Patristics (from the Latin genitive noun *patris*, "of" or "pertaining to a father") is the discipline of Christian theological studies that is concerned with the history, literature, and theology of postapostolic Christianity in late antiquity. In its broadest periodization, its concern is with Christianity between AD 100 and 800, but the span of the patristic period is sometimes shortened to AD 100-500 or 600 for Latin Christianity. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) offered such a definitive synthesis of the preceding Latin theological tradition that it ushered in a period of development and consolidation of the Augustinian tradition that set the stage for medieval Christianity in the west, and Gregory the Great (c.540-604) fulfilled a similar function for various aspects of the institutional life of the church. From the perspective of the Eastern Church, this formative period extends through the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicaea II, 787) and through the career of John of Damascus (c.650-c.749), who played a role comparable to Augustine in the west by virtue of his definitive synthesis of the preceding Greek theological tradition that set the stage for Byzantine Christianity in the east.

While much attention has been given to early Christian literature in Greek and Latin, Christianity in the eastern half of the world of late antiquity was ethnically and linguistically diverse. Substantial bodies of early Christian literature were written in Coptic, Ge’ez (Ethiopic), Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Slavonic, and even Arabic, and scholars of early Christianity are beginning to specialize in these literatures as well. Furthermore, although the etymology of the term “patristics” is gender-specific and reflects the unavoidable fact that most of this literature was written by men, there were noteworthy exceptions to the masculine dominance of patristic authorship. The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, for example, contains Perpetua’s prison diary written before her martyrdom in 203; the *Pilgrimage of Egeria* is a travelogue authored by a 5th century nun from Spain who undertook a pilgrimage to Sinai and Palestine; Gregory of Nyssa’s *Dialogue on the Soul and the Resurrection* recounts Gregory’s dialogue with his sister Macrina as she lay dying, with Macrina as the primary theological voice in the dialogue; and the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* include the sayings of Amma Theodora and other desert mothers.

The roots of patristics as a discrete division of theological studies are in the early Christian literary genre of the *florilegia*, which were anthologies of passages from earlier Christian writers that addressed various biblical, theological, moral, and ascetic topics. These collections attest to the growing awareness later in the patristic period that the postapostolic theologians were witnesses to both continuity and development within the Christian tradition and could be appealed to as authorities in connection with contemporary questions and controversies. This function of the patristic *florilegium*
paved the way for the medieval theological handbooks that consolidated and systematized the formative period of Christian theology for subsequent generations. Eastern Christianity in its Byzantine period likewise made efforts to conserve the heritage of the patristic tradition, but with more evident continuity from the last of the eastern fathers through such influential Byzantine theologians as Gregory Palamas (1296-1359); owing principally to the lack of any parallel to the 16th century developments in the Western Church, this greater degree of continuity with the patristic period may be extended to modern Eastern Orthodoxy as well.

The controversies of the Reformation in the Western Church were not argued only in terms of differing patterns of relating the authority of Scripture to postbiblical tradition. All parties involved took advantage of the 16th century renaissance of patristic scholarship that produced critical printed editions of a vast body of patristic literature that would have been virtually inaccessible in the preceding century. The Magisterial Reformers, their Roman Catholic contemporaries, and even Radical Reformers such as Balthasar Hubmaier (c.1480-1528) all contended that their perspectives were not only in accord with Scripture but also in continuity with the teachings of the fathers. The forging of the Anglican via media between Catholicism and Protestantism depended in part on the retrieval of patristic liturgical materials by Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) and subsequent shapers of the liturgy of the Church of England.

The advent of modern historiography resulted in a different sort of appeal to patristic literature. Nineteenth century defenders and opponents of revolutionary reconstructions of the development of early Christianity by historical critics such as Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860) traced trajectories from the New Testament documents through the succeeding two centuries of Ante-Nicene literature, but J. B. Lightfoot (1828-1889) and Theodor Zahn (1838-1933) in particular were able to refute Baur’s extremely late dating of some New Testament texts with evidence of dependence on them in literature from earlier in the 2nd century. The influential contention of Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) that the orthodox theology of patristic Christianity was largely the product of the Hellenization of an original Hebraic ethical gospel was steeped in his extensive patristic research, but it may be more appropriate to speak of this transformation as the “Christianization of Hellenism” (Wilken, xvi). This encounter of the church with its cultural context yielded a distinctive form of civilization, the sociological phenomena of which have provided the focus for much recent historical inquiry. Also influential was the thesis of Walter Bauer (1877-1960) that the original expression of Christianity in numerous geographical locations was what was later regarded as heresy and that what came to be regarded as orthodoxy came to dominate early Christianity largely through the exercise of power by the Roman church, though more recent scholarship has called details of his argument into question.

The engagement of the patristic tradition as the common heritage of the presently divided church is now regarded an important task of ecumenical theology, and several prominent modern ecumenists have had academic backgrounds in patristics. The developments in Roman Catholic theology represented by the Second Vatican Council were informed by a renewal of patristic scholarship, especially in French circles, and a remarkable number of young evangelical scholars are seeking to retrieve the patristic tradition in order to supply their own churches with the resources they need to meet the challenges of postmodernity. The concurrence of these ecclesial motivations for patristic study with the application of sociological and other theoretical methods to the period by historians has made patristics the most rapidly growing field of Christian historical studies today.

SEE ALSO: Augustine, Saint; Cranmer, Thomas; Gregory I, (Gregory the Great); Gregory Palamas, Saint (1296-1359); Harnack, Adolph von; St. John Damascene; Oecolampadius, Johannes; Reformation; Walls,
References and Suggested Readings


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