this reason, the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity dates from after the emergence of a Christological consensus within the church. Only when the divinity of Christ could be treated as an agreed and assured starting point could theological speculation on the nature of God begin.

It may be noted that the Christological debates of the early church took place largely in the eastern Mediterranean world, and were conducted in the Greek language, and often in the light of the presuppositions of major Greek schools of philosophy. In practical terms, this means that many of the central terms of the Christological debates of the early church are Greek, often with a history of use within the Greek philosophical tradition.

The main features of patristic Christology will be considered in some detail on pp. 355–64, to which the reader is referred. At this early stage, however, we may summarize the main landmarks of the patristic Christological debate in terms of two schools, two debates, and two councils, as follows.

- 1 *Schools* The *Alexandrian school* tended to place emphasis upon the divinity of Christ, and interpret that divinity in terms of “the word becoming incarnate.” A scriptural text which was of central importance to this school is John 1: 14, “the word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” This emphasis upon the idea of incarnation led to the festival of Christmas being seen as especially important. The *Antiochene school*, however, placed a corresponding emphasis upon the humanity of Christ, and attached especial importance to his moral example (see pp. 360–3).
- 2 *Debates* The *Arian* controversy of the fourth century is widely regarded as one of the most significant in the history of the Christian church. Arius (c. 250–c. 336) argued that the scriptural titles for Christ, which appeared to point to his being of equal status with God, were merely courtesy titles. Christ was to be regarded as a creature, although nevertheless as preeminent among other creatures. This provoked a hostile response from Athanasius, who argued that the divinity of Christ was of central importance to the Christian understanding of salvation (an area of theology known as “soteriology”). Arius’ Christology was, he declared, inadequate soteriologically. Arius’ Christ could not redeem fallen humanity. In the end, Arianism (the movement associated with Arius) was declared to be heretical. This was followed by the *Apollinarian* debate, which centered on Apollinarius of Laodicea (c. 310–c. 390). A vigorous opponent of Arius, Apollinarius argued that Christ could not be regarded

as being totally human. In Christ's case, the human spirit was replaced by the divine *logos*. As a result, Christ did not possess full humanity. This position was regarded as severely deficient by writers such as Gregory of Nazianzus, in that it implied that Christ could not fully redeem human nature (see pp. 360–2).

- 3 *Councils* The *Council of Nicea* (325) was convened by Constantine, the first Christian emperor, with a view to sorting out the destabilizing Christological disagreements within his empire. This was the first “ecumenical council” (that is, an assembly of bishops drawn from the entire Christian world, whose decisions are regarded as normative for the churches). Nicea (now the city of Iznik in modern-day Turkey) settled the Arian controversy by affirming that Jesus was *homoousios* (“one in being” or “of one substance”) with the Father, thus rejecting the Arian position in favor of a vigorous assertion of the divinity of Christ. The *Council of Chalcedon* (451), the fourth ecumenical council, confirmed the decisions of Nicea, and responded to new debates which had subsequently erupted over the humanity of Christ.

The doctrine of the Trinity

Once the Christological debates of the early church had been settled, the consequences of those decisions were explored. In this intensely creative and interesting period of Christian theology, the doctrine of the Trinity began to emerge in a recognizable form. The basic feature of this doctrine is that there are three persons within the Godhead – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and that these are to be regarded as equally divine and of equal status. The co-equality of Father and Son was established through the Christological debates leading up to the Council of Nicea; the divinity of the Spirit was established in the aftermath of this, especially through the writings of Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea.

The main thrust of the Trinitarian debates increasingly came to concern the manner in which the Trinity was to be understood, rather than its fundamental validity. Two quite distinct approaches gradually emerged, one associated with the eastern, and the other with the western, churches.

The *eastern* position, which continues to be of major importance within the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches of today, was developed especially by a group of three writers, based in modern-day Turkey. Basil of Caesarea (c. 330–79), Gregory of Nazianzus (329–89), and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330–c. 395), known as the *Cappadocian fathers*, began their reflections on the Trinity by considering the different ways in which the Father, Son, and Spirit are experienced. The *western* position, especially associated with Augustine of Hippo, began from the unity of God, and proceeded to explore the implications of the love of God for our understanding of the nature of the Godhead. These positions will be explored in greater detail at the appropriate point in this work (see pp. 330–6).

The doctrine of the Trinity represents a rare instance of a theological issue of

concern to both the eastern and western churches. Our attention now shifts to two theological debates which were specifically linked with the western church, and have both come to be particularly associated with Augustine of Hippo.

The doctrine of the church

A major controversy within the western church centered on the question of the holiness of the church. The Donatists were a group of native African Christians, based in modern-day Algeria, who resented the growing influence of the Roman church in northern Africa. The Donatists argued that the church was a body of saints, within which sinners had no place. The issue became of especial importance on account of the persecution undertaken by the emperor Diocletian in 303, which persisted until the conversion of Constantine in 313. During this persecution, in which the possession of Scripture was illegal, a number of Christians handed their copies of Scripture in to the authorities. They were immediately condemned by others who had refused to cave in under such pressure. After the persecution died down, many of these *traditores* – a Latin word which literally means “those who handed over [their Scriptures]” – rejoined the church. The Donatists demanded their exclusion; they had compromised themselves. Augustine argued otherwise, declaring that the church must expect to remain a “mixed body” of saints and sinners, refusing to weed out those who had lapsed under persecution or for other reasons. The validity of the church’s ministry and preaching did not depend upon the holiness of its ministers, but upon the person of Jesus Christ. The personal unworthiness of a minister did not compromise the validity of the sacraments. This view, which rapidly became normative within the church, has had a deep impact upon Christian thinking about the nature of the church and its ministers.

The Donatist debate, which will be explored in greater detail elsewhere (see pp. 478–80), was the first to center on the question of the doctrine of the church (known as “ecclesiology”), and related questions, such as the way in which sacraments function. Many of the issues raised by the controversy would surface again at the time of the Reformation, when ecclesiological issues would once more come to the fore (see pp. 480–6). The same may be said of the doctrine of grace, to which we now turn.

The doctrine of grace

The doctrine of grace had not been an issue of significance in the development of theology in the Greek-speaking eastern church. However, an intense controversy broke out over this question in the second decade of the fifth century. Pelagius, a British ascetic monk based at Rome, argued forcefully for the need for human moral responsibility. Alarmed at the moral laxity of the Roman church, he insisted upon the need for constant self-improvement, in the light of the Old Testament law and the

example of Christ. In doing so, he seemed to his opponents – chief among whom was Augustine – to deny any real place to divine grace in the beginning or continuation of the Christian life. Pelagianism came to be seen as a religion of human autonomy, which held that human beings are able to take the initiative in their own salvation.

Augustine reacted forcefully against Pelagianism, insisting upon the priority of the grace of God at every stage in the Christian life, from its beginning to its end. Human beings did not, according to Augustine, possess the necessary freedom to take the initial steps toward salvation. Far from possessing “freedom of the will,” humans were in possession of a will that was corrupted and tainted by sin, and which biased them toward evil and away from God. Only the grace of God could counteract this bias toward sin. So forceful was Augustine’s defense of grace that he later became known as “the doctor of grace” (*doctor gratiae*).

A central theme of Augustine’s thought is the *fallenness* of human nature. The imagery of “the Fall” derives from Genesis 3, and expresses the idea that human nature has “fallen” from its original pristine state. The present state of human nature is thus not what it is intended to be by God. The created order no longer directly corresponds to the “goodness” of its original integrity. It has lapsed. It has been spoiled or ruined – but not irredeemably, as the doctrines of salvation and justification affirm. The image of a “Fall” conveys the idea that creation now exists at a lower level than that intended for it by God.

According to Augustine, it follows that all human beings are now contaminated by sin from the moment of their birth. In contrast to those twentieth-century existentialist philosophies which affirm that “fallenness” is an option which we choose (rather than something which is chosen for us), Augustine portrays sin as inherent to human nature. It is an integral, not an optional, aspect of our being. This insight, which is given more rigorous expression in Augustine’s doctrine of original sin, is of central importance to his doctrines of sin and salvation. In that all are sinners, all require redemption. In that all have fallen short of the glory of God, all require to be redeemed.

For Augustine, humanity, left to its own devices and resources, could never enter into a relationship with God. Nothing that a man or woman could do was sufficient to break the stranglehold of sin. To use an image which Augustine was fortunate enough never to have encountered, it is like a narcotic addict trying to break free from the grip of heroin or cocaine. The situation cannot be transformed from within – and so, if transformation is to take place, it must come from outside the human situation. According to Augustine, God intervenes in the human dilemma. God need not have done so, but out of love for fallen humanity God entered into the human situation in the person of Jesus Christ in order to redeem it.

Augustine held “grace” to be the unmerited or undeserved gift of God by which God voluntarily breaks the hold of sin upon humanity. Redemption is possible only as a divine gift. It is not something which we can achieve ourselves, but is something which has to be done for us. Augustine thus emphasizes that the resources of salvation are located in God, outside of humanity. It is God who initiates the process of salvation, not men or women.

For Pelagius, however, the situation was very different. Pelagius taught that the resources of salvation are located within humanity. Individual human beings have the capacity to save themselves. They are not trapped by sin, but have the ability to do all that is necessary to be saved. Salvation is something which is earned through good works, which place God under an obligation to reward humanity for its moral achievements. Pelagius marginalizes the idea of grace, understanding it in terms of demands made of humanity by God in order that salvation may be achieved – such as the Ten Commandments, or the moral example of Christ. The ethos of Pelagianism could be summed up as “salvation by merit,” whereas Augustine taught “salvation by grace.”

It will be obvious that these two different theologies involve very different understandings of human nature. For Augustine, human nature is weak, fallen, and powerless; for Pelagius, it is autonomous and self-sufficient. For Augustine, humanity must depend upon God for salvation; for Pelagius, God merely indicates what has to be done if salvation is to be attained, and then leaves men and women to meet those conditions unaided. For Augustine, salvation is an unmerited gift; for Pelagius, salvation is a justly earned reward.

One aspect of Augustine’s understanding of grace needs further comment. As human beings were incapable of saving themselves, and as God gave his gift of grace to some (but not all), it followed that God had “preselected” those who would be saved. Developing hints of this idea to be found in the New Testament, Augustine developed a doctrine of predestination. The term “predestination” refers to God’s original or eternal decision to save some, and not others. It was this aspect of Augustine’s thought which many of his contemporaries, not to mention his successors, found unacceptable. It need hardly be said that there is no direct equivalent in Pelagius’ thought.

The Council of Carthage (418) decided for Augustine’s views on grace and sin, and condemned Pelagianism in uncompromising terms. However, Pelagianism, in various forms, continued to be a point of contention for some time to come. As the patristic era came to its close, with the Dark Ages settling over western Europe, many of the issues remained unresolved. They would be taken up again during the Middle Ages, and supremely at the time of the Reformation (see pp. 453–63).

Key Names, Words, and Phrases

By the end of this chapter you will have encountered the following terms, which will recur during the work. Ensure that you are familiar with them! They have been capitalized as you are likely to encounter them in normal use.

*Apollinarianism
 apologetics
 *Arianism
 Augustinianism
 Byzantine

canon
 canonical
 Cappadocian fathers
 *Christological
 *Christology

| | |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| creed | patristic |
| *Donatism | patrology |
| *Donatist | *Pelagian |
| *ecclesiological | *Pelagianism |
| *ecclesiology | *predestination |
| ecumenical council | *soteriology |
| extra-canonical | *Trinitarian |
| *incarnation | *Trinity |

Those terms marked with an asterisk (*) will be explored in greater detail later in this work.

Questions for Chapter 1

As this is the first chapter that many students will read, two sets of questions are provided. The first group are elementary; the second are pitched at the level found throughout the remainder of this book.

Set 1 Introductory

- 1 Locate the following cities or regions on map 1 (p. 6): Alexandria; Antioch; Cappadocia; Constantinople; Hippo; Jerusalem; Rome.
- 2 Now find the Latin/Greek dividing line on the same map. Latin was the main language west of that line, and Greek east of it. Identify the predominant language in each of the cities mentioned in question 1.
- 3 Which language would you associate with the following writers: Athanasius; Augustine of Hippo; Origen; Tertullian?
- 4 The following movements were of major importance during the patristic period: Arianism; Donatism; Gnosticism; Pelagianism. Associate the controversies centering on each of these movements with one of the following theologians: Athanasius; Augustine of Hippo; Irenaeus of Lyons. (Note that one of these theologians is associated with more than one controversy.)

Set 2 Standard Level

- 1 What was the main issue debated during the Arian controversy? Why did Arius' opponents regard this as being of such importance?
- 2 Why was the introduction of fixed creeds widely regarded as a welcome development by many within the churches?
- 3 Why was it important to reach agreement on the canon of Scripture? What practical difference would this have made to theological debate at the time?
- 4 The English historian Thomas Carlyle once suggested that history was basically the biography of great individuals. On the basis of your reading of this chapter,

- who do you think was the most significant person in relation to the shaping of Christian theology over this period?
- 5 Why was there relatively little interest in the doctrine of the church in this early period? And why do you think the Donatist controversy broke out in the western, rather than the eastern, church?

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