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# Polemics

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## I. Philosophy

The word *polemic* refers to texts produced in the context of a debate, often personal, carried on in public. The word can denote anything from a single text such as a pamphlet through the debate as a whole. It can be used neutrally in the sense of a scientific or academic controversy or pejoratively in the sense of an *ad hominem* attack. Initially the word referred exclusively to academic debate, especially in theology (see II below) or philosophy. The restriction to an academic context survived into the early 20th century, although the pejorative usage was already beginning to appear in the 18th century. Today *polemic* refers generally – and primarily with negative connotations – to conflicts in the context of intellectual debate.

The rhetoric of classical antiquity did not identify polemic as a distinct genre, but discussed it in certain systematic settings for instructions regarding polemical texts – for example in the context of an encomium or invective or in a forensic oration, and also in the theory of those sections of an oration that include rebutting the opposite position. G.E. Lessing made a major contribution to the culture of theological polemic as well as to the culture of academic debate in general within Humanism. In the preface to his *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet* (1769; ET: “How the Ancients Represented Death,” in: *Selected Prose Works of G.E. Lessing*, 1890), he provides a vigorous philosophical justification of polemic as a form of criticism that serves the quest for truth. I. Kant takes much the same tack, seeing “in the polemical use of pure reason . . . the defense of its propositions against their dogmatic denial” (*Kritik der reinen*



*Vernunft*, 1781, B 1787; ET: *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1881). In F.D.E. Schleiermacher's conception of dialectics, debate still functions as a central, indeed essential tool of the movement toward truth.

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## II. Fundamental Theology

From the outset, theological controversy has always involved an element of critical attack. The terms *polemics* ("art of disputation") and *polemic* have been used for the substance of the controversy, its literary deposit, reflection on its methods, and finally, since the 17th century, for a subdiscipline of theology (*theologia polemica/controversa/elenctica*) closely associated with apologetics. In contrast to irenics, whose goal is doctrinal conciliation or toleration, the goal of polemics is to refute opposing teachings.

Polemics within Christendom reached its high point in the doctrinal controversies of the Early Church, the Reformation, and the confessional age (classical examples: M. Chemnitz, *Examen concilii Tridentini* [1566–1573; ET: *A discoverie and batterie of the great fort of vnwritten traditions . . .*, 1582]; *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 4 vols., 1971–1986; R. Bellarmine, *Disputationes de controversiis christianae fidei*, 1586–1593); in the latter period, methodological reflection also reached a high point. Challenged in its classical form in 18th century by methodological criticism, historical criticism, and the notion of toleration, polemics was put on a new foundation by Schleiermacher: as an element of the discipline of so-called philosophical theology, polemics and apologetics together were expected to perform the critical function of identifying within the manifestations of Christianity deviations from its ideal (cf. *Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums*, 1811, §§54–62; ET: *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, 1966, 1989). When K.A. v. Hase published his *Handbuch der Protestantischen Polemik gegen die Römisch-Katholische Kirche* in 1862, polemics had "a somewhat shabby reputation" (Foreword). With a critical allusion to the Catholic *Symbolik* (1832; ET: *Symbolism*, 1844, 1997) of J.A. Möhler, Hase claimed that he could just as well have called his own work *Symbolik*. This suggests that there were no precise agreed-upon definitions of the term and its content, but also the polemics constituted one of the roots of the later comparative study of denominations. The success of Hase's *Handbuch* (7th ed., 1900), which developed into a classic, must be understood against the background of the boom in polemical literature that began in the 1830s.

Since the end of the 19th century, the conceptual diversity of fundamental theology and dogmatics has meant that the importance and function of polemics are also disputed. While the term *polemic(s)* has fallen increasingly into

disuse, the critical function of polemics is still performed by so-called controversial theology or, within dogmatics and fundamental theology, by apologetics. When these acknowledge their ecumenical responsibility, critical dialogue generally replaces the earlier goal of refutation.

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