

# drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, JULY 12, 2006

## Three Types of "Historical Theology"

I was first introduced to theology by a self-proclaimed "historical theologian." Although he respected other approaches to theology, I have since encountered a number of self-titled "historical theologians" who claim superiority over any other kind of theology (especially "systematic theology"). At first glance, this seems obvious: certainly a theology rooted in history is superior to the speculative construction of systems. But upon further reflection, the term "historical theology" is ambiguous. What exactly does "historical theology" mean? I can think of three possible alternatives, each of which has their past and present practitioners.

**1. History of Theology.** This is the first and most obvious meaning. Historical theology is a *method of inquiry into the development of theology*. Another name for this is the history of doctrine. However, comparing this inquiry to systematic theology is like comparing apples and oranges: simply narrating the history of theology is not a normative task in itself. One is not saying what is right or wrong, true or false. One is simply telling the story. Although this is a much needed task, it leaves genuinely theological questions open. Furthermore, one could accurately tell the history of theology without actually believing any of it. So surely this is not what someone means when he or she says historical theology is superior to systematic theology.

**2. Theology of History.** Another very different approach is to perform a *theological interpretation of history*. In such an inquiry, theological assumptions serve as a criterion of judgment for "what happened." One would make decisions regarding past events by discerning the hand of providence in history. Although I would not want to rule out the possibility of such an inquiry, it does seem rather dubious. How does one know when and where God was working? On what basis could we make such decisions? What supports the theological assumptions driving the project? How can such a project be kept from becoming a mere ideological power play?

## About Me



Name:  
JohnLDrury  
Location:  
Doylestown,  
Pennsylvania, US

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**3. Theology out of History.** A third option is to not simply narrate the history of theology or use theology to narrate history, but rather to develop one's own theology out of the history of theology. Such a historical theologian would regard "God" and other related topics as emergent concepts. If we want to know who God is, we must reflect upon the history of humanity's reflection upon God. Because it actually seeks to make normative truth statements, this third option comes closer to a genuine alternative to systematic theology. It is most likely that this is the notion that one has in mind when claiming the superiority historical theology over systematic theology. Yet at least one problem remains: how does one decide which parts of history are to be privileged? The history of theology in particular and religion in general is far from uniform. One must make normative decisions about which history ought to be privileged. Is it the most ancient? Or the most recent? Or the middle? Or is it none of the above, but rather some criterion like the Bible or reason or creed? Whatever one decides, he or she is no longer simply drawing theology out of the wells of history, but is making theological judgments. And these judgments have to come from somewhere, as they cannot simply be "read off" history as such.

Of the three, I certainly think that this last one is the most noble. However, even at its height it cannot bear the whole weight of the theological task on its own. As a normative supplement, it requires assistance from the critical study of the Bible and the systematic presentation of Christian doctrine. So, the purpose of this post is not to undermine historical theology. That is surely not my intent. Rather, *I simply wish to place a moratorium on any claim that "historical theology" supplants "systematic theology."* We need each other, and it is unwise to make each other into enemies when we could make such great allies.

#### Any thoughts?

What do you think of when someone says he or she is a "historical theologian"?

Is there another sense to the term "historical theology" that I have missed?

Why do different branches of theological inquiry tend to attack each other?

How can the different branches of theological inquiry work together better?

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posted by JohnLDrury @ 3:14 PM

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At [10:37 AM, July 13, 2006](#), [Jake](#) said...

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Good point, John. Despite my frustrations with the lofty aims of systematic theology, I see it as an admirable and important discipline. My natural proclivity is to hide behind the rhetoric of "biblical theology." And, more specifically, I tend to not be as concerned with systematizing the biblical corpus' theological propositions in order to mitigate diffuse perspectives espoused by its respective authors. (Boy that was a wordy sentence!) However, as a preacher and pastor I cannot in good conscience neglect salient contradictions in Scripture. Even if, at day's end, I let the tentions remain, I do not want to play the whole osterich in the sand bit towards the work of systematic theologians. Moreover, as a student of hermeneutics, I try to play close attention to the historical and cultural lenses through which people have interpreted the texts. This is where I rely on the "historical theologians" and social historians to get a better understanding of why a John Chysostom or Martin Luther reads a text the way that each does. I guess what I'm trying to say is, we are all in this together. Like the red-green-blue that makes a TV or computer screen visible, perhaps we equally need biblical-historical-systematic theologies in order to see the theological screen with greater clarity. Peace.

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