

Introduction to Systematic Theology

Class 1

Part One of Class 1: The Two Senses of 'System' in Theology

Two descriptions of this course can be found. In Checkmarq, the following is given: 'Relation of systematic theology to faith, revelation (the Bible, Church creeds and doctrines), and the Church. The role of biblical exegesis, historical scholarship, philosophy, natural and human sciences in systematic theology. Derivation of various categories, subdivisions, and methods of systematic theology. The challenges and prospects of interconfessional and interreligious dialogue for systematic theology.'

And my own description, written for the department website for this year, reads: 'The classes will focus in depth on one view of systematic theology, its functions and aims, its method, and its relation to other theological specialties: the approach of Bernard Lonergan and of the professor. Students are welcome to study other approaches in their research and to represent these in the course of the discussions. The principal theological topics covered in the M.A. examination will be discussed in the class, as an aid to preparing students for the exam. The required texts are Lonergan's *Method in Theology* and Doran's *What Is Systematic Theology?* The class meets once a week, so the classes will be a combination of lecture-discussion led by the professor and reports by students on the readings and/or on their research for a paper.'

1 Overall Approach

When I was first asked to teach this course two years ago, I inquired of other professors who had taught it in previous years how they had approached the course. I found that there was no one consistent approach that has been taken by the department, and so I took that as license to create my own. The general approach mentioned in the departmental description of the course (the first description above) will certainly be covered in our course, but from a specific perspective.

I have never been a fan, either as a student or as a teacher, of survey courses. In fact, I have never taught a survey course in any theological discipline. I tend to want to teach texts, important texts, and to do in depth. So I ruled out from the beginning the approach to an introduction to systematic theology that would survey various other theologians' views on what systematic theology is, on how it is to be done, on how it is structured, etc. But that has to do with my own contribution to this course. *Your* contribution is another matter. I will present one consistent approach to what systematic theology is, an approach gathered from my own mentor Bernard Lonergan and from the additions and adaptations that I have made regarding his own work, and I will leave to you the task of presenting other approaches in the discussions and, if possible, relating these other approaches to the one that I am presenting *in accord with your interests*. The survey portion of the course, then, to the extent there is one, will be provided by your own work, but even this will not be randomly a matter just of a survey. It will be done as much as possible in relation to the approach that I will be suggesting.

This allows us, if you will, to have the best of both worlds: a consistent approach from the professor of one view regarding systematic theology, and an introduction to other approaches provided by the students. If you wish, you are most welcome to select some other theologian, one who interests you, and to concentrate on that in your own work for the course, that is, in your paper and in your presentation. Your paper for the course may, then, involve work on some other systematic theologian on whom you will give a class report (unless of course you choose to write the paper on something else.)

2 One Major Problem

Statement 1 on ‘Preliminary Notions.’ Now there is one major problem with the approach that I have decided to take, and it is best dealt with immediately at the outset. For in fact I will be presenting not one, but two distinct and related views. For there is a sense in which we may speak of the “system” of the whole of theology, and then there is a sense in which we may speak of the strictly systematic component of that overall ‘system.’ The ‘system’ of the whole of theology is a methodological position, and so we will approach it with the help of Lonergan’s book *Method in Theology*. It has to do with that part of the departmental description that speaks of ‘the role of biblical exegesis, historical scholarship, philosophy, natural and human sciences in systematic theology,’ that is, the part that integrates these various tasks with one another.

Again, we might speak of the ‘system’ of the whole of theology as *a generalized theory of theological operations and of the meanings intended in those operations*. And with this notion we arrive at our first statement of the

methodological meaning of 'system.' **Statement 2 on 'Preliminary Notions.'**

- There are operations involved in doing the kind of research that establishes critical texts.
- There are other operations involved in interpreting these texts to discover what they mean.
- There are further operations involved in narrating the history of what was going forward in the development of doctrine and in the development of theology.
- There are still further operations involved in discerning the roots of the conflicts that have occurred in that history and of the conflicts that occur today in interpretation and history.
- There is an entirely different set of operations involved when theologians turn from stating what others have said and done to providing the grounds for stating:
 - what they themselves hold to be true,
 - how they understand what they hold to be true,
 - how they would communicate what they hold to be true to contemporary women and men.

How do these operations relate to one another? How do the meanings intended in these operations relate to one another? The 'system' of the whole of theology would be constructed out of the answers to these

questions. It would be a methodological, not a theological, system, a systematic interrelating of the operations employed in the theological community.

Which of these sets of operations provides the *theological* system? That is reached by the set of operations in which theologians attempt to understand what they hold to be true, and to understand it coherently, so that their different positions on different issues can be integrated with one another.

Not all *theological* meaning is strictly systematic in this technical sense, and so the strictly systematic component within that overall methodological ‘system’ or generalized theory of theological operations and meanings will involve ordering theological content in a systematic fashion. We will find a ground for understanding that content as systematic both in the chapter on systematics in *Method in Theology* and in my own book *What Is Systematic Theology?* We will read good deal of *Method in Theology* first, and then will interweave *What Is Systematic Theology?* with the final chapters of *Method*. Depending on the time at our disposal, I may share with you all or part of the first chapter of a book that I’m writing at present, *The Trinity in History*, in order to give you a taste of further developments. Whether or not we have time to discuss this more recent work, it will definitely come into my lectures.

And so we will focus on the methodological ‘system’ of the whole of theology first, on the generalized theory of theological operations and meanings, on how they are connected to one another, and only then will we

zero in on the strictly theologically systematic component within that overall methodological 'system.' *Refer back to Checkmark description*

Understanding the methodological 'system' of the whole of theology is a matter of grasping the relations between such tasks or operations as textual criticism, interpretation of scripture and hermeneutics, the history of dogma and of theology, the conflicts to be found within that history and within contemporary interpretations and evaluations of it, foundations in theology, doctrinal theology, systematics, and communications or pastoral theology. We will find that the methodological key to the 'system' of the whole of theology, to the generalized theory of theological operations and meanings, lies in the 'system' that is our own conscious intentionality within a mutually self-mediating historical community of intentionally conscious theological subjects. It is the singular merit of *Method in Theology* that it provides us with a consistent understanding of these various interrelations. And so it is there that we begin. Chapter 1 of *Method in Theology* introduces us to this 'system' that in some way we are.

There is always the question, of course, Why begin here? The theological meanings constitutive of my particular ecclesial community are clear in the creeds and doctrines or dogmas of my community. Why not start there? Well, let me provide a question that might help us address this issue. In order to understand the significance and importance of beginning with the methodological considerations, I would ask you to consider the following question: What would be required for the meaning of the biblical category 'the kingdom of God,' once that meaning has been disengaged by serious exegesis of the New Testament, to function appropriately in a contemporary

systematic theology? Jesus came announcing the kingdom of God. Biblical exegesis is capable of informing us not only about what the evangelists understood this to mean but also about what Jesus understood it to mean. But the employment of that meaning today or of a meaning that is entirely consistent with it and continuous with Jesus' meaning is another issue. There is one set of operations involved in understanding what the gospels and Jesus himself mean. There is an entirely different set of operations involved in employing today a meaning continuous with the meaning of Jesus. The first set of operations mediates a meaning from the past into the present. The second set expresses a meaning continuous with that mediated meaning in the contemporary situation and with an eye to the future. It is the methodological sense of the system of the whole of theology that enables us to differentiate the two sets of operations and relate them to one another.

3 Introduction to *Method in Theology*

This leads us right into the next topic for today's presentation, namely, the opening sentence of the introduction to *Method in Theology*.

'A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion within that matrix' (xi).

3.1 The two phases of theological meaning

Statement 3 on 'Preliminary Notions.'

As stated, I will interpret *Method in Theology* as a generalized theory of theological operations and meanings. Operations and concomitant meanings within any

discipline, at least in the human sciences, philosophy, and theology, or as Lonergan would put it, in any discipline that draws on the past to guide one's transition into the future, have two phases.

Statement 4 on 'Preliminary Notions.' First, there is the mediating phase, the phase that mediates from the past into the present. Here the discipline is hermeneutical in the broad sense of this term, that is, it mediates an understanding of what others have said and done.

In a methodology for this phase of 'indirect discourse,' heuristic directives are presented for understanding and evaluating both (1) the history of the discipline and (2) the history of what the discipline is all about. Thus, in sociology, for example, there is a phase that interprets what previous sociologists have said about social units and their interrelations: the history of the discipline 'sociology.' But this phase also informs us about what kinds of social units have existed in the past and what were the laws governing their interactions.

In theology, this first phase interprets the previous history of the discipline – biblical, patristic, medieval, Reformation and counter-Reformation, modern, contemporary – but it also narrates the previous history of what the discipline itself is all about. What the discipline is all about is the action of God in history. And the approach taken here understands the action of God in history in terms of the interrelation of various cultural matrices and the significance and role of the grace that informs the actions and words of living religious people and communities within those matrices. This first phase tells what was going forward, then, in the discipline itself, but more

radically it tells what was going forward in the religious community on whose life the discipline reflects. Thus, for example, Yves Congar's *A History of Theology* belongs to this first phase, in that it is an account of what was going forward in the discipline of theology. Jaroslav Pelikan's several-volume history of Christian dogma also belongs to this first phase, but it does so not only as an account of the past history of the discipline but also as an account of the past history of the community struggling to articulate correctly its constitutive meaning. And finally, a book like N.T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God* belongs to this first phase, but here the issue is strictly the account of what was going forward between the grace of God active in the life, preaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the cultural matrix in which these events unfolded. This latter book is an account, not primarily of what was going forward in theology, but of what was going forward in what theology itself is all about, namely, the mutual self-mediation between the action of God in history and the cultural matrix in which God is acting: *the Kingdom or reign of God*.

This first phase, in general, can be called hermeneutical. Its concern is what others have said and done and the meaning constitutive of the words, deeds, and movements of the past. Lonergan calls this phase 'mediating,' because in it theologians are mediating theological meaning from the past into the present.

Statement 5 on 'Preliminary Notions.' But theologians not only mediate what others have said and done, whether these others be strictly religious figures like Jesus or church teachers like the framers of dogmas or theologians reflecting on dogma and doctrine and interrelating their various

meanings. Theologians also stand on their own two feet and say and do what they think is true and good. Lonergan calls the second phase, not 'mediating,' but 'mediated.' In the second phase, theologians are concerned not so much with the history of christological doctrine or of systematic Christologies as they are with what they maintain to be the *correct* christological doctrine or the best or most adequate systematic Christology. So here one is concerned, not with the conciliar history of christological dogma, not with the disputes over christological dogma, but with affirming what one holds to be the correct christological dogma; and one is concerned not with the Christology of Aquinas or Calvin or Schleiermacher or Barth or Tillich or Rahner or Lonergan or anyone else other than oneself, but with one's own Christology. 'You have heard it said ... but I say to you.'

Statement 6 on 'Preliminary Notions.' Again, Lonergan refers to this second phase not as mediating but as mediated. I will begin with this designation for the second phase, but I regard it as only partly accurate. I will go on to a further set of terms that I think is consonant with his intentions but that also expresses more clearly what the second phase is really all about. The second phase, precisely as mediated in Lonergan's sense, is the result of the critical appropriation and evaluation of the first phase on the basis of certain basic considerations that can be called foundational for this second phase. Thus, in sociology, the second phase as mediated will select options offered by the first phase, present these options as the right ones, and understand the realities with which the discipline is concerned (in this case, social units and their interrelations) in harmony with the selected options. But normally it will also go on from there; it will not be content simply with meaning mediated from the past, but will prescribe

what social units today and in the future ought to be, how they ought to function, and what their interrelations ought to be. Consider, for example, the work of Alvin W. Gouldner and Jürgen Habermas. And that is more than stating meaning mediated from the past. It is also articulating meaning that one would have be constitutive of the future.

In theology, the second phase is mediated, in that it selects options from the interpretation and history that constituted the first phase, presents these options as the correct ones, and attempts to understand these various options in relation to one another. It will state what is true from the meanings mediated into the present from the past (doctrines) and it will attempt to understand these doctrinal affirmations in a coherent manner (systematics). But the second phase is more than mediated, in this sense of the word 'mediated.' That expresses only part of what the second phase is and does. The second phase is also a constructive enterprise. It offers not only meaning mediated from the past through the filter of theological foundations, but also the constitutive meaning that the theologian judges ought to be formative of specific religious communities and of the specific cultural bodies with which it is theology's task to mediate the meanings affirmed by the religious communities. And so I want to refer to the second phase, not only as the mediated phase of theology but also as the constitutive phase, the constructive phase. Thus, in this second phase one (1) states one's agreement or disagreement with the positions of past theologians, (2) transposes the categories of these theologians into contemporary idioms, (3) states new positions, (4) works out a systematically coherent understanding of what one holds to be true, and (5) applies all of this to concrete situations and to dialogue with other disciplines and other religions. These tasks, all of

which Lonergan recognizes as part of his second phase, are more than a matter of stating meaning mediated from the past into the present. They are partly this, but even as partly this they are primarily concerned with the articulation, affirmation, and implementation of constitutive meaning, of the meaning that the theologian judges should be constitutive of the Christian community and of the particular cultural matrix or matrices with which one is mediating Christian theological meaning.

Statement 7 on ‘Preliminary Notions.’ Thus, in the first phase one is understanding already embodied meaning and evaluating it – embodied principally in texts but also in other cultural and religious artifacts – whereas in the second phase one is promoting meaning, advancing, if you want, its ever fuller being, even as one is accepting some of the embodied meaning from the past. The term ‘mediated’ adequately reflects the acceptance of embodied meaning from the past, but it does not adequately reflect the promotion and advancing of meaning that occurs in this second phase, unless, of course, we extend the meaning of ‘mediating’ to the mutual self-mediation that occurs as a religion interacts with a given cultural matrix. Thus, in the second phase, one’s activity is praxis, the praxis of meaning, the ongoing advance of meaning, the creation of the meaning of the community as this community moves into its future. Specifically for theology, one’s activity is oriented to the constitution by meaning of the Christian community and of one’s cultural situation. And as we shall see in greater detail, it is oriented to the promotion of the human good in history.

We will cover points 8 through 11 on ‘Preliminary Notions’ very quickly.

Part Two of Class 1: Chapter 1, *Method in Theology*

We are investigating first, then, the methodological meaning of ‘system’ as applicable to theology, the overall system of the operations performed by all of the practitioners in the theological enterprise. How do these relate to one another? The answer to that question will give us this first meaning of ‘system.’

The approach taken to method is clearly stated in the first two pages of the chapter. At the time Lonergan was writing *Method in Theology* – and this remains true today, I believe – there was not a successful or convincing presentation of the interrelations of the various tasks performed in the theological community, and so there was no teacher to be followed in this general area of what I’m calling the methodological meaning of ‘system’ and so no way of implementing the first meaning of ‘method’ that he mentions, method as an art.

The second way of conceiving method at that time was according to the analogy of natural science, and the difficulties there were very prominent: not only the lower status assigned human sciences, but also reductionism.

And so the chapter seeks ‘to work out the basis for ... a third way,’ a way that would ‘advance the less successful subjects’ and keep it from ‘remain[ing] a mediocrity or slip[ing] into decadence and desuetude’ (p. 4): (1) appeal to the successful sciences for a *preliminary* notion of method, (2) go behind the procedures of the natural sciences to ‘something both more general and more fundamental, namely, the procedures of the human mind’ (p. 4), (3) discern there a transcendental

or **generalized empirical method**, ‘**a basic pattern of operations employed in every cognitional enterprise**’ (p. 4), and (4) specify the relevance of this t.m. to more special methods. This basically divides the chapter, though the fourth section is given the more general heading, ‘**The Functions of Transcendental Method.**’

1 A Preliminary Notion

The preliminary notion of method is given in the first sentence of the first section: a **normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results**. Thus, as manifested in the natural sciences:

(1) **Distinct operations**: inquiry, observation and description, discovery, formulation of discoveries in hypotheses, deducing implications of hypotheses, experimentation to check implications of hypotheses against observable facts (4-5).

(2) **Operations are related**. 5: ‘Inquiry transforms mere experiencing into the scrutiny of observation. What is observed is pinned down by description. Contrasting descriptions give rise to problems, and problems are solved by discoveries. What is discovered is expressed in a hypothesis. From the hypothesis are deduced its implications, and these suggest experiments to be performed. So the many operations are related; the relations form a pattern; and the pattern defines the right way of going about a scientific investigation’ (normative).

(3) **Results are cumulative and progressive**: experimentation, new data, new observations, new descriptions either confirming or not

confirming hypothesis being tested, possibly new discovery, new hypothesis, new deduction, new experiments.

Next, the cumulative and progressive character of the results rules out a notion of method as a set of rules that, even when followed blindly by anyone, yield satisfactory results. 6: 'Results are progressive only if there is a sustained succession of discoveries; they are cumulative only if there is effected a synthesis of each new insight with all previous valid insights. But neither discovery nor synthesis is at the beck and call of any set of rules. Their occurrence follows statistical laws; they can be made more probable; they cannot be assured by a set of prescriptions.'

If not a set of rules, then what? 6: '... a prior, normative pattern of operations.' And the operations are not all logical.

2 The Basic Pattern of Operations

Lonergan first lists them. My setup reflects the pattern.

4 - deliberating, evaluating, deciding, speaking, writing, acting

3 - reflecting, marshalling and weighing evidence, judging,

2 - inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, formulating

1 - seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting

General characteristics: Eight in all

(a) **transitive**: they have objects, by the operation we become aware of objects, that is, they are intentional: by seeing there becomes present what is seen, etc.

(b) operations of a subject who operates **consciously**: in each of these operations I am aware of myself operating, present to myself operating, experience myself operating (meaning of consciousness). 8: 'Just as operations by their intentionality make objects present to the subject, so also by consciousness they make the operating subject present to himself' or herself.

different meanings of 'present'

consciousness not another operation

(c) the data of consciousness can be **objectified**: 8-9: 'Just as we move from the data of sense through inquiry, insight, reflection, judgment, to statements about sensible things, so too we move from the data of consciousness through inquiry, understanding, reflection, judgment, to statements about conscious subjects and their operations.'

(d) when we do this we can distinguish different '**levels**' of consciousness and intentionality. 9: 'There is the *empirical* level on which we sense, perceive, imagine, feel, speak, move. There is an *intellectual* level on which we inquire, come to understand, express what we have understood, work out the presuppositions and implications of our expression. There is the *rational* level on which we reflect, marshal the evidence, pass judgment on the truth or falsity, certainty or probability, of a statement. There is the *responsible* level on which we are concerned with ourselves, our own operations, our goals, and so deliberate about possible courses of action, evaluate them, decide, and carry out our decisions.'

Quality of consciousness changes from one operation and level of operations to another. Expansion, enlargement, fuller self of which we are aware. See 9-10, par. ‘As empirically conscious ...’

(e) different operations also yield qualitatively **different modes of intending** (knowing is not like looking). See 10-11: ‘The intending of our senses ...’

The most fundamental difference in modes of intending lies between the **categorial and the transcendental** – and here L is talking about the transcendental intending, ‘the prior **transcendental notions** that constitute the very dynamism of our conscious intending, promoting us from mere experiencing towards understanding, from mere understanding towards truth and reality, from factual knowledge to responsible action.’ 11-12. Distinct from transcendental concepts.

(f) 12: Elementary and **compound** objects, elementary and **compound** knowing. Compounding takes place because of the transcendental notions, through which ‘the many elementary objects are constructed into a single compound object, and in turn the many compound objects will be ordered in a single universe.’

(g) The many levels of cs are successive stages in the unfolding of a single thrust, **the eros of the human spirit**. See 13: ‘To know the good ...’

(h) The basic pattern is dynamic, dynamic materially as a pattern of operations, and **dynamic formally**, as self-assembling, consciously: **attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible**.

3 Transcendental Method (or Generalized Empirical Method)

This basic pattern of operations is transcendental method: transcendental in the sense that (14) ‘the results envisaged are not confined categorially to some particular field or subject, but regard any result that could be intended by the completely open transcendental notions ... transcendental method is concerned with meeting the exigences and exploiting the opportunities presented by the **human mind** itself.’

Everyone observes it insofar as they are attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible. But **objectifying** it is another issue: applying the operations as intentional to the **operations** as conscious: see 14-15, and to the **relations** as conscious, see 15-16.

In this section he tries to take us through the process of **objectifying**, of applying the operations as intentional to the operations as conscious. Thus:

- experiencing the operations;
- understanding their unity and relatedness (to p. 16);
- then, Do the operations occur? (16-17)
- Do they occur in the described pattern? (17-18) Unity of cs is given, pattern is part of that givenness. 18: ‘Spontaneously ...’
- Is this pattern just a hypothesis to be revised? The objectification can be refined, but the dynamic structure is the issue, and the conditions of a basic revision of the structure cannot be fulfilled (19, ‘Moreover’)

Thus, a ‘rock’: the subject in his or her conscious, unobjectified attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, responsibility. (More on the rock in chapter 4)

4 The Functions of Transcendental Method

- (1) Normative.** All special methods make specific the transcendental precepts, Be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible –spontaneous dynamism
- (2) Critical.** Reality – objectivity – cognitional process. Cognitional theory basic.
- (3) Dialectical.** Sorting out basic positions and counterpositions.
- (4) Systematic.** Objectification yields basic terms and relations, isomorphic with terms and relations denoting ontological structure of any proportionate reality.
- (5) Continuity without rigidity.** Continuity from basic method, non-rigid because cognitional process yields development.
- (6) Heuristic.** To be known by experiencing, understanding, and judging.
- (7) Foundational.** Common core of special methods.
- (8) Relevant to theology.** Human minds: attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible.

(9) Objects not outside transcendental field. Unrestricted field. Outside it there is nothing at all. Transcendental notions comprehensive. Intelligible, being, good.

(10) Not a new resource in theology.

(11) Key to unified science.

(12) Relation to philosophy: cognitional theory, epistemology, metaphysics.

What is the transcendental notion of value? How does it function concretely in making decisions? What is the process of decision as articulated in chapter 2? What is the criterion of a good decision?