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Edited by
Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY
Theodore DE BRUYN
Carol HARRISON

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PATRISTICS AND THEOLOGY



CHRISTOPH MARKSCHIES

Berlin

PATRISTICS AND THEOLOGY:
FROM CONCORDANCE
AND CONFLICT TO COMPETITION
AND COLLABORATION?

There are occasions when, after having accepted a friendly invitation to contribute to a certain subject, you do not realize *when formulating the title*, precisely what a challenge you have taken on, which only becomes clear when actually *writing* the piece. The challenge this time already begins with the title, as the title of my paper contains two terms that nowadays are not self-explanatory, either standing on their own, or when examined in their specific collocation. I will begin with a relatively detailed explanation of the title, and this explanation will also contain the guiding thesis of my paper; I shall develop this argument in two parts that will deal with the following principal questions, namely: ‘What can Theology contribute to Patristics today?’ and ‘What can Patristics contribute to Theology today?’ The fact that I have to limit myself in a very strict sense and that what I have to say is influenced by a very specific confessional and national background, which I can escape only to a certain extent, requires no further explanation. Luckily, very different confessional and national views are offered in the present volume as well.

I begin the first part of my paper by explaining the main title: ‘Patristics and Theology’, before examining the main questions in the following two parts. The English word ‘Patristics’ or ‘Patristik’ in German – as documented in nearly all relevant lexica or textbooks – derives from the Latin adjective *patristicus*. The use of this adjective enabled the differentiation of the

theologia patristica from the *theologia biblica* in early modern times.¹ And, as often happened in modern times, the adjective took on an independent existence as a noun and in the process of gaining independence lost, in purely linguistic terms, its original accompanying noun *theologia*. This autonomous noun ‘Patristics’ first of all continued to stand *pars pro toto* for that to which *theologia patristica* had once referred, namely, the study of early Christian writings under the guiding paradigm of the two (or three) confessional theologies in continental Europe or under the guiding paradigm of the Anglican theology in modern times. As such, to name only one single Protestant example from Germany, the theologian, physicist and mathematician Albrecht Veiel (1672–1704) from Ulm published – under the title the *Theses ex universa theologia patristica selectae* – forty-four quite extensively documented miscellanea in 1695 which dealt with early Christian literature under the deanship of Lutheran baroque-era theologian Johannes Fecht (1636–1716). The standard by which early Christian literature (for example, the First Epistle of Clement in the seventeenth thesis) is judged in these *Theses* reflects Lutheran Reformation theology, narrowed down to the doctrine of justification by grace alone. And Johann Franz Buddeus (1667–1729), Lutheran professor in Jena from 1705 on, in his historical and systematic introduction to theology published posthumously in 1730, pointedly defined ‘Patristics’ as a secondary subject within systematic theology: ‘*Per theologiam patristicam intelligimus complexum dogmatum sacrorum ex mente sententiaque patrum, inde ut cognoscatur, quo pacto veritas religionis christianae conservata semper sit in ecclesia, ac propagata*’; (it is through Patristic theology that we understand the connection between the teachings from the spirit and the opinions of the Fathers so that we can recognise why the truth of the Christian religion must always be safeguarded and disseminated in the Church).² To put it in other words: until the end of the eighteenth century the horizons within which

¹ H. R. DROBNER, *Lehrbuch der Patrologie*, Frankfurt am Main, 2011³, p. 61f.; J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, 4 vols., Utrecht, Brüssel, 1950, I, p. 1–20.

² J. F. BUDDEUS, *Gesammelte Werke*, VIII.1: *Isagoge Historica-Theologica ad Theologiam Universam Singulasque eius Partes. Novis Supplementis Auctior (Historia Scientiarum)*, Hildesheim, 1999 (= Lipsia, 1730), p. 478.

early Christian texts were perceived under the term *theologia patristica* were – at least in Germany– the debates of the confessional age, that is, on the one hand the conflicts between Roman Catholic and Lutheran and Reformed theologians and, on the other hand, of course, also the conflicts within a single confessional paradigm, in our example within the Lutheran theology of the Baroque period. The same may be observed in the Anglican engagement with the Church Fathers and their writings since the early modern period, but I will not elaborate on this here. Likewise, I will leave out the discussion of the origins of the use of this terminology in the ancient Christian discourse by the Church Fathers and the theological argumentation with the Fathers in antiquity, mainly since the fourth century; this topic has been examined in detail in other places, also by myself.³

The title ‘Patristics and Theology’ of the present paper, however, only makes sense if we keep in mind that this close unity between the study of early Christian literature and a certain confessional horizon fell apart in most parts of Protestant continental Europe in the late eighteenth, and above all in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even if Johann Matthias Schröckh (1733–1808), professor at Wittenberg and author of a forty-three volume ‘Christian Church History’, presented early Christianity with the aim of gaining orientation for the present time, and considered both the perfection and the simplicity of the early Christians as representative of early Christianity,⁴ nevertheless, neither the ancient nor the early modern distinctions between true and false theology, between orthodoxy and heresy, played

³ T. GRAUMANN, *Die Kirche der Väter. Vätertheologie und Väterbeweis in den Kirchen des Ostens bis zum Konzil von Ephesus (431)* (Beiträge zur Historischen Theologie, 118), Tübingen, 2002; CH. MARKSCHIES, ‘Normierungen durch “Väter” bei Neuplatonikern und Christen. Ein Vergleich’, in *Zwischen Altertumswissenschaft und Theologie. Zur Relevanz der Patristik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* – ed. Ch. Markschie, J. van Oort (Studien der Patristischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft, 7), Löwen, 2002, p. 1–30.

⁴ J. M. SCHRÖCKH, *Christliche Kirchengeschichte*, 43 vols., Leipzig, 1772, I, p. 63f.; cf. S. P. BERGJAN, ‘Die Beschäftigung mit der Alten Kirche an deutschen Universitäten in den Umbrüchen der Aufklärung’, in *Zwischen Altertumswissenschaft und Theologie*, p. 31–61, in partic. p. 49.

an influential role in the study of early Christianity, as my colleague from Zurich, Silke-Petra Bergjan, has already shown with regard to Schröckh and other theologians some time ago.⁵ ‘Patristics’ and ‘Theology’ developed into two separate disciplines in Protestant continental European Universities in the eighteenth century already because of the differentiation that was taking place in the academic disciplines in the universities at that time. Thus, out of *theologia patristica* emerged ‘Patristics’ and ‘systematic theology’. However, this development also set free the study of early Christianity to seek out new institutional affiliations and therefore methodical contexts and fundamental frameworks other than the systematic theology of Europe’s confessional churches. Representative of this increase in autonomy, which is – for example, in the German speaking regions – often conventionally and confusingly referred to under the central category ‘Patristics’ is the article in the classic *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche* from the year 1904, edited by Gustav Krüger (1862–1940), a student of Adolf Harnack.⁶ Krüger basically understood Patristics as a literary history of early Christian writings and strived verbatim ‘to eradicate the leftovers of dogmatic prejudices’⁷. Of course, on the other hand there have also been since then repeated attempts to revive the classical *theologia patristica* or to transform it, in order to meet the needs of the respective contemporary climate. I am thinking here, for example, of the so-called Neo-Lutheranism (“Neuluthertum”) on German Protestant territory. In 1867, Adolf von Harnack’s sometimes friend and later opponent Theodor von Zahn (1838–1933) portrayed Marcellus of Ancyra as a model for a Bible-oriented Lutheran theologian from Antiquity⁸. The representa-

⁵ BERGJAN, *Die Beschäftigung mit der Alten Kirche an deutschen Universitäten in den Umbrüchen der Aufklärung*, p. 42–49.

⁶ G. KRÜGER, ‘Patristik’, *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, 24 vols., Hamburg, 1904, XV, p. 1–13.

⁷ G. KRÜGER, ‘Patristik’, p. 12; H. CH. BRENNECKE, “‘Patristik’ oder “altchristliche Literaturwissenschaft”? Eine historische Leitwissenschaft der protestantischen Theologie in Deutschland am Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts’, *ZAC*, 15 (2011), p. 8f.

⁸ H. CH. BRENNECKE, ‘Patristik in der konfessionellen Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts’, in *Zwischen Altertumswissenschaft und Theologie*, p. 62–90, in partic. p. 83.

tives of the French Catholic ‘Nouvelle Théologie’ oriented themselves after 1945 less towards the *Dicta probantia* of the preceding neo-scholastic textbooks, but more towards the theological methods of the Church Fathers.⁹ Accordingly, not only the orthodox Church Fathers of the Great Church appeared in the ‘Sources Chrétiennes’ edition series, but also Anhomoean Easter homilies.¹⁰ However, in addition to such attempts to continue or revive the classic *theologia patristica*, as we saw, attempts were also made to study early Christianity without any reference whatsoever to confessional contexts. And ‘Patristics’ is nowadays the only umbrella term used to cover different approaches to the rich field of the study of ancient Christianity, which is widely accepted, although nearly everyone has serious problems with that term – a quite paradoxical situation!

Out of the self-evident unity of a *theologia patristica*, the dyad Patristics and/or Theology began to develop in the eighteenth century – and to put it pointedly – at least at some institutions, and above all universities in Protestant lands, but also French and Italian state universities, under respectively different conditions that were brought about by the separation of state and church. One only needs to go through the lists of participants and the published lectures from any of the Oxford Conferences on Patristic Studies since these took place first in 1951 to see that some of them understood the term ‘Patristics’ fully in the classic meaning of a *theologia patristica*. Others tended to see it as a dyad – a view which may sometimes implicate antagonism – and as we know, many of the circumstances in which a discipline gains autonomy from its original discipline are often rife with conflict during the initial stages of this process; I am thinking here of the certainly tense relationship between Religious Studies and Theology. Accordingly, in the first Oxford conference in 1951, the Swiss reformed theologian Lukas Vischer (1926–2008), a student of Oscar Cullmann, held a joint lecture

⁹ R. WINLING, ‘Nouvelle Théologie’, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 36 vols., Berlin, New York, 1994, XXIV, p. 668–675.

¹⁰ *Deux homélies anoméennes pour l’octave de Pâques*, – ed. and tr. J. Liébaert (SC, 146), Paris, 1969; cfr. É. FOUILLOUX, *La collection ‘Sources Chrétiennes’, éditer les Pères de l’Église au XX^e siècle*, Paris, 1995.

with David Lerch about ‘the history of interpretation as a necessary task of theological study’ and examined, if only briefly, the benefits of the history of interpretation for systematic theology.¹¹ Early Christian texts are not dealt with at all in that essay. The relationship between ‘Patristics’ and ‘Theology’ was presented completely differently, for example, in a lecture also held in 1951 by the editor of the conference volume, Lietzmann’s student, Kurt Aland (1915–1994), who worked in Halle and Berlin at the time. Aland dealt in his lecture with ‘the religious attitude of Emperor Constantine’. At the end of his lecture, he asks – and that only in mild terms – whether the religious changes that took place during the times of Emperor Constantine, Chlodwig and the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise during the Reformation were a sign of a ‘reasonable occurrence, which was driven by the inner strengths of the faith, the continuation of which we are referring to here.’¹² Seen from this viewpoint, ‘Patristics’ is one of the many terms in modern European times which was deprived of its original theological context and became secularised (this holds true, no matter what one thinks about the thesis put forward by the not unproblematic jurist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), who stated that all terms used in modern theories of the state are secularised religious terms).¹³ At the same time, however, the category ‘Patristics’ also makes clear what contemporary research on secularisation repeatedly makes clear as well, namely, that there has not been an uninterrupted dechristianisation of Europe, but rather always a renewed religiosity and therefore always a renewed *theologia patristica*. Munich’s Protestant theologian Trutz Rendtorff has described these circumstances as ‘multivalent’ (‘vielspältig’),¹⁴ meaning that in our times what we have is not simply the random parallel existence of ideological pluralism, but a situation, in which

¹¹ L. VISCHER, D. LERCH, ‘Die Auslegungsgeschichte als notwendige theologische Aufgabe’, *Studia Patristica = TU* 63, Berlin, 1957, p. 417.

¹² K. ALAND, ‘Die religiöse Haltung Kaiser Konstantins’, *Studia Patristica = TU* 63, Berlin, 1957, p. 599.

¹³ C. SCHMITT, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, Berlin, 2004⁸, p. 43.

¹⁴ T. RENDTORFF, *Vielspältiges. Protestantische Beiträge zur ethischen Kultur*, Stuttgart, 1991.

a variety of conflicts exist. Ultimately, a secular definition of ‘Patristics’ stands for very different forms of the study of early Christianity alongside a very traditional definition of ‘Patristics’ in the sense of a renewed *theologia patristica*. My colleague from Göttingen, Ekkehard Mühlenberg, describes this situation – in what at first glance appears to be a confusing use of language – in one of the aforementioned Lexicon entries as follows:

As used in the language of today, Patristics refers to all academic study of church history of the first six centuries. Theologians dedicated to the research of early Christianity are called Patristics scholars. In Roman Catholic faculties, Patrology is listed as a discipline on its own right that deals with the lives, writings and teachings of the Church Fathers. [...] “Church Fathers” is a conventional term for early Christian writers who are seen as witnesses of the truth of faith and their teachings enjoy a position of authority within the Church.¹⁵

The thesis that I would like to substantiate in its two parts in the following begins with a simple observation based on hermeneutics and the philosophy of science: even if the increasing movement within Patristics towards an autonomy from theology has repeatedly been justified by the sublime pathos of objectivity in European science¹⁶ – a classic example of which is Gustav Krüger’s claim to purify Patristics by ‘eradicating remaining dogmatic prejudices’¹⁷ and thus render it suitable for scientific study – it nevertheless remains questionable whether an objectivity of this type, understood quasi as the clinical purity of a science free from prejudices, is even possible. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), who last taught in Heidelberg, described a model of aseptic objectivity of this kind as an illusion. In his work, first published in 1960 and entitled *Truth and Method*,

¹⁵ E. MÜHLENBERG, ‘Patristik’, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 36 vols., Berlin, New York, 1996, XXVI, p. 97–106, in partic. p. 97.

¹⁶ L. DASTON, P. GALISON, *Objectivity*, New York, 2007.

¹⁷ KRÜGER, ‘Patristik’, p. 12; H. CH. BRENNECKE, “‘Patristik’ oder ‘altchristliche Literaturwissenschaft’?”, p. 8f.

he instead defined ‘prejudices as a condition of understanding.’¹⁸ Prejudices are then conditional for real understanding if they are ‘judgements before scrutiny’ that are in principle revisable, that is, they can be revised in the process of the appropriation of texts or positions. Thus, Gadamer rehabilitates the concept of ‘prejudice’, which had had negative connotations since the eighteenth century, as something that is always influenced by a previous understanding, which guides and defines our understanding, but which can always be adapted and formed anew through our understanding. If one describes the theological background of those who study early Christianity as prejudices in this sense, then these do not categorically differ from other kinds of preconception that are constituted by national origin, social influence or any other factors. One can, with Gadamer, count all of these elements under ‘historical tradition’ that shapes us when we encounter something that is alien to us and we attempt to understand it.¹⁹ When Gadamer tries to rehabilitate ‘authority and tradition’ as characteristics of prejudice, theology can even be seen as a particularly classic case of prejudice in the way that Gadamer means this – like the definition of classic as well, of course.²⁰ It is, of course, clear to me that this is not all that there is to say about theology in the context of other academic disciplines, but for the purposes of the present article, a description of theology within the horizons of the dyad ‘Patristics and Theology’ may suffice. For ‘Patristics’, ‘Theology’ provides an ensemble of possible ‘prejudices’ in Gadamer’s definition and, vice versa, ‘Patristics’ also offers ‘Theology’ an ensemble of possible prejudices in this sense. Theology is a prejudice quite close to the *content* of texts and positions that we analyse in Patristic studies. Understanding is the endless process of merging these distinct horizons so that both Theology and Patristics can be respectively transformed through their separation²¹. A process of this kind is an opportunity and not a disadvantage to academic pursuit.



¹⁸ H. G. GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen, 1975⁴, p. 261.

¹⁹ GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*. p. 255.

²⁰ GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*. p. 263.

²¹ GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*. p. 289.

After this relatively detailed explanation of my title, we can now come to the two other parts of my paper, the title and contents of which are reflected in the main questions of our section: ‘What can Theology contribute to Patristics today?’ and ‘What can Patristics contribute to Theology today?’ I will begin with the question about the influences of theology on Patristics – and in doing so I would like to mention in passing that it is presumably not that easy to define cause and effect in precise terms here. Whether, for example, the greater attention to the history of interpretation of Scripture that Lukas Vischer and David Lerch demanded in 1951 can be explained either on the grounds of their respective doctoral studies in Patristics under Oscar Cullmann²² or because of a systematic interest in building a bridge between ‘historical-critical exegesis and denominational interpretation’ (as formulated in the aforementioned Oxford lecture from 1951) would require a thorough investigation, unless what we have here is an inextricable hermeneutical circle. Taking all of this into consideration, I would like to attempt to provide several answers to the first question:

What can Theology contribute to Patristics today?

First of all, I could come up with a simple answer to this question: Theology offers Patristics in many places an institutional umbrella in the form of theological educational facilities, faculties and research institutes. I am thinking here not only of the faculties of Theology that still exist – if in very different forms – in various European countries at state universities, but also of research institutes, such as the *Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum* or the bilingual *Fontes Christiani* series. The latter receives notable funds from the German Catholic Bishops’ Conference and leans towards the ‘Sources Chrétiennes’, not only in terms of language. It is hardly surprising that Catholic institutions

²² L. VISCHER, *Die Auslegungsgeschichte von I. Kor. 6,1-11 (Beiträge zur Geschichte der neutestamentlichen Exegese, 1)*, Tübingen, 1955; D. LERCH, *Isaaks Opferung, christlich gedeutet. Eine auslegungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung. Die vorreformatorische Auslegung von Isaaks Opferung*, Tübingen, 1950.

are more predominant here of course; it is only the Catholic Church that offers an ‘Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests’, (this booklet from the year 1989 does not contain any references to critical text editions at all, but only to the *cloaca maxima* of the *Patrologiae* by Jean-Paul Migne), but the Protestant churches do not have anything comparable. However, such a listing would, of course, only be a very superficial description. One could assume (and mainly from a French or Italian perspective) that what we have here are the last institutional remains from the era of the *theologia patristica*. More recent developments towards the deconfessionalisation of theological faculties in Great Britain and Sweden could indeed be interpreted in this direction.

It seems to me that we have been given the first hints towards a somewhat more thorough answer: *on the one hand*, the obvious awakening of research in the area of the history of interpretation of Scripture, at least in German-language Patristics between the fifties and seventies, is without doubt down to a fundamental reorientation of Protestant theology during those years. In the context of the so-called dialectical theology, one would once again reflect upon the category of the ‘Word of God’ (Karl Barth and his friends speak of the ‘theology of the Word of God’). Accordingly, the biblical text received a new appreciation also within the systematic theology. However, this also meant that the interpretation of this biblical text precisely and the history of its interpretation at the same time became more interesting. Nevertheless, if one considers the relevant book series, namely the ‘Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese’ (Contributions to the History of Biblical Exegesis), of which twenty-eight volumes appeared in the years between 1955 and 1986 and which the Mohr-Siebeck publishing house in Tübingen has since ceased publishing, one needs to acknowledge that a complete realignment of the discipline, in order to become the ‘history of the interpretation of the Holy Scripture’, as was the intention of the Protestant theologian, Gerhard Ebeling (1912-2001),²³ did not succeed. Presumably, one must

²³ G. EBELING, *Kirchengeschichte als Geschichte der Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift* (Sammlung gemeinverständlicher Vorträge, 189), Tübingen, 1947 = *Wort Gottes*.

concede that, although Ebeling did not intend to narrow down this program in terms of a pure history of biblical exegesis, it was fortunate for both Patristics and Theology that the program did not succeed. In the meantime, this program of interpretation history has also been taken up in some sense by the Italian journal ‘Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi’. Moreover, one can also trace back, to a certain extent, the more fundamental hermeneutical works of Basil Studer (1925–2008) and Charles Kannengiesser to distant influences of this Protestant awakening.²⁴ Still, both names also bear evidence to the strong impact of the awakening of the ‘Nouvelle Théologie’ on Patristics, because both the Benedictine, Studer, and the once Jesuit, Kannengießer, had been influenced by their formative years in Paris, and by De Lubac and Daniélou in particular.²⁵ Furthermore, one should mention this awakening and the corresponding debates at the Second Vatican Council.²⁶

It should have become clear by now that my review of the process of awakening in interpretation history during the last decades of the previous century, has not of course answered the question concerning its contributions *today* yet. It also seems to me that a Protestant theologian of German origin is not necessarily the best person to fulfil this task. German Protestant theology is at the present time in many places greatly influenced by a very significant renaissance of the theologians Friedrich Schleiermacher and Ernst Troeltsch. As is well known, neither of these theologians offered any particularly original academic contributions to Patristics, but rather – as Simon Gerber demonstrated in his edition of relevant lectures by Schleiermacher (as well as

Studien zu einer Hermeneutik der Konfessionen (Kirche und Konfessionen, 7), Göttingen, 1966², p. 9–27.

²⁴ CH. KANNENGIESSER, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, Leiden, 2000; B. STUDER, *Dominus Salvator. Studien zur Christologie und Exegese der Kirchenväter (Studia Anselmiana, 107)*, Roma, 1991.

²⁵ G. REXIN, ‘Studer, Basil’, in *Biographisch-bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, 33 vols., Nordhausen, 2011, XXXII, p. 1379–1390.

²⁶ Cfr. D. E. GIANOTTI, *I Padri della Chiesa al Concilio Vaticano II. La teologia patristica nella “Lumen gentium”*, Bologna, 2010; A. M. TRIACCA, ‘L’uso dei “loci” patristici nei documenti del Concilio Vaticano II: un caso emblematico e problematico’, in *Lo studio dei Padri della Chiesa oggi* – ed. E. dal Covolo (*Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose, 96*), Roma, 1991, p. 149–184.

in his *Habilitation* thesis in Berlin)²⁷ – they mainly relied on secondary sources. Schleiermacher has at least contributed an intelligent treatise on the history of Trinitarian theology which, however, written in favour of the theology of Marcellus of Ancyra, establishes a clear distance to the Neo-Nicene theology laid down by the authoritative ‘Church Fathers’ of the fourth century.²⁸ Since there are hardly any direct influences on Patristics by contemporary Protestant theology, one needs to refer to awakenings in the Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox churches – I am thinking, for example, of the neo-Patristic concepts of a ‘*teologia patristica*’ in Romania or the concepts of a revived mysticism among Catholics²⁹ or of Sarah Coakley’s attempts to rethink contemporary Anglican theology with the use of the Cappadocian Fathers³⁰. At this point because of a lack of expertise on my own part, I may refer to contributions in this volume that further illuminate corresponding theological concepts.

Thus, we can now proceed with the examination of our second question regarding the influences of Patristics on Theology.

What can Patristics contribute to Theology today?

As a scholar of Patristics who has been teaching and still teaches at Protestant theological faculties in Germany, I must unfortunately begin this last part of my paper by announcing a deficit: in contemporary Protestant theology, the interest in the outcome of the scholarship of early Christianity tends to be low. This is

²⁷ F. D. E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *Vorlesungen über die Kirchengeschichte* – ed. S. Gerber (*Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, II/6), Berlin, New York, 1991.

²⁸ F. D. E. SCHLEIERMACHER, ‘Über den Gegensatz zwischen der Sabellianischen und der Athanasianischen Vorstellung von der Trinität’, in *Theologisch-dogmatische Abhandlungen und Gelegenheitsschriften* – ed. H.-F. Traulsen, M. Ohst (*Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, I/10), Berlin, New York, 1990, p. 223–306.

²⁹ G. COLLINS, *Meeting Christ in His Mysteries: A Benedictine Vision of the Spiritual Life*, Dublin, 2011.

³⁰ *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, – ed. S. Coakley, Oxford, 2003 [originally a special issue of *Modern Theology* 18 (2002)], *passim*; *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, – ed. S. Coakley, C. M. Stang, Oxford, 2009 [originally a special issue of *Modern Theology* 24 (2008)].

mostly due to the prejudice that the history of the Reformation churches began only in the sixteenth century. The view that the Protestant Church is that part of the *una sancta catholica* which went through the Reformation is not unanimously held in the run-up to the Reformation jubilee year in 2017.³¹ A telling example of this confusion is the comparatively unhelpful definition of the function of Patristics for theology that can be found in Ekkehard Mühlenberg's aforementioned article under the same title:

The word Patristics expresses a connection to theology. As a result, the theological element in the academic study of the early Christian period must be named as clearly as possible. There is, namely, in Theology, a specific interest in its own history and in particular in the knowledge of the ancient Christian era. Roman Catholic theology defines the theological element as a principle of tradition; for the Orthodox churches, the principle of tradition is rather confined to the time period of the seven ecumenical councils, while the Anglican Church has a leaning towards Patristics. The relationship of the Protestant churches of the Reformation to the Fathers can by comparison be described as a broken one. However, what should be true for Christian theology in general is, that it cannot ignore the question of the Church's historical unity, nor can it detach its truth from the Christian faith of the past.³²

The images of a specific understanding of the respective Christian confessions are static (a theological awakening like the aforementioned one of the *Nouvelle Théologie* is left by the wayside) and the importance of Patristics for Protestant theology is here reduced to a plain interest in gaining orientation via the past in order to establish a relationship to past concepts of church and faith. Why it might be necessary or even vital, and

³¹ Cfr., however, CH. MARKSCHIES, 'Wie katholisch ist die Evangelische Kirche? Wie katholisch sollte sie sein?', *Evangelischer Pressedienst Dokumentation*, 16 (17.4.2012), p. 4-14 [repr. in *Ökumenische Information. Nachrichten und Hintergründe aus der Christlichen Ökumene und dem Dialog der Religionen*, 17 (24.4. April 2012), p. I-XII]; cfr. Italian version: 'L'importanza di stabilire cosa significhi cattolicità per la Chiesa evangelica. Certe parole hanno un peso', *L'Osservatore romano*, 227 (3.10.2012), p. 4.

³² MÜHLENBERG, 'Patristik', p. 97.

what gains one might have from an orientation of this kind, remains hidden within an unspecific and imprecise discourse. In his 1999 farewell lecture, Mühlenberg's Protestant colleague from Heidelberg, Adolf Martin Ritter, defined the significance of early Christian (and medieval) traditions for Protestantism very differently, in the following three respects:

Protestantism needs to be rooted in the pre-Reformation, ancient Christian and Medieval tradition and therefore in Antiquity itself, because its ability to take part in an ecumenical dialogue is highly dependent on this. The ability to take part in a dialogue with the "Catholic churches" (that is, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican) in particular [...] is affected at its very core by whether or not Protestants possess not only rudimentary knowledge of early and Medieval (Church) history, but also whether they understand the pre-Reformation period as a part of their own history instead of *purely in terms of historical development*. [...] Protestantism needs this rootedness in pre-Reformation tradition, because this is an essential factor influencing its ability to take part in the dialogue between religions. The Antiquity and the early Middle Ages are not only the "formative periods of Christianity and Islam", but also of the so-called "classical Judaism". [...] Protestantism needs to be rooted in the ancient Christian and Medieval tradition in the interest of a *cultural competence* that is becoming increasingly vital today. [...] However: the fact that knowledge of the Jewish-Christian tradition may contribute essential insights to our cultural self-reassurance is something that can hardly be disputed.³³

If one derived tasks for Patristics from this definition of three layers of meaning, then one would end up with a very broad approach to the subject, both in terms of method and content. A classic history of dogma and a theology focusing on the great ecumenical themes would be welcome (which could certainly be broadened in the sense of a new history of ideas in line with



³³ A. M. RITTER, 'Protestantisches Geschichtsbewusstsein und vorreformatorische Tradition', in A. M. Ritter, *Vom Glauben der Christen und seiner Bewahrung im Denken und Handeln. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte (Texts and Studies in the History of Theology, 8)*, Mandelbachtal, Cambridge, 2003, p. 22f.

the suggestions put forward by Quentin Skinner's Cambridge School to include historical, political and social contexts)³⁴ as well as a study of Patristics that expands to include religious history and to examine ancient Judaism and Christianity as *praeparatio islamica* (from the research perspective brought forward by Guy Stroumsa, at the Oxford Patristics Conference in 2011, which understands Islam as a part of that Late Antiquity which is characterized by lively contacts between Judaism and Christianity and not only by a parting of the ways).³⁵ Ultimately, it remains necessary, in order to fulfil the tasks outlined by Ritter, to develop an interest in the transformation of the early Christian (as well as the ancient Jewish and Islamic) heritage in the post-Antique period. In the meantime, the classic models of a history of reception and influence have been added to by highly ambitious theories of transformation (for example, in one research project in Berlin entitled 'Transformations in the Antiquity')³⁶ which describe the alongside-one-another in in-one-another of change and continuity much more precisely than the older models.

One can take Ritter's description further by referring to contributions from French scholars of Antiquity, who drew attention to the fact that the secularisation of our image of Antiquity which took place in the nineteenth century dramatically affected more than just our image of Antiquity in relation to historical reality. In Germany, at least, following the Humboldt educational reform, the texts of Augustine disappeared from the school curricula and Antiquity became just as dechristianised as the surrounding society. When some time ago, following Henri-Irénée Marrou, Jacques Fontaine (incidentally, before the circle of sponsors and friends of the Franz-Josef-Dölger Institute in Bonn, which publishes the Encyclopaedia of Antiquity and Christianity – *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*) in turn

³⁴ *Die Cambridge School der politischen Ideengeschichte* – ed. M. Mulsow, A. Mahler, Frankfurt am Main, 2010.

³⁵ G. STROUMSA, 'Athens, Jerusalem and Mekka: The Patristic Crucible of the Abrahamic Religions', in *Studia Patristica* 62 (2013), p. 153-168.

³⁶ H. BÖHME, 'Einladung zur Transformation', in *Transformation. Ein Konzept zur Erforschung kulturellen Wandels* – ed. H. Böhme et al., München, 2011, p. 7-38.

stated, in programmatic terms, ‘Christianity is also Antiquity’,³⁷ he of course intended to express the converse of his sentence, namely: ‘Antiquity is also Christianity’. The classical philologist, Reinhart Herzog (1941-1994), who was in close exchange with Fontaine and his French colleagues, bundled and narrowed down the results of French research on the history of the term, ‘Late Antiquity’, in his programmatic essay, “‘We live in Late Antiquity’: The experience of an era and its impulses for scholarship.”³⁸ If one attempts to draw one simple pragmatic conclusion from his highly reflective considerations, then perhaps that conclusion should be not to overdo it when trying to update the results of Patristics research work for contemporary theological tasks: a mere repristination of ancient *theologoumena*, ethical norms, or even world views would serve nobody. Herzog pleads in favour of dealing with the tradition of the Enlightenment in a reflective manner.

If one compares Adolf Martin Ritter’s description to what Italian colleague Lorenzo Perrone, who teaches at an institute for the study of Antiquity in Bologna, said in 2004 at a conference of the ‘New Europe College’ in Bucharest under the title ‘Les Pères de l’église dans le monde d’aujourd’hui’, one will find significant congruities between a Protestant church historian and an Italian scholar of Antiquity. Even if Perrone, of course, also refers to the Second Vatican Council, to the new world situation after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, and to the conflicts with a radicalized Islam, his lecture is also characterised by the conviction that early Christian texts contain challenging ideas for the present time.³⁹ Certainly, he pleads in favour of

³⁷ J. FONTAINE, ‘Christentum ist auch Antike. Einige Überlegungen zu Bildung und Literatur in der lateinischen Spätantike’, *JbAC*, 25 (1982), p. 5-21.

³⁸ R. HERZOG, “‘Wir leben in der Spätantike’: Eine Zeiterfahrung und ihre Impulse für die Forschung”, in R. Herzog, *Spätantike. Studien zur römischen und lateinisch-christlichen Literatur* – ed. P. Habermehl, (*Hypomnemata. Suppl.*, 3), Göttingen, 2002, p. 321-348.

³⁹ L. PERRONE, ‘L’étude des Pères dans l’Université: pour une approche européenne’, in *Les Pères de l’église dans le monde d’aujourd’hui. Actes du colloque international organisé par le New Europe College en collaboration avec la Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft (Bucarest, 7-8 octobre 2004)* – ed. C. Badilita, Ch. Kannengiesser, Paris, 2006, p. 19-35.

taking a European approach to the task at hand and thus leaving decidedly behind us the era of competition between individual nation states (take, for example, the edition of the Greek Church Fathers of the Prussian Academy in Berlin that was in competition with the edition of the Latin Church fathers in Vienna⁴⁰). This adds a fourth layer to the series of tasks for the research of Patristics which we have already derived from the three layers of meaning provided by Ritter: if one follows Perrone's plea in favour of a European dimension to the significance of Patristics (which, of course, does not apply to theology alone), then the trans-European dimension of the history of early Christianity must once again be addressed more rigorously. Here, we not only have a (sometimes strongly deviating) Christianity beyond the imperial borders of Persia and Arabia, which is of great importance for the emergence of Manichaeism and Islam, but also an interaction on the basis of the Mediterranean between various actors in the so-called Arian or Pelagianist disputes, which it would be well worth investigating again.

Concluding: in his aforementioned Bucharest lecture, Lorenzo Perrone said that 'l'univers des Pères', the universe of the Church Fathers, cannot be studied by only one discipline and also not from only one disciplinary background, because of the fact that it is already so rich. Significantly, it is not exhausted in Greek and Latin texts,⁴¹ since it has been transmitted in the various languages and cultures of the Christian Orient. If, in the course of my line of argument here, it has become clear that the increasing autonomy of Patristics from its mother, the *theologia patristica*, does not have to result in a permanent, eternal separation between Patristics and Theology – a perpetual breaking asunder of the two – but that Theology can now happily join the ranks of the disciplines that may deliver interesting aspects to

⁴⁰ CH. MARKSCHIES, 'Origenes in Berlin und Heidelberg', *Adamantius*, 8 (2002), p. 135-145 [= 'Origenes in Berlin. Schicksalswege eines Editionsunternehmens', in MARKSCHIES, *Origenes und sein Erbe. Gesammelte Studien (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, 160), Berlin, New York, 2007, p. 239-259].

⁴¹ L. PERRONE, 'L'étude des Pères dans l'Université: pour une approche européenne', p. 27f.

the study of early Christianity, then I have achieved what I set out to do in this paper. Certainly, one should not have illusions about the possible achievements of a reflectively established connection between Patristics and Theology: Andrei Pleșu, former Romanian foreign minister and rector of the New Europe College in Bucharest, when he spoke at the aforementioned conference about ‘Les Pères de l’église dans le monde d’aujourd’hui’ in 2004, did not speak of the relevance of the Church Fathers in contemporary times, but about their lack of contemporary relevance.⁴² And I clearly remember how surprised I was as a young assistant to find only isolated *Dicta probantia* in mostly outdated editions,⁴³ both in official Roman Catholic and Ecumenical church documents. That is why a sense of sobriety is recommended in the – for theologians perhaps – natural expectation to bring Patristics and Theology closer together, if the subject is to be dealt with to some extent exhaustively.

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⁴² A. PLEȘU, ‘Réflexions sur l’actualité et l’inactualité des Pères’, in *Les Pères de l’église dans le monde d’aujourd’hui*, p. 13–18.

⁴³ CH. MARKSCHIES, ‘Die altkirchlichen Väter – eine ökumenische Herausforderung?’, in ‘... zur Zeit oder Unzeit’. *Studien zur spätantiken Theologie-, Geistes- und Kunstgeschichte. Hans Georg Thümmel zu Ehren*, – ed. A. M. Ritter, W. Wischmeyer, W. Kinzig (*Texts and Studies in the History of Theology*, 9), Mandelbachtal, Cambridge, 2004, p. 307–342.

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Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of the complex and intricate relationship between Patristics and theology today and offers a history of the discipline of Patristics as well as a historical overview of the relationship between Patristics and its mother discipline: Theology, in its various stages and mainly in continental Europe. The paper refers to the impact of particular confessional understandings with regard to the historical development and interpretation of a *theologia patristica*. Moreover, the paper examines the role, and transformation of the study of early Christianity in German language Protestant theology with a focus on the secularisation process in modern times. It suggests a new approach based on hermeneutics and the philosophy of science that highlights the importance of theology as an ensemble of possible preconceptions for Patristics. Finally, the paper stresses the importance of the study of Patristics that expands to include a classic history of dogma and theology as well as religious history and a trans-European dimension of the history of early Christianity and argues for the significance of the contribution of theology to this rich field of study.

