

*The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, edited by Colin E. Gunton

reviewed by [Stephen H. Webb](#) in the [October 20, 1999](#) issue

Academic theology can have a future only if theologians themselves are interested in it. Why should anybody else read it if theologians are so caught up in experimenting with every philosophical movement and political program that they ignore their own field? If this volume is any indication, theology seems to have rediscovered itself as a tradition with its own resources and issues.

What's most surprising about the important essays collected here is how little attention they pay to methodology. All the great theologians of the 1970s and '80s focused on method. Even those who rejected this emphasis wrote methodological books. Now those concerns seem to be passé.

Theology has become more grounded in history than ever before. In the wake of the 1960s, theologians rushed to reconstruct the Christian tradition from the ground up. Now theologians are recovering the rich heritage of the past, immersing themselves in those ancient thinkers who were speaking to and for the church, not for some abstract educated elite. The central debates that have always defined the church now seem more complex and intriguing than do the cunning theories theologians have used to combat or accommodate secularism during the past 30 years.

Another way of putting this is to say that, after the postmodern assault on metaphysics and on objectivist views of rationality, theologians have turned to history to replace their earlier reliance on philosophy. What interests them, however, is not the socioeconomic or materialistic approaches to history but the old-fashioned debates about doctrine that used to be taught in church history courses.

It's surprising also to find none of the obsession with religious pluralism that has dominated theology for the past 15 years. Much of that concern was still sparked by Enlightenment skepticism about religious faith. Given so many religions, the pluralists asked, how do we figure out which one to trust? In the postmodern universe, by contrast, theologians no longer try to construct a vantage point from which to view all the world's religions. The more modest task of analyzing Christianity's own internal coherence and historical development seems much more

feasible and important.

The one other religion that Christianity cannot avoid engaging is, of course, Judaism, and Bruce Marshall's essay demonstrates that all theological discussions of pluralism should begin and end with this dialogue. He raises some perplexing problems, however, when he affirms the Jews as the chosen people only if they remain very orthodox. This leaves little room for dialogue with Reform Judaism. Marshall seems to argue that though Jewish law is no longer meaningful after Christ, it does function to distinguish Abraham's children from all others. Most creatively, Marshall tries to hold together the idea of the eternal election of the Jews with the claim that their salvation depends on the work of Jesus Christ. Whether this can be defended without making Jews secret believers in the Trinity or people with an incomplete knowledge of God is the question with which Marshall struggles.

One field that has become crucial to systematic theology is ethics. If ethics is defined broadly as the witness of the church to an increasingly non-Christian public, then every systematic theology today must be ethical at its core. In a typically brilliant contribution, Stanley Hauerwas argues that theologians have too frequently permitted ethical assumptions to provide the foundation for the revision of doctrinal matters. To make something called "ethics" the justification for being a Christian is, from the Reformation perspective, very bad theology indeed. Ethical reflection should flow from doctrinal formulations. Ethics has become a separate discipline only because colleges and universities have gone from teaching church history and theology to focusing on practical issues with only a vague reference to religious faith.

One surprising inclusion is an essay on theology and art. Theologians often deplore the neglect of this topic but do nothing about it. Theology and the arts is such a broad field that it is difficult to get a handle on it, but Jeremy Begbie shows how the artistic imagination has become both the dominant way of viewing reality and a major means of trivializing it. That the Holy Spirit is at work transfiguring the cosmos, Begbie argues, is the basis of an aesthetics that takes seriously both the freedom and the order of God's creation.

Striking in all of these essays is the towering influence of Karl Barth. It seems increasingly clear that he is the theologian with the power to move theology forward as a discipline with its own integrity. One example of Barthian theology at its best is Robert Jenson's provocative argument that the image of the church as the body of Christ is much more than a metaphor. Meanwhile, Kathryn Tanner challenges Barth's

emphasis on Christ as the revelation of God. Focusing on the rubric of revelation, rather than on healing and redemption, traps Barth in the Enlightenment emphasis on knowledge and validation, the very emphasis that he sought to circumvent. Tanner demonstrates that theology makes progress not only by acknowledging Barth but also by going beyond him.