

Class 9: Nov 2/09

## Chapters 1-4 of *What Is Systematic Theology?*

**Preface, pp. 1-2:** The book envisions 'a complete reconstruction of the discipline or functional specialty of systematic theology,' not by an individual but by a community. The new systematics will be 'entirely continuous with the permanent achievements of the past,' achievements, however, that 'were reached in stages of meaning that are now part of history.' The ultimate arbiters of meaning are found in 'interiorly and religiously differentiated consciousness ... in the personally appropriated structure of one's own cognitive and deliberative operations and in the gift of God's love as one has made that gift one's own and followed it where it leads one.'

**Chapter 1:** The book works from the presumption that there is a certain amount of unfinished business in what Lonergan wrote about systematics (3). His notion of systematics remained unchanged throughout his career, but his own development in other areas raises further questions about systematics. For one thing, more will be included among the tasks of systematic theology than he ever explicitly acknowledged. For another, the dynamic of *Method in Theology* currently is interrupted by the chapter on systematics, and I would like to rectify that. 'More precisely, there are operations that systematic theologians perform that Lonergan does not account for at any point in his presentation of the method of systematics, or for that matter anywhere else' (4). One result of this effort would be 'to open the presentation of systematics to the issues of **cultural and religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue**' (4). 4-5: 'Perhaps no area of theology in direct discourse is of greater importance at the present time and for the foreseeable future than this, and I am convinced that Lonergan's own suggestions concerning the direction that Christian theology must take on these issues are still the clearest I have seen and make more sense than any others, even as they are compatible with the best thinking on the part of people who have specialized in this set of questions.'

This is by no means a rejection of Lonergan's emphases. 5: 'I insist on the necessity of preserving his distinct emphases.' 'I have no quarrel with what Lonergan *does* say about systematics. I am rather noting the absence of certain key elements from his work. I want him to say more. He *can* say more. The 'more' is waiting to be said. Clearly, I cannot make him say more, so I will try to say more myself.'

Lonergan's 'most detailed single exposition' of an understanding of systematics is contained in the first chapter of *The Triune God: Systematics*. Much happened between 1957 and 1972, and yet the understanding of systematics remains unchanged. This is the problem I am addressing.

More particularly, the breakthrough to functional specialization, the notion of mediation, and the foundation of systematics in conversion demand a more extensive notion of systematics than is found in chapter 13 of *Method in Theology*, an accumulation of insights, adjustments, re-interpretations around the notions of systematics. I register agreement with the proposal that the **principal function** of systematics is the understanding of the mysteries of faith affirmed in ecclesial and theological doctrines.

But I think there are **other functions** that need more development than they have been given.

**Chapter 2: Four emphases** in particular should be retained from Lonergan's notion, but each of them raises a further question. The four emphases are:

(1) The **principal function** of systematics is the hypothetical, imperfect, analogical, obscure, and gradually developing understanding of the mysteries of faith. The *truth* of doctrines pertains to the functional specialty 'doctrines,' where it is affirmed on grounds other than either systematic argumentation or proof and demonstration. The *meaning* of what has already been affirmed as true is the concern of systematics. Thus Lonergan writes (*Method* 336, quoted on p. 8):

Out of the Augustinian, Anselmian, Thomist tradition, despite an intervening heavy overlay of conceptualism, the first Vatican council retrieved the notion of **understanding**. It taught that reason illumined by faith, when it inquires diligently, piously, soberly, can with God's help attain a highly fruitful understanding of the mysteries of faith both from the analogy of what it naturally knows and from the interconnection of the mysteries with one another and with man's last end (DS 3016).

The promotion of such an understanding of the mysteries we conceive to be the principal function of systematics.

The paragraph on 8-9 contrasting Lonergan with Pannenberg should prove helpful here:

Perhaps a clarification by contrast will be helpful. Let us compare this emphasis of Lonergan's with the procedures followed by Wolfhart **Pannenberg** in his *Systematic Theology*. Pannenberg conceives truth as coherence. This is an **idealist** conception of truth entailing a less than adequate distinction between insight and judgment. Within such a conception there is no ground for **distinguishing doctrines from systematics**, for there is **no acknowledgment of judgment as a distinct constitutive element in human knowing**. On Lonergan's account doctrines are correlated with judgment, systematics with understanding. **Doctrines are affirmations. Systematics attempts to understand what has been affirmed**. The affirmations are reached in other ways than by systematic argumentation. On Pannenberg's account doctrines and systematics are one, because on his account judgment and understanding are one; as in all idealisms, they are not adequately distinguished. Thus we have the title of the first chapter of Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*: 'The Truth of Christian Doctrine as the Theme of Systematic Theology.' On Lonergan's account, again, affirming Christian doctrine as true is one thing, while understanding what one has affirmed to be true is something else. For Lonergan, it is the *meaning* of Christian doctrine, not its truth, that is 'the theme of systematic theology.' It is 'how it *can* be true' that is at stake in systematics. *That* it is true is already affirmed. Or, to be more precise, by the time the theologian begins to do systematics, he or she has already determined precisely what are the doctrines that are to be affirmed. These may or may not be completely coincident with the official doctrines of a particular communion, but the point is that systematics is an attempt on the part of the theologian to state as clearly as possible the meaning of what one has already affirmed to be the case. And at this point, we are concerned