

UNIT 1: SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: SOURCES AND METHODS

1. Sources

Traditionally, systematic theology is thought to deploy four sources:

- Scripture
- Reason
- Tradition
- Experience

Different sources have been emphasised at different moments in the history of Christian theology. For example, within modernity, under the heavy influence of Enlightenment rationalism, the key authority was reason (of a particular kind). At the rise of theological liberalism in the late nineteenth century, experience became the central authority. Likewise, perhaps as a reaction to the priorities of modernity and liberalism, the supreme authority of the Bible has been emphasised within certain churches, to the point where the scriptures are understood to be of supernatural origin or divinely dictated to human secretaries. There is a very helpful discussion of the authority of the Bible in Migliore (2004), ch.3. Meanwhile, reacting to the disparaging of tradition which is characteristic of modernity, some theologians have emphasised the authority of the Church's historical practice and beliefs, particularly those of early Christian thinkers and communities.

While most theological schools of thought recognise that, in some measure, scripture, reason, tradition and experience are all authoritative, the exact nature of each and the balance between the four has been a source of major dispute. The texts you read for this unit will provide you with a sense of this debate.

2. Methods

Theological reflection on the nature of Christian doctrine has taken very different forms. Even within the New Testament, different styles and theological methods are clear: the gospel genre, narrative history (the Acts of the Apostles), letters and the Apocalypse are the most obvious.

Thomas Aquinas orders his theology according to the pattern of discussion in the thirteenth century university. An issue would be raised (for example, knowledge of God) and then ten or so central questions would be identified (for example, is it possible to know anything of God?). A student would provide some preliminary replies to the questions, those replies would be

rebutted and the teacher or master (known as the *magister*) would pronounce his reply to the question. This is a very 'discursive' method of theologising which perhaps owes a good deal to the more ancient Platonic method of philosophy through dialogue.

Aquinas's method is taken from the classroom because his aim is pedagogical and he believed that truth is arrived at discursively. Meanwhile, other theologians have attempted to order their reflections on doctrine in a different kind of systematic fashion. Gunton (p.11) makes a useful distinction between theologians who are systematic and those who have a system. On the one hand, Irenaeus (c.130-c.200) understands the implications of one doctrine upon another and in this sense is systematic, but he did not order his theology according to any kind of formal system. By contrast, the systematic theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) had a system, namely a tight framework which begins with the Word of God, continues with the doctrine of God followed by the doctrine of creation and ends with the doctrine of reconciliation. Throughout that system, Barth is concerned always with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, made known by the Holy Spirit, attested to in scripture and proclaimed by the Church. At any point in the system, one is always concerned with that central revelation. Barth's work is systematic **and** has a system.

A final method for undertaking the study of Christian doctrine which has received particularly prominent attention in recent years deserves specific mention: narrative theology. It is striking that the Bible does not contain doctrinal pronouncements or philosophical disputation. It does, however, contain much narrative or story. Theology undertaken in narrative style has a long heritage. In 397, St. Augustine of Hippo wrote the *Confessions*, one of the greatest and most influential works of the western theological tradition. Superficially, this work is the story of Augustine's life and conversion. It is written as a narrative prayer. Yet the *Confessions* is also concerned with the narrative of creation and the narrative of reconciliation with God. We all encounter God in the stories of our lives, and therefore Augustine is concerned to learn how to read the narrative of his life, and indeed the narrative of creation. The grammar he uses to read that story is Christian doctrine understood as a distillation of the scriptures.

Narrative theology – the study of narrative as a method and source of Christian theology – came to prominence in the 1970s, and more particularly with the work of Hans Frei in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974). This method recognises that the literary form most appropriate to divine revelation is story, and that in the telling of the story is revealed the truth.

This is in stark contrast to the understanding of theology and doctrine as a discrete series of facts or cognitive propositions.