
THE MEANING AND FUNCTION OF SYSTEM IN THEOLOGY

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Topic

Due to the nature of the discipline, the importance of understanding the meaning of the term “system” in systematic theology cannot be gainsaid. Unfortunately, however, there seems to be little discussion or critique as to how this term is being used, and its meaning is often taken for granted, even though it seems to mean different things to different authors.

Purpose

To address this ambiguity, this study takes a close look at the etymological development of this word in its various linguistic forms as it has been used in theology throughout history. Then, based on this etymological analysis, an intentional definition is proposed with analysis of each element represented in that definition (whole, parts, and articulation) to clarify the meaning of this term as it has been used in theology. Finally, from that definition and its isolated elements, an instrument of analysis (the architectonic analysis) is designed and applied to two examples of theological systems to demonstrate the function of this idea in theology.

Sources

For the etymological survey, this study focused primarily on theological and philosophical works in history that address the meaning of the word “system” with its Greek (συστημα) and Latin (*systema*) roots. These sources begin with the introduction of the word into theological usage with Bartholomew Keckermann’s *Systema logicae* (1600) and trickle off shortly after Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), with particular attention to John Heinrich Lambert, Immanuel Kant, and Soren Kierkegaard. In addition to my own bibliographical research, I am indebted to Otto Ritschl’s *System und systematische Methode in der Geschichte des wissenschaftlichen Sprachgebrauchs und der philosophischen Methodologie* (1906). For the application of the architectonic analysis on specific examples, I chose the iconic works of Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* and Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*.

Conclusion

After applying the architectonic analysis to the works of Aquinas and Barth, the definition proposed—“A theological system is a cognitive whole of articulated theological doctrines”—was found adequate for the structures represented by the *Summa Theologica* and *Church Dogmatics*. That is, based on the meaning of system as it is used in theology, these two works can confidently

be called “systems.” Also, in addition to confirming the meaning of this word and demonstrating its function in these great works, the architectonic analysis proposed here exposed the essential element of a conditioning, transcendental principle in anything properly called a system. That is, a system will always include at least one independent, necessary part, which provides the basis for both the whole expected and the articulation of its parts. Additionally, reminiscent of Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, this part is axiomatic and transcendent, and cannot be validated or invalidated by the system in which it is found, but separately, as a dependent part in a greater system.