

What is the Task of Systematic Theology?

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Abstract: This article notes the difference between the tasks of biblical scholarship and systematic theology: that of the former is comparatively clear; while that of the latter not easy to specify. As a result, collaboration between these two disciplines has become very complex. The problem, then, is to clarify how systematic theology understands its task. Contributing to the much-needed clarification in this area, Lonergan's theological method and Robert Doran's recent suggestions will prove good resources.

Key Words: systematic theology; theological methodology; nature of theology; Bernard Lonergan; Robert Doran; exegesis and theology; theology as system

At a joint session of the Australian Catholic Theological Association and the Australian Catholic Biblical Association during their 2006 annual conferences, the topic for discussion was the relationship between biblical scholarship and systematic theology. While the discussion was fruitful in many ways, there was a basic question which at least to my mind remained unclear – what is the task of systematic theology? In many ways the task of biblical scholarship is well-defined. They focus on the biblical text. They ask questions about its authorship, its historical and social context, its literary forms, intended readership and so on. Their aim is to present as full an account of the biblical text as they possibly can. Over the years the methods adopted by biblical scholars have varied and developed, through form criticism, redaction criticism, historical criticism and literary criticism. What unites each of these is their common focus of engagement on the object of their study, the biblical text. On the other hand the focus of systematic theology is much more diffuse and its methods less clear cut. Vatican II encourages collaboration between theologians and biblical scholars; “Catholic exegetes and other workers in the field of sacred theology should work diligently together” (*Dei Verbum*, no. 23). However, the field of relevant material for a systematic theologian encompasses not only the Scriptures, but also the writings of the Church Fathers, the great councils of the Church, and well as the writings of other theologians both modern and classical. Faced with such complexity the desire to ground systematic theology in the Scriptures may seem a lost cause. Nonetheless both Scripture scholars and theologians at the joint session expressed the desire and expectation that there be some connection between their two disciplines.

In this article I would like to suggest that in fact the relationship between Biblical scholarship and systematic theology is quite complex and not susceptible to a simple answer. One reason is the above mentioned need for theologians to consider a much wider range of material apart from the Scriptures. However, more is at issue here. A deeper issue is the current confusion over what precisely the task of systematic theology is. I will argue that there are two competing visions of that task, visions which may not be clear for theologians but which produce two different understandings of the relationship between biblical exegesis and systematic theology. Until these distinct visions are identified and differentiated, any response to this problem will remain somewhat confused. I shall then

suggest two proposals for consideration by those who identify themselves as systematic theologians which seek to address the particular issue of system.

Behind this analysis lies a conception of theology as a collaborative framework, as articulated in Lonergan's *Method in Theology*.¹ Bernard Lonergan conceived of theological method as involving eight distinct but interrelated tasks, what he referred to as functional specialties. These are research, interpretation, history, dialectics, foundations, doctrines, systematics and communication. The first fours of these tasks are the positive phase of theology, corresponding to the upward movement from empirical, to intellectual, to rational, to moral consciousness in the subject. The second normative phase corresponds to the reverse downward movement. The hinge between the two movements is conversion which Lonergan identifies in terms of religious, moral and intellectual modalities. I will argue that this framework sheds considerable light on the questions raised by the relationship between scriptural scholarship and systematic theology.²

The Tension within Biblical Scholarship

As I mentioned earlier the task of the biblical scholar is relatively well-defined. While the field of scriptural scholarship is increasingly specialised, involving long term study of ancient languages, histories and cultures, there are some basic questions which this scholarship seeks to answer. There is a cumulative process as they move from textual critical concerns, word studies and dictionaries, questions of literary forms and criticism, and eventually to problems of historicity, "what really happened?." In many ways the unfolding history of biblical scholarship has been a process of delineating the various tasks of the first three of Lonergan's functional specialties, research, interpretation and history. The more recent contribution of feminist, liberationist and other perspectives mark a foray into the next specialty of dialectics which seeks to uncover the patterns of diverging outcomes on the results of the previous specialties, including the possibility of dialectically opposed stances leading to opposed outcomes as distinct from alternative perspectives.

All this is well and good; however it helps us identify a common tension found among the writings of biblical scholars. The tasks undertaken by biblical scholars are the common possession of many scholars investigating ancient texts; those scholars may or may not be Christians, and the texts they investigate may or may not be Christian. Yet Christian biblical scholars enter into the discipline with a specific faith commitment and dedication. They want to promote and contribute to a Christian vision, a Christian faith and a Christian theology that speaks to our contemporary world. What difference does their faith commitment make to their work when others without that commitment can use the same methods on the same texts? How then does their work assist in the task of promoting and contributing to a specifically Christian contemporary vision?

There are three matters that can be raised in response to these questions.

Firstly one may respond to Christian biblical scholars by noting that though others may use the same methods on the same text, if Lonergan's method is correct, one would expect there to emerge differing patterns of response, depending on the absence or

¹ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1971).

² For an alternative approach to the issues raised in this paper from the perspective of a Biblical scholar also utilizing Lonergan's framework, see John Topel, "Faith, Exegesis and Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 69 (2004), 337-48. Also valuable is Anthony Kelly, "Dimensions of Meaning: Theology and Exegesis," in *Transcending Boundaries: Contemporary Readings on the New Testament*, ed. Rekha M. Chennattu and Mary L. Coloe (Rome: LAS, 2005), 41-55.

presence of various conversions, in relation to the outcomes of their studies. The approach would be suffering from a false sense of the objectivity of their methods if they thought that all people using the same methods will arrive at the same results. Indeed Lonergan's approach leads us to expect a diversity of results.³ Feminist and liberationist approaches confirm this to some extent. Deeper divergences can be found in the presence of absence of a specifically Christian religious conversion. I think it is not too difficult to identify such divergences in the results of people associated with the so-called "Jesus seminar" whose affiliation with traditional Christian faith positions is marginal at best.⁴ Christian biblical scholars assist in the theological task by bringing this divergence to the fore.

This response however is not likely to meet the desire of biblical scholars to make a direct contribution to the development of a contemporary Christian vision. Secondly, then, one should distinguish between contributions which are strictly theological and those which while they may be biblically and theologically informed, are more of the character of religious writings than strictly theological writings. This is not to denigrate such writings, but to distinguish that there are in all our writings a variety of literary forms. Some writing, though highly theologically informed, simply does not constitute theological writing. One may think, for example, of the prayers of Thomas Aquinas, which have a rich theological background but nonetheless are not themselves theological writings. Such writing may well make a contribution to the development of a contemporary Christian vision, inspire people to a deeper religious life and so on. But it seems to me a category mistake to think that we must use the term "theological" to such writing. I prefer a broader term "religious." All theological writing is religious in some sense, but not all religious writing is theological in the strict sense. I find some support for this recognition in the comments of Brendan Byrne:

Where more traditional approaches to biblical exegesis tend to speak in terms of "theology" and to review different "theologies" to be found across a range of biblical literature, the notion of symbolic universe seems to reflect more accurately the primarily persuasive and argumentative nature of that literature, especially the letters of Paul. Theology can be related to the symbolic universe in the sense that it represents a more detached, systematic reflection upon religious aspects of a shared symbolic world ... when considering the process of persuasion that documents like the letters of Paul purport to initiate, it seems more appropriate to speak of shared symbolic universes rather than shared theologies.⁵

What is true of the biblical text is equally true of all of us who write on matters of our faith.

In a similar manner, Anthony Kelly has drawn attention to the importance of what Lonergan refers to as different functions or dimensions of meaning.⁶ Lonergan identifies four functions of meaning, the cognitive, constitutive, effective and communicative functions. Kelly has used these to illuminate the differing ways in which the Johannine text may convey meaning to the reader.

³ Lonergan specifies a number of sources of diversity, some genetic (developmental), some perspectival, others dialectically opposed. Perspectival differences complement one another, while one must choose between dialectically opposed positions. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 236-237.

⁴ One thinks for example of the work of Dominic Crossan whose work it is difficult to characterize as Christian in any meaningful sense.

⁵ Brendan Byrne, *Romans* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 7.

⁶ Kelly, "Dimensions of Meaning," 41-55. On the functions or dimensions of meaning see Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 76-81.

... to reduce the data of the Johannine experience merely to a catalogue of objective truths or to new doctrines about God (*cognitive* meaning) would be rather jejune. There are elements of personal transformation (*constitutive* meaning), new imperatives towards community (*communicative* meaning) and new forms of ethical conduct (*effective* meaning) inherent in the experience.⁷

It seems to me that the goal of systematic theology is primarily one of expressing a cognitive function of meaning, whereas religious writing embraces all the differing functions to one degree or another.

The third matter is then how this might impact on the work of a systematic theologian. If a systematic theologian thinks that the results of applying the methods of biblical scholarship "objective," in the sense of independent of the scholar who produces them, then she will draw erroneous conclusions. Further the very diversity itself is matter for theological consideration. Whence does it arise? Where do I stand as a theologian? Which stance should I adopt and why? As Lonergan argues, the dialectic outcomes of biblical and other historical scholarship evoke questions of conversion. As distinct from the relative faith neutrality of the methods of biblical scholarship, now the faith stance of the theologian begins to take on a major significance.

This having been said, I think there is a larger problem facing the work of systematic theologians, most of whom are unlikely to adopt this particular Lonerganian approach. It is evident in the form of question about the relationship between biblical scholarship and theology which seeks a relatively simple response, and it goes to the heart of the matter about the task of systematic theology.

The Task of Systematic Theology

The study of theology has undergone a profound transformation in the past one hundred years, and a large factor in that change can be expressed in one word, history. We live in an historical conscious era and the impact of historical consciousness upon theology cannot be doubted. The Bible can no longer be simply read as the "word of God" without careful qualification and nuance. It is no longer possible to simply quote authorities such as Church Fathers or the great Councils of the past without a detailed study of the historical and social circumstances and events surrounding the authorities in question. Theology has been transformed by this growing awareness as we attempt to absorb the details of the multiple biblical and historical studies; indeed not only transformed, but in danger of being swamped by the meticulous studies of scholars in the biblical, patristic, medieval and modern eras. Clearly no single theologian can hope to master the output of these armies of scholars.

While theology has undoubtedly been enriched by these studies, it has also been somewhat disoriented. Is it simply the task of theology to contribute to this historical scholarship? Or is the lesson we learn that everything is "historically and culturally conditioned," a phrase which has become such a theological commonplace? Does the past still hold any authority for us? One should not be blind to the enormity of the task that faces us here. Lonergan once commented that "the whole problem in modern theology, Protestant and Catholic, is the introduction of historical scholarship." He also claimed that "all my work has been introducing history into Catholic theology."⁸ Similarly the then Cardinal Ratzinger identified as a central problem the need to find "a better synthesis

⁷ Kelly, "Dimensions of Meaning", 46-47.

⁸ Both quoted in Frederick E. Crowe, *Developing the Lonergan Legacy: Historical, Theoretical and Existential Themes*, ed. Michael Vertin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 79.

between historical and theological methods, between higher criticism and church doctrine." Further, "a truly pervasive understanding of this whole problem has yet to be found which takes into account both the undeniable insights uncovered by historical method, while at the same time overcoming its limitations."⁹

In a recent work of mine, reviewed in this journal, I argue that systematic theology is torn between two distinct conceptions of its project.¹⁰ One conception, a particularly modern one, is dominated by the categories of experience and interpretation. The Scriptures, Church Fathers, early Councils and so on are interpretations of a particular experience, and the theological task is to reinterpret that experience in a way which communicates that experience to the present. I trace the origins of this position to the philosophy of Emmanuel Kant and his distinction between phenomena and noumena. For Kant, knowing is a projective act of the mind upon the phenomena, while the true noumenal reality remains beyond our reach. This position rules out *a priori* the possibility of truth and replaces it with an endless cycle of interpretation and reinterpretation.¹¹ In my experience many theologians have adopted either explicitly or implicitly such a stance in their theological writings.

The second conception, which draws on a longer lineage, is dominated by the categories of truth and meaning. What is communicated is not simply an experience, but a truth whose meaning remains one of inexhaustible mystery. On this view the doctrines of the Church are not an interpretation but a judgment. They are a judgment on the truth contained within the Scriptures.¹² The theological task is then expressed in the classical adage of Anselm, one of "faith seeking understanding," of accepting the revealed truth with gratitude and then exploring its meaning, and deepening our understanding of it. Following Augustine, this conception would argue that "unless you believe, you will not understand" (Isa 7:9).¹³ Now the faith of the theologian is fundamental to the theological task because without faith theology has no proper apprehension of its object.

Robert Doran makes the same point in his latest book, *What is Systematic Theology?*,¹⁴ when he refers to a distinction found in the writings of Bernard Lonergan, the distinction between understanding data and understanding truth. Doran evokes the term "reception," the reception into consciousness of the sedimented truths and meanings of the past, which is not the same as an understanding of a datum whose meaningfulness is yet to be determined. We live in a world of such sedimented meanings and values, whose reception into consciousness shapes that consciousness from our earliest years. In recent years more and more has been written on the topic of reception, particularly the ways in which church teachings are "received" by the church as a whole, as indicative of the *sensus fidei*.¹⁵ However the issue is a larger one than this. We live in a cultural world constituted,

⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, "Foundations and Approaches of Biblical Exegesis," *Origins* 17.35 (1988): 596.

¹⁰ Neil Ormerod, *Trinity: Retrieving the Western Tradition* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005), 143-149. Reviewed by Anthony Kelly, AEJT 6 (2006).

¹¹ For an analysis of the Kantian presuppositions in the theology of Schillebeeckx see Neil Ormerod, "Schillebeeckx's Philosophic Prolegomenon: A Dialectic Analysis," in *Australian Lonergan Workshop*, ed. William Danaher (Lanham, Md: Univ Pr of America, 1993), 69-78.

¹² It seems to me that this position is not just "traditional"; it gives a much more accurate historical account of what the Councils did and what they actually thought they were doing.

¹³ This is a constant theme in Augustine's writings.

¹⁴ Robert M. Doran, *What Is Systematic Theology?* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

¹⁵ In particular Orm Rush, "Reception Hermeneutics and The "Development" Of Doctrine: An Alternative Model," *Pacifica* 6 (1993); Orm Rush, "Sensus Fidei: Faith 'Making Sense' of Revelation," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001).

and mediated to us, by meanings and values; without them our existence would not just be less than human, it would lack even the most basic instinctual forms.¹⁶ The world of faith is then the cultural milieu in which theology is undertaken; it is the world of faith which the theologian receives and which shapes his or her consciousness.

Thus when a theologian approaches the Bible the question uppermost in his or her mind might be “what is the *revealed* truth that this text is seeking to give expression to?” Two points emerge from this question. The first is that this is not necessarily the question at the forefront of the work of biblical scholars. They ask a variety of questions of the text apart from this, and their methods of themselves do not necessarily lead to an answer to such a question. The movement from literary analysis or historical conclusion to revealed truth is not immediate or obvious. Though all biblical texts may claim to be inspired, they do not therefore necessarily contain the same revelatory significance, though they may continue to be fruitful as religious texts. The theologian need not therefore take all biblical texts with the same degree of interest or seriousness. Secondly, a question concerning revealed truth presupposes judgments about revelation which are already constitutive of Christian identity, for example judgments about the identity of Jesus. These judgments are carried in the creeds and councils, the liturgies and prayers, the scholars and saints of the last two thousand years. As John Henry Newman notes:

I think I am right in saying that the tradition of the Apostles, committed to the whole Church in its various constituents and functions *per modum unius*, manifests itself variously at various times: sometimes by the mouth of the episcopacy, sometimes by the doctors, sometimes by the people, sometimes by liturgies, rites, ceremonies, and customs, by events, disputes, movements, and all other phenomena which are comprised under the name of history.¹⁷

The theologian thus “receives” the biblical text in the light of this process of transmission, formulation and refinement. The theologian cannot be neutral in relation to this process like some supposedly “objective” bystander. As first and foremost a believer, they stand within this process. Theology is thus an ecclesial, tradition constituted, vocation.

On the other hand, if one works within the Kantian framework of experience and interpretation, then the Scriptures appear as an interpretation of an experience which the theologian will seek to reinterpret. The process of transmission and reception that characterizes the traditional approach holds no normative force for a theologian working in this mode. What is normative is the founding experience. In particular the creeds and conciliar degrees of the Church appear as culturally conditioned and limited reinterpretations of interpretations of experience. If an individual theologian judges this reinterpretation to be no longer relevant or intelligible to our postmodern context, he or she can feel free to dismiss it as no longer important.¹⁸ While such an approach forges a direct link between the work of the biblical scholar and the theologian, it does so at

¹⁶ Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that “the extreme generality, diffuseness, and variability of man’s innate (that is, genetically programmed) response capacities mean that without the assistance of cultural patterns, he would be functionally incomplete, not merely a talented ape who had, like some underprivileged child, unfortunately been prevented from realizing his full potentialities, but a kind of formless monster with neither sense of direction nor power of self-control, a chaos of spasmodic impulses and vague emotions”. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 99.

¹⁷ J.H. Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (London: Collins, 1961), 63.

¹⁸ Lest this appear too harsh this is the attitude taken by Roger Haight to the definitions of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Haight finds any reference to an immanent Trinity a leftover from dogmatic and Scholastic theology, Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 487.

enormous cost to theology. Often the outcome of this process is simply a reproduction of trajectories of development that the early Church considered and rejected.

On this analysis the more fundamental issue that faces the systematic theologian is not the relationship between scripture and theology but that of the relationship between doctrine and theology. The issue at stake is the normative force of doctrine for the theologian. This does not mean abandoning a range of advances such as an acknowledgement of a hierarchy of truths, or the distinction between the formulation of doctrine and its intended meaning, or the varying degrees of authority which doctrines may carry. Determination of the significance of these may still be a theological issue, but one which might be taken up by what used to be called "dogmatic theology," a task increasingly marginalized by the dominance of the Kantian perspective.¹⁹ However, as "faith seeking understanding," the task of systematic theology is not to determine the content of faith, but to understand that content in a systematic fashion.

Putting System back into Systematic Theology

So far I have considered the relationship between biblical scholarship and systematic theology with no reference to the significance of the word "systematic." What is it then that makes systematic theology "systematic"? Few people today would seek to write a major work which sought to incorporate all Christian belief within a single systematic framework, in the manner of the great *Summae* of Thomas Aquinas. Perhaps the closest by a major theologian is the multi-volume systematic theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg.²⁰ But there is something a bit anachronistic about such a project in an increasingly historically conscious age. As historically conscious and informed we now about the whole history of such attempts, their successes and failures. To produce yet another system can seem like an exercise in futility. It is far easier to opt for eclecticism in response to the drive for system, aware as we are of the passing fragility of the systems of the past. Indeed much of what is written as systematic theology is more eclectic than systematic. It attacks individual issues with intelligence and energy, but there is not often evidence of some overarching position which would hold it all in place. There is no clear ordering of questions or issues and no accumulation of outcomes. The result is a coincidental manifold of insights and oversights which is unlikely to contribute to the long term development of the discipline.

Is it still possible then to still speak of systematic theology as an achievable goal? I would like to suggest two approaches which may help put the system back into systematic theology.

The first is the suggestion of Doran in his latest work. Faced with the historical multiplicity of systems of systematic theology Doran proposes that this historical process itself become the object of theological study. Doran argues for a particular stance on the nature of systematic theology, one which seeks to achieve not just a single system, but rather a genetic and dialectic sequence of systems over historical timeframes. This is the

¹⁹ Lonergan's sixth functional specialty is doctrines. It is concerned with these issues.

²⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991). Doran argues, and I agree, that in fact Pannenberg's work is not systematic theology in the classical sense because he works from a "truth as coherence" theory of truth. This blurs the distinction between doctrines and systematics since for Pannenberg doctrines can only be known to be such through their relative coherence. See Doran, *What Is Systematic Theology?*, 8, 10. For a more detailed account of the differences between Lonergan and Pannenberg and their implications see Neil Ormerod, *Method, Meaning and Revelation: The Meaning and Function of Revelation in Bernard Lonergan's Method in Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 183-91.

goal of a systematic approach which has become historically conscious. Such a goal can only be achieved by locating systematic theology within a larger project, that of a systematic theology of history. Systematic theology then has a specific task which "is a promotion of the being, and good systematic theology a promotion of the well-being, of meaning, and indeed of that meaning that is the outer word of God in history."²¹ Doran illustrates something of the possibility of such a project through a consideration of the place of the psychological analogy for the Trinity in the writings of Augustine, Aquinas and Lonergan.²²

This is a bold conception of theology involving cross-generational collaboration in a common project. It is not the sort of project that can ever be accomplished by a single theologian for the field of data is simply too large for one person to control. That such a goal is not impossible is evidenced by the sustained cross-generational collaboration evident in other areas of study such as science and mathematics. However, in my estimation we are far from achieving the level of collaborative effort required for such a common project. As I have argued above there are major methodological divisions within the field that need to be sorted out before such a project could get off the ground.

So while I endorse the direction of Doran's proposal, a more modest and achievable goal is to heighten our own awareness of and commitment to putting system back into systematic theology. Prior to all system and the source of all system is the theologian herself. The prior question is then how systematic and coherent are the positions I hold as a working theologian? Are there tensions and perhaps even contradictions on the positions I hold? Are there problems which resist my efforts? Can I find development in my own internal "system" over the years? Further, do I work within some established framework or do I go it alone and try to work it out for myself? Here one might draw attention to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre who argues for the importance of a tradition of rationality for the development of a sustained long term intellectual enterprise.²³ These are questions we can all address as working theologians who want to be "systematic" and not just eclectic. My own experience is that the most productive systematic theologians are those who work within some well-established framework of thought.²⁴

Conclusion

In 1995 the mathematical world was electrified by the announcement that British mathematician Andrew Wiles had solved a long standing problem known as "Fermat's last theorem."²⁵ Simple enough to state, the problem had resisted efforts at a solution for over 350 years. When Wiles eventually solved the problem it was not just an individual achievement. It involved the collaborative effort of hundreds of mathematicians through those intervening centuries, each contributing their piece to the final puzzle. Wiles' contribution was brilliant and the result of great personal sacrifice and determination, but

²¹ Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 629.

²² Doran, *What Is Systematic Theology?*, 34-39.

²³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

²⁴ This observation has been reinforced by private comments of an editor of a major journal who identified the "schools" of Lonergan and von Balthasar as making the most substantial contribution to the journal over the past couple of decades. In Australia I think one would say the most productive have been those working in either a Rahnerian or Lonerganian framework.

²⁵ See <http://mathworld.wolfram.com/FermatsLastTheorem.html> for details. There is an interesting theological connection, since Andrew Wiles is the son of British theologian Maurice Wiles.

it would have been impossible without all that went before him. As Isaac Newton said of his own work, "If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."²⁶

In my idle moments I have often wondered what theology might be like if it could muster that type of collaborative cross-generational collaboration and commitment. Prior to the emergence of historical consciousness this may not have been a major issue. However, with the burgeoning number of historical studies into every aspects of our faith tradition it may be that we are entering into a time when such collaboration not only become possible, but necessary. Certainly our colleagues in the area of biblical scholarship display a greater sense of collaboration. In theology however it remains a more distant goal.

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²⁶ In fact Newton was responding to criticisms made by Robert Hooke that he did not sufficiently acknowledge the achievement of others, Hooke in particular. Newton's comment in fact has a barb, because Hooke was of slight build and had been afflicted from his youth with a severe stoop.