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Patristic study debunked – or redivivus? A review article

Andrew Gregory

The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies

Susan Ashbrook Harvey & David G. Hunter (eds)

Oxford: OUP, 2008. xxvii + 1020 pp. hb. £85, ISBN 978-0-19-927156-6
pb. £30, ISBN 978-0-19-959652-2

Ancient Christian Doctrine Series

Thomas C. Oden (Series Editor)

Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009-10. hb. 5 vols, \$250, ISBN 978-0-8308-2530-1. Details of individual volumes can be found at the end of the paper.

I. Introduction

It is just over a century since H. B. Swete published a small book called *Patristic Study*, one of a number of volumes in a series entitled *Handbooks for the Clergy*.¹ The aim of his little book, wrote Swete, then Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, was ‘to draw the attention of the younger clergy of the Church of England to the vast store of wisdom which has been bequeathed to them by the ancient Catholic Church’.² This need not mean, however, that it was only the younger clergy of his day who were neglecting the riches of the ancient Catholic Church. He continues: ‘Times are changed since George Herbert wrote “The country parson hath read the Fathers also and the Schoolmen and the later writers, or a good proportion of all”.’³ Such widespread reading, Swete had the grace to admit, was no longer possible, just as it seems hardly possible for most clergy today. But, he continued, clergy should read at least some of the Fathers, and prescribes a reading list of texts in their original language that few academic theologians who do not specialise in Patristics, let alone busy clergy, are likely to have read today.

Such reading, Swete argues, is not only stimulating but also of great practical value, for ‘the parish priest of the twentieth century will find in the greater writers of the Ancient Church much direct help for his daily work; sermons, catchesings, pastoral intercourse, personal life will be enriched by converse with

1 H. B. Swete, *Patristic Study* (London: Longmans, 1901). The series *Handbooks for the Clergy* was edited by A. W. Robinson.

2 This quotation is from the author’s foreword. It is found in the front matter, on what (if numbered) would be p. vii.

3 *Patristic Study*, 2.

the pastors and teachers of other times.⁴ Indeed, he tells his readers, 'There are few departments of theological research in which the Fathers can fail to render valuable help to those who know how to make them yield up their treasure', and he gives as examples biblical textual criticism, the history of the canon, the history of biblical interpretation, the progress of Christian thought and the study of liturgy.⁵

'Nor', he continues, 'is it only to students in the stricter sense that the Fathers can render service; they may be turned to practical account by the working parish priest. The preacher will find in their pages the grand models of ancient pulpit oratory; the pastor may look to them for guidance in problems which are common to all ages of the Church.'⁶ Thus the benefits of patristic study to which Swete directs his readers are practical as well as academic, if such a distinction may be sustained: 'If a knowledge of the Fathers may be of value to the clergy in forming an opinion on disputed points of ritual and Church order, it will help them even more surely on the side of pastoralia – the practical conduct of the parish priest's life and work. The majority of the Fathers were not only writers and preachers, but diligent and experienced guides of souls.'⁷

Swete's basic point, that the Christian Church in one age should learn from the wisdom (and, we might add, the mistakes) of those who have gone before, can hardly be disputed. Neither does it seem possible to underestimate the particular importance of learning from our predecessors from those early centuries in which the canon of Scripture was formed, the Catholic Creeds were formulated, and the core Christian doctrines of God, Christ and salvation assumed much of the content and shape that they retain today. Yet much has changed since Swete wrote, and those who would echo his message today must do so in the face not only of even greater ignorance of the history of the early church than he found among the younger clergy of his day, but also of great changes in how that history is studied today, not to mention the even greater changes in our understanding of the world and the place of the human race within it.

One late twentieth-century scholar whose work exemplifies one influential approach to such developments was the late Maurice Wiles, a former Regius Professor of Theology in the University of Oxford. Like Swete, Wiles was an Anglican priest who was strongly committed to both the Church and the Academy. Like Swete, Wiles was clear on the importance of patristic study for the contemporary church even if there were points at which his conclusions were at odds with those of his earlier Cambridge counterpart. Reflection upon the early doctrinal tradition, he wrote, is 'a necessary element in any satisfactory approach to Christian doctrine, because of the all-pervasive influence that the patristic formulation of doctrine has had on the whole subsequent history of Christian thought'.⁸

4 *Ibid.*, 3.

5 *Ibid.*, 148–149.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, 178.

8 Maurice Wiles, *Working Papers in Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1976), viii.

Unlike Swete, however, Wiles concluded that the changes and increased historical consciousness of his own day and the awareness to which it has led require that statements of fundamental belief – including those found in Scripture and in the classical Christian Creeds and other key formulations of Christian belief – must be understood in relation to the ‘particular cultural situation’ of their time. Thus, he observes, ‘we are all today, in one degree or another, historical relativists.’⁹ Therefore, although committed to the relevance of patristic theology for the contemporary Church, Wiles argued not only that the role that it had to play was more indirect than previously had been claimed, but also that it ‘can never play a directly decisive part in what must be the increasingly complex task of determining contemporary belief and practice’.¹⁰

Wiles’s theological interests made him very clearly a patristic scholar, despite his acute awareness of the need to understand patristic theology in its historical context. Yet many scholars who work today in this field show little if any interest in how the theological claims of the Fathers may or may not have any bearing on the task of Christian theology today, as understood either by Swete or by Wiles.

II. *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*

Perhaps nowhere may such changes in the discipline be seen more clearly than in the title and contents of the recently published *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*. Unlike Swete’s handbook, this volume is written not for clergy but for academics, and is intended to give non-specialists an authoritative introduction to various aspects of its subject-matter, so this difference in intended readership and purpose should be taken into account when comparing the two works. Yet it is possible to argue that the most fundamental difference between the volumes is neither their intended readership, nor their intended purpose nor even their respective size(!), but the difference between the way in which their various authors conceptualise the subject matter that they introduce. For if ‘patristics’ may be defined as ‘systematic reflection upon Christian theology, as propounded by early theologians whose teachings are considered authoritative and binding’, its nature as a self-consciously theological and ecclesiastical enterprise becomes clear, and the distinction between it and the contemporary academic discipline of Early Christian Studies may be readily seen.

Elizabeth Clark explains the difference in her important and programmatic opening essay, ‘From Patristics to Early Christian Studies’. The term ‘patristics’, she notes, fell increasingly into disuse in the late twentieth century, as did the way in which its subject matter was conceived. Not only was the word rejected as a sign of ecclesiasticism, maleness and notions of orthodoxy from which some scholars wished to dissociate themselves, but the subject matter to which it referred came to be taught increasingly in the humanities departments of secular universities and colleges. There the relevance of religious belief was less signifi-

9 Ibid., 92–94, quotations on 93.

10 *Working Papers*, 107.

cant than it had been when the subject was taught in confessional contexts, and its concerns were less encumbered by contemporary theological disputes. There too it was taught often by those whose training was in classics and ancient history, not theology or religious studies, which meant that it was conceptualised less often as a branch of church history (or, we might add, theology) than as an aspect of late ancient history and literature. Previously, the authors studied had often been treated, albeit often not uncritically, as repositories of theological wisdom that might be mined in order to inform contemporary theological thinking. Now instead, however, those authors came to be interrogated and understood by means of the same questions and methodological approaches as were used by scholars working on other ancient authors. Hence they were approached not as theologians writing for posterity, but as historical figures operating in particular historical contexts in which their writings must be understood. Further, those who treated them in this way were now increasingly scholars who might themselves have little interest in how these Early Christian or late antique authors and their debates might or might not contribute to the ongoing theological thinking of the contemporary Church.

This is the background against which the contents of this volume should be read. It is not, of course, a perspective that is unique to this volume, and it may be seen to inform the perspective and approach of other recent books in this field.¹¹ Yet this is a substantial and magisterial reference work that is likely to achieve prominence and therefore to have a significant impact upon the further development of the field in a way that many other handbooks and similar reference books will not. At their best, its contributors offer not only a critical analysis of recent scholarship in their field, but also help to advance the discussion with original work of their own. At their worst, they provide at least useful if not groundbreaking entrées to the topics that they discuss. Their 45 essays are arranged in eight parts.

Part I, Prolegomena, includes Elizabeth Clark's essay on the development of the discipline, a complementary essay by Mark Vessey on different literary approaches to the study of Early Christian texts, and a survey by Karen King on diversity and competing identities within ancient Christianity and how modern historians address the issues that they raise. Part II, 'Evidence: Material and Textual', introduces the sub-disciplines of archaeology, the study of visual culture, epigraphy, and palaeography and codicology, whereas Part III, 'Identities', offers

11 For example, note also the title of another important reference book, *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, edited by Frances Young, Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: CUP, 2004) and the understanding of the volume that its editors set out in its preface. Its subject-matter, they write, has traditionally been studied by students of Christian theology and Christian scholars with doctrinal and ecclesiological interests, and who refer to these texts as 'patristic'. 'It is not intended to ignore the concerns of this clientele' (xi.), they continue, but their hope is to reach also beyond theologically-interested readers to others who wish to study these texts in their wider late-antique context.

overviews of some of the groups whom scholars have identified or postulated on the basis of such material and textual evidence as is extant. Part IV, 'Regions', divides the West into studies of Italy, Gaul and Spain, and of North Africa, and the East into studies of Greece and Asia Minor, of Egypt and Palestine, and of Syria and Mesopotamia. Part V, 'Structures and Authorities', has essays on Clergy and Laity, the Biblical Canon, Creeds, Councils and Canons, Church and Empire, Women and Gender, and Monasticism, whereas Part VI, 'Expressions of Christian Culture', considers Early Christian Apocryphal Literature, Apologetics, Homiletics, Early Christian Historians and Historiography, Martyr Passions and Hagiography, Poetry and Hymnography (with separate essays on each of the Greek, Latin and Syriac traditions) and also Christian philosophy. Part VII, 'Ritual, Piety and Practice' includes discussions of Christian Initiation, Eucharistic Liturgy, Prayer, Asceticism, Penance, Martyrdom and the Cult of the Saints and Pilgrimage. The final section, 'Part VIII, Theological Themes', has essays on the Interpretation of Scripture, the Doctrine of God, Christ and Christologies, the Doctrine of Creation and, finally, Early Christian Ethics. There then follows a bibliographical essay which introduces standard reference works, dictionaries, series of texts and translations, and other tools for research in Early Christian Studies, and the book is rounded off by indexes of subjects, persons, and biblical citations (but not, surprisingly, citations from other early Christian texts).

As will be clear from this list of entries, there is much here of interest for readers whose interests may be primarily theological rather than historical, but the consistent approach to the subject matter is that of the research-lead secular university, not that of the theological college, seminary or church. Readers whose interests are theologically or ecclesiastically orientated will find much here that is of value, but also important questions with which they will need to grapple if the contemporary church is to continue to draw with integrity and with profit on the riches of its past. This handbook is a very impressive resource, and the editors are to be congratulated for assembling a fine team of scholars, making sure that they do not repeat material covered by others, and producing a substantial and significant work that is much greater than the sum of its parts.

III. *Early Christian Doctrine*

A very different and much more doctrinally and theologically driven approach to the study of early Christian literature (and it is literature, rather than other material remains, on which it draws) may be found in the five volume series, *Early Christian Doctrine*. Its volumes are similar in outlook, format and content to the companion series, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, so readers already familiar with that series will understand what I mean when I say that it is the doctrinal equivalent to that earlier biblically-focussed work. It is, explains the series editor, Thomas Oden, 'a five-volume collection of doctrinal definitions organized around the key phrases of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed... as viewed by the foremost ancient Christian writers.' The project, in other words, is very much a work of patristics, as traditionally conceived. It draws on the 'prized

ore' which consists of 'the most crucial doctrinal passages of key consensual interpreters of the early Christian centuries',¹² the early Christian intellectuals known as Fathers because in their 'consensual interpretation of canonical Scripture they were ... widely regarded by believers as trustworthy protectors and engenderers of apostolic faith' (xxi).

Oden scarcely acknowledges many of the questions and issues that are addressed by scholars who might be identified as working in Early Christian Studies, although one might assume that he has in mind at least some of their work when he refers to the presumption that historical knowledge is 'limited to reductionist premises and pseudo-scientific methods' that are based on 'ever-narrowing secularist premise' which he associates with 'the speculative excesses and spiritual limitations and hubris of much recent academic theology' (xix). This is strong polemic which readers can hardly ignore, whether they agree with it or not, but it seems better to concentrate on what Oden claims that the series is intended to offer, which is what he spends most of his preface explaining, rather than to focus too much on his disparaging remarks about other approaches to which he contrasts that of these five volumes. They are intended, he tells us, for a wider audience than students of 'the highly technical and specialized scholarly study of patristic studies as conceived in the university' (xvii), so should be tested according to their central purpose: to reintroduce 'ordinary believers' to 'classic Christian doctrine' (viii) and to allow 'nonprofessional readers' to benefit from such ancient wisdom' (vii).

One important point that needs to be made is that Oden does acknowledge (albeit only very briefly) that there was some diversity of opinion 'within the wide and ranging boundaries of common orthodoxy' (xvii) and that the different ways in which 'the truth of Christianity' may be expressed legitimately 'are often strongly affected by wide varieties of social environments and contexts' (xviii). Hence, it would seem, Oden accepts Wiles's point that all (or most¹³) expressions of Christian faith are necessarily historically conditioned. This is important, as is his reference to the 'wide and ranging boundaries of common orthodoxy', for it shows that Oden's repeated remarks about the faith that Christians have always and everywhere shared cannot refer to a specific and definite list of doctrinal definitions, such as the Nicene Creed might be taken to provide, even if this point is not clearly developed in his preface. To take but one article of the

12 Thomas C. Oden, 'General Introduction', in Gerald L. Bray, *We Believe in One God*, vii.

13 It is hard to know what significance to ascribe to Oden's use of the word 'often' in this context. It seems hard to believe that it can imply that he thought that some expressions of Christian theology were not affected by the social (and therefore historical) environment and context of the person who articulated them and the people with whom he or she was seeking to communicate. Therefore the word may perhaps best be seen as an unnecessary qualifier that ought to be dropped in a future edition. If the rhetorical function of the word is intended to express the claim that Christian beliefs are not merely historically conditioned, but refer to the person or action of a God who is outside human history and therefore neither historically conditioned nor contingent, that point might be made in a different way.

Creed as an example, we do not know whether the authors of the gospels according to Matthew, Mark and John believed in the incarnation as a means of explaining how Jesus was both God and man, and we might very well argue that they did not, even if we take their gospels to claim that Jesus said and did what only God could say or do and therefore exhibit what may be properly be called a high Christology. Lay readers at whom this series is primarily aimed might easily miss the significance of this observation, for Oden's emphasis on apparently universally held beliefs might be thought to obscure it. Yet it does mean those who might place much more emphasis on diversity within the ancient Church and on the merits of reading different texts in the light of the particular historical circumstances in which they were composed and transmitted cannot accuse Oden of denying the importance of these issues, however grudging and oblique his acceptance of these points may be.

It would be wrong, however, as I have noted above, to evaluate these volumes and the approach that they encapsulate only according to the criteria of the predominantly historical and perhaps historicist approach of the modern secular university and by the particular questions that are prominent in the field of Early Christian Studies. Christian theologians can hardly ignore such questions if they wish to engage with anyone who is aware of them, whether or not they would think of themselves as fellow believers, but it is possible to engage with such questions while not allowing the entire task of theology to be shaped and determined by them. Or, to put it another way, it is as much the role of the theologian to build up the faith of the Church as to engage with those who might question the historical or philosophical foundations on which its beliefs are at least partially based. In this context, it is important to note that *Early Christian Doctrine* is intended to be a resource for those who are already Christians and who wish to reflect further on the core Christian beliefs expressed and encapsulated in the Creed. It is not an attempt to explain how the Creed came into being, and it draws on writers both earlier and later than the fourth century when the Creed received more or less the form in which modern translations represent it today, but an illustration of the different ways in which the claims that it makes have been articulated and understood by some of those theologians whom, with hindsight, the later Church has identified as authoritative exponents of its beliefs about who God is and how he has been and continues to be at work in the world. Thus the book illustrates what Christians believe or have believed, with particular reference to the form in which those beliefs were encapsulated in the fourth century, and has continued to be of importance ever since, not least through its continuing use in the liturgy; it sets out neither to analyse how those beliefs came about, nor how they have been variously questioned, developed or upheld ever since.

Oden's series introduction appears only in volume one, and volume five concludes with a useful set of biographical sketches of authors and brief description of anonymous texts drawn upon in the compilation of the volumes, together with a timeline of patristic authors and the places where they wrote. Otherwise, the structure of all five volumes is the same. Each begins with an introductory

essay by the editor, but consists mainly of excerpts arranged to offer a phrase-by-phrase commentary on the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. A table of contents at the beginning of the volume offers readers an overview of its subject-matter and is complemented by a more detailed listing at the end. Each section of the Creed is presented in parallel columns in Greek, Latin and English, then put in historical context by the editor of the volume in a short discursive essay designed to provide a framework in which the following excerpts may be understood. Those excerpts account for the majority of each volume and range in length from as few as one or two sentences to as much as fifteen to twenty sentences in total. Most are presented as if they can speak largely for themselves, without detailed contextualization, and have been chosen because are considered not to require extensive explanatory comment.

Each excerpt has its own heading, in capital letters printed in bold, which allows the reader to see at a glance what is on offer. This makes the book easy to navigate, but accentuates the degree to which this series offers a compilation of only loosely connected observations, not a systematic elucidation of how a particular ancient Christian author articulated his understanding of any of the claims made in the Creed. Readers who might wish to see the context from which any excerpt is drawn are given the references and bibliographical information that they need to read it in its original context, but I suspect that few of the non-specialist readers for whom the series is intended will use it in that way. This need not, however, diminish the value of having the excerpts collected together in this way, nor their potential (to quote John McGuckin, whose enthusiasm and excitement about the power of theological understanding to transform the believer is palpable and contagious) to help the disciple 'ascend even into the presence of God; being transfigured, by the grace of God, so as to pass from mere comprehension into godly illumination'.¹⁴ It merely underlines the inherent limitations of the chosen format, and suggests that it may be of most use for Christian readers seeking brief devotional thoughts rather than a textbook discussion of historical theology. Such devotional reading clearly has an important place, and can play a significant role in Christian instruction, but it raises questions about who will buy these books and how they will be read. Writing in a British context, it is hard to imagine many lay Christians spending the required price for this series, even though the production standards are high and the volumes are handsome books. Perhaps they will come into their own not as printed works, but when they are digitized and made available in a searchable form – but even then, at least in the UK, I wonder who it is who will read them.

Such differences of emphasis (and they are, in the main, differences of emphasis rather than substance) as may be found in each of the volumes are most readily apparent in the introductory essays and other editorial matter. The editors are all agreed, for example, on the central role of Scripture in the formulation of patristic theology. In the case of Angelo di Berardino, this means that

14 *We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ*, xxi.

he draws extensively on the New Testament when discussing the origins of the Church, its practices and beliefs, although he does not explicitly address the nature or authority of Scripture as such. He also implies a high degree of continuity rather than discontinuity between the writings of the New Testament and other early Christian literature and, although aware of the need to situate texts in their historical contexts and to recognise differences between the teaching of Jesus and the life of the institutional Church,¹⁵ makes nevertheless the astounding claim that the origins of the threefold ministry are to be found in the teaching of Jesus himself.¹⁶ Gerald Bray, by contrast, is explicit about the authority of Scripture, but seems to make this claim in a different way from his colleagues when he appears to present the Fathers as if they were proto-Protestants with proto-angelical understandings of what the authority of Scripture might entail.¹⁷ Linked closely to this is Bray's emphasis on the propositional nature of Christian belief, as seen in his discussion of what the Fathers meant by the words 'We/I believe'. For Bray the emphasis is on propositional statements to which believers offer their assent, a 'clearly defined and coherent set of beliefs contained in Christian Scriptures'.¹⁸ McGuckin and Elowsky, however, note the essentially doxological nature of the Creed, rather than reduce it to only a list of statements of belief. Thus, as McGuckin observes, 'the expression of the beliefs of the early church was always a question of dynamic confession ("praise" is how we moderns should translate that word) rather than academic systematization'. Statements of faith were expressed in liturgical forms, he argues, 'long before they arrived at the stage of literary doctrinal formulations'. Thus, 'the creeds were first and foremost baptismal prayers long before they became conciliar tests of faith to stand against and remedy schools of thought that had been rejected as either peripheral or obnoxious by the common body of believers'.¹⁹ Or, as Elowsky observes, 'the ancient Christian faith was as much lived as it was confessed. It was

15 *We Believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church*, xxv.

16 *We Believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church*, xvi. He writes: 'according to the command of Jesus there are specialized forms of ministry: bishops, elders, deacons and other ministers are in charge to serve God's purpose for humankind.'

17 'The fathers', he writes, 'believed that what we now call the infallibility and inerrancy of the biblical texts were a logical consequence of their divine origin, but they had a more relaxed understanding of these terms than would normally be the case today' (*We Believe in One God*, xxx).

18 *Ibid.*, xix.

19 *We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ*, xiii. We might note, however, that it is not clear in what context the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed arose. It was certainly used as a baptismal creed in the fifth century, but there is insufficient evidence to show that that was the purpose for which it was put together. It is clear, however, that the Creed of Nicaea, the single largest source for the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, was not first and foremost a baptismal prayer. As Averil Cameron observes, it most emphatically 'was not a baptismal statement; it was a document drawn up by and for bishops, and signing it was made a test of their orthodoxy and accompanied by state sanctions ... it was almost an official communiqué'. See A. Cameron, 'The Creed' in *Living the Eucharist*, ed. by Stephen Conway (London: DLT, 2001), 56-71.

a life of *doxology* as much as *orthodoxy*’;²⁰ so what believers did, and how they lived, mattered as much as what they believed.

Again, a difference of emphasis may be seen in the various approaches of the different editors to what is often referred to as the question of orthodoxy and heresy, or the nature and extent of the limits on acceptable diversity within the ancient Church. All, I think, would agree with Gerald Bray and his claim that the emphasis of much recent scholarship on diversity within early Christianity means that ‘it is now necessary to defend the classical fathers of the early church against the charge that they were a small and unrepresentative minority who happened to take control of the church at a key moment and who were thus able to obscure the historical truth in their own interests’.²¹ Yet the different editors take different approaches in seeking to refute other modern scholars who claim that the ‘Fathers’ whose works the editors privilege were less representative of the majority of ancient believers than other early Christians to whom the editors frequently refer (often not very helpfully, it must be said) as ‘heretics’ or ‘Gnostics’. Bray, for example, begins with an appeal to a modern but now neglected authority when he suggests that H. E. W. Turner, whose book *The Pattern of Christian Truth* was published in 1954, successfully refuted the influential arguments of Walter Bauer, whose important monograph on orthodoxy and heresy was published in German in 1934 and then translated into English and published as *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* in 1971. Yet even if Bray is correct, his appeal to Turner fails to acknowledge the enormous amount of work that has been done on this subject since he wrote. Thus Bray seems on much stronger ground when he suggests that those whom ‘fathers’ such as Irenaeus and Tertullian labeled ‘heretics’ were relatively small in number, even if his assertion that such individuals were alien to, rather than part of the wider church might be questioned.

McGuckin makes similar points, presumably alluding to Bauer and those influenced by him when he refers to ‘careless historians’ who have implied that the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy arose only in the second century and not the first. Yet, as he reminds us, ‘a cursory perusal of the Johannine letters or the Pauline pastorals will show any reader that the clear distinction of orthodoxy and heresy was already seen, by the end of the first century, to be a critical matter if faith in Jesus was to be preserved and handed on.’²² Thus not only were those often referred to as ‘orthodox’ or ‘proto-orthodox’ not only probably in the majority in the second century, they had good reason to claim that their awareness of borders between beliefs that were or were not consistent with apostolic faith may be traced back to the earliest Christian writings to survive, including the undisputed letters of Paul.²³ However, unlike both Bray and McGuckin, Edwards

20 *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, xx.

21 *We Believe in One God*, xxxviii.

22 *We Believe in the Crucified and Risen Lord*, xiv–xv.

23 See further I. H. Marshall, ‘Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earlier Christianity’, *Themelios* 2.1 (1976), 5–14.

manages to balance an emphasis on both the preponderance and the enduring importance of ‘mainstream’, ‘orthodox’ or ‘catholic’ thought with an explicit recognition that other Christian thinkers also played an important role in the development of Christian theology, even if their conclusions were rejected by the wider church. For example he notes not only that Valentinus (often referred to as a heretic and, at least in older scholarship, as a Gnostic) was as much indebted to Paul and to John as was Irenaeus, even if he interpreted them differently, but also that there are significant elements of catholic faith that were ‘more distinctly present in his thought than in that of Irenaeus’.²⁴ Thus Edwards shows both an ability to interpret a thinker such as Valentinus on his own terms, and a recognition that even those deemed heretics either by their contemporaries or by later generations were often as engaged in the interpretation of Scripture as were those who opposed them. Further, he allows that they too contributed to, rather than merely impeded, the development of Christian doctrine.²⁵ Here it seems helpful to quote at length from his conclusion:

Christian theologians of our own time who aspire to be evangelical or catholic can read almost any writer of the patristic age with profit, even those who failed to satisfy the exacting canons of the first five councils. As the Fathers assumed the unity of the New Testament, so the Reformers and their medieval predecessors posited a consensus among the Fathers; all, in my view, were nearer to the truth than those who now speak of ‘competing Christianities’ in antiquity. It seems to me that Christian thought was more diverse in dress than in substance, even in the first and second centuries, while the conflicts of the fourth century were all the fiercer because the combatants were aware that they were striving for possession of the same ground. My aim in this anthology has been to illustrate not only the trends that were then, as now, called catholic, but also the tenets of sectarians and experimental thinkers. If the catholic element preponderates, I submit that the reason is that it was catholic in fact as well as in name.²⁶

Edwards’s conclusion, if accepted (as I think that it should be) brings us almost full circle, and close to the position of Swete who also, it should be noted, paid careful attention to texts apparently outside as well as within the mainstream of Christian thought. Thus he too argues that the writers of the patristic

24 *We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ*, xxxvi.

25 Cf. the more negative assessment of Bray, albeit with reference to ‘Gnostics’ rather than to a named individual such as Valentinus: ‘Far from spurring the orthodox to construct a competing theological system, the Gnostics appear to have retarded the development of systematic theology by forcing the church fathers to restrict their defence to an appeal to the precise wording of the biblical texts alone’ (*We Believe in the Crucified and Risen Lord*, xxxviii). For a fuller exposition of Edwards’s understanding of how ‘heretical’ views played an important constructive role in the development of ‘orthodox’ theology, see his *Catholicity and Orthodoxy in the Early Church* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

26 *We Believe in the Crucified and Risen Lord*, xl.

age may be read with profit by Christians today. Edwards does not deny the need for the sort of historical approach showcased in the *Oxford Handbook to Early Christian Studies* (to which he, along with many other scholars with theological as well as historical interests and commitments) is a contributor. He does, however, make the important point that theologians should read more widely than just the works of those later called Fathers. This does not mean that the perspectives of those whom he calls 'sectarian and experimental thinkers', and whom others might call heretics, should be presented as if they were more representative of the majority of early Christian churches than those later identified as Fathers, but it does mean that they cannot and should not be ignored by anyone seeking historical understanding rather than acting only as an apologist for a particular theological perspective or ecclesiastical position.

IV. Conclusion

The emerging discipline of Early Christian Studies and the branch of historical theology that consists of Patristics as traditionally conceived are not one and the same, even if they focus on many of the same ancient texts. But there is significant overlap between them, and it is difficult to see how a historically informed approach to Patristics could now ignore the questions and challenges raised by Early Christian Studies, just as it is difficult to see how Early Christian Studies could flourish if it did not seek to engage with the theological beliefs held by those whose literary, material and social cultures it seeks to study.

No longer, as a theologian like Maurice Wiles reminds us, and as the authors of the *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* demonstrate, is it possible to claim with integrity that the way in which we hold and understand our faith today is precisely the same as the way in which Christians always and everywhere have held it before us (or indeed as Christians of other traditions and/or from other parts of the world hold it today). This is not to deny that there are important and fundamental continuities both between different cultures and between different times, but detailed historical study shows us how each of us sees things differently, and how each of us is shaped by the particular historical context in which we live. Nor can we so easily silence the voices of those whom the orthodox considered heretical as our forebears sometimes did. Recent discoveries of texts long lost let us read the words of those whose voices had been lost, and raise questions about how the particular stream of early Christianity that emerged in the different churches that we know today related to other forms of Christianity with which it was in dialogue and competition from the earliest days of its history. Once again, we cannot simply claim that what we believe is precisely what Christians have believed everywhere and always.

Yet, as Edwards, Oden and their colleagues have shown, it is possible to be aware that there have always been differences between Christians, just as there have always been attempts to set boundaries around which beliefs were acceptable and which were not, but to identify a central body of catholic teaching, the broad outlines of which are not in doubt. Thus, important though the questions

raised by Early Christian Studies undoubtedly are, they need not rule out the ongoing value of patristics in something like the way in which it has traditionally been understood, provided that Christian theologians and patristic scholars are clear about what they are doing and why, and how their context and their task is both similar and dissimilar to that of the theologians of earlier ages. Certainly those whose interest in the early church is primarily theological should be informed by and aware of the questions that Early Christian Studies raises in its historically-focussed way, and certainly those studies present challenges with which they must engage. But they may still respond, quite properly, that neither an informed awareness of the historical context in which early Christian theologians wrote, nor an awareness that there were always Christians with different views than those distilled and encapsulated in the Creeds, need mean that theologians cannot discriminate between those beliefs that they wish to uphold and those that they wish to reject. Thus, in principle, there seems no good reason why as Christians we cannot continue to give more weight to the teaching of those whom the Church has deemed to be faithful exponents of its beliefs than to those whose views it has rejected. If it is our intention to reflect on and grow in understanding of the faith into which we were baptised, then there seems no reason not to draw on the work of those who have shared that faith before us, albeit in different ways, at different times, and in different places.

Certainly contemporary Christians must engage with questions and challenges that arise from our post-Enlightenment historical and scientific understanding of the world, an understanding that is far removed from that of the early Church in which our creeds and doctrines were formed and in which our Scriptures were written and collected together. But although this means that we must approach critically all that the early Church has entrusted to us, it need not mean that we must reject it out of hand. Theology, history and science are different disciplines, but there need be no contradiction between them, provided that their practitioners remain clear on what they are doing, and how and why they do it.

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