



McGuckin, John Anthony.

The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth
New Jersey

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I didn't quite know what to expect when I had requested this book for review. In the back of my mind I had assumed it would be a primer on patristic theology similar to Christopher A. Hall's *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*, but upon its arrival I discovered what I can only term a dictionary. With approximately 350 entries ranging in length from a single paragraph (e.g., "Flavian of Constantinople," 146) to six-and-a-half pages (e.g., "Trinity," 338-44), *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* is a handy reference that I'm sure will be of benefit to anyone who is looking for a quick description of the major terms, ideas, and controversies of the patristic period.

Right off the bat the book begins with a convenient tool, i.e., the "Thematic Guide to Reading the Handbook" (xiii-xv) where selected major Christian theologians and theological schools are listed in chronological sequence, taking the reader from the first to the sixth century. From there it continues with a thematic arrangement of theological ideas, covering every major topic from Christology to the sacraments to major heretical movements. This is certainly beneficial for the person looking to focus their study on a particular theme. This is followed by a complete listing of all the entries in the handbook from A-Z (xix-xxiii). I found this to be extremely convenient and it's something that you don't see in most reference works of this type. I was also pleased to find short select bibliographies at the end of each entry. This is especially useful for some of the shorter entries which leave the reader with a desire to research much further.

I chose to survey the entries on the subjects that I am most familiar with so as to be able to assess McGuckin's general competency in explaining them. This exercise has proven McGuckin (for the most part) to be concise, accurate, and helpful. In his six-and-a-half page entry on the "Trinity" he accomplishes what it takes others entire monographs

to do (i.e., give the reader a very good general idea on the history and process of the formation of Trinitarian dogma). I greatly appreciated his recognition of some of the lesser known (or at least lesser spoken of) ante-Nicene fathers and their contributions to the process. He discusses Theophilus of Antioch's "*distinction of the Logos being immanent within God (Logos endiathetos), and then 'expressed' for the purposes of creation (Logos prophorikos)*" while noting that "[s]imilar ideas can be found in *Athenagoras and Justin Martyr.*" (339) Athenagoras has long been one of my favorite early apologists, so I was glad to see him recognized in the entry on the Trinity, but I was also pleased that he received his own (albeit too short) entry as well (36).

On certain subjects (some of relative obscurity) I compared McGuckin's entries to those in *Nelson's Dictionary of Christianity (NDC)* since it is a comparable work. The subjects of comparison were:

1. Adoptionism
2. Arianism
3. Docetism
4. Donatism
5. Economic Trinity
6. Monarchianism
7. Monophysitism

In every entry except "Arianism," *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology (WHPT)* offered a much more in-depth treatment of the subject (in some cases as great a difference as two pages in the *WHPT* to a single paragraph in *NDC*), as well as the aforementioned bibliographic material. Granted, the focus of McGuckin's work is strictly patristic theology while *NDC* offers a broader range of material, but nonetheless, when addressing the same subjects the *WHPT* far exceeds *NDC*.

Perhaps my biggest gripe (which is one of only a few) with this work was the entry on "Perichoresis" in which McGuckin begins with the dubious claim that:

The term literally means "a dancing around something" (the *chora* was the ancient Greek dance in a ring). (260)

The rest of the entry is rather accurate, and McGuckin is correct to note that the word is generally translated as "coinherence" or "interpenetration," and rightly so, for this is what the word means (especially in its patristic usage). But allow me to take this as an opportunity to rant: McGuckin's initial remarks are the fodder for the pop-theology that posits the persons of the Trinity as engaged in some sort of:

divine dance [which] suggests the partnership of movement, symmetrical but not redundant, as each dancer expresses and at the same time fulfills him/herself towards the other, [which leads to the conclusion that] [t]here are neither leaders nor followers in the divine dance, only an eternal

movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, giving again and receiving again.¹

The fact of the matter is that the verb *perichoreuō* (from the preposition *peri* + the verb *choreuō*) means to “dance around (or about),” and this has no connection to the patristic conception of perichoresis/coherence. I was also disappointed that no mention was made in the entry of the biblical warrant for the doctrine, which is those passages in John’s Gospel that speak of the Father being in the Son and the Son in the Father (e.g. 14:10).

This criticism aside, I found all of the entries that I looked at to be solid and helpful. McGuckin has done the budding patrologist a great service in providing them with such an accessible guide to patristic theology. I wholeheartedly recommend this work to anyone looking for a quick answer to a pressing question concerning patristic theology, with the further recommendation that this certainly not be the last work that they examine. This cannot replace monographs on the subjects covered, nor are the bibliographies adequate to stand in place of Quasten’s 4 volume *Patrology* or Drobner’s *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, but this is a great gateway into further study.

¹ Cathering Mowry LaCugna. *God For Us: The Trinity & Christian Life*, (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), 271-272.