

Book Review

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Th 602 History of Christian Thought

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July 18, 2020

Gonzalez's A History of Christian Thought Volume II detailed the historical account of Christianity, a religion once hated and persecuted. The beginnings started from the Jewish perspective and foundational precepts. Within the framework of time, there arose a Jewish man named Jesus who taught disciples and performed miracles, who was killed and martyred, but widely acclaimed as having rose from the dead. His teachings revolutionized Jewish beliefs and began to include not only Jews, but encompassed believers from all ethnicities, races from essentially everyone everywhere who would believe.

The author began with Jews living in Palestine under Roman rule which shaped the context of the Christian history. Throughout Roman occupation, Jewish nationalists clung to the Law and the Torah. Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, made religion an integral part of daily living. The author also identified other sects and mystics who lived during the same period. The religious groups held on to eschatological hopes of a kingly Messiah who would overthrow their enemies and established Israel to her former glory.

Gonzalez described the Greco-Roman world which was the environment that influenced Christianity. After the conquest of Alexander the Great, Greek culture was brought to Palestine and into the entire civilized world. Jewish life became Hellenized, a term ascribed to the absorption of Greek culture. The Greek language, literature, and philosophy became the dominant culture. Even after the spread of the Roman Empire, the Greek influences predominately existed, and the two cultures melted into what was called the Greco-Roman world from which Christianity began its incredible journey.

After the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus His followers recounted stories of His ministry through the oral tradition from which the Christian writings evolved according to the author. These early writings initiated the New Testament canon which became known as the Apostolic Fathers. The Apostolic Fathers were believed to be the writings of associates of the original Apostles. These writings dated back to the first century and included eight written bodies of works which told of the life of the early church and the development of early Christian theology.

According to Gonzalez, in spite of Christian persecutions of the second century, some writers took it upon themselves to defend the Christian faith. The Apologists, as they were called, hoped their writings would be widely read among the educated circles of their culture. The Apologists defended their faith and quelled false and wild allegations and rumors. They also wrote to defeat sophisticated attacks and misconceptions of false practices. Wild stories spread based on gross misunderstandings. The teachers of Christianity were accused of being ignorant, the lowest strata of society and subversively opposed to the state and against the divinity of Caesar.

Along with challenges of being misunderstood, Christians suffered heresies early on and throughout its doctrine. The Apostle Paul addressed Judiazers in his epistles. Judiazers were many and diverse according to Gonzalez. Basically, they thought Christians should follow the Law and the Old Testament, and they refuted the teachings of Paul questioning the Sonship of Christ. In spite of the challenges of heresies, Christianity developed a unified response which was the beginning of church doctrine.

The author noted that the great defenders of the faith arose during the second century as a result of the many attacks on Christianity. The author reported detailed facts concerning

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ideas and beliefs of these early noted theologians, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, and Origen. The third century saw the development of Eastern theology. The Western theology devoted attention to the forgiveness of sins and the nature of the church whose main centers were located in Rome and North Africa. Origen and his followers continued the tradition of the Greek Eastern theological world which dominated through the fourth century.

Gonzalez stated that the fourth century saw a significant turnaround of tolerance toward Christianity and the church. The conversion of the Roman leader, Constantine, caused the persecuted church to become the tolerated church. During this time, several “Fathers” of the faith flourished in their doctrines. Martyrdom was no longer the focus, but, thousands became hermits and took flight into seclusion. Beautiful architecture and lavish liturgical ceremonies saw the best development during this time period. However, this era was not without controversy. The great gathering of the Council of Nicea convened and was attended by three hundred bishops to settle doctrinal issues which resulted in the adoption of the Nicene Creed.

As great as the Nicene Creed was, it did not completely diminish its opposition. Constantine commented that it was the “cement” that held the Empire together. Yet, the controversy continued with opposing theologians, such as, Athanasius and the Cappadocians, staking their claims even under the threat of being exiled. Their theology helped shaped doctrines and questioned future Christological controversies which carried onto the next century.

The author noted the events of two more council, the Council of Ephesus and the Council of Chalcedon which formulated the framework in the development of Christian thought. The accounting of Christian history continued to evolve. Augustine of Hippo was the end of one era

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and the beginning of another. Augustinian theology was met with more controversy and less acceptance. Further theological controversies continued among the upheaval of the fall of the Roman Empire. The social systems and political states as well as intellectual decline were collapsing all at once. The status quo was no more. The Middle Age Renaissance brought about dramatic changes in Christian thought.

Western theology faced more upendings while Eastern faced decline. The Carolingian Renaissance's short duration saw many conflicting issues, like the Virginité of Mary, the Eucharist, and Predestination. This not only did witness the rise of the pope's authority and gain power, it also saw the beginning of a split between pope and the emperor. Christianity in the East felt and followed Greek philosophy influences which brought about divisive thinking. Islam and Moslem began to increase while Christian churches grew small and became conservative.

Gonzalez reported that during the tenth century, it became known as the Dark Age. It reigned in constant turmoil. Different empires engaged in constant warfare. The church became chaotic. Popes were appointed by opposing sovereign rulers and became political puppets. Theologically, the Dark Ages saw a few bright moments shone from some important writings from Gezo, Adso, and Otto. That small light continued to flicker into the eleventh century while intellectual activity fermented and boiled under the surface and came into fruition in the following twelfth century.

The author directly quoted: "The twelfth century brought with itself a new era in the history of Christian thought." During this time, Anselm the Archbishop of Canterbury contributed outstanding theological writings. His method consisted of posing a theological problem then

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solving it, not on the basis of the authority of Scripture, but through the use of reasoning in the mind. Anselm took on rational explanations for the Trinity and the Incarnation. Other prominent theologians contributed to the spiritual awakenings. Heresy and schism among many clashing doctrines erupted during this period of phenomenal intellectual activity.

Gonzalez turned attention to other events of theological development among other religious entities. He pointed to Eastern theological developments mostly led by the Greek Orthodox Byzantine influences on Bulgaria, Russia, and others. These developments reflected major undertakings in religious and political platforms. The Moslem and Islamic domination interfered in church authority. Yet, Christian thought continued to evolve.

The Middle Ages was pointed out to be the golden period during the thirteenth century. The author ascribed to this time the establishment of the Inquisition, the founding of universities, and great steeples of Gothic design. The Aristotelianism thought invaded the West. Impoverished medicants invaded the world. Great cathedrals dotted urban areas with picturesque steeples. This century witnessed the dominating, sometimes murderous force, initiated by the Pope of Innocent. The Inquisition rose to power and enforced physical punishment and revisited the practice of burning and hanging heretics. The reoccurrence of Aristotelianism brought to the forefront in addressing theology through the medium of reason.

In contrast to Aristotelianism, the thirteenth century saw the Augustinian tradition. The views held that Aristotle spent too much occupation of knowledge of the things of the world. Augustinian taught that all knowledge was divine illumination. Those theologians insisted that real knowledge was not derived from bodily senses. Gonzalez noted that this theological trend

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practically ruled throughout the thirteenth century.

Opposition to Augustinian theology held to portions of Aristotelian philosophy, according to the author. A group of those who lined up with this thought were the Dominican School. The foremost and prominent leader of the Dominican School was Thomas Aquinas. The author reported that Thomas Aquinas was without a doubt one of the greatest theologians of all times. His school of followers continued activity well into the twentieth century.

The author stated that Thomas Aquinas was called the "Angelic Doctor." He taught philosophy as a science that can reach the very limits of human reason. He believed in five ways or proofs in the existence of God. He explained that knowledge can be attained from sensory data. Thomas Aquinas supported the Christological notion of the dual nature of Christ.

According to Gonzalez, the latter end of the thirteenth century saw at its close more changes in Christian history. Some followers took Aristotelianism to extreme claiming faith was inferior to reason. The city capital of Constantinople fell to Moslem Istanbul. Dissatisfaction with the institutional church prevailed. The precursors of the Reformation were in theologians John Wycliffe and John Hus. The author presented the close of this era and an ending of its status quo, but the dawning of a great beginning.

The author reported that from the fifteenth century until well into the sixteenth century, the old ways had run its course and it became necessary to venture in new directions. The monarchy continued to influence the church. The papacy was losing the prestige it once had throughout Europe. Believers searched for other more practical ways of being a Christian through mysticism, nominalism, and humanists. There arose a cry to turn the Bible for authority over church tradition.

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Sixteenth century witnessed the evolution of the Reformation Era which swept across the nation of Europe and Eastern theology. The author reported and explained the theology of Martin Luther. His theology became the spark of this fiery period. His ninety-five theses questioned the validity of indulgences which began as a scholarly dispute. Yet, his debate sparked a great commotion in theological circles.

The Reformation begun by Luther sent ripples throughout various parts of Europe. In Switzerland, it was led by Zwingli. The Reformation influenced the Reformed movement. The Reformation inspired the Anabaptist movement. It caused Spiritualists and Rationalists to express their individual theological ideas. The author commented, "The founders of the true great Protestant traditions, Luther and Zwingli, were followed by others who at once systematized traditions." Melancton and Agricola debated Lutheran theology. The Formula of Concord was a meeting to put an end to division within the Lutheran camp. However, different variations of the same opposing ideals reappeared. Yet, the Formula of Concord did bring some measure of success in putting together the Melanctonian spirit and Lutheran orthodoxy.

Gonzalez reported on the impact of John Calvin had on Christian thought. Calvin made significant developments in the Reformation. He constructed Protestant theology. He believed theology was approached through soteriology. He systematized and formulated the Reformed movement. His critics claimed he was too rigid and too systematic.

The Reformation continued to expand. It became the framework for theological development. Reformation in England was dominated by political events and the varying attitudes

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of the monarchy. The monarch went back and forth between Roman Catholicism and the Reformation. It struggled amidst political upheavals.

Later effects of the Reformation were felt with the Roman Catholic church and continued to exert influence on the Lutheran and Calvinist followers long after the leaders' deaths. Inner reformation swept through the Catholic church and was the Counterreformation. In continental Europe, the seventeenth century saw a process of clarification of doctrinal positions within the Lutheran orthodoxy. Calvinists were mostly associated with the Reformed movement, but it extended across many areas, Scotland, France, the Netherlands, in Germany and Switzerland and became involved with the Puritan movement.

The author stated that the focus of Protestant theology began to rediscover the profound personal implication of the Christian faith. Gonzalez went on to describe and explain the many theologians whose ideas and beliefs furthered the history of Christianity. As the modern centuries came into existence with the Industrial Revolution, technological ideas, scientific

discoveries influenced traditional Christian views. The theological focus became personal. People desired a more heart felt experience with God. These experiences impacted and expanded the evolution of Christian thought.

Gonzalez, Justo, A History of Christian Thought, Volume II, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN