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drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 04, 2006

Busting the Categories

Over the Christmas break I read [this](#) excellent article about the busting of categories on the web. The author makes the observation that some web searches (e.g., yahoo) retain the librarian's mentality that every item has a "place" where it "belongs." Other searches (e.g., google) have busted the categories wide open, allowing the user to determine the parameters of her search. In other words, information on the web has no "place" and thus categories are free form.

If categorical thinking is busted wide open on the web, what might be the implications for theology (at least when it is practiced on-line)?

One of the essentials of systematic theology as traditionally practiced is the loci-format. Loci are the topics or domains of Christian doctrine that one works through systematically. Courses in systematic theology are usually structured around these loci, as are the outline of theological texts.

But a perennial problem for this loci method is the placement of certain topics. I will give one significant example: where does the doctrine of predestination belong? Does it come at the beginning in the doctrine of God (where it has a tendency to control everything that follows)? Does it come with the doctrine of sin (where it becomes an explanation of a problem)? Does it belong somewhere in the doctrine of salvation (where it functions

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somewhere in the doctrine of salvation (where it functions in a highly individualistic way)? Does it go at the end of the doctrine of salvation as an aspect of assurance (where Calvin puts it)? Does it go with ecclesiology (where it evades the difficult questions)? Wherever you put it, the doctrine of predestination will perform differently within your theology.

The googlization of categories leads me to ask: what if this doctrine does not have a “place” where it “belongs” at all? What if predestination is just a biblical theme that we talk about again and again in connection with all sorts of other doctrines? What if this is true for all the loci of theology - that they do not belong anywhere, but can be treated freely when needed? What would it mean to be “systematic” under these open conditions? Could one systematically integrate theological topics by means of hyperlink rather than an outline?

What are the dangers of this approach to categorization?

What are the benefits?

Any other implications to add?

Labels: [Practice of Theology](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ [4:46 PM](#)

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At [9:11 AM, January 06, 2006](#), [Erik](#) said...

The compromise of broadness and depth. Is one of the elements of the recent surge in the populatiry/more visible emerging and remerging church permission to bust up these catagories? I think so.

At [4:09 PM, January 07, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Your mother did a piece on problem based learning for our graduate program here at IWU (it stands waiting for someone to impliment it somewhere). The idea is that you start with a problem and then set everyone to finding the solution in a cross disciplinary way.

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It could be applied equally well to a theology course, I suspect. Susan comes to you wondering if she's even a Christian because she has been attending a United Pentecostal Church and does not speak in tongues. The person then needs to "google" the world of theologically relevant knowledge and skills (and I don't mean superficially, I mean with full graduate depth) to bring it to bear on the problem.

It may just be the model of the future...

At [6:32 PM, January 09, 2006](#), [Jake](#) said...

John,

Perhaps we need a theology that is akin to the "choose your own adventure" books we read as kids. People enter theological conversation from many different locations (process philosophy, pentecostal revivalism, postmodern aesthetics, etc.) it seems that by offering two options (systematic or haphazard) one mitigates the complexity of each person and community's faith-journey. This way you start from your various perspective and that leads you on an theological adventure in which you eventually cover all the doctrinal bases, so to say.

I think people will always think categorically. Maybe the breadth and types of categories will differ, but the human propensity to organize into manageable units of thought will not. So both Kant and Nietzsche can be right on this matter and the journeyer is not affected. We see this everyday in our interactions with others: some want to see the big picture first and *then* see how everything works, others can't see the big picture *until* they know how everything works together. Peace.

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