

HISTORICAL THEOLOGY (I)—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Catholic Theology and the Theological Tradition
Convener: Kristin Colberg, St. John's University/College of Saint Benedict
Moderator: Daria Spezzano, Providence College
Presenters: Brian E. Daley, S.J., University of Notre Dame
Boyd Taylor-Coolman, Boston College

What is the role of history, and specifically, the theological “tradition,” in the practice of contemporary Catholic theology? This session explored the role of the theological tradition as a constructive warrant and source for contemporary Catholic theology, and it suggested that a robust engagement with historical theology speaks to the very vocation of the theologian. The session explored the way in which divine revelation is an on-going historical experience, that tradition is generative in its content and use, and that all theology must include historical, biblical, and systematic dimensions. Brian Daley, S.J., initiated the conversation with his paper, “On Theology as Biblical, Historical, and Systematic: Can We Do One without the Others?” Daley argued that theology’s fundamental task is to know and say something about God from an experience of God’s self-disclosure to humankind. Such experience is necessarily historical and finds critical expression in Israel’s history, the Incarnation of the Son, the apostolic witness to Jesus, the liturgical life of the Christian community, and the ongoing “cloud of witnesses” who continually receive, work out, and apply this experience in their own contexts. With the historical and theological tradition defined as the handing on of the shared witness to divine revelation, careful engagement with the tradition constitutes an indispensable theological task affirmed especially in documents of Vatican II, notably, *Dei Verbum*. Inextricably related to tradition is Sacred Scripture as a particular and authoritative witness. For the same reason that all theology must engage the theological tradition in order to know and speak of God, it must also attune itself to the scriptural witness. Similarly, the theologian’s task of understanding and expressing something of God is constructive and pastoral for its own time; theology must therefore and necessarily be regarded as “systematic”: organizing and ordering the experience of God’s revelation to the questions of women and men in a given historical context. Daley outlined four important goals for persons practicing theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*; doing so involves (1) engaging the whole history of the theological tradition in order to observe and explore its overarching patterns, strengths, and struggles; (2) studying the work of at least one seminal Christian theologian who has thought synthetically about the systematic and practical implications of faith; (3) recognizing that the foregoing practices of study, in themselves, advance the *intellectus fidei*; and (4) asking the “so what” or timely question of the way in which the biblical and historical theological witness speak to contemporary humanity’s experience of the faith.

The session’s second paper, “Why Karl Rahner and Pius XII Agree that All Catholic Theology is Necessarily Historical Theology,” by Boyd Taylor-Coolman, advanced the insights outlined in Daley’s paper. Taylor-Coolman focused more narrowly on the role of dogmatic and doctrinal history/tradition in Catholic theology, and he suggested that the tradition forms one half of a dynamic movement which animates theological inquiry. To that end, he framed his argument around three

general stipulations: (1) that the dogmatic and doctrinal traditions are not simply normative but also generative for on-going and constructive theological inquiry; (2) that these traditions cannot be fundamentally “superseded” by later theological developments; and (3) that a prohibition against supersessionism cannot mean a static re-statement of the tradition, but instead must cultivate a dynamic relationship between theological history and future theological development. To illustrate the relationship between the tradition and modern theology, Taylor-Coolman turned to examples from Pope Pius XII’s encyclical, *Humani generis* and Karl Rahner’s 1951 article, “Chalcedon: End or Beginning?” Working from Rahner, he suggested that dogmatic formulas possess both a “regulo-normative” character that sets useful boundaries and an “inherently ecstatic” characteristic whereby dogma transcends itself by expounding the very content of its ineffable message anew. These poles—regulo-normative and inherent ecstasy—cultivate a “circulatory movement” whereby Catholic theology advances by asserting and expressing anew the historical tradition. Similarly, Taylor-Coolman explicated *Humani generis* to affirm not only the regulo-normative character of tradition but a genuine *aggiornamento* that frames and applies the tradition to contemporary questions; doing so may lead to natural and coherent theological development. In sum, the paper proposed a theological method called the “‘spiral of continuity’ which both *maintains* dogmatic continuity and *fosters* doctrinal development.” The paper concluded by outlining four significant implications of the spiral of continuity. First, the method promotes “formal and material continuity” between historical and on-going treatments of theology by retaining formulas and their subject matter even as constant re-articulation unfolds. Second, by rejecting a supersessionist viewpoint of dogma, the spiral promotes “critical accumulation,” that is, the dynamic movement between past and future distills and enriches the church’s understanding of dogma and its meaning in the present context. Third, such accumulation makes “dynamic re-integration” possible; specifically, the spiral demands that theologians at least entertain points of continuity or constructive dialogue among the eras and styles of theology which contribute to normative formulas. Such willingness can illumine a unified vision of the whole *traditio*. Finally, the spiral demands renewed appreciation for the relationship between *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* as a contraposed tension that forms and animates the spiral itself.

Both papers elicited lively questions from listeners. Questions explored the challenges posed by the distinctions in methods among diverse theological disciplines, particularly in the university; the ways dogmatic formulas might be explored, which both affirmed the tradition while advancing new understanding; and the specific conception of “history” employed in both papers. Responses by the presenters affirmed that the theological tradition does not merely define borders for theological discourse; it transmits, instead, God’s self-disclosure in ways which orient and catalyze the theological task in its own time and context.

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