

Christianity's Intellectual Foundation

Christianity is often derided as “unintellectual”. Yet, if you actually spend any time with those making the most dogmatic arguments about the “stupidity” of religion, particularly Christianity, you get the feeling that few of those individuals have actually engaged in any meaningful way with the intellectual tradition of Christianity.

In *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, former University of Virginia professor Robert Louis Wilken opens the book with this argument:

“From the beginning Christians were conscious of the other. The first Christians had to explain to their fellow Jews why they venerated a man who had been executed by the Romans. Within a few decades of Jesus’ death, as some Christians ceased observing the Jewish Law, Christian leaders had to answer charges they had abandoned the ancient traditions of the Jewish people. Later, in Greece, as Paul began to move beyond the Jewish world to address the Gentiles, the citizens of Athens brought him to the famous hill west of the Acropolis, the Areopagus, and asked him to justify his new teaching. ‘It sounds rather strange to our ears,’ they said, ‘so we would like to know what it means.’ (Acts 17.21)

Of course all efforts to explain or to justify what one believes are undertaken as much for oneself as for others. If the questions are genuine, if they go to the heart of the matter and are not simply rhetorical flourishes to score points in a debate, over time they will be asked even in the absence of the other. Dialogue inevitably leads to a more solitary and sustained inquiry. Nevertheless, even if there is no philosophical necessity

for dialogue, it is no idle matter to have the questions posed by someone else, especially if the inquirer belongs to a neighboring community that lives by different answers.”

So, in the spirit of dialogue and genuine questioning, here is the list of early Christian intellectuals recommended by Wilken with a few of their writings:

- **Justin Martyr** (2nd century A.D.)
 - [*Dialogue with Trypho*](#)
 - [*The Apologies of Justin Martyr*](#)

- **Irenaeus** (2nd century A.D.)
 - [*Against Heresies*](#)
 - [*On the Apostolic Preaching*](#)

- **Clement of Alexandria** (2nd century A.D.)
 - [*The Works of Clement of Alexandria: The Stromata, On the Salvation of the Rich Man, Pædagogus and More*](#)
 - [*Clement of Alexandria: The Exhortation to the Greeks. The Rich Man's Salvation. To the Newly Baptized \(fragment\)*](#)

- **Lactantius** (3rd – 4th century A.D.)
 - [*The Divine Institutes*](#)
 - [*Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died*](#)
 - [*On the Workmanship of God*](#)

- **Athanasius** (4th century A.D.)
 - [*On the Incarnation*](#)
 - [*Defense Against the Arians*](#)
 - [*The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*](#)

- **Basil of Caesarea** (4th century A.D.)
 - [*Hexaemeron*](#)
 - [*Against Eunomius*](#)

- [On the Human Condition](#)
- **John Chrysostom** (4th century A.D.)
 - [On Wealth and Poverty](#)
 - [The Cult of the Saints](#)
 - [On Marriage and Family Life](#)
 - [Complete Works \(33 Books\)](#)
- **Ambrose of Milan** (4th century A.D.)
 - [On the Mysteries & On Repentance](#)
 - [On the Holy Spirit](#)
- **Cyril of Alexandria** (5th century A.D.)
 - [On the Unity of Christ](#)
 - [Christological Dialogue on the Incarnation of the Only-Begotten](#)
 - [Commentary on John](#)

The “Big Four” Wilken recommends:

- **Origen** (2nd – 3rd century A.D.)
 - [On First Principles](#)
 - [Against Celsus](#)
 - [The Works of Origen](#)
- **Gregory of Nyssa** (4th century A.D.)
 - [The Life of Moses](#)
 - [On the Soul and the Resurrection](#)
 - [On the Making of Man](#)
- **Augustine** (4th century A.D.)
 - [Confessions](#)
 - [On Grace and Free Will](#)
 - [City of God](#)
- **Maximus the Confessor** (6th-7th century A.D.)
 - [On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ](#)
 - [Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings](#)

Christian or not, if you want to genuinely engage with the

intellectual arguments of Christianity, the authors and books above are a great start. If you just want to troll, well...

[via GIPHY](#)

(Image Credit: omegajs.blogspot.com)