

## Christian Theology: the Classics

**Shawn Bawulski and Stephen R. Holmes. *Christian Theology: the Classics*. New York: Routledge, 2014. 282 pp. Softcover. \$30.95. ISBN: 9780415501873.**

As the title indicates, *Christian Theology: the Classics* is a collection of multiple writings deemed classics in the area of Christian theology. Anyone who tries to pull together a sort of “greatest hits” album or book can expect to be roundly criticized by anyone whose favorites were omitted. Given the relative brevity of this book, there will no doubt be many such critics. But once readers hear the goal of the two editors, perhaps they will be more understanding of the choices.

First, this book is aimed primarily at an undergraduate audience in introductory courses. The selections are meant to be very abbreviated versions of the original larger works. The hope of the editors is that “readers will use this book as a springboard into the wealth and treasures of the classics in Christian theology” (x). Most of the works are edited in such a way as to make them more readable. This seems fitting given the goal of the book as an introduction for those who have never read these works. Note well, this is not a systematic introduction to Christian theology. It is meant as an anthology of sorts that introduces Christian theology.

Second, as the title also indicates, it is about Christian theology. It includes writers from the time of the early church (Irenaeus) all the way through the twentieth century (Lindbeck). The writers represent most aspects of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian spectrum. The book does not touch on Eastern Orthodox writings so in that respect has a Western flavor. The scope of the writings would be considered orthodox and Trinitarian in terms of the core beliefs represented. Those from other traditions will find this lacking, but again, this is the choice the editors made.

Their selection criteria are interesting. “We have not tried to choose the ‘best’ works of theology...or the most historically significant, but those which would lead to raised eyebrows or worse if, in the present state of the academy, one admitted to not having read them” (ix). The choices are by their admission somewhat tilted more toward more recent books than some will like, though they do not include much that is truly recent that has not yet stood the test of time. At least the editors admit their biases up front, even if readers disagree on the end result.

There are thirty-one selections, in the range of seven to ten pages in length. Only one title per author is presented in a conscious choice to prefer variety over depth. Choosing only one work from Augustine or Aquinas or Luther may seem impossible, but the choices at least initially seem to be well suited as appetizers for larger samplings of those authors. Whether ten pages is enough to allow the true voice of those authors to come through is questionable. But then again, getting an undergrad to read even that much of these voices would be a feat these days.

Also included in the selections are some of the classic creedal statements from the early church as well as from both the Protestant Reformation (Anglican and Presbyterian) and Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation. To omit such creeds would have weakened the collection considerably, for they demonstrate the importance of the collective voice of the Church and not merely individuals.

Where this collection diverges from typical anthologies is that *it never presents true excerpts of the original works*. Each chapter contains three sections: Introduction, Synopsis, and Criticisms. The introductions are helpful brief historical overviews to place the authors and the particular work selected in context. The synopsis is just that – a summation of the work (e.g., Bonhoeffer’s *Cost of Discipleship*). The criticism section provides some of the main objections to the writings included. Those turning to this book to actually read a snippet of Schleiermacher or a chapter of Calvin will be disappointed.

Including an introduction makes eminent sense. Readers who are mostly alien to Christian theology will need introductions to most of the writers. However, the decision to go with a synopsis rather than a true excerpt or abridgment

in the actual words of the original texts seems problematic. If the aim is to introduce students to important theological writings, why not let them get a taste of the actual documents? Granted, it would be a small sampling. But choosing to take the original documents and re-serve them in highly edited form is more like overhearing a conversation about a third party who is not present.

The presentation of criticisms to close each selection is even more curious. It seems to end each selection in an overly negative manner. While some aspects of the positive impact of each author are presented in the introduction, the criticisms seem to overbalance the positives. Perhaps the criticisms could have instead been presented in terms of the legacy, pro and con, of each work.

A brief glossary of theological terms is provided at the end of the book, which seems a good choice for such a work. It may, however, be so brief as to not really be helpful.

The authors seem well qualified for selecting and editing this sort of collection. Stephen R. Holmes is a senior lecturer in theology, director of teaching, and deputy head of school at the School of Divinity, University of St Andrews. He has written on historical theology, treating patristic, Reformation, early modern, and contemporary theology. Shawn Bawulski earned his Ph.D. from the University of St. Andrews. He is an assistant professor of theology at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona, and formerly was an assistant professor of theology at LCC International University in Klaipeda, Lithuania. His research interests include various topics in eschatology and philosophical theology.

The more one examines this book against its stated goal, the more it seems that it would be better suited to the format not of a print book but perhaps of an expanded e-book or website. This would allow for actual excerpts of documents and perhaps also links to the full versions elsewhere.

A book that seems to do a better job of providing actual excerpts of documents while also covering a broader cross-section of the church (even some “heretics”) is C. Douglas Weaver, et al., *Exploring Christian Heritage: A Reader in History & Theology* (Baylor, 2012). Two other collections come to mind as well, though they are arranged more topically than chronologically: Alister McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th edition (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) and Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th edition (Oxford, 2011).

It seems that the decision not to include actual excerpts was both curious and a fatal flaw for this work. It might serve a purpose somewhere as a text for an undergraduate class, but even that is questionable. A graduate theological library should avoid this as a purchase; Weaver’s work does a far better job of providing an introductory overview of Christian theology (for about the same cost).

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