

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