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Iustitia Dei

A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification

The Christian doctrine of justification is of immense interest to historians and theologians, and continues to be of major importance in modern ecumenical discussions. The present work appeared in its first edition in 1986, and rapidly became the leading reference work on the subject. Its many acclaimed features include a detailed assessment of the semantic background of the concept in the ancient Near East, a thorough examination of the doctrine of the medieval period, and an especially careful analysis of its development during the critical years of the sixteenth century. The third edition thoroughly updates the work, adding new material where necessary, and responding to the latest developments in scholarly literature. It will be an essential resource for all concerned with the development of Christian doctrine, the history of the Reformation debates on the identity of Christianity, and modern discussions between Protestants and Roman Catholics over the nature of salvation.

ALISTER E. MCGRATH is Professor of Historical Theology at the University of Oxford. His major academic works include *The Genesis of Doctrine* (1990) and *The Intellectual Origins of the Reformation* (1987). He is also editor of the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (1995) and the author of a number of acclaimed student textbooks including *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd edition (2001).

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Preface

The present study is an extended exploration of the manner in which the western church developed the Pauline concept of 'justification' throughout two thousand years of reflection and debate, culminating in the sixteenth-century Protestant declaration that the doctrine of justification was 'the article by which the church stands or falls (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*).[1] It reflects my own interest in a number of areas of scholarship, especially the intellectual origins of the European Reformation of the sixteenth century, and the nature of doctrinal development within the Christian tradition. It is both a celebration and a criticism of the pioneering work of Albrecht Benjamin Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* (1870). Despite its many weaknesses, this earlier work remains a landmark of scholarship in the field.

Three reasons may be given for exploring the history of the doctrine of justification within the Christian tradition at such length. First, the historical study of the development of any Christian doctrine from its origins to the present day is inherently significant, in that it offers a means of identifying and evaluating the factors which have influenced the development of doctrine in general. The development of the doctrine of justification is thus a paradigm for the study of ideological interaction in the development of doctrine, illustrating how theological and secular concepts were related as theologians responded to the cultural situation of their period.

[1] For the sense and origins of this celebrated phrase, see F. Loofs, 'Der articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae'. It is necessary to challenge Loofs upon several points, particularly his suggestion that the phrase is first used in the eighteenth century by the Lutheran theologian Valentin Löscher in his famous anti-Pietist diatribe *Vollständiger Timotheus Verinus oder Darlegung der Wahrheit und des Friedens in denen bisherigen Pietistischen Streitigkeiten* (1718–21), and is restricted to the Lutheran constituency within Protestantism. This is clearly incorrect. The *Reformed* theologian Johann Heinrich Alsted uses the phrase a century earlier, opening his discussion of the justification of humanity *coram Deo* as follows: 'articulus iustificationis dicitur articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae' (*Theologia scholastica didacta* (Hanover, 1618), 711). Precursors of the phrase may, of course, be found in the writings of Luther himself – e.g., WA 40/3.352.3: 'quia isto articulo stante stat Ecclesia, ruente ruit Ecclesia'. For more recent reflection, see Schwarz, 'Luthers Rechtfertigungslehre als Eckstein der christlichen Theologie und Kirche'.

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The study is also of intrinsic interest to systematic theology. It could be argued that the theological situation today demands at least a *restatement*, and quite possibly also a *reinstatement*, of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation.[2] The essential prerequisite of any attempt to interpret, reinterpret or restate that doctrine is a due appreciation of the historical origins and subsequent development of the concept. It is clearly somewhat pointless to attempt to develop or defend theories of justification, reconciliation or atonement which can be shown to rest upon some misunderstanding of a Hebrew root, which represent a recent distortion of an older and more considered doctrine, or which represent a conditioned response to a specific cultural situation that no longer pertains today (a theme which I explored in my 1990 Bampton Lectures at Oxford University).[3]

Justification is one of several concepts that have been used within Scripture and the Christian tradition to articulate the reconciliation effected by God with the world through Christ. As will become clear, at certain points during the development of Christian theology – especially during the sixteenth century – this concept came to assume a particularly significant role. At others, however, the concept plays a much less prominent part in theological reflection on the foundations of salvation, or on the shape of the Christian life. The present study is offered as a resource to stimulate and inform this theological reflection on the ongoing place of the concept of justification in the church's self-understanding of its identity and mission.

In the third place, the study may serve as a resource for the dialogue between Christians of different traditions, most notably those whose present identities have been shaped decisively by the European Reformation of the sixteenth century. The doctrine came to assume a major, possibly pivotal, role at that time, with debates over the issue contributing significantly to the emergence of divisions within western Christianity. As pressure grows for Christians to attempt to settle their differences (or at least to understand one another better), an informed understanding of the sixteenth-century debates over the doctrine of justification clearly has

[2] This was certainly Ritschl's intention in undertaking his massive historical analysis of the concept: see M. Werner, *Der protestantische Weg des Glaubens*, Bern: Haupt, 1955, 799–815. Few have chosen to follow his lead subsequently, however, with the notable exception of Martin Kähler's important essay *Zur Lehre von der Versöhnung* (1898); see Schäfer, 'Die Rechtfertigungslehre bei Ritschl und Kähler'. In recent times, the Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson (b. 1930) has made some intriguing suggestions for the systematic role of the doctrine; see Jenson, 'Justification as a Triune Event'; idem, 'Rechtfertigung und Ekklesiologie.' However, his recent *Systematic Theology* (2 vols., New York: Oxford University Press, 1997–9) does not develop these suggestions to the extent that might have been anticipated.

[3] A. E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

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a major role to play. It is no accident that discussions over this doctrine have played a major role in ecumenical dialogues since about 1980.

The origin of the research contained in this volume goes back to the earliest stage of my period as a theologian, when I studied for the Final Honour School of Theology at Oxford University (1976–8). I chose to specialise in scholastic theology, and was introduced to the ideas of leading representatives of this period, from Peter Lombard to Gabriel Biel. A period spent researching at the University of Cambridge allowed me to develop these interests further. I chose to focus on the theological development of Martin Luther, seen against his late medieval background. This work was published in 1985 as *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough*.

As is so often the case, the initial research project proved to be a launching pad for others. At one level, it led me to take an interest in the theological methodology of the Reformation period, and to trace back its antecedents into the late medieval and Renaissance periods. This work was published in 1987 as *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, and revised in 2003 in the light of important scholarly advances in the field. Although my research interests moved on to areas more properly understood as systematic, rather than historical, theology, I nevertheless kept up my reading in the field, noting new developments which suggested that revision and expansion of my original approach were required. In 2003, I published a second edition of this work, in the light of ongoing work in the field which necessitated expansion, and occasionally revision, of my original conclusions.

The second area in which my original research developed was to consider the development of the doctrine of justification throughout the entire period of theological history. Having researched the origins of Luther's doctrine of justification in its late medieval context, it was entirely reasonable to extend this to embrace the western theological tradition as a whole.

At that time, the only serious attempt to document this development was Ritschl's *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* (1870). The value of that work was rather reduced by the moralist assumptions Ritschl brought to his task, and by his decision to limit his analysis from the eleventh to the nineteenth century, focussing particularly on German-language Protestant contributions to the discussion. The vast scholarly undertakings which have given the modern period the magnificent critical editions denied to Ritschl (such as the Weimar Luther edition) have also cast new light on the theology of the medieval period, calling into question many of Ritschl's conclusions. One of the more troubling aspects of my investigation was the realisation that most

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of Ritschl's conclusions, particularly his very unsatisfactory account of Luther's theological formation, could no longer be sustained. *Iustitia Dei* was published in two volumes in 1986, and rapidly established itself as a benchmark for discussion of the doctrine, especially in the ecumenical dialogues of that era. In 1998, it was reissued in a new format, merging the two original volumes without revisions, and adding some new material relating to some developments in the twentieth century. Although designated a 'second edition', its new format did not allow for a detailed revision of the work. By this stage, it was, however, clear that such a review was needed.

This third edition represents a complete revision of the original work in the light of scholarly developments since the publication of the first edition in 1986. The new edition is based on a complete reappraisal of every aspect of the first edition, including its structure and format, as well as the positions I defended at that stage. My continuing engagement with both primary and secondary sources convinced me of the need to rewrite the work, retaining what was clearly sound and reliable, and correcting or modifying whatever was open to justified criticism. At points, I have had to make inevitable adjudications concerning intensely contested issues in the scholarly literature relating to the development of the doctrine, and have done so on the basis of the best evidence currently available.

The most obvious changes have to do with the presentation of the material. In response to many requests, I now cite primary sources in English translation (although retaining key phrases in the original languages where these are appropriate). I have introduced a substantial new section early in the work, exploring aspects of Paul's views on justification, noting especially the issues which would dominate subsequent theological debate.

The first edition made use of many scholarly studies published in the first half of the twentieth century, which often made landmark contributions to scholarship in the field. As time has passed, other studies have appeared, confirming some aspects of their work, and revising others. I have made every effort to base this new edition of the work on the best recent scholarship. However, it is still an uncomfortable fact that some of the most reliable and original scholarship on certain key matters dates from a previous generation. For this reason, certain older works continue to feature in the notes and scholarly apparatus, despite the appearance of more recent studies.

Those hoping for a definitive pronouncement on what the word 'justification' means will be disappointed. This is a work of historical analysis, not of theological prescription. It does not attempt to define the concept of justification, but sets out to offer an account of the various ways in

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which the western theological tradition has understood the notion, both as a resource and as a challenge to those who wish to provide such a definition. It is a resource, in that it provides a detailed account of how this notion has been conceived over two thousand years of theological reflection. Yet it is also a challenge, in that the failure of that tradition of reflection to agree on the meaning of the term must raise certain awkward questions for those who believe that such a definition may be offered. The evidence offered in this volume suggests that such definitions are dependent on certain implicit semantic, metaphysical and juristic assumptions which were questioned, criticised, replaced, and occasionally retrieved, as the development of Christian theology proceeded.

Finally, I must thank all those who have made this new edition possible, especially those who have read and commented on earlier versions of the work. In particular, I wish to thank M. D. Chenu OP, Fergus Kerr OP, Oliver O'Donovan, Cassian Reel OFMCap, E. G. Rupp, Beryl Smalley, Peter Southwell, N. T. Wright, E. J Yarnold SJ, and Adolar Zumkeller OESA, for their comments and suggestions over many years. I owe particular thanks to Cambridge University Press for being all that a good publisher should be, and to Elizabeth McGrath for her editorial assistance. As always, I take full responsibility for any errors of fact or judgement that remain.

Oxford, July 2004 ALISTER McGRATH

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Abbreviations

Bibliographical abbreviations follow the guidelines provided by S. Schwertner, *Internationales Abkurzungsverzeichnis für Theologie und Grenzgebiete*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974.

ARG	*Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*
AnAug	*Analecta Augustiniana*
AthA	*Année théologique augustinienne*
Augustinus	*Augustinus: Revista tremestral publicada por los Padres Agustinos Recoletos*
BHR	*Bibliothéque d'humanisme et Renaissance*
BIOSCS	*Bulletin of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies*
BJRL	*Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*
BSLK	*Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*
BSRK	*Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CChr	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CFr	*Collectanea Franciscana*
ChH	*Church History*
CR	Corpus Reformatorum
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
CT	Concilium Tridentinum: diariorum, actorum, epistolarum, tractatuum nova collectio
D	*Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*
DR	*Downside Review*
DThC	*Dictionnaire* de *théologie catholique*
EE	*Estudios eclesiásticos*
EETS	Early English Text Society
EThL	*Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*
EvTh	*Evangelische Theologie*
FS	*Franziskanische Studien*

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FrS	*Franciscan Studies*
HThR	*Harvard Theological Review*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JEH	*Journal of Ecclesiastical History*
JHI	*Journal of the History of Ideas*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JThS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
KuD	*Kerygma und Dogma*
MF	*Miscellanea Franciscana*
MGH.Ep	*Monumenta Germaniae historica: Epistolae*
MGH.SRG	*Monumenta Germaniae historica: Scriptores rerum Germanicarum*
MoTh	*Modern Theology*
NRTh	*Nouvelle revue théologique*
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
NZSTh	*Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie*
OS	*Calvini opera selecta*
PG	Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Graeca
PL	Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina
REAug	*Revue des études augustiniennes*
RechAug	*Recherches augustiniennes*
RelSt	*Religious Studies*
RET	*Revista española de teología*
RMAL	*Revue du moyen âge latin*
RSPhTh	*Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*
RSR	*Revue des sciences religieuses*
RThom	*Revue thomiste*
RThAM	*Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*
SCJ	*Sixteenth Century Journal*
SJTh	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
StA	*Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl: Studienausgabe*
StB	*Studia Biblica*
StTh	*Studia Theologica*
ThLZ	*Theologische Literaturzeitung*
ThPh	*Theologie und Philosophie*
ThQ	*Theologische Quartalschrift*
ThRev	*Theological Review*
ThStKr	*Theologische Studien und Kritiken*
ThZ	*Theologische Zeitschrift*
VCaro	*Verbum Caro*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VyV	*Verdad y Vida*

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WA	D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZKG	*Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*
ZKTh	*Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZSTh	*Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie*
ZThK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

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