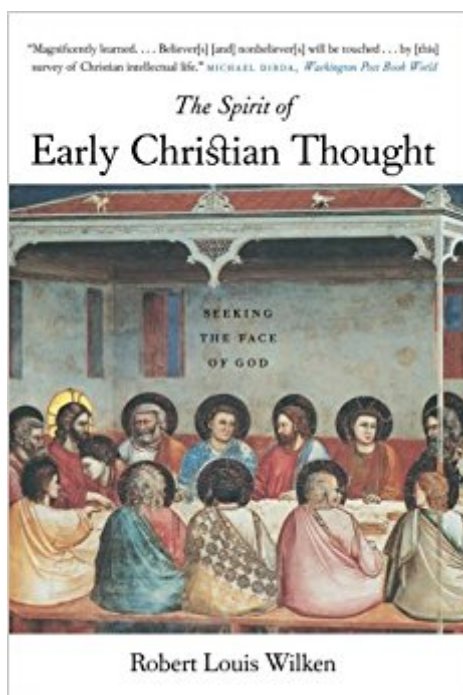


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# The Spirit Of Early Christian Thought: Seeking The Face Of God



## Synopsis

In this eloquent introduction to early Christian thought, eminent religious historian Robert Louis Wilken examines the tradition that such figures as St. Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and others set in place. These early thinkers constructed a new intellectual and spiritual world, Wilken shows, and they can still be heard as living voices in the modern world. In chapters on topics including early Christian worship, Christian poetry and the spiritual life, the Trinity, Christ, the Bible, and icons, Wilken shows that the energy and vitality of early Christianity arose from within the life of the Church. While early Christian thinkers drew on the philosophical and rhetorical traditions of the ancient world, it was the versatile vocabulary of the Bible that loosened their tongues and minds and allowed them to construct the world anew, intellectually and spiritually. These thinkers were not seeking to invent a world of ideas, Wilken shows, but rather to win the hearts of men and women and to change their lives. Early Christian thinkers set in place a foundation that has endured. Their writings are an irreplaceable inheritance, and Wilken shows that they can still be heard as living voices within contemporary culture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"[A] magnificently learned, deeply felt and surprisingly pellucid set of essays. Anyone who approaches *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* with a welcoming spirit and patient attention will learn from it. Certainly, an attentive reader of Wilken, whether believer or nonbeliever, will be touched anew by his survey of Christian intellectual life." —Michael Dirda, *Washington Post Book World* "The book is a compelling invitation to enter more deeply into the contemplative

hearts of the early Church Fathers." — Kay Kettenhofen, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* — "An interpretation of early Christian thought for the general reader. . . . A good general introduction to the writings of Christian antiquity, this is appropriate for both public and academic collections." — *Library Journal* — "We recommend (The Spirit of Early Christian Thought) as outstanding. . . . Any Christian concerned that the traditional Christian faith and its consequent Way of Life is often disparaged as 'irrelevant' and 'refuses to face philosophical and social criticism'; will find this book a gold mine." — *Doxa: A Quarterly Review Serving the Orthodox Church* — "This is not a book written for the academy but for all readers." — Luke Timothy Johnson, *America* — "This is not a book written for the academy but for all readers. It is not driven by theoretical or ideological agendas but is the fruit of years of patient and affectionate reading. It is not a young scholar's bid to make a name but a senior scholar's effort to share the fruit of learning. It is not marked by a hermeneutics of suspicion but by a hermeneutics of generosity. As such, it provides for a new generation of readers a sense of what is important about those astonishing teachers of the early church who instructed the ages after them." — Luke Timothy Johnson, *America* — "[A book of] great learning. . . . Written . . . for all readers. . . . It provides for a new generation of readers a sense of what is important about those astonishing teachers of the early church who instructed the ages after them." — Luke Timothy Johnson, Pam Kingsbury, Richard Haslam, *America* — "The Spirit of Early Christian Thought is a delight to read. It is written as history ought to be, especially for nonspecialist readers." — Richard A. Kauffman, *Christian Century* — "[His] unusual insight gives a fresh perspective to everything Wilken says as he goes through the usual history of the councils and theological controversies." — Robert Royal, *Crisis Magazine* — "Get The Spirit of Early Christian Thought and read it. Read it slowly, letting Wilken take you by the hand. . . . Let [Wilken] show you a more excellent way." — Richard John Neuhaus, *First Things* — "Read [this book] slowly, letting Wilken take you by the hand. . . . Let [him] show you a more excellent way." — Richard John Neuhaus, *First Things* — "Prof. Wilken's book is much more than a history of the early church and its thought. . . . The themes are obviously the fruit of Prof. Wilken's long and insightful study of the early church. . . . Prof. Wilken's thematic approach has the advantage of giving the reader a comprehensive and sympathetic portrait of the early church, and it is a compelling one. . . . The book represents a real contribution. The bird's eye view attends to the full dimensions of the life of the early church and captures its spirit in a sympathetic and persuasive way. . . . [Prof. Wilken] has enabled us to see the early church in a vivid and exciting way." — Rowan A. Greer, *Modern Theology* — "A sensitive, essayistic overview of how

pre-medieval Christians engaged in the life of the mind, and the role that intellect played in their work and worship. . . . This excellent book is a window into a very rich intellectual world." — Michael Potemra, *National Review* "This book evidences many years of careful study and thoughtful reflection. . . . Beautifully written and accessible to the non-specialist." — Bryan Hollon, *Perspectives in Religious Studies* "It captures perfectly for the general reader, in non-technical terms and relying on the words of the fathers themselves, the all pervasive theme that thinking is an essential component of believing, and that Christianity always has been a religion that is moral, intellectual, and liturgical." — Casimir Bernas, *Religious Studies Review* "This book is an elegant introduction to the Fathers of the Church. Giants such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and Maximus the Confessor move gracefully through its pages, teaching us how the Church lives by the Word of God, which itself lives in the Church, proclaiming the wonderful deeds of God to all the world." — Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., *Fordham University* "By turns scholarly, contemplative, and argumentative, this is an exposition in which the early Christian writers speak for themselves — and to us." — Jaroslav Pelikan, author of *The Christian Tradition* "Robert Wilken delivers exactly what his title promises: not a history, but a display of how the ancient church's mind worked. An accessible and delightful read, backed by immense scholarship." — Robert W. Jenson, *Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton N.J.* "This book is the welcome fruit of long study by a scholar of the first rank. To be sure, scholars will profit from the book, but the real beneficiaries will be thoughtful readers who want to understand what the early Christian church was all about." — Rowan Greer, *Professor Emeritus of Anglican Studies, Yale University* "Robert Wilken offers here a rich and nuanced interpretation of the Christian faith as seen through the eyes of its most formative exponents — the theologians, bishops, poets, and hymn writers of the early church. Written with clarity and conviction, this book is a window onto the landscape of the Christian soul." — Timothy George, *Dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University and executive editor of Christianity Today*

Also available by Robert Louis Wilken: *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book is not a polemic or a book of apologetics; it is instead an exposition of what early Church theologians thought about important topics in Christian belief, and how those thoughts evolved and grew. If you think all theology is merely empty wind or arguments about angels dancing on the head

of a pin, this is not the book for you. But if you want to know how early Christians developed their thought about the Trinity, or theological views on Christ being simultaneously fully human and fully divine, or how they viewed faith through the prism of reason, this is the book for you. Don't plan on finishing this book in an evening. It's not too long, and it's surprisingly readable, but it benefits from careful reading and consideration. I'm sure it benefits from multiple readings, as well. Moreover, given how it's divided into clear topics, it is easy to return to the book when considering a specific topic, whether that is Christian views on the Trinity, the resurrection of the body, or the role, origin and logic of faith in Christian belief. While it is not intended as such, this book is also a rebuke and response to the currently fashionable New Atheist set of such imagined luminaries as Dawkins and Harris (as well as other similarly shallow thinkers on the topic such as Gibbon). A key premise, always unexamined, of the New Atheists is that Christian thought is an oxymoron, and that they have discovered this key fact as a revelation missed by all prior opponents of Christianity. "The Spirit Of Early Christian Thought" shows in detail what anyone who is not ignorant already knows, that Christian thought and reasoning has absorbed the finest minds of the West for two millennia, and from the very beginning Christian thinkers actively grappled with and definitively responded to critics (Celsus, the Emperor Julian, Porphyry) who wrote in the same vein but with infinitely more intelligence and insight than the New Atheists, who are, in any reasonable view, a bunch of supercilious clowns. In fact, Wilken wrote a prior book on the topic of the arguments of early opponents of Christianity, to which this book was initially supposed to be a type of sequel/response, but which instead developed into an independent examination of Christian thought. The conflict between the New Atheists and Christians is not an abstract philosophical argument; it, or the issues under discussion, have very real consequences. All Western morality is premised on Christian thought and principles. And it is a very different moral code than that of non-Christian societies, since it is a pure myth that the Golden Rule has any core relevance to any religion but Christianity. The New Atheists believe that without God societies can still retain a moral core. Steven Pinker actually argues that morality is merely the outcome of people finding positive-sum games. Maybe. But more likely, as Wilken says, "Augustine's City of God" defends a fundamental truth about human beings and about society. Only God can give ultimate purpose to our deepest convictions, for example, the dignity of the human person, and provide grounds for communal life that transcend self-interest. An abstract core belief in human dignity (real dignity, not Anthony Kennedy's "dignity") seems

an unlikely automatic outcome of positive-sum games. Human history suggests the opposite. But we will find out within the next fifty years or so. In any case, apologetics or calling out silly people is not Wilken's goal in this book, and he does neither. Rather, the core of the book, the reason for its existence, is "Christianity is more than a set of devotional practices and a moral code: it is also a way of thinking about God, about human beings, about our world and history." When talking about this thinking, Wilken focuses on Origen; Gregory of Nyssa; Augustine; and Maximus the Confessor. These are all pre-medieval, or at least pre-High Medieval, thinkers while later theologians, like St. Thomas Aquinas, are occasionally mentioned, the focus is on "early" Christian thought. That said, some readers may expect "early" to be first century, and that is not the case here, if for no other reason than that detailed theological exposition of most Christian topics took centuries to accomplish. Aside from the specific topics, Wilken maintains two threads throughout the book. The first is the importance of Biblical exegesis to all these thinkers. The Bible, Old and New Testament, suffused all their analyses, even the most complex. This is in contrast to the popular Protestant view that before Martin Luther, the Bible was ignored. And this Biblical analysis was extremely focused and subtle, using both comparisons of different passages from the Bible and sophisticated reasoning, which is in contrast to the modern tendency to view each personal analysis, even of the uneducated and stupid, as equal, and to view purely literal interpretations as somehow superior. As Wilken notes, "the church fathers took it as self-evident that the words of the Bible often had multiple meanings and the plain sense did not exhaust their meaning." The second thread is that the Hellenization of early Christianity has been grossly overstated. In its simplest and crudest form, the idea is that the Judaic Christianity of Christ and the Apostles was hijacked by Saint Paul and his Neoplatonist progeny. Wilken doesn't like this idea. Instead, he emphasizes the concrete roots of all early Christian thought in the Scriptures; informed sometimes, to be sure, by Greco-Roman philosophical ideas, but those ideas flavored rather than supplanted the Scriptures and traditions of the Apostles. I personally found the discussions of the Trinity and the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Christ the most interesting. The Trinity absorbed many early thinkers, who first fit Jesus into the Trinity and later fleshed out the Spirit (though the Trinity itself was always accepted as a core Christian doctrine and mystery), relying primarily on Biblical exegesis rather than deductive reasoning or, as Gregory of Nyssa said, "his aim is to fit together what he learns from the Scripture with conceptions that are drawn from arguments based on reason." This includes gems like Tertullian's

analogy of the social nature of the Trinity to the back-and-forth that occurs inside any human's head while thinking. Similarly, the early Christians struggled with the apparent paradox of simultaneous divinity and humanity (i.e., the hypostatic union). They saw clearly how this was essentially impossible to fully grasp and how ridiculous it seemed to non-Christians, and they addressed such objections head-on, when they weren't contending among themselves on the issue. (For those keeping score at home, the mainstream Christian position that was converged on over the centuries is that in Christ there are two natures and two wills; each retaining its own properties, and together united in perfect harmony in one substance and in one single person). As to faith itself, Wilken explains how Christians have always viewed faith not as some required unreasoned belief—quite the contrary. Outsiders, non-Christians or the non-religious, view religious faith as an inverse invincible ignorance. Wilken notes that Christian faith has been a key point of attack by non-Christians from the very beginning, citing Galen and Celsus, through many later thinkers. But Wilken carefully shows how Christians, from earliest times, have instead viewed faith as a combination of recognition of the testimony of reliable people who had come before, reasoning, and concrete evidence. Wilken's core point is that any historical (as opposed to mathematical) knowledge involves a type of faith, as Augustine said, and quotes Augustine: "Nothing would remain stable in human society if we determined to believe only what can be held with absolute certainty. The existence of witnesses (the original meaning of "martyr"), reason, evidence, and authority (in the sense Augustine used the Latin "auctoritas, as a person able to guarantee the validity of a legal document or action), allow Christians to conclude that their faith is not blind. Once you read this section of Wilken's book, anybody who uses the Flying Spaghetti Monster (which lacks all four markers of Christian faith) as a counter-Christian argument will, if he thinks clearly, be duly ashamed and put that argument aside with his Hot Wheels. That said, Wilken also acknowledges that faith is not at all a matter of pure reason, as the Manichees would have it. He has a long discussion of the role of hope and love in faith, again quoting Augustine, "If you have faith without hope and without love, you believe that he is the Christ, but you don't believe in Christ. And he concludes, "But in matters of religion the way to truth is not found in keeping one's distance. It is only in loving surrender that we are able to enter the mystery of God. In the words of Richard of Saint Victor, the twelfth-century theologian and spiritual writer, "Where there is love, there is seeing. By putting itself in service

of truth, faith enables reason to exercise its power in realms to which it would otherwise have no access. It is only in giving that we receive, only in loving that we are loved, only in obeying that we know. And, of course, this is the core of Christianity. The Trinity is important but abstract to most believers. But faith itself is not, and Wilken's book ties the entire Christian project together.

I have read many books concerning church history and about the theology of the Patristics. Yet, I find Wilken's book one of the best in style, content and doing justice to the Church Fathers. Some authors criticize the Church Fathers without explaining why they believed what they believed in light of their social and religious contexts or backgrounds. Wilken does that. It is worth mentioning that a problem that arises from Wilken's praises of the church fathers and thinkers, and just taking some of their teachings to explain the general ideas of their times is that he tends to minimize or not mention what made some of their positions troubling for the church (in their times and for the church today). They seem to be idealized to some degree. We do not see (or see them polished) the hurtful implications of Athanasius' Christology in the discussion of the wills and the natures of Christ, or Origen's Christology, or Gregory of Nyssa's Platonism negative influence. Nevertheless, Wilken does achieve what he proposed, which was to "kiss goodbye" to von Harnack and others position about the Hellenization of Christianity and to accept that what truly happened was the Christianization of Hellenism. (xvi). His work is a masterpiece for the reader who is interested in knowing more the church fathers in their context and in light of their backgrounds. He demonstrates his proficiency on church history and on the patristic writings and also demonstrate on being a careful writer that pursues to make himself and the fathers understandable for anyone who desires to know more (xix), making the book easy to read and follow.

Point: The era of the early Church fathers was not an age of darkness, nor even a stepping stone on the path of faith. These men were deep thinkers who sought to know God. Path: The author traces a variety of topics through the Fathers in order to expose their beliefs. Sources: He cites many of the fathers but focuses on Origen (3rd century), Gregory of Nyssa (4th century), Augustine (5th century), and Maximus the Confessor (7th century). Agreement: This is a helpful survey on the early Church and her thoughts. Disagreement: The author comes from a Catholic background so there is obvious factors which he stresses. The composition was not as easy to read as Ferguson's "Early



Christians Speak."Personal App: I need to read Augustine's "City of God." The early Church fathers did not possess a refined understanding of everything we have today, but we do not possess near the devotion they had.It would be worth another read. I would recommend Ferguson first.

Very readable. Author is a gifted communicator of his wide and deep research.

We chose it for our scripture study group. it was magnificent. The language is advanced-college level --we kept a dictionary handy. The themes, the writing, the interesting and inspiring discussion of the development of early christian thinking and theology were often new to us "old" Catholics and awe inspiring..Recommend for people especially Catholics who are interested in the development ofChristian thought doctrine and theology. It doesn't have a study guide so we read and talked about especially meaningful passages.

Extremely informative and interesting, though I wish Wilken had chosen to focus on some other theologians and ideas. Good introduction to the basics of "thinking Christianly." Intellectual connection between the pagan philosophers and the Holy Fathers made clear.

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