

Key Themes in Systematic Theology

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Lecture 1: What is Systematic Theology?

- Reading
- K. Tanner/J. Webster/I. Torrance (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, OUP 2007.
- Webster, 'Introduction: Systematic Theology', in: *Oxford Handbook of ST*, ch.1 (with good list of further readings).
- G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 1984.
- W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1. ch. 1.

What is ST?

- Many religions have spawned intellectual and philosophical reflections.
- Topics are frequently similar:
- The existence and nature of God or the gods;
- The relationship between God and world;
- The nature of humanity.
- Human destiny.

What is ST? II

- In Christianity, this tendency had to accommodate at least two special features.
- First, the existence of a Holy Books or, more accurately, books.
- Second, an institution (the Church) built on doctrinal consensus.
- The two inevitably were often in tension as Scripture could give rise to different ideas whereas the Church required agreement.

What is ST? III

- One way to mitigate this problem was the emergence of a tradition of reading Scripture. This involved both the selection of relevant passages and their interpretation (e.g. in Creeds).
- In this way, the Early Church developed a range of normative teachings in important areas of religious thought (notably Trinity, Christology, but also creation 'ex nihilo', resurrection of the body, and many others).
- Yet this 'production' of doctrines created a new question: how do all these ideas hang together?

What is ST? IV

- This need to find coherence between individual teachings created 'systematic theology'.
- At least in a general sense: even in Patristic theology, the need is recognized to align the various aspects of the doctrine of faith with each other.
- Example: Arian controversy (early 4th century).
- Opponents of Council of Nicaea (325) claimed that the second person of the Trinity had to be subordinated to the Father to preserve monotheism.
- Athanasius of Alexandria, however, argued that only Christ's full divinity guaranteed salvation.

What is ST? V

- The argument about Trinitarian theology is enriched by the insistence that it must explain soteriology, the doctrine of salvation.
- This does not necessarily mean that salvation was most important.
- Rather: doctrines were increasingly connected in a complex web where every teaching hangs together with all others.
- In such a web, there is no single, privileged approach or starting point, no single idea is absolutely central.

What is ST? VI

- For a long time, therefore, doctrines were not strictly arranged into a rigid order.
- Rather, they were collected under individual headings:
- On God: God exists; he is one; he is Trinity.
- On creation: God creates from nothing; what is the world?
- On human beings: Created in God's image; fallen into sin; in need of redemption.

What is ST? VII

- On Jesus Christ: He is God and human; he saves humanity.
- On salvation: How can humanity be reconciled with God? The need of the church, sacraments etc. The resurrection, final judgment and eternal life.
- This arrangement broadly follows the history of salvation: God, creation, fall, incarnation, restoration.
- Alternative arrangement follows the articles of the Creed: God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit.

What is ST? VIII

- Most accounts of Christian doctrine until the early modern period followed this principle.
- John of Damascus (8th century), *On the Orthodox Faith* is divided into 100 chapters, later IV books: God, creation, Incarnation/salvation, restoration.
- Thomas Aquinas (13th c.), *Summa Theologica* is divided into three parts: (1) God, creation, angels, human beings; (2) morality; (3) Christ and salvation [unfinished].

What is ST? IX

- Early modern theologians (both RC and Protestants) wrote *Loci theologici*, theological topics, arranging the essential teachings of their churches.
- Differences become indicative of confessional divergence.
- Major shift at end of eighteenth century:
- Question of epistemic basis and certainty of religious teachings became pressing.

What is ST? X

- G.E. Lessing (1729-1781): ‘Accidental truths of history can never be proof of necessary truths of reason’.
- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804): Rational proofs of God’s existence are impossible.
- Jointly, these criticisms undermined traditional dogmatics.
- ‘Historical’ arrangement of topics suggests a story more than an exposition of religious truth.
- Beginning with God becomes problematic when his existence is not universally acknowledged.

What is ST? XI

- Idea of *Systematic* Theology strictly speaking resulted from this challenge.
- Can all doctrines be shown to hang together in such a way that their account has *one* starting point?
- Can this starting point be epistemically justified and how?
- Can the starting point also be *theologically* justified, i.e. does it point the reader of the book to the central insight of the Christian faith?

What is ST? XII

- All three concerns can be seen in classical work by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1835), *The Christian Faith*.
- (1) Assuming that traditional theology speaks of God's interaction with humanity, Schleiermacher argues that, after Kant, this relationship must be reconstructed by moving from its effects to its cause. The effect is understood as a human disposition, the 'feeling of absolute dependence'.
- Note: 'Feeling' does not here mean an emotion.
- (2) From this principle, doctrines of God, creation, sin, salvation, can all be explained. Schleiermacher reorders and reinterprets traditional doctrines in line with his system.

What is ST? XIII

- (3) Writing as a Protestant, Schleiermacher identifies this subjective appropriation of the relationship with God as *faith* and thus central to Christianity. Hence his title *The Christian Faith*. The starting point of his ST is, for him, also the centre of theology.
- Schleiermacher was never uncontroversial and few followed his system to the letter, but his approach cast a long shadow over subsequent theology, both Protestant and Catholic.
- Important also his insistence that ST is not timeless but written for its own age.

What is ST? XIV

- Karl Barth (1886-1968) is often seen as Schleiermacher's great counterpart.
- He did not call his *opus magnum* a ST for a reason; instead chose *Church Dogmatics*.
- Still, it *is* a ST exactly in the modern sense.
- (1) Everything depends on ONE principle. For Barth this is God's revelation in his word. 'God speaks'.
- Barth too rearranges and reinterprets traditional doctrine. Neo-orthodox isn't a very helpful epithet.

What is ST? XV

- (2) This too is meant to respond to modern criticism: theology is not fanciful but makes *one* assumption which it then seeks to explicate.
- (3) Clearly, for Barth as much as for Schleiermacher the 'systematic' character of dogmatics is rooted in a theological decision, in his case the priority of God's revelation in his word.
- Similar observations can be made on other, major 20th century figures, such as Karl Rahner and Paul Tillich.

What is ST? XVI

- From today's perspective, the strengths and weaknesses of this approach are more apparent. Strengths:
- (1) A real focus on the question of how the doctrines hang together. Much of what was implied in earlier debate is helpfully focused and expressed in modern STs.
- (2) In an environment that doesn't take Christian foundations for granted, STs have helped connect this 'insider discourse' with the lives of individuals and communities in its entirety.
- (3) Emphasis on contextuality is salutary. Theology is not written for eternity although it deals with eternal things.

What is ST? XVII

- Weaknesses:
- (1) The plurality of Christian ideas and teachings is unduly simplified and homogenized in a system. Earlier models allowed for more flexibility and even more diversity.
- (2) While the epistemic concern has not gone away, it has been put into some perspective. It is one important but not the only relevant problem for theology.

What is ST? XVIII

- In these lectures, therefore, we follow a loser model.
- ‘Themes’ are God, Creation, Christ, Church.
- They are connected but their order is ‘historical’.
- Each commands its own importance and necessitates its own approach.
- Diverse traditions must be accepted as aspects of Christian plurality.
- Contextuality is crucial throughout.