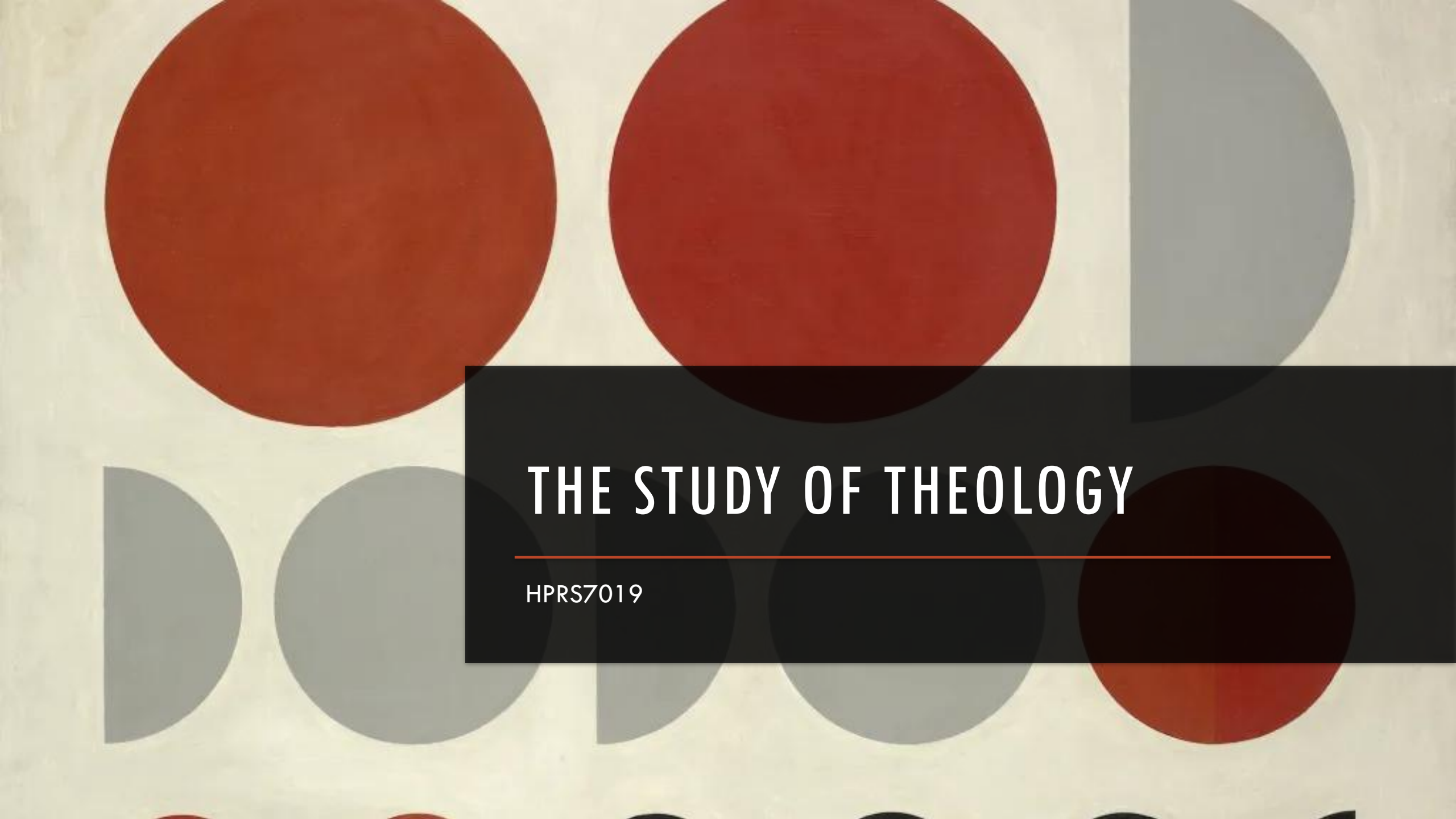




THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY

HPRS7019

SYSTEMATIC
THEOLOGY

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THEOLOGICAL WRITING

The history of theological writing might be understood in terms of the prevailing genres of any era.

Commentary: much patristic theology was not heavily schematic, but was organised in a topical or thematic fashion, expanding upon and reflecting on authoritative texts.

Sententia: Lombard's Sentences initiates a new phase in theological writing, attempting to reconcile and integrate the teachings of Scripture and the church fathers.

Summa/Compendia: summaries of Christian teaching designed for classroom use to initiate baccalaureate students into the study of theology.

Loci communes: a summa offering conceptually ordered theological commentary on Scripture.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THEOLOGICAL WRITING

Doctrinal “Syntagma” & “Bodies of Divinity” – a very schematic arrangement of Christian teaching, seeking a high degree of conceptual refinement, fidelity, and coherence.

Systematic/Dogmatic Theologies – a highly schematic, comprehensive, and/or “scientific” presentation of Christian dogma, often with a special emphasis on the unity and coherence of a particular ecclesiastical (sub-)tradition.

SYSTEMATIC
THEOLOGY

IS THEOLOGY “SYSTEMATIC”?

There is a type of systematicity that theology cannot have in virtue of the fact that its principle object – God – cannot be comprehended under any term or set of terms.

On the other hand, there is a necessarily “systematic” character in theology of all kinds, insofar as it seeks the coherence (insofar as it is capable) and integration of its understanding of God and God’s works.

Formal & Material Order:

- Formal Order: The structure and arrangement of any body of Christian teaching.
- Material Order: The inner conceptual relationships between the various elements of Christian teaching.

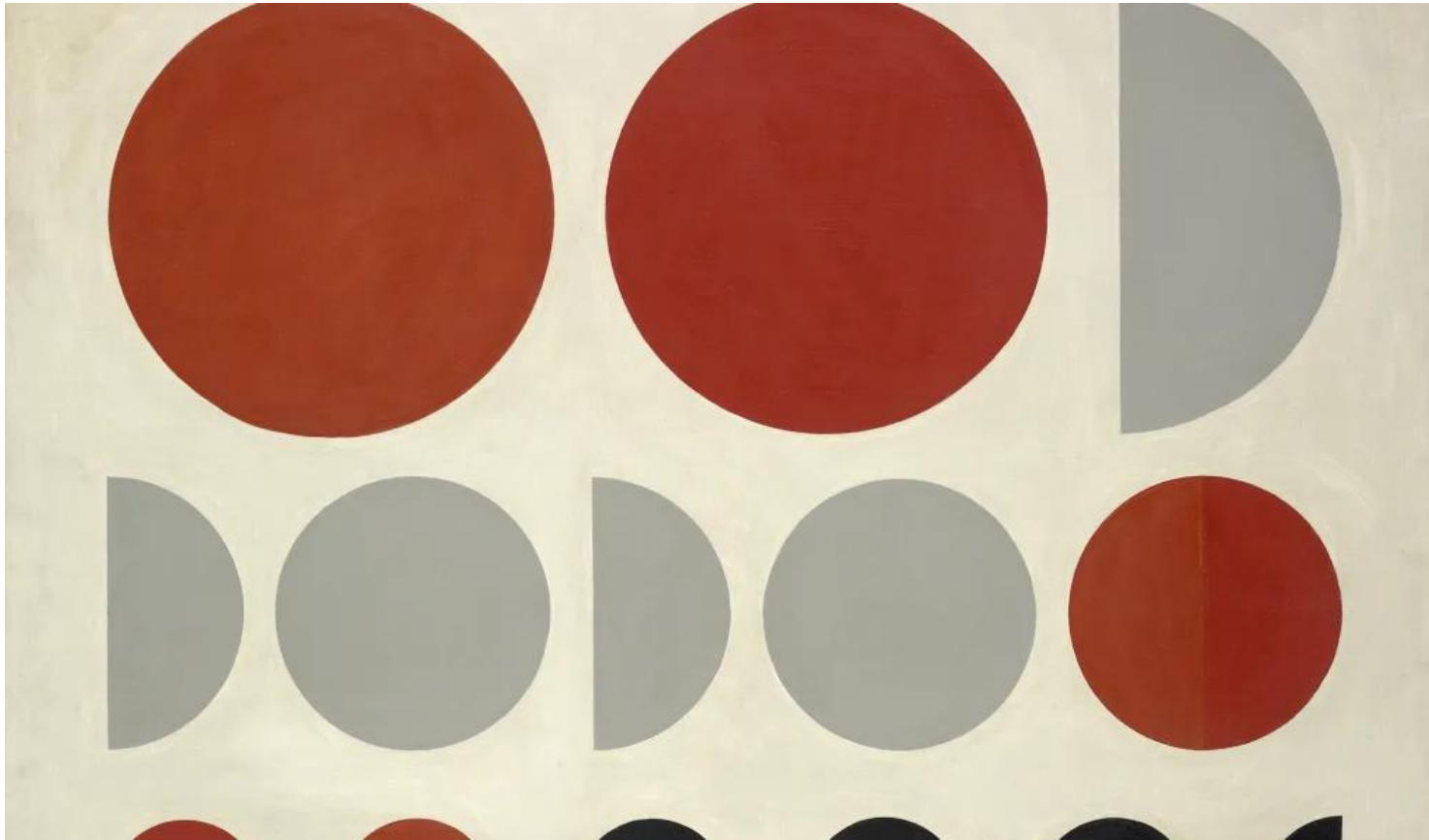


IS THEOLOGY “SYSTEMATIC”?

Theology need not adopt a systematic form or structure, but Christian theology is inherently “systematic” in the recognition of an internal order in its dogma which is determined by the self-consistency of God’s nature & works. God’s life and purposes, though mysterious, are intelligible, and intelligibly revealed.

“Systematic Theology” may thus refer narrowly to a formal arrangement of theological teaching, or more broadly to theology in its integrative moment, seeking the internal consistency of its knowledge.





PRINCIPLES OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

If the object of theology is “God and all things in relation to God”, then systematic theology is that branch of theology concerned with the first principles of Christian faith and practice.

PRINCIPLES OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Object:

- God in himself
- God's works toward us

Sources:

- Revelation (General and Special) and Tradition

Subject Matter:

- the “dogmas” of the Christian faith critically formulated under revelation as the controlling rule and norm of that faith.

Mode:

- Faith and Reason



FEATURES OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Confessional: Discusses objects of theological knowledge in relation to their principle in God.

Coherent: An emphasis on the internal consistency of Christian dogma.

Conceptual: Analytical use and refinement of concepts.

Connections: Ordered to illustrate the internal relationships between Christian dogmas.

Comprehensiveness: Unrestricted in scope, addressing discrete topics within the field of theological knowledge, but weighted proportionately.



FEATURES OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Constructive Ambition: Not interested merely in the restatement of the history of church teaching but in the truth and relevance of that teaching for our time.

“Christian doctrine can only claim to be such if it arrives not merely at problematic statements but also at assertive ones, that is, at judgments that express an unrestricted and unconditional reality and assert the truth”

Ebeling, *The Study of Theology*, 131



**METAPHYSICS:
MASTER OR
SERVANT?**

METAPHYSICS: MASTER OR SERVANT?

Theology takes an interest in all things, but because Systematic Theology is interested in tracing objects back to their principle in God, theology also takes an interest in the nature of things.

For this reason, it has often employed metaphysics, the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and properties of “being”.

METAPHYSICS: MASTER OR SERVANT?

Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation theologians all employed metaphysics.

In the Enlightenment, metaphysics was subjected to heavy critique on epistemological and phenomenological grounds.

If we can know only our experiences, we cannot know the nature of things in themselves.
Metaphysical claims seen as power moves.



METAPHYSICS: MASTER OR SERVANT?

A good portion of Modern theology took this critique on board, especially Liberal theologies which tended to grant theological claims only if they could be empirically and publicly verified.

Metaphysics comes to be seen as an alien imposition of philosophy upon theology, and theology moves to a more existentialist mode.



METAPHYSICS: MASTER OR SERVANT?

This modern separation of theology and metaphysics claims to free theology from being coopted by alien philosophies, but it comes with a high price tag:

- Restricts theology's philosophical ambition and implies an antithesis between faith and reason.
- Limits theology's knowledge to the realm of the inward and private, understanding it as an act of interpretive or poetic "meaning-making".
- Permits the nature of the world to be understood in terms of a wholly secular, natural "reason", undetermined by divine realities.



METAPHYSICS: MASTER OR SERVANT?

Post-Liberal theology has pushed back on this, emphasising that theology unavoidably engages in metaphysics.

Liberal theology does this by placing conditions on the “knowledge” theology can have. The question isn’t whether we do metaphysics, but which metaphysic we endorse.

Pushing metaphysics out of the conversation doesn’t create a public square free of sectarian theologies, it just forces those commitments under-ground.



A NEW PHILOSOPHIA CHRISTIANA?

Many theologians today are calling for a renewal of theology's philosophical and metaphysical ambition to bring the insights of the Christian faith to our public conversations.

There are two possible dangers here:

Ideology:

Metaphysics becomes an instrument to extend ideology and out-narrate those with competing points of view.

This fails to acknowledge the limits of metaphysical argument, and the fundamental importance of faith for theology.



A NEW PHILOSOPHIA CHRISTIANA?

Idolatry:

That metaphysics might claim priority over the substance of the church's witness, so that rather than transforming our imagination, the gospel becomes captive to our vision of "the real world".

This is why Robert Jenson has described one of the roles of theology as offering a "revisionary metaphysics" — that is, a description of reality as a realm which is not foreign to God, but to which and in which God is already present and active.





READING

The readings below are by two contemporary theologians, each of which offers a different look at the nature and task of thinking "systematically" about theology.

The concerns that orient the systems of doctrine that Coakley and Cone develop are very different.

Coakley is responding to Feminist concerns, and Cone is engaged in a programme attentive to the need for Black Liberation.

But both share the fundamental commitment that the analysis, critique, and formulation of doctrine are tasks necessary in order to set forward a faithful account of God and God's works in the world



READING

Cone, J. H. (2010). *A Black theology of liberation*. Orbis.
“Chapter 1: The Content of Theology”.

Coakley, S. (2013). *God, sexuality and the self : an essay “on the Trinity.”*
Cambridge University Press.
“Chapter 1: Recasting ‘systematic theology’”.