

ARTICLE III.

THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF SYSTEMATIC
THEOLOGY.

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THE expression "systematic theology" is really an impertinent tautology. It is a tautology, in so far as a theology that is not systematic or methodical would be no theology. The idea of rational method lies in the word *logos*, which forms part of the term theology. And it is an impertinence, in so far as it suggests that there are other theological disciplinæ, or departments of theology, which are not methodical. There doubtless may be, nay more, there certainly are, treatments of the subject-matter of all the branches of the great family of sciences known as theology which are far enough from being rationally methodical;—the same thing is true with regard to other groups of sciences, such as medicine or economics—only too true;—but in neither case would a suggestion of the kind referred to be warranted.

The title "systematic theology," common as it has been, and is, in this country, can claim no prescriptive right. Indeed, if we look beyond our own country, or even beyond the United States, we shall find that it is one of the designations which are less sanctioned by scientific usage. The majority, or at all events a large proportion, of recent German works do not bear the title. During the present century, influenced by the example of Schleiermacher,¹ the name

¹ Schleiermacher did not originate the usage. A very interesting bit of intellectual history is enshrined in the various names given to the discipline under consideration.

Glaubenslehre, Christliche Glaubenslehre,—which may be somewhat freely rendered “Doctrine or Science of the Christian Faith,”—has become almost as current in Germany as Systematic Theology has been among us, though it is not open to the reproach deserved by the designation which we have preferred.

The subject-matter which it is the business of the systematic theologian to investigate belongs primarily to the domain of history; and what is commonly designated systematic theology may therefore be described as a chapter in the science or philosophy of history. If it were permitted on the one hand to extend, and on the other to narrow, the meaning of the word Christianity, I should speak of it as, “The Philosophy of Christianity”—a designation for which I might plead the authority of eminent German authorities like Weisse and Hofmann. The reasons why I do not straightway follow their example are, *first*, that the mission and work of Christ and his apostles constitute apparently the whole of the historical matter of which they treat; in other words, they restrict themselves mainly to the first century of our era; *then*, that they mix up the subject-matter with what I regard as properly forming part of the philosophy of the subject-matter; and *thirdly*, that they deal with the biblical books as if they alone furnished, or as if they even *were* the subject-matter; whereas they are primarily the sole, or at all events the chief, media through which we become acquainted with a part of the objective life, which is the real subject-matter. In excuse for the exaggerated position and importance assigned to them, however, it may be justly pleaded that the section of the life they reflect and embody, besides being original, and standing in normative relation to the life outside the limits of those books, also sets forth, in the form of beliefs, its generative causes and sustaining energies.

German theologians all unhesitatingly speak of systematic theology as a science, whatever other specific designa-

tion they may adopt; and the usage is certainly correct. We in England have unfortunately accustomed ourselves to restrict the term science to the methodical observation and explanation of the various domains of the world of nature; in which some include psychology, and indeed the individual man generally. Some scientists laugh us theologians to scorn, when we are bold enough to apply the term science to theology at all, much more to systematic theology;—possibly because they know about as much of it as most of us know of the higher mathematics.

So far, however, as the use of the term science would suggest—as it is only too liable to do—the classification of its subject-matter with that of the natural sciences, and the exclusive validity of their methods, so far it is wiser, for the present, to avoid it. It is of course true that there is no perfect homogeneity either in the subject-matter, or in the methods of the sciences, though the constant use of the general term “science,” as in phrases like “science teaches this,” “science is opposed to that,” implies it. Still, on the whole, their procedure is so dominated by the ideas of necessity and uniformity, or by the idea of natural law, that no room is left for many of the determining forces and facts with which systematic theology is chiefly concerned.

On the other hand, there is not a sufficient agreement with regard to the word philosophy to admit of its being employed without cautionary remark. It has been defined as a theory of knowledge; as self-knowledge, rather than knowledge of the universe; as an attempt to find the necessary *a priori* elements or factors in experience, and to arrange them into a system; as the doctrine of the final purpose of human reason; as the universal science which has to unite the cognitions obtained by the particular sciences into a consistent system, or as the complete unification of knowledge, in contrast to the partial unification aimed at by the individual sciences; as the science of the absolute idea, reason being as-

sumed to be the substance of the universe, and the absolute idea being regarded as the identity of the theoretical and the practical¹—and so forth. A Christian philosopher like Professor Ladd of Yale University defines it, in substantial agreement with Lotze, as “the progressive rational system of the principles presupposed and ascertained by the particular sciences in their relation to ultimate Reality.” With perhaps one exception,—that of the German Wundt and of Herbert Spencer,—these and other definitions can scarcely be made to cover or include the subject-matter of systematic theology. In point of fact, I doubt whether they admit of application to *history* at all, unless history be regarded after the manner of both supra-spiritual and sub-spiritual, that is, the idealistic and materialistic schools of thought, as an unbroken and unbreakable though exceedingly complicated chain of causes and effects.

Without further examining or criticising the various definitions of philosophy, let me briefly explain my own use of the term in connection with theology. This will be best done by approaching it from the side of nature in general.

The world to which we belong is a system constituting part of the great system known as the universe; itself, again in turn, constituted by other systems. There is, for example, the system investigated by physics; that investigated by chemistry; a third investigated by crystallography; a fourth, the biological system; each with more or less numerous and varied subsystems; and, finally, there is the psychical system, shading away downwards to the lowest form of animal life, and upwards—whither?

The constitutive factors of these several systems, and their mutual relations,—their movements,—may be isolated for examination, isolated in and for thought; but, as every one knows, cannot be actually, really isolated. Equally impossible is it to *understand* any factor or movement of any

¹ See Ladd's Introduction to Philosophy.

system, without taking into consideration every other factor and movement. A sort of working intelligibility may, of course, be arrived at; but a true and full scientific intelligibility is not otherwise attainable. Illustrations in evidence might be endlessly adduced. The lowest and most elementary system, indeed, is independent of the higher ones. It forms the foundation on which the mundane edifice rests. Its independence, if I may so say, is necessary to the interdependence which constitutes the peculiar character of the higher systems. But as such, whilst in one aspect it is the most intelligible, in another and higher aspect it is the darkest, the least intelligible. Take, however, a factor of the vegetable world:—the life of a plant, the movements of its constitutive elements, and the movements of the whole are inexplicable, unless we bear in mind the action of the physical and chemical forces around and within it. Earth, water, air, light, heat, and other things act upon it; evoke its reaction, give rise to its changes; in other words, its growth and development are dependent, as we say, on its environment.

Great mundane changes or movements too are dependent on analogous influences wielded by the solar system to which our planet belongs. The double revolution of our earth—around the sun and on its own axis; the regular recurrence of the tides, on which the order of the world and the health of its inhabitants so largely depend; the light and heat which stream in on us and condition the very existence of life,—all these things witness to the fact under consideration.

What is true of our solar system is true of the entire universe: nay more, what is true of the minutest part of any system in relation to its own proper system, namely, that its movements or life cannot be properly understood save in the light of the whole, is no less true of the minutest system in relation to the universal system to which all belongs.

Tennyson's beautiful lines may be taken in a larger and fuller sense than he indicates:—

“Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies:—
Hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower—but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.”

As the flower contains within itself the key to the universe; so the universe, the key to the flower. The part throws light on the whole: the whole throws light on the part. Approaching the question as to the true nature and aim of philosophy from this point of view, I should say that its function is so to grasp the whole that every part shall find its proper place therein; and the parts, that they shall form an orderly organic whole. In this way the whole becomes intelligible as well as the part; and the part as well as the whole. What a science properly understood does for a subsystem; that, philosophy aims to do for the system which the subsystems constitute. Its business is not merely or primarily to elaborate a theory of knowing, or to discover general principles, which, after all, are abstractions; but so to correlate the *reals*, which with their interactivities make up the world or the universe, that the whole shall be seen in its harmony and unity; and that to every individual real shall be assigned the place in which it can be seen to be discharging its proper functions. This seems to me to be, moreover, the ideal that really hovers before the mind of philosophers.

I remarked previously that I could not directly use the word Christianity to designate the subject-matter of which systematic theology, as I understand it, aims to be the philosophy. Why I do not, will more fully appear when I describe the nature of that subject-matter.

To indicate in a single sentence what I mean—*It is the religious life the beginnings of which are found in Abraham,*

which reached its culmination in Jesus Christ, and which from him has gone on diffusing itself down to the present day. That is the history, the objective historical life, which it is the business of the theologian to explain. He seeks to effect his purpose by first correlating its parts to each other, and then by correlating the whole to the great system in which the movement has found a place.

When I speak of the *religious* life I do not mean a life isolated from everything else that goes to constitute a human life; but life—the life, for example, of individual Jews, of Jewish communities, of the Jewish nation, which in its general features resembled that lived by other men in their circumstances—life, chiefly on its Godward side, in its conscious Godward relations with its divine elements.

Christ indeed lived, so far as was at all compatible with earthly conditions, after he entered on his active mission, an exclusively religious life. So also did his apostles. This in fact was a necessity of his and their mission to humanity. The religious life needed deepening: the relation to God needed to be apprehended and realized in all its importance, significance, depth, and height. Men needed to learn that the whole life was to be religious; that religion is not a matter of times and seasons, particular commands and observances, as it had in the main been amongst the Jews down to that time, and as it tends everywhere to become. But, in order to secure this, detached lives were requisite,—lives consecrated to the one object.—lives, the meat and drink of which were, in the most restricted sense possible, to do the will of God. Apart from this, men generally could never have been empowered to eat and drink, and to do all that they do, to the glory of God.

Some of the first followers of Christ fell into the mistake of supposing that what was necessary as a temporary means to an end, was the normal state of things; and accordingly began with spending their whole time in exercises of religion.

We all know how this error constantly revives. Like the heads of the fabled Cerberus, no sooner has one been destroyed than it springs up again in another form or place. Especially is this the case when shallowness, worldliness, externality, take possession of the church of Christ:—and though the form and direction of reactions may be false, the instinct to which they owe their rise is true. It is only by detachment, even now, that mankind generally will be brought to see that the truest religious life is normally interwoven with, and normally expresses itself chiefly in and through, ordinary activities and occupations. This was the view of religion which Luther in his day revived with all the energy of a man who had tried the plan of isolation, almost to the point of self-immolation, and had found it out to be as alien from the mind of God as it is alien from the constitution of man. Happily, among ourselves the day is fast passing when it was thought necessary, in order to live a religious life, to live a life as far as possible emptied of common human interests and activities. If we are exposed to any danger at all in this sphere, it is the opposite *moralistic* danger of identifying religion with the normal discharge of the ordinary human functions and duties.

The limits of this address will not admit of my sketching with any detail the features of the great stream of life to which I have just alluded. In point of fact to do so lies beyond my proper beat. Strictly speaking, it is the business of the teachers of Old Testament history, of the life of Christ, of the history of the rise and development of the Christian church, to deal with that subject. They supply the students with the materials out of which I build my edifice. The systematic theologian must of necessity lay claim in a sort to the position of architect among the workmen who are engaged in building up the edifice of Christian thought.

I hope I shall be forgiven if, as the representative,—however humble,—in this College, of the queen of the sciences,

I seem thus to be treating my colleagues as my *Handlanger*, or hodsmen; but it is a necessity of the situation, not wilful or willing self-exaltation. In reality, I am proclaiming my dependence on them. At the same time they will not be at all surprised, from what they know of me already, and especially after the remarks which I have been making in the course of this address, if I maintain that, whilst my branch depends on theirs, theirs also depends on mine. I am quite sure that investigations into the sources of our knowledge of the life of which I am speaking cannot be healthily fruitful, unless they are conducted with due regard to, and in the light of, the whole history, as well as of its determinative epochs. One of the perils of present-day thought and science is isolation; or, described from another point of view, specialism. I know indeed too well that this part is to some extent the result of a reaction against the arbitrary conduct of the queen whose servant I am. She used practically, if not theoretically, to claim the right not only to correlate, but even to modify, to correct, or possibly to deny or give existence to, her subject-matter, as suited her convenience. This was bad, and the result has naturally given rise to discontent, to revolt, to rebellion, in some cases to anarchy. But if facts are propounded as facts in other departments of theological enquiry which cannot find a proper place in the great whole of life, which it is my business to construct; if the stones and timbers supplied for the edifice of which you have chosen me to be the master-builder cannot be worked in, depend upon it, I shall deal with them as they deserve. On the other hand, if I should yield to the temptation to which even ordinary architects are subject, much more those who build in the spiritual world, to sacrifice solidity and truth to artificial beauty, consistency, and homogeneity, it will be their business to run a full tilt against my building; and, if possible, demonstrate that it is constructed on unsound principles. My hope, however, is that whilst each of us will work in his own way

and on his own lines, we shall be seen to be co-operating harmoniously and energetically, for the erection of a theological house which our students shall welcome as an object of beauty, a home of comfort, and a tower of refuge amid the storms which are raging around us. Let me add, too, that I trust, and believe, that none of us will ever be classifiable among the men who, to use an apt commercial illustration, have "tied their parcel up" so tight and close, that it is incapable either of diminution, enlargement, or rearrangement;—still less among those who have no goods at all that they think worth tying up—no goods that they know to be of abiding value.

The subject-matter to be explained, as I stated before, is a great historical religious movement which is still in progress at the present moment; whilst its beginnings go back to the time when Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees in obedience to what he believed to be a divine command. The religious life of Abraham and his descendants, down to the epoch inaugurated by Moses, would seem to have been in every respect of a most elementary and simple kind. Isolated acts were performed in fulfilment, as was believed, of definite divine commands; worship and sacrifice were occasionally offered; they took for granted that they must obey and follow the divine will—that was all, till the Exodus. Afterwards, a whole network of divine obligations was by degrees cast around the life of the Israelites. Their weeks and years were broken up by Sabbatic festivals; the customs and common laws which had grown up among them acquired a divine sanction and a new significance; and religious rites were reduced to system and regularity. A third stage was inaugurated with the passage of the loose tribal relationship between the various stems and families into a kingdom. It differed, however, from the preceding chiefly in the ever-increasing elaboration and finity of both the civil and religious organization; and in the rise of the order of prophets, whose mission was, *first*, to inten-

sify and widen the connection of the civil life with God; *secondly*, to make the religious and moral life more inward; and, *thirdly*, to prepare the way for the transformation of the relation of the Israelites from a merely national one to a personal one; i. e., from a relation of individuals mediated through that of the nation, to one that was direct, immediate.

The *final* epoch was inaugurated by Christ. He established a kingdom or society which was to include all legitimate modes of human activity or forms of human life within itself; and all the relations and activities of which were to be in the deepest and broadest sense religious—in which the religious life was to express itself alike in worship and work, each aiding and glorifying the other. In this epoch we are living.

This is the movement considered in its development; considered in the stricter sense from its historical or temporal side.

Taking the movement as a whole, and classifying its contents from a religious point of view, we find: *first*, certain ideas as to the nature and character of God and man, and their reciprocal relations; *secondly*, a certain mode of inward and outward conduct on the part of man toward God; *thirdly*, certain experiences; and, *fourthly*, certain beliefs touching the genesis of the ideas, the conduct, and the experiences.

The elements embraced under these four heads, with various others affecting the intellectual life, the affections, and the social, civic, and political relations, did not all make their appearance in ripeness and completeness at once. Nor were they always contemporary. Nor, after once appearing, did they maintain their position and take ever firmer hold, without relapse, on the lives they concerned and affected. That is not the way with human history under any circumstances. It is not the way, in fact, with any form of life. Not even a tree goes on, without break or intermission, realizing the idea

that informs it. Still less is this the way with a life—whether it be that of an individual, or of a community, or of a nation—which God inspires and controls. For God never forces or drives; his influence on men is never marked by the uniformity which we rightly expect in the region where physical law holds sway. Ever-varying development of the whole and of the parts is the law of normal human life; abnormal human life is marked, in addition, by ever-varying retardations, retrogressions, and corruptions.

The ideas, the inward and outward conduct towards God, the experiences and the beliefs regarding the action of God, to which the rise of the ideas, conduct, and experiences was traced, have found embodiment and expression in a variety of institutions, customs, rites, ceremonies, festivals, laws, books, buildings, monuments, and so forth, which have naturally undergone manifold changes, corresponding to the changes of the life out of which they grew. This was no less the case in Old Testament times, than it has been in New Testament times. And the special action of God in Old Testament times, and in the mission and work of Christ and his apostles, did not necessitate either sudden completeness or uniform growth in the manifestations of the life, any more than it did in the life itself.

One of the products of the life which grew out of the special action just referred to, which in the nature of the case was of the highest importance both in itself and in its bearing on the invigoration and propagation of the life, namely, the literature to which we chiefly owe our knowledge of it, has naturally attracted to itself chief attention. Its exceptionally remarkable religious character has led to its being isolated from the life which it embodies, and to its being treated as if, like the image of the great goddess Diana worshipped by the Ephesians, it had been produced immediately by the very finger of God. But we shall never understand its peculiarities; we shall never profit by it as we might, un-

less we learn to treat it primarily as the expression, embodiment, monument, and record of a life—a veritable historical life. Still further, until then we shall constantly find ourselves hampered by difficulties, due not to the literature itself or the life, but to the defective point of view from which we regard it.¹

In enumerating the elements with which the theological philosopher has to deal, you will have noticed—or at all events I intended to bring under your notice—that I referred to the special action of God in the genesis, growth, and development of the life to be considered solely as a belief. Let me ask particular attention, for a minute or two, to this point, and set forth my idea with regard to it.

It is not open to reasonable doubt or question, that as to some, indeed as to the chief, essential features, there has been a wonderful continuity and homogeneity in the religious life of Israel and the Christian nations. The highest Christianity of to-day is linked with the Jewish religion of three thousand or more years ago, as truly as the oak of to-day is linked with the acorn of the reign of Elizabeth. The best evidence of this fact is, the place which the literature of Israel has held, and still holds, in the life of the Christian church—that the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are essentially the production of Jews, constitute for us one religious canon.

Now both Jews and Christians have *believed* and *maintained* that their distinctive religious life owed its *origin* to special divine interventions, and its growth and sustenance to continuous and distinctive gifts of divine grace:—I say, this was their *belief* and *conviction*. As to that, there can be no doubt.

But to start, as theologians have been wont to do, with the assumption that this belief and conviction were well

¹ For a further discussion of the point of view here summarily described, see my book, *The Bible an Outgrowth of Theocratic Life*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; New York: Scribner & Sons. Price, 4s. 6d. Engl.

grounded, that they represented facts, is of course, scientifically or philosophically considered, a *petitio principii*. The belief, for the philosophical student, is one of the things to be explained and justified. For myself, I have no doubt that the belief was well grounded. The explanation which forced itself on the great bearers and leaders of the life, that their life owed its significance, hopefulness, vigor, nobility, glory, yea eternity, to the direct, and at certain great epochs special or supernatural, action of God, is in my judgment the only rational one. In the first instance, however, the philosopher has to treat it simply and solely as a *belief*—a belief, moreover, to which parallels are adduced from other religions.

Let me now recur to what I said regarding the business of the systematic theologian. The *historical life* with which he occupies himself forms one of the subsystems of the general history of humanity; and he seeks to understand it. His *first* effort will be to show how the various factors and stages fit into, and throw light on, each other, and together constitute a process which is informed and ruled by a great idea. Here he will be chiefly concerned with, and aided by, the *beliefs* of which I spoke. In them he ought to find the unifying principle of the whole, *if they are well grounded; if not, they will as readily bear pruning or excising as analogous beliefs elsewhere.*

The *next* step will be to do for the religious history of man generally, what he has done for the special section to which I have just been referring. If a true philosophy of the latter have been found,—considering what this latter claims to be,—it ought to serve as a key to the labyrinth which the former has hitherto been for enquirers, who approach the subject from an unbiblical point of view. His final aim will be the construction of a view of the world, in which all the observed phenomena or facts shall form one organic whole,—all, whether belonging to the sphere of nature or to that of spirit. In my humble judgment, no view of the system of

the world as a whole, no view of the subsystem humanity, especially with its religions, will for long commend itself as faithful to all the facts, natural and spiritual, moral and religious, which treats the beliefs recorded in the Scriptures and in the literature of the Christian church as merely subjective—as imaginations destitute of objective validity;—no view, in other words, which eliminates or emasculates the supernatural element of the great history to which we owe the most precious factors of our modern life. It is a question, in this connection, not of upholding a system of belief because it is comfortable and useful; not of the authority of a creed or dogma, or a church or a literature; not of orthodoxy; but of a rational view of the system of things to which we belong. Leave out the elements which I classified as beliefs, in their objective validity; in other words, leave out the living God and Father; leave out his special loving action for the redemption of humanity, first, through the Jewish nation, by means especially of inspiration; then, through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son; subsequently, through the intercession and invisible kingly sway of the same Son; and, finally, through the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit;—and you will understand neither the historical life of which we are the youngest born heirs, nor the life of humanity generally in its relation to God. You will not understand even the history of the physical world:—*understand*, I mean, *in the true and full sense of the word*.

Were I engaged in apologizing for, instead of merely expounding—expounding, too, of necessity in an exceedingly fragmentary way—the view of the nature and scope of systematic theology to which I have called your attention, many points would need elucidation and justification which have been merely touched on and taken for granted,—or scarcely even that. One, in particular, which has not improbably occurred to some of those present, namely, the exceptional position, among the religions of the world, assigned to Chris-

tianity, with the Judaism which prepared the way for it. To do that, however, is not the work of an inaugural address, but that of the lecture-room. Part, at all events, of the task will be performed in another department of the instruction given in this Institution.

One word, in conclusion, with regard to the determination and classification of the phenomena with which philosophical theology has to deal. You all know that the first thing in every science is the due appreciation of the subject-matter which it investigates; that each science has its own specific class of facts or phenomena; and that in each case the due appreciation thereof depends on the fulfilment of certain conditions. A chemist gains an adequate acquaintance with his subject-matter in one way; the geologist in another; the biologist in another, and so on. Neither of them, however eminent he may be in his own department, is qualified to pronounce upon the subject-matter of the other, unless he first fulfil the appropriate conditions. So is it, let me say especially to you who will be my fellow-students in the domain over which we are to roam, we shall not be able to appreciate the subject-matter of theology; that is, the historical life, with its human warp and divine weft, unless we approach it in an attitude and spirit which is akin to itself. We must enter into the life we study, and let the life enter into us, ere we can pretend to appreciate it;—nay more, ere we can pretend profitably to carry on the work of textual and other criticism and of interpretation which a biblical scholar has to undertake. And that means, otherwise expressed,—expressed in the names of the founders of this Institution and of its supporters,—that we must be converted men, men of living faith in Christ; men under the control of the Holy Ghost; men who are seeking with a single eye the glory of the Triune God. One of the chief difficulties in the study of theology is, that the life whose history is our study must, as to its essential elements, be lived by ourselves if we are to study it

to profit; whilst, at the same time, one of our peculiar advantages is that, if we cultivate close fellowship with God, the innermost secrets thereof will be unveiled by him whose gracious purpose controlled the history. Provided then that, in addition, we go to work with disciplined minds, thorough industry, and a single eye to the truth, we shall not only theologize or philosophize well, but, in the very act of doing so, we shall quicken our own spiritual life and glorify the name of our God.