

CHAPTER I

Introduction

This book is written for anybody who wants to find out more about the ideas of the major theologians of the medieval period from the time of St. Augustine to the end of the 14th century. Rather than offering a survey of a myriad of theologians I focus on a limited number of key thinkers and expound their ideas in some depth. I opt for a text-focused approach – often quoting from primary texts – thus allowing the authors to speak for themselves as much as possible. I also incorporate brief comments on the historical and cultural background of each period, which will assist the reader in contextualizing the authors I discuss.

Although I would like to think this book is written in a clear style and explains complex issues in a lucid manner, this is not a textbook that offers a “standard” survey of key medieval thinkers, and this is for two reasons. First, one of the joys of writing this book was the opportunity it offered me to debunk “popular” accounts of medieval thought readers still come across in systematic textbooks, to which especially Augustine, Anselm and even Thomas Aquinas have fallen victim. Second, rather than offering disparate chapters on key figures I try throughout this book to make a sustained argument that contrasts (post)modern understandings of the nature of theology and human rationality with medieval ones. My overall aim, therefore, is to extend an invitation to *think along* with medieval authors. In a postmodern climate in which modern views on “autonomous reason” are increasingly questioned, it may prove fruitful to reengage with premodern thinkers who obviously did not share our modern and postmodern presuppositions. Their different perspective does not antiquate their thought, as some of the “cultured despisers” of medieval thought might imagine. On the contrary, rather than rendering their views obsolete it makes them profoundly challenging and enriching, perhaps more so than any postmodern critique of modernity could possibly be. For the postmodern, as a mirror image of the modern, is still determined by key assumptions of the modern.

Indeed, it could be plausibly argued that the postmodern critique is part and parcel of the history of modernity itself.

Medieval theology is radically theocentric, and God, for medieval theologians, is of course the Trinitarian God. This may not sound particularly surprising, but it is fundamentally different from those theologians who operate in the shadow of Schleiermacher (and his “anthropological turn” in theology), as well as from those who react against this anthropological turn by espousing a radical bibliocentric approach. This radical theocentric focus is both strengthened and exemplified by how medieval theologians conceived of human rationality. For them, human intelligence encompassed much more than reason. It also involved intellect. If reason is to be rational it has to have an openness toward that which transcends reason, and reason transcends itself by becoming intellect. This is a key theme to which I allude throughout this book.

Medieval theologians were desirous for God. Their whole thinking reached out toward the divine. There is a profound thrust toward the transcendent in medieval theology. In order to illustrate this I pay particular attention to how they conceived of the Christian life, especially their understanding of faith and love, two of the theological virtues. I also hope to show that the theocentric focus at the heart of medieval theology introduces an element of gratuity in the medieval mindset that is rather at odds with modern notions of instrumentalization and functionalization. From Augustine’s invitation to “enjoy God solely” (*frui Deo*) to Meister Eckhart’s notion of detachment, the medieval period contains rich resources to critique modern utilitarian and instrumentalizing perspectives on the world.

Thomas Aquinas wrote that there are two central mysteries in the Christian faith: the mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The doctrine of the Trinity is at the heart of medieval theology, and broad-sweeping and often repeated claims about the alleged emphasis upon the divine unity in Latin theology at the expense of a true Trinitarian understanding of God are to be discarded as scholarly untenable. Indeed, the mystery of the Trinity shapes every aspect of the theology and spirituality of most of the figures I discuss.

While the patristic period witnessed major debates on the nature of the Person of Christ, medieval theology was drawn more toward soteriological questions. Here Anselm’s analysis, often caricatured in modern scholarship, looms large. It is another aspect that retains my attention.

Discussions of the nature of the relation between faith and reason, the mystery of the Trinity, soteriology, Christian love and the transcendent

thrust of medieval thought run like a thread throughout my examination of the authors I have selected. I hope focusing on these themes will provide this book with a measure of cohesion and unity.

Any selection of authors to be included is somewhat arbitrary. The first major author is St. Augustine. It is hardly an exaggeration to describe medieval theology as a footnote to Augustine. In line with the overall aims of this book, other patristic authors such as Boethius, John Cassian and Pseudo-Dionysius receive a more cursory treatment.

It is probably true to say that Gregory the Great's ideas were not all that original. Of course, and revealing, medieval authors did not consider originality a virtue in its own right. They were rather concerned with discovering truth. Gregory merits inclusion for the specific way he appropriates Augustinian views and adapts them for a more monastic setting. With Augustine, he shaped monastic theology well until the 11th century and beyond.

The Carolingian renaissance witnessed renewed theological activity in the West, and it is mostly remembered for the so-called Eucharistic controversy between Radbertus and Ratramnus. One theologian stood out amongst his peers, if only because he devised a daring synthesis of Augustinian and Greek theology. An engagement with the thought of John Scotus Eriugena is therefore well justified even if his influence on later medieval thought was admittedly somewhat limited.

Undoubtedly one of the towering figures of medieval theology is St. Anselm. His *Proslogion* (and its famous "ontological argument"), as well as his soteriology, are addressed at some length.

The 12th century is one of the most creative eras in the cultural history of the West. This is the time of Abelard and Heloise, the Cistercian revolution (Bernard of Clairvaux) and the School of St. Victor in Paris. The theology of Peter Abelard, Hugh and Richard of St. Victor is discussed, as well one of the most influential works of the medieval period: the *Sentences* by Peter Lombard. On one hand Peter Lombard's synthesis looked back by incorporating the Augustinian legacy into his *Sentences*. Its more systematic approach was, however, forward-looking and explains why it became the key text in the theology faculties of the universities founded throughout the 13th century. In contrast, Hildegard of Bingen's oeuvre is squarely set in the monastic culture of the 12th century. Defying categorization, it echoes Old Testament prophecy and vision.

Peter Lombard paved the way for scholastic theology, which flowered in the 13th century. This is the time of the rise of the universities, mendicant orders and, of course, the reception of the entire Aristotelian corpus,

facilitated by Islamic scholarship. The inclusion of Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus does not need justification. Their achievements, however, are incomprehensible without some knowledge of their immediate predecessors such as Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon, Albert the Great and the highly influential *Summa Halensis*. Vernacular theology also came to its own, especially (initially) in the writings of women authors. In the 13th century their theology often took its lead from the Cistercian sources with which it was often closely associated. I discuss two examples – namely, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch.

The Condemnations of 1277 are often seen as a caesura (perhaps more symptomatic than a causal factor) in the history of scholastic theology. While the impact of Duns Scotus's contribution to early modern developments is a matter for debate, most scholars agree that William of Ockham's thought originated in an intellectual climate very different from that of the 13th century. As I hope to explain, the most remarkable change is the more analytical and less intellective notion of theological reason.

It is inaccurate to claim that scholasticism came to an end with the arrival of nominalism. It is, however, fair to say that the theological scene in the 14th and 15th centuries is more pluralist and divided and less systematic or encompassing than before. The nature of reason (*ratio*) changes, and hence also its relation with faith. Metaphysics and theology and even theology and spirituality are increasingly considered separate and not just distinct from one another. Two important authors of this period (Meister Eckhart and Ruusbroec) are discussed so as to illustrate the ongoing vibrancy of medieval spirituality.