# Introduction

I remember a discussion with some fellow students about life and the choices we make and being shocked when one of them, latching onto this concept of choice, declared that I was an Arminian. At the time, I thought it rather harsh, given that I had not at the time read Arminius' work, or the *Remonstrance* that his followers had compiled, and was not seeking to engage in a seventeenth-century theological discussion, let alone a recent, processed version.

Having now read these texts, and many others concerning the core issues in the four hundred years since the death of Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), I reflect that the appellation was not merely unfair in the context but rather fundamentally incorrect. 'Arminian' has become jargon used by Christians, largely without an understanding of the historical and the theological roots underpinning the concept; the result of which is often that division between individuals and communities increases because the deeply nuanced areas of belief are simplified from a spectrum of greys into a clear 'black and white' alternative.

As a historical theologian, the task of charting the development of beliefs across centuries of Christian thought in different areas of the world, in vastly different historical and cultural contexts, encourages humility in approaching the subject. When reading sources from various periods of Christian history, one recognises a devotion to God's revelation in Scripture, church and experience. Writers throughout history have displayed a Spirit-filled wisdom that seeks to process this in theological and philosophical terms, in a lived-out spirituality, which recognises current challenges, and in practical calls to holy and faithful witness in a broken world.

This does not mean that the Church today should blindly accept the teachings of any one writer in history; there are, however, wise voices that need to be included in our thinking, which support us and challenge us. When I find passages in historical texts that I struggle with, I try

to recognise that instead of taking a judgemental attitude toward my brothers and sisters from the past, I should rather be aware that no one is complete in knowledge and lifestyle; I should question at which point these men and women would have had issues with my faith and life.

This approach creates a complexity to the Christian life; apparent absolutes of faith and thought are often challenged as one considers others who have engaged with these ideas in societies in which Christians have served throughout the history of the Church, these experiences mediated through different languages and systems of thought. There are understandable solutions available today in systematic works that clarify an area of belief for the reader; these books are immensely valuable for those who struggle with an issue, the answer to which is needed to confirm and strengthen them. However, there is a danger, if one is limited to these packaged solutions, that a box forms around how God reveals and relates in any given area, which prevents the majesty of God's dynamic interaction with creation from being understood. This can limit the wonder and worship (and often the confusing complexity) that results from the experience the Church has had of God through history. As a consequence, there is a need to go back to read the original writings of Christians, instead of relying on others to tell us what the texts might have said, to enrich our beliefs and our lives.

There is thus a general inspiration to present directly the thought of great Christian writers through history. In terms of the precise themes of this work – sin, grace and free will – the decision to write this book came from a course that I developed to teach for Notre Dame University at their global gateway in London. A key aspect of the course I created had to be the historical development of thought. The themes of sin, grace and free will seemed, in their inter-relationship, to offer a broad scope, which could engage the students in some interesting debates. While seeking to prepare the course structure and materials, however, it soon became clear that these areas of thought generally had not been dealt with over a broad span of history but were either focused on particular debates – Augustine and Pelagius, Calvinists and Arminians – or were presented systematically with references to particular points supporting the view expressed.

Throughout the course of my own studies and then my teaching, I had been aware of the richness of thought that exists and I resolved to encourage the students to engage directly with the primary sources. The issue this posed was that, given the time for reading assigned and the fact that thought on sin, grace and free will was often embedded in writing about wider topics, only a limited amount could be read, which often involved engaging with, at best, tangentially relevant material.

I therefore decided to create this reader on sin, grace and free will, through looking at the works of some of the most prominent theologians in the history of the church, extracting the relevant passages and organising them thematically to give focused access to the development of thought about these themes. The intention is twofold: firstly, as indicated above, to help readers to recognise the breadth and depth of thought in these areas by Christians from different backgrounds, working in different contexts, to guard against an over-simplification, which would say one point of view is 'right' and another is 'wrong'; and, secondly, to encourage people to go beyond the quotations provided here, back to the original texts that interest them to study their work in greater detail – to this end, each chapter ends with links to the primary sources. In addition, the quotations here come from the most easily accessible editions of the works, generally speaking, those that are freely available online, in order that those who wish to move from the thought here to the context of the original works will be able to recognise the quotation that they are working from. There are two main drawbacks from working this way: the lack of gender-neutral language and the use of some arcane terms, but the intention to encourage the reader beyond this work, to the original sources, is more important than seeking the latest editions available.

I have sought to include the most prominent theologians in this volume from the first thousand years of the Church but others will undoubtedly highlight omissions they consider worthy: St Jerome, Cyprian of Carthage, Ambrose of Milan, for example. A book of this size is necessarily limited in the number of sources with which it can engage; there will always be the regret that more could not be included. I decided to group the Greek Fathers together because there is a general unanimity of thought on these concepts. Augustine of Hippo has been divided into two chapters, early and late, since there are discernible changes in his thought on sin, grace and free will as he confronted different groups.

In terms of the three main subjects studied here, the aim is to present sin, grace and free will as the writers use these concepts, rather than comparing their ideas to any preconceived definition. For two of the three, there are areas that need highlighting in this regard. Grace has become tied, in certain traditions, closely with particular aspects of Christianity – salvation, sacraments, spiritual gifts – but no assumptions are made here about what grace entails. The use of grace in biblical texts is so varied that a definitive reduction of its application would seem counter-intuitive. Free will is another problematic term, particularly in the Latin tradition where there are two phrases (*libera voluntas*, free will, and *liberum arbitrium*, free choice), which are used, and often translated, as 'free will', although they

can have very particular, nuanced differences. This work is not aimed at a postgraduate level at which an understanding of this is vitally important; therefore individual instances where one or other Latin word is used are not noted. As a basic introduction to the difference between the two, the will is the core motivation or value, whereas a choice is the realisation of the will in an action. A choice is therefore more contextually limited than the fundamental orientation of a person's will.

This volume begins with a chapter on the Early Church Fathers, some of whose writings were considered for inclusion in the New Testament (indeed, some were part of New Testament canons until the end of the fourth century). These writings, with the exception of Justin Martyr, were not systematic treatments of Christian thought but are included here to act as something of a bridge between the New Testament and the history of theology, showing how the concepts of sin, grace and free will were treated in the earliest writings. Following this, three key early theologians are studied in depth – Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen – in which we see the development of theological thought, generally in response to perceived incorrect teachings from groups that were overly reliant on current philosophical or religious teachings but differed from that received from the Apostles. At this stage, the New Testament was still in the process of formation and thus the oral tradition maintained an authority alongside the written tradition until at least 200 CE.

After these three writers, the centre of theological thought was firmly rooted in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, written in Greek and largely aimed at clarifying the doctrine of God. The chapter looking at the Greek Fathers surveys a number of different writers from the late fourth to the early sixth centuries, who were largely agreed in their teaching on sin, grace and free will. The last of the Greek Fathers, John of Damascus, who wrote in the early eighth century, is also included here. Finally, the work of Augustine of Hippo is discussed in two chapters covering his early and late work. He is the most influential theologian in the history of the church because of his defining role in the development of western thought. The split is not simply down to chapter size limitations, but the transition in his thought across all three areas. This was influenced by his switch from confronting the thought of the Manicheans to the Pelagians and addressing the different bases of theology. The Epilogue looks briefly at two later works – the canons of the Council of Orange and the work of John Scottus Erigena – that demonstrate how the western church engaged with Augustine in the centuries between his death and the twelfth-century renaissance that saw the birth of the scholastic movement.