

## The Veritable Ideal of Systematicity

### A Postfoundationalist Construal of the Task of Christian Theology

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Presented to the “Systematic Theology” Group of the AAR (November, 1999, Boston, MA)

#### Introduction

Does the desideratum of systematicity in Christian theology inevitably carry the pernicious baggage of modernist notions of reason? Have the radical challenges of postmodernity undercut the very idea of a *systematic* presentation of doctrine? I will argue “no” – *systematicity* does indeed remain a veritable ideal, although its nature and function must be refigured in our contemporary context. Toward this goal, the current paper aims for a *postfoundationalist* construal of the task of systematic theology.

I will begin by briefly describing the “foundational” problem in theology, i.e., the polarized debate between foundationalists and non-foundationalists over the structure of theological argumentation. In this context I hope to show how the epistemic and hermeneutic assumptions that subtend each of these models shape their understandings of the enterprise of theological construction. In Part 2 I will set out the criteria that guide my proposal for refiguring a new ideal of “systematicity” in our postmodern context. The third and longest part will outline the contours of the emerging *postfoundationalist* model of rationality, which may open up conceptual space for us to find a middle way between the foundationalist and nonfoundationalist construals of systematicity. Finally, I will list some implications of this new model for the constructive task of theology.

#### Part 1: The “Foundational” Problem in Theology

The issue of “foundationalism” has clearly become a *foundational* problem in theology... or perhaps we should say the issue is deeply ingrained in the web or smack dab in the middle of the raft of theological activity. The adjective “foundational” in “the foundational problem of theology” is ambiguous. On the one hand, it points to the seriousness of the problem, but on the other hand it serves to illustrate our intuitive use of the metaphor of “foundations” when describing the structure of knowledge and argumentation. This “foundational” problem in theology is not new, nor is it a problem

only for theologians. Although one commonly hears of “Cartesian anxiety,” the fear of noetic vertigo can be traced at least as far as Plato and his search for *episteme* in contrast to *doxa*.

Often the discussion about method presupposes we have only two options: *either* theology must maintain its alliance with the modernist goal of building systems firmly grounded on a foundationalist bedrock *or* theology must be content to accept its place as one raft (among many) floating on the non-foundationalist sea of radical postmodernity. Some foundationalists see theological language as attempting to re-present a meta-narrative *System* (capital “S”) that corresponds precisely to reality, while some non-foundationalists settle for a local-narrative *system* (lower case “s”) that is merely internally coherent. Notice that both extremes operate out of some construal of “systematicity.” Each has its own version of this *ideal* in presentation.

*Foundationalism*, in the “classical” sense, was a part of the Enlightenment project: human reason could attain certain knowledge based on self-evident foundational experiences *or a priori* propositions, from which necessary and universal conclusions could be reached. *Absolutism* guides the definition of Reason (and so the drive for systematicity). *Nonfoundationalism* is diametrically opposed to this approach, asserting that we have no foundational beliefs that are independent of the support of other beliefs; rather, we subsist in a groundless web, attempting merely to maintain coherence in our local praxis. Justifying beliefs is only a matter of determining whether they cohere with the other beliefs in a particular web or context. *Relativism* often shapes the view of reason (and so also of the ideal of systematicity).

Both sides of this polemic share many assumptions about the possibilities available to us in a description of human knowledge. Either we have absolute foundations for knowledge or truth is relative. Either the individual is endowed with universal reason or each community has its own form of rationality. Either our explanations are capable of achieving universality or our understandings are locked into the particularity of our own local context. Overcoming these bogus dichotomies is the goal of the postfoundationalist construal below.

## **Part 2: Two Factors that Shape the Refiguring of “Systematic” Theology**

At least two factors shape our construal of the systematic task in contemporary culture: (1) the way we interpret and respond (or fail to respond) to postmodernity, and (2) the way we conceptually link (or fail to link) epistemology and hermeneutics.

First, most students of culture agree that “postmodernism” (whatever else it may be) includes a challenge to the Enlightenment “modernist” ideals of absolute truth, universal reason, autonomous



Now let us turn to a second factor that influences our construals: the linking of epistemology and hermeneutics. Both foundationalists and non-foundationalists make assertions about *epistemology* and about *hermeneutics*. The epistemic aspect of the problem is the focus of the foundationalists, who fear that the idea of knowledge itself is at risk in the discussion. In conceptualizing the relation between epistemology and hermeneutics, the foundationalist will tend to privilege the former and ignore or downplay some of the recent historicist developments in the latter. Conversely, nonfoundationalists tend to focus on the hermeneutic side of the issue, and emphasize the untenability of the modernist approach to theory justification. For the nonfoundationalist, we cannot get “behind” or “under” our beliefs to justify them; all we have is the criteria of coherence with other beliefs within our culturally conditioned web. In the quest for a totalizing knowledge of the truth, foundationalism privileges epistemology as the primary enterprise of philosophy, while nonfoundationalism tends to disparage the longing for *episteme* and valorizes instead the play of hermeneutics as philosophy’s sole task.

Postfoundationalism refuses to give up the search for epistemologically adequate and intelligible explanations (as an ideal) and replace it with mere hermeneutical understandings, yet it recognizes that the search can never escape the fallibility and contextuality of human explanations. It wants to throw out the bath water of modernist apodicticity, but not the baby of the *search* for better intersubjectively criticizable explanations. On the journey into interdisciplinary discussion, we do not have to *leave our commitments behind* (like the foundationalist), nor are we compelled to *stay behind with our commitments* (like the non-foundationalist). Instead, the postfoundationalist wants to do theology on the move, “between” epistemology and hermeneutics, which are conceived as mutually conditioning moments in human rationality. The postfoundationalist believes that it is possible to accommodate the postmodern critique of *episteme* without collapsing into relativist hermeneutics and, conversely, that it is possible to accommodate the modernist search for epistemological justification without returning to foundationalist absolutism.

In his recent book on *The Shaping of Rationality* (Eerdmans, 1999), J. Wentzel van Huyssteen argues that in a postfoundationalist model, “a fusion of epistemological and hermeneutical concerns will enable a focused (though fallibilist) quest for intelligibility through the epistemic skills of responsible, critical judgment and discernment” (p. 33). I have dealt with the details of this linkage elsewhere (especially chapters 2 and 4 of my *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology* – Eerdmans, 1999), so let us turn now to the focus of today’s presentation, viz., salvaging “systematicity” as a valid ideal for theology in a postmodern age.

### **Part 3: A Postfoundationalist Construal of the Systematic Task of Theology**

I define the postfoundationalist task of theology in the following way: to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue within our postmodern culture while *both* maintaining a commitment to

intersubjective, transcommunal theological argumentation for the truth of Christian faith, *and* recognizing the provisionality of our historically embedded understandings and culturally conditioned explanations of the Christian tradition and religious experience. At this stage, there is no “school” of postfoundationalism. However, several contemporary thinkers display obvious family resemblances (to borrow Wittgenstein’s phrase). J. Wentzel van Huyssteen has enlisted this term and articulated it as a distinctive model for philosophical theology in several books, most recently *The Shaping of Rationality*. Other scholars who have rejected the antipodal structuring of the debate as an outdated epistemological dilemma, and have begun exploring the possibility of a “middle way” that escapes its horns, include Philip Clayton, Andy Sanders, Nicholas Rescher, Susan Haack, Nancy Frankenberry, Mikael Stenmark, Calvin Schrag and others.

In order to bring the family resemblances into sharper relief, my strategy is to define a “postfoundationalist” as one who would assert a particular kind of relationality as obtaining between four conceptual pairs: experience and belief, truth and knowledge, individual and community, and explanation and understanding. Foundationalism emphasizes experience as the basis of belief, the unity of truth, reason in the individual, and the universality of explanation. Nonfoundationalism stresses the web of belief as conditioning experience, the plurality of knowledge, the rationality of the community, and the particularity of understanding. Postfoundationalism attempts to accommodate the legitimate intuitions of these emphases without collapsing into either extreme. So I propose the following four couplets as a way of defining the contours of this model.

(PF1): interpreted experience engenders and nourishes all beliefs, and a network of beliefs informs the interpretation of experience.

(PF2): the objective unity of truth is a necessary condition for the intelligible search for knowledge, and the subjective multiplicity of knowledge indicates the fallibility of truth claims.

(PF3): rational judgment is an activity of socially situated individuals, and the cultural community indeterminately mediates the criteria of rationality.

(PF4): explanation aims for universal, trans-contextual understanding, and understanding derives from particular contextualized explanations.

Notice that the first part of each couplet aims to capture the positive intuitions of foundationalism, while the second part articulates the nonfoundationalist concern. Let me unpack each couplet briefly, exploring the implications for “systematicity.”

**1. Experience and Belief.** Ernest Sosa suggests we must choose between metaphors: “Contemporary epistemology must choose between the solid security of the ancient foundationalist pyramid and the risky adventure of the new coherentist raft.”<sup>1[1]</sup> The postfoundationalist approach, however, aims for a middle way, challenging both metaphors:

**(PF1): interpreted experience engenders and nourishes all beliefs, and a network of beliefs informs the interpretation of experience.**

Once we recognize that all beliefs emerge out of already interpreted experience, this frees us to explore critically the experiential roots of our beliefs without feeling compelled to throw out our commitment to the explanatory power of those beliefs that in turn are informing our experience. This dialectic (or reciprocal relation between belief and experience) overcomes the nonfoundationalist worry about a linear justification of rationality that moves only from experience to beliefs. It also responds to the foundationalist anxiety about attempts to divorce our reasons for believing something from our experience of the world.

Mikael Stenmark defines a “foundationalist” (of any type) as one who asserts that the relation between beliefs is asymmetrical,<sup>1[2]</sup> i.e., that there are two types of belief: basic and non-basic. The former are justified non-inferentially or immediately, while the latter are justified by inferential appeal to basic beliefs. Susan Haack notes that *coherentists*, on the other hand, assert that “a belief is justified if and only if it belongs to a coherent set of beliefs.” Haack points to the “drunken sailors” objection (if beliefs are holding each other up, what is holding the beliefs up?) and the “consistent fairy story” objection (coherentists have no way of indicating the *truth* of their beliefs).

As a middle position between foundationalism and coherentism, Haack proposes *foundherentism*, which asserts two theses:

- (FH1) A subject’s experience is relevant to the justification of his or her empirical beliefs, but there need be no privileged class of empirical beliefs justified exclusively by the support of experience, independently of the support of other beliefs, and
- (FH2) Justification is not exclusively one-directional, but involves pervasive relations of mutual support.<sup>1[3]</sup>

Applying her approach to our current topic, we agree that the strong construal of systematicity as building on apodictic foundations has become untenable. However, the weak construal of systematicity as mere raft repair also seems unsatisfactory. Supported by a postfoundationalist construal of the organic relation between experience and belief, a refigured ideal of systematicity in theology will hold onto the desideratum of coherence among beliefs, but acknowledge that systematic presentation of those beliefs includes an attempt to be faithful to the interpreted experience that engendered and now nourishes those beliefs.

**2. Truth and Knowledge.** The classical foundationalist emphasized the drive for certain and objective knowledge of the truth. In this view, the multiplicity of truth claims is due only to unclear thinking (opinion, *doxa*). The nonfoundationalist, on the other hand, points to the obvious plurality of knowledge claims, and argues that all knowing is subjectively bound to the knower; in its deconstructivist and relativist forms, this leads to a denial of the existence of “truth” independent of the subject. The postfoundationalist couplet that aims to transcend this dichotomy is:

**(PF2): the objective unity of truth is a necessary condition for the intelligible search for knowledge, and the subjective multiplicity of knowledge indicates the fallibility of truth claims.**

Here we see a distinction (but not a strong bifurcation) between objectivity and subjectivity, between unity and multiplicity, between truth and knowledge. The key conceptual tools used by the postfoundationalist in linking these pairs are the terms “intelligibility” and “fallibility.” The goal is to maintain the foundationalist vision of truth as an *ideal* that drives our inquiry, but to avoid arrogating one’s current knowledge as the total and final meta-narrative, a danger against which the nonfoundationalist rightly warns.

To clarify the role of intelligibility and fallibility in the postfoundationalist model, I point to van Huyssteen’s version of “critical realism.” He argues that “As a broader, holistic approach a *fallibilist*, experiential program of postfoundationalist critical realism can... link theology, philosophy of religion, and the sciences in their common search for *intelligibility*.”<sup>1[4]</sup> The emphasis on “intelligibility” accommodates the foundationalist intuitions about truth as an ideal, and the insistence on “fallibility” responds to the nonfoundationalist worry about absolutism and hegemonic totalization. So we might say that the postfoundationalist calls for a “kinder, gentler” systematicity.

The postfoundationalist does not claim to “have” the truth, but argues that the truth as an ideal is what “pulls” our search for optimal intelligibility.<sup>1[5]</sup> As Nicholas Rescher puts it, truth as an ideal is a *focus imaginarius* that canalizes and structures human inquiry.<sup>1[6]</sup> This use of the ideal of truth does not inevitably lead to the bugaboo of a totalizing metanarrative; it is precisely the function of “fallibilism” that serves to protect against it. What about “systematicity”? No longer can we aim for a re-presenting of the neutral objective truth in a totalizing System, but neither should we settle for a mere re-positing of particular localized knowledge claims. Instead, we may allow intelligibility to serve as a criterion of presentation, while acknowledging the inherent fallibility and so provisionality of systematic truth claims.

In the concluding chapter of her 1999 *Language, Truth and Religious Belief* (AAR Press), Nancy Frankenberry notes that

...philosophy of religion has yet to theorize diversity of belief in any way that does not lead either to the absolutizing of some one convictional set above all others or to the

relativizing of the notion of truth altogether in light of the mutually conflicting claims of different religions. No one has a good account of this” (p. 526).

This postfoundationalist couplet is offered as a first stab at such an account as it impacts the systematic task of theology.

**3. Individual and Community.** Foundationalism tends to privilege the individual in discussions of rationality. The neo-platonists, e.g., believed that the individual human *nous* participates in the divine logos. Enlightenment thinkers assumed that individuals had access to “Reason” as a kind of neutral tribunal that would guide them to the truth if the proper rules were followed and the conclusions were necessarily derived from the right foundations. This meant all individuals can and ought to come to the same conclusion, irrespective of context, tradition or language. Nonfoundationalism, on the other hand, has affirmed the postmodern critique of individualism. Historicist hermeneutics has illustrated the dependence of rationality on the historical context in which it operates. After the “linguistic turn,” it is difficult to deny that the language games of the communities in which we live do indeed have a profound effect on our interpretations. We are shaped by the cultural systems and traditions into which we are born. In its relativist forms, nonfoundationalism takes this to the extreme and argues that language games are incommensurable, and that each community determines its own rationality. Finding transcommunal criteria for justifying rationality is impossible. As with the other polarities, *postfoundationalism* aims to accommodate the intuitions of both sides without collapsing into absolutism or relativism.

**(PF3): rational judgment is an activity of socially situated individuals, and the cultural community indeterminately mediates the criteria of rationality.**

The works of philosopher Calvin Schrag are particularly helpful to the postfoundationalist model in overcoming this dichotomy between individual and community. He acknowledges that

...we cannot think and act except through an engagement with the tradition. The task is to stand in a *critical* relation to the tradition... our project... [is] an effort to split the difference between the vertically grounded conceptions of reason and the horizontality of the postmodern anti-logos of becoming... The logos is reconstituted but it is not left behind. It continues to register its effects... in a transversal binding or gathering of the multiplicity and flux of our socio-historical practices.<sup>1[7]</sup>

Perhaps the most important contribution to the specific issue of the relation of individual and communal factors in rational judgment is Schrag's refiguring of the dialectics of *participation* (in the community/tradition) and *distanciation* (from the community/tradition). He tries to show how these terms, common in hermeneutical discussions, might be seen not as simply juxtaposed in a linear way, nor as one determining the other in a hierarchical way, but rather as in a relation of "transversal interplay" that connects "the performance of reason with our communal discourse and our communal action."<sup>18</sup> Critically appropriating the work of Jurgen Habermas, Schrag proposes that we speak of participation and distanciation as the "twin moments" of praxial critique. The dialectic between them is "socio-pragmatic," jettisoning neither the rational subject, nor the communal concerns and practices out of which the identity of that subject emerges. "Although distanciation without participation remains bereft of its background conditions, participation without distanciation remains blind to resources for critical assessment and evaluation."<sup>19</sup>

In his more recent work, *The Self After Postmodernity* (Yale, 1997), Schrag describes the self as conditioned, but not determined, by a particular tradition. It is precisely the existential experience of becoming a self (over against but still a part of the community) that discloses the nature of the communalized self. The task of systematic presentation in Christian theology is reconfigured by this new model of rationality. Here systematicity becomes a goal that guides the individual theologian's articulation of her community's tradition, but this articulation thematizes its own social situation and refuses to immunize religious beliefs from the critique that inevitably comes in transcommunal conversation.

**4. Explanation and Understanding.** The final postfoundationalist couplet focuses specifically on the interdisciplinary location of theology by responding to a dichotomy that has shaped the strong separation in western culture between the *natural* sciences, which aim to explain things according to universal laws, and the *human* sciences, which aim to understand things in their particularity. How does this influence the debate between foundationalists and nonfoundationalists about theological method and systematic presentation? The foundationalist will tend to model theology as much as possible after the natural sciences, aiming to offer absolute "explanations" (Erklärung) necessarily derived by following specific rules, which are or aim to be clearly true regardless of tradition or context. This is evident, for example, in Charles Hodge's famous comment that "the Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science," which assumed a 19<sup>th</sup> century positivist view of scientific method. The foundationalist will aim to rise above (operate rationally beyond) the pre-understanding which the individual brings to the interpretation of an event or text, and "explain" the text objectively from a neutral position.

The nonfoundationalist, on the other hand, embraces the turn to "understanding" and lists theology as one of the disciplines whose aim is "Verstehen" (empathic understanding). This approach concedes that all understanding is conditioned by the historical context within which the understanding occurs. Interpretation and language go all the way down and all the way back up. The nonfoundationalist sees understanding as rooted in particular traditions (contexts) which have their own

coherence, and eschews the chimerical goal of an explanation that could escape its context and make contact with other incommensurable traditions. The nonfoundationalist will be content with securing for theology a place among the human sciences, and limiting its role to the analysis of language games, or to a depth description of the forms of life of particular faith communities.

The *post*foundationalist rejects the strict methodological opposition between “human” and “natural” science, seeing this dichotomous division of labor as an expression of the outdated distinctions between thought and matter in Descartes, or between mind and nature in German idealism. Instead, the postfoundationalist model stresses the mutual conditioning of these two movements in human rationality.

**(PF4): explanation aims for universal, trans-contextual understanding, and understanding derives from particular contextualized explanations.**

By emphasizing the back and forth movement between traditioned understanding and universally-intended explanations, we can escape relativism without retreating into absolutism. Theological rationality involves a fallible search for intelligibility, open to constant interdisciplinary dialogue. Attempts to understand involve seeking the best explanation, and explanations emerge out of and lead to new interpretive understandings. Rather than being mutually exclusive, both tasks are intrinsic to the search for maximal intelligibility.

Of all the authors I am calling postfoundationalist, Philip Clayton offers the most extensive treatment of the distinction and connection between understanding and explanation with reference to theological method. In his *Explanation from Physics to Theology*, Clayton’s general theme is epistemology, but his specific concern is to show how the explanatory practices of science and religion may both be seen as “rational,” which he specifies as “intersubjective criticizability.”<sup>1</sup>[\[10\]](#) He carefully traces the divorce of the natural from the human sciences that was related to the distinction between nomothetic disciplines, which sought explanations of general laws, and ideographic disciplines, which are interested in understanding how a particular fits into a whole or pattern. In natural science, there is one framework of interpretation, viz., the scientist’s. But in social science, there is not only the social scientist but also the social agent. In other words, the *objects* of the science are also agents who are operating out of semantic worlds.<sup>1</sup>[\[11\]](#) This makes Popper’s aim of finding a single type of explanation for all science very problematic. Equally problematic, on the other hand, are the Verstehen theorists and their extreme “antipositivist” successors, who try to make social science distinctive by attempting to avoid Erklärung.

Clayton’s mediating position (which he calls a “formal-semantic” theory<sup>1</sup>[\[12\]](#)) aims to recognize the shaping influence of contexts of meaning, but simultaneously allows for general standards or criteria for explanation in social science. He proposes that we define “understanding” broadly as an intuitive grasping of patterns of meaning, and “explanation” as a rational reconstruction of these interrelated structures in a primarily theoretical context. They are interdependent. The latter part of Clayton’s book argues that religious beliefs generally, and theology as a discipline specifically, involve “explanation.”

This is entailed by the fact that religious and theological claims are constative by their very structure; they intend to make assertions about something outside themselves. Clayton summarizes a basic conviction of the position we are calling postfoundationalism:

...to reject foundationalism is not to fall automatically into the waiting arms of the antifoundationalists, who claim that theology can be pursued without attention to the nature and epistemic status of its truth claims. To the contrary, the whole debate between foundationalism and antifoundationalism is probably based on the *false dichotomy* of an *outdated epistemological dilemma*. The shift to a fallibilist epistemology avoids, I believe, the alleged necessity of being either a foundationalist or an antifoundationalist.<sup>1</sup>[\[13\]](#)

The postfoundationalist model is precisely the attempt to find a middle way between the horns of this outdated epistemological dilemma. This means that a theological explanation can be “systematic” without reifying into a Grand meta-narrative Scheme. Understanding always involves a recognition of systemic patterns, but these patterns are not prisoners of a subjective empathy. So systematicity may remain an ideal that drives the task of theology and the theologian can and should engage in ongoing presentations that aim for contextualized explanations, which in turn open up new possibilities for trans-contextual understandings.

**Implications.** If we accept the postfoundationalist construal as described above, what are the implications for the constructive task of theology? I want to point to three.

1. The Interdisciplinary location of theology
2. The Issue of Prolegomena
3. Material issues influenced by radical thematizing of “relationality”

First of all, the constructive task of theology is also inherently an interdisciplinary task. For theology to avoid the insularity of nonfoundationalism, without regressing into foundationalism, it must seriously engage other contemporary attempts to understand and explain the various aspects of reality, which Christian faith asserts is the creation of the biblical God. Further, this *interdisciplinary* task can only be fulfilled by *intradisciplinary* cooperation. By transgressing the strict boundaries between philosophical theology, systematic theology, biblical studies, historical and practical theology, without

effacing the differentiation of their functions, Christian theology as a whole can more easily engage in coherent and constructive discussion with the worldviews of postmodern culture. We aim for systematicity (as well as practicality) together.<sup>1[14]</sup> The new language of postfoundationalist thought, with its concepts of interpreted experience, traditioned understanding, and transversal thinking will better serve theology in its interdisciplinary dialogue within postmodern culture.

Our analysis also impacts the issue of “prolegomena” in systematic theology. Rather than restricting methodological discussions to the beginning of a theological presentation, the postfoundationalist model suggests the need for what I would call “*paralegomena*.” By this neologism, I mean the ongoing articulation and engagement of methodological issues “alongside” and intertwined with material doctrinal presentation. We can see this idea in van Huyssteen: “...the project of theological methodology and ‘prolegomena’ now becomes part of theological reflection as such, that is, as part of an ongoing interdisciplinary inquiry within the practice of theology itself.”<sup>1[15]</sup> Similarly Wolfhart Pannenberg has argued that methodological reflections “need to be based on interaction with the subject matter and presentation. They should not be offered abstractly in advance, especially in a situation in which there is so little general agreement on what the subject matter of theology really is, and therefore on what method is appropriate to it” (ST, I, xii).

Nonfoundationalist theologians are fond of quoting Jeffrey Stout’s comment that if you clear your throat too long, you will lose your audience. The complaint is that methodological discussions can go on indefinitely and no real theological work is accomplished. This naïve assumption that we can stop talking about method and simply start doing theology only makes sense if one either accepts foundationalism, and claims to have secured the necessary foundations, or if one accepts nonfoundationalism, and claims that methodology is only subject to criteria internal to the community. While Stout may be correct, it is also true that if you do not clear your throat sufficiently, the audience will not be able to understand you. *Can we not clear our throats as we go along?* The postfoundationalist will attempt to intercalate methodological and material reflections, incorporating epistemological and hermeneutical concerns as he or she does constructive theology.

Finally, a postfoundationalist method may foster the constructive task of theology in its presentation of specific material issues. The rigorous thematization of relationality that characterizes this view of rationality lends itself to attempts to conceptualize some of the central aspects of Christian doctrine. First, we have already noted the revival of trinitarian doctrine in the last half-century, emerging concurrently with the radical changes in philosophy of science traced above. The doctrine of Trinity is perhaps the most relational thought possible for the human mind, and the “relational turn” in philosophy may indeed help theologians articulate this uniquely Christian concept of God. Second, the doctrine of the Incarnation obviously requires careful analysis of relationality, in this case between God and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Ways of thinking about types of relational unity that involve neither fusion nor mere conjunction are particularly helpful here; the concept of the “true infinite” may be especially pertinent in this doctrine. Finally, the actual living out of the Christian faith is constituted by a relational unity – the relation between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit, whereby the person linked to Christ is “one Spirit with the Lord” (1 Corinthians 6:17). My hope is that developments in the

postfoundationalist model of rationality may provide theologians with conceptual tools that will prove their fecundity in radical interdisciplinary dialogue with postmodernity. This model would recognize that the ongoing human endeavor to achieve systematicity is always already dynamically embedded in the historically-mediated relation of the communally-conditioned individual and his or her interpreted experience of God

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[1\[1\]](#) Ernest Sosa, “The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, v. V: Studies in Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980): 3. Notice that the “raft” metaphor also suggests that we are supported by *something* (water), even if it is not as solid as we might like. Similarly, “webs” have to be supported somehow, or the metaphor falls down completely.

[1\[2\]](#) Stenmark, *Rationality in Science, Religion and Everyday Life* (Notre Dame, 1995), p. 44.

[1\[3\]](#) Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 19.

[1\[4\]](#) *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Eerdmans, 1997), p. 52. Emphases added.

[1\[5\]](#) For van Huyssteen, intelligibility is “the supreme value that determines rationality” (*Essays*, 163).

[1\[6\]](#) N. Rescher, *A System of Pragmatic Idealism, Voll.* (Princeton University Press, 1992): 94.

[1\[7\]](#) Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality* (Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 166.

[1\[8\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[1\[9\]](#) *Ibid.*, 64-65.

[1\[10\]](#) Clayton, *Explanation from Physics to Theology*, 9.

[1\[11\]](#) *Ibid.*, 61.

[1\[12\]](#) *Ibid.*, 66.

[1\[13\]](#) *Ibid.*, 152. Emphasis added.

[1\[14\]](#) Osmer, Rick, “Beyond the Theological Encyclopedia.” [in press]

[1\[15\]](#) van Huyssteen, *Essays*, 228. Cf. Philip Clayton, *Explanation From Physics to Theology*, 152.

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### **Introduction**

Does the desideratum of systematicity in Christian theology inevitably carry the pernicious baggage of modernist notions of reason? Have the radical challenges of postmodernity undercut the very idea of a *systematic* presentation of doctrine? I will argue “no” – *systematicity* does indeed remain a veritable ideal, although its nature and function must be refigured in our contemporary context. Toward this goal, the current paper aims for a *postfoundationalist* construal of the task of systematic theology.

I will begin by briefly describing the “foundational” problem in theology, i.e., the polarized debate between foundationalists and non-foundationalists over the structure of theological argumentation. In this context I hope to show how the epistemic and hermeneutic assumptions that subtend each of these models shape their understandings of the enterprise of theological construction. In Part 2 I will set out the criteria that guide my proposal for refiguring a new ideal of “systematicity” in our postmodern context. The third and longest part will outline the contours of the emerging *postfoundationalist* model of rationality, which may open up conceptual space for us to find a middle way between the foundationalist and nonfoundationalist construals of systematicity. Finally, I will list some implications of this new model for the constructive task of theology.

## Part 1: The “Foundational” Problem in Theology

The issue of “foundationalism” has clearly become a *foundational* problem in theology... or perhaps we should say the issue is deeply ingressed in the web or smack dab in the middle of the raft of theological activity. The adjective “foundational” in “the foundational problem of theology” is ambiguous. On the one hand, it points to the seriousness of the problem, but on the other hand it serves to illustrate our intuitive use of the metaphor of “foundations” when describing the structure of knowledge and argumentation. This “foundational” problem in theology is not new, nor is it a problem only for theologians. Although one commonly hears of “Cartesian anxiety,” the fear of noetic vertigo can be traced at least as far as Plato and his search for *episteme* in contrast to *doxa*.

Often the discussion about method presupposes we have only two options: *either* theology must maintain its alliance with the modernist goal of building systems firmly grounded on a foundationalist bedrock *or* theology must be content to accept its place as one raft (among many) floating on the non-foundationalist sea of radical postmodernity. Some foundationalists see theological language as attempting to re-present a meta-narrative *System* (capital “S”) that corresponds precisely to reality, while some non-foundationalists settle for a local-narrative *system* (lower case “s”) that is merely internally coherent. Notice that both extremes operate out of some construal of “systematicity.” Each has its own version of this *ideal* in presentation.

*Foundationalism*, in the “classical” sense, was a part of the Enlightenment project: human reason could attain certain knowledge based on self-evident foundational experiences or *a priori* propositions, from which necessary and universal conclusions could be reached. *Absolutism* guides the definition of Reason (and so the drive for systematicity). *Nonfoundationalism* is diametrically opposed to this approach, asserting that we have no foundational beliefs that are independent of the support of

other beliefs; rather, we subsist in a groundless web, attempting merely to maintain coherence in our local praxis. Justifying beliefs is only a matter of determining whether they cohere with the other beliefs in a particular web or context. *Relativism* often shapes the view of reason (and so also of the ideal of systematicity).

Both sides of this polemic share many assumptions about the possibilities available to us in a description of human knowledge. Either we have absolute foundations for knowledge or truth is relative. Either the individual is endowed with universal reason or each community has its own form of rationality. Either our explanations are capable of achieving universality or our understandings are locked into the particularity of our own local context. Overcoming these bogus dichotomies is the goal of the postfoundationalist construal below.

## Part 2: Two Factors that Shape the Refiguring of “Systematic” Theology

At least two factors shape our construal of the systematic task in contemporary culture: (1) the way we interpret and respond (or fail to respond) to postmodernity, and (2) the way we conceptually link (or fail to link) epistemology and hermeneutics.

First, most students of culture agree that “postmodernism” (whatever else it may be) includes a challenge to the Enlightenment “modernist” ideals of absolute truth, universal reason, autonomous subjectivity, and inevitable progress. Scholars differ widely, however, in the way they *respond* to this perceived challenge. We can classify these responses broadly into three types:

- *De-constructive* response: fully affirm the postmodern challenge and conclude that because there is no neutral knowledge we must be content with a plurality of interpretations.
- *Paleo-constructive* response: reject or ignore the challenge of postmodernity and appeal to an earlier pre-modern era in which truth and knowledge were allegedly unproblematic.
- *Re-constructive* response: attempt to distinguish the positive from the negative contributions of postmodernity and aim for a reconfiguration of the task of epistemology.

My postfoundationalist construal of “systematicity” is driven by a desire to respond “re-constructively” at the intersection of historic Christian faith and contemporary culture. This proposal is self-consciously molded by a concern to avoid the theological pitfalls of either a liberal “*de-constructive*” or a fundamentalist “*paleo-constructive*” response to the postmodern challenge. The former sometimes renders Christian faith so diffuse that the boundaries that distinguish it from other voices in culture are nearly erased; theology loses its identity. The latter sometimes reacts so violently to the plurality of cultural forces that boundaries are reified into impermeable walls; theology becomes isolated. Neither of these approaches allows for authentic dialogue. We need a more subtle model of the relationality

between theology and culture that captures their actual differentiation as well as their real coinherence. Such a model would support a praxis of authentic response that neither dissolves nor dissects and that refuses to settle for mere conflation or conjunction.

Postfoundationalism does not interpret *postmodernity* simply as the negation (or end) of *modernity*; its philosophical response is a dialectical movement that shuttles back and forth between their concerns. It constantly interrogates the foundationalisms of modernity from the point of view of historicist hermeneutics, but its task does not stop with the deconstruction of epistemic ideals – it strives for reconstruction as well. It is precisely the failure to see this dialectic that leads many non-foundationalists to *stop* the interrogation, inadvertently allowing new (unchallenged) “foundations” to ground their (localized) methods while giving up hope of identifying transcommunal criteria for rationality. *Postfoundationalists* want to affirm the validity of the postmodern challenge, but they do this in order to take up the task of refiguring the ideals of truth, progress, reason, *and systematicity*, rather than expunging them from the philosophical vocabulary. By the way, I suggest that the increasingly popular phrase “professor of *constructive* theology” still captures the systematic nature of our task. Even etymologically, both con-structing and sy-stematizing (syn-histeimi) involve a standing-together of ideas.

Now let us turn to a second factor that influences our construals: the linking of epistemology and hermeneutics. Both foundationalists and non-foundationalists make assertions about *epistemology* and about *hermeneutics*. The epistemic aspect of the problem is the focus of the foundationalists, who fear that the idea of knowledge itself is at risk in the discussion. In conceptualizing the relation between epistemology and hermeneutics, the foundationalist will tend to privilege the former and ignore or downplay some of the recent historicist developments in the latter. Conversely, nonfoundationalists tend to focus on the hermeneutic side of the issue, and emphasize the untenability of the modernist approach to theory justification. For the nonfoundationalist, we cannot get “behind” or “under” our beliefs to justify them; all we have is the criteria of coherence with other beliefs within our culturally conditioned web. In the quest for a totalizing knowledge of the truth, foundationalism privileges epistemology as the primary enterprise of philosophy, while nonfoundationalism tends to disparage the longing for *episteme* and valorizes instead the play of hermeneutics as philosophy’s sole task.

*Postfoundationalism* refuses to give up the search for epistemologically adequate and intelligible explanations (as an ideal) and replace it with mere hermeneutical understandings, yet it recognizes that the search can never escape the fallibility and contextuality of human explanations. It wants to throw out the bath water of modernist apodicticity, but not the baby of the *search* for better intersubjectively criticizable explanations. On the journey into interdisciplinary discussion, we do not have to *leave our commitments behind* (like the foundationalist), nor are we compelled to *stay behind with our commitments* (like the non-foundationalist). Instead, the postfoundationalist wants to do theology on the move, “between” epistemology and hermeneutics, which are conceived as mutually conditioning moments in human rationality. The postfoundationalist believes that it is possible to accommodate the postmodern critique of *episteme* without collapsing into relativist hermeneutics and, conversely, that it is possible to accommodate the modernist search for epistemological justification without returning to foundationalist absolutism.

In his recent book on *The Shaping of Rationality* (Eerdmans, 1999), J. Wentzel van Huyssteen argues that in a postfoundationalist model, “a fusion of epistemological and hermeneutical concerns will enable a focused (though fallibilist) quest for intelligibility through the epistemic skills of responsible, critical judgment and discernment” (p. 33). I have dealt with the details of this linkage elsewhere (especially chapters 2 and 4 of my *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology* – Eerdmans, 1999), so let us turn now to the focus of today’s presentation, viz., salvaging “systematicity” as a valid ideal for theology in a postmodern age.

### **Part 3: A Postfoundationalist Construal of the Systematic Task of Theology**

I define the postfoundationalist task of theology in the following way: to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue within our postmodern culture while *both* maintaining a commitment to intersubjective, transcommunal theological argumentation for the truth of Christian faith, *and* recognizing the provisionality of our historically embedded understandings and culturally conditioned explanations of the Christian tradition and religious experience. At this stage, there is no “school” of postfoundationalism. However, several contemporary thinkers display obvious family resemblances (to borrow Wittgenstein’s phrase). J. Wentzel van Huyssteen has enlisted this term and articulated it as a distinctive model for philosophical theology in several books, most recently *The Shaping of Rationality*. Other scholars who have rejected the antipodal structuring of the debate as an outdated epistemological dilemma, and have begun exploring the possibility of a “middle way” that escapes its horns, include Philip Clayton, Andy Sanders, Nicholas Rescher, Susan Haack, Nancy Frankenberry, Mikael Stenmark, Calvin Schrag and others.

In order to bring the family resemblances into sharper relief, my strategy is to define a “postfoundationalist” as one who would assert a particular kind of relationality as obtaining between four conceptual pairs: experience and belief, truth and knowledge, individual and community, and explanation and understanding. Foundationalism emphasizes experience as the basis of belief, the unity of truth, reason in the individual, and the universality of explanation. Nonfoundationalism stresses the web of belief as conditioning experience, the plurality of knowledge, the rationality of the community, and the particularity of understanding. Postfoundationalism attempts to accommodate the legitimate intuitions of these emphases without collapsing into either extreme. So I propose the following four couplets as a way of defining the contours of this model.

- (PF1): interpreted experience engenders and nourishes all beliefs, and a network of beliefs informs the interpretation of experience.
- (PF2): the objective unity of truth is a necessary condition for the intelligible search for knowledge, and the subjective multiplicity of knowledge indicates the fallibility of truth claims.
- (PF3): rational judgment is an activity of socially situated individuals, and the cultural community indeterminately mediates the criteria of rationality.
- (PF4): explanation aims for universal, trans-contextual understanding, and understanding derives from particular contextualized explanations.

Notice that the first part of each couplet aims to capture the positive intuitions of foundationalism, while the second part articulates the nonfoundationalist concern. Let me unpack each couplet briefly, exploring the implications for “systematicity.”

**1. Experience and Belief.** Ernest Sosa suggests we must choose between metaphors: “Contemporary epistemology must choose between the solid security of the ancient foundationalist pyramid and the risky adventure of the new coherentist raft.”<sup>[1]</sup> The postfoundationalist approach, however, aims for a middle way, challenging both metaphors:

**(PF1): interpreted experience engenders and nourishes all beliefs, and a network of beliefs informs the interpretation of experience.**

Once we recognize that all beliefs emerge out of already interpreted experience, this frees us to explore critically the experiential roots of our beliefs without feeling compelled to throw out our commitment to the explanatory power of those beliefs that in turn are informing our experience. This dialectic (or reciprocal relation between belief and experience) overcomes the nonfoundationalist worry about a linear justification of rationality that moves only from experience to beliefs. It also responds to the foundationalist anxiety about attempts to divorce our reasons for believing something from our experience of the world.

Mikael Stenmark defines a “foundationalist” (of any type) as one who asserts that the relation between beliefs is asymmetrical,<sup>[2]</sup> i.e., that there are two types of belief: basic and non-basic. The former are justified non-inferentially or immediately, while the latter are justified by inferential appeal to basic beliefs. Susan Haack notes that *coherentists*, on the other hand, assert that “a belief is justified if and only if it belongs to a coherent set of beliefs.” Haack points to the “drunken sailors” objection (if beliefs are holding each other up, what is holding the beliefs up?) and the “consistent fairy story” objection (coherentists have no way of indicating the *truth* of their beliefs).

As a middle position between foundationalism and coherentism, Haack proposes *foundherentism*, which asserts two theses:

(FH1) A subject’s experience is relevant to the justification of his or her empirical beliefs, but there need be no privileged class of empirical beliefs justified exclusively by the support of experience, independently of the support of other beliefs, and

(FH2) Justification is not exclusively one-directional, but involves pervasive relations of mutual support.<sup>[3]</sup>

Applying her approach to our current topic, we agree that the strong construal of systematicity as building on apodictic foundations has become untenable. However, the weak construal of systematicity as mere raft repair also seems unsatisfactory. Supported by a postfoundationalist construal of the organic relation between experience and belief, a refigured ideal of systematicity in theology will hold onto the desideratum of coherence among beliefs, but

acknowledge that systematic presentation of those beliefs includes an attempt to be faithful to the interpreted experience that engendered and now nourishes those beliefs.

**2. Truth and Knowledge.** The classical foundationalist emphasized the drive for certain and objective knowledge of the truth. In this view, the multiplicity of truth claims is due only to unclear thinking (opinion, *doxa*). The nonfoundationalist, on the other hand, points to the obvious plurality of knowledge claims, and argues that all knowing is subjectively bound to the knower; in its deconstructivist and relativist forms, this leads to a denial of the existence of “truth” independent of the subject. The postfoundationalist couplet that aims to transcend this dichotomy is:

**(PF2): the objective unity of truth is a necessary condition for the intelligible search for knowledge, and the subjective multiplicity of knowledge indicates the fallibility of truth claims.**

Here we see a distinction (but not a strong bifurcation) between objectivity and subjectivity, between unity and multiplicity, between truth and knowledge. The key conceptual tools used by the postfoundationalist in linking these pairs are the terms “intelligibility” and “fallibility.” The goal is to maintain the foundationalist vision of truth as an *ideal* that drives our inquiry, but to avoid arrogating one’s current knowledge as the total and final meta-narrative, a danger against which the nonfoundationalist rightly warns.

To clarify the role of intelligibility and fallibility in the postfoundationalist model, I point to van Huyssteen’s version of “critical realism.” He argues that “As a broader, holist approach a *fallibilist*, experiential program of postfoundationalist critical realism can... link theology, philosophy of religion, and the sciences in their common search for *intelligibility*.”<sup>[4]</sup> The emphasis on “intelligibility” accommodates the foundationalist intuitions about truth as an ideal, and the insistence on “fallibility” responds to the nonfoundationalist worry about absolutism and hegemonic totalization. So we might say that the postfoundationalist calls for a “kinder, gentler” systematicity.

The postfoundationalist does not claim to “have” the truth, but argues that the truth as an ideal is what “pulls” our search for optimal intelligibility.<sup>[5]</sup> As Nicholas Rescher puts it, truth as an ideal is a *focus imaginarius* that canalizes and structures human inquiry.<sup>[6]</sup> This use of the ideal of truth does not inevitably lead to the bugaboo of a totalizing metanarrative; it is precisely the function of “fallibilism” that serves to protect against it. What about “systematicity”? No longer can we aim for a re-presenting of the neutral objective truth in a totalizing System, but neither should we settle for a mere re-positing of particular localized knowledge claims. Instead, we may allow intelligibility to serve as a criterion of presentation, while acknowledging the inherent fallibility and so provisionality of systematic truth claims.

In the concluding chapter of her 1999 *Language, Truth and Religious Belief* (AAR Press), Nancy Frankenberry notes that

...philosophy of religion has yet to theorize diversity of belief in any way that does not lead either to the absolutizing of some one convictional set above all others or to the relativizing of the notion of truth altogether in light of the mutually conflicting claims of different religions. No one has a good account of this" (p. 526).

This postfoundationalist couplet is offered as a first stab at such an account as it impacts the systematic task of theology.

**3. Individual and Community.** Foundationalism tends to privilege the individual in discussions of rationality. The neo-platonists, e.g., believed that the individual human *nous* participates in the divine logos. Enlightenment thinkers assumed that individuals had access to "Reason" as a kind of neutral tribunal that would guide them to the truth if the proper rules were followed and the conclusions were necessarily derived from the right foundations. This meant all individuals can and ought to come to the same conclusion, irrespective of context, tradition or language. Nonfoundationalism, on the other hand, has affirmed the postmodern critique of individualism. Historicist hermeneutics has illustrated the dependence of rationality on the historical context in which it operates. After the "linguistic turn," it is difficult to deny that the language games of the communities in which we live do indeed have a profound effect on our interpretations. We are shaped by the cultural systems and traditions into which we are born. In its relativist forms, nonfoundationalism takes this to the extreme and argues that language games are incommensurable, and that each community determines its own rationality. Finding transcommunal criteria for justifying rationality is impossible. As with the other polarities, *postfoundationalism* aims to accommodate the intuitions of both sides without collapsing into absolutism or relativism.

**(PF3): rational judgment is an activity of socially situated individuals, and the cultural community indeterminately mediates the criteria of rationality.**

The works of philosopher Calvin Schrag are particularly helpful to the postfoundationalist model in overcoming this dichotomy between individual and community. He acknowledges that

...we cannot think and act except through an engagement with the tradition. The task is to stand in a *critical* relation to the tradition... our project... [is] an effort to split the difference between the vertically grounded conceptions of reason and the horizontality of the postmodern anti-logos of becoming... The logos is reconstituted but it is not left behind. It continues to register its effects... in a transversal binding or gathering of the multiplicity and flux of our socio-historical practices.<sup>[7]</sup>

Perhaps the most important contribution to the specific issue of the relation of individual and communal factors in rational judgment is Schrag's refiguring of the dialectics of *participation* (in the

community/tradition) and *distanciation* (**from** the community/tradition). He tries to show how these terms, common in hermeneutical discussions, might be seen not as simply juxtaposed in a linear way, nor as one determining the other in a hierarchical way, but rather as in a relation of “transversal interplay” that connects “the performance of reason with our communal discourse and our communal action.”<sup>[8]</sup> Critically appropriating the work of Jurgen Habermas, Schrag proposes that we speak of participation and distanciation as the “twin moments” of praxial critique. The dialectic between them is “socio-pragmatic,” jettisoning neither the rational subject, nor the communal concerns and practices out of which the identity of that subject emerges. “Although distanciation without participation remains bereft of its background conditions, participation without distanciation remains blind to resources for critical assessment and evaluation.”<sup>[9]</sup>

In his more recent work, *The Self After Postmodernity* (Yale, 1997), Schrag describes the self as conditioned, but not determined, by a particular tradition. It is precisely the existential experience of becoming a self (over against but still a part of the community) that discloses the nature of the communalized self. The task of systematic presentation in Christian theology is reconfigured by this new model of rationality. Here systematicity becomes a goal that guides the individual theologian’s articulation of her community’s tradition, but this articulation thematizes its own social situation and refuses to immunize religious beliefs from the critique that inevitably comes in transcommunal conversation.

**4. Explanation and Understanding.** The final postfoundationalist couplet focuses specifically on the interdisciplinary location of theology by responding to a dichotomy that has shaped the strong separation in western culture between the *natural* sciences, which aim to explain things according to universal laws, and the *human* sciences, which aim to understand things in their particularity. How does this influence the debate between foundationalists and nonfoundationalists about theological method and systematic presentation? The foundationalist will tend to model theology as much as possible after the natural sciences, aiming to offer absolute “explanations” (Erklärung) necessarily derived by following specific rules, which are or aim to be clearly true regardless of tradition or context. This is evident, for example, in Charles Hodge’s famous comment that “the Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science,” which assumed a 19<sup>th</sup> century positivist view of scientific method. The foundationalist will aim to rise above (operate rationally beyond) the pre-understanding which the individual brings to the interpretation of an event or text, and “explain” the text objectively from a neutral position.

The nonfoundationalist, on the other hand, embraces the turn to “understanding” and lists theology as one of the disciplines whose aim is “Verstehen” (empathic understanding). This approach concedes that all understanding is conditioned by the historical context within which the understanding occurs. Interpretation and language go all the way down and all the way back up. The nonfoundationalist sees understanding as rooted in particular traditions (contexts) which have their own coherence, and eschews the chimerical goal of an explanation that could escape its context and make contact with other incommensurable traditions. The nonfoundationalist will be content with securing for theology a place among the human sciences, and limiting its role to the analysis of language games, or to a depth description of the forms of life of particular faith communities.

The *postfoundationalist* rejects the strict methodological opposition between “human” and “natural” science, seeing this dichotomous division of labor as an expression of the outdated distinctions between thought and matter in Descartes, or between mind and nature in German idealism. Instead, the postfoundationalist model stresses the mutual conditioning of these two movements in human rationality.

**(PF4): explanation aims for universal, trans-contextual understanding, and understanding derives from particular contextualized explanations.**

By emphasizing the back and forth movement between traditioned understanding and universally-intended explanations, we can escape relativism without retreating into absolutism. Theological rationality involves a fallible search for intelligibility, open to constant interdisciplinary dialogue. Attempts to understand involve seeking the best explanation, and explanations emerge out of and lead to new interpretive understandings. Rather than being mutually exclusive, both tasks are intrinsic to the search for maximal intelligibility.

Of all the authors I am calling postfoundationalist, Philip Clayton offers the most extensive treatment of the distinction and connection between understanding and explanation with reference to theological method. In his *Explanation from Physics to Theology*, Clayton’s general theme is epistemology, but his specific concern is to show how the explanatory practices of science and religion may both be seen as “rational,” which he specifies as “intersubjective criticizability.”<sup>[10]</sup> He carefully traces the divorce of the natural from the human sciences that was related to the distinction between nomothetic disciplines, which sought explanations of general laws, and ideographic disciplines, which are interested in understanding how a particular fits into a whole or pattern. In natural science, there is one framework of interpretation, viz., the scientist’s. But in social science, there is not only the social scientist but also the social agent. In other words, the *objects* of the science are also agents who are operating out of semantic worlds.<sup>[11]</sup> This makes Popper’s aim of finding a single type of explanation for all science very problematic. Equally problematic, on the other hand, are the *Verstehen* theorists and their extreme “antipositivist” successors, who try to make social science distinctive by attempting to avoid *Erklärung*.

Clayton’s mediating position (which he calls a “formal-semantic” theory<sup>[12]</sup>) aims to recognize the shaping influence of contexts of meaning, but simultaneously allows for general standards or criteria for explanation in social science. He proposes that we define “understanding” broadly as an intuitive grasping of patterns of meaning, and “explanation” as a rational reconstruction of these interrelated structures in a primarily theoretical context. They are interdependent. The latter part of Clayton’s book argues that religious beliefs generally, and theology as a discipline specifically, involve “explanation.” This is entailed by the fact that religious and theological claims are constative by their very structure; they intend to make assertions about something outside themselves. Clayton summarizes a basic conviction of the position we are calling postfoundationalism:

...to reject foundationalism is not to fall automatically into the waiting arms of the antifoundationalists, who claim that theology can be pursued without attention to the nature and epistemic status of its truth claims. To the contrary, the whole debate between foundationalism and antifoundationalism is probably based on the *false dichotomy* of an *outdated epistemological dilemma*. The shift to a fallibilist epistemology avoids, I believe, the alleged necessity of being either a foundationalist or an antifoundationalist. [13]

The postfoundationalist model is precisely the attempt to find a middle way between the horns of this outdated epistemological dilemma. This means that a theological explanation can be “systematic” without reifying into a Grand meta-narrative Scheme. Understanding always involves a recognition of systemic patterns, but these patterns are not prisoners of a subjective empathy. So systematicity may remain an ideal that drives the task of theology and the theologian can and should engage in ongoing presentations that aim for contextualized explanations, which in turn open up new possibilities for trans-contextual understandings.

**Implications.** If we accept the postfoundationalist construal as described above, what are the implications for the constructive task of theology? I want to point to three.

1. The Interdisciplinary location of theology
2. The Issue of Prolegomena
3. Material issues influenced by radical thematizing of “relationality”

First of all, the constructive task of theology is also inherently an interdisciplinary task. For theology to avoid the insularity of nonfoundationalism, without regressing into foundationalism, it must seriously engage other contemporary attempts to understand and explain the various aspects of reality, which Christian faith asserts is the creation of the biblical God. Further, this *interdisciplinary* task can only be fulfilled by *intradisciplinary* cooperation. By transgressing the strict boundaries between philosophical theology, systematic theology, biblical studies, historical and practical theology, without effacing the differentiation of their functions, Christian theology as a whole can more easily engage in coherent and constructive discussion with the worldviews of postmodern culture. We aim for systematicity (as well as practicality) together. [14] The new language of postfoundationalist thought, with its concepts of interpreted experience, traditioned understanding, and transversal thinking will better serve theology in its interdisciplinary dialogue within postmodern culture.

Our analysis also impacts the issue of “prolegomena” in systematic theology. Rather than restricting methodological discussions to the beginning of a theological presentation, the postfoundationalist model suggests the need for what I would call “*paralegomena*.” By this neologism, I mean the ongoing articulation and engagement of methodological issues “alongside” and intertwined

with material doctrinal presentation. We can see this idea in van Huyssteen: "...the project of theological methodology and 'prolegomena' now becomes part of theological reflection as such, that is, as part of an ongoing interdisciplinary inquiry within the practice of theology itself."<sup>[15]</sup> Similarly Wolfhart Pannenberg has argued that methodological reflections "need to be based on interaction with the subject matter and presentation. They should not be offered abstractly in advance, especially in a situation in which there is so little general agreement on what the subject matter of theology really is, and therefore on what method is appropriate to it" (ST, I, xii).

Nonfoundationalist theologians are fond of quoting Jeffrey Stout's comment that if you clear your throat too long, you will lose your audience. The complaint is that methodological discussions can go on indefinitely and no real theological work is accomplished. This naïve assumption that we can stop talking about method and simply start doing theology only makes sense if one either accepts foundationalism, and claims to have secured the necessary foundations, or if one accepts nonfoundationalism, and claims that methodology is only subject to criteria internal to the community. While Stout may be correct, it is also true that if you do not clear your throat sufficiently, the audience will not be able to understand you. *Can we not clear our throats as we go along?* The postfoundationalist will attempt to intercalate methodological and material reflections, incorporating epistemological and hermeneutical concerns as he or she does constructive theology.

Finally, a postfoundationalist method may foster the constructive task of theology in its presentation of specific material issues. The rigorous thematization of relationality that characterizes this view of rationality lends itself to attempts to conceptualize some of the central aspects of Christian doctrine. First, we have already noted the revival of trinitarian doctrine in the last half-century, emerging concurrently with the radical changes in philosophy of science traced above. The doctrine of Trinity is perhaps the most relational thought possible for the human mind, and the "relational turn" in philosophy may indeed help theologians articulate this uniquely Christian concept of God. Second, the doctrine of the Incarnation obviously requires careful analysis of relationality, in this case between God and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Ways of thinking about types of relational unity that involve neither fusion nor mere conjunction are particularly helpful here; the concept of the "true infinite" may be especially pertinent in this doctrine. Finally, the actual living out of the Christian faith is constituted by a relational unity – the relation between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit, whereby the person linked to Christ is "one Spirit with the Lord" (1 Corinthians 6:17). My hope is that developments in the postfoundationalist model of rationality may provide theologians with conceptual tools that will prove their fecundity in radical interdisciplinary dialogue with postmodernity. This model would recognize that the ongoing human endeavor to achieve systematicity is always already dynamically embedded in the historically-mediated relation of the communally-conditioned individual and his or her interpreted experience of God

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- [1] Ernest Sosa, "The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, v. V: Studies in Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980): 3. Notice that the "raft" metaphor also suggests that we are supported by *something* (water), even if it is not as solid as we might like. Similarly, "webs" have to be supported somehow, or the metaphor falls down completely.
- [2] Stenmark, *Rationality in Science, Religion and Everyday Life* (Notre Dame, 1995), p. 44.
- [3] Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 19.
- [4] *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Eerdmans, 1997), p. 52. Emphases added.
- [5] For van Huyssteen, intelligibility is "the supreme value that determines rationality" (*Essays*, 163).
- [6] N. Rescher, *A System of Pragmatic Idealism, Vol I.* (Princeton University Press, 1992): 94.
- [7] Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality* (Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 166.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 64-65.
- [10] Clayton, *Explanation from Physics to Theology*, 9.
- [11] *Ibid.*, 61.
- [12] *Ibid.*, 66.
- [13] *Ibid.*, 152. Emphasis added.
- [14] Osmer, Rick, "Beyond the Theological Encyclopedia." [in press]
- [15] van Huyssteen, *Essays*, 228. Cf. Philip Clayton, *Explanation From Physics to Theology*, 152.