



## Philosophy & the Christian Faith

*Colin Brown*

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Colin Brown surveys the thought of over 400 philosophers from the Middle Ages to the present day, showing how various thinkers and ideas have affected Christian belief.

### Philosophy & the Christian Faith Details

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## Jonathan says

This book recounts the history of philosophy from the middle ages to the present, analyzing how various movements have interacted with Christianity, and what their status is according to orthodox Christianity. Obviously, there is a lot that can be said on this subject, and at around 300 pages this book feels very brief. But regardless, it accomplishes its task fairly well.

Brown's writing is easy to read, and he adeptly summarizes complex philosophical movements/periods and their interactions with each other. He can be somewhat wordy, and he uses the phrase "Procrustean bed" throughout, but overall there is nothing really detrimental about his style. His analyses of the various movements seem authoritative, although due to the brevity of the work he is often reduced to merely stating his claims and failing to justify them. Sometimes his critiques come off a little snarky--for example, he seems to take particular pleasure in eviscerating Thomas Altizer. But generally he handles things equitably, pointing out the strong points and benefits of philosophical systems he ultimately disagrees with (for example, the Enlightenment rationalist critique of German idealism).

At first, it's not totally clear what perspective he's coming from. My guess is that he's most sympathetic toward Reformed theology, since at the end he analyzes Schaeffer and doesn't really find fault with his thought. Given this stance he is surprisingly gentle with figures like Locke and Pascal who, although ostensibly Christian, had some pretty unorthodox (and in the case of Locke, flat-out wacky) ideas. This shortcoming, in addition to its general brevity, makes the book insufficient as a standalone guide to the history of philosophy. Therefore I could only recommend reading this in conjunction with or after having read another, more detailed history of philosophy, like the *Brief* one edited by Anthony Kenny.

The book is at its best when it addresses some more "internal" philosophical issues in Christianity. Especially enlightening is the discussion of figures like Bultmann, Tillich, Bonhoeffer, Barth, Van Til, and Schaeffer. These are still big names in Christianity, and it's hard to navigate through the nuances of some of their views, but Brown makes it all much clearer. I plan on revisiting these chapters especially in future.

The conclusion to the book attempts to tie everything together and give a Christian perspective on philosophy in general. His points here are again brief, but surprisingly prescient. They are probably most useful for new Christians or those just beginning to scratch the surface of philosophy. He speaks briefly to the future of apologetics and seems to accurately predict a heavier focus on the presuppositional approach, which we can see now in works like Timothy Keller's *Making Sense of God*. Then he speaks to the historical problem of the scriptures, raising basic, important presuppositional questions about the study of history. Here he seems to anticipate works like N.T. Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God* which makes a negative case against postmodern historical criticism along with its own positive case.

I read this book after having read Kenny's *Brief History of Western Philosophy*. That book had raised lots of questions in my mind about various figures and what might be the orthodox Christian response to their claims. For that, this book was nearly perfect, much better than anything I thought I would be able to find. Brown provides a reliable guide to a generally Reformed and/or evangelical perspective on most of the important issues.

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### Gene says

Perhaps I have overdone my recent reading in philosophy, but I found it hard to drag myself through this book. It had good information, but it was presented in a way that neither kept my attention or clearly formed the lines that linked or divided one philosopher's views from another. I'm a beginning student in this area, and I need to be spoon-fed; this book didn't do that for me, though I think it was intended to be for the beginner.

It was all there, of course, all the big names from the Middle Ages until the middle of the last century, but somehow very little of it stuck with me. In addition, when comparing it to Rushdoony's The One and the Many, it seemed to be more dry and academic and less passionate. But like Rushdoony, this author found it easy to brush aside perspectives he disdains, in this case the natural theology of Thomas Aquinas and the Neo-Scholastics. The way he wrote off Aquinas' view of transubstantiation seemed glib, the same way Rushdoony seemed toward theologians who adhere to the idea of theosis. Neither case involved the presentation of arguments against the views; they simply treated them as beneath honest consideration.

There was still much there to benefit from and praise. I saw a better presentation of the Neo-Orthodoxy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer than I have read anywhere else. I think Evangelicals in America tend to not deal openly or honestly with some of his more modern and less orthodox opinions. And as an overview of philosophy, again, it was worthwhile reading. In addition, the treatment of Francis Schaeffer was more positive than I had hoped to see. I'm just satiated with the topic of philosophy for the time-being and I've lost my ability to retain the content because of this.

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### Dayo Adewoye says

An amazing survey of the history of philosophy, especially as it affects the Christian faith. I thoroughly enjoyed it!

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### Chris Comis says

Very good overall, but with some minor faux pas here and there. Mr. Brown ends up giving too much of the Christian farm away to the various philosophical fads over the centuries, in my opinion. I understand his desire to want to "continue the dialogue" with unbelieving philosophers and their movements, but sometimes you just have to come down from your ivory tower and start proclaiming "repent or perish!" like some OT wild-eyed prophet. Mr. Brown is often way too nice with men and their petty philosophical movements - movements that will all be burned at the last with an intense heat.

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### Bill says

This is an excellent 'one stop shop.' Brown does a good job of showing how one bankrupt philosophy is 'corrected' by another bankrupt philosophy by absolutizing (to use Dooyeweerd's word) a perceived missing

element from the former. Also, I found it helpful where Brown indicated that Existentialism is founded on a Rationalistic materialism. The presumptions of rationalism together with a naive idealism allow existentialism to project a reality regardless of reality, because they're (after all) just shadows on the cave of the brain (to pervert Plato). Finally, the author's key insight that unbelieving philosophies and Christianity make strange bedfellows which are doomed to scorn, marginalization, and the dust-bin of history is very helpful. Too often Christians fall for the idea that some hip idea is what Christianity needs only to find themselves out of style and bewildered in short order. Good read.

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### **Eli says**

An outstanding survey of philosophical and theological thought and discussion of how Christianity and philosophy relate with each other. I found Brown to be level-headed, Biblical and refreshing. An excellent introduction, with lots of re-readability and springboards for further discussion. Highly recommended.

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### **Danny says**

Colin Brown wrote a fantastic survey of various Philosophical systems of the past millennium. His writing style is not static or stale. He beautifully weaves together the systems you will encounter and I believe it will help you see how the variety of philosophical systems interacted and responded to each other. I will admit that I did not agree with him on everything, such as his disdain for natural theology, but broadly his book "gets the job done" and in an engaging way despite some flaws. His summation near the end of the book best describes what I felt as I enthusiastically devoured the pages:

"...no system of philosophy has ever turned out to be complete and perfect. In fact, it could be said that those systems which, like Absolute Idealism, have laid the greatest claims to comprehensiveness and completeness are precisely those which are the most defective. At almost regular intervals down the centuries someone will hit upon an idea which has some claim to truth. It is then blown up into a system which is thought to be capable of explaining everything. It is hailed as a key to unlock every door. But sooner or later its advocates find themselves obliged to deny the existence of anything that their key fails to unlock, or to admit that it was not quite what they thought it was...what often happens in philosophy is that someone stumbles across something that has been ignored or feels a need to account for some aspect of experience or relate it to 'modern' thought....In each case the thinkers concerned were so impressed with their particular insight that they built it into a more or less rigid system which virtually destroyed its original usefulness." - Colin Brown, *Philosophy & The Christian Faith*, pg 268-269

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### **G0thamite says**

Great introduction to the major philosophical issues and philosophers from the Middle Ages till Francis Schaeffer (the book was published in 1968). Brown is exceptional at distilling the contributions of the major philosophical schools and how each impacted Christianity. He is no fan of Classical Apologetics, but still has a place for the trustworthiness of the New Testament as a historical record. Buy this if you want to have a handy guide to philosophers and their thought in the Western Tradition since the Middle Ages. You will Not Be Disappointed. He also has an excellent annotated bibliography at the end of the book.

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**Troy Gibson says**

Fantastic brief summary of major ideas in Western philosophy and how they have shaped Christian theology.

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**maryam says**

This was one of the first books which gave me motivation to study philosophy.

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**Andrew Flynn says**

Found this book in the depths of my father's seminary collection, and found it to be more than what I hoped for. A beautiful summary of the history of philosophy and the impact (or lack there of) of it on the Christian faith. For the most part very easy to read, and very informative.

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**Julia says**

Even though it took me months to finish reading this one I really did enjoy it. Brown did an excellent job relaying the main points of each philosopher and movement over the course of his sketch - throwing in biographical and period details when needed. After attempting to describe the position and motivation behind each philosophers' contribution in their time, including details about their influences and followers, he would follow up with a discussion about where and how the philosophical movement might intersect with Christian belief.

As a Christian myself, I trusted his account to be honest and as fair as possible to each philosopher he handled. However, I can see that an outside perspective might not see it that way.

Overall I found it to be an incredibly informative read in the history of western philosophy and reference book for future philosophical exploration. The ample bibliography too provides much in the way of future reading on the topic.

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