Common Places: A New Forum for Old Conversations

Michael Allen & Scott Swain

Recent Developments in Trinitarian Theology
Fred Sanders

Recent Developments in Theological Exegesis
Wesley Hill

Recent Developments in Protestant Scholasticism
J. Todd Billings

Recent Developments in the Divine Attributes
Michael Allen

Recent Developments in Analytic Theology
Oliver Crisp

Recent Developments in Dogmatics
John Webster

Recent Developments in Roman Catholic Thought that Shape Contemporary Dogmatic Theology
Thomas Joseph White, O.P.

Recent Developments in Eschatology
Michael Allen

Has Theology Seen Better Days?

Alexander Solzhenitsyn characterized modern literary and artistic culture as exhibiting “a stubborn tendency to grow not higher but to the side.” The same judgment might be made about much modern theology. There is growth, to be sure, and developments in all manner of technical facets and interdisciplinary conversations. One would have to be a curmudgeon of a particular order not to appreciate the many blessings of life this side of the modern phase of Christian theology.

And yet, in many ways, this growth exhibits a sideways drift, not an upward progression. In its attempts to move beyond traditional modes of reflection upon God and the works of God and beyond traditional patterns of biblical commentary and interpretation in order to engage new methods, disciplines, and philosophical approaches to the study of the Bible and religion, theology has in many cases failed to move forward.

We often find ourselves in the position of the elders who witnessed the rebuilding of the temple after the exile (Ezra 3:10-13; Hag 2:3): what is for many a cause of celebration in theology is for us a cause of lament. One need not buy into a “golden age” theory of historical progress or decline to observe: theology has seen more glorious days.

Moving Forward

The path toward theological renewal, we suggest, lies in moving from “a less profound to a more profound tradition; a discovery of the most profound resources.”² We do not wish to impose parochial narrowness upon theologians, but we do believe that if engagement with wider cultural and methodological conversations is to be Christianly principled and profitable, it must follow rigorous catechesis in the theological reasoning of the classical Christian tradition and draw upon the deep roots of the biblical writings, as well as the literature of the patristic, medieval, and reformational eras.

In our judgment, the time seems ripe for ressourcement and retrieval, for reacquainting ourselves with the questions and approaches of earlier Christians who sought to read their Bibles and to let it shape their moral and spiritual imaginations. If we hope to have genuine and fruitful conversation between Christian theology and various eclectic inquiries, then we need to develop a spiritual-intellectual backbone formed by biblical reasoning and doctrinal discipline.

“Common Places”

The title of this regular column, Common Places, intends to elicit at least three senses related to the kind of systematic theology that we hope to practice and promote herein. First, Christian theologians around the globe and through the centuries have noted that careful study of various portions or “places” of Holy Scripture must be paired with attentive consideration of the grand themes of the Bible taken as a whole. These “common places” (loci communes) were the headings under which dogmatic or doctrinal theology proceeded forth from biblical commentary. Accordingly, we intend to follow the examples of those patristic, medieval, reformational, and post-reformation era theologians who not only developed doctrinal topics out of sedes doctrinae (“seats of doctrine” or pertinent portions of God’s Word relating to any given issue) but also sought to regulate their understandings of those topics by considering the influence of the wider span of the biblical canon.

Second, the common places of Christian theology, drawn out of the Scriptures and organized in a manner suitable to their exposition in the church and the academy, have functioned historically as common points of reference for theological discussion and debate. Indeed, when the Protestant theologian William Perkins dubbed himself a “reformed catholic,” he was indicating that he did not wish to wipe the theological table clean of the church’s traditional common places but to revisit and reform them in light of what he deemed to be more faithful biblical exegesis. This column, then, will focus upon the classical topics or loci of systematic theology, not as occasions for revision, but as opportunities for entering into the ongoing conversation that is Christian systematic theology.

Third, this column will feature the work of a number of theologians: with contributions from present-day authors representing a wide spectrum of the catholic Christian tradition and studies of influential figures from the Christian past. In that sense, it is a common place as well, a lived demonstration of the corporate sphere of theological work in the communion of the saints. The gospel not only brings illumination, but is also delivers community; more often than not, a healthy pursuit of the one involves that of the other.

What to Expect from “Common Places”

We invite you to join and dialog with us on the first and third Thursdays of every month. Future posts will seek to introduce and survey key figures, texts, and concepts from the classical tradition, to engage with significant works of contemporary theology regarding perennial questions, to assess the present state of the discipline in light of its historic roots, and to reflect upon the significance of Christian doctrine for the life of the church, its members, and its society.

Our first series will seek to think deeply about ways in which doctrinal theology has in fact flourished in the last quarter century by focusing on a number of areas in which, for various reasons, Christian dogmatics seems

to be experiencing growth and development in ways about which we wish to be informed and for which we want to be thankful.

About the Authors

Michael Allen (PhD, Wheaton College) is D. James Kennedy Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Knox Theological Seminary in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He is author of *Justification and the Gospel* (Baker Academic, 2013); *Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics: An Introduction and Reader* (T&T Clark, 2012), *Reformed Theology* (T&T Clark, 2010), and *The Christ’s Faith: A Dogmatic Account* (T&T Clark, 2009). His articles have been published in the International Journal of Systematic Theology, Journal of Theological Interpretation, Scottish Journal of Theology, Horizons in Biblical Theology, Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology, Westminster Theological Journal, and Themelios. He serves as general editor (with Scott Swain) for T&T Clark’s International Theological Commentary and Zondervan’s New Studies in Dogmatics series and as book review editor for the International Journal of Systematic Theology.

Scott Swain (PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. He is author of *The God of the Gospel: The Trinitarian Theology of Robert Jenson* (IVP Academic, 2013), *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and its Interpretation* (T&T Clark, 2011), and (with Andreas Köstenberger) *Father, Son, and Spirit: The Trinity and John’s Gospel* (InterVarsity, 2008). He has published articles in the International Journal of Systematic Theology and the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, and contributed to The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity. He serves as general editor (with Michael Allen) for T&T Clark’s International Theological Commentary and Zondervan’s New Studies in Dogmatics series. He blogs regularly at Reformation21.

Copyright © 2014 Michael Allen and Scott Swain.
Two influential examples may suffice. Colin Gunton’s *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* was published in 1991, opening with the programmatic essay “Trinitarian Theology Today” wherein he declared, “the unfortunate fact is… that the shape of the Western tradition has not always enabled believers to rejoice in the triune being of God.” Before the paragraph is over, he has blamed Augustine for the ills that beset the spiritual history of the West. At this distance, it is not hard to refute Gunton’s historical arguments: Michel Rene Barnes had already begun dismantling them historiographically in 1995,1 and Brad Green has more recently explored Gunton’s wider interests in *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine: The Theology of Colin Gunton in Light of Augustine*. But even so, it is hard to take up that essay without catching a palpable sense of the sheer excitement that a master of constructive theology like Gunton brought to the task. Line after line of the book jumps out with the energy of a manifesto: “Because God is triune, we must respond to him in a particular way, or set of ways, corresponding to the richness of his being… In turn that means that everything looks—and, indeed, is—different in the light of the ‘Trinity’” (p. 4).

In Roman Catholic theology, Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s 1993 *God For Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* cut a very similar profile. The sense of energy and project was there: “The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for the Christian life. That is the thesis of this book” (p. 1). But so was the insistence that something had gone awry at the core of the traditional doctrine, and the present generation had to set it right. Whereas Gunton characteristically saw the West as the region of error and the East as the reservoir of the needed resources for trinitarianism, LaCugna found the problem more ecumenical (the Cappadocian legacy was equally fraught) and longer standing (Aquinas did not untie these knotty problems). And the ultimate problem was that the doctrine of the Trinity had become a “nonsoteriological doctrine of God,” a mere cognitive puzzle about deity. LaCugna countered that “the doctrine of the Trinity is not ultimately a teaching about ‘God’ but a teaching about God’s life with us and our life with each other” (p. 228). Even though she struck an utterly non-traditional posture in her lamentable polemic against the idea of God-in-himself, of the immanent Trinity, LaCugna’s work gave many younger theologians a vision of the difference a “joined-up” trinitarianism might make for theology, worship, and church.

I hope these two examples show why the last two decades have been marked by progress in teasing apart the Harnackian ring and the theological vivacity that emerged together at about the time that Gunton and LaCugna were making their marks. It is especially poignant that both authors passed away at unexpectedly young ages, so that we can only guess how they would have responded to the shift in tone since the works mentioned here.

Because such a shift of tone is undeniable. Augustine, Nicaea, and Aquinas have found able defenders who have done remarkable work in putting these ancient figures into dynamic dialogue with contemporary systematic theology. As the disciplinary wall between historical and systematic theology has been lowered, the voices of the older authors have been heard more and more clearly. Perhaps sensing that new dialogue is becoming possible, practitioners from biblical studies and philosophical theology have also found a greater welcome in the doctrine of the Trinity, which was once the sole province of systematists.

Twenty years ago there was a lot of noise and hype about the doctrine of the Trinity, along with a lot of confused and indefensible generalizations. As the historical errors were corrected and the misplaced enthusiasms were inevitably stamped out, there was ample reason to fear that the excitement, the theological elaboration of trinitarian insights, and the vision of a more organically connected doctrinal core might also suffer loss. That has not been the case. The renewal of interest has eventuated in a steady refocusing of attention onto the doctrine, and important work continues. Gunton signaled the need for his project by lamenting that “there is a suspicion that the whole thing is a bore, a matter of mathematical conundrums and illogical attempts to square the circle.” The suspicion of boredom is dispelled, and has now been replaced by the conviction that we are joining the apostolic, patristic, and Reformation church in one of the most worthwhile conversations in all dogmatics.

---

About the Author

Fred Sanders (PhD, Graduate Theological Union) is professor of theology in the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University in La Mirada, California. He is author of several books including *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*, *Dr. Doctrines’ Christian Comix*, and *The Triune God* in Zondervan Academic’s *New Studies in Dogmatics* (forthcoming). Fred is a core participant in the Theological Engagement with California’s Culture Project and a popular blogger at Scriptorium Daily.

Copyright © 2014 Fred Sanders.

Recent Developments in Trinitarian Theology

Recent Developments in Theological Exegesis

Wesley Hill

Many of the most interesting developments that have taken place in the fields of biblical studies and systematic theology in the last twenty years can be charted under the heading of “theological interpretation of Scripture.” Even more specifically, narrowing the focus a bit more, it seems that many of these developments may be described with the word *retrieval*. Biblical scholars and dogmatic theologians are reaching back to eras of the Christian past before the rise of modern ways of reading in order to rediscover and reimagine older habits of biblical interpretation.

Giants of eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century biblical scholarship, such as J. P. Gabler and William Wrede, had argued that study of the biblical texts should be a purely historical discipline. Our goal as readers should not be to itemize the abstract “doctrines” that the “canonical apostles” believed. Instead, Wrede and others thought we should limit ourselves to studying the religious life of early Christian communities, “orthodox” and “heretical.” What theologians later chose to do with these historical findings was their own business, not the historians.

But in contrast to this “historical critical” approach, many Christian biblical scholars today are recognizing that that kind of method isn’t theologically satisfying. The texts of Paul, James, John, and others are not simply “early Christian texts” that can serve as windows onto some human experience. They are, rather, for the Church, “words of the Word, human words uttered as a repetition of the divine Word, existing in the sphere of the divine Word’s authority, effectiveness, and promise” (as John Webster has put it). And as
such, they need to be studied in the context of the Church's life, under the Lordship of the Triune God. The doctrines of the faith—above all, the doctrine of God—and the creeds, confessions, and liturgies of the Church are the arena within which to understand the task of biblical interpretation.

Much of the freshest and richest biblical scholarship today is, accordingly, oriented to this ecclesial context of biblical interpretation. I think, for instance, of Markus Bockmuehl's recent work on the apostle Peter, which locates the significance of the New Testament witness on a trajectory that includes consideration of the Bishop of Rome. Or I think of Walter Moberly's new *Old Testament Theology*, whose readings of select Old Testament passages would have been impossible without the history of Christian spirituality and prayer, even as they serve to root that history more firmly on biblical terrain. Or I think of C. Kavin Rowe's work on the Gospel of Luke, which highlights the continuity between Luke's portrayal of Jesus as the “Lord,” the *kyrios*, and the later Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. Or I think of a forthcoming volume on “Reformation readings of Paul,” which lets biblical scholars engage Pauline texts with interpreters such as Luther, Calvin, and Cranmer, demonstrating along the way how deep a conversation is possible when we assume that the “theologians” of an earlier time weren’t simply imposing their own assumptions and convictions on biblical texts but were, like us, trying to grasp the text’s subject matter and state it afresh in their own day. Conversely, I am heartened by recent dogmatic and historical theology that sees biblical exegesis as integral to its task, too. Thirty or forty years ago it would have been much harder to find the kind of detailed engagements with the exegesis of Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth that is so plentiful today. Furthermore, it is now beginning to seem normal again—as it would have been in previous chapters of the Church’s life—to find vast tracts of biblical exegesis in a dogmatics volume on the Trinity or justification by faith or political theology.

Retrieving the past, of course, doesn’t—or shouldn’t—equal a naïve desire to forget the intervening centuries. We need voices like Wrede’s in our ears, keeping us honest about the need for rigorous historical study. But the practice of retrieval is a way of confessing anew the third article of the creed. As biblical scholars and theologians, we believe that the Holy Spirit was alive and well before the dawn of modernity, and reading Scripture well today means taking seriously what happened then.

---

**About the Author**


Copyright © 2014 Wesley Hill.
Recent Developments in Protestant Scholasticism

J. Todd Billings

Many people who think that they despise the theology of John Calvin change their mind once they actually take time to read his writings. I’ve seen it again and again in the classroom—both as a student, and as a teacher.

When this has happened, however, I’ve often heard a warning: Calvin may be biblical, dynamic, and Christ-centered, but steer clear of those seventeenth century “Calvinists.” Rather than going straight to the Bible, they got distracted by the medieval scholastics; rather than being pastoral and Christ-centered, the Reformed Scholastics were rationalists whose writings don’t edify the church.

Twenty years after hearing these warnings in college, I can say that they reveal more about those giving the warnings than the Protestant Scholastics themselves.

There has been a sea change in scholarship on Protestant Scholasticism, and its implications reach far beyond those whose confessions hail from Westminster or Augsburg. On the whole, this movement in scholarship has not been generated by systematic theologians trying to defend or counter Protestant Scholasticism. It has come from historians, giving contextual assessments of both the continuities and discontinuities within movements of medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation theology. Particularly significant has been the work of David Steinmetz, the meticulous historical work of his former doctoral students (including Richard Muller, John L. Thompson, and Timothy Wengert) as well as the scholarship of Willem Van Asselt and Carl Trueman. Probably the most influential works are by Muller, with his magisterial four-volume work on Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, and his books and articles that dismantle the “Calvin versus the Calvinist” thesis.

The fruit of this historical work is just starting to be harvested by theologians, and it has implications across the theological spectrum: whether Reformed or Arminian, Protestant or Roman Catholic, etc. Here are two characteristics of this scholarship that are particularly important for contemporary theologians to recognize:

1.) Recent scholarship has a renewed appreciation of the catholicity of the Reformation—the way in which the Reformers and the Protestant Scholastics both drew critically upon the early patristic and medieval catholic tradition in method and practice. In other words, sola scriptura did not involve spurning the church’s exegetical and doctrinal traditions, but reassessing them in light of scriptural exegesis. This Reformation-era catholicity stands in contrast to contemporary trends such as some “new Calvinists” who want to define the Reformed tradition by the TULIP. But it is also in contrast to scholars operating with a Barthian historiography, downplaying areas of continuity between the Reformation traditions and earlier catholic notions, such as general revelation and natural theology.

2.) Recent scholarship re-emphasizes the centrality of scripture and biblical exegesis, not only for the Reformers but for Protestant Scholasticism as well. Neither the Reformers nor the Protestant Scholastics started with a central doctrine (such as providence or election or justification by faith), and then deduced their other doctrines from that starting point. Instead, each topic of doctrine was exegetically derived from scripture and gathered into topics as common places (loci communes) of the Christian tradition. Contemporary systematic theologians have tended to
(mis)interpret these earlier theologies as deductive systems, and have unduly neglected the significance of biblical commentaries for Reformation and post-Reformation theologians.

It is important to note that the change in historical scholarship is a descriptive one, not a prescriptive one. Muller, Steinmetz, and others have made contextual and textual arguments that historians have found persuasive regardless of their own confessional affiliation. The question is: what implications does this innovative historical work have for theologians today?

Elsewhere I present a possible vision of how this scholarship can help to enliven contemporary Reformed theology. But here are a few brief suggestions for theologians in general:

1.) Rediscover the Centrality of Biblical Exegesis—The loci communes approach to theology models a compelling way to make scriptural exegesis a central task for the theologian. In addition, the Reformation and Post-Reformation theologians offer examples of scriptural exegesis that illuminate both in their debates and in their areas of agreement.

2.) Rediscover Catholicity—Read the Reformers and the Protestant Scholastics together with the patristic and medieval writers who influenced them (e.g., the influence of Thomas Aquinas upon John Owen). This provides an opportunity for a doctrinal feast that is deeply traditional, philosophically nuanced, and widely ecumenical.

3.) Deepen and Widen Traditions—Explore the breadth and diversity of Protestant traditions which are often narrowed, caricatured, and constricted in their contemporary forms. The Reformed Scholastics, for example, had surprising things to say about the freedom of the will; a contextual account of Melanchthon defies stereotypes about Lutherans and the three uses of the law; and surprisingly, variations of seventeenth-century “hypothetical universalism” are actually part of the broad Reformed tradition, if one takes the Synod of Dort as exemplative.

All theologians tell stories about the history of theology. However, the stories of many theologians today—e.g. that Calvin had a “biblical” method in contrast to the “deductive rationalism” of the Reformed Scholastics—are not historically plausible. For theologians willing to change their stories about the Reformation and scholasticism, there is an opportunity to rediscover the deeply biblical, catholic, and expansive theological traditions of Reformation and Post-Reformation theology.

About the Author

J. Todd Billings (ThD, Harvard University) is the Gordon H. Girod Research Professor of Reformed Theology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, MI. He is author of several books, including the award-winning Calvin, Participation, and the Gift (Oxford, 2007) and Union with Christ (Baker Academic, 2011). He has lectured internationally, and has published articles in a variety of journals, including Modern Theology, Harvard Theological Review, Missiology, and International Journal of Systematic Theology, as well as popular periodicals such as Christianity Today, The Christian Century, and Sojourners.

Copyright © 2014 J. Todd Billings.
Recent Developments in the Divine Attributes

Michael Allen

What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? For several decades in the twentieth century, the answer seemed to be overwhelmingly: “Too much!” The influence of Greek philosophy upon Christian faith and practice was viewed as excessive and uncritical. A century ago Adolf von Harnack proposed the “Hellenization thesis,” the argument that the early church swallowed a bunch of Hellenistic fat that makes their theological approach difficult to digest today. Harnack proposed a radical revision to the faith whereby we seek to cut the fat out and get back to the message of Jesus himself, a proclamation unencumbered by the metaphysics of Greece and the dogmas of the later fathers. The influence of this model of history has been and continues to be remarkably widespread, accepted not only in more revisionist circles (e.g., Jürgen Moltmann) but also by those who wish to affirm orthodox theology (e.g., the late Colin Gunton). Its most deleterious application regards the character of God, that is, the doctrine of divine attributes. Numerous attributes were viewed as Greek accretions that ran not only away from, but directly against the grain of biblical teaching and Christ-centered theology.

Life After the Hellenization Thesis

In the last two to three decades, however, the Hellenization thesis has taken a beating and then some. First in patristic studies that sought to locate Christian intellectual work amidst the variegated world of late antiquity, and then in careful study of later theological developments that drew upon or even critiqued that early Christian period, historical theologians have re-shaped the discipline such that Harnack’s approach no longer carries weight.

Paul Gavrilyuk has examined perhaps the most maligned divine attribute—God’s impassibility. He has returned to the scene of the supposed crime: the early church’s adoption of the terminology of *apatheia*. He has shown that the mainstream of Christological reflection honored both God’s impassibility and God’s genuine engagement of human history in the economy of salvation. By fixing his sights on Cyril of Alexandria, Gavrilyuk shows the exegetical roots of impassibility as well as its function within Christological and Trinitarian discourse, noting that the orthodox faith (with Cyril) committed itself to language about the “suffering of the impassible God.”

Similarly, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz has considered another divine attribute, simplicity, and noted how its philosophical pedigree and genealogy has often been misunderstood. By comparing simplicity in Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa’s debates with Eunomius of Cyzicus against a background of usage that goes back to Ptolemy, he shows the exegetical transformation of simplicity and its distinctively Christian meaning and function in affirming God’s faithfulness (against Marcionites or later *contra* modalists).

Now, with other studies on early church fathers, medieval scholastics, the reformers (and their supposed revision of the catholic faith), and early modern theologians on various divine attributes, Robert Louis Wilken can summarize matters this way: “The notion that the development of early Christian thought represented a Hellenization of Christianity has outlived its usefulness … a more apt expression would be the Christianization of Hellenism, though that phrase does not capture the originality of Christian thought nor the debt owed to Jewish ways of thinking and to the Jewish Bible.”

---


The Prospects for Dogmatics Today

In what ways has this historical reassessment helped situate our current dogmatic work?

First, theologians now have resources to help us think through the necessary relationship between scripture and metaphysics. Indeed, one of the most significant theological works of recent years goes by that very title: Matthew Levering’s *Scripture and Metaphysics*. Scripture does not teach a metaphysics per se, but it does require us to make revisions to whatever ontological commitments we bring to the table. And classical theism in the early Christian church was a powerful instance of this sort of intellectual ascesis, whereby exegetical work led to casting out some idolatrous presuppositions while also trying to plunder the philosophical tools of the Greeks.

Second, some of the best recent reappraisals of divine attributes have shown they nestle together with other doctrines. For example, Janet Soskice has offered comparative analysis of various pagan and Christian reflections on creation (*ex nihilo* or otherwise) and how this informs our understanding of God’s aseity or self-sufficiency/self-existence: her argument that creation *ex nihilo* radically recasts one’s metaphysics is a thing of beauty and truly illuminating. In light of her analysis, one cannot help but appreciate the way in which this divine attribute will somehow need to be addressed in talking about the topic of creation in the divine economy. The doctrine of God is not just important; it is a hub to which all other doctrines relate.

Third, the Reformers did not intend to recast catholic theology but to reform how catholic theology affected Christian salvation, sacramental practice, and church polity. With respect to the doctrine of the divine attributes, however, the Reformers appreciated the classical attributes and noted their pastoral/spiritual function. For example, while Calvin is oftentimes taken to be either uninterested in or possibly suspicious of the classical attributes, a recent study of his lectures on the Psalms shows how fundamental they were to his treatment of that significant canonical witness and the systemic role they played in shaping the spirituality of the Christian life through the Psalter.

Fourth, the divine attributes radically shape Christian spirituality. Classical attributes like divine simplicity, aseity, immutability, and impassibility will shape the way in which one relates to the triune God. David Bentley Hart has sketched many of the ways in which the reality of God cannot be removed from what we take to be vital religious experience. Others—whether by way of Aquinas or Owen—have suggested the same with regard to specifically Trinitarian attributes of God.

In these ways, theologians must adjust to life after the Hellenization thesis. We needn’t be compelled to dig back to an earlier theology before the failures of the fathers, but we should feel the freedom (as did those before Harnack’s thesis) to do our theology alongside, with, and beyond the scriptural revisions to theological metaphysics as exemplified by so many of our patristic, medieval, and Reformational forebears.

About the Author

Michael Allen (PhD, Wheaton College) is D. James Kennedy Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Knox Theological Seminary in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He is author of *Justification and the Gospel* (Baker Academic, 2013); *Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics: An Introduction and*  

---


5 John Webster has furthered this project immensely in recent years by focusing upon the systemic effects of thinking about the full scope and sequence of the economy of God always with respect to the aseity of God. See, e.g., “The Aseity of God,” in *God Without Measure: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (London: T & T Clark, forthcoming).
Recent Developments in Divine Attributes


Copyright © 2014 Michael Allen.

Recent Developments in Analytic Theology

Oliver Crisp

Analytic theology has its roots in the development of the analytic philosophy of religion in the second half of the twentieth century. In the early 1980s, a number of those working in the philosophy of religion began to turn their attention to topics in philosophical theology. If questions in the philosophy of religion are about generic philosophical issues raised by religious belief (e.g. the problem of evil, the justification of religious belief, and so on), philosophical theology concerns concrete matters pertaining to the theology of a particular religious tradition.

Literary Developments

The literature in philosophical theology gradually became more theologically informed, more sophisticated, and diversified to include a range of theological topics including central matters like the Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement, sin, eschatology, the nature of faith, and the like. It developed largely independently of contemporary systematic theology, however, a matter that has been noted and lamented by people like R. R. Reno, who has written of the “blindness” of modern theology to the analytic literature and of “theology’s continental captivity” referring to the way in which theologians happily engage major continental philosophers as dialogue partners while ignoring analytics.

However, as this philosophical-theological literature matured into the 1990s, it became increasingly difficult for those outside the conversation to ignore. To all intents and purposes this was theology being done
Recent Developments in Analytic Theology

by Christian philosophers independent of the theological schools and seminaries. By the early 2000s some rapprochement between the two sides was beginning to happen. Analytic theology was, as William Abraham has put it in conversation, “an accident waiting to happen.” But what was new about it? In one respect, not very much. According to some pundits it was merely philosophical theology rebranded. Yet there were some important differences: theologians as well as philosophers were now working on theological topics using the sensibilities and literature of analytic philosophy to ask dogmatic questions. Inevitably, this led to systematic theology done in the mode of analytic theology, as other theologians worked in the mode of Postliberalism, or Radical Orthodoxy. Once there were practicing theologians on board it became difficult to marginalize the movement within the study of religion as the preserve of a few Christian philosophical trespassers.

Future Prospects of Analytic Theology

As the work of analytic theology has flourished since 2009, more collaboration has brought significant steps forward. In addition to a new journal, a book series, an annual conference at Notre Dame, and initiatives in Europe and elsewhere, there is a literature that really engages with the theological tradition, with ancient and modern theologians, and with questions of theological method as well as constructive theology. Examples include Tom McCall’s work on the Trinity, Marc Cortez’s work on theological anthropology, Kevin Hector and William Abraham who have both written on theological method, Marilyn Adams’ work on medieval Christology, Mike Rea and Hud Hudson who have worked on original sin, and so on. The fact that analytic theology can now be found represented at the annual Evangelical Theological Society conferences, at the American Academy of Religion annual meetings, at major regional theology conferences such as those at Wheaton and in Los Angeles, and in top-tier peer-reviewed theological organs as well as philosophical ones, is evidence of the “normalization” of analytic theology in the wider guild.

In many ways, analytic theology is a return to more classical analytical sensibilities that have governed Christian theology for much of its history in scholasticism, as well as the work of key thinkers from St. Augustine and St. Anselm of Canterbury to Jonathan Edwards. Yet it is not just this; there is a real concern to engage in wider theological and religious discussion, and to foster dialogue between the Abrahamic faiths, as can be seen in the recent symposium on Yoram Hazony’s work in the Journal of Analytic Theology.

There is also the beginnings of an awareness of the limits of analytic theology, and of worries it must take more seriously if it is to continue to flourish. These include concerns about ontotheology (roughly, the notion that the god of analytic theology is an idol), criticisms from feminist theology, the place of metaphor and tropes in religious language, and the relationship to other theological methodologies as well as allied disciplines such as biblical studies. There is much work to be done. But the fact that analytic theology has already made such headway indicates that it is meeting a theological need, and making a significant constructive contribution to twenty-first-century Christian theology.

About the Author

Oliver Crisp (PhD, King’s College, London) is professor of Systematic Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He is author of numerous books in philosophical and systematic theology, including Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered; Jonathan Edwards on God and Creation; and Deviant Calvinism: Broadening Reformed Theology.

Copyright © 2014 Oliver Crisp.
Recent Developments in Dogmatics

John Webster

When I was a graduate student in Cambridge in the late 1970s, dogmatics was a minority discipline, and the word itself almost never mentioned unless with reference to Barth’s magnum opus. It still enjoyed prestige in the German faculties, but was rarely a component of theological curricula in England (in Scotland the picture was, and remains, somewhat different). Interest in the inner content and overall structure of Christian teaching was edged out by other preoccupations: theological method, the dialogue of the religions, critical doctrinal history, analytical philosophy, the social science of religion. Exceptions to the prevailing lack of interest in systematic theological work, such as John Macquarrie’s Principles of Christian Theology, were just that: exceptions.

Moving to North America in the mid-80s, I found myself in a theological setting where dogmatics counted for more and attracted able practitioners. In part this was because of a well-established tradition of church theology and of church theological institutions outside the universities, Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic. Yet, a few exceptions aside, this culture did not generate an enduring dogmatic literature, largely restricting itself to textbooks and to translations of works such as Weber’s Foundations of Dogmatics or Thielicke’s The Evangelical Faith. Alongside this was another approach, often located in university divinity schools, which articulated doctrinal themes in negotiation with dominant philosophical or cultural norms; Hodgson’s Winds of the Spirit or Kaufman’s In Face of Mystery are among the most distinguished examples.

Returning to the UK a decade later, the theological culture of at least some faculties had shifted somewhat, and systematics appeared guardedly optimistic. There were prolific writers in the field: Colin Gunton, then at the height of his powers, and T. F. Torrance, who produced a steady flow of doctrinal works in his retirement. Barth and other dogmaticians were read with respect and written about with intelligence; doctoral programmes in dogmatics attracted gifted candidates. Over the last twenty years, those elements have continued to establish themselves, and systematic theology enjoys better circumstances than it has for some time. A substantial systematic theology is beginning to appear from the Cambridge theologian Sarah Coakley, the first volume of which, God, Sexuality and the Self, sets out a fresh approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, and others are planned; there are successful monograph series in the field, and a widely respected journal, the International Journal of Systematic Theology. In North America, similarly, the period has seen much serious doctrinal writing, whether on the grand scale of Jenson’s Systematic Theology or in monographs from Kathryn Tanner, Michael Horton, Thomas Weinandy, Kevin Vanhoozer, and many others.

Why the change? Interest in dogmatics is an element in the presence of an intelligent, articulate ecclesially-minded culture which draws extensively on the church’s internal resources—biblical, theological, spiritual—in order to nourish its life and witness. This, in turn, prompts theologians to living conversation with the church’s heritage, looking to it for instruction, absorbing and inhabiting it as a complex body of texts, ideas and habits of mind which can relativize and sometimes subvert seemingly hegemonic modern conventions. In this connection, one thinks not only of those associated with Radical Orthodoxy, but of quieter trends in theological work, such as the recovery of the dogmatics and spirituality of Reformed orthodoxy in the work of Richard Muller and a host of other American and Dutch scholars, or loving attention to the speculative and exegetical works of the mediaeval schoolmen paid by interpreters such as Jean-Pierre Torrell or Gilles Emery. Again, shifts in the practice of other fields of theology have encouraged dogmatics to pursue its tasks. In biblical and early Christian studies, the historical-naturalist assumptions on which much inquiry is often predicated no longer command universal assent, and “theological” reading of Scripture and the fathers of the church is no longer self-evidently
eccentric or complacent: students can now turn to a number of distinguished series of biblical commentaries which draw out the theological and spiritual import of the text, and to revisionist patristic scholarship such as that of Lewis Ayres or Michel Rene Barnes. In philosophical and moral theology, similarly, unease about the religiously generic leads to greater attentiveness to doctrinal specificity. One thinks of the work of the Roman Catholic philosopher Robert Sokolowski, or of moral theologians like Gerald McKenny and Oliver O’Donovan.

For these and other reasons, the prospects look more secure than they did a quarter-century ago. One would do well to temper confidence with caution: much energy is still directed to fields of theology where dogmatics has little honour, such as public theology or historical-literary examination of the biblical writings. Moreover, the flourishing of dogmatics depends in some measure on an understanding of theology as a unified science embracing exegetical, historical, practical, and speculative arts, and such an understanding of theology is still rare. But, such cautions aside, late-career systematicians may still look with some hope to the work of a future generation of intellectually acute, historically and ecumenically generous, and spiritually alert dogmatic theologians. May their tribe increase.

John Webster (PhD, Cambridge University) is Professor of Divinity at the University of St. Andrews and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He is author of several books, including The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason and Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch, and a founding editor of the International Journal of Systematic Theology.

Copyright © 2014 John Webster.

Recent Developments in Dogmatics

Broadly speaking, Catholic theology in the past twenty years has been characterized by three distinctive tendencies. The first is the decline of influence of the Rahnerianism of the post-Vatican II period. The second is the rise of influence of theologians associated with the Communio movement. The third is the return of interest in classical theological sources, marked particularly by the renaissance of Thomistic studies. I will consider each of these points briefly in turn.

The Decline of Rahnerianism

The theology of the twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner was marked by an insistence of the use of modern philosophical anthropology to interpret the contemporary relevance of the gospel for modern human beings. Rahner sought to find profound points of contact between the thought of Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant, while also welcoming insights from contemporary phenomenology. He paid special attention to
the dogmatic pronouncements of Catholic tradition (often citing Denzinger on key points of doctrine) while simultaneously seeking to recast Catholic teaching in a distinctively modern idiom, so that traditional teachings might seem relevant to an increasingly secularized European culture. At the same time, Rahner's theory of grace envisaged the work of God as being most present in “ordinary” conditions of life (secular political movements, other religious traditions, existential questioning, the trial of human death). This method produced an influential theology of “correlation” in which the questions of modernity are seen as the principal locus that shapes theological reflection. Rahner's theology was often employed by progressivist Catholics in order to argue for the ongoing adaptation or alteration of classical Catholic teachings in the face of new modern situations.

The demise of Rahnerianism occurred because the influence of the Kantian philosophy that it presupposed as normative was eroded away by the rise in the modern university of post-modern theory as well as analytic philosophy. Furthermore, Rahner's disciples have found it difficult to transmit integrally the traditional faith of the Catholic Church, due to the reductive metaphysical framework in which they sought to articulate basic Christian beliefs. The project has been plagued by intrinsic incoherence at various levels. The teaching pontificates of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI did not promote the methodology of this theology, but frequently reiterated traditional teachings of Catholicism at which Rahnerians chaffed.

The “Communio” Movement

The theological movement that takes its name from the theological journal Communio is associated especially with theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger, and Henri de Lubac. This theology came to prominence in recent decades in large part as a creative reaction to the crisis in theology of the 1970s, and in self-conscious opposition to the aforementioned theological paradigm. Taken as a school of thought, it can be broadly characterized by the following features:

1.) It emphasizes a Christocentric and biblical approach to theology, in which the Church's traditional ontological and soteriological teachings about the person of Jesus Christ are foundational, and in which profound harmony is sought between modern biblical studies and classical patristic interpretations of scripture.

2.) The movement has sought consistently to offer an alternative to modern scholasticism (“neo-Thomism”), by advancing a form of theology that is more symbolic and intuitive, one that engages with and adopts insights from modern philosophers, and which is marked by influences from Neoplatonism more so than from Aristotle.

3.) Against Rahner’s theories of grace, this movement has stressed the idea of De Lubac that natural human desire finds ultimate fulfillment only in the supernatural life of grace. Consequently, the Church is seen as the visible “sacrament” (or sign and instrument) of all human fulfillment in Christ, so that confessional Catholic identity is understood to matter greatly for the potential salvation of the world.

4.) This movement has consistently sought to defend traditional Catholic views that are controversial (the moral teachings on sexuality, the reservation of the priesthood to men) by making arguments that are distinctively Christological and sacramental in kind.

The Renaissance of Thomistic Studies

Thomism was often regarded after the Second Vatican Council as an outdated system of thought that made use of a pre-modern philosophical metaphysics and that employed syllogistic reasoning in theology in an excessively rationalistic, and non-biblical way. This viewpoint (which is a caricature) has eroded significantly in recent decades for two reasons.

1.) Modern historical studies by Thomists like Jean-Pierre Torrell, Servais Pinckaers, Gilles Emery, and Matthew Levering have demonstrated the deeply scriptural and patristic roots of Aquinas' thought, as well as the intrinsically spiritual and
mystical aspirations of his theology. They have also shown how the philosophical reasoning of Aquinas is habitually employed in the service of distinctively theological ends, in view of a deeper contemplative consideration of the mystery of God.

2.) In the post-modern era, theologians have been more disposed to acknowledge the importance of seeking philosophical first principles, even within theology, and theologians like Steven A. Long and Reinhard Huetter have sought to make manifest the intellectual viability, coherence, and insight of Thomist metaphysics even in the midst of the modern world.

What was deemed a liability in the epoch just after the Second Vatican Council is seen as a strength in an era that is increasingly marked by philosophical disorientation and theoretical fragmentation. Thomist studies in Catholic theology continue to proliferate in domains that are historical, philosophical, and dogmatic, often engaging contemporary theology in ways that were not typical in the pre-Conciliar era.

Conclusion

If we compare these three movements briefly, we can note that each has something in common with one of the others. Rahnerians and Communio theologians, while opposed in many respects, both see the age of modern theology as requiring a kind of break with pre-modern scholastic methods of theological reasoning. Communio theologians and Thomists both typically wish to emphasize that theology is a science of revelation, to which all philosophical systems are subordinate, and both seek to maintain an integral commitment to traditional Catholic teachings, maintained within the context of a Christ-centered spirituality. Both Thomists and Rahnerians strongly emphasize the unavoidability of a distinctively philosophical “moment” of reflection within theology, and the importance of a philosophical engagement with modernity. They differ of course on the principles and methods of the philosophy employed.

Based on this necessarily superficial characterization of dominant paradigms, what might one expect for the future of Catholic theology in the next twenty years? The only viable pattern of Catholic thought that can adjust to the challenges of secular modernity will be one that engages with modern science in a learned and philosophically informed way, one that attempts to interpret the Bible in a way that is coherent with both Catholic tradition and modern scientific and historical consciousness, and one that promotes the Church’s traditional moral teachings within the context of Catholic liturgical life, but also by recourse to arguments that are both Christ-centered and philosophically coherent. In an age of increased spiritual disorientation, the only theology that will be successful in evangelization is one that addresses human rationality in depth, but which is also mystical, sacramental, and centered on the person of Christ.

About the Author

Rev. Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (DPhil, Oxford University) is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the Thomistic Institute of the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. His research and teaching have focused particularly on Thomistic metaphysics and Christology as well as Roman Catholic-Reformed ecumenical dialogue. He is the author of Wisdom in the Face of Modernity: A Study in Modern Thomistic Natural Theology and The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology (forthcoming), and editor of The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Anti-Christ or Wisdom of God?, Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue (with Bruce L. McCormack), and Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering (with James F. Keating).

Copyright © 2014 Thomas Joseph White.
Recent Developments in Eschatology

Michael Allen

Surveys of Christian doctrine regularly note that the themes of eschatology have attained a certain prestige in the late nineteenth and then twentieth centuries that exceeds their fate in previous times. What do we make of this new emphasis? What benefits have been gained? And what dangers might we need to be alert to? I want to focus briefly upon one new emphasis, its potential and frequent cost, and a way in which theological retrieval helps us move toward a more biblical eschatology for the contemporary church.

Heaven Is a Place on Earth

Surely the most marked shift in twentieth century eschatology was its earthiness. Perhaps no tradition has so emphasized the created and material character of our blessed hope as that of the Dutch Reformed theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck). Bavinck’s magisterial *Reformed Dogmatics* illustrates this cosmic turn of modern eschatology in the attention to detail, organizational structure, and rhetorical emphasis that it places upon the “renewal of creation” as ingredient to biblical hope.

Theologians and exegetes regularly and rightly lambast any notion of Christian hope as otherworldly or non-earthly (likened regularly in the literature to the naïve expectations of someday playing harps in the clouds). Thus, no one wishes to shift to an eschatology that is ethereal or disembodied.

But the Best Sight Ain’t a City

I do not advocate a return to life prior to the remarkable witness of theologians like Bavinck. His biblical imagination, commitment to the full canonical scope of Scripture, and unswerving determination to let dogmatic eschatology shape Christian ethics are all to be commended and never to be forgotten. And yet it seems to me that one can (and many seem, unintentionally, to) herald something akin to Bavinck’s Augustinian vision without capturing the very center of Augustine’s eschatology (and that of the classical Christian consensus that marked at least the late patristic and medieval eras). There may be something approximating an “Augustinian naturalism” (unintentionally) where the focus and emphasis falls upon the New Jerusalem rather than her chief occupant, forgetting that the best news of Christian bliss is not newness but nearness: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man” (Rev. 21:3). Hence the repetition of the promise: “Behold, I am coming soon” (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20).

While eschatology has moved front and center in twentieth century Protestant theology, the beatific vision appears to have exited stage right. Brønner gave it a paragraph; Jenson a sentence; Barth nary a word. The absence is glaring in the face of the substantial place held by the doctrine of the beatific vision in classical faith and practice, where the beatific vision played a role in prolegomena (as the ultimate form of human knowledge of God), in eschatology (as the central hope of the Christian), and in ethics (as the driving force or motivation for ascetic discipline). Attention has fixed upon the environment, the body, and social relations (all of which are facets of a biblical eschatology), but oftentimes such concern has come at a cost and not infrequently with a smirk. The marginalization of the beatific vision from modern Protestant theology proves a remarkable case study and, I suggest,

marks a fundamental problem with the earthy eschatology of the contemporary church.

**A Vision of Retrieval**

Fortunately, a number of recent studies have suggested the need to retrieve riches from this ancient and medieval past regarding the special character of our Christian hope. For example, Matthew Levering and Hans Boersma have each presented an argument that recent eschatology and anthropology is too much focused or, perhaps, even restricted to earthly concerns.²

Most significant, however, is the portrayal of Augustine’s theology offered by Charles Mathewes in his sadly neglected but dogmatically vital work, *A Theology of Public Life.*³ In the course of offering a “dogmatics of public life,” Mathewes draws from Augustine of Hippo a critique of our current anxiety about being “otherworldly.” Indeed, Mathewes shows that Augustine’s great concern was not “otherworldliness” as such, but idolatry (which may be ethereal or material). Thus, he rightly ties together a truly spiritual center to our hope with a demand for serious moral engagement now. The book proves so significant precisely because it offers a spiritually centered account of eschatology that, nonetheless, shows how being spiritually minded enables one to be of earthly (ethical and public) good. And it does so in the words and way of Augustine, the patron saint of so much twentieth century Reformed eschatology.

The way forward in dogmatic eschatology should be Augustinian, and it should avoid both spiritualism and naturalism. Our future thinking ought to follow the wisdom of Gregory and Augustine, of Thomas and of later Protestants such as John Owen,⁴ however, in showing that the special character of our hope as spiritual communion with God through Jesus Christ provides the means for honoring both heaven and earth in the right way. It must center upon God, but contain within it an expectation of God renewing all things in him. Retrieving the doctrine of the beatific vision—and noting the spiritual communion to which it is meant to alert us—may be a powerful resource for better thinking of our Christian hope in a Christ-centered key. Here, as much as anywhere else, we benefit from a vision for theological retrieval and, thus, from a retrieval of the importance of that blessed hope which is yet to be ours.

**About the Author**


Copyright © 2014 Michael Allen.

---


⁴ Suzanne McDonald has offered an account of the role and character of the beatific vision in the works of the great Puritan divine in her, “Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: John Owen and the ‘Reforming’ of the Beatific Vision,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology* (ed. Kelly Kapic and Mark Jones; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 141-158.
Read More

Get *Common Places* articles and more sent to your email inbox.

Subscribe to the Zondervan Academic blog.