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The Middle Ages and the Renaissance, c.500–1500

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The Middle Ages represented an immensely creative and innovative period in Christian theology. The courts, monasteries, and later the universities of Europe became centers of excellence for theological reflection and the forging of new approaches to the relation of Christian thought and life. The period was given an added injection of vitality through the rise of the Renaissance. This dynamic cultural program looked for the reinvigoration of the life and thought of the church and society as a whole through the creative reappropriation of the classical past. As so many theological landmarks date from this period, it is important to identify and reflect on its achievements and contributions to the theological agenda.

On Defining the “Middle Ages”

It is always difficult to be precise about when one era ends and another begins. Traditionally, accounts of the development of Christian theology proceed directly from the close of the patristic period, marked by the Council of Chalcedon (451), to the great theological renaissance in western Europe during the Middle Ages. This is unsatisfactory for many reasons. The most obvious of these is that the “Middle Ages” is a cultural development that is specific to western Europe. It overlooks the fact that the Roman Empire in the east was relatively unaffected by the fall of Rome in 410. The development of Byzantine theology does not easily fit the categories of western European history. It also overlooks earlier renewals in Christian theology in the west— for example, the important developments that took place during the reign of Charlemagne, the first Holy Roman Emperor. This “Carolingian renaissance,” which began in the eighth century and continued well into the ninth, saw some particularly important theological developments, especially in relation to the theology of the sacraments.

The terms “medieval” and “Middle Ages” are modern, signifying the period of transition between the intellectual glories of antiquity and those of the modern period. Although phrases similar to “medieval” are encountered in the medieval period itself, their meaning is quite distinct from the modern sense of the term. Thus Julian of Toledo (died c.685) uses the phrase “the middle age” or “the middle of time [tempus medium]” to refer to the period between the Incarnation and the second coming of Christ. Since the Renaissance, the term has been used in a somewhat disparaging sense, to meet the somewhat uninteresting period of time separating the intellectual glories of antiquity and their retrieval in the Renaissance.

The expansion of Islam around the Mediterranean in the seventh century led to widespread political destabilization and further structural changes in the region. By the eleventh century, a degree of stability had settled upon the area, three major power groupings having emerged to take the place of the former Roman Empire:

1. Byzantium, centered on the city of Constantinople (now Istanbul, in modern-day Turkey). The form of Christianity which predominated in this region was based on the Greek language, and was deeply rooted in the writings of patristic scholars of the eastern Mediterranean region, such as Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers, and John of...
Damascus. A discussion of some distinctive themes of Byzantine theology may be found on pp. 87–8.

2. Western Europe, mainly regions such as France, Germany, the Low Countries, and northern Italy. The form of Christianity which came to dominate this region was centered on the city of Rome, and its bishop, known as “the pope.” (However, for the period known as the “Great Schism,” some confusion developed: there were two rival claimants for the papacy, one based at Rome, the other at the southern French city of Avignon.) Here, theology came to be concentrated in the great cathedral and university schools of Paris and elsewhere, based largely on the Latin writings of Augustine, Ambrose, and Hilary of Poitiers.

3. The Caliphate, an Islamic region embracing much of the extreme eastern and southern parts of the Mediterranean. The expansion of Islam continued, with the fall of Constantinople in 1453 sending shock waves throughout much of Europe. By the end of the fifteenth century, Islam had established a significant presence in two regions of the continent of Europe: Spain and the Balkans. This advance was eventually halted by the expulsion of the Moors from Spain in the final decade of the fifteenth century, and the defeat of Islamic armies outside Vienna in 1523.

An event of fundamental importance to the history of the church took place during this period. For a variety of reasons, relations between the eastern church based at Constantinople and the western church based at Rome became increasingly strained during the ninth and tenth centuries. Growing disagreement over the *filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed (see pp. 60–1) was of no small importance to this increasingly sour atmosphere. Other factors also contributed, including the political rivalry between Latin-speaking Rome and Greek-speaking Constantinople, and the increasing claims to authority of the Roman pope. The final break between the Catholic west and Orthodox east is usually dated to 1054, although this date is somewhat arbitrary.

One major result of this tension was that there was little theological interaction between east and west. Although western theologians such as Thomas Aquinas felt free to draw on the writings of the Greek fathers, these works tended to antedate this period. The works of later Orthodox theologians, such as the noted writer Gregory Palamas, attracted little attention in the west. It is only in the twentieth century that western theology may really be said to have begun to rediscover the riches of the Orthodox tradition.

The term “medieval theology” is often used to refer to western theology during this era, whereas the term “Byzantine theology” is used to refer to the theology of the eastern church over roughly the same period, prior to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. During this period in western European history, the centers of Christian theology gradually moved northward, to central France and Germany. Although Rome remained a center of Christian power in the region, intellectual activity gradually came to migrate to the monasteries of France, such as Chartres, Reims, and Bec. With the foundation of the medieval universities, theology rapidly established itself as a central area of academic study. A typical medieval university possessed four faculties: the lower faculty of arts, and the three higher faculties of theology, medicine, and law. In what follows, we shall consider some of these developments in western Europe, before turning to consider developments in Byzantium.
Medieval Theological Landmarks in Western Europe

Historians have debated for some time the question of when the “Middle Ages” can be said to have begun. The answers given to this question depend, as might be expected, on matters of definition. The practically simultaneous suppression of the Athenian Platonic academy and the establishment of the great monastery at Monte Cassino in 529 are regarded by many as marking, although not in themselves causing, the transition from late antiquity to the medieval period. For some, the medieval period is regarded as having been initiated through Alaric’s conquest of Rome in 410, with the resulting gradual shift in the centers of intellectual life from the Mediterranean world to the northern European world of Theodoric and Charlemagne, and later to the abbey and cathedral schools of France, and the universities of Paris and Oxford. We may therefore begin our brief survey of the development of western medieval theology by considering the revival of its fortunes under the first Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne (742–814).

The Carolingian renaissance

Under Charlemagne, a concerted effort was directed toward renewing the life of the mind within the church. Perhaps the most important figure in this theological renewal was Alcuin (735–804), who had trained at the cathedral school of York, before becoming its master. At Charlemagne’s invitation, Alcuin became abbot of the monastery of St. Martin of Tours, which he established as a leading center of learning. A series of imperial decrees established two kinds of theological school throughout northern Europe. First, there were the monastic schools, which were intended primarily for the instruction of those intending to proceed to monastic vocations. Secondly, there were cathedral schools, set up by the bishop and presided over by a *magister scholarum* or *scholasticus*. One of the results of the Carolingian renaissance was the recognition of the importance of monasteries and cathedrals as seats of learning. The great monastery of Fulda, founded in Germany in 744, became one of the most significant centers of theological and secular learning in the region. Rabanus Maurus, Walafried Strabo, Servatus Lupus, and Otfried of Weissenburg studied there in the eighth and ninth centuries.

In the end, the Carolingian renaissance faltered, due to growing political instability and economic uncertainties. Yet the institutions identified by Charlemagne as central to the tasks of theological education remained, and were able to play a critical role in bringing about the theological renaissance of the twelfth century. We shall consider this development in what follows.

The rise of cathedral and monastic schools of theology

The origins of the monastic movement are generally thought to lie in remote hilly areas of Egypt and parts of eastern Syria during the patristic period. Significant numbers of Christians began to make their homes in these regions in order to get away from the population centers, with all the distractions that these offered. The theme of withdrawal from a sinful and distracting world became of central importance to these communities.
While some lone figures insisted on the need for individual isolation, the concept of a communal life in isolation from the world gained the ascendancy.

During the sixth century, the number of monasteries grew considerably. It was during this period that one of the most comprehensive monastic “Rules” – the “Rule of Benedict” – made its appearance. Benedict of Nursia (c.480–c.550) established his monastery at Monte Cassino at some point around 525. The Benedictine community followed a rule which was dominated by the notion of the unconditional following of Christ, sustained by regular corporate and private prayer, and the reading of Scripture. Benedict’s sister, Scholastica, was also active in the monastic movement.

Although the origin of the monasteries is to be traced back to the patristic era, they played a critical role in the development of theology during the medieval period. Most of the great medieval schools of theology are associated with France. One of the most important was linked to the great cathedral of Chartres. Under the leadership of Fulbert (c.960–1028), bishop of Chartres from 1006 until his death, Chartres became one of the most important centers of theological learning in the eleventh century. The Benedictine abbey of Bec, or Le Bec, in Normandy, provided a base for two of the most important theologians of the eleventh century, Lanfranc (c.1010–89) and Anselm (c.1033–1109).

The great convents of the Middle Ages provided bases for women writers to exercise a significant influence on the thinking of the church. A good example is provided by Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Abbess of Rupertsberg, near the city of Bingen, who established a reputation as a theological and spiritual writer of considerable originality. She is best known for her *Liber divinorum operum* (“Book of divine works”), which was written over the period 1163–73. Catherine of Siena (1347–80), remembered for a series of theological writings, often in the form of dialogues, was a Dominican tertiary (that is, a layperson who observed a modified version of the Dominican rule).

Not all women theological writers of the Middle Ages were based in convents, however. The English recluse Julian of Norwich (c.1342–c.1415), remembered for her *Revelations of Divine Love*, appears to have led a solitary life. Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1210?–c.1282) is widely celebrated as one of the most important women spiritual writers of the thirteenth century. She is best known for her *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, which includes her visionary experiences, as well as letters of advice and criticism, allegories, reflections, and prayers. Mechthild was a beguine – that is, a woman with a religious vocation who was not bound by vows, did not live in an enclosed community, and did not totally renounce the possibility of marriage.

The great cathedral of Laon, northwest of Paris, became the site of a very significant school of theology under Anselm of Laon (d.1117), attracting scholars of the caliber of Peter Abelard during its heyday. The Royal Abbey of St. Victor, founded in Paris in the twelfth century, became one of the most important centers of theological education, and was of major importance in shaping the theological curriculum at the fledgling University of Paris. Among its twelfth-century luminaries we may note Hugh of St. Victor, Peter Lombard, Andrew of St. Victor, and Richard of St. Victor.

The rise of importance of these schools is linked with another development, to which we now turn – the emergence of distinctive styles of theology, linked with specific religious orders.
The religious orders and their “schools of theology”

The Middle Ages witnessed the founding of several major new religious orders. In 1097, the Cistercian order was founded at Cîteaux, in the middle of the wild countryside around the River Saône. One of the most noted Cistercian leaders was the great spiritual writer and preacher Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). By the dawn of the fourteenth century, it is estimated that some 600 Cistercian monasteries or convents had come into being.

Two other major orders were founded more than a century later – the Franciscans and Dominicans. The Franciscans were founded by Francis of Assisi (c.1181–1226), who renounced a life of wealth to live a life of prayer and poverty. He was joined by Clare of Assisi, formerly a noblewoman, who founded the order of “Poor Clares.” The Franciscans were often referred to as “Grey Friars,” on account of the dark grey habits they wore. The order was distinguished by its emphasis on individual and corporate poverty.

The Dominicans (sometimes referred to as “Black Friars” on account of their black mantle worn over a white habit) were founded by the Spanish priest Dominic de Guzman (1170–1221), with a particular emphasis on education. By the end of the Middle Ages, the Dominicans had established houses in most major European cities, and made a significant contribution to the intellectual life of the church.

From the standpoint of the development of theology, it is important to appreciate that distinct schools of theology came to be associated with particular monastic orders. Not all religious orders regarded academic theology as being of importance. The Cistercians, for example, placed a particular emphasis on spirituality, rather than more academic forms of theology. Three religious orders may be noted as having had a particularly significant impact on the shaping of medieval theology. In each case, a distinctive style of theology developed within the order, which distinguished it from others.

1. **The Dominicans.** The distinctive theological position of this order was developed by such major writers as Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Peter of Tarantaise.

2. **The Franciscans.** Three major theologians of the Middle Ages were associated with this order: Bonaventura, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham.

3. **The Augustinians.** The distinctive theological position of this order was developed initially by Giles of Rome (c.1244–1316), and subsequently by later writers such as Thomas of Strasbourg (c.1275–1357).

The importance of these distinctive schools of theology is evident throughout this period, and continues into the sixteenth century. It is impossible to understand the development of the theological ideas of Martin Luther (originally an Augustinian friar) or the theological debates at the Council of Trent without having some knowledge of these schools.

The founding of the universities

The restoration of some degree of political stability in France in the late eleventh century encouraged the reemergence of the University of Paris, which rapidly became recognized as the intellectual center of Europe. A number of theological “schools” were established on the
Left Bank, and on the île de la Cité, in the shadow of the newly built cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris.

One such school was the Collège de la Sorbonne, which eventually achieved such fame that “the Sorbonne” came to be a short-hand way of referring to the University of Paris as a whole. Even in the sixteenth century, Paris was widely recognized as a leading center for theological and philosophical study, including among its students such prominent individuals as Erasmus of Rotterdam and John Calvin. Other such centers of study were soon established elsewhere in Europe. A new program of theological development began, concerned with consolidating the intellectual, legal, and spiritual aspects of the life of the Christian church.

The University of Paris soon established itself as a leading center of theological speculation, with such scholars as Peter Abelard (1079–1142), Albert the Great (c.1200–80), Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–74), and Bonaventure (c.1217–74). Initially, the most significant rival to Paris was the University of Oxford, in England. However, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed a considerable expansion of the university sector in western Europe, with major new universities being founded in Germany and elsewhere.

Peter Lombard’s *Four Books of the Sentences*

The medieval period was characterized by its attempts to accumulate biblical and patristic material considered to be relevant to particular issues of theological interpretation, and by its attempt to develop *hermeneutical* methods to resolve the apparent contradictions encountered in this process. These collections of patristic “sentences” appear to have been modeled upon the codifications of the canonists, who initially grouped their collected decretals (papal letters that were regarded as settling disputed matters of church law) chronologically, and later according to subjects. Prosper of Aquitaine’s *Liber sententiarum ex operibus Augustini* (“Book of sentences from the works of Augustine”) is an early example of this phenomenon. These collections of patristic “sentences” were largely drawn from the works of Augustine. The most famous of them became a standard medieval theological textbook.

A central resource to the new medieval interest in theology is also linked with Paris. At some point shortly before 1140, Peter Lombard arrived at the university to teach. One of his primary concerns was to get his students to wrestle with the thorny issues of theology. His contribution was a textbook – his *Sententiarum libri quattuor*, or *Four Books of the Sentences*, bring together quotations from Scripture and the patristic writers, arranged topically. The work has often been styled as an “Augustinian breviary,” in that roughly 80 percent of its text is taken up by a thousand citations from Augustine. The task Peter set his students was simple: to construct a theology which was able to reconcile the various quotations he had assembled. The book proved to be of major importance in developing the Augustinian heritage, in that students were obliged to wrestle with the ideas of Augustine, and reconcile apparently contradictory texts by devising suitable theological explanations of the inconsistencies.

Some writers attempted to have the book banned, noting its occasional incautious statements (such as the opinion that Christ did not exist as a person, a view which came...
to be known as “Christological nihilism”). However, by 1215 the work was firmly established as the most important textbook of the age. It became obligatory for theologians to study and comment on Lombard’s work. The resulting writings, known as Commentaries on the Sentences, became one of the most familiar theological genres of the Middle Ages. Outstanding examples include those of Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Duns Scotus. The work was still used in the sixteenth century, and was even annotated by Martin Luther.

The Rise of Scholasticism

Scholasticism derives its name from the great medieval scholae (“schools”), in which the classic questions of theology and philosophy were debated. Although often portrayed negatively, scholasticism needs to be seen in a much more positive light – as an attempt to create a bold and brilliant synthesis of Christian ideas, capable of undergirding every aspect of life. It can be thought of as a “cathedral of the mind” (Etienne Gilson) – an attempt to do with ideas what the great medieval masons did with stones, as they constructed some of the most admired and visited buildings the world has ever known. At its best, scholastic theology is to the world of ideas what those cathedrals are to the world of architecture.

How may scholasticism be defined? Like many other significant cultural terms, such as “humanism” and “Enlightenment,” it is difficult to offer a precise definition, capable of doing justice to all the distinctive positions of the major schools within the Middle Ages. Perhaps the following working definition may be helpful: scholasticism is best regarded as the medieval movement, flourishing in the period 1200–1500, which placed emphasis upon the rational justification of religious belief and the systematic presentation of those beliefs. “Scholasticism” thus does not refer to a specific system of beliefs, but to a particular way of doing and organizing theology – a highly developed method of presenting material, making fine distinctions, and attempting to achieve a comprehensive view of theology.

Scholasticism may be argued to have made major contributions in a number of key areas of Christian theology, especially in relation to the discussion of the role of reason and logic in theology. The writings of Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham – often singled out as the three most influential of all scholastic writers – make massive contributions to this area of theology, which have served as landmarks ever since.

The Italian Renaissance

The French term “Renaissance” is now universally used to designate the literary and artistic revival in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy. In 1546 Paolo Giovio referred to the fourteenth century as “that happy century in which Latin letters are conceived to have been reborn [renatae],” anticipating this nomenclature. Certain historians, most notably Jacob Burckhardt, argued that the Renaissance gave birth to the modern era. It was in this era, Burckhardt claimed, that human beings first began to think of themselves as individuals. In many ways, Burckhardt’s definition of the Renaissance in purely individualist
terms is highly questionable. But in one sense, he is unquestionably correct: something novel and exciting developed in Renaissance Italy that proved capable of exercising a fascination over generations of thinkers.

It is not entirely clear why Italy became the cradle of this brilliant new movement in the history of ideas. A number of factors have been identified as having some bearing on the question:

1. Scholastic theology – the major intellectual force of the medieval period – was never particularly influential in Italy. Although many Italians achieved fame as theologians (including Thomas Aquinas and Gregory of Rimini), they generally lived and worked in northern Europe. There was thus an intellectual vacuum in Italy during the fourteenth century. Vacuums tend to get filled – and Renaissance humanism managed to occupy this particular gap.

2. Italy was saturated with visible and tangible reminders of the greatness of antiquity. The ruins of ancient Roman buildings and monuments were scattered throughout the land, and appear to have aroused interest in the civilization of ancient Rome at the time of the Renaissance, acting as a stimulus to its thinkers to recover the vitality of classical Roman culture at a time that was culturally arid and barren.

3. As Byzantium began to crumble – Constantinople finally fell to Islamic invaders in 1453 – there was an exodus of Greek-speaking intellectuals westward. Italy happened to be conveniently close to Constantinople, with the result that many such émigrés settled in Italian cities. A revival of the Greek language was thus inevitable, and with it a revival of interest in the Greek classics.

It will be clear that a central component of the worldview of the Italian Renaissance is a return to the cultural glories of antiquity, and a marginalization of the intellectual achievements of the Middle Ages. Renaissance writers had scant regard for the latter, regarding them as outweighed by the greater achievements of antiquity. What was true of culture in general was also true of theology: they regarded the late classical period as totally overshadowing the theological writings of the Middle Ages, both in substance and in style. Indeed, the Renaissance may partly be seen as a reaction against the type of approach increasingly associated with the faculties of arts and theology of northern European universities. Irritated by the technical nature of the language and discussions of the scholastics, the writers of the Renaissance bypassed them altogether. In the case of Christian theology, the key to the future lay in a direct engagement with the text of Scripture and the writings of the patristic period. We shall explore this matter further shortly (see pp. 115–18).

The Rise of Humanism

In the modern period, the term “humanism” has come to designate a worldview which denies the existence or relevance of God, or which is committed to a purely secular outlook. This is certainly not what the word meant at the time of the Renaissance. Most humanists of the period were religious, and were concerned to purify and renew Christianity, rather
than eliminate it. And how would this process of regeneration take place? By a return to the fountainheads of western thought.

The humanist program was set out in the Latin slogan *ad fontes* (“back to the sources”), which set out the vision of returning to the wellspring and source of modern western culture in the ancient world, allowing its ideas and values to refresh and renew that culture. The classical period was to be both a resource and a norm for the Renaissance. In art and architecture, as in the written and spoken word, antiquity was seen as a cultural resource that could be appropriated by the Renaissance. In the case of Christian humanism, believers would return directly to the simplicities of the New Testament, bypassing the complex theological programs of the Middle Ages. But it would be the original Greek text of the New Testament, not the Vulgate Latin translation, widely used by medieval theologians.

One of the most significant theological developments associated with the rise of humanism is the increased questioning of the reliability of the Vulgate text. If this translation proved unreliable, in the light of an increased understanding of the Greek and Hebrew languages, and an increased recognition of studying the Bible in those original languages, what of the theological ideas that might be dependent on such faulty translations? We shall return to this point later in this chapter (pp. 97–8).

Having thus far concentrated on western Europe, we must now turn to consider some of the important developments that took place in eastern Europe during this period.

**Medieval Theological Landmarks in Eastern Europe**

Byzantine theology takes its name from the Greek city of Byzantium, which Constantine chose as the site of his new capital city in 330. At this point, it was renamed Constantinople (“the city of Constantine”). However, the name of the older town remained in use, and gave its name to the distinctive style of theology which flourished in this region until the fall of the city to invading Islamic armies in 1453. Constantinople was not the only center of Christian thought in the eastern Mediterranean. Egypt and Syria had been centers of theological reflection for some time. However, as political power increasingly came to be concentrated on the imperial city, so its status as a theological center advanced correspondingly.

During the time of Justinian (527–56) Byzantine theology began to emerge as an intellectual force of some considerable importance. As the eastern and western churches became increasingly alienated from each other (a process which had begun long before the final schism of 1054), so Byzantine thinkers often emphasized the divergence from western theology (for example, in relation to the *filioque* clause: see p. 60), thus reinforcing the distinctiveness of their approach through polemical writings. For example, Byzantine writers tended to understand salvation primarily in terms of *deification*, rather than western legal or relational categories. In addition, they found themselves puzzled by the doctrines of purgatory which were gaining the ascendancy in western Catholic circles. Any attempt to achieve a degree of reunion between east and west during the Middle Ages was thus complicated by a complex network of political, historical, and theological factors. By the time of the fall of Constantinople, the differences between east and west remained as wide as ever.
In order to understand the distinctive nature of Byzantine theology, it is necessary to appreciate the ethos which lies behind it. Byzantine theologians were not particularly concerned with systematic formulations of the Christian faith. For them, Christian theology was something “given,” and which therefore required to be defended against its opponents and explained to its adherents. The idea of “systematic theology” is somewhat foreign to the general Byzantine ethos. Even John of Damascus (c.675–c.749), whose work De fide orthodoxa (“On the orthodox faith”) is of considerable importance in the consolidation of a distinctively eastern Christian theology, is to be seen as an expositor of the faith, rather than as a speculative or original thinker.

Byzantine theology can be regarded as remaining faithful to a principle originally set out by Athanasius, in his writing De incarnatione (“On the Incarnation”), which affirmed that theology was the expression of the mind of the saints. Byzantine theology (including its modern descendants in both Greek and Russian Orthodoxy) is thus strongly orientated toward the idea of paradosis (“tradition”), particularly the writings of the Greek fathers. Writers such as Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, and the writer who adopted the pseudonym “Dionysius the Areopagite,” are of particular importance in this respect.

The iconoclastic controversy

Two controversies are of particular importance. The first, which broke out during the period 725–842, is usually referred to as the iconoclastic (“breaking of images”) controversy. It erupted over the decision of emperor Leo III (717–42) to destroy icons, on the ground that they were barriers to the conversion of Jews and Moslems. The controversy was mainly political, although there were some serious theological issues at stake, most notably the extent to which the doctrine of the Incarnation justified the depiction of God in the form of images.

John of Damascus played a major role in this controversy. One of his fundamental arguments in favor of the use of icons was his belief that the material world possesses the capacity to signify and mediate the spiritual world:

Is not the ink in the most holy gospel book matter? Is not the life-giving altar, from which we receive the bread of life, constructed from matter? Are not gold and silver matter? Yet from them, we make crosses, patens and chalices. And more importantly than any of these things, are not the body and blood of our Lord matter? Either dispense with the honor and veneration that these things deserve, or accept the tradition of the church and the veneration of images.

The hesychastic controversy

The second controversy, which broke out in the fourteenth century, focused on the issue of hesychasm (Greek: hesychia = silence), a style of meditation through physical exercises which enabled believers to see the “divine light” with their own eyes. Hesychasm placed considerable emphasis upon the idea of “inner quietness” as a means of achieving a direct inner vision of God. It was particularly associated with writers such as Symeon the New
Theologian and Gregory Palamas (c.1296–1359), who was elected as Archbishop of Thessalonika in 1347. Its opponents argued that its methods tended to minimize the difference between God and creatures, and were particularly alarmed by the suggestion that God could be “seen.”

In responding to this criticism, Palamas developed the doctrine now generally known as “Palamism,” which draws a distinction between the divine energies and the divine essence. The distinction allowed Palamas to defend the hesychastic approach by affirming that it enabled believers to encounter the divine energies, but not the unseen and ineffable divine essence. Believers cannot participate directly in the divine essence; however, they are able to participate directly in the uncreated energies which are God’s mode of union with believers.

Palamas’s theology was espoused and developed particularly by the lay theologian Nicolas Cabasilis (c.1320–c.1390), whose *Life in Christ* remains a classic work of Byzantine spirituality. His work has been reappropriated in more recent years by neo-Palamite writers such as Vladimir Lossky and John Meyendorff.

**The fall of Constantinople (1453)**

The golden era of Byzantine theology came to an end in 1453, when the great city of Constantinople finally fell to the Turks. It was the end of an age. With the fall of Byzantium, intellectual and political leadership within Orthodoxy largely passed to Russia. The Russians had been converted through Byzantine missions in the tenth century, and took the side of the Greeks in the schism of 1054. By the end of the fifteenth century, Moscow and Kiev were firmly established as patriarchates, each with its own distinctive style of Orthodox theology.

It was only when Greece, now part of the Ottoman Empire, finally broke free from Turkish rule in 1829 that the renewal of Orthodox theology in that region was able to begin.

It will be clear from the material presented in this chapter that both western and eastern Christian theology underwent significant development during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Subsequent generations of theologians have regarded the period as being of landmark significance in relation to several areas of theological reflection, with a number of its writers being regarded as possessing permanent importance. The rise and fall of Byzantium is of particular importance to a full understanding of the subsequent development of eastern Orthodoxy in Russia and Greece, just as the rise of scholasticism and humanism were of considerable importance to the shaping of western theology.

**Key Theologians**

Of the many theologians of importance to have emerged during this period of enormous creativity, the following are of especial interest and importance.

**John of Damascus**

The Syrian theologian known as “John of Damascus” (c.675–c.749) was one of the eastern church’s most influential thinkers, and is often regarded as the last of the Greek fathers.
At this time, Islam was sweeping through much of North Africa and the Levant, and Syria was firmly under Islamic control. John was brought up within the household of the caliph of Damascus, Abdul Malek, and succeeded his father as the caliph’s chief financial officer. We know little about him, and are dependent upon unreliable later sources for the fragmentary information that has been passed down to us. At some point, probably around the year 735, he resigned his position within the caliph’s court, and entered the monastery of St. Sabas, southeast of Jerusalem.

At an early stage in his career, he was drawn into the iconoclastic controversy, and vigorously opposed those who wanted to destroy icons. Paradoxically, John’s position within an Islamic household prevented his many enemies in Byzantium from taking any action against him. His defense of the use of icons involves an appeal to the doctrine of the Incarnation, both as a basis of establishing the divine willingness to become visible, and for the use of material forms to represent the divine likeness or convey divine truths.

John is remembered for his work *The Fountain of Wisdom* (*Pege gnoseos*), which consists of three parts. The first part deals principally with Aristotle’s concept of ontology, apparently on the assumption that this would assist with the understanding of Christian doctrine. The second part is an updated reworking of an earlier work on heresy by Epiphanius. The third part is the most important and interesting. Entitled “A Precise Analysis of the Orthodox Faith,” this section sets out in detail the fundamentals of the Christian faith, as John has received them from earlier writers. This section of the treatise is often treated as a work in its own right, and is generally referred to simply as “the Orthodox Faith.” It was highly regarded by both Latin- and Greek-speaking Christians, and was translated into Latin in 1150 by Burgundius of Pisa. This translation is cited by both Peter Lombard in his *Four Books of the Sentences*, and Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*.

Simeon the New Theologian

Simeon (or “Symeon,” 949–1022) was born into a wealthy family in Paphlagonia, Asia Minor, in 949. His given name was “George”; he subsequently changed it to “Simeon.” At the age of 11, he was sent to the great city of Constantinople for further study. Although his parents had aspirations that he would go on to a political career, John had a spiritual experience at the age of 20 which convinced him of the importance of a direct encounter with God. Although he did not immediately give up on his political hopes, his ecstatic experience of God as a living presence of radiant life had clearly made a deep impression on him. At the age of 27 he entered the monastery of Studios, and came under the spiritual direction of Symeon the Pious, changing his name as a mark of respect for his mentor. He subsequently entered the monastery of St. Mamas in Constantinople, where he was ordained priest, and eventually became the abbot of the monastery. During this period, he set about renewing the monastery’s life of prayer and meditation, and wrote a number of spiritual treatises, emphasizing the power of contemplative prayer and meditation.

Simeon remains one of the most important theological influences on modern Orthodoxy, reflecting the high regard in which he is held. His theology echoes many of the now-traditional themes of Byzantine doctrine, particularly an emphasis upon the doctrine of the Incarnation, and an accentuation on redemption as deification. He is called “Symeon the
New Theologian” within Orthodoxy to distinguish him from John the Evangelist (known as “John the Theologian”) on the one hand, and Gregory of Nazianzus (known as “Gregory the Theologian” in the eastern Orthodox tradition).

Anselm of Canterbury

Anselm (c.1033–1109) was born in northern Italy, but soon moved to France, then establishing a reputation as a center for learning. He quickly mastered the arts of logic and grammar, and acquired a formidable reputation as a teacher at the Norman abbey of Bec. Standing at the dawn of the theological renaissance of the twelfth century, Anselm made decisive contributions in two areas of discussion: proofs for the existence of God, and the rational interpretation of Christ’s death upon the cross.

The Proslogion (the word is virtually untranslatable) was written around 1079. It is a remarkable work, in which Anselm sets himself the task of formulating an argument which will lead to belief in the existence and character of God as the highest good. The resulting analysis, often known as the “ontological argument,” leads to the derivation of the existence of God from an affirmation of his being “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” Although the argument has been contested since its inception, it has remained one of the most intriguing components of philosophical theology to this day. The Proslogion is also of importance on account of its clear appeal to reason in matters of theology, and its appreciation of the role of logic. In many ways, the work anticipates the best aspects of scholastic theology. Anselm’s phrase fides quaerens intellectum (“faith seeking understanding”) has passed into widespread use.

Following the Norman invasion of England (1066), Anselm was invited to become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1093, thus ensuring the consolidation of Norman influence over the English church. It was not an entirely happy period of his life, due to a series of violent disputes between the church and the monarchy over land rights. During one period spent working away from England in Italy, Anselm penned perhaps his most important work, Cur Deus homo (“Why God became man”). In this work Anselm seeks to set out a rational demonstration of the necessity of God becoming man, and an analysis of the benefits which accrue to humanity as a result of the incarnation and obedience of the Son of God. This argument, to be considered at length later in this work, remains of foundational importance to any discussion of “theories of the atonement” – in other words, understandings of the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ, and its significance for humanity. Once more, the work exhibits the characteristics which are typical of scholasticism at its best: the appeal to reason, the logical marshaling of arguments, the relentless exploration of the implications of ideas, and the fundamental conviction that, at its heart, the Christian gospel is rational, and can be shown to be rational.

Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas (c.1225–74) was born at the castle of Roccasecca in Italy, the youngest son of Count Landulf of Aquino. To judge by his nickname – “the dumb ox” – he was rather portly. In 1244, while in his late teens, Aquinas decided to join the Dominican order, also known
as the “Order of Preachers.” His parents were hostile to this idea: they rather hoped he would become a Benedictine, and perhaps end up as abbot of Monte Cassino, one of the most prestigious positions in the medieval church. His brothers forcibly imprisoned him in one of the family’s castles for a year to encourage him to change his mind. Despite this intense opposition from his family, Aquinas eventually got his way, and ended up becoming one of the most important religious thinkers of the Middle Ages. One of his teachers is reported to have said that “the bellowing of that ox will be heard throughout the world.”

Aquinas began his studies at Paris, before moving to Cologne in 1248. In 1252 he returned to Paris to study theology. Four years later he was granted permission to teach theology at the university. For the next three years he lectured on Matthew’s Gospel and began to write the *Summa contra Gentiles*, “Summary against the Gentiles.” In this major work Aquinas provided important arguments in favor of the Christian faith for the benefit of missionaries working among Muslims and Jews. In 1266 he began the most famous of his many writings, usually known by its Latin title, *Summa Theologiae*. In this work Thomas developed a detailed study of key aspects of Christian theology (such as the role of reason in faith), as well as a detailed analysis of key doctrinal questions (such as the divinity of Christ). The work is divided into three parts, with the second part subdivided into two. Part I deals chiefly with God the creator; Part II – divided into two sections known as the *prima secundae* and the *secunda secundae* (literally, the “first of the second” and the “second of the second”) – with the restoration of humanity to God; and Part III with the manner in which the person and work of Christ bring about the salvation of humanity.

On December 6, 1273, Aquinas declared that he could write no longer. “All that I have written seems like straw to me,” he said. It is possible that he may have had some sort of breakdown, perhaps brought on by overwork. He died on March 7, 1274. Among Aquinas’s many contributions to theology, the following may be noted: his famous “Five Ways” (arguments for the existence of God); his development of the principle of analogy, which provides a theological foundation for knowing God through the creation; and his extended discussions of the relation between faith and reason.

**Duns Scotus**

Scotus (c.1265–1308) was unquestionably one of the finest minds of the Middle Ages. In his short life he taught at Cambridge, Oxford, and Paris, and produced three versions of a *Commentary on the Sentences*. Known as the “subtle doctor” on account of the very fine distinctions he frequently drew between the possible meanings of terms, he was responsible for a number of developments of considerable significance to Christian theology.

Scotus was a champion of the theory of knowledge associated with Aristotle. The earlier Middle Ages were dominated by a different theory of knowledge, going back to Augustine of Hippo, known as “illuminationism,” in which knowledge was understood to arise from the illumination of the human intellect by God. This view, which was championed by writers such as Henry of Ghent, was subjected to devastating criticism by Scotus.

Scotus was also a champion of the notion of “voluntarism,” which regarded the divine will as taking precedence over the divine intellect. Where Thomas Aquinas had argued for the primacy of the divine intellect, Scotus opened the way to new approaches to theology,
based on the assumption of the priority of the divine will. An example illustrates the point. Consider the idea of merit – that is to say, a human moral action which is deemed worthy of reward by God. What is the basis of this decision? Aquinas argued that the divine intellect recognized the inherent worth of the human moral act. It then informed the will to reward it appropriately. Scotus argued along very different lines. The divine will to reward the moral action came before any evaluation of its inherent worth. This approach is of considerable importance in relation to the doctrines of justification and predestination, and will be considered in more detail later.

One of Scotus's theological concerns related to the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Thomas Aquinas had taught that Mary shared the common sinful condition of humanity. She was tainted by sin (Latin: *macula*) like everyone else, apart from Christ. Scotus, however, argued that Christ, by virtue of his perfect work of redemption, was able to keep Mary free from the taint of original sin. Such was the influence of Scotus that the “immaculate position” (from the Latin *immacula*, “free of sin”) became dominant by the end of the Middle Ages.

**William of Ockham**

In many ways, Ockham (c.1285–1347) may be regarded as developing some of the lines of argument associated with Scotus. Of particular importance is his consistent defense of a voluntarist position, giving priority to the divine will over the divine intellect. It is, however, probably his philosophical position which has ensured his permanent place of note in the history of Christian theology.

Perhaps Ockham is best known for the method known as “Ockham’s razor,” often also referred to as “the principle of parsimony.” Ockham insisted that simplicity was both a theological and a philosophical virtue. His “razor” eliminated all hypotheses which were not absolutely essential. Yet Ockham was also a vigorous defender of nominalism. In part, this resulted from his use of his own “razor”: universals were declared to be a totally unnecessary hypothesis. The growing impact of the “modern way” in western Europe owes a considerable debt to him. One aspect of his thought which proved to be of especial importance is the “dialectic between the two powers of God.” This device allowed Ockham to contrast the way things are with the way things could have been. A full discussion of this follows later; for the moment it is enough to note that Ockham made a decisive contribution to discussions of divine omnipotence, which are of continuing importance today.

**Erasmus of Rotterdam**

Desiderius Erasmus (c.1469–1536) is generally regarded as the most important humanist writer of the Renaissance, and had a profound impact upon Christian theology during the first half of the sixteenth century. Although not Protestant in any sense of the term, Erasmus did much to lay the intellectual foundations of the Reformation, not least through his extensive editorial undertakings, including the production of the first printed text of the Greek New Testament (see pp. 116–18). His *Enchiridion militis Christiani* (“Handbook of the Christian soldier”) was a landmark in religious publishing.
The "Enchiridion" developed the revolutionary and highly attractive thesis that the church of the day could be reformed by a collective return to the writings of the fathers and the Bible. The regular reading of Scripture is put forward as the key to a new lay piety, on the basis of which the church may be renewed and reformed. Erasmus conceived of his work as a layperson's guide to Scripture, providing a simple yet learned exposition of the "philosophy of Christ." This "philosophy" is really a form of practical morality, rather than an academic philosophy. The New Testament concerns the knowledge of good and evil, in order that its readers may eschew the latter and love the former. The New Testament is the *lex Christi*, "the law of Christ," which Christians are called to obey. Christ is the example whom Christians are called to imitate. Yet Erasmus does not understand Christian faith to be a mere external observance of a moral code. His characteristically humanist emphasis upon inner religion leads him to suggest that reading of Scripture transforms its readers, giving them a new motivation to love God and their neighbors.

Erasmus also undertook extensive scholarly projects, two of which are of especial importance to the development of Christian theology. First, Erasmus was responsible for the production of the first published Greek New Testament. As noted earlier, this allowed theologians direct access to the original text of the New Testament, with explosive results. Second, Erasmus undertook extensive editorial work, leading to the production of reliable editions of patristic works, including the writings of Augustine. Theologians thus had access to the full texts of such major works, instead of having to rely upon second-hand quotations, known as "sentences," often taken out of context. A new understanding of Augustine's theology began to develop as a result, with significant implications for the theological development of the period.

Key Theological Developments

The major renaissance in theology which took place during the period under consideration focused on a number of issues, of which the following are of especial importance. They will simply be noted briefly at this point; detailed discussion of most of them will take place later in this work. The first six such developments are associated with scholasticism (see p. 84), the last two with humanism (see pp. 85–6).

The consolidation of the patristic heritage

During the theological renaissance of the twelfth century and following, Christian theologians saw themselves as consolidating and extending the rich heritage of theological resources passed on to them from the patristic era. In that the western church was Latin-speaking, it was natural that its theologians should turn to the substantial collection of works by Augustine of Hippo, and take this as a starting point for their own theological speculations. Peter Lombard's *Four Books of the Sentences* may be regarded as a critical compilation of quotations ("Sentences") drawn largely from the writings of Augustine, upon which medieval theologians were required to comment.
The exploration of the role of reason in theology

The new concern to establish Christian theology upon a totally reliable foundation led to a considered exploration of the role of reason in theology, a central and defining characteristic of scholasticism (see p. 84). As the theological renaissance of the early Middle Ages proceeded, two themes began to dominate theological debate: the need to systematize and expand Christian theology; and the need to demonstrate the inherent rationality of that theology. Although most early medieval theology was little more than a replay of the views of Augustine, there was growing pressure to systematize Augustine’s ideas and take them further. But how could this be done? A “theory of method” was urgently needed. And on the basis of what philosophical system could the rationality of Christian theology be demonstrated?

The eleventh-century writer Anselm of Canterbury gave expression to this basic belief of the rationality of the Christian faith in two phrases which have come to be linked with his name: fides quaerens intellectum (“faith seeking understanding”) and credo ut intellegam (“I believe, in order that I may understand”). His basic insight was that, while faith came before understanding, the content of that faith was nevertheless rational. These definitive formulae established the priority of faith over reason, just as they asserted the entire reasonableness of faith. In the preface to his Monologium Anselm stated explicitly that he would establish nothing in Scripture on the basis of Scripture itself; instead, he would establish everything that he could on the basis of “rational evidence and the natural light of truth.” Nevertheless, Anselm is no rationalist; reason has its limits!

The eleventh and early twelfth centuries saw a growing conviction that philosophy could be an invaluable asset to Christian theology at two different levels. In the first place, it could demonstrate the reasonableness of faith, and thus defend it against non-Christian critics. In the second place, it offered ways of systematically exploring and arranging the articles of faith, so that they could be better understood. But which philosophy? The answer to this question came through the rediscovery of the writings of Aristotle, in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. By about 1270, Aristotle had become established as “the Philosopher.” His ideas came to dominate theological thinking, despite fierce opposition from more conservative quarters.

Through the influence of writers such as Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, Aristotle’s ideas became established as the best means of consolidating and developing Christian theology. The ideas of Christian theology were thus arranged and correlated systematically, on the basis of Aristotelian presuppositions. Equally, the rationality of Christian faith was demonstrated on the basis of Aristotelian ideas. Thus, some of Thomas Aquinas’s famous “proofs” for the existence of God actually rely on principles of Aristotelian physics, rather than on any distinctively Christian insights.

Initially, this development was welcomed by many, who saw it as providing important ways of defending the rationality of the Christian faith – a discipline which has since come to be known as “apologetics,” from the Greek word apologia (defense). Thomas Aquinas’s Summa contra Gentiles is an excellent example of a work of theology which draws on Aristotelianism as a common philosophy shared by Christians and Muslims, which would allow the attractiveness of the Christian faith to be explained within the Islamic world.
At points, Aquinas’s argument seems to work like this: if you can agree with the Aristotelian ideas presented in this writing, then you ought to become a Christian. As Aristotle was highly regarded by many Muslim academics of the period, Thomas can be seen as exploiting the apologetic potential of this philosopher.

This development came to be viewed with concern by some late medieval writers, such as Hugolino of Orvieto. A number of central Christian insights seemed to have been lost, according to such critics, as a result of a growing reliance upon the ideas and methods of a pagan philosopher. Particular concern centered on the doctrine of justification, in which Aristotelian ethical ideas came to play a significant role. The idea of the “righteousness of God” came to be discussed in terms of the Aristotelian idea of “distributive justice.” Here, “righteousness” (iustitia) was defined in terms of “giving someone what they are entitled to.” This seemed to lead to a doctrine of justification by merit. In other words, justification takes place on the basis of entitlement, rather than grace. It can be shown without difficulty that this concern lies behind Martin Luther’s growing dislike of Aristotle, and his eventual break with scholastic doctrines of justification.

The development of theological systems

We have already noted the pressure to consolidate the patristic, especially the Augustinian, heritage (p. 93). This pressure to systematize, which is integral to scholasticism, led to the development of the sophisticated theological systems which Etienne Gilson, a noted historian of the period, described as “cathedrals of the mind.” This development is perhaps best seen in Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae, which represents one of the most forceful statements of the comprehensive and all-embracing character of this approach to Christian theology.

The development of sacramental theology

The early church had been somewhat imprecise in its discussion of the sacraments. There was little general agreement concerning either how the term “sacrament” was to be defined, or what items were to be included in a list of the sacraments. Baptism and eucharist were generally agreed to be sacramental; sadly, there was relatively little agreement on anything else. However, with the theological renaissance of the Middle Ages, the church was coming to play an increasingly important role in society. There was new pressure for the church to place its acts of public worship on a secure intellectual footing, and to consolidate the theoretical aspects of its worship. As a result, sacramental theology developed considerably during the period. Agreement was reached on the definition of a sacrament, the number of the sacraments, and the precise identity of these sacraments.

The development of the theology of grace

A central element of the Augustinian heritage was a theology of grace. However, Augustine’s theology of grace had been stated in a polemical context. In other words, Augustine had been obliged to state his theology of grace in the heat of a controversy, often in response to
the challenges and provocations of his opponents. As a result, his writings on the subject were often unsystematic. Occasionally, Augustine developed distinctions in response to the needs of the moment, and failed to lay an adequate theological foundation for at least some of them. The theologians of the Middle Ages saw themselves as charged with the task of consolidating Augustine’s doctrine of grace, placing it upon a more reliable foundation, and exploring its consequences. As a result, the doctrines of grace and justification were developed considerably during the period, laying the foundation for the Reformation debates over these central issues.

The role of Mary in the scheme of salvation

This new interest in grace and justification led to a new concern to understand the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, in salvation. Growing interest in devotion to Mary, linked with intense theological speculation concerning the nature of original sin and redemption, led to a series of developments relating to Mary. Many of these are linked with Duns Scotus, who placed Mariology (that is, the area of theology dealing with Mary) on a considerably more developed foundation than hitherto. Intense debate broke out between “maculists” (who held that Mary was subject to original sin, like everyone else) and “immaculists” (who held that she was preserved from the taint of original sin). There was also considerable discussion over whether Mary could be said to be “co-redemptrix” (that is to say, whether she was to be regarded as a figure of redemption, in a manner similar to Jesus Christ).

Returning directly to the sources of Christian theology

A central element of the humanist agenda was the return to the original sources of western European culture in classical Rome and Athens. The theological counterpart to this element was the direct return to the foundational resources of Christian theology, above all in the New Testament. This agenda proved to be of major significance, as will be seen later (see pp. 115–17). One of its most important consequences was a new appreciation of the foundational importance of Scripture as a theological resource. As interest in Scripture developed, it became increasingly clear that existing Latin translations of this source were inadequate. Supreme among these was the “Vulgate,” a Latin translation of the Bible which achieved widespread influence during the Middle Ages. As revision of the translations, especially the Vulgate, proceeded, it became clear that theological revision was inevitable. Some teachings seemed to be based on faulty translations.

The rise of humanist textual and philological techniques was to expose distressing discrepancies between the Vulgate and the texts it purported to translate – and thus to open the way to doctrinal reform as a consequence. It is for this reason that humanism is of decisive importance to the development of medieval theology: it demonstrated the unreliability of this translation of the Bible – and hence, it seemed, of the theologies based upon it. The biblical basis of scholasticism seemed to collapse, as humanism uncovered error after error in its translation. We shall explore this point further in what follows; it is unquestionably one of the most significant developments in the history of Christian theology at this time.
The critique of the Vulgate translation of Scripture

The literary and cultural program of humanism can be summarized in the slogan ad fontes – “back to the original sources.” The “filter” of medieval commentaries – whether on legal texts or on the Bible – was abandoned, in order for humanists to engage directly with the original texts. Applied to the Christian church, the slogan ad fontes meant a direct return to the title deeds of Christianity – to the patristic writers, and supremely to the Bible, studied in its original languages. This necessitated direct access to the Greek text of the New Testament.

The first printed Greek New Testament was produced by Erasmus in 1516. Erasmus’s text was not as reliable as it ought to have been: he had access to a mere four manuscripts for most of the New Testament, and only one for its final part, the Book of Revelation. As it happened, the manuscript left out five verses, which Erasmus himself had to translate into Greek from the Latin of the Vulgate. Nevertheless, it proved to be a literary milestone. For the first time, theologians had the opportunity of comparing the original Greek text of the New Testament with the later Vulgate translation into Latin.

Drawing on work carried out earlier by the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla, Erasmus showed that the Vulgate translation of several major New Testament texts could not be justified. As a number of medieval church practices and beliefs were based upon these texts, Erasmus’s allegations were viewed with consternation by many conservative Catholics (who wanted to retain these practices and beliefs) and with equally great delight by the reformers (who wanted to eliminate them). Three classic examples of translation errors will indicate the relevance of Erasmus’s biblical scholarship:

1. Much medieval theology justified the inclusion of matrimony in the list of sacraments on the basis of a New Testament text which – at least, in the Vulgate translation – spoke of marriage being a sacramentum (Ephesians 5: 31–2). Erasmus pointed out that the Greek word mysterion, here translated as “sacrament,” simply meant “mystery.” There was no reference whatsoever to marriage being a sacrament. One of the classic proof texts used by medieval theologians to justify the inclusion of matrimony in the list of sacraments was thus rendered virtually useless.

2. The Vulgate translated the opening words of Jesus’ ministry (Matthew 4: 17) as “do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” This translation suggested that the coming of the kingdom of heaven had a direct connection with the sacrament of penance. Erasmus, again following Valla, pointed out that the Greek should be translated as “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In other words, where the Vulgate seemed to refer to an outward practice (the sacrament of penance), Erasmus insisted that the reference was to an inward psychological attitude – that of “being repentant.” Once more, an important justification of the sacramental system of the medieval church was challenged.

3. According to the Vulgate, the angel Gabriel greeted Mary as “the one who is full of grace” (gratia plena) (Luke 1: 28), thus suggesting the image of a reservoir full of grace, which could be drawn upon at time of need. But, as Erasmus pointed out, the Greek simply meant “favored one,” or “one who has found favor.” Mary was one who had found God’s favor, not necessarily one who could bestow it on others. Once more, an important feature of medieval theology seemed to be contradicted by humanist New Testament scholarship.
HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

These developments undermined the credibility of the Vulgate translation and opened the way to theological revision on the basis of a better understanding of the biblical text. They also demonstrated the importance of biblical scholarship in relation to theology. Theology could not be permitted to base itself upon translation mistakes! The recognition of the vitally important role of biblical scholarship to Christian theology thus dates from the second decade of the sixteenth century. It also led to the theological debates of the Reformation age, to which we shall turn in the next chapter.

Key Names, Words, and Phrases

By the end of this chapter, you will have encountered the following terms, some of 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.

*ad fontes*  Middle Ages
apologetics  ontological argument
Byzantine  Renaissance
Five Ways  scholasticism
humanism  theories of the atonement
immaculate conception  voluntarism
medieval  Vulgate

Questions

1. What was the language spoken by most western theologians during this period?
2. “Humanists were people who were interested in studying classical Rome.” How helpful is this definition of the term?
3. What were the major themes of scholastic theology?
4. Why was there such interest in the theology of the sacraments during the Middle Ages?
5. What is meant by the slogan *ad fontes*?

Case Studies

Case study 2.1 Arguments for the existence of God

During the Middle Ages, considerable emphasis was placed upon the rationality of the Christian faith. This was especially the case during the thirteenth century, when Christianity came into contact with Islam at various places in western Europe, including the University
of Paris. Since Christianity and Islam shared little in common, debates between the two faiths were often conducted on the basis of an appeal to reason.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the question of whether God’s existence could be proved was a frequent topic of debate. Few scholastic theologians thought it was possible to prove that God existed from first principles. A more general approach was to take the general Christian understanding of God, and show that this fitted in with human rationality, or with what could be observed of the natural world. In this case study, we shall consider two families of arguments for the existence of God that emerged during the Middle Ages – Anselm of Canterbury’s eleventh-century argument, and the “Five Ways” of Thomas Aquinas, developed during the thirteenth century.

Anselm of Canterbury’s “ontological” argument

The “ontological argument” is first set out in Anselm’s work entitled the Proslogion (this Greek word is not easily translated: “foreword” might be an acceptable starting point), a devotional work which dates from 1079. (The term “ontological” refers to the branch of philosophy that deals with the notion of “being.”) Anselm himself does not refer to his discussion as an “ontological” argument. When his contemporaries wished to refer to his approach, they dubbed it “Anselm’s argument.” In fact, there is really no “ontological” character to the argument, as Anselm presents it; and Anselm never actually suggested that his reflections were to be seen as an “argument” for the existence of God. The Proslogion is really a work of meditation, not of logical argument. In the course of this work, Anselm reflects on how self-evident the idea of God has become to him, and what the implications of this might be.

In his Proslogion, Anselm offers a definition of God as “that than which no greater thing can be thought” (*aliquid quo maius cogitari non potest*). He argues that if this definition of God is correct, it necessarily implies the existence of God. The reason for this is as follows. If God does not exist, the idea of God remains, yet the reality of God is absent. Yet the reality of God is greater than the idea of God. Therefore, if God is “that than which no greater thing can be thought,” the idea of God must lead to accepting the reality of God, in that otherwise the mere idea of God is the greatest thing which can be thought. And this contradicts the definition of God on which the argument is based. Therefore, given the existence of the idea of God, and the acceptance of the definition of God as “that than which no greater thing can be thought,” the reality of God necessarily follows. Note that the Latin verb *cogitare* is sometimes translated as “conceive,” leading to the definition of God as “that than which no greater thing can be conceived.” Both translations are acceptable.
This is not an easy argument to follow, so it may be helpful to go over this again. God is defined as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” Now the idea of such a being is one thing; the reality is another. Thinking of a 100-dollar bill is quite different from having a 100-dollar bill in your hands – and much less satisfying, as well. Anselm’s point is this: the idea of something is inferior to the reality. So the idea of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” contains a contradiction – because the reality of God would be superior to this idea. In other words, if this definition of God is correct, and exists in the human mind, then the corresponding reality must also exist:

This [definition of God] is indeed so true that it cannot be thought of as not being true. For it is quite possible to think of something whose non-existence cannot be thought of. This must be greater than something whose non-existence can be thought of. So if this thing (than which no greater thing can be thought) can be thought of as not existing, then, that very thing than which a greater thing cannot be thought is not that than which a greater cannot be thought. This is a contradiction. So it is true that there exists something than which nothing greater can be thought, that it cannot be thought of as not existing. And you are this thing, O Lord our God! So truly therefore do you exist, O Lord my God; that you cannot be thought of as not existing, and with good reason; for if a human mind could think of anything greater than you, the creature would rise above the Creator and judge you; which is obviously absurd. And in truth whatever else there be beside you may be thought of as not existing. So you alone, most truly of all, and therefore most of all, have existence: because whatever else exists, does not exist as truly as you, and therefore exists to a lesser degree.

This is an important and much-discussed argument, and it is worth focusing on its central elements:

1. Note the definition of God which Anselm offers. No justification is offered for the notion of God as “that than which no greater thing can be thought.” It is taken to be self-evidently true.
2. Anselm then argues that a real entity is greater than a mere idea. This point, which is assumed to be obvious to the reader, is the second critical stage in the argument, the first being the definition of God that was offered earlier in the passage.
3. The conclusion of the argument is that since the idea of God is clearly inferior to the reality of God, it must follow that God exists. Otherwise, the definition of God which was set out is shown to be inconsistent.

This argument did not persuade one of his earliest critics, a Benedictine monk named Gaunilo, who made a response known as “A Reply on Behalf of the Fool” (the reference being to Psalm 14:1, cited by Anselm, “The fool says in his heart that there is no God”). There is, according to Gaunilo, an obvious logical weakness in Anselm’s “argument” (although it must be stressed that Anselm does not really regard it as an argument in the first place). Imagine, Gaunilo suggests, an island, so lovely that a more perfect island cannot be conceived. By the same argument, Gaunilo suggests, that island must exist, in that the reality of the island is necessarily more perfect that the mere idea. In much the same way, we might argue that the idea of a 100-dollar bill seems, according to Anselm, to imply that
we have such a bill in our hands. The mere idea of something – whether a perfect island or God – thus does not guarantee its existence:

People say that somewhere in the ocean there is an island which, because of the difficulty (or rather the impossibility) of finding that which does not exist, some have called the “Lost Island.” And we are told that it is blessed with all manner of priceless riches and delights in abundance, far more than the Happy Isles, and, having no owner or inhabitant, it is superior in every respect in the abundance of its riches to all those other lands that are inhabited by people. Now, if someone were to tell me about this, I shall easily understand what is said, since there is nothing difficult about it. But if I am then told, as though it were a direct consequence of this: “You cannot any more doubt that this island that is more excellent than all other lands truly exists somewhere in reality than you can doubt that it is in your mind; and since it is more excellent to exist not just in your mind but in reality as well, therefore it must exist. For if it did not exist, any other land existing in reality would be more excellent than it, and so this island, already conceived by you to be more excellent than others, will not be more excellent.” I say that if anyone wanted to persuade me in this way that this island really exists beyond all doubt, I should either think that they were joking, or I should find it hard to decide which of us I ought to think of as the bigger fool: I myself, if I agreed with them, or they, if they thought that they had proved the existence of this island with any certainty, unless they had first persuaded me that its very excellence exists in my mind precisely as a thing existing truly and indubitably and not just as something unreal or doubtfully real.

The response offered by Gaunilo is widely regarded as exposing a serious weakness in Anselm's argument. The text itself is so clear that no comment is needed. It may, however, be pointed out that Anselm is not so easily dismissed. Part of his argument is that it is an essential part of the definition of God that he is “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” God therefore belongs to a totally different category than islands or dollar bills. It is part of the nature of God to transcend everything else. Once the believer has come to understand what the word “God” means, then God really does exist for him or her. This is the intention of Anselm's meditation: to reflect on how the Christian understanding of the nature of God reinforces belief in his reality. The “argument” does not really have force outside this context of faith, and Anselm never intended it to be used in this general philosophical manner.

Furthermore, Anselm argued that Gaunilo had not entirely understood him. The argument which he set out in the Proslogion did not involve the idea that there is a being that is, as a matter of fact, greater than any other being; rather, Anselm had argued for a being so great that a greater one could not even be conceived. The argument continues, and it remains a disputed question to this day as to whether Anselm's argument has a genuine basis.

**The “Five Ways” of Thomas Aquinas**

A very different approach (or, perhaps we should say, range of approaches) is offered by the great scholastic writer Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas believed that it was entirely proper to identify pointers toward the existence of God, drawn from general human experience of the world. So what kind of pointers does Aquinas identify? The basic line of thought guiding
Aquinas is that the world mirrors God, as its creator – an idea which is given more formal expression in his doctrine of the “analogy of being.” Just as an artist might sign a painting to identify it as his handiwork, so God has stamped a divine “signature” upon the creation. What we observe in the world – for example, its signs of ordering – can be explained on the basis of the existence of God as its creator. God is both its first cause and its designer. God both brought the world into existence, and impressed the divine image and likeness upon it.

Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–74). Probably the most famous and influential theologian of the Middle Ages. Born in Italy, he achieved his fame through his teaching and writing at the University of Paris and other northern universities. His fame rests chiefly on his *Summa Theologiae*, composed toward the end of his life and not totally finished at the time of his death. However, he also wrote many other significant works, particularly the *Summa contra Gentiles*, which represents a major statement of the rationality of the Christian faith.

So where might we look in creation to find evidence for the existence of God? Aquinas argues that the ordering of the world is the most convincing evidence of God’s existence and wisdom. This basic assumption underlies each of the “Five Ways,” although it is of particular importance in the case of the argument often referred to as the “argument from design” or the “teleological argument.” We shall consider each of these “ways” individually.

The first way begins from the observation that things in the world are in motion or change. The world is not static, but is dynamic. Examples of this are easy to list. Rain falls from the sky. Stones roll down valleys. The earth revolves around the sun (a fact, incidentally, unknown to Aquinas). This, the first of Aquinas’s arguments, is normally referred to as the “argument from motion”; however, it is clear that the “movement” in question is actually understood in more general terms, so that the term “change” is more appropriate as a translation at points. (The Latin word *motus* can bear the meaning of both “motion” and “change.”)

So how did nature come to be in motion? Why is it changing? Why isn’t it static? Aquinas argues that everything which moves is moved by something else. For every motion, there is a cause. Things don’t just move – they are moved. Now each cause of motion must itself have a cause. And that cause must have a cause as well. And so Aquinas argues that there is a whole series of causes of motion lying behind the world as we know it. Now, unless there is an infinite number of these causes, Aquinas argues, there must be a single cause right at the origin of the series. From this original cause of motion, all other motion is ultimately derived. This is the origin of the great chain of causality which we see reflected in the way the world behaves. From the fact that things are in motion, Aquinas thus argues for the existence of a single original cause of all this motion – and this, he concludes, is none other than God. In the passage that follows, I have translated the Latin term *motus* as “change”:

The existence of God can be proved in five ways. The first and most obvious proof is the argument from change [*ex parte motus*]. It is clearly the case that some things in this world are
in the process of changing. Now everything that is in the process of being changed is changed by something else. ... If, then, whatever is changing it is itself changed, this also must be changed by something else, and this in turn by something else again. But this cannot go on forever, since there would then be no first cause to this process of change, and consequently no other agent of change, because secondary things which change cannot change unless they are changed by a first cause, in the same way as a stick cannot move unless it is moved by the hand. We are therefore bound to arrive at a first cause of change which is not changed by anything, and everyone understands that this is God.

The second way begins from the idea of causation. In other words, Aquinas notes the existence of causes and effects in the world. One event (the effect) is explained by the influence of another (the cause). The idea of motion, which we looked at briefly above, is a good example of this cause-and-effect sequence. Using a line of reasoning similar to that used above, Aquinas thus argues that all effects may be traced back to a single original cause – which is God.

The third way concerns the existence of contingent beings. In other words, the world contains beings (such as human beings) which are not there as a matter of necessity. Aquinas contrasts this type of being with a necessary being (one who is there as a matter of necessity). Whilst God is a necessary being, Aquinas argues that humans are contingent beings. The fact that we are here needs explanation. Why are we here? What happened to bring us into existence? Aquinas argues that a being comes into existence because something that already exists brought it into being. In other words, our existence is caused by another being. We are the effects of a series of causation. Tracing this series back to its origin, Aquinas declares that this original cause of being can only be someone whose existence is necessary – in other words, God.

The fourth way begins from human values, such as truth, goodness, and nobility. Where do these values come from? What causes them? Aquinas argues that there must be something which is in itself true, good, and noble, and that this brings into being our ideas of truth, goodness, and nobility. The origin of these ideas, Aquinas suggests, is God, who is their original cause.

The fifth and final way is the teleological argument itself. Aquinas notes that the world shows obvious traces of intelligent design. Natural processes and objects seem to be adapted with certain definite objectives in mind. They seem to have a purpose. They seem to have been designed. But things don't design themselves; they are caused and designed by someone or something else. Arguing from this observation, Aquinas concludes that the source of this natural ordering must be conceded to be God.

It will be obvious that most of Aquinas's arguments are rather similar. Each depends on tracing a causal sequence back to its single origin, and identifying this with God. A number of criticisms of the "Five Ways" were made by Aquinas's critics during the Middle Ages, such as Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. The following are especially important:

1. Why is the idea of an infinite regression of causes impossible? For example, the argument from motion only really works if it can be shown that the sequence of cause and effect stops somewhere. There has to be, according to Aquinas, a Prime Unmoved Mover. But he fails to demonstrate this point.
2. Why do these arguments lead to belief in only one God? The argument from motion, for example, could lead to belief in a number of Prime Unmoved Movers. There seems to be no especially pressing reason for insisting that there can only be one such cause, except for the fundamental Christian insistence that, as a matter of fact, there is only one such God.

3. These arguments do not demonstrate that God continues to exist. Having caused things to happen, God might cease to exist. The continuing existence of events does not necessarily imply the continuing existence of their originator. Aquinas’s arguments, Ockham suggests, might lead to a belief that God existed once upon a time— but not necessarily now. Ockham developed a somewhat complex argument, based on the idea of God continuing to sustain the universe, which attempts to get round this difficulty.

In the end, Aquinas’s arguments only go some way toward suggesting that it is reasonable to believe in a creator of the world, or an intelligent being who is able to cause effects in the world. Nevertheless, a leap of faith is still required. It still remains to be shown that this creator or intelligent being is the God which Christians know, worship, and adore. Aquinas’s arguments could lead to faith in the existence of a god rather like that favored by the Greek philosopher Aristotle—a Unmoved Mover, who is distant from and uninvolved in the affairs of the world.

Case study 2.2 Understandings of the atonement

The medieval period saw considerable interest in the doctrine of the work of Christ (often also referred to as “the atonement”), both in academic theology and in popular religion. Writers such as Anselm of Canterbury and Peter Abelard developed quite different approaches to the meaning of the death of Christ, Anselm emphasizing its legal significance, and Abelard its transformative subjective impact on the believer.

One theme which became especially significant in popular religion was the idea of the “harrowing of Hell.” The background to this idea is found in the New Testament itself. The New Testament and early church laid considerable emphasis upon the victory gained by Christ over sin, death, and Satan through Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. This theme of victory, often linked liturgically with the Easter celebrations, was of major importance within the western Christian theological tradition until the Enlightenment. The theme of “Christ the victor” (Christus Victor) brought together a series of themes, centering on the idea of a decisive victory over forces of evil and oppression.

The image of Christ’s death as a ransom came to be of central importance to Greek patristic writers, such as Irenaeus. But what were the implications of this idea? If Christ’s death was a ransom, Origen argued, it must have been paid to someone. But to whom? It could not have been paid to God, in that God was not holding sinners to ransom. Therefore it had to be paid to the devil. Gregory the Great developed this idea still further. The devil had acquired rights over fallen humanity, which God was obliged to respect. The only means by which humanity could be released from this satanic domination and oppression was through the devil exceeding the limits of his authority, and thus being obliged to forfeit his rights. So how could this be achieved? Gregory suggests that it could come about
if a sinless person were to enter the world, yet in the form of a normal sinful person. The devil would not notice until it was too late: in claiming authority over this sinless person, the devil would have overstepped the limits of his authority, and thus be obliged to abandon his rights.

Gregory suggested the image of a baited hook: Christ's humanity is the bait, and his divinity the hook. The devil, like a great sea monster, snaps at the bait – and then discovers, too late, the hook. “The bait tempts in order that the hook may wound. Our Lord therefore, when coming for the redemption of humanity, made a kind of hook of himself for the death of the devil.” Other writers explored other images for the same idea – that of trapping the devil. Christ’s death was like a net for catching birds, or a trap for catching mice. It was this aspect of this approach to the meaning of the Cross that caused the most disquiet subsequently. It seemed that God was guilty of deception. It was against any such idea of deception on the part of God that Anselm of Canterbury reacted – an idea to which we shall return presently.

The imagery of victory over the devil proved to have enormous popular appeal. The medieval idea of “the harrowing of hell” bears witness to its power. According to this idea, after dying upon the cross Christ descended to hell, and broke down its gates in order that the imprisoned souls might go free. The idea rested (rather tenuously, it has to be said) upon 1 Peter 3:18–22, which makes reference to Christ “preaching to the spirits in prison.” The great medieval hymn “You choirs of New Jerusalem,” written by Fulbert of Chartres, expresses this theme in two of its verses, picking up the theme of Christ as the lion of Judah (Revelation 5:5) defeating Satan, the serpent (Genesis 3:15):

For Judah’s lion bursts his chains
Crushing the serpent’s head;
And cries aloud through death’s domain
To wake the imprisoned dead.

Devouring depths of hell their prey
At his command restore;
His ransomed hosts pursue their way
Where Jesus goes before.

A similar idea can be found in a fourteenth-century English mystery play, which describes the “harrowing of hell” in the following manner:

And when Christ was dead, his spirit went in haste to hell. And soon he broke down the strong gates that were wrongfully barred against him. … He bound Satan fast with eternal bonds, and so shall Satan ever remain bound until the day of doom. He took with him Adam and Eve and others that were dear to him … all these he led out of hell and set in paradise.

A very different approach was developed during the eleventh century by Anselm of Canterbury, who reacted against any idea of God deceiving the devil, or any idea that the devil could be said to have “rights” of any kind over fallen humanity, or that God should be under any obligation to respect such “rights.” At best, the devil might be allowed to have a
de facto power over humanity – a power which exists as a matter of fact, even if it is an illegitimate and unjustified power. Yet this cannot be thought of as a de jure authority – that is, an authority firmly grounded in some legal or moral principle. “I do not see what force this has,” he comments, in dismissing the notion. Equally, Anselm is dismissive of any notion that God deceives the devil in the process of redemption. The entire trajectory of redemption is grounded in and reflects the righteousness of God.

Anselm’s emphasis falls totally upon the righteousness of God. God redeems humanity in a manner that is totally consistent with the divine quality of righteousness. Anselm’s treatise Cur Deus homo (“Why God became human”) is a sustained engagement with the question of the possibility of human redemption, cast in the form of a dialogue. In the course of his analysis, he demonstrates – although how successfully is a matter of dispute – both the necessity of the Incarnation, and the saving potential of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The argument is complex, and can be summarized as follows:

1. God created humanity in a state of original righteousness, with the objective of bringing humanity to a state of eternal blessedness.
2. That state of eternal blessedness is contingent upon human obedience to God. However, through sin, humanity is unable to achieve this necessary obedience, which appears to frustrate God’s purpose in creating humanity in the first place.
3. In that it is impossible for God’s purposes to be frustrated, there must be some means by which the situation can be remedied. However, the situation can only be remedied if a satisfaction is made for sin. In other words, something has to be done, by which the offense caused by human sin can be purged.
4. However, there is no way in which humanity can provide this necessary satisfaction. It lacks the resources which are needed. On the other hand, God possesses the resources needed to provide the required satisfaction.
5. Therefore a “God-man” would possess both the ability (as God) and the obligation (as a human being) to pay the required satisfaction. Therefore the Incarnation takes place, in order that the required satisfaction may be made, and humanity redeemed.

A number of points require comment. First, sin is conceived as an offense against God. The weight of that offense appears to be proportional to the status of the offended party. For many scholars, this suggests that Anselm has been deeply influenced by the feudal assumptions of his time, perhaps regarding God as the equivalent of the “lord of the manor.”

Second, there has been considerable debate over the origins of the idea of a “satisfaction.” It is possible that the idea may derive from the Germanic laws of the period, which stipulated that an offense had to be purged through an appropriate payment. However, most scholars believe that Anselm is appealing directly to the existing penitential system of the church. A sinner, seeking penance, was required to confess every sin. In pronouncing forgiveness, the priest would require that the penitent do something (such as go on a pilgrimage or undertake some charitable work) as a “satisfaction” – that is, a means of publicly demonstrating gratitude for forgiveness. It is possible that Anselm derived the idea from this source.

However, despite the obvious difficulties that attend Anselm’s approach, an important advance had been made. Anselm’s insistence that God is totally and utterly obliged to act
according to the principles of justice throughout the redemption of humanity marks a decisive break with the dubious morality of the Christus Victor approach. In taking up Anselm's approach, later writers were able to place it on a more secure foundation by grounding it in the general principles of law.

An early example of this can be found in Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae ("The totality of theology"), which he began to write in 1265 and left unfinished at the time of his death. This is widely regarded as the greatest work of medieval theology. In this important and influential analysis, Aquinas develops the idea of "satisfaction," as stated by Anselm, dealing with a number of objections which had been raised against it. His response to the criticism that the dignity of Christ was not sufficient to obtain God's forgiveness of human sin is of especial interest. As the passage is of interest and importance, we shall cite it in some detail, to allow the main points to be properly understood:

1. It seems that the passion of Christ did not effect our salvation by way of satisfaction. For it seems that to make satisfaction is the responsibility of the one who sins, as is clear from other aspects of penance, in that the one who sins is the one who must repent and confess. But Christ did not sin. As St. Peter says, "he committed no sin" (1 Peter 2: 22). He therefore did not make satisfaction through his passion.

2. Furthermore, satisfaction can never be made by means of a greater offense. But the greatest offense was perpetrated in the passion of Christ, since those who put him to death committed the most grievous of sins. For this reason, satisfaction could not be made to God through the passion of Christ.

3. Furthermore, satisfaction implies a certain equality with the fault, since it is an act of justice. But the passion of Christ does not seem to be equal to all the sins of the human race, since Christ suffered according to the flesh, not according to his divinity. As St. Peter says, "Christ has suffered in the flesh" (1 Peter 4: 1) … Christ therefore did not make satisfaction for our sins by his passion …

I reply that a proper satisfaction comes about when someone offers to the person offended something which gives him a delight greater than his hatred of the offense. Now Christ by suffering as a result of love and obedience offered to God something greater than what might be exacted in compensation for the whole offense of humanity; firstly, because of the greatness of the love, as a result of which he suffered; secondly, because of the worth of the life which he laid down for a satisfaction, which was the life of God and of a human being; thirdly, because of the comprehensiveness of his passion and the greatness of the sorrow which he took upon himself. … And therefore the passion of Christ was not only sufficient but a superabundant satisfaction for the sins of the human race. As John says, "he is a propitiation for our sins, not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2: 2).

In this extended passage, Aquinas addresses a number of points of importance. The following are of especial interest, and should be noted carefully:

1. Aquinas demonstrates how the satisfaction which Christ offered on the cross can be considered to be greater than the offense committed by humanity in the first place. The
value of the satisfaction offered is determined by three factors: the greatness of the love of Christ; the intrinsic value of his life, in which humanity and divinity are combined; and the greatness of the burden which he bore. Anselm tended to focus only on the second of these three; Aquinas extends the analysis of Christ’s satisfaction to include additional elements, reinforcing the theological foundations of the atonement in doing so.

2. Developing this point further, Aquinas stresses that the high value to be attributed to Christ’s human nature is not to be understood purely in terms of the human nature which is assumed, but in the divinity of the person who assumed that nature.

3. Note Aquinas’s distinctive method of arguing in the *Summa Theologiae*. Various objections or difficulties are set out; a general response is made (usually beginning with the words “I reply that …”); and the individual points are then dealt with separately.

Peter Abelard (1079–1142). French theologian, who achieved a considerable reputation as a teacher at the University of Paris. Among his many contributions to the development of medieval theology, his most noted is his emphasis upon the subjective aspects of the atonement.

Aquinas’s analysis shows the theological potential of the “satisfaction” model of atonement. Other medieval writers were, however, uneasy about Anselm’s approach, for different reasons. Some felt that it failed to deal adequately with the subjective aspects of salvation, including the personal appropriation of faith. Others wondered whether the theme of the “love of God” had really been adequately explored, and wished to see a greater emphasis placed upon the manner in which the death of Christ showed the love of God. Perhaps the most important medieval statement of this emphasis can be found in the writings of Peter Abelard. It must be stressed that Abelard does not, as some of his interpreters suggest, reduce the meaning of the Cross to a demonstration of the love of God. This is one among many components of Abelard’s soteriology, which includes traditional ideas concerning Christ’s death as a sacrifice for human sin. It is Abelard’s emphasis upon the subjective impact of the Cross that is distinctive.

For Abelard, “the purpose and cause of the incarnation was that Christ might illuminate the world by his wisdom, and excite it to love of himself.” In this, Abelard restates the Augustinian idea of Christ’s incarnation as a public demonstration of the extent of the love of God, with the intent of evoking a response of love from humanity. “The Son of God took our nature, and in it took upon himself to teach us by both word and example, even to the point of death, thus binding us to himself through love.” This insight is pressed home with considerable force, as the subjective impact of the love of God in Christ is explored further:

Love is increased by the faith which we have concerning Christ on account of the belief that God in Christ has united our human nature to himself, and that by suffering in that same nature he has demonstrated to us that supreme love … Therefore, our redemption through the
suffering of Christ is that deeper love within us which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but also secures for us the true liberty of the children of God, in order that we might do all things out of love rather than out of fear.

Abelard fails to provide an adequate theological foundation to allow us to understand precisely why Christ’s death is to be understood as a demonstration of the love of God. Nevertheless, his approach to the meaning of the death of Christ brought home the powerful subjective impact of that death, which had been somewhat ignored or downplayed by contemporary writers, such as Anselm of Canterbury.

It will therefore be clear that the medieval period witnessed considerable interest in the doctrine of the work of Christ, and made significant contributions to its development. Much the same may be said of its approach to the question of the nature and function of the sacraments, to which we now turn.

Case study 2.3  The theology of the sacraments

The first centuries of the Christian tradition were characterized by a relative lack of interest in the theology of the sacraments. During the second century, some discussions of a general sacramental nature can be found in such writings as the Didache, and the works of Irenaeus. It is only in the writings of Augustine that the issues, including that of the definition of a sacrament, begin to be fully addressed. Augustine laid down two general principles relating to the definition of sacraments, as follows:

1. A sacrament is a sign. “Signs, when applied to divine things, are called sacraments.”
2. The sign must bear some relation to the thing which is signified. “If sacraments did not bear some resemblance to the things of which they are the sacraments, they would not be sacraments at all.”

These definitions are, however, still imprecise and inadequate. For example, does it follow that every “sign of a sacred thing” is to be regarded as a sacrament? In practice, Augustine understands by “sacraments” a number of things that are no longer regarded as sacramental in character – for example, the creed and the Lord’s Prayer. As time developed, it became increasingly clear that the definition of a sacrament simply as “a sign of a sacred thing” was inadequate.

Hugh of St. Victor (d.1142). A theologian, of Flemish or German origin, who entered the Augustinian monastery of St. Victor in Paris around 1115. His most important work is De sacramentis Christianae fidei (“On the sacraments of the Christian faith”), which shows awareness of the new theological debates that were beginning to develop at this time.
It was during the earlier Middle Ages – the period of sacramental development par excellence – that further clarification took place. In this case study, we shall explore the general area of the definition of a sacrament. In the first half of the twelfth century, the Paris-based theologian Hugh of St. Victor revised the very imprecise definition offered by Augustine. In his comprehensive account of the theology of the sacraments, written in the first half of the twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor set out a definition of a sacrament that included the need for a physical element which bore some resemblance to the grace it signified. This had the important – and apparently unintended – consequence of excluding penance from the list of sacraments:

Not every sign of a sacred thing can properly be called a sacrament ... Anyone wanting a fuller and better definition of a sacrament can define it as follows: “a sacrament is a physical or material element set before the external senses, representing by likeness, signifying by its institution, and containing by sanctification, some invisible and spiritual grace.” This definition is recognized as being so appropriate and perfect that it turns out to be appropriate in the case of every sacrament, yet only the sacraments. For everything that has these three elements is a sacrament; and everything that lacks these three cannot be considered as a sacrament. For every sacrament ought to have a kind of likeness to the thing of which it is the sacrament, according to which it is capable of representing the same thing. It ought also to have been instituted in such a way that it is ordained to signify this thing. And finally, it ought to have been sanctified in such a way that it contains that thing, and is efficacious in conferring the same on those who are to be sanctified.

Hugh thus asserts that there are four essential elements in the understanding of the nature of a sacrament:

1. There must be a “physical or material” element involved – such as the water of baptism, the bread and wine of the eucharist, or the oil of extreme unction. (“Extreme unction” is the practice of anointing those who are terminally ill with consecrated olive oil.)
2. There must be a “kind of likeness” to the thing which is signified, so that it can represent the thing signified. Thus the eucharistic wine can be argued to have a “kind of likeness” to the blood of Christ, allowing it to represent that blood in a sacramental context.
3. There must be some form of “institution” through which it is “ordained to signify this thing.” In other words, there must be a good reason for believing that the sign in question is authorized to represent the spiritual reality to which it points. An example – indeed, the primary example – of the “authorization” in question is institution at the hands of Jesus Christ himself.
4. There must be an efficacy, by which the sacrament is capable of conferring the benefits which it signifies to those who partake in it.

The third of these points is of especial interest. In medieval theology, a careful distinction was drawn between the “sacraments of the Old Covenant” (such as circumcision) and the “sacraments of the New Covenant.” The essential distinction between them is that the sacraments of the Old Covenant merely signified spiritual realities, whereas the sacraments of the New Covenant actualized what they signified.
This point is emphasized in most thirteenth-century discussions of the nature of a sacrament. For example, Thomas Aquinas argues that a sacrament is an efficacious sign — something that both signifies and causes holiness:

Signs are given to humanity, so that they can discover the unknown by means of the known. As a result, a sacrament in the proper sense of the term is something that is the sign of some sacred thing pertaining to humanity; so that properly speaking a sacrament, as considered by us now, is to be defined as being the “sign of a holy thing which makes humanity holy.”

The thirteenth-century Franciscan writer Bonaventure made this point as follows, using a medicinal analogy:

Under the Old Law, there were ointments of a kind, but they were figurative and did not heal. The disease was lethal, but the anointings were superficial. … Genuinely healing ointments must bring both spiritual anointing and a life-giving power; it was only Christ our Lord who did this, since … through his death, the sacraments have the power to bring to life.

However, Hugh of St. Victor’s definition of a sacrament remained unsatisfactory. According to Hugh, the following items were “sacraments”: the Incarnation, the church, and death. Something was still missing. By this time, there was general agreement that there were seven sacraments – baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, penance, marriage, ordination, and extreme unction. But by Hugh’s definition, penance could not be a sacrament. It contained no material element. Theory and practice were thus seriously out of line.

The situation was resolved through the contribution of Peter Lombard. In his *Four Books of the Sentences*, compiled at Paris during the years 1155–8, Peter Lombard set out a definition of a sacrament which differed from that offered by Hugh of St. Victor by avoiding any reference to any physical element (such as bread, wine, or water). Using this definition, Peter was able to set out a list of seven sacraments, which became definitive for medieval Catholic theology:

A sacrament bears a likeness to the thing of which it is a sign. “For if sacraments did not have a likeness of the things whose sacraments they are, they would not properly be called sacraments” (Augustine). … Something can properly be called a sacrament if it is a sign of the grace of God and a form of invisible grace, so that it bears its image and exists as its cause. Sacraments were therefore instituted for the sake of sanctifying, as well as of signifying. … Those things which were instituted for the purpose of signifying alone are nothing more than signs, and are not sacraments, as in the case of the physical sacrifices and ceremonial observances of the Old Law, which were never able to make those who offered them righteous. … Now let us consider the sacraments of the New Law, which are baptism, confirmation, the bread of blessing (that is, the eucharist), penance, extreme unction, ordination, and marriage. Some of these, such as baptism, provide a remedy against sin and confer the assistance of grace; others, such as marriage, are only a remedy; and others, such as the eucharist and ordination, strengthen us with grace and power.
Note the following points:

1. A sacrament is defined as “a sign of the grace of God and a form of invisible grace, so that it bears its image and exists as its cause.” Compare this with Hugh’s definition of a sacrament as “a physical or material element set before the external senses, representing by likeness, signifying by its institution, and containing by sanctification, some invisible and spiritual grace.” Hugh begins by insisting on the need for “a physical or material element”; Peter makes no reference of any kind to such an element.

2. Note the list of seven sacraments provided by Peter: “baptism, confirmation, the bread of blessing (that is, the eucharist), penance, extreme unction, ordination, and marriage.” This list would become normative in subsequent medieval Christian thought and practice.

Case study 2.4  The interpretation of the Bible

The question of how the Bible is to be interpreted has always been of theological importance, and was discussed at some length during the medieval period, particularly as the reading of the Bible played such an important role in monastic spirituality. It was during this era of Christian thought that the interpretive scheme usually known as the “Fourfold Sense of Scripture” received its final form. In view of the importance of this method, and its impact on the theology of the period, we shall consider it in a little detail.

It will be helpful if we begin by exploring the background to the development of this scheme in the patristic period. A major influence at this time, especially within the Alexandrian school, was the lengthening shadow of the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria (c.30 BC–c. AD 45). Philo argued that it was necessary to look beneath the surface meaning of Scripture to discern a deeper meaning which lay beneath the surface of the text. In addition to the “literal” meaning of the text, there was a deeper “spiritual” meaning, which could be uncovered by treating the passages in question as allegories, pointing to these deeper truths.

These ideas were taken up by a group of theologians based in Alexandria, including Origen. The scope of the allegorical method can be seen from Origen’s interpretation of key Old Testament images. Joshua’s conquest of the Promised Land, interpreted allegorically, referred to Christ’s conquest of sin upon the Cross, just as the sacrificial legislation in Leviticus pointed ahead to the spiritual sacrifices of Christians. It might at first sight seem that this represents a degeneration into eisegesis, in which the interpreter simply reads any meaning he or she likes into the text of Scripture. However, as the writings of Didymus the Blind make clear, this need not be the case. It seems that a consensus developed about the images and texts of the Old Testament which were to be interpreted allegorically. For example, Jerusalem regularly came to be seen as an allegory of the church.

In contrast, the Antiochene school placed an emphasis upon the interpretation of Scripture in the light of its historical context. This school, especially associated with writers such as Diodore of Tarsus, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia, gave an emphasis to the historical location of Old Testament prophecies, which is quite absent from the writings of Origen and other representatives of the Alexandrian tradition. Thus
Theodore, in dealing with Old Testament prophecy, stresses that the prophetic message was relevant to those to whom it was directly addressed, as well as having a developed meaning for a Christian readership. Every prophetic oracle is to be interpreted as having a single consistent historical or literal meaning. In consequence, Theodore tended to interpret relatively few Old Testament passages as referring directly to Christ, whereas the Alexandrian school regarded Christ as the hidden content of many Old Testament passages, both prophetic and historical.

In the western church a slightly distinct approach can be seen to develop, which would eventually find full expression in the *Quadriga*. This Latin term, which really means “a four-horse chariot,” sees the four senses of Scripture as the powerhouse of the church’s interpretation of the Bible. The roots of this idea lie in the patristic period. In many of his writings, Ambrose of Milan (c.337–97) developed a threefold understanding of the senses of Scripture: in addition to the natural sense, the interpreter may discern a moral and rational or theological sense. Augustine chose to follow this approach, and instead argued for a twofold sense: a literal – fleshly – historical approach and an allegorical – mystical – spiritual sense, although Augustine allows that some passages can possess both senses: “The sayings of the prophets are found to have a threefold meaning, in that some have in mind the earthly Jerusalem, others the heavenly city, and others refer to both.” To understand the Old Testament at a purely historical level is unacceptable; the key to its understanding lies in its correct interpretation. Among the major lines of “spiritual” interpretation, the following should be noted: Adam represents Christ; Eve represents the church; Noah’s ark represents the Cross; the door of Noah’s ark represents Christ’s pierced side; the city of Jerusalem represents the heavenly Jerusalem.

By the use of such lines of analysis, Augustine is able to stress the unity of both Old and New Testaments. They bear witness to the same faith, even if its modes of expression may be different. Augustine expresses this idea in a text which has become of major importance to biblical interpretation, especially as it bears on the relation between Old and New Testaments: “The New Testament is hidden in the Old; the Old is made accessible by the New” (*In Vetere Novum latet et in Novo Vetus patet*).

This distinction between the literal or historical sense of Scripture on the one hand, and a deeper spiritual or allegorical meaning on the other, came to be generally accepted within the church during the early Middle Ages. The standard method of biblical interpretation used during the Middle Ages is usually known as the *Quadriga*, or the “fourfold sense of Scripture.” The origins of this method lie specifically in the distinction between the literal and spiritual senses. Scripture possesses four different senses. In addition to the literal sense, three non-literal senses can be distinguished: the allegorical, defining what Christians are to believe; the tropological or moral, defining what Christians are to do; and the anagogical, defining what Christians are to hope for. The four senses of Scripture were thus the following:

1. **The literal sense** of Scripture, in which the text could be taken at face value, referring to some historical event.
2. **The allegorical sense**, which interpreted certain passages of Scripture to produce statements of doctrine. Those passages tended either to be obscure, or to have a literal meaning that was unacceptable, for theological reasons, to their readers.
3. The *tropological or moral sense*, which interpreted such passages to produce ethical guidance for Christian conduct.

4. The *anagogical sense*, which interprets passages to indicate the grounds of Christian hope, pointing toward the future fulfillment of the divine promises in the New Jerusalem.

This scheme was often summed up by a Latin mnemonic, found in the writings of Augustine of Denmark and many other writers of the early Middle Ages:

Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria  
Moralis quid agas, quid speres anagogia.

A rough translation of this is: “The literal [sense] teaches about deeds; the allegorical [sense] what to believe; the moral [sense] what to do; the anagogical [sense] what to hope for.”

A potential weakness was avoided by insisting that nothing should be believed on the basis of a non-literal sense of Scripture, unless it could first be established on the basis of the literal sense. This insistence on the priority of the literal sense of Scripture may be seen as an implied criticism of the allegorical approach adopted by Origen, which virtually allowed interpreters of Scripture to read whatever “spiritual” interpretations they liked into any passage.

So how was this method of biblical interpretation applied? An example will help understand the scope of the *Quadriga*, as well as indicate its potential limitations. In the course of his exposition of Song of Songs 1:16, written in Latin in the first half of the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux provides an allegorical interpretation of the phrase “the beams of our houses are of cedar, and our panels are of cypress”:

By “houses” we are to understand the great mass of the Christian people, who are bound together with those who possess power and dignity, rulers of the church and the state, as “beams.” These hold them together by wise and firm laws; otherwise, if each of them were to operate in any way that they pleased, the walls would bend and collapse, and the whole house would fall in ruins. By the “panels,” which are firmly attached to the beams and which adorn the house in a royal manner, we are to understand the kindly and ordered lives of a properly instructed clergy, and the proper administration of the rites of the church. Yet how can the clergy carry out their work, or the church discharge her duties, unless the princes, like strong and solid beams, sustain them through their goodwill and munificence, and protect them through their power?

This extract is an excellent illustration of the way in which doctrinal or spiritual meaning was “read into” otherwise unpromising passages at this time. Note especially the way in which developed meanings, often with virtually no connection with the text itself, were drawn out of the passage in question. The advantages and disadvantages of the method will be immediately obvious. On the positive side, significant meanings can be attached to otherwise apparently unimportant passages of the Bible; on the negative side, the meanings in question often rest on somewhat flimsy or even arbitrary foundations.

A further development of major importance to biblical interpretation in the later Middle Ages was the rise of Renaissance humanism, with its distinctive emphasis on
returning to the original sources in the original languages. We shall explore this further in the following case study.

Case study 2.5  Renaissance humanism and the Bible

In our overview of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, we drew attention to the importance of humanism in relation to biblical scholarship in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and touched on the importance of translation alterations to theological revisionism. So important is this theme for historical theology that a much more detailed examination of the matter is required. The present case study aims to set out the implications of the methods and goals associated with the Renaissance for Christian theology at the time. We begin by exploring what a typical medieval theologian would have understood by the phrase “the Bible.”

When medieval theologians refer to “Scripture,” they almost invariably mean the Latin translation of the Bible widely referred to as the *textus vulgatus* (literally, the “common text”) drawn up by the great patristic biblical scholar Jerome in the late fourth and early fifth century. Although the term “Vulgate” did not come into general use in the sixteenth century, it is perfectly acceptable to use this term to refer to the specific Latin translation of the Bible prepared by Jerome. This text was passed down to the Middle Ages in a number of forms, with considerable variations between them. For example, Theodulf and Alcuin, noted scholars of the Dark Ages, used quite different versions of the Vulgate text. A new period of intellectual activity opened up in the eleventh century as the Dark Ages lifted. It was clear that a standard version of this text was required to service the new interest in theology which developed as part of this intellectual renaissance. If theologians were to base their theology upon different versions of the Vulgate, an equally great, if not greater, variation in their conclusions would be the inevitable result.

This need for standardization was met by what appears to have been a joint speculative venture by some Paris theologians and stationers in 1226, resulting in the “Paris version” of the Vulgate text. By then, Paris was recognized as the leading center of theology in Europe, with the inevitable result that – despite its many obvious imperfections – the “Paris version” of the Vulgate became established as normative. This version, it must be emphasized, was not commissioned or sponsored by any ecclesiastical figure: it appears to have been a purely commercial venture. History, however, concerns the fate of accidents, and it is necessary to note that medieval theologians, attempting to base their theology upon Scripture, were obliged to equate Scripture with a rather bad commercial edition of an already faulty Latin translation of the Bible. The rise of humanist textual and philological techniques would expose the distressing discrepancies between the Vulgate and the texts it purported to translate – and thus open the way to doctrinal reformation as a consequence.

So what was the significance of humanism in relation to the many theological questions concerning the authority, interpretation, and application of the Bible? The main elements of the humanist contribution to this important question are summarized as follows:

1. The great humanist emphasis upon the need to return to the original sources (*ad fontes*) of theology established the priority of Scripture over its commentators, particularly
those of the Middle Ages. The text of Scripture was to be approached directly, rather than through a complicated system of glosses and commentaries.

2. Scripture was to be read directly in its original languages, rather than in Latin translation. Thus the Old Testament was to be studied in Hebrew (except for those few sections written in Aramaic), and the New Testament was to be read in Greek. The growing humanist interest in the Greek language (which many humanists held to be supreme in its capacity to mediate philosophical concepts) further consolidated the importance attached to the New Testament documents. The late Renaissance scholar's ideal was to be *trium linguarum gnarus*, “expert in three languages [Hebrew, Greek, and Latin].” Trilingual colleges were established at Alcalá in Spain, at Paris, and at Wittenberg. The new interest in, and availability of, Scripture in its original language soon brought to light a number of serious translation mistakes in the Vulgate, some of considerable importance.

3. The humanist movement made available two essential tools required for the new method of study of the Bible. First, it made available the printed text of Scripture in its original languages, for example, Erasmus's *Novum Instrumentum omne* of 1516, which allowed scholars direct access to the printed text of the Greek New Testament; Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples provided the Hebrew text of a group of important Psalms in 1509. Second, it made available manuals of classical languages, allowing scholars to learn languages which they otherwise could not have acquired. Reuchlin's Hebrew primer, *De rudimentis hebraicis* (“On the basics of Hebrew,” 1506), is an excellent example of this type of material. Greek primers were more common: the Aldine press produced an edition of Lascaris's Greek grammar in 1495; Erasmus's translation of the famous Greek grammar of Theodore of Gaza appeared in 1516; and Melanchthon produced a masterly Greek primer in 1518.

4. The humanist movement developed textual techniques capable of establishing accurately the best text of Scripture. These techniques had been used, for example, by Lorenzo Valla to demonstrate the inauthenticity of the famous Donation of Constantine. It was now possible to eliminate many of the textual errors which had crept into the Parisian edition of the Vulgate. Erasmus shocked his contemporaries by excluding a significant part of one verse of the Bible (1 John 5:7), which he could not find in any Greek manuscript, as a later addition. The Vulgate version reads as follows: “For there are three that testify [in heaven: the Father, the Words and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one. And there are three that testify on earth]: the Spirit, the water and the blood.” The bracketed section of the verse, omitted by Erasmus, was certainly there in the Vulgate – but not in the Greek texts which it purported to translate. As this text had become an important proof-text for the doctrine of the Trinity, many were outraged at his action. Theological conservatism here often triumphed over scholarly progress: even the famous King James Version (also known as the Authorized Version) of 1611, for example, included the spurious verse, despite its absence in the key Greek manuscripts.

5. The humanists tended to regard ancient texts as mediating an experience, which could be recaptured through appropriate literary methods. Included in the theme *ad fontes* is the notion of recapturing the experience mediated by the text. In the case of the New
Testament, the experience in question was that of the presence and power of the risen Christ. Scripture was thus read with a sense of anticipation – it was believed that the vitality and excitement of the apostolic era could be regained in the sixteenth century by reading and studying Scripture in the right manner.

6. In his *Enchiridion*, which became enormously influential in 1515, Erasmus argued that a biblically literate laity held the key to the renewal of the church. Both clergy and church were marginalized: the lay reader of Scripture had therein a more than adequate guide to the essentials of Christian belief and especially practice. These views, which achieved wide circulation among the lay intelligentsia of Europe, unquestionably prepared the way for the scriptural reforming program of Luther and Zwingli in the period 1519–25.

In what follows, we shall look at two key passages in which humanist scholars detected translation errors, and consider the theological implications of the translation changes which were introduced through humanist scholarship.

**Matthew 4: 17**

This verse describes the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, and the basic content of his preaching at this stage. The gospel of Matthew was widely used in the Middle Ages as a source for Christian teaching in parish sermons, with the result that this verse appears to have had considerable impact on the popular understanding of what Christianity was all about. The Latin of the Vulgate text reads as follows:

Exinde coepit Iesus praedicare et dicere paenitentiam agite adpropinquavit enim regnum caelorum.

A literal English translation of this Latin text is: “Then Jesus began to preach and say: ‘do penance [paenitentiam agite], for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.’” The natural way of reading this would be to assume that Jesus was directing those who wished to respond to his preaching of the coming of the kingdom by “doing penance” – that is, by making use of the penitential system of the church. There is a clearly implied link between the preaching of Jesus and the institution of the church. The Greek original, however, does not bear this meaning. The most natural translation of the Greek text of Matthew’s gospel at this point would be “repent,” not “do penance.” In other words, the Greek implies a personal transformation of the individual, with no implied connection with the institution or sacraments of the church. The translation change thus had considerable theological implications.

**Luke 1: 28**

This text describes what is generally known as “the annunciation” – that is, the declaration by Gabriel to Mary that she is to bear a child. The Latin of the Vulgate texts reads as follows:

Et ingressus angelus at eam dixit: ave graitia plena Dominus tecum benedicta tu in mulieribus.
A rough translation of this is: “And the angel went in, and said to her: ‘Hail, one that is full of grace [ave gratia plena] the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women.’” The implications of this greeting were considerable, in that the clear implication is that Mary is to be regarded as a person who is “full of grace.” In medieval theology, grace was characteristically thought of as a divine or quasi-divine substance, rather than a gracious attitude on the part of God. This passage would therefore have been understood to imply that Mary was a vessel containing grace, and thus further to imply that access could be had to this grace by those who needed it in times of distress. These themes certainly became an important aspect of late medieval Marian spirituality. However, humanist scholars (such as Erasmus) argued that the Greek original of the gospel text could not be translated in this way. The natural interpretation of the text would be to refer to Mary as “one who has found favor” (with God), an idea that could be expressed in the Latin term gratificata rather than gratia plena. The implications of this translation alteration for both theology and spirituality were thus potentially considerable.

Case study 2.6  Augustinianism and Pelagianism in late medieval theology

The late medieval period saw some fascinating theological developments taking place. These are often interpreted (especially in older textbooks) in terms of a confrontation between “nominalism” and “Augustinianism” within the scholastic theology of the later Middle Ages. In recent years, however, considerable progress has been made in understanding the nature of late medieval scholasticism, leading to a rewriting of the intellectual history of the early Reformation. In what follows, we shall attempt to present an up-to-date account of trends in late medieval scholasticism, and assess their significance.

An earlier generation of scholars, writing in the period 1920–65, regarded “nominalism” as a religious school of thought which captured most northern European university faculties of theology in the later Middle Ages. It proved remarkably difficult, however, to identify the exact features of this theology. Some “nominalist” theologians (such as William of Ockham and Gabriel Biel) seemed to be very optimistic about human abilities, suggesting that it was possible for a human being to do everything that was necessary to enter into a relationship with God. Other “nominalist” theologians (such as Gregory of Rimini and Hugolino of Orvieto) appeared to be profoundly pessimistic about those same abilities, suggesting that without the grace of God, humanity was totally unable to enter into such a relationship.

In desperation, scholars began to speak of “nominalistic diversity.” Eventually, however, the real solution to the problem emerged: there were actually two different schools of thought, the sole common feature of which was antirealism. Both schools adopted a nominalist position in matters of logic and the theory of knowledge – but their theological positions differed radically.

The term via moderna is now becoming generally accepted as the best way of referring to the movement once known as “nominalism,” which includes among its representatives such leading fourteenth- and fifteenth-century thinkers as William of Ockham, Pierre d’Ailly, Robert Holcot, and Gabriel Biel. During the fifteenth century, the via moderna began to make significant inroads into many northern European universities – for example, at Paris, Heidelberg, and Erfurt. In addition to its philosophical nominalism, the movement adopted
a doctrine of justification which many of its critics branded “Pelagian.” In view of the importance of this form of scholasticism to Luther's theological breakthrough, we shall explain its understanding of justification in some detail.

The central feature of the soteriology, or doctrine of salvation, of the via moderna is a covenant between God and humanity. The later Middle Ages saw the development of political and economic theories based upon the concept of a covenant (for example, between a king and his people), and the theologians of the via moderna were quick to realize the theological potential of this idea. Just as a political covenant between a king and his people defined the obligations of king to people, and people to king, so a religious covenant between God and his people defined God's obligations to his people, and their obligation to God. This covenant was not negotiated, of course, but was unilaterally imposed by God. The theologians of the via moderna were able to develop this theme – already familiar to readers of the Old Testament – using ideas borrowed from their own political and economic world.

According to these theologians, the covenant between God and human beings established the conditions necessary for justification. God has ordained to accept an individual, on condition that this individual first fulfills certain demands. These demands were summarized using the Latin tag *facere quod in se est*, literally “doing what lies within you,” or “doing your best.” When individuals met this precondition, God was obliged, by the terms of the covenant, to accept them. A Latin maxim was often used to express this point: *facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*, “God will not deny grace to those who do what lies within them.” The noted late medieval theologian Gabriel Biel, who is known to have influenced Luther through his writings, explained that “doing your best” meant rejecting evil and trying to do good.

At this point, the parallels between the theology of the via moderna and Pelagius become obvious. Both assert that men and women are accepted on the basis of their own efforts and achievements. Both assert that human works place God under an obligation to reward them. It would seem that the writers of the via moderna are simply reproducing the ideas of Pelagius, using a more sophisticated covenantal framework. At this point, however, the theologians of the via moderna drew upon contemporary economic theory to argue that they were doing nothing of the sort. Their use of late medieval economic theory is fascinating, in that it illustrates the extent to which medieval theologians were prepared to exploit ideas drawn from their social context. We shall consider their argument in some detail.

The classic example invariably cited by these theologians to illustrate the relation between good works and justification is the king and the small lead coin. Most medieval coinage systems used gold and silver coins. This had the advantage of guaranteeing the value of the coins, even if it also encouraged the practice of “clipping” precious metal from the coins’ sides. The introduction of milled edges to coins represented an attempt to prevent removal of gold or silver in this way. Occasionally, however, kings found themselves in a financial crisis, through war for example. A standard way of meeting this was to recall gold and silver coins, and melt them down. The gold and silver thus retrieved could be used to finance a war.

In the meantime, however, currency of some sort was still required. To meet this need, small leaden coins were issued, which bore the same face value as the gold and silver coins.
Although their inherent value was negligible, their ascribed or imposed value was considerable. The king would promise to replace the lead coins with their gold or silver equivalents once the financial crisis was past. The value of the lead coins thus resided in the king's promise to redeem them at their full ascribed value at a later date. The value of a gold coin derives from the gold – but the value of a lead coin derives from the royal covenant to treat that coin as if it were gold. A similar situation, of course, exists in most modern economies. For example, paper money is of negligible inherent value. Its value derives from the promise of the issuing bank to honor its notes to their full face value.

The theologians of the *via moderna* used this economic analogy to counter the charge of Pelagianism. To the suggestion that they were exaggerating the value of human works (in that they seemed to be making them capable of meriting salvation), they replied that they were doing nothing of the sort. Human works were like lead coins, they argued – of little inherent value. But God had ordained, through the covenant, to treat them as if they were of much greater value, in just the same way as a king could treat a lead coin as if it were gold. Pelagius, they conceded, certainly treated human works as if they were gold, capable of purchasing salvation. But they were arguing that human works were like lead: the only reason they were of any value was that God had graciously undertaken to treat them as if they were much more valuable. The theological exploitation of the difference between the inherent and imposed value of coins thus served to get the theologians of the *via moderna* out of a potentially awkward situation, even if it would not satisfy their more severe critics, such as Martin Luther.

It is this "covenantal" understanding of justification that underlies Martin Luther's theological breakthrough, to which we shall return in a later case study. Our attention now turns to a trend within late medieval scholastic theology which re-embraced the ideas of Augustine, in deliberate opposition to the *via moderna* – the movement which is now generally known as the *schola Augustiniana moderna*, the "modern Augustinian school."

It is known that the University of Oxford was one of the strongholds of the *via moderna* in the early fourteenth century. A group of thinkers, largely based in Merton College, developed the ideas on justification noted above, characteristic of the *via moderna*. And it was at Oxford that the first backlash against this movement occurred. The individual responsible for this backlash was Thomas Bradwardine, later to become Archbishop of Canterbury, who wrote a furious attack on the ideas of the Oxford representatives of the *via moderna*, entitled *De causa Dei contra Pelagium*, "The case of God against Pelagius." In this book, he charged his Merton colleagues with being "modern Pelagians," and developed a theory of justification which represents a return to the views of Augustine, as they are found in the anti-Pelagian writings.

Important though Oxford was as a theological center, the Hundred Years War led to it becoming increasingly isolated from the continent of Europe. Although Bradwardine's ideas would be developed in England by John Wycliffe, they were taken up on the mainland of Europe by Gregory of Rimini at the University of Paris. Gregory had one particularly significant advantage over Bradwardine: he was a member of a religious order (the Order of the Hermits of St. Augustine, generally referred to as the "Augustinian Order"). And just as the Dominicans propagated the views of Thomas Aquinas, and the Franciscans those of
Duns Scotus, so the Augustinians would promote the ideas of Gregory of Rimini. It is this transmission of an Augustinian tradition, deriving from Gregory of Rimini, within the Augustinian Order which is increasingly referred to as the “modern Augustinian school,” *schola Augustiniana moderna*. Its general features can be described as follows.

First, Gregory adopted a nominalist view on the question of universals. Like many thinkers of his time, he had little time for the realism of Thomas Aquinas or Duns Scotus. In this respect, he has much in common with thinkers of the *via moderna*, such as Robert Holcot or Gabriel Biel. Second, Gregory developed a soteriology, or doctrine of salvation, which reflects the influence of Augustine. We find an emphasis upon the need for grace, upon the fallenness and sinfulness of humanity, upon the divine initiative in justification, and upon divine predestination. Salvation is understood to be totally a work of God, from its beginning to its end. Where the theologians of the *via moderna* held that humans could initiate their justification by “doing their best,” Gregory insisted that only God could initiate justification. The *via moderna* held that most (but not all) necessary soteriological resources were located within human nature. The merits of Christ are an example of a resource lying outside humanity; the ability to desist from sin and turn to righteousness is, for a writer such as Biel, an example of a vital soteriological resource located within humanity.

In marked contrast, Gregory of Rimini argued that these resources were located exclusively outside human nature. Even the ability to desist from sin and turn to righteousness arose through the action of God, not a human action. It is obvious that these represent two totally different ways of understanding the human and divine roles in justification.

Although this academic Augustinianism was particularly associated with the Augustinian Order, not every Augustinian monastery or university school seems to have adopted its ideas. Nevertheless, it seems that a school of thought that was strongly Augustinian in cast was in existence in the late Middle Ages on the eve of the Reformation. In many ways, the Wittenberg reformers, with their particular emphasis upon the anti-Pelagian writings of Augustine, may be regarded as having rediscovered and revitalized this tradition. As the views of some leading reformers, such as Luther or Calvin, seem to parallel those of this academic Augustinianism, the question has often been asked: were the reformers influenced, directly or indirectly, by this Augustinian tradition? While this question is too complex to be discussed in detail here, it may be noted that there are excellent reasons for suggesting that both may have been influenced by currents of thought in late medieval scholasticism (although the extent and nature of that influence is a matter of some debate).

We may illustrate this point by considering the case of John Calvin (1509–64). Calvin began his academic career at the University of Paris in the 1520s. As study after study has made clear, the University of Paris – and especially Calvin’s college, the Collège de Montaigu – was a stronghold of the *via moderna*. During his four or five years studying at the faculty of arts at Paris, Calvin could not have avoided encountering the leading ideas of this movement. One especially obvious point of affinity between Calvin and late medieval theology concerns voluntarism – the doctrine that the ultimate grounds of merit lie in the will of God, not in the intrinsic goodness of an action. To explore this doctrine, let us consider a human moral action – for example, giving money to a charity. What is the meritorious value of this action? What is it worth in the sight of God? The relation between the moral
(i.e., the human) and the meritorious (i.e., the divine) value of actions was of major concern to late medieval theologians. Two distinct approaches developed: the intellectualist and the voluntarist.

The intellectualist approach argued that the divine intellect recognized the inherent moral value of an act, and rewarded it accordingly. There was a direct connection between the moral and the meritorious. The voluntarist approach rejected this, arguing that it made God dependent upon his creatures. The meritorious value of a human action could not be allowed to be predetermined; God had to be free to choose whatever value he liked. There was thus no necessary connection between the moral and the meritorious. So the meritorious value of a human action does not rest upon its inherent value, but is grounded solely in the worth which God chooses to impose upon it. This principle is summarized in the maxim of Duns Scotus (usually, though not entirely correctly, regarded as the originator of the trend toward voluntarism in later medieval thought), to the effect that the value of an offering is determined solely by the divine will, rather than by its inherent goodness. The divine will choose to impose whatever value it cared upon human actions, preserving the freedom of God. In the later Middle Ages, the voluntarist position gained increasing sympathy, especially within radical Augustinian circles. Most theologians of the *via moderna* and *schola Augustiniana moderna* adopted it.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin adopts exactly this voluntarist position in relation to the merit of Christ. Although this is implicit in earlier editions of the work, it is only explicitly stated in the 1559 edition, in the aftermath of Calvin’s correspondence with Laelius Socinus on the subject. In 1555, Calvin responded to questions raised by Socinus concerning the merit of Christ and the assurance of faith, and appears to have incorporated these replies directly into the text of the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*.

The death of Christ on the cross is a central focus of Christian thought and worship. But why should the death of Christ have such enormous importance? What justification can be given for its centrality? Why is the death of Christ – rather than of any other individual – declared to be of unique significance? In the course of this correspondence, Calvin considers this question, known technically as the *ratio meriti Christi* (the basis of the merit of Christ). Why is Christ’s death on the cross sufficient to purchase the redemption of humanity? Is it something intrinsic to the person of Christ, as Luther had argued? For Luther, the divinity of Christ was adequate grounds for declaring that his death was uniquely important. Or was it that God chose to accept his death as sufficient to merit the redemption of humanity? Was this value inherent within Christ’s death, or was it imposed upon it by God?

Calvin makes clear his view that the basis of Christ’s merit is not located in Christ’s offering of himself (which would correspond to an intellectualist approach to the *ratio meriti Christi*), but in the divine decision to accept such an offering as of sufficient merit for the redemption of mankind (which corresponds to the voluntarist approach). For Calvin, “apart from God’s good pleasure, Christ could not merit anything.” The continuity between Calvin and the late medieval voluntarist tradition will be evident.

In the past, this similarity between Calvin and Scotus has been taken to imply the direct influence of Scotus on Calvin. In fact, however, Calvin’s continuity appears to be with the
late medieval voluntarist tradition, deriving from William of Ockham and Gregory of Rimini, in relation to which Scotus marks a point of transition. No reason may be given for the meritorious nature of Christ's sacrifice, save that God benevolently ordained to accept it as such. The continuity of Calvin with this later tradition is evident.

This observation provides a convenient transition to the next part of this work, which deals with the period of the Reformation itself.