

# Systematic Theology

Mary McClintock Fulkerson

Systematic theology is, as its name implies, a methodical approach to the study of Christianity that attempts to make sense of its diverse elements. Systematics has long history, so any introductory approach to the subject necessitates a brief examination first, of some classic accounts of theology; second, of emerging challenges to accounts of theology as systematic; and third, of new possibilities for thinking about systematics. Additionally, given that the study of systematic theology frequently occurs as an academic discipline separate from practical theology and the formation of faith and ministry, it is important to consider curricular shifts in theological education that support new practical ways of thinking systematically.

While there was no single meaning for the term *theology* in early Christianity (see Congar 1968: 25–36), from the beginning Christians made use of the idea that faith was – in the basic centuries-old Greek sense – a *paideia*, that is, a “knowledge of God” that entailed formation of a person’s soul, sometimes defined as the “virtue-shaping function” of theological treatises (Charry 1997: 19). Indeed, theology at its most profound has always been practical in some sense. And since formation and lived knowledge of God necessarily require assessment of one’s situation and the parameters of faithful response, *practical* entails conviction, reflection, and the connection of claims and beliefs. While *practical theology* will come to mean different things – from the lived faith of believers, a curricular area, a method, to an academic discipline (Miller-McLemore 2010) – its ideal use here, expressed as *theologia*, will invoke this general, overarching sense of reflective, formative, lived knowledge of God (Farley 1983).

Doctrine, dogma, creeds, confessions, and systematics all represent genres of reflection that have developed in the history of *theologia*, but they are by no means consistently defined. For example, *doctrine* has sometimes been distinguished from *dogma*, when the latter is treated as required belief, and widely used creeds such as the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds are distinguished from the confessions of

particular denominations. Similarly, systematics has been identified as an academic discipline that “seeks to express the content of religious faith as a coherent body of propositions” (Macquarrie 1992: 469). However it can also be understood more broadly. Liberation approaches, for example, can identify doctrines as the display of “symbols, as key areas or loci around which Christian communities construct their beliefs, spiritualities, practices, and relations to the world and other religions,” thus understanding systematics as more flexible and practical than coherent propositions or required belief (Chopp and Taylor 1994: 14–15). Therefore, this overview will treat systematic theology as a particular genre when appropriate, while recognizing there exists overlap between the genres and the term can be used to describe theological coherence in the broadest sense.

## Background History

Jesus of Nazareth, the paradigmatic figure for Christianity’s grasp of the nature of God and reality, does not appear to have been a systematic theologian. Indeed, Christian scripture, the central witness to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, is dominated by genres not typically characterized by the organizing of cognitive claims into coherent systems. Instead, we find narratives, parables, and metaphors, as well as poetry, sayings, rituals, and laws in scripture, many of which convey profound insights, invoke ongoing mystery, and even prove contradictory. While biblical testimonies to and about Jesus have generated doctrine and much resultant ecclesiological controversy, they are too varied to constitute a system.

As controversies developed about the proper identity of Christian faith, new forms of reflection on faith began to emerge. Of course, conflict was there from the beginning, “inherent within the tradition concerning Jesus,” says historical theologian Alister McGrath, and this tradition did “not merely *generate* conflict but *transmit[ed]* it as an essential constituent element” (1990: 3; emphases original). But it was not until the early third century that theologian Origen of Alexandria’s *On First Principles* (212–215 CE) articulated what many consider the first systematic theology as he responded to perceived threats such as Gnosticism and the need to clarify the nature of the divine logos as trinity. This four-volume work treated the connections between God, order and reason, celestial beings, the material world and “man,” free will, its consequences, and scripture. As systematic theologian Colin Gunton notes, Origen’s emphasis on connectedness and unity displays “a strong conception of system, involving internal coherence and a definite logic” deriving from Aristotle (1999: 7).

Understood in its broader sense, a variety of modes of systematic theological thinking developed in the early centuries. Controversy, as well as the search itself for intellectual coherence, generated questions and connections between beliefs that led to both the writings of theologians and the formation of creeds and confessions. For example, the most basic claim of the emerging new community, namely, that Christians worship Jesus as the Christ, required discussion of a number of additional issues such as how Jesus related to the creator and whether he pre-existed with God the Father. Holders of views such as Arianism invoked biblical testimony to argue for differences

between Jesus and God.<sup>1</sup> But in 325 the Council of Nicaea, while attempting to resolve such controversies over the nature of God and Jesus, affirmed in its Creed that Jesus was of the same substance as the Father (*homoousios*).

However, many issues were not resolved with the early creeds. Thomas Aquinas wrote the *Summa Theologica* in the thirteenth century to argue for natural theology, exploring how God's truth is revealed in the natural world, the relation between faith and reason, and the unity and two natures of the second person of the Trinity, among other things, in contrast to other views (Nestorius', Appollinaris'). Debates about authority and the nature of salvation in the sixteenth century generated theological criticism of the church that eventuated in new doctrines of justification by faith and notions of *sola scriptura*, and birthed a Reformation that shifted ecclesiology in unprecedented ways. While Martin Luther did not write a systematics that treated all of what were then perceived as central issues, as did reformer John Calvin, Luther's articulation of *sola fide* was a theological reflection with such broad resonance that a new Protestant church was born.

One factor that affected the process of critical and constructive thinking was the change in thought about the *paideia* character of *theologia*. In the fourteenth century there was debate between Thomas Aquinas, whose focus was on faith and reason, and thinkers such as Bonaventure that resulted in a split between views of theology as a speculative discipline and as practical knowledge (see Maddox 1990: 652–653). Such distinctions led to different institutional forms: we find the study of theology as a science occurring primarily in independent universities, while monasteries became the primary places for theology as a practice of spirituality and mysticism (see Congar 1968: 85–143; Maddox 1990: 652–653).

While these contexts inevitably encouraged various foci, it is important to stress that they still assumed a coherence rooted in the unity of God and God's revealed truth. Premodern separations of theology as science and theology as a kind of piety formation do not seem to have questioned the *unity* of their end and cause (which is not to say they agreed completely on the content). The uniformity of truth and its coherence were assumed, for theologians were thought to have access to God's truth. Since God was one, the "word 'system' had God's reality as its reference," as Gunton (1999: 7–8) puts it. Thus God's truth, however speculative, was a saving truth: it affected lives. To be sure, a split between the speculative and the *paideia* of theology is found in the differences between scholastics and pietists that developed out of Protestantism.<sup>2</sup> However,

<sup>1</sup>Arius said Jesus was not divine, but was a human who was made divine; the Council judged Jesus as Son of God to be *homoousios* with God the Father – of the same substance, e.g., coeternal and coexistent. The complexity and difficulty of such theological judgments are illustrated in a small way by the fact that Arius (250–336 CE) was deemed a heretic by the Council of Nicaea, exonerated at the First Synod of Tyre in 335, and then deemed a heretic later at the First Council of Constantinople in 351. Arius was a Christian presbyter from Alexandria, Egypt, and had biblical support for his position.

<sup>2</sup>For a helpful overview of two visions of theological education that developed out of the dual notions of *paideia* versus intellectual critical thinking, or *Wissenschaft*, see Kelsey 1993.

key Reformation thinkers such as John Calvin understood his *Institutes of Christian Religion* as a systematic investigation of Christian teaching that had pedagogical, catechetical ends.

## The Modern University and Theological Education

One of the most significant effects on the definition and formation of the holistic enterprise intended by *theologia* was the European Enlightenment. German philosopher Immanuel Kant's eighteenth-century critique of orthodoxy's claim to God knowledge created new and more deeply embedded divisions in *theologia* as both science and *paideia*. The modern university privileged reason-based sciences over what were perceived to be authoritarian-based religious convictions, thereby demoting theology as queen of the sciences. However, new justification for the presence of divinity education in the university was subsequently provided by Friedrich Schleiermacher, who defended it as necessary for the training of professionals, that is, clergy who serve society by pastoring churches. As important as this was, what came to be called the *clerical paradigm* had the long-term effect of removing the need for shared assumptions about the connections of all knowledges to theology. Eventually, this new form of theological education undermined the unity of theology – *paideia* and theology – science in God's one truth.

Schleiermacher's account of theology did not do away with *theologia* as a form of redemptive knowing, nor was it intended to destabilize the unity of theology. Rather, it shifted the availability of theology's subject matter from God's revealed propositional truth to the mediating phenomenon of redemptively altered human experience. This experience was defined as a fundamental posture toward the world and the Ultimate. Attempting to avoid the reduction of faith to individualistic belief or moral volition, Schleiermacher defined faith experience as the interplay of individual and intra-communal existence-in-the-world. With this shift, *doctrines* become "accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech," rather than direct references to God and dogmatics, "the science which systematizes the doctrine prevalent in a Christian Church at a given time" (Schleiermacher 1989: 3–128).

In the years following Kant and the Enlightenment, three problems for systemic theology became pressing: first, its contents could no longer be automatically viewed as divinely revealed; second, and contingent on the first, its authority-based status was challenged; and third, its ensuing loss of such foundations meant that the way it defended its subject matter was open to debate. However, on the positive side, these challenges to long-held foundational beliefs made possible the exposure of the historical and contextual character of the way in which theology is transmitted – an exposure that is crucial for recovering and exploring the lived human character of *every* dimension of *theologia*. Dogma and creeds thus come to be seen as reflecting contexts, not ahistorical truth (e.g., Aquinas's views on divinely ordered sexual natures must be read to reflect the *contextual* Aristotelian view that woman is a "misbegotten male").

Additionally, the challenges to systematics also had consequences within the modern university. While Schleiermacher had hoped that a shared judgment about God's con-

temporary mode of presence would unify the developing fields of what he termed philosophical, historical, and practical theology, what emerged instead was a set of secular disciplines such as linguistic studies, historical research, archaeology, philosophy, and so on. To complicate matters further, the modern university also produced a unique separation of systematics from lived faith or the "cognitive disposition toward God." As systematic theology was relocated in the academic institutions termed divinity schools, not only was theology no longer the queen of the sciences, the schools that offered theological education no longer assumed theology to be all embracing. Rather, theology was reduced to one of the so-called fields that have come to be called the "fourfold," that is, Bible, church history, theology/ethics, and the practical/ministerial field.<sup>3</sup> And even if its location as one of four fields allowed for the ongoing study of systematics, no intrinsic connection of such thinking to contexts was entailed, nor to the other three fields. The illogic of placing theology and church *history* in different fields suggests an implicit dehistoricizing of the former. The question of how systematic theology is related to what are designated as the domains of practical theology – that is, primarily clerical practices of the ministerial division – was answered by exploring the analogy between so-called theory and practice. While this model has been under critique for quite some time, it endures at some level, if only because the deeply embedded fourfold makes it difficult to structure alternatives. Thus, even with the historical-critical modes of thinking, *systematics* articulates the basic normative beliefs of Christian faith, and *ethics* or practical theology in some form ostensibly explores how they may be applied.

## New Challenges for a Theology that Would Be Practical

Subsequent responses to the divisions effected by the modern university include new approaches that challenge the limits of the so-called field of theology. Developments within the field include its increasing historical contextualization, the emergence of liberation perspectives, the shift to practice and virtue theory, and resulting new images for the reflective character of theology. Also important to widening theology as a field is the development of practical theology in forms that challenge the divisions. While different in their immediate goals, all of these developments can be seen as attempts that to some extent reconnect theology to lived faith, *theologia* in its fullest sense.

Clearly, the historicizing of theology is important. While it can be reductive, historicizing is crucial to linking belief with lives in social contexts, thus facilitating a recognition of the complex worlds out of which so-called normative dogma and confessions were and are composed and allowing for attention to the social production of theology, even when the "author" is an individual. For example, in examining the role of patriarchal culture in patristic's reasoning, historian Virginia Burrus (2000) shows how the doctrine of the Trinity was shaped by fourth-century constructs of fecundity, desire, and the gendered body, and while thinking about the success of Reformation

<sup>3</sup>Farley's *Theologia* (1983) traces this development. See also Bonnie Miller-McLemore's critique in Miller-McLemore 2007.

theologians like Luther and Calvin, it is important to recognize the role of the printing press in widely disseminating their writings.

The contextual character of systematic theology has been further complexified by liberation theologies, which include the work of feminists, womanists, black, *mujerista*, and Latina thinkers, as well as disability studies and queer theologies. This work has resulted in critical change-oriented thinking from the perspective of a marginalized group and generated a classic liberation hermeneutic that moves from the perception of injustice to a hermeneutic of suspicion toward tradition and toward a hermeneutic of constructive retrieval. Liberation theologies do not necessarily proceed to examine concerns *in toto*, but by focusing on issues and doctrines in most urgent need of addressing their work serves to expose unconsidered assumptions. For example, one fundamental liberation insight has been to expose the political, power-laden character of knowledge production. For theology to deny the worldly, mediated character of what is designated as *revelation* means that the role of privileged voices in shaping what is *seen* in scripture or what counts as *tradition* remains invisible. Liberationists insist upon outing the socially located perspective of all theology to resist a "false universal" claim, such that combining historical context and power analysis allows classical theologians to be read in their inevitable entanglements with empire (Kwok et al. 2007).

One example of a liberation approach to theological reflection that does attempt to take a broader systematic approach was feminist Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* (1973). Not only did Daly share with feminist theology in general the critique of male-privileged readings of biblical passages, tradition's exclusion of women, and the sexist character of much Christianity, she produced a radical systematic theology that parodies the male-centered doctrinal loci.<sup>4</sup> Addressing God, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, *Beyond God the Father* makes fun of the way the male God reproduces himself in the valorizing of males in the church, and asks, for example, if a male savior can save women. In a similar vein, queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000) extends the genre of liberation parody more radically, exposing the homosexual resonances of biblical and doctrinal traditions.

Another important move in fully rendering the lived dimension of *theologia* is found in the shift to *practice theories*. Bringing together so-called systematic theologians and practical theologians, virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre's (1984) definition of practice foregrounds character formation and the function of tradition in its shaping, thereby moving theology beyond the limitation of faith as cognitive belief. Much has been written on theology and practice using MacIntyre's definition. An indication of its significance is its use in Charles R. Foster et al.'s comprehensive study of contemporary theological education (2006: 26–29). Similarly, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) bodied concept of *habitus* shapes emerging theological work. A concept of practice that entails pre-reflective bodily knowledge and skills, including enculturations to which virtue ethics fails to attend, Bourdieu's *habitus* adds the affective, bodied wisdom to the formative, lived character of faith. *Habitus* allows for new ways to think about continu-

<sup>4</sup>For a definition of the constructive function of theology as "parody," see Fulkerson 1994: 299–354.

ity in change as improvisation and adds the category of bodied practices to the concept of social memory and tradition (Fulkerson 2007: 42–52).

The shift to the complexities of context and (literal) fleshing out of lived faith could be seen as simply a complicating of the subject matter of theological reflection or a hand-off to ethics. However, the work of theologians designated by the fourfold as “practical” has long pushed the convergences of the practical with all forms of the problematically separated fields. Indeed, Don Browning’s (1991) work identifies *practical* as the fundamental adjective for *theology in general*, and lays out its moments from descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic practical theology. *Systematic* for Browning is also much more complex than a closed system. Similarly, Elaine Graham, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Dale Andrews, and Richard Osmer, among others, have further developed such unifying constructions in part to honor the emerging democratization of *theologia* as the process of lived faith. “Practical theology carries out four mutually related intellectual operations: the descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic. This distinguishes practical theology from other forms of theology and from the social sciences, even as it overlaps these fields in certain ways” (Osmer 2008: 240). *Theologia* in its fullest practical sense is thus not reducible to beliefs, to orthodoxy, or to psychology or sociology. Full respect for this, of course, requires real shifts in theological education (Graham et al. 2005).

## Toward New Forms of Practical Theological Education

The deep structural formation of theological education – the fourfold disciplines – will not be easily changed. However, there is a clear call for theological education to move beyond the problematic “‘silo mentality’ of the theological encyclopedia” where courses focus on reproducing a discipline or particular “task competence,” and for faculties to negotiate more directly about shared visions (Osmer 2008: 221, 234–235).

The importance of *theologia* invites three educational changes connected to systematic theology. A first is not to do away with systematics, but to reject its acontextual status as theory. Systematic theologizing is a practice, just like pastoral ministry. Theory *production* is the interest-driven practice of discerning patterns, albeit patterns that retain a certain amount of consistency and endurance. These patterns do not reflect reality in its totality but rather *aspects* of reality relative to the interests driving them, interests that may be shaped, to take one example, by academics and their institutions.<sup>5</sup> Given the professional managerial class status of most academics and their institutions, the context for developing interests will often limit what patterns are discerned. However, patterns highlighted by the academic are not to be dismissed. They generally rest on corporate historical memory and are likely to be broader than those discerned by the faithful reflection of individual believers. Nevertheless, it is still vital to distinguish

<sup>5</sup>White male theologians’ theories tolerated the falsehoods that normative theology is a male wisdom. As members of the professional managerial class, we progressive theologians can fail to discern the threatening, desperate nature of reality. It has been remarked that those who practice it as an academic discipline in the security of some chamber immune to the risks of the liberation struggle.

between themes and beliefs that can be of long-lasting significance and urgent issues that require more explicit thematic attention (Ritschl 1987: 89–90). What should not happen is treatment of the former as frozen, acontextual truths or the only way to “do theology.”

If theology can resist its proclivity to project “onto the object studied what its own procedures of investigation requires – a coherent whole” (Tanner 1997: 76), a second shift in theological education will be to radically broaden systematics in its wider sense as coherent critical reflection that is not restricted to the internal logics of a self-enclosed intellectual system (Gunton 1999: 23). Culture theory has already undercut rule- or grammar-based postliberal theology; the growing popularity of theological ethnography will continue to force the expansion of images of coherence. Logics for evaluating lived faithfulness already exist in other forms and new images are emerging for the unity sought by systematics – it is “aesthetic and moral,” as Gunton says, or akin to a landscape, a geography, or an “economy.” He proposes an image of economic structuring to enable the move out of the “merely verbal to the concrete, material and bodily” (Gunton 1999: 18–19). Such images need to get the status of “real theology.” Finally, a radical challenge comes from sociological evidence showing the rarity of congruence between beliefs, between beliefs and actions, and between beliefs and practices in one setting (e.g., church) and the transfer of these connections outside of that setting (Chaves 2010). The answer is *not* to make people think dogmatically and systematically, but to discern redemptive narratives, bricolages, or hybridities, and so on.

Practical theologians rightly insist on the third challenge: the current disciplinary split that leaves classic theology underdeveloped as a kind of reflection that could be supple enough to read different situations and contexts (Graham et al. 2005: 7–8). The need for more normative logics becomes especially serious with the crucial move from a primarily text-based hermeneutic focus in education to a contextual focus on “reading” lived situations where full-bodied and complex practices are interpreted in different social locations, both ecclesiastical and otherwise. The primary place for most integrated contextual education that moves beyond the pedagogy of interpretation is field education. Yet, as a study by Foster et al. indicates, academic faculty are rarely directly involved in field education, which all too often has a lower status (2006: 298).

The subject matter of theological education must shift beyond that characteristic of separate historical, biblical, and theological divisions that allow theology to be “impractical” theory. *Context*, as local and as intersected by social or institutional and global realities, needs to be fundamental to education, not a secondary signature specialty. Normative thinking requires new genres for educating students to read situations rather than texts, to enable students to discern the *theonomy*, or God-sustained character of a situation, and to respond faithfully.

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