

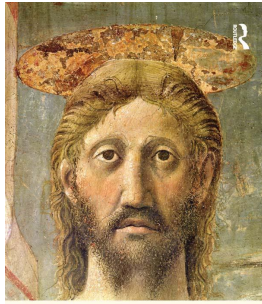
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**MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION**  
EDITED BY GRAHAM OPPY AND N. N. TRAKAKIS  
THE HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

## **Medieval Philosophy of Religion**

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### **Medieval Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction**

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MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION:  
AN INTRODUCTION

G. R. Evans

I. PHILOSOPHY AND THE 'GREAT WORLD RELIGIONS'  
IN THE MIDDLE AGES: AN OVERVIEW

*The transition from the ancient world*

The period from the collapse of the Roman Empire to the beginning of the sixteenth century saw several significant transitions in the way students of philosophy and religion understood the relationship of the two, and whether they saw them as distinct at all. For the Greeks and Romans they were closely allied, if not one, because philosophy was a way of life as well as a way of thinking about the universe. A philosopher could be a 'practitioner', even an 'adherent', as well as a student. In the ancient world, philosophy had been concerned with moral as well as intellectual explanation of the universe and how to live in it. It is not too much to call it a 'vocation'.

In Christianity, Judaism and Islam, 'rules for living' and a 'framework of belief' were distinctive to each religion, and stood in a particular relationship in each case. Each arrived at its own 'settlement' with ancient philosophy, while preserving its integrity. Christianity and some forms of Judaism found it comparatively easy to identify the 'love of wisdom' in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament; and once the doctrine of Christ as Logos developed in Christianity, Christ himself was frequently portrayed as a philosopher, teaching his disciples much as philosophy tutors taught young men in the late antique world. But the era of persecutions in late antiquity had made it clear that neither Jews nor Christians could engage in a simple syncretism.

*The Christians*

From the point of view of direct influence on Western civilization, the adoption of Greek philosophical ideas by the early Christian community was of the

first importance, not least because this more perhaps than any other factor drove the Latin speakers among them to enlarge the capacity of their language for the expression of abstract ideas. The heritage of Rome, with its synthesis of Greek and Roman intellectual traditions and its ultimate dependency at many points on the Greek, also lingered in the oriental Orthodox churches which divided from the rest after the Council of Chalcedon in 451, bringing in Syriac speakers to this process. Classical philosophy left the Middle Ages a booklist, which the burgeoning intelligentsia of the Christian community largely shared with Judaism, too, especially Hellenic Judaism, and it found its way into Islam, where indeed it was exploited with particular intellectual skill. We might usefully begin with a general overview of this mixed process of transmission, modification and ‘inculturation’ as it affected each category of believers.

Points of view, and ways of understanding the relationship of ‘philosophy’ and ‘religion’, were different, and increasingly diverged in the Greek-speaking East and the Latin-speaking West, as they became two increasingly distinct ‘language communities’ with the end of Empire. It was primarily in the West that the leading authors represented in this volume emerged, for the Western tradition was a good deal more analytical and argumentative than that of the East. But in the lands that lay at the Eastern end of the dying Empire there were also subtle shifts of understanding and emphasis.

### *Greek-speaking Christians*

The Greeks went through the Middle Ages in a spirit that discouraged the kind of debate and writing we see going on so energetically in Western authors. They took it that the Christian faith was a ‘given’, certainly after the end of the period of the Ecumenical Councils, and its truth a fixed quantity. In Christology the Council of Chalcedon of 451 formed a decisive endpoint, separating the oriental Orthodox or non-Chalcedonian churches from the rest. In Greek eyes, development of doctrine, any form of innovation, even if apparently right in itself, was unacceptable if it made a change in the way something was expressed or thought about. That became plainer still when the West added ‘and the Son’ (the *filioque* clause) to the Creed in the Carolingian period and the Greeks objected that this was heresy, and that even if it had not been heresy it would be wrong because it was something new.

A second reason for the distinctiveness of the understanding of the relationship of philosophy and religion in the Greek East of medieval Europe was the fact that philosophers were reading and thinking in Greek. Something of the crucial difference between the way Platonism persisted in the West and in the Greek East may be seen in Volume 1, Chapters 19 and 20, “Proclus” and “Pseudo-Dionysius”. Late Platonism (Platonism had become inextricably mingled with Stoicism and Aristotelianism from the Neoplatonist stage of its evolution) had also fostered a taste for mysticism. The West had its mysticism, too, but it had, again, a more

analytical character. It involved the climbing of a ladder to God in the mind rather than a trusting leap into the unknown. The mysticism of the medieval Greek Christian world was developed in a monastic and eremitical tradition where the individual soul, stripping itself of all worldly connections, often in extremes of suffering from deprivation of food and from physical discomfort, travelled into the far distance of contemplation in the search for union with God.

### *Latin-speaking Christians*

Few Western philosophers were fluent in Greek by the sixth century. Even though Gregory the Great had spent time in Constantinople, it remains uncertain whether he had any command of Greek. Among the authors discussed in this volume, only Eriugena can claim to have been competent to discuss certain of the questions Greeks were thinking about and the way they approached them, and even he could not do so as an insider.

This language divide alone meant that for centuries Western access to Aristotle and Plato remained limited. Boethius (*b. c.476*) had planned to translate the whole corpus, but he was executed *c.525* in the political turmoil of the times, with only a part of Aristotle's logic completed, not all of which survives. The early medieval West was able to study only the *Categories* and the *De interpretatione* (On interpretation). In the twelfth century new translations of the remainder of Aristotle's logic were made and by the thirteenth century Aristotle's writings on science, ethics and politics (the last about 1270) were arriving in Latin in the West partly by way of Arabic scholarship and some directly from the Greek.

A diffuse 'Platonism' was mediated through Augustine and others, including references to Plato in Aristotle. Platonic themes were also to be found in Cicero's popular *Dream of Scipio* and in the commentary Augustine's contemporary Macrobius wrote on it, this also becoming quite widely studied in the medieval West. A translation of the *Timaeus*, which became fashionable to study for a time in the mid-twelfth century, presented a considerable challenge to Genesis with its different explanation of the way the world was made by its creator. The *Meno* and the *Phaedo* were also available in translations by Henry Aristippus, although they never became central to academic study. Otherwise, Plato remained almost literally a closed book in the West until the revival of the study of Greek from the fifteenth century. Once Plato began to be studied again directly, problems of compatibility with the Christian faith re-emerged. Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) revived Platonic notions of the existence of a 'World Soul', which had been controversial in the early Christian world and again in the twelfth century.

An additional strand in which there was an admixture of Platonism was the 'hermetica', a body of probably second- to third-century writings linked to Egypt, comprising debased late antique philosophical notions that proved attractive to medieval minds. An example is the idea that human beings are creatures poised between beast and god, who become more like beasts if they behave like beasts,

and more like gods if they lift up their heads and concentrate on spiritually and intellectually 'higher' things. This material was discussed by Augustine and therefore became familiar in an abbreviated form to his medieval Western readers.

### *Judaism and Jewish scholars*

Jewish scholarship also had its particular medieval concerns. It has been suggested that the account of the creation of the world in Genesis prompted philosophical discussion of the question how the world began in ways that changed the emphasis of ancient philosophical discussions, especially those on the eternity of the world. This was an issue for Jews as much as for Christian scholars. Could a creator who made the world from nothing have made it in any way he chose? This was a very different being from Plato's craftsman-creator, and a very different situation from the one presented by a world that had somehow always been there, as Aristotle argued.

The twelfth-century Maimonides helped to frame a Jewish philosophical tradition in Arabic, which took forward earlier Islamic scholarship (Inglis 2002: 202). Among his concerns was this question of the beginning of things, on which he disagreed with Aristotle. But Maimonides also took a view on the nature of the highest good in which he found it unsatisfactory to believe that the highest good did nothing but think; and he disputed Aristotle's views on the nature and divisions of the virtues.

For Western Christian Europe, Jews could be a source of advice on the meaning of certain Old Testament Hebrew terms. Peter Abelard (1079–1142) seems to have consulted Hebrew speakers for this purpose. But talking with Jews presented challenges, since they, like the Arab scholars, thought in terms of a monotheism in which the complexities of Christian Trinitarian theology and the Christian theology of redemption had no place. Abelard was the author of one of the experimental philosophical and religious literary dialogues between Jews and Christians that were briefly fashionable in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, although unlike Gilbert Crispin, he left Christological questions out of the debate. In such dialogues, as in the related 'anti-heretical' writings such as the *Contra haereticos* (Against the heretics) of Alan of Lille in the later twelfth century, it is Christology that is typically the sticking-point.

### *Islam and the Nestorian Christians*

Nestorian and Jacobite Christians who spoke Syriac and Arabic, as well as Islamic scholars, translated Greek philosophers from Syriac or Greek into Arabic. This work was done mainly in the eighth and ninth centuries during the period of the Abbasid caliphs. Al-Kindi (*d. c.870*) was one of the leading figures (Inglis 2002: 24). These generations seem to have been struck by points at which the texts chimed with the pre-Christian beliefs of their region. They commented; they

wrote monographs. Al-Kindi, for example, realized the importance of clarity in the use of terms and wrote a treatise on definitions to help Arabic speakers in their study of the translated Greek. But he also took a more extended view of the questions that were presenting themselves about the nature of philosophy. In his *On First Philosophy*, he encourages Muslims to welcome perceptions of truth even if they come from outside their own tradition. He extols Aristotle, he tackles the question of the origin of the world, and he creates his own synthesis of Greek and Islamic thinking in the spirit he encourages others to adopt.

The rise of Islam created still more new scholarly communities, for the translations were of a high standard and stimulating to their Muslim readers. After al-Kindi's death, the links with Nestorian Christians continued. Al-Farabi (*d. c.950*) was a member of a circle of students of logic and philosophy that included Nestorians, and he was a pupil of at least one of these. Al-Farabi became a leading logician and philosopher in his own right and an influential commentator on Aristotelian texts.

The encounter with Aristotle was probably more direct than that with Plato, for although Arabic histories record the existence of Plato's *Republic*, the *Laws*, the *Parmenides* and the *Timaeus*, it seems that the translations were probably from summaries such as Galen's synopsis of Plato's dialogues. It was not until the twelfth century that the translations were seized on by a hungry West and rendered into Latin for Western use.

Avicenna (Ibn Sina, *d. 1037*), who impressed Albert the Great (1193/1206–1280), was an even bolder synthesizer of Greek and Islamic thought. Among the Islamic thinkers represented in the present volume is al-Ghazali, whose late-eleventh- and early-twelfth-century career coincided quite closely with that of Anselm of Canterbury. Al-Ghazali was struck by the contradictoriness of the opinions of the ancient philosophers he read. Also discussed in this volume is Averroes (Ibn Rushd, *d. 1198*), who was based in Spain and in a part of the Islamic world in much closer touch with the West, and wrote a rebuttal that sought to retrieve the ancient philosophers' reputations.

We turn now to the developments and emphases that entered what was to become, in terms of its subsequent influence on the history of philosophy, the mainstream of medieval European culture.

## II. KEY ASPECTS OF THE MEDIEVAL RELATIONSHIP OF PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

### *The changing syllabus*

The main energy of Western medieval thought went into the study of philosophical and theological method and the underlying questions of the nature of logic and language. Here the Western medieval contribution was considerable.

Epistemology and the theory of language were taken well beyond the point they had reached in ancient philosophy. Aristotle's logic was added to, as medieval Western scholars became interested in questions of logic and language, and the conflict between Aristotle and some points in Priscian's teaching of Latin grammar. The doctrine of transubstantiation arose directly out of this line of study, for it is framed in terms of a reversal of the norms of Aristotle's *Categories*. Ordinary bread changes in its accidents (i.e. perceptible qualities) when it grows mouldy but remains bread in substance. The doctrine claims that the consecrated bread of the Eucharist remains the same in its accidents for its appearance does not alter, but its substance has changed completely, for it has now become the actual body of Christ.

From the early thirteenth century, physics and metaphysics became established as additions to the old staples of the 'arts' course (the grammar, logic and rhetoric of the *trivium*, and the arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy of the *quadrivium*), and their inclusion in the syllabus of the emerging universities led to challenging debate about their relationship and the way they might fit into the study of philosophy and theology. Universities were to be one of the major contributions of the Middle Ages to the intellectual life of the Latin West. Within them there was, from the first, highly competitive debate, not least between the 'arts' students and their teachers and the older students and more senior teachers of theology. Faculties of theology came into being in some universities and there could be energetic debate between the 'theologians' and the 'philosophers' of the arts faculty about what was essentially common ground, as occurred at Paris. The notion that assertions about the natural world and its workings might be tested and verified experimentally was not to gain ground until the sixteenth century, however, with the work of Francis Bacon. The underlying philosophy was still that reality lay in abstraction or 'ideas' and that nothing could be learned from the particular exemplifications of those ideas in the world the senses can perceive, which can alter the truth of ideas that belong in a higher realm. Mathematics was another matter, with Thomas Bradwardine (c.1290–1349) and others doing original work in that area.

In the West, 'religion' began to be written about from at least the twelfth century within the framework of an increasingly 'systematic' Christian theology (although the term 'theology' was slow to emerge as the natural label for the body of Christian doctrine). 'Philosophy' mutated into a study of those questions that are susceptible to reasoning and do not necessarily require scriptural revelation for their resolution, and was given an uneasy position on the edge of Christian theology. Aquinas saw the problem clearly and makes it the first article of the first question of his *Summa theologiae* on whether there is a need for anything more than what reasoning can discover by philosophy alone.

We must now look more closely at the way these implications for the understanding of the relationship of philosophy and religion were worked out in the centuries covered by this volume.



*Questions of vocabulary*

*Philosophia* is a common term and *theologia* a comparatively rare one for much of the medieval period in the West. Isidore (c.560–636) says in his *Etymologiae* (Etymologies) that theologians (*theologi*) are so called because they “speak of God in their writings” (*quoniam in scriptis suis de deo dixerunt*; in *Etymologiae* VIII. vi.18 [1909]). It was not until the twelfth century and after that the word *theologia* came to be used regularly to describe the whole spread of themes of Christian theology that were to be included in ‘systematic theology’. *Studium sacrae scripturae* or even *sacra doctrina* came more naturally.

Augustine and especially Boethius had used the terminology as writers of the late antique world, for whom *theologia* belonged within *philosophia*. Augustine wrote in *De civitate Dei* (On the city of God) VI.5 of the distinction between a theology (*theologia*) that deals with the natural world, a civil *theologia* that shapes the *pietas* of the citizen and encourages him to respect the emperor as a deity, and the *fabulosa theologia* that is mythology, stories of the pagan gods. Cassiodorus (c.485–c.585), in his short encyclopedia the *Institutiones* (Institutions) gives a series of definitions (1937: 110). Philosophy is the knowledge of things divine and human at the level of what is probable (as all syllogistic argument was taken to be, for it can have only as much certainty as the propositions from which its conclusions are drawn): “*Philosophia est divinarum humanarumque rerum, ... probabilis scientia*”. He also sees philosophy as the all-embracing art and science, the *ars artium et disciplina disciplinarum*. And, like the classical writer he essentially is, he understands philosophy to be the study of the deep questions of life, which he sums up in the phrase *meditatio mortis*.

The personified *Philosophia*, from whose advice Cassiodorus’ contemporary Boethius drew ‘consolation’, was of this last sort. She concerned herself with the great philosophical topics of the ancient world, which taught a person how to live as much as how to think and believe. Boethius’ *Consolations* concentrates particularly on the question of the purpose of life and how far its ultimate outcome was under the care of a providence which cared and could ensure a good outcome.

Boethius wrote in a different frame of reference and using different terminology in the *De Trinitate*, where he discusses ‘theology’. He divides intellectual activities (*speculativa*) into *theologia*, *mathematica* and *physica*. Of these “*tres ... speculativae partes*”, *naturalis* considers the forms of bodies in matter; *mathematica* considers forms as though they were abstracted from bodies although in reality they cannot be; and *theologia* considers what is truly not material, for “the substance of God lacks both matter and motion” (1973: 9).

On this understanding, *theologia* confines itself to the highest and most abstract ideas: topics that can be dealt with by reasoning. Reason alone can equip a thinker to come to conclusions about the existence of a God and whether there is one God or many. It may even, at a stretch, make it possible to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity and to discuss the creation of the universe. For that which is spread



before the eye of the mind in the natural world may also be regarded as a form of divine revelation. What reason cannot do is to arrive unaided at the historical facts of revelation and discuss those aspects of Christian belief that depend on knowing that Jesus was born and taught and died, and what he said to his disciples, although once those are 'given' reason may struggle with the technicalities of the Incarnation, as the Church had been doing during the fourth- and fifth-century Ecumenical Councils.

This distinction was very apparent to Hugh of Saint-Victor (*d.* 1141), a keen pedagogue who went to great trouble to help his pupils learn. For example, he was much concerned to ensure that the canons of the Abbey of Saint-Victor in Paris understood the underlying structure and divisions of their studies, in ways which would chime with the expectations they would encounter in their reading. There was an exchange of ideas between the Victorines, the students and masters of the cathedral school in Paris, and the rival schools that were coming into existence round Sainte-Geneviève, from which the University of Paris was to emerge. So this was a way of understanding the deep structure of Christian theology, which had a wider potential importance and influence. In his *De sacramentis ecclesiae* (On the sacraments of the Church), Hugh divided Christian theology into two broad areas: the *opus creationis*, which deals with the existence and nature of God, the Trinity and the creation; and the *opus restaurationis*, which is concerned with the matters known about only through the pages of Scripture and not accessible to reasoning alone.

He wrote in this way, in a period when the question what authorities could be relied on in constructing arguments was the subject of widespread debate. It was beginning to be realized that not everyone would accept the same proof-texts, or indeed any proof-texts. If Christian theology depended on the Bible for a significant part of its content, there were going to be problems in winning converts. Accordingly, Gilbert Crispin (*c.*1055–1117) takes different approaches to the use of biblical authorities in his *Dialogue with a Gentile* and his *Dialogue with a Jew*. In the opening passages of the *Dialogue with a Jew* (1986: 10–11), the Christian and the Jew discuss the *auctoritas* of the Old Testament and the New, and the place of *ratio* in proofs. For the Jew will accept only the Old Testament. In the *Dialogue with a Gentile* (by whom he means a pagan), Gilbert describes a kind of philosophical club in which the members are discussing Aristotle and Porphyry, and genera and species, and how many branches of the art of argument there are, and how many liberal arts. Once more they have to begin by agreeing which authorities they propose to rely on. "I do not accept your laws and literary works, nor the authorities drawn from them", asserts the 'Gentile', and they are obliged to agree to use reasoning alone (*ibid.*: 62–4). Peter Abelard (2001: 9) addresses the same difficulty in his fictional three-cornered debate of a Jew, a Christian and a Philosopher. Pagans or philosophers will accept only reason; Christians will accept the authority of the New Testament as well as the Old; and Jews will accept only the authority of the Old Testament.

Alan of Lille (*d. c.1202*) adds a further dimension in his treatise against the heretics, where he points out that the dualists (the Manichees of Augustine's day and contemporary Albigensians or Cathars) accept only the New Testament because they deem the God of the Old Testament to be the dark God of matter who is the Principle of Evil. Chapter after chapter in his first book lists "the authorities and reasons" that support a particular position (1855; *Patrologia Latina* 210:307–78).

These considerations all turn ultimately on the distinction Boethius had made between the *theologia*, which is accessible to everyone and is open to pure reasoning, and the study of those parts of Christian theology that rely on the revelation of the Word of God in the Bible and can therefore be known only to those who can read the Bible or hear it read to them.

It was perhaps partly with this distinction in mind, and very probably because he had been discussing the problem with Gilbert Crispin while Gilbert was planning his *Dialogue with a Jew*, that Anselm of Canterbury (*c.1033–1109*) made a bold bid to cross this boundary. In his *Cur Deus homo* (Why God became man) he proposes to try to prove by reason alone that once Adam had sinned the incarnation and all that followed became the only way forward. *Remoto christo* he says, setting aside everything we know about the coming of Christ from Scripture let us see whether we can establish by reasoning what we are told actually happened (Anselm 1940: 42–3).

Alongside this subtle and increasingly complex balancing of *theologia* and *philosophia* are to be found mid-twelfth-century discussions of the syllabus. These are of particular interest because they antedate the invention of the universities and do not relate to any formal requirements with which a student might have to comply before obtaining a qualification or degree. They do, however, help to clarify the way the two disciplines looked at this period.

Hugh of Saint-Victor is again helpful here. Hugh's *Epitome Dindimi in philosophiam* (Dindimus' summary of philosophy) (1966: 189), a partly catechetical, partly Socratic, dialogue between master and pupil, of the sort that was popular at the time, includes an opening definition of philosophy. Hugh takes philosophy to be the study that seeks wisdom (*studium querende sapientie*) and involves the pursuit of truth: indeed, a careful investigation of the truth (*et diligens investigatio veri*). The partners in the dialogue go on to discuss the definitions of wisdom and truth.

Hugh goes on to give a more 'theological' analysis of the 'three things' with which philosophy is properly (*recte*) concerned, as befits a teacher preparing canons for the religious life

For its first investigation should concern man (*Nam prima investigatio hominis hec esse debet*) so that the philosopher may know himself and be aware that he was created (*ut sciat seipsum et agnoscat quod factus est*). Then, once he begins to know himself, he should reflect on his own creation and contemplate the wonders of the created world he sees all about him. (1966: 190)

The notion of ‘theology’ Hugh has in mind here is as much devotional as intellectual. This is a ‘mode’ of doing theology that he taught in the school at the Abbey of Saint-Victor. It linked the intellectual activities of reading and thinking with the spiritual exercise of meditation. It is in tune with Isidore’s definition of *religio* as that through which we turn our souls to God and worship him in service (*Etymologiae* VIII.ii.1–2 [1909]).

‘Knowing oneself’ was a topic that had a brief fashion in the twelfth century, with some awareness of its meaning in ancient Greek philosophical thought. ‘*Scito te ipsum*’ was the Latin version. “*Gnothi seauton*”, know yourself, says Juvenal, explaining that this means ‘be realistic about yourself’, ‘take stock of yourself and describe yourself to yourself as you really are’. Peter Abelard chose the title of his book on the ethics of intention (*Scito te ipsum*) accordingly (Abelard 1971).

The standard introduction to books to be lectured on, the *Accessus ad auctores* (Bernard of Utrecht 1970: 191–3), included in at least some versions “in which part of philosophy” (*pars philosophiae*) the book was to be placed. This implied that ‘philosophy’ could mean the generality of all disciplines. Hugh of Saint-Victor writes about the syllabus of studies in the spirit of this *partes philosophiae* approach, with the kind of breakdown of the disciplines current in the discussions of the day. They form a tree with branches, with the parts of philosophy being *logica*, *ethica*, *theorica*, *mechanica* (Hugh of Saint-Victor 1966: 191–3). Logic includes *grammatica et ratio disserendi*. ‘Reasoning’ (*ratio disserendi*) comprises the three branches of ‘probable’ (syllogistic), ‘necessary’ (demonstrative, as used by Euclid) and ‘sophistical’ (fallacious) arguments. The branches of ethics are also listed: *solitaria*, *privata* and *publica*. Studies classified as ‘theoretical’ are the three that Boethius lists: *theologia*, *mathematica* and *physica*, and it is notable that Hugh is happy to leave ‘theology’ in this corner of the syllabus. Lastly come the ‘mechanical’ studies, a list derived from Varro, and “scarcely” (*vix*) parts of philosophy at all; Hugh suggests *lanificium*, *armatura*, *navigation*, *agricultura*, *venatio*, *medicina* and *theatrica*.

On the evidence we have, not all these could actually be studied, certainly not to the same depth. The textbooks did not exist, for one thing, although some new ones were being written experimentally. The syllabus of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*, the grammar, logic and rhetoric, and the arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy of the practical teaching arrangements were, on the evidence of Thierry of Chartres’ *Heptateuch*, what Hugh’s more comprehensive list of parts of philosophy amounted to in reality in the twelfth-century schools. Grammar and then logic were dominant, the rest tailed off in the detail in which they were treated. In his *Metalogicon*, John of Salisbury gives a lively picture of the way a student, such as he had himself been in Paris when Peter Abelard had been lecturing there, would decide on a whim which book to study next, and choose a master to ‘hear’ on the subject.

The pragmatic recognition that these arts, especially the arts of language and most particularly the art of argument, were of value whether a student was

‘doing’ philosophy or theology is noted in passing in Thomas of Chobham’s *Art of Preaching*. He is discussing the definition of an ‘argument’, by which he means a ‘topic’ or something that can be inserted into a sequence of argumentation. This must be something that could actually happen or exist, even if it does not really exist: “*Argumentum est rerum narratio que si non facta sunt, fieri tamen poterunt*”. This kind of thing, he says, neither philosophy nor theology disdains, for both commonly make use of parables and other fictional devices in teaching (Thomas of Chobham 1993: 5).

*The Aristotelian synthesis: philosophy and theology change places*

It did not take long after the universities began to emerge from the twelfth-century schools for ‘philosophy’ to take its place in the comparatively lowly arts course while ‘theology’ became the highest of the higher degree subjects and the queen of all studies. In reality the students of the arts had often made daring raids into the territory of the theologians, for subjects such as contingent futurity (logic) were inseparable from questions about divine foreknowledge and predestination. Aristotle’s *De interpretatione*, which ends with this topic, had been available since Boethius had translated it.

But now there was a radical shift from the vague presumption of the previous century that ‘philosophy’ embraced all other studies and that ‘theology’ was confined to one section of the study of the Christian faith that it was usual to refer to as the *studium sacrae scripturae*, so solidly founded was it in biblical exegesis and patristic commentary.

The first significant factor in this change was the emergence, from the end of the twelfth century, of universities with syllabuses leading to examinations and the conferment of a degree or *gradus*. It became apparent early on that most students would proceed no further than the study of the *artes*, and the arts became a first-degree course and a foundation for higher studies in medicine, law and theology. There was a certain amount of controversy between the mendicant orders and the universities as to the order of study, for the friars tended to arrive in order to study theology, having taken their preliminary studies in an order determined by their own internal schools.

A second factor was the arrival of the philosophical and natural science works of Aristotle in translation in the medieval West. This made it necessary to revise the syllabus. These books had to be incorporated into a course of study if they were to be admitted to become part of the furniture of educated minds. Albertus Magnus (c.1193–1280), one of the masters who taught Thomas Aquinas, was one of the leading synthesizers. Aristotle’s ‘scientific’ and philosophical works, particularly *On the Soul*, quickly became part of the syllabus of the arts course, and were treated as ‘philosophical’ and as part of a preparation (in the case of those students who were to go on to higher studies) for the study of theology. The regulations of 1268 for the University of Oxford require the study of three of Aristotle’s works:

*De physica* (On physics), *De anima* (On the soul) and *De generatione et corruptione animalium* (On generation and corruption).

The process of assimilation was far from uncontroversial. From 1210 in Paris and at intervals throughout the thirteenth century until the 1270s, lists of banned opinions that were to be found in these books were published in an attempt to prevent them from being mentioned by teachers. Nothing could have been better calculated to stir the interest of students. The kind of problem that could present itself is reflected in a remark of John Blund, writing his own *De anima*:

Perhaps someone says that it is for theologians to write about the soul (*Foret dicet aliquis quod theologi est tractare de anima*). On the contrary. The theologian's task is to ask in what way the soul may be deserving or undeserving, of salvation or punishment (*Contra. Theologus habet inquirere qua via contingat animam mereri et demereri, et quid sit ad salutem at quid ad penam*). He does not have to enquire that the soul is, *et in quo predicamento sit* and how it inhabits the body.

(Blund 1970: 7)

There were further complications because the new Aristotle came from the Arabic translations that had been made by Islamic scholars as well as directly by translation from the Greek, and it arrived accompanied by works of Arabic scholarship commenting on it. This was learning of great sophistication but it had not, naturally, been shaped by considerations of the compatibility of Aristotle with Christian orthodoxy. The arrival of this stimulating new material meant that the arts course promptly became less lowly; it now included textbooks whose content went far beyond the intricacies of grammar and logic, which had been presenting challenges to theological study since the eleventh century.

All those who emerged from one of the early universities having completed the arts course had learned the skill of disputation, and that was to prove important in the shaping of the late medieval study of theology, especially at Oxford and Paris, the two universities that specialized most notably in this subject. There were, in the later medieval centuries, two strands to the study of theology. The old *studium sacrae scripturae* continued. Every theology student heard lectures on the Bible, and, if he aspired to become a master in his turn, he gave lectures on the Bible himself. But at the end of the twelfth century a systematic theology had begun to emerge, a method of studying doctrine topic by topic. Peter Lombard (c.1100–60) had put together a set of *Sentences* (*sententiae* or 'opinions') drawn from the Fathers and arranged in a thematic order, so that the student could see more or less at a glance the range of contradictory opinion he needed to be aware of on any given point. The book was controversial at first, because there was some suspicion that Lombard held unorthodox views on the Trinity, but from early in the thirteenth century it became the standard textbook for students of theology in universities, and remained so throughout the Middle Ages. Within the same

tradition emerged the *summa*, for example Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* and *Summa contra Gentiles*, but no later attempt superseded Peter Lombard's work as the standard textbook. (The significance of Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* began to be felt only in the sixteenth century with the Counter-Reformation.)

The methodology of these collections of contradictory opinions was that of the formal university disputation. A question was put. Arguments were marshalled by the students, citing authorities or reasons. The presiding master 'determined' the answer and proceeded to demolish the arguments that had been advanced against his decision.

*Is theology a practical science?*

Aquinas argues that in being both speculative and practical, *sacra doctrina* outclasses all other *scientiae*, which are merely one or the other (*Summa theologiae* Ia.1.5). In one sense he was merely showing a sensitivity to the kind of duality Hugh of Saint-Victor insisted on, in which the intellectual and the spiritual both had a place in the study of theology. But he was also well aware, as he shows in his commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*, that there was a fundamental question here. Medieval pedagogy was disposed to consider theory a higher kind of study than practical disciplines. That is why Varro's list of mechanical arts had scarcely (*vix*) deserved a mention in the twelfth century. There was a pervasive separation of the two. *Musica*, for example, was regarded as a different subject from *cantus*. The first was a branch of mathematics, for which Boethius' *De musica* (On music) was the appropriate textbook. The second was the study of actual singing. Geometry, for which Euclid had provided a textbook, was a different study from the skill in measuring fields, for which the *agrimensores* of Roman literature had written guides. The distinction was less easy to maintain in the case of a subject such as politics, since arguably a political science that could not be applied was inherently flawed. The study of politics ought to be useful in the running of states. The same might be said of theology, as Aquinas does in his *Summa theologiae*, but with a consciousness of the Aristotelian dimension of the question that had not been present in the twelfth-century discussions.

*The role of Plato and the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius in the medieval West*

Hugh of Saint-Victor (1939: 25) explains that the word *theologia* comes from the Greek for the knowledge of God. But knowledge of Greek was sketchy in the medieval West. Partly for this reason, Plato was poorly represented in the West in the medieval 'stage' of the long story of the rebalancing of the relationship of philosophy and theology, at least in terms of the kind of detailed study of the source texts to which the works of Aristotle were progressively subjected.

The most important and distinctive strand in the study of theology in the Middle Ages, which bore the imprint of late Platonism, was represented by the



work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (see Vol. 1, Ch. 20, “Pseudo-Dionysius”), who was probably a writer of the fifth or sixth century and certainly not the much earlier Dionysius who is mentioned in Acts 17:34. He introduced themes that had a different flavour from those that were kin to them within the Western tradition. His concept of mysticism contrasts with the traditional Western mysticism of Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux. They identified the mystical experience with the rapture described by Paul (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Pseudo-Dionysius, in his *De mystica theologia* (On mystical theology), thought in terms of a ‘negative’ ultimate ‘experience’ of God, which reflected what we cannot know about him. To describe God as infinite is, for example, a negative rather than a positive statement. It tells us that God has no boundaries, but it does not tell us what he positively is. The whole question of ‘naming God’ is made much more difficult by this line of thought.

Maximus Confessor (c.580–662) used Dionysian writings, and Johannes Scottus Eriugena (c.800–c.877), who seems to have been unusual in the West in having a genuine competence in Greek, made use of this work in his own translation and the fragments of his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius that survive, and also in his huge work on ‘nature’, the *Periphyseon*. Eriugena was a controversial figure and his endorsement of the Dionysian approach did not assist it to gain currency. Nevertheless, Robert Grosseteste (c.1175–1253) compiled a ‘corpus’ of Dionysian material in the form of translation and commentary. And Aquinas was sufficiently interested in Pseudo-Dionysius to write on the *De divinis nominibus* (On the divine names). Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) was attracted to the Dionysian paradoxicality of the impossibility of saying anything about God, and his own reflections on this problem underpin the *De docta ignorantia* (On learned ignorance).

The other theme that became partly identified with Pseudo-Dionysius was the concept of a celestial and natural hierarchy. Ideas of hierarchy were familiar and acceptable in the West but it was Pseudo-Dionysius who encouraged the working out of the details, for example, the idea that there are nine orders of angels. These stretched upwards from ordinary angels (messengers) and archangels (who carry special messages such as the Annunciation to Mary) to the cherubim and seraphim of Isaiah 6, who spend eternity in intellectual bliss in the very presence of God. The orders of angels caught the imagination of the medieval West, as did the notion of a detailed breakdown of heaven and earth and hell into their layers. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* made use of this in vernacular literature.

As for reading Plato himself and not mere discussions of his ideas, we have seen that Plato’s *Meno* and *Phaedo* were available in translation in the twelfth century, as was Chalcidius’ rendering of the *Timaeus*, made in the fourth century and available for study in the West as early as the eighth century. The *Timaeus* proved to be the most challenging, because its account of creator and creation seemed incompatible with that of Genesis. Plato envisages a maker who assembles pre-existing matter and form (see Vol. 1, Ch. 4, “Socrates and Plato”); Genesis a creator who makes everything from nothing according to ideas he invents himself. Clarembald



of Arras, in his *Tractaculus super librum Genesis* (Little treatise on the book of Genesis), wrestled with the task of reconciling the two (1965: 229). Other medieval authors used Genesis as a peg on which to hang discussions of philosophical and scientific problems, optics for example, at the point where Genesis says that God separated light from darkness. Robert Grosseteste wrote on the six days of creation in that spirit in the early thirteenth century, and in the fourteenth century Henry of Langenstein did the same.

This creeping progression towards what would now be identifiable as ‘science’ was to become important. Among the Platonic notions that chimed with what Boethius had said in his theological tractates was the idea that what seemed right to the reason was likely to be far stronger than anything ascertained in any other way, whether by reading authoritative texts or by attempts at experimental verification. *Per se nota*, the *communes animi conceptiones* that Boethius speaks of in the *De hebdomadibus*, were the ultimate intuitively perceived and accepted abstractions. These were essentially Platonic Ideas. As long as it remained the case that all particular exemplifications of such Ideas in the material world must be regarded as inferior to the Ideas themselves, capable of disintegrating and decaying, experimental science could not begin. No experiment could disprove a beautiful idea because its evidence could never be strong enough.

Moreover, there were important implications here for the nature of the boundary between the natural and the supernatural. Modern experimental science confines itself to the study of the physical world on which experiments can be conducted. It does not typically attempt to draw inferences about the supernatural. But to the mind of Plato, that which is above the natural world is the world of Ideas and it bestows on the material things such form as they have and such intelligibility as they possess. Hugh of Saint-Victor, writing on *theologia* in his *Didascalicon* (1939: 25), cites Boethius in his commentary on Porphyry in language that shows how deeply such Platonism penetrated even into early medieval thought.

So the influence of Platonism should not be underestimated just because the works of Plato were not available to be read *in extenso* alongside those of Aristotle in the late medieval universities. Augustine had transmitted a great deal of Platonist thought and assumption, which he had himself imbibed largely second-hand but nevertheless in an age when its implications hung heavy in the air. Platonism was, moreover, a pervasive influence in Eastern Christendom, which had never been cut off from Greek and where the style of Platonic mysticism had proved immensely attractive in the late antique period and after. Also worth mentioning is John Colet (1467–1519), Erasmus’ friend and contemporary, who became enraptured with Platonism while studying in Italy as a young man and by the time of his return to England was eloquent on the subject of the hierarchies of Pseudo-Dionysius (Colet 1869).

*Philosophy and religion in the sixteenth century*

The relationship of philosophy and theology took on a new look once more in the sixteenth century. The study of Greek had now become fashionable, largely driven by the movement to return ‘to the sources’ (*ad fontes*) in the study of the Bible, to read the Old Testament in the Hebrew and the Septuagint and the New Testament in the Greek. Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522) was one of the leaders in the study of Hebrew, Erasmus of the Greek.

But the pressure to read the Bible itself in Greek was not the result of a wish to read the philosophers whom access to the language also made available, although it was recognized that learning Greek gave access to more than Scripture. Once texts were available in the original Greek, students could read that philosophical literature for themselves.

The call *ad fontes* arose from another quarter altogether. Developments of the later Middle Ages, principally those that concerned the sacraments, ecclesiology, the governance of the Church and the relations of Church and State, had grown contentious because of a perception that the institutional Church of the West had begun to exceed its powers and ‘impose’ requirements on the faithful that had no divine warrant. In many respects these concerned pastoral rather than intellectual matters. For example, Martin Luther’s great bugbear was the system of indulgences. These were remissions of penalties imposed by the Church within the penitential system, and the Church had begun to make a substantial income from selling them, particularly to those who believed they could buy for their deceased loved ones some time off from the period to be served in Purgatory. The Church had undoubtedly exploited the earning potential of indulgences but the system had developed largely in response to popular demand. It met a need, and the theology was cobbled together after the event to justify and explain the practice. Once Luther and others began seriously to challenge the authority of the Church it became important to rethink the whole question of authority. That had led reformers to think afresh about the Bible and to want to examine the text at its ‘source’, in the original version.

Some of the perennial ‘philosophical questions’ of Christian theology, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, aspects of Christology and what Anselm of Canterbury had called the ‘most famous question’ of the relationship of divine foreknowledge, predestination, free will and grace presented themselves afresh for discussion in the sixteenth century in the light of new insights derived from ancient Greek philosophy.

The full range of the Greek Fathers could be read again, and not only small snippets of a few, such as Origen (partly available in the translation of Jerome’s contemporary, Rufinus). It was noticed that these Fathers, particularly the Cappadocians – Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzus and Basil the Great – were themselves no mean philosophers (*see* Vol. 1, Ch. 17, “The Cappadocians”). They could begin to be given their full context. For the first time Western readers hitherto confined to Latin could appreciate for themselves why Ambrose of Milan had found them so

stimulating in composing his sermons on Genesis; and why Augustine's opinion of Christianity had risen so sharply when he heard Ambrose explain creation in terms of the Neoplatonic philosophical ideas with which they were working.

The sixteenth century's changes were also pedagogical. The teaching methodology that had evolved in the medieval centuries with the rise of the universities had included a heavy emphasis on the reading (*lectio*) of set texts with commentary by a 'lecturer' in the form of comparative references to the opinions of earlier exegetes and critics. As this apparatus grew and became more complex and unwieldy, it became usual to defer discussion of particularly knotty questions to a separate session of disputation, in which the pros and cons could be debated and a 'determination' reached, with the master presiding. For this purpose the study of language (at the level of linguistics and epistemology) and logic was of paramount importance, and an immensely sophisticated and demanding syllabus had been constructed. This was now, in the sixteenth century, associated with what the reformers perceived to be the worst excesses of the Church's control of the study of the faith. It was labelled 'scholasticism' and sneered at. That does not mean that its use died away at once. The 'scholastic' syllabus was simplified, but not abandoned altogether until the nineteenth century. But at Luther's University of Wittenberg the disputation was still being used both for teaching and for examination in the late 1530s.

The changes of the sixteenth century, which led to those of the early modern world, were to do with the mechanics of philosophizing and 'doing theology', access to texts, knowledge of languages, understanding of the theory of language and the methodologies of argument. But transformation of those basics presented old questions in an entirely new light and made it possible to ask them from the vantage-point of an assumption that fundamentals could be redefined and human effort allowed to question quite radically what earlier authors had thought.

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