



CHRISTIAN THINKERS

*A Beginner's Guide to Over Seventy
Leading Theologians Through the Ages*

COLIN BLAKELY



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Colin Blakely was born in Ayrshire, Scotland, and is now the editor of *The Church of England Newspaper*. After studying theology at London Bible College, he worked for BBC local radio, and was then deputy editor at *Today Magazine*. He is a writer, editor and broadcaster, and his journalistic work has taken him all over the world. He is married to Libby and they live in Epping with their daughter.



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*To Libby, Aimee, and Naomi,
my three favourite girls
in the whole world*

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PREFACE

When Christ ascended after his earthly ministry, he had not left us with all the answers to the questions that were raised by his extraordinary life and message. These questions have taxed the minds of theologians for centuries but as understanding has grown so has a deeper understanding of the significance of Jesus Christ, his life, death, resurrection and ascension.

It has been said that the story contained in the Bible is so simple that everyone without exception can comprehend its message, while at the same time it is so profound that it challenges even the most brilliant minds. While many Christians are happy to live with the plain message of the Gospel story, this book is an effort to entice people to a deeper level of understanding about what our faith means and how we have come to understand it.

The style of the following pages may be light-hearted, but this should not be taken to mean that any part of the information is not intended to be serious. This is not a satire on theology, more of a simple introduction to the vast subject. Indeed, the concept first arose while we were considering the construction of a Theology Page in *The Church of England Newspaper*. We had already signed up an impressive range of theologians who would write learned articles aimed primarily at the clergy. However, some of our readers were not clergy and might not be interested in the finer points of the *Didache*, for example. So we came up with the idea of the articles you are about to read. I took a range of theologians from the early Church through to the present day and answered the questions that non-professionals might ask. It proved to be immensely popular with our readers, and so for them and for you, here is the collection.

It is my hope not only that this slim volume will explain some of those trivial worries that sometimes afflict people while listening to a sermon

(“What exactly is the Nicene Creed?”) but also that it will stimulate fresh thinking about theology. At the very least, it should allow you to lose that blank expression while chatting to your clergy. There is here also the opportunity to find out a little more about how the Church has developed over the last 2,000 years, so even if you are repelled by the very thought of church history, you might find this a painless way to get something of an overview.

What exactly is a theologian? Conventionally, theology is the study of the nature or being of God. Not all of the people on the following pages are theologians in the strict sense, some may be biblical scholars or important church leaders, but they have all molded the way Christians have looked on the various aspects of their beliefs. In a sense we are all theologians as we all, at some point or other, reflect on God. This book recounts how that thinking has taken place in others as well as telling how the Church has formulated its theology down through the years. The following pages reflect a personal selection of some of these leading figures and your favorite theologian may not be here. However, it is my hope that these articles will give the reader an introduction to the range of theological thought of the last two millennia.

I am indebted to a number of people, not least Andrew Carey who helped formulate the idea for these articles in the first place, to my wife and daughter for giving me the time and space to devote to writing them, to Jonathan Wynne-Jones for his comments on the manuscript and also to Liz Marsh who first had the idea of putting them all in a book. It has been a pleasure to work with her and all the staff at SPCK. Of course, while I am grateful for the input of these people, the final version is my responsibility.

There are of course hundreds, if not thousands, of other works on the subject, but there are three that stand out because they give a great overview to the whole subject. The first is Tony Lane’s *Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought* and the second is the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. I refer to many other works, often single volumes concerning a particular theologian, but have to record a debt of gratitude to these two books in particular. The third is not actually a book about the theologians, but a resource that is unrivalled: the *Christian Ethereal Library*, an Internet resource run by Wheaton College. Visit them on the web at www.ccel.org/ and you can read the full text of many of the historic works mentioned here.

It is my hope that after reading this book you will have a greater comprehension of not only what we believe as Christians, but why we believe it. Doctrine has been forged at the coalface of conflict, oppression and suffering, and many, in particular from the early Church, paid with their lives in their search for the significance of the life of Christ. We are in debt to them, and our lives and faith will be all the richer by knowing and understanding what they went through for the sake of understanding the faith.

Colin Blakely

TIMELINE

<i>Year</i>	<i>Biography</i>	<i>Major world events</i>
35–107	Ignatius of Antioch	
54		Nero succeeds Claudius
64		Great Fire of Rome
69–155	Polycarp	
70		Titus sacks Jerusalem
130–200	Irenaeus	
160–220	Tertullian	
185–254	Origen	
250		Christians are persecuted in Britain
290–373	Athanasius	
303		Diocletian decrees persecution of Christians
312		Constantine becomes Emperor
313		Constantine legalizes Christianity
–336	Arius	
329–90	Gregory of Nazianzus	
345–420	Jerome	
347–407	John Chrysostom	
351–451	Nestorius	
354–430	Augustine of Hippo	
360–420	Pelagius	
360		Julian tries to restore paganism
391		Theodosius bans paganism
395		Roman Empire divided between East and West
410		Rome sacked by Goths
–444	Cyril of Alexandria	
446		Saxons arrive in Britain
520		Dionysius creates AD dating
540–604	Gregory the Great	
563		Columbus establishes monastery on Iona
604		First church of St Paul in London

— G R E A T C H R I S T I A N T H I N K E R S —

<i>Year</i>	<i>Biography</i>	<i>Major world events</i>
–609	Augustine of Canterbury	
614–80	Hilda	
622		Islam founded
638		Jerusalem captured by Muslims
655–750	John of Damascus	
673–735	The Venerable Bede	
739		Vikings take Lindisfarne
959		England united under Edgar
961		First monastery on Mount Athos
966		Poland converts
990		Russian Orthodox Church established
1033–1109	Anselm	
1050		Great Schism (between East and West)
1079–1142	Peter Abelard	
1090–1179	Bernard of Clairvaux	
1098–1179	Hildegard of Bingen	
1150		Crusaders launch assault on Jerusalem
1182–1226	Francis of Assisi	
1225–74	Thomas Aquinas	
1265–1308	John Duns Scotus	
1275		Marco Polo arrives in China
1330–84	John Wycliffe	
1342–1413	Julian of Norwich	
1348		Black Death in Europe
1374–1415	Jan Hus	
1378		Great Schism (between rival popes)
1431		Joan of Arc burned at the stake
1453		Turks capture Constantinople
1466–1536	Desiderius Erasmus	
1476		Caxton's presses unveiled
1483–1546	Martin Luther	
1484–1531	Ulrich Zwingli	
1489–1556	Thomas Cranmer	
1491–1551	Martin Bucer	
1491–1536	Ignatius Loyola	
1492		Columbus arrives in America
1495–1536	William Tyndale	
1497–1560	Philipp Melancthon	
1502–55	Nicholas Ridley	
1506–52	Francis Xavier	

<i>Year</i>	<i>Biography</i>	<i>Major world events</i>
1509–64	John Calvin	
1513–72	John Knox	
1515–82	Teresa of Avila	
1522–71	John Jewel	
1532		Henry VIII starts Reformation in England
1542–91	John of the Cross	
1554–1600	Richard Hooker	
1555–1626	Lancelot Andrewes	
1581–1656	James Ussher	
1600		Shakespeare writes <i>Hamlet</i>
1615–91	Richard Baxter	
1620		Puritans arrive in New England
1623–62	Blaise Pascal	
1628–88	John Bunyan	
1633		Galileo condemned
1642		English Civil War
1656		St Peter's, Rome, completed
1703–58	Jonathan Edwards	
1703–91	John Wesley	
1707		Union of Scotland and England
1759–1836	Charles Simeon	
1768–1834	Friedrich Schleiermacher	
1769		James Watt patents steam invention
1776		US Declaration of Independence
1779		French revolution
1801–90	John Henry Newman	
1807		Slave trade abolished in British Empire
1813–55	Søren Kierkegaard	
1815		Napoleon defeated at Waterloo
1822–89	Albrecht Ritschl	
1840		First postage stamps
1848		Communist manifesto launched
1851–1930	Adolf von Harnack	
1859		Darwin publishes <i>Origin of Species</i>
1861		American Civil War
1865		Salvation Army founded
1870		Vatican I
1881–1955	Pierre Teilhard de Chardin	

— G R E A T C H R I S T I A N T H I N K E R S —

<i>Year</i>	<i>Biography</i>	<i>Major world events</i>
1884–1976	Rudolf Bultmann	
1886–1968	Karl Barth	
1886–1965	Paul Tillich	
1892–1971	Reinhold Niebuhr	
1899		Boer War
1904–84	Karl Rahner	
1906–45	Dietrich Bonhoeffer	
1908–	Helmut Thielicke	
1914		First World War
1918		Church property confiscated in Russia
1926–	Jürgen Moltmann	
1928–	Gustavo Gutiérrez	
1928–	Hans Küng	
1928–	Wolfhart Pannenberg	
1929		Wall Street Crash
1929–68	Martin Luther King, Jr.	
1938–	Leonardo Boff	
1945		Second World War
1948		State of Israel established
1962–5		Vatican II
1965		Vietnam War
1967		Arab–Israeli War
1969		First man on the moon
1992		Church of England ordains women priests

PETER ABELARD

As in Abelard and Héloïse? That's the one. While he was a brilliant scholar he was also one of the most annoying characters of the medieval Church – just ask any of his contemporaries.

When did he live? He was born near Nantes in France in 1079 and died in 1142 (or 1143). Perhaps the fact that he was the son of a knight gave him a profound arrogance; perhaps it was just in his character. He made his name studying theology under two very influential figures, Roscellin and William of Champeaux, the debate at that time being on 'universals'.

You mean universalism? No, that came much later. This debate was philosophical and the two sides were split on whether these 'universals' contained any reality or whether they were just abstract concepts. For example, some said, following Plato, that there are universal realities, such as Tree, Man and Sea. So when you see a tree, for example, it derives from the bigger universal reality. But the opponents believed that 'tree', 'man' and 'sea' were only names and that the things we call by these names derived no reality from universals. The 'real' Tree had nothing to do with the yew in your garden.

Sounds complex. Indeed it was, but Abelard came up with a compromise. He said we call these things 'tree', 'man' and 'sea' because they embody characteristics of the universal. This new way of looking at things has been compared to the impact that Darwin had when he first wrote about the *Origin of Species*. For Abelard it made his reputation. In fact, it seemed to go to his head, because he quit school and set up his own classes, to which his former fellow pupils flocked. This did not go over well with his teachers, and that was a pattern that was to continue.

So he had no further need for teachers himself. Not quite. He did go to study under Anselm, but even then he could be scathing of his superiors.

He said of the great teacher: ‘He had a remarkable command of words, but their meaning was worthless and devoid of all sense.’ That’s not a guaranteed way to impress one’s elders.

How did Anselm respond? He didn’t get a chance. Abelard again set up rival classes and drew away his students. However, Anselm made it clear that he had outstayed his welcome and Abelard then went to Paris.

Where did Héloïse come in? At this point. Abelard got a job as tutor to the niece of Fulbert, a canon of the famous Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Now Abelard was thirty-six at this point and the niece, Héloïse, was a teenager. The two fell in love and Héloïse got pregnant. This outraged Fulbert, and the pregnancy threatened Abelard’s career, for he was in minor orders by this time. So he agreed to marry Héloïse secretly; but when word of her condition spread, she was sent off to a convent, much to her distress.

And Fulbert was pacified. Not a bit. He was raging. He actually went so far as to hire a gang of hit men, who paid Abelard a visit in the night and castrated him.

An extreme remedy. They don’t come much more extreme than that. Anyway, Abelard took the hint and became a monk, never seeing Héloïse again, but they did correspond later in life. They were reunited in death by being buried together in Paris.

How romantic. And did Abelard finish his life quietly? No. It was after all this that he wrote his most important work: *Sic et Non* (Yes and No), and it is for this that he will be eternally remembered. Abelard introduced formal logic into the Church’s theology. The idea of using logic had already been popularized by an Italian lawyer, Gratian, who built it into the canon law process. But Abelard went one step further and applied it to theology.

This was a new idea? Until that time tradition and Scripture were the two important tests in working out theology, but he said that these alone were not sufficient to answer major theological questions. Logic had to be introduced to deal with such dilemmas. *Sic et Non* followed the lawyer’s method of asking questions, and this reflected Abelard’s own style. He said: ‘The first key to wisdom is assiduous and frequent questioning. For by doubting we come in enquiry and by enquiry we arrive at the truth.’

What was the response to this approach? At the same time there was a man called Bernard, from Clairvaux, who thought that this was the height of heresy. He tried to do intellectually to Abelard what Fulbert's thugs did to him physically. Bernard wrote to the Pope to complain and succeeded in getting Abelard's ideas condemned at the Council of Sens. Abelard was not pleased and set off to appeal to the Pope directly.

Did he succeed? He died en route. However, it is a safe bet to assume that he would not have been successful, because the Pope was a friend of Bernard, and probably listened to him. It is interesting to note, nevertheless, that one of Abelard's students, Peter Lombard, employed the same technique of using logic when he wrote his book *The Sentences*. Bernard approved of that and the book became a classic.

Don't mention Fulbert.

Most likely to say Are you getting all of this down?

Least likely to say I think Bernard might have a point here.

LANCELOT ANDREWES

He was a famous bishop? Yes, he was bishop of Winchester, but this Barking boy (who lived from 1555 to 1626), from East London, played an important part in the development of Anglicanism.

How so? Elizabeth I took a liking to him and invited him to become bishop of Salisbury and then bishop of Ely, but he turned both of these down. When James I took to the throne, he too was impressed by him and made him bishop of Chichester, then Ely and, finally, Winchester. But just before he took up the first of these posts (in 1604) he was appointed one of the translators of the Authorized Version of the Bible.

Was this just because he was friendly with the Royals? Not at all, he was fluent in no fewer than fifteen languages, so he knew a thing or two about translation. He concentrated on the first five books of the Old Testament and the history books.

But he was well connected? Yes he was. This could have been because he was educated at Merchant Taylors' and Pembroke Hall, Cambridge. But perhaps his character is best seen in the fact that he was appointed to the commission investigating Archbishop Abbot, of Canterbury.

Why was he investigating the Archbishop? Because of an unfortunate accident. The Archbishop had accidentally shot a gamekeeper while out hunting, and of course there had to be an investigation.

And he was a defender of Anglicanism. He certainly was. He first went with James I to Scotland, where they tried to get the Scots to accept the episcopacy, but it was a doomed attempt. Back home, he tried to develop a distinctive Anglican theology.

What was his agenda? He was acting against the Puritans mainly and

wanted to promote what he regarded as ‘a reasonable faith’. He didn’t like the Puritans, so he tried to popularize the Roman heritage of the Church. He also opposed Calvin’s theology, and his teaching, in particular, reflected the Roman way, especially where it concerned the Eucharist.

So he was a High-Churchman? He didn’t see it like that, he saw himself as a regular Anglican, but used incense and sacrificial language at the Eucharist. What he was trying to do was to point out the middle way that identified Anglicanism.

Did he write any books? Yes, he wrote some works in defense of the king (surprise, surprise) and in support of the Oath of Allegiance, which had come in after the Gunpowder Plot. But his most famous work is probably *Ninety-Six Sermons*, which is, as the innovative title suggests, a collection of ninety-six of his sermons.

Don’t mention Gamekeepers, Calvin, the Scots.

Do mention Royalty, Bible translation, the Anglican way.