

Philosophical Thinking and Systematic Theology

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There have been four great coalitions of churches in the last 2000 years: Eastern Orthodox, Church of the East, Roman Catholic, Protestant. Within these churches there have been many systems of theology. Ostensibly, the reason for a 'system' of theology is that someone, or some group, has come to understand the teachings of the Bible and of their church in a distinctive, organized way, and is ready to share that organized thinking with their church and the world. Such systems grow much more intricate and complex when they add the results of the first three councils, historical theology, integration of thinking outside any one specific approach, and broader interaction with human experience.

Logic informs all such conceptual systems. But far more than logical thinking patterns comes from philosophy to help systematic theology (Corduan, 1981). The following elements make up the philosophical "bones" of a theological system:

1. choice of a starting point (God; the individual; humanity; experience; spirituality)
2. choice of a metaphysical stance (realism, dualism, idealism, etc.)
3. choice of a methodology (rationalism, empiricism, systematic consistency)
4. understanding of the main points of a conceptual model
5. interrelation in the developmental process of doing theology of reason, experience, tradition, and scripture

All of these processes are part of any theological system. All processes come to the system from a person's or group's philosophy and values.

Even basic biblical theology has embedded philosophical elements in both individual's and community's exegetical perspectives. This interplay of philosophy and theology has been refined in the last century far beyond any period before. In modern America the pattern began with Jonathan Edwards rejection of traditional Calvinist' philosophy and substitution of Berkeley's idealism. It continued throughout the 19th century, culminating in Henry Smith's rejection of German idealism and its American transcendentalist form in Bushnell (1849). In the 20th century theologians like Karl Rahner, Carl Henry, E. J. Carnell and others have had doctoral degrees in philosophy, as well as theology. Books in theology which debate old issues without the help of critical philosophy thinking fulfill minor roles in the discourses of our communities. They may make significant points of biblical or theological refinement, which is very much needed, but they will not

be competitors for creating new systems or substantially refining old ones.

An early attempt to demonstrate the balance of many research (modern rational, empirical, sociological, critical) methodologies with theological thinking was presented by John W. Montgomery (1967) in “The Theologian’s Craft.” He introduced a major alternative to the Wesleyan four-fold method of doing theology, based on a Lutheran world view. Other writers about the interaction between theology and philosophy include Ian Ramsey (1957), Robert Voelkel (1968), Francis Schaeffer (1975), Gordon Kaufman (1979), T. F. Torrance (1980), Win Corduan (1981), John Jefferson Davis (1984), J. J. Mueller (1984), Charles Colson (1999), and Stanley Grenz (2000).

Let me use, as an example of philosophical clarity helping theological reflection, the current controversy regarding openness theology. I do not agree with all the conclusions of the proponents, but I do agree with the main point I see Pinnock and others making: orthodox theology in the East and the West, especially at the time of the Councils, was too heavily influenced by Greek philosophical thinking. Too many of our standard theological definitions and conclusions, including the early creeds, defend Platonic or Aristotelian concepts of God, truth, and reality, which are at best pre-Christian and non-biblical. They have elements of truth, as do all well constructed non-Christian belief systems, based on experience of the real world and common grace. The thinking pattern of that day, especially in apologetics and to some extent in theology, was that Socrates and Plato were gentiles who understood and responded to the light they had, and thus represent something at least partially compatible in secular philosophy. But in today’s terms, they fall far short of representing the biblical model of understanding what God is doing in the creation and development of all reality (cf. Raher, 1968; and Barnhouse, 1965).

At the very least, we can learn from some of our dissatisfied brethren to take a fresh look in light of more open ways of thinking. Is this dangerous? Perhaps. It will have to be done carefully. But we owe God and the church no less than our best. While interaction with all realistic thinking is called for (Clinton, 1995, 2001), any foundational or fundamental dependence upon non-Christian methods or approaches is uncalled for. At least once, in each age, we must restate the form of our reflection without compromising the content of the faith.

The response to openness theology generally has been two-fold. Some writers have given thoughtful interactions to the points made and seen some value to the interaction. Other writers have reacted strongly to the possible problems and dangers and rejected the whole approach (eg. Ware, 2002). The criticisms of these last authors often seem to miss the main points of the proponents (Pinnock, 2002). Philosophical thinking could add much to this debate. We need Craig, Moreland, Clark, Willard, Geisler, Cox, Habermas, and

others to join the discussion in a measured way in behalf of the church.

The same point may be made of our human theological systems contained in creeds or theological books. We do not depend on such creeds or books. We may use them as guides to teach our beliefs and to sharpen our disciples and pastors. But our fundamental dependence as Christian philosophers and theologians is upon God's work in life and reality and upon biblical revelation, interpreted by the Christian community, under the leading of the Holy Spirit. That revelation teaches us that God created all that is and called it good. Therefore, human experience of God's world and the use of human reason are acceptable, under the leading of the Spirit and within the theoretical parameters of some systematic understanding of scripture. Human reason and experience, both personal and corporate, help us to interpret scripture. This hermeneutical spiral is good and necessary (Garrison, 1988; Nieman, 1995), because what we want to create is a system of thought which includes scripture and reality: an integrated system of conceptual thinking.

Philosophy also would offer us a much greater use of personal and corporate experience in a much more controlled way than the usual sweeping generalizations which occur in theology books. Since Roger Bacon, western philosophy has been attempting to balance reason and experience in careful ways. Today, the use of controlled experiments and empirical generalizations based on multiple studies informs all research in the social sciences and professional fields, as well as in science and technology. Such use of modern social investigation is almost completely absent from the construction of theology. Presentation of a system of understanding God and the world demands our best reasoning, our best empirical investigation, our best biblical study.

There are three fundamental tests of a theological theory. They are the same as the philosophical test for any theory (Carnell, 1967). First is the test of coherence (Henry, 1986). Here are included both the logical test of "does the theory contradict itself?" and the more general test "does the theory seem to make sense?" This is a logical test and a test of broad personal understanding (Giroux, 1988). Second is the test of correspondence. This includes the test of the relevance of the theory to corporate life and to the educational system within which educators work. The test is to see if the theory is stated such that it can be applied and will obtain the intended results within a specific group. At the theoretical level this test is rejected by some humanists and many pragmatists (Beyer, 1986), but is retained by other writers (Derr, 1981). Third is the test of personal relevance. It asks the question, "Will this theory work in my context?" This could be subsumed under the second test except that even within a culture or social group, what will work for one person would not work in a different situation or for a different person (Atkins, 1988). This is a legitimate existential, or to use Polanyi's (1960) word, "personal," test (Goodson, 1990). All of these tests are variations on Kant's views of truth.

Once the various philosophical positions and values have been identified for any particular issue, there is still

a need to find a basis to judge between the positions concerning which one will best serve the needs of a particular system of theology. To compare these positions, a matrix must be constructed. No matrix exists at present for cross-comparison of the various theological models, but one is derivable from three strands: 1) analysis of the components of the main positions, 2) use of methodology in justifying value choices, and 3) values involved in choosing between competing theories. Such a matrix will need to evaluate fairly all the models and make use of warrants (measures of personal/social meaningfulness) which relate to all the models (cf. Clinton, 1991, 1995; Clark, 1993).

Turner's (1991) suggestion is that there are common topics among various value perspectives and that a matrix can be developed using these common elements. He lays the groundwork for a similar comparison in his research on comparative sociological theories, although he does not construct a matrix. Thompson and his colleagues (1990) make a comparative association of relevant value theories from a relativistic position, but they do not align value positions based on the value terms (they use social data).

In order to identify the types of values in each of the theological systems a system of relating values is needed. In our context is the use of the value-laden term 'covenant' more important than the use of the value-laden term 'dispensation'? Any such decision cannot be empirical, since this would reduce to empirically based research and conclusions reflecting human choices and would not be definitive. The decision cannot be based on social consensus at local levels, for that leaves no basis for agreement across theological systems. The decision cannot be based on intuition or reason for this would leave us with individual-based systems. There is no hypothetical-speculative systematic approach which may be used, since this would imply either that one of the ethical philosophers or theologians was correct and that there is some basis for rationally affirming that conclusion, or that human reason itself is the test of truth and that there is one rationally derivable probable conclusion to which all humans should eventually come. This last rejection of any authority outside any one thinker is in keeping with the trend to refuse to identify any specific person or humanly derived method as ultimately authoritative.

If a system of related values cannot be based on empiricism, social consensus, intuition, or reason there would not appear to be a basis for construction of the system. This is the conclusion reached by many books on philosophy and theory construction and is part of the post-modern dilemma.

However, the methods of investigation indicated in the major four systems indicated in the opening paragraph may stand as themselves the unordered system (perhaps it can be called a taxonomy) of constructing human theological values (cf. Rokeach, 1979, on human values in general). We seek to reason, experience, and

in an explanatory system or causal model, (3) must be generalized in the form of middle-range propositions, and (4) must be theoretically linked together to form analytic models. Only when the links of such a system are seen does the model retain the connection to factual data and thus preserve realistic integrity (Clinton, 1997).

However, it is possible to go beyond Turner and use even less advanced levels of abstraction. This can be accomplished by relating middle-range propositions to one another in a *hypothetical analytic model*, and then test the relationships of the theory to discern if the analytic model is faithful to the propositions; a test of coherence. Some form of analytic model made up of middle range propositions, based on empirical generalizations and causal models is necessary to be sufficiently broad in scope and yet testable in practice. This formal understanding of statements and the levels of abstraction and scope of phenomena can be applied to the theoretical matrix of relational elements of values (see Chart II). Using this careful approach to human experience we can do better theology.

Chart II: Theological Research Model

Meta-theory (God's view)
Hypothetical models (Integrated theologies)
Middle-range propositions (Doctrines)
Causal Model (Scripture and deductions from empirical and historical generalizations)
Empirical Generalization (life and tradition)

A good model of a theological theory may be constructed from examination of present theologians' writings in major systematic theologies. Examples would include Barth's doctrines of creation and redemption (1958); Henry's doctrine of God and revelation (1983); or Rahner's approach to theological foundations (1978). In another frame of reference, one can use the multi-volume systematic theologies of various writers: Arminius, Berkouwer, Bloesch, Buswell, Calvin, Carter, Chafer, Erickson, Hodge, Shedd, Taylor, Thielicke, Warfield, Watson, Wesley, Wiley, and Williams. Newer approaches to doing systematic theology include Pannenberg, Oden and Pinnock. Without trying to review all of these, I shall discuss the major elements of a theological model which can be derived from these and other sources.

In researching the above mentioned authors I found the following elements to be central to most systems. The first element which occurs in a theological system is prolegomena. This study of introductory matters lays the philosophical basis and defines the foundational materials which under girds the entire system. Items include

a definition of the cosmos or reality as defined by the system, the means and scope of human knowledge (metaphysical and epistemological issues), philosophical and literary hermeneutics, theological methodology (the nature and procedures of the method to be employed), and the issue of a theological center (which item(s), if any, is the focal point of the doctrinal development). I would also add to this list a discussion of the level of discrimination at which one will take appropriate action (i.e. when is it appropriate to separate fellowship, when is it appropriate to label a view heretical, etc.) [cf. Alan Scholes, 1986].

The second element in a theological system is usually biblical doctrine. Here the author investigates the text of the Bible from the framework developed in the prolegomena section. The identification of the issues is taken from the Bible itself and from the concerns of contemporary life. The goal is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the major biblical teachings on various issues.

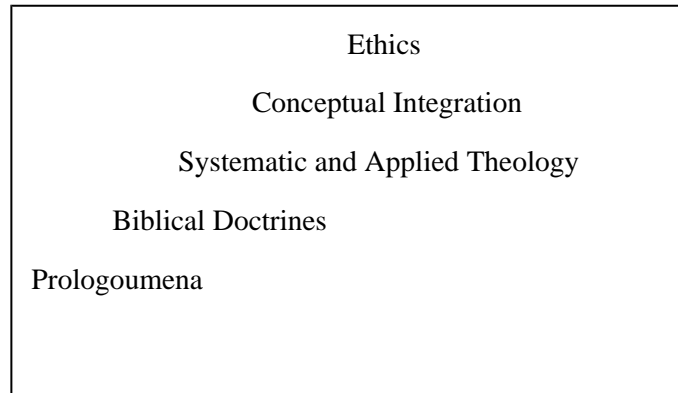
The third element is an arrangement of the results of the biblical theology into a topical format, setting forth the major doctrines of the system, thus forming the final step in a systematic theology. This includes the central teaching or theme of the doctrine being studied, the biblical major developments of the doctrine (arranged logically, not issue oriented), historical and contemporary issues being discussed within this doctrine, and practical application of the doctrine (practical theology).

In the area of developing practical theology, Schreiter (1985) addresses "the question of how Christians in some particular cultural context are to express their religious experience in a way that is faithful both to that experience itself and to a received Christian tradition." If Christian tradition is a series of local theologies, how does there come to be a shared core? Schreiter suggested that "the cross-cultural ground of Christian identity is finally a matter not of distinctive conceptual or even symbolic content but rather of distinctive operational procedures" (Vertin, 1986, p. 136). It would be interesting to explore this focus on operational procedures which are devoid of conceptual distinctiveness, but we cannot do so here. This recent discussion does make the point of using careful empirical methodology.

Fourth, the systematic theology forms the basis, both procedurally and conceptually, for integration of all truth and for approaching all life issues. In one sense this fourth element is present more systematically when the development of a systematic theology leads directly to a world view and to Christian education and discipleship as part of the practical theology (Colson, 1999). In this sense, systematic theology is not an academic option; it is vital to the life and experience of every believer. What is needed is a form of development which will transmit God's truth in a systematic way to be used by the believer in his or her life and ministry every day (practical theology and ethics). Every decision and every action should be informed by God's Word. We are told that every

act will be brought into judgment. Furthermore, if disciplers, preachers, and teachers are to be judged strictly as to how they have helped equip the people of God, and they will be so judged (James 3:1), then theology must serve the people of God in the way we have discussed.

Chart III: Model of Integrative Theology



These four elements, taken together, constitute a system of thinking about all of life. Many single or double volume 'systematic theology' books include only the second of the major doctrinal elements; that is, a brief discussion of the biblical major developments of the doctrine. These are sometimes, and more properly, labeled 'doctrine surveys'. Other more complete systematic theologies include the relevant historical and philosophical thinking regarding the issues discussed. Thus, systematic theology can be the product of an inductive, logical, comprehensive study of biblical and theological truths and of historical and contemporary situations. Exegesis, logic, hermeneutics, history, philosophy and social analyses all have a role in the development of a full systematic theology. The final point is to integrate all the finding of systematic theology with all other forms of human learning and social experience (humanities, social sciences, sciences, professional fields) (Clinton, 1990 A & B). The results would be an integrated approach to all of life (see Chart III).

Conclusion: Philosophy and theology go together as necessary parts of a perspective on reality which form all world views and adequate theoretical perspectives. May we not stop short of all we need.

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