

[MJTM 13 (2011–2012)]

BOOK REVIEW

Gregg R. Allison. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2011. 778 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0310230137.

In his book *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, Matthew Fox tells the story of a woman in an Indian sari who approached him after a series of lectures he had given at a Mennonite seminary. “You are the first Christian theologian I have ever met . . . who spoke Hindi.” Noting his perplexity at her comment, she went on to explain that his teaching, and specifically his discussion of twelfth-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen, were both “deeply Hindu.” Fox claims, “I was not altogether surprised by this exchange. I knew of the influence of Hinduism on Celtic spirituality, and I knew that Hildegard was part of that Celtic movement along the Rhine.”¹ Medievalist Barbara Newman, who has devoted considerable energy to the study of the German abbess, reformer, and theologian, finds Fox’s appropriation of Hildegard historically untenable. She claims that Fox’s treatment of Hildegard, mediated through strategic abridgement, sloppy translation, and clever paraphrase, remakes her into a New Age avatar. “Hildegard is welcome to Fox’s mystical pantheon so long as she refrains from being a twelfth-century Catholic.”²

The ensuing argument raises significant questions regarding the role and place of historical theology in the ongoing theological enterprise. In the day of postmodern reader-based interpretation, where are the borders of intertextuality? Do the canons

1. Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*. New York: HarperCollins, 1988, 230.

2. Barbara Newman, “Romancing the Past: A Critical Look at Matthew Fox and the Medieval ‘Creation Mystics,’” *Touchstone* 5, no. 3 (Summer, 1992). <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=05-03-005-f>.

of history have a voice in the hermeneutical process or does the inaccessibility of true history render its contribution superfluous? Can the ancients speak today? In spite of their diversity, do their voices harmonize into any recognizable tradition? Are today's theologians accountable to such a Christian tradition, if it can be shown to exist?

In the face of these quandaries, Gregg Allison's *Historical Theology* offers a formidable answer. We live in increasingly ahistorical times. The postmodern penchant for novelty, anachronism, and co-opting traditions for their present-moment usefulness with little reference to their contextual significance continues to flourish unabated. This is the theological context into which Allison sends his monumental work, and he offers a methodology that uniquely addresses the question of historical validity and the development of a Christian tradition.

Rather than providing a straightforward, chronological treatment of the history of theology, Allison proposes a truly historical *theology*. Designed as a companion to Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, Allison's book, an unwieldy tome weighing in at 778 pages, follows Grudem's seven-part division, starting with the Doctrine of the Word of God, followed by the Doctrine of God, the Doctrine of Humanity, and so on. Allison then charts the historical development of each doctrine over four periods: the early church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation and post-Reformation period, and the modern church. In doing so, the author creates a handy compendium, making available to students and lay people an introduction to the great voices of church history as they commented on specific areas of theology.³ The book does not describe the theology of Augustine as a whole, but rather asks, "What did Augustine, and a host of others before and after, have to say about predestination," for instance.

The introductory nature of the work is reflected in the useful glossary of names, writings and events at the back, and in

3. Allison admits (p. 12) that his "topical-chronological" approach is not unique, citing John D. Hannah's *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001, a book that undertakes a similar task in 400 pages.

Allison's freedom to modernize the text of older English translations of non-English works (always footnoted as "The text has been rendered clearer"). The volume virtually mirrors the topical development of Grudem, and provides a chapter-by-chapter chart comparing the two and noting differences. Clearly, Allison's concern is to speak to people approaching the topic from a theological, rather than a historical point of view.

This last point underscores the volume's greatest weakness, while indicating its most practical strength. The limitation is twofold—and arises directly from Allison's methodology. First, tracing the theological development of individual doctrines betrays both the historical context of any one theologian, and the intellectual and literary matrix of that theologian's larger *oeuvre*. Second, theologians are examined, not on their own terms, but according to the framework of modern evangelicalism. These limitations, of course, are compensated by connecting specific theological motifs within the broad scope of doctrinal development and the emergence of a larger Christian tradition.

One cannot but marvel at Allison's judicious selection of sources to represent theological advances over the last two millennia. The choices, he admits, were difficult, but along with the standard *dramatis personae*, one will find reference to lesser known luminaries as well, including the Donatist Tyconius, whose seven rules of biblical interpretation influenced Augustine, or Jesse Penn-Lewis and Neil T. Anderson in the discussion of demons. On the other hand, Boethius appears, but not Bonhoeffer. Such omissions are minor, but inevitable, because Allison's methodology imposes a bias. By placing the emphasis on specific doctrines, rather than chronological development, Allison cannot focus on historical context as much as one might like. While long on theological connections between dominating voices and movements, Allison's work is of necessity short on the historical forces shaping the theological discussion in any one period. Allison's approach allows the reader to see the growth of Christian tradition, but is less helpful in placing that development within its cultural dynamic. Happily, though, *Historical Theology* is intended for the former purpose, not the latter, for which the student may refer to more standard

treatments; and for the general reader, a volume such as Roger Olson's *The Story of Christian Theology* does the trick admirably. But for the busy pastor looking for a clue to the development of the notion of election in the history of the church, or of various views on eternal destinies, or a succinct treatment of the history of biblical interpretation, Allison is a rare treat.

A second limitation of this fine work surrounds the particular grid that is laid upon it. The book is intended to be read in tandem with Grudem's systematics.⁴ How might it have been different had it been based on Calvin's *Institutes*, or Barth's *Dogmatics*, or Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin's (eds.) *Roman Catholic Systematic Theology*? Of course, most theologies follow the same general pattern, but the starting point in this particular endeavor seems to dictate the general direction of the treatment as well. Allison is unapologetically evangelical in his approach, as he tells us in his insightful preface, where he offers six organizing principles that inform his methodology. He is clear that he is surveying the Western Christian tradition, omitting other voices, such as Orthodoxy (p. 5). While Allison demonstrates appropriate sensitivity in handling primary texts, at times North American Calvinist evangelicalism seems to determine the approach in a more intrusive way than it might in a more chronologically historical treatment. A case in point is Allison's treatment of worship, which includes a consideration of Pentecostalism, and contemporary Christian music. While he turns momentarily to Roman Catholic developments after Vatican II and the impact of renewal in mainline denominations, the chapter ends with a brief consideration of the regulative principle of worship (pp. 674–80). More often than not, the narrow end of the funnel in the modern period pours into the pool of American Evangelicalism. In some ways this is part of the book's stated usefulness, connecting contemporary evangelical theology with the wider (and longer) tradition of Christian thought. One laments, though, that a more expansive scope of modern

4. Indeed, Allison (p. 11) suggests that Grudem be read first and then his book consulted for the historical development.

theological issues has not been considered. For instance, no mention is made of black, feminist, or queer theologies, an omission which may not surprise conservative evangelicals, but reveals a significant lacuna in the breadth of discussion.

A book as capacious as this, however, must make selective decisions, and Allison's generally stay within the main flow of the Western theological canon. Though his preferences occasionally show, he seeks to treat all voices fairly, and in the end we hear a vast number of them. All in all, one could not ask for a more useful or more clearly written book to invite evangelicals, and others, to contemplate the rich and varied tradition of Christian theology.

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