

Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God
Acquisitions editor Michael Gibson interviews Katherine Sonderegger



The publication of volume one of *Systematic Theology* marks the first appearance in nearly two decades of a full cycle, multivolume dogmatics in English. Could you provide a bit of the background to this—what led you to embark on such a task? What were some of your goals in writing such an ambitious, large scale project?



I think it must seem an odd thing to say, but in truth I have always hoped to be able to write a systematic theology. I entered graduate school with the aim of equipping myself as best as I was able to undertake such a work. I had a splendid dissertation director, Wendell Dietrich, who allowed me free reign in my research and encouraged me to take on a large, constructive thesis. He had the wonderful gift of teaching rather than disciple making, and he offered me the remarkable chance to develop my own voice, my own assessment of the material at hand. How very rare that is! My colleagues in Barth studies opened my eyes to the unfailing richness and complexity of the *Church Dogmatics*. I learned from them, and from Barth even more, how very demanding, and how very joyous is the task of writing theology for the Church. It is, most deeply, a vocation.

I have hoped for several things in this project: that Holy Scripture could be seen as teaching and undergirding a full-throated metaphysical Doctrine of God; that systematic work could be edifying and conceptually exacting; that I might embolden others to do “far greater works than these;” and that the glorious Beauty of Almighty God might be relished and praised within it.



Comprehensive systematic theology cycles were once a mainstay in Christian theology—a capstone achievement—not only in the longer historical tradition, but as well the mid- to late-twentieth century

seemed to be a golden age of such attempts. That has changed in the last decade or so. The mode of grand systematics seems to be in a state of modification, with more perspectival or contextual series of contributions predominating. How do you see your project in relation to the current model(s) of systematic theology? What are the resonances and differences? What do you hope to contribute to the present discussion? Who do you think should be reading this book and how do you imagine it will be used?



Again, this must seem odd to say so, but in truth I believe that the most radical voice in our contemporary world is tradition, the Scripture and Doctrinal tradition of the Church. These are the radical un-making of our world of the everyday, and I hope to train my ears and the ears of my neighbors to that radical theme. So, I share with my contemporaries the conviction that theology—the Gospel!—does not rest content with the way things are and that the theologian speaks of Divine things from an altogether earthly vantage. But I think my colleagues in theology may find the larger field of epistemology and its methods more fruitful and compelling than do I. I believe theology must simply begin: it speaks of and before Almighty God. This conviction may give the reader the sense she has stepped back behind the modern or the Enlightenment to a naive, perhaps misguided, universality and unvarnished realism. But I don't think the options are really reduced to these! My conviction rather is that the Spirit gives us utterance in systematic work for theology that is genuinely anchored in this day, yet speaks confidently of a Reality that is Universal, Eternal, One. I hope that this will strike some readers as the pattern of the biblical scribe, bringing out from the treasure house things old and things new.



Relatedly, how would you describe the current state of systematic theology? What are some of the positive developments you see? Challenges and/or disappointments?



I see signs everywhere of theologians raising their eyes from particular and local discussions to broader fields, longer views. Kathryn Tanner, Sarah Coakley, Kendall Soulen, and John Webster are all in the midst of ambitious multivolume projects, and I am sure that is a small, parochial list. Women are taking up large dogmatic themes,

and are properly ambitious in their undertakings. Dogmatic conferences are less and less handed over, without remainder, to dense methodological discussions and second or third order analyses of prolegomena. The ecumenical breadth and seriousness of theology these days is a remarkable gift—unprecedented I believe in the divided Church—and is so firmly rooted now that it almost slips by unnoticed. These are all signs of hope! But, of course, theology these days is being written in a world highly unsuitable for it. It is not simply that the university is secular these days; rather it is no longer respectable, intellectually and at times morally, to be religious. I do think it is that strong. Of course academics are by and large tolerant and indulgent of the oddities of their neighbors! But it is an odd thing in educated, elite circles these days to be a devout Christian. Because I do not think it enriches dogmatics to be written always *contra mundum*, such pronounced secularism is a burden for systematic theology these days. Theologians need to work in community, I believe, and the theological world that our ancestors could assume, even a generation or two ago, no longer surrounds us. And of course we in the postindustrial world live in a society of great inequality, one in which material objects are the steady diet of consumption, of desire, and of possession—none of these material conditions can nurture or instruct Christian dogmatics in Things Eternal.



Readers will note with some surprise that this volume does not start with the doctrine of the Trinity, which has been the resounding trend for some time. Could you say a little bit about your choice here and how you understand your own project in relation to what has been called the “Trinitarian renaissance” or “revival of the Doctrine of the Trinity”?



It seems to me that the relation of Christianity to Judaism has been a gift to theology, under the *Providentia Dei*, but one that has not been fully incorporated into the Doctrine of God. Thankfully, Christian theologians have taken to heart the counsel that the election of the People Israel is irrevocable, and no longer advocate a full-throated supersessionism in the Doctrine of the Church. But in my view, the Doctrine of God has not kept step with the deep reappraisal underway in Doctrines of Election, Soteriology, and Ecclesiology. The faith of Israel is anchored to the proclamation and confession of the One God; the *Shema* stands at the head of Torah. I believe that the scholastic treatise, *De Deo Uno*, properly stands at the head of the Doctrine of

God and gives Christian witness to the prophetic teaching of Moses in its midst. I do not consider this a reversion to a “bare God,” stripped of biblical concreteness or particularity, nor to a Deity of “abstractness” and “remoteness” from creation. Exactly not that! The One God, beyond all genus and form and visibility, springs up from every page of Holy Scripture, and speaks as the Living God, the Eternal Fire, Holy and Free. The Doctrine of Trinity must conform, I say, to this Divine Unicity; indeed I would say that Trinity is one way Christians speak of the One God. We run risks, I believe, in the Trinitarian revival of losing sight of this Anchor and this radical Claim upon our speech. Too quickly we Christians have spoken of Three and not shown or underscored how this must be One. In this way, the Economic Trinity has achieved a prominence in the Doctrine of God that distracts us from the severely difficult demand, to think the thought of Radical Unicity.



At the heart of this volume is the Oneness—the singularity—of God. It is in many respects a reclamation of scriptural monothesis, which connects to the testimony of the Jewish Scriptures and confession, and the interpretation of that tradition as impacted by the Christian declaration of Jesus Christ as Lord. This pattern really gives the volume a unique shape. What were some of the key influences for you in pursuing this way of constructing a doctrine of God? What thinkers in particular provided inspiration (or the opposite)? Did you pursue this line of construction out of a sense of deficiency in modern and contemporary systematic thinking?



On the advice of a friend I have been reading through volumes four and five of von Balthasar's *Glory of the Lord* as an aid to developing a Doctrine of Trinity. Now here is a Christian theologian who finds something deeply congenial in the paganism of ancient Greece! In a remarkable and seemingly unhesitant voice, von Balthasar can find the One, True God praised and discovered in the tragedies of Aeschylus, the epics of Homer. The “Father past all finding out” can speak to him of the Christian Trinity; it’s quite striking. But I discover in me a strong, nearly allergic, reaction to such a view. I think this amounts to saying that I believe there is such a thing as “paganism,” a teaching of Deity that violates the Unity and Uniqueness of God. I have been much influenced by the modern Judaic thinkers who spot paganism throughout the modern world, not least in much Christian teaching. Rosenzweig’s and Beck’s diagnosis of the Christian as the

born pagan who must be baptized into the One God strikes me as fundamentally correct. And I believe that our Lord Christ has taught us to honor the One God through the Great Commandment, the love of God standing as the highest claim upon the Christian life. In this way, I believe, the extraordinarily beautiful and *radical* idea of Divine Uniqueness can hold center stage in Dogmatics. David Bentley Hart has recently defended the One God, the God who is Being Itself, in a rather ferocious fashion, but one I find myself persuaded must be true.



One of the fascinating elements of this volume is an extensive exposition of the divine perfections or attributes. There is, of course, a long tradition in dogmatics on the attributes, though such became less “front matter” material in the resistance to scholastic method and material approaches in the twentieth century. (An exception might be Barth’s work in *CD II*, though even there the attributes are less centered as the material for a doctrine of God). Could you discuss your decision to retrieve this locus of dogmatics? Do you think this is an unfairly neglected area in modern and contemporary thought? Is there a key insight in recovering this for today?



Nothing is so beautiful as the thought of God. We Christians should never tire of this truth! For some time in the stretches of modern theology, Christians have hesitated before the steep slope of a rich and positive Doctrine of God, finding surer footing in an apophatism about Divine Nature and Deity, and an appeal to Divine Mystery. Here the legacy of Kant's Critical Philosophy looms large, and it seems that modern theology has not quite shaken off its Critical slumbers. Other streams feed this river: Feminist theology's appeal to metaphor and constructive model; a large-scale reluctance, especially among Protestant dogmaticians, to accept metaphysical claims, and an eagerness to ward off “speculation;” a frank boredom with the puzzle cases thrown up by traditional Doctrines of Attributes; and a wariness, born of a chastened intellect, to grand schemes that set out high truths and peer into deep seas. There is much truth in all these things! But Almighty God is One who gives Himself to be known, and is willing, in great humility, to be laid down as Object of our thought. This exceeding Mystery is the gift we honor in the Doctrine of Divine Perfections: it is our faithful attempt to think the thought of God, the One who Is. God is pleased to sanctify our intellects in the very thought of Him. Our doctrine is not inerrant for all that! But to think

God is to be changed—that is the promise of the Doctrine of Divine Attributes.



Students and readers today have an almost dizzying choice of texts in theology. Are there a few key payoffs you would identify for those who choose to embark on the exciting adventure in systematic theology with you? Why do you think this should be the text scholars and students pick up to read?



I hope indeed that students—pastors, lay people, scholars—read widely and deeply in the rich offerings in theology these days! Like any banquet, the feast is enriched by a well-set table. My own work, I hope, will stand as an open invitation: to test whether elements of the scholastic tradition can be generated from Holy Scripture; whether systematic theology can be best pursued as a form of intellectual prayer; whether the One God can be known, worshipped, and loved truly—as He is!—in the finite, fallen words we offer up to Him. I hope, too, that readers may discover there a trace of the Beauty who is God, and the loveliness of thinking from and into His own Reality. It was exciting to work on this volume, and I hope that the readers will catch sight of that great adventure, the thought of the Living and Good God.



This is the first volume of a projected three-volume cycle. Could you provide a preview of the course the set will take from here? What can readers expect next?



The ordering of doctrines in systematic work is itself a *locus* of great sophistication and depth. The conviction that the Doctrine of God begins most properly with the Divine Unicity is, I believe, a cardinal instance of the material work such ordering carries out in theology. I believe that such a principle unfolds into the Doctrines of Trinity and Christology; these two will comprise volume two of the systematics. My aim here is to express how the Doctrine of the One God governs and is expressed in the Dogma of Trinity—Trinity is a Christian proclamation of Divine Oneness—and how that Trinitarian Mystery governs and is expressed in Christology. Unlike many modern treatments of Trinity, that is, I would not look to Christology to

provide the pattern and animation of Trinity, but rather Trinity to inform and drive Christology. God is Infinite, Infinite Life and Dynamism, and in this affirmation is caught up the traditional teaching of the Divine Processions. Processions, not Persons, I say, is the proper starting point for the Doctrine of Trinity: God is, in shorthand, a Structured Infinity. Because all determinate Life in God is also and always Personal, we confess the Ends of the Processions to be Persons, the second of Whom, the Eternal Son, became Incarnate of the Virgin Mary. The Person, and the Nature of Christ, will exemplify and honor the Divine Processions, the Life Whose Ways are Truth and Goodness. A third volume will treat the work of Christ, his atoning sacrifice and upbuilding of the community, and the outpouring of the Spirit on the Church and the world. A beautiful and exciting adventure!
