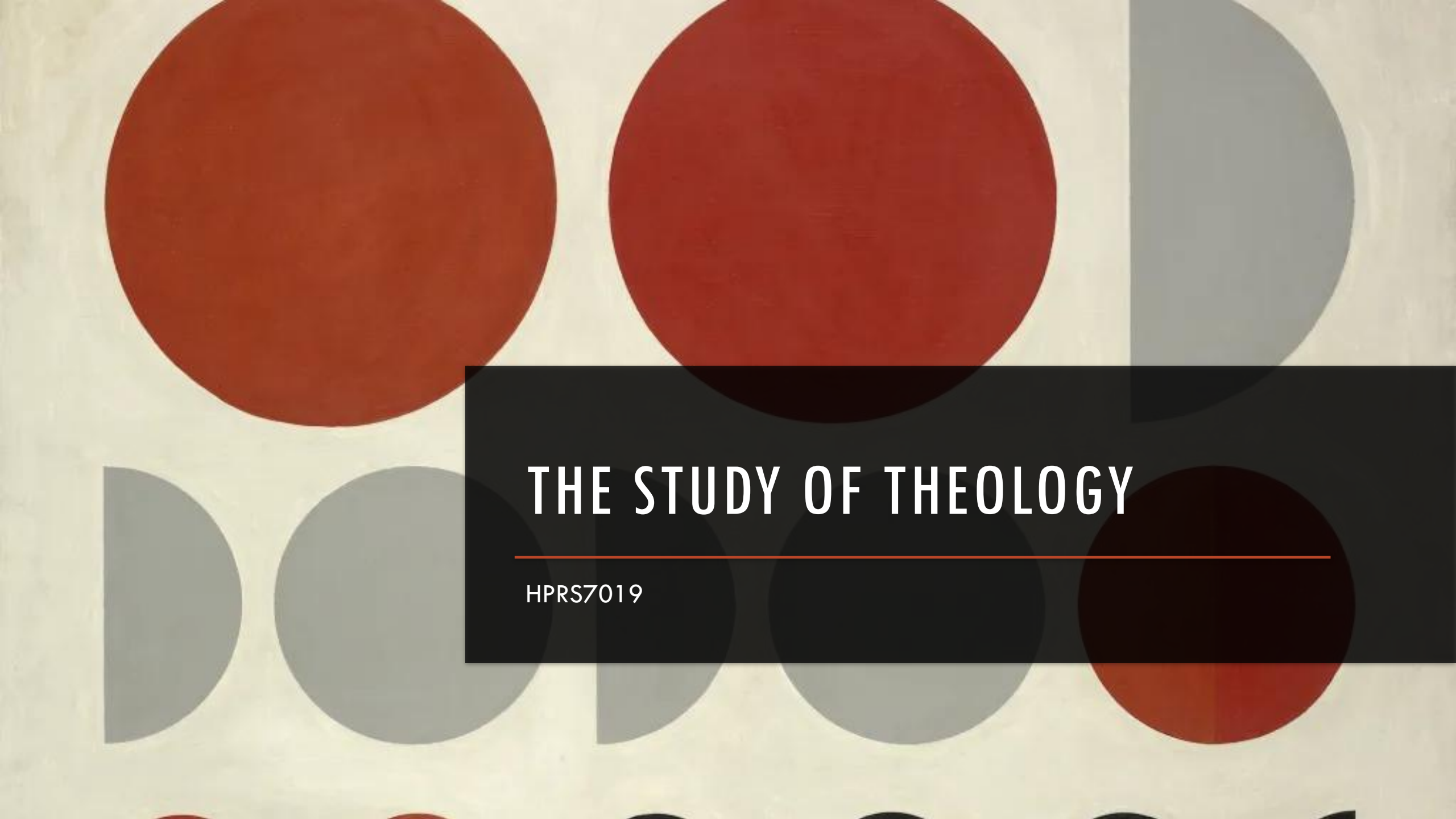


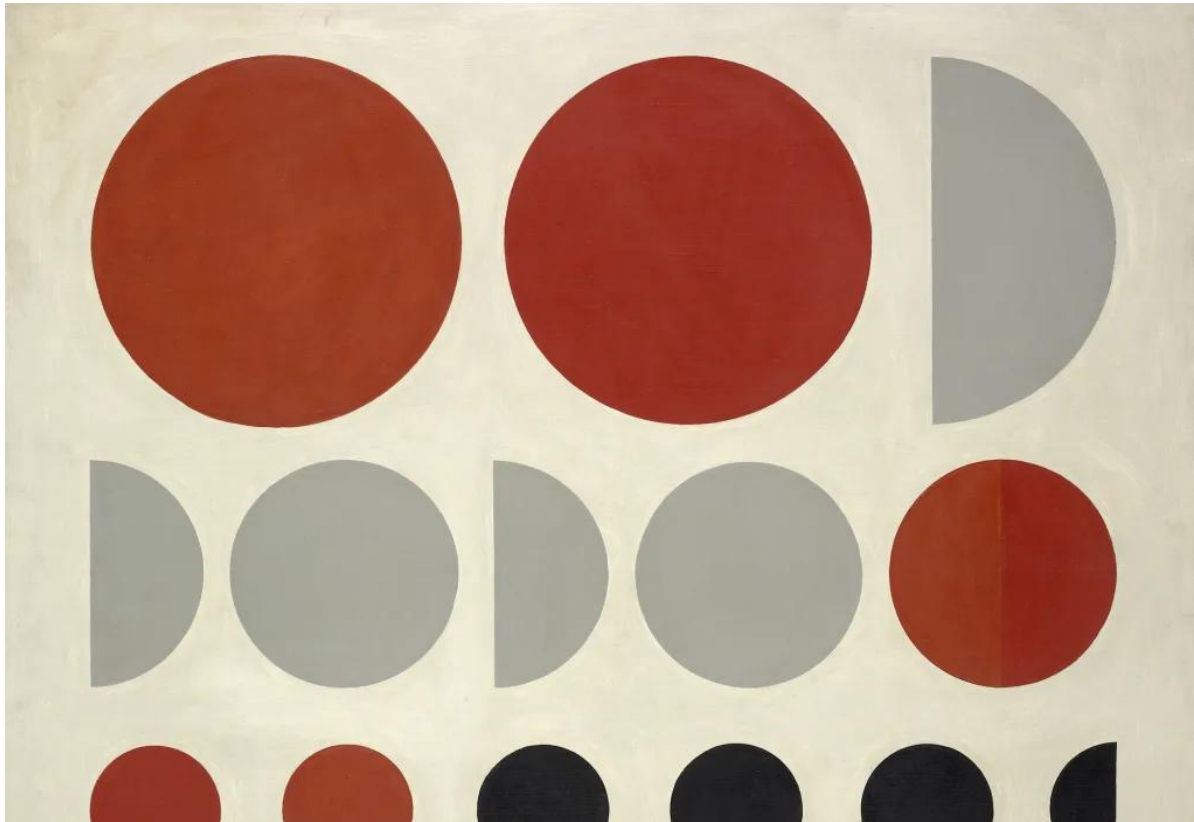


THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY

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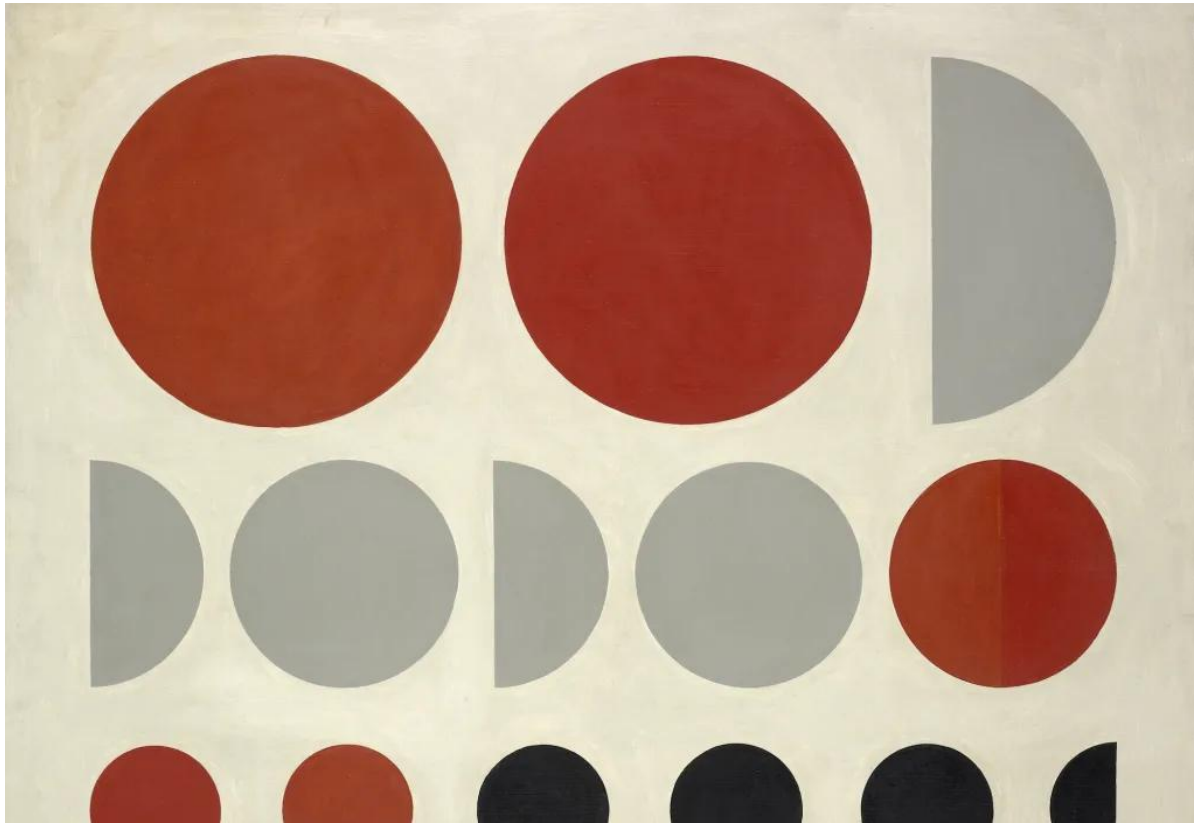
THEOLOGY AND CHURCH HISTORY



THEOLOGY AND CHURCH HISTORY

Theology is the wisdom that attends to the knowledge of God. Because the church is the steward of that wisdom, theology must reflect on the traditions and history of the church as the concrete setting in which that “deposit” of faith is communicated (2 Tim. 1:14).

Reflecting on the history of the church is a critical aspect of theology. It assists us in naming those decisive events, ideas, and figures that have definitively shaped the Christian faith.



THEOLOGY AND CHURCH HISTORY

But the history of the church is also one which takes an interest in the character of the church's teaching and witness in any age.

In that sense, the study of Church History has a deeply normative interest: namely, it attempts to identify and discern those practices and beliefs which constitute the church's life as expressions of "the faith... once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3)

A NATURAL
HISTORY OR THE
HISTORY OF
PROVIDENCE?

A NATURAL HISTORY OR THE HISTORY OF PROVIDENCE?

Since the Enlightenment, a great deal of writing in ecclesiastical history has been content to provide a natural history of the church, without reference to divine providence.

- The origins of the church are depicted as contingent developments within the life of first century Judaism.
- The action and agency of its central figures may be understood sufficiently with reference to the goals which they set for themselves within their immediate social settings.
- Its faith commitments may be explained by internal conflicts between various factions of the church, or through the appropriation of ideas and practices within the ambient culture.

A NATURAL HISTORY OR THE HISTORY OF PROVIDENCE?

As a result, what comes to constitute “orthodoxy” may itself come to be seen as a merely contingent, or even arbitrary determination.

So, Goethe:

“The whole of church history is a mishmash of error and power”

Ebeling, *Study of Theology*, p. 68



A NATURAL HISTORY OR THE HISTORY OF PROVIDENCE?

But the Christian confession attests its faith in “one holy, catholic, and apostolic church”.

How can it be that across such ages and times, in such diverse places and with such diverse expressions of faith, that there can be one church at all?

Is it even possible to give an honest “church history”?



A NATURAL HISTORY OR THE HISTORY OF PROVIDENCE?

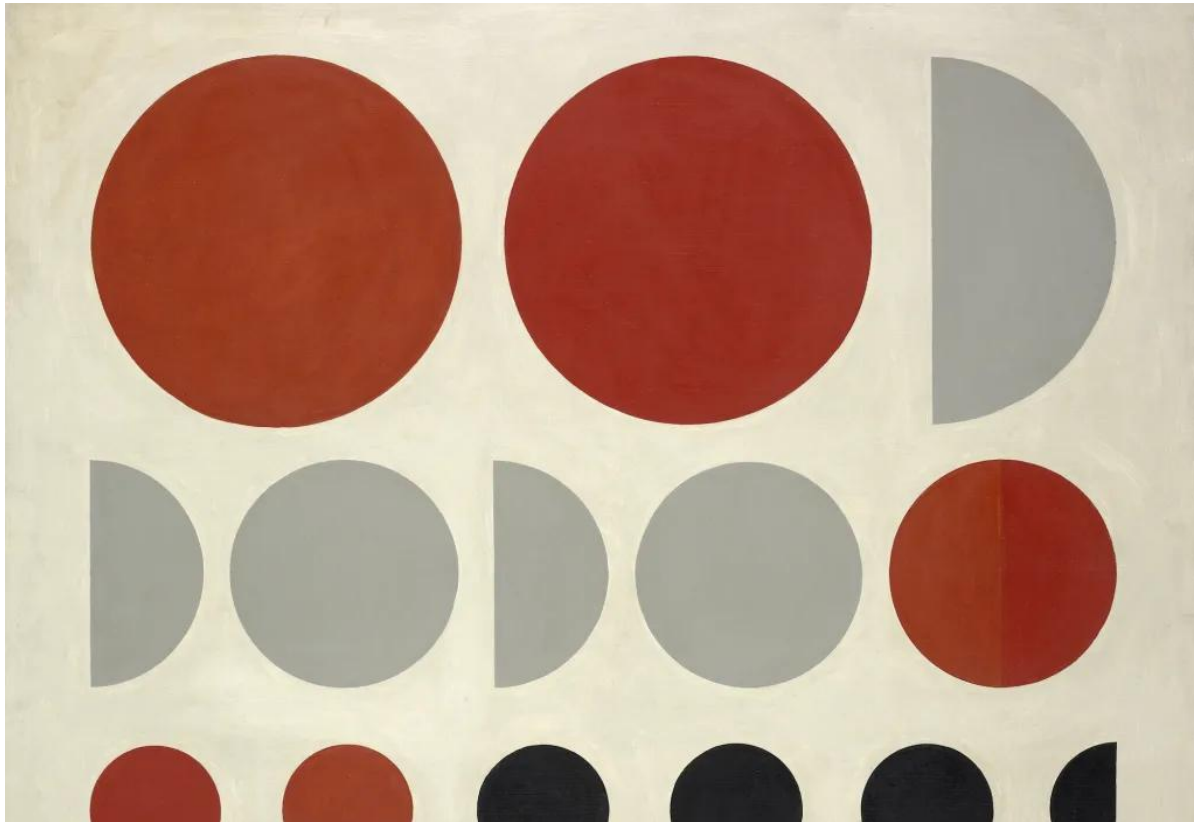
Claiming this as an article of faith places its cause beyond the realm of merely natural inquiry. This means that a theological account of the history of the church acknowledges God's work within, under and behind this natural history.

To say “one . . . church”, in other words, is to claim that lying beneath this apparent series of accidents is a hidden wisdom which providentially unifying and guiding the church toward its final end.





PROVIDENCE

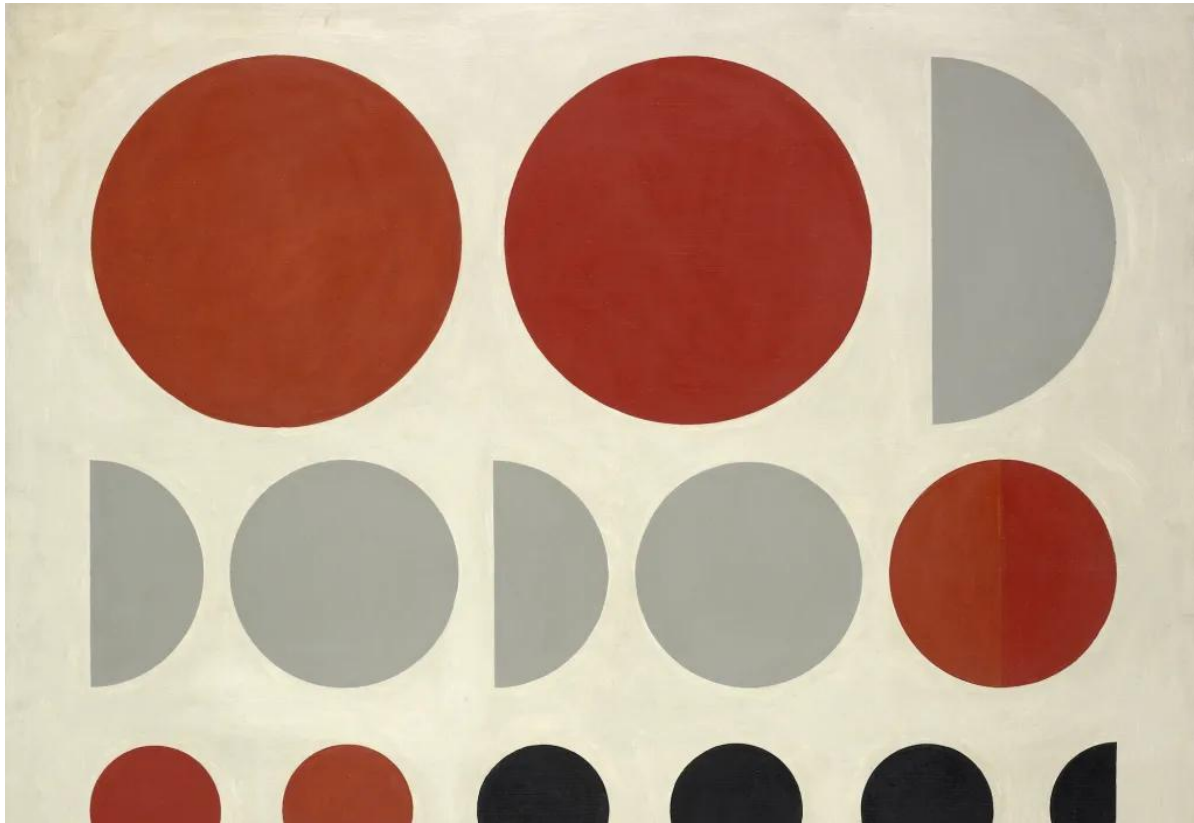


PROVIDENCE AND THE CHURCH

By his work of Creation, God grants to creatures their life, natures, and power of movement.

Providence is the work of God exercising his sovereignty over creatures for their good by:

- Preservation
- Governance
- Concurrence



GENERAL & SPECIAL PROVIDENCE

General providence refers to God's continuous upholding of the natural order, physical laws, and the universe as a whole.

Special providence refers to God's focused, extraordinary interventions, personal guidance, and care directed toward specific individuals or His church.

The history of the church (and of theology) is an element within God's special providence, by which he seeks to bring the world to rest in himself

GENERAL & SPECIAL PROVIDENCE

General Providence

- Universal
- Natural
- Impersonal
- Regular

Special Providence

- Targeted
- Extraordinary
- Personal
- Redemptive Purpose



TRADITION

THE TRADITIONS: A HISTORY IN SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Church history is obviously a very large field of study and could accommodate any interest touching on the form of the church's life within its specific socio-cultural location.

However, theology takes a special interest in “the traditions” of the church as bearers of divine teaching.

“I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you” (1 Cor. 11:2).



THE TRADITIONS

Traditio (*tradere*) = “gift”. Gifts are given and received. The substance of these gifts consist in:

Teachings (orthodoxy) — preserved in the confessions and writings of the church.

Practices (orthopraxy) — virtues, behaviours, and rituals that structure its spiritual life.

Passed from one community and generation to another, these gifts constitute the form of the church’s life and faith.

The church is never without tradition.



THE TRADITIONS

The operative principle in this tradition is the sanctifying and illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. This is not a dead and closed tradition, but a living and moving one.

Its cultural forms are diverse, but there is an inner unity in its substance: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5).

It is one in which we ourselves participate.

Accordingly, we are not only responsible to it but for it, as well.



THE TRADITIONS

The study of this history needs to be a critical form of reflection. This for two reasons:

There is no “ideal” form of the Christian faith. It is always communicated in words, ideas, and in cultural contexts that are temporary, impermanent, and subject to change.

Because the history of the church is a mixed reality. The church is a communion of redeemed sinners.

As such, its history is one of both of sin and grace



THE TRADITIONS

The history of the church is one of spiritual conflict with that order which opposes God.

Because it is a mixed society, this conflict sometimes invades the common life of the church, and often enough concerns its traditions of faith and practice.

Though disruptive, these conflicts are not always unproductive.

The NT itself and the history of theology suggests conflicts within the church may be instruments of God to refine the church's witness.



THE TRADITIONS

Yet the spiritual vocation of the church requires it to exercise judgment within its common life:

“Do you not know that we will judge angels?” (1 Cor. 6:3).

This extends to the discernment of God’s will in its own place and time to set forth a fitting witness to God’s grace, but it also extends to the history of its own faith and practice.



THE TRADITIONS

Because the church is comprised of sinners, this witness will inevitably take the form of repentance – the humble confession of its sins.

Because the church is comprised of saints, this witness will consist in praise – the joyful celebration of God's gifts





READING

The first reading by Anna Williams will give you a survey of how tradition, alongside Scripture and reason, inform theological judgment.

The second is by John Behr. The introduction to his large work *The Way to Nicea* lays out an excellent account of what tradition is, how it relates to the gospel, and its significance for historical study.

The third reading is by Ernst Troeltsch. His essay on the "Essence" of Christianity offers a glimpse at the key elements of a natural history of the Christian church, and some of the challenges that it poses to a theological approach to church history



READING

Williams, A. N. (2011). *The architecture of theology : structure, system, and ratio*. Oxford University Press. "Chapter 2: Warrants and Norms", p. 79-127.

The Way to Nicaea. Vol. 1 of *The Formation of Christian Theology*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001. "Introduction", p. 1-8.

'Writings on theology and religion', Troeltsch, Ernst, 1977, "What does the 'Essence' of Christianity Mean?", p.124-181.