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Doing Christian Systematic Theology: Faith, Problems, and Mysteries

WHAT IS THE FOUNDATION for Christian systematic theology? Moreover, what do Christian systematic theologians hope to achieve when they explicate the Christian Gospel? These are not new questions and others have attempted to provide answers that are more comprehensive and scholarly than the ones I will offer in this article. Here I want only to offer and elucidate a twofold principle that I have found helpful in doing Christian systematic theology. While I have attempted, over some years, to implement both aspects of this principle in the course of doing Christian theology, I have found them best expressed by John Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. There he states:

Theology is structured as an understanding of faith in the light of a twofold methodological principle: the *auditus fidei* and the *intellectus fidei*. With the first, theology makes its own the content of Revelation as this has been gradually expounded in Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Church's living Magisterium. With the second, theology seeks to respond through speculative enquiry to the specific demands of disciplined thought.¹

In order to demonstrate the importance of this twofold principle for the proper doing of Christian systematic theology, I would now like to examine separately each aspect of this twofold principle so as to establish the importance of their interrelatedness. In so doing I will also argue that some, maybe many, contemporary Christian systematic theologians do not follow this twofold principle, and so are not performing their task properly. Lastly, in the light of this twofold principle, I will propose what I consider to be the proper vocation of the Christian systematic theologian.

The Auditus Fidei and the Actus Fidei

The act of faith made by the Christian systematic theologian is no different from the act of faith made by any other Christian. Together they have heard one and the same Gospel (*auditus fidei*), and so together they make one and the same *actus fidei* in that Gospel. The foundation, then, of the Christian theological enterprise, the *intellectus fidei*, is the *actus fidei* in the *auditus fidei*. This act of faith is the *sine qua non* for properly undertaking the task of Christian systematic theology.

However, the question immediately arises as to what “the one and the same Gospel,” that is, the *auditus fidei*, is to which all, including systematic theologians, are called to believe. Pope John Paul II answers this question in terms of “the content of Revelation as this has been gradually expounded in Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Church’s living Magisterium.” By speaking of “the Church’s living Magisterium,” John Paul has obviously placed the theological enterprise within a Roman Catholic context. As a Catholic I believe that the “living Magisterium” has been and continues to be the ultimate helmsman for doing systematic theology. Nonetheless, in this essay I wish to express a view of the Gospel and of the doing of systematic theology that encompasses a broader spectrum of Christian systematic theologians. Such a view will certainly not be accepted by

all Christian theologians, nor will it address some crucial questions concerning ecclesial magisterial authority, yet my hope is that it could be applied, at least in its foundational understanding, by Christian theologians of all denominations.

For the purpose of this essay then, I consider the Gospel in a rather broad sense, that is, I am thinking primarily of the scriptural proclamation as it has been traditionally interpreted and as it has been doctrinally defined by the first four Ecumenical Councils. Obviously, there are doctrinal differences between the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and various Protestant denominations. Nonetheless, most Christian denominations have, at least officially, professed and upheld the creeds of this conciliar doctrinal tradition and have traditionally interpreted scripture in the light of this doctrinal tradition. Thus, I am espousing here what J. Webster has referred to as a “generous orthodoxy.”²

With the above in mind, I would argue that Christian systematic theologians are to accept the basic content of the Gospel as that content is authoritatively proclaimed and doctrinally understood within the Christian community past and present. The Christian community was first established and defined by its act of faith in the person of Christ and his redemptive work. While its understanding has deepened and proceeds to mature, the Christian community has, in faith, continued through the centuries to proclaim and embody, within its life and worship, that same basic content of faith. Christian systematic theologians, therefore, must receive in faith that same content of faith making it their own. Neither the Christian community nor the systematic theologian is the font from which the content of faith springs; rather, both drink, in faith, from the inherited well of Christian revelation. As A. Dulles states with regard to Catholic theology (though I believe that it is applicable to Christian theology as a whole): “Catholic theology does not generate its own object. It receives that object in faith.”³ Thus, Christian systematic theologians are called to profess the same Christian creed

with the same understanding of its content as that of the past and present Christian community. Only if Christian systematic theologians accept in faith the sacred Scriptures as they are traditionally read and doctrinally interpreted by and within the Christian community, both past and present, can they do systematic theology properly, that is, in a manner that is authentically Christian. As C. Gunton states: "Systematic theology is thus an activity which is the expression of a personal skill learned in community, that of the church."⁴

I believe that it is precisely at this juncture that contemporary Christian systematic theology finds itself in a crisis, and it is nothing less than a crisis of faith. It is particularly this crisis of faith among its practitioners that causes contemporary Christian systematic theology to appear to have no foundation, that is, a common understanding as to what the Gospel is. Some, maybe many, contemporary Christian systematic theologians seem never to have made an act of faith in the content of faith as it has been authoritatively and traditionally proclaimed and doctrinally understood. Or, if they have, they have subsequently, for various reasons, abandoned it. Much of what passes for contemporary Christian systematic theology falters, it seems to me, precisely because those who attempt to practice its art lack authentic faith in the received content of faith. Some contemporary Christian systematic theologians attempt to interpret and elucidate the content of faith, that is, they attempt to perform the task of *intellectus fidei*, without having sufficiently or properly performed the *actus fidei* in the *auditus fidei*. They instead attempt to elucidate a content that is other than the content of faith as authoritatively proclaimed and doctrinally understood within the Christian tradition.

Because of the absence of a proper act of faith, Christian systematic theologians often end up then placing their "act of faith" in their own theological speculations, in their own *intellectus fidei*. Their "faith" becomes entirely commensurate with their speculations, and so the truth or falsity of that faith is commensurate with the validity

or invalidity of such speculations. However, Christian systematic theologians do not, or ought not if they do, strictly speaking, actually “believe” their own theological speculations, that is, they can not, or should not if they do, give the assent of faith to them. They may argue and hold that what they say is true and so in accordance with what is traditionally believed, but they do not hold that their arguments or even, at times, that their conclusions are a necessary part of the received content of faith. Sometimes what theologians teach may come to form part of the doctrinal tradition, and so a true expression of the faith as, for example, Cyril of Alexandria’s understanding that Christ is the one person of the Son existing as man (the Hypostatic Union) or Augustine’s teaching on the *Filioque*. But even here what is professed in faith are the doctrines of the Hypostatic Union and the *Filioque* and not, necessarily, Cyril’s or Augustine’s complete argumentation on their behalf. I, for example, have proposed certain understandings of the Trinity and of the humanity of Christ, which are, to a degree, novel.⁵ Furthermore, I would argue, and am quite certain, that they are not only in conformity with the traditional doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation, but also actually deepen and clarify the traditional doctrinal understanding. Nonetheless, if my theological speculations proved erroneous and so were declared not to be in conformity with the doctrinal tradition, neither my act of faith nor the content of my faith would change one iota, because I do not “believe” my own theological speculations. What I believe, and so hold in faith, are the Christian doctrines as they have been traditionally proclaimed and understood.

Moreover, again because a proper act of faith is absent, some Christian systematic theologians have filtered the content of faith through a philosophical or cultural prism that distorts the Gospel as it has been traditionally proclaimed and doctrinally understood.⁶ Thus, what the Christian systematic theologian is doing is not *intellectus fidei*, that is, the elucidating and deepening of the *auditus fidei*, but the establishing of a new and often entirely different “faith.” The

faith content of such systematic theology differs in kind, then, from the faith content of the traditional Christian Gospel. Actually, it could hardly be termed “a faith” since what the systematic theologian now proposes as the Christian faith is grasped not through an act of faith in divine revelation, but through a comprehensive act of human knowing. The Gospel is reduced to some form of merely human philosophical insight or knowledge. Christianity becomes Gnosticism.

The question that now arises is: Why is the proper act of faith in the *auditus fidei* sometimes absent among Christian systematic theologians? Is it simply due to the “bad faith” on the part of some Christian systematic theologians, that is, to their censurable refusal to believe what has been traditionally proclaimed and doctrinally defined? While this could be so in some instances, I believe that the deeper problem lies in the contemporary confusion over the nature of Christian systematic theology, that is, the character and task of the *intellectus fidei*. This confusion over the proper doing of the *intellectus fidei* may, obviously, also arise out of a defective act of faith, but I believe that, historically, this defective act of faith first arose from a changed perception of what the nature of systematic theology is.⁷ It is this issue that I would now like to address.

The Intellectus Fidei: Problems and Mysteries

Gabriel Marcel, in his Gifford Lectures of 1949 and 1950, and later Jacques Maritain, who borrowed the distinction from Marcel, spoke of two contrasting attitudes a person may possess when approaching questions. Marcel pointed out that we can approach a field of inquiry as either a *problem* or as a *mystery*.⁸ He was critical of the modern mentality that approached every intellectual endeavor under the rubric of *problem*, that is, as if one were always examining some detached state of affairs that could be coldly dissected and systematically analyzed so as to produce complete and comprehensive

knowledge. This was being done, he believed, not only within the natural sciences, where it may be legitimate, but also within the humanities, specifically within his own discipline—that of philosophy.⁹ Marcel argued that some fields of human inquiry cannot be properly understood, and in actual fact they become distorted, when approached as problems. Rather, they must be approached under the rubric of *mystery*, which “by definition, transcends every conceivable technique.”¹⁰ Human beings are, for Marcel, a mystery and the fundamental concerns of human beings are mysteries—personhood, identity, friendship, family, good and evil, etc. By mystery, then, Marcel meant that while one could say a great deal about human beings and the central issues that surround them, no matter how much one said and no matter how true it may be, there is always more to be understood and articulated. There is no comprehensive, complete, and final answer. We may come to a greater understanding of the mystery of human life, but we never come to a complete comprehension of it. Maritain states that where there is mystery “the intellect has to penetrate more and more deeply the *same* object.”¹¹ The mystery, by the necessity of its subject matter, remains.

While Marcel and Maritain were primarily concerned with distinguishing the problems of scientific inquiry from the mysteries of philosophic inquiry, I believe that such a distinction between *problem* and *mystery* is relevant to how systematic theologians ought to approach issues of faith and theological doctrine. Marcel and Maritain were well aware that, arising out of the Enlightenment, there grew the mentality that intellectual advancement consisted in solving problems that had hitherto not been solved. The former “mysteries” of the physical universe were being resolved by approaching them as scientific problems to be decoded and unraveled. The scientific and physical laws of nature became transparent and unmistakable. This new enthusiasm for and success of the scientific method was the major contributing factor to this mentality. In the realm of science and technology, this mentality—that intellectual advance-

ment consists in solving theoretical and practical problems—may be legitimate.¹² However, I want to argue that this mentality, to disastrous effect, has colored how some systematic theologians approach questions of faith and so the doing of theology, the *intellectus fidei*. This mentality has simultaneously rendered the *auditus fidei*, with its concomitant *actus fidei*, almost impossible.

Some Christian systematic theologians today, having embraced the Enlightenment presuppositions and the scientific method that it fostered, approach theological issues as if they were problems to be solved rather than mysteries to be discerned and clarified. However, the true goal of theological inquiry is not the resolution of theological *problems*, but the discernment of what the *mystery* of faith is. Because God, who can never be fully comprehended, lies at the heart of all theological inquiry, theology by its nature is not a problem-solving enterprise, but rather a mystery-discerning enterprise.

Moreover, at the heart of the Christian gospel lies the foundational conviction that God has acted in time and history and continues to act in time and history in ways that are not commensurate with the natural order. God acts in ways that differ in kind from the manner in which the physical universe normally proceeds and in ways that differ in kind from the manner in which human actions and historical events occur. Thus, God's actions cannot be reduced to nor be commensurate with natural or human causes. The Bible, along with the doctrinal tradition to which it has given rise, embodies the proclamation and interpretation of these divine actions. Precisely because these actions are of divine origin, they partake of the very mystery of God, and thus can never be expressed or interpreted in a manner that is entirely comprehensible to the human mind. The words of Scripture may make known to us the significance of God's actions and the revelation that such actions contain. Moreover, the Christian tradition, both in its doctrinal content and theological speculation, may bring further clarity to the significance and content of this revelation. However, we can never penetrate the full signifi-

cance of God's actions, nor comprehend fully the content of revelation such actions contain. Thus divine revelation, as the acts of God to which scripture bears witness, is a mystery to be grasped in faith and intellectually discerned and clarified. Divine revelation cannot be reduced to the posing of a problem to be systematically resolved by human comprehension and so fully explained.

However, it is precisely here where we discover why some contemporary Christian systematic theology has become a problem-solving enterprise, and why the *intellectus fidei* has become detached from the *auditus fidei*. Some modern theologians, having embraced philosophical and cultural presuppositions which preclude that God can act in time and history in ways that go beyond and so are not commensurate with the natural and human order, have no other alternative than to see their task as that of solving "theological" problems. Having converted the theological enterprise into a problem-solving task, the very notion of "unsolved mysteries" cannot be tolerated. Their philosophical presuppositions contravene the very existence of divine revelation that would give rise to the mysteries of faith. The mysteries of faith proclaimed in the *auditus fidei* are dissolved in a false *intellectus fidei* that holds, for philosophical and cultural reasons, that such mysteries cannot be, and thus there cannot be an *actus fidei* in them. Thus, what intrinsically guides and internally compels the *intellectus fidei* is not an *actus fidei* in the *auditus fidei*, but philosophical and cultural factors that are external to and often not in conformity with the *auditus fidei*.¹³ C. Gunton insightfully states:

Origen's foundationalism [and he would also include such theologians as Irenaeus, Aquinas, and Barth], it must be noticed, is what can be called intrinsic. The foundation stones upon which the edifice is built are the teachings of the deposit of faith, the doctrines of the creed handed down in the tradition, as they interpret biblical truth. Contrast this with the *extrinsic* foundationalism that developed with Descartes and Locke, where the foundations are from outside the system.¹⁴

When the doing of systematic theology is governed by extrinsic philosophical principles, the theological enterprise becomes the philosophical systemization of the Gospel. Such a philosophical systemization not only takes precedence over any traditional doctrinal content, but it also becomes the interpreter and arbiter of that content. One may be doing systematic theology, but because it is no longer animated or governed by Christian doctrine, it is no longer authentic *Christian* systematic theology. R. Jensen summarizes this nicely when he states:

An irreversible rule of faith is dogma. It sets the bounds of what can pass as the proper message of the community. For theology, the bounds of the permissible will be set by the metarule: no proposed theologoumenon can be true that would hinder a dogma's control of the church's discourse.¹⁵

Moreover, when extrinsic philosophical or cultural presuppositions are employed by which the mysteries of faith are converted into "theological" problems, then the integrity of Biblical truth, with its doctrinal interpretation, is forfeited. Biblical 'truth' is reduced to a mythical or poetic expression of a deeper philosophical insight that is now known not by faith but by mere intellectual comprehension.

Problems and Mysteries: A Historical Example

While this problem-solving mentality may be more prevalent within contemporary theology, it was not absent within past doctrinal controversies. Let me illustrate the difference between approaching questions of revelation as problems to be solved rather than as mysteries to be clarified by examining one of the first major controversies within the early church, that of Arianism.

In the early fourth century, Arius took up the issue of how God could be one and how simultaneously the Son could be God. This is an authentic theological concern, and one that had been percolating

in the early Church for a long time. Arius, having examined all of the previous attempts at explaining this ‘problem’ concluded that there was no way to resolve the issue rationally. If God was one, then the Son, Arius concluded, could not possibly be God and, therefore, he must be a creature. Arius resolved the “problem” of how God could simultaneously be one and the Son be God by denying one of the truths that the church had previously held, that is, the divinity of the Son. Arius provided an answer. It was very clear and understandable. The problem was solved. However, in solving this theological ‘problem’ Arius also dissolved the faith of the church which believed that not only was the Father God but also equally the Son.

Because Arius conceived the *intellectus fidei* as a problem-solving enterprise, he was forced to withhold consent to the church’s *auditus fidei*. He could no longer make the same act of faith in the content of faith as that content was proclaimed and understood by the early church.¹⁶ Similarly today, because some contemporary systematic theologians conceive the *intellectus fidei* as the resolving of theological problems, they too are forced to withhold consent to the church’s *auditus fidei*.

Unlike Arius, the Council of Nicea ultimately realized that the Christian understanding of God was not a problem to be solved but a mystery that needed to be clarified. The majority of the church fathers probably did not know how to answer fully or satisfactorily Arius’s arguments, but they did know what the church believed, and so proclaimed that Jesus is God as the Father is God and that he was *homoousion* (one in being) with the Father. It was Athanasius, in the ensuing controversy after the Council, who grasped the full significance of Nicea’s *homoousion* doctrine. Athanasius reconceived what it meant for God to be one. Where in the past all Christian theologians conceived the one God to be the Father (this understanding included Arius), and then attempted to show how the Son shared in the one nature of God, an attempt that Arius realized was doomed to failure, Athanasius recognized that Christian revelation completely

shattered this view of God. Athanasius's great insight was to perceive that the one God is not just the Father, but rather that the one God is the Father begetting the Son. This is the very nature of the one God. This is what God is. What the one nature of God is is the Father eternally begetting the Son. Therefore, the Father and Son are the one God, one in being, for the one God is the dynamic interrelationship between Father and the Son.

Athanasius approached the issue of how God can be one and the Son be God not as a problem to be solved, but as a mystery to be discerned. With Arius all becomes comprehensible. With Athanasius a new clarity is achieved as to what the mystery is, but the mystery itself does not become completely comprehensible. We know more precisely and clearly what the mystery is, that is, that the one God is the Father begetting the Son, but we do not comprehend the mystery, that is, we do not fully grasp how the one being/nature of God is the Father eternally begetting the Son. That remains a mystery and has become, in a sense, even more a mystery, but one that has obtained new depth of clarity.

This historical example also illustrates two further points that are relevant to the task of the Christian systematic theologian. First, when theological issues are treated as problems to be solved, once the seeming solution has been found, often by denying one of terms of the problem as in the case of Arius, the issue becomes completely closed. The problem is solved. There is no longer any further need for clarification or development. One can move on to the next *problem*.

This is not the case with true theological and doctrinal development. While the mystery has been clarified, it has not become fully comprehensible, and so it remains open to further clarification and development. The depth of the mystery can still be probed further. True development is an impetus to further development. Even in heaven, while the mystery of God will become crystal clear, for we will see God face to face, yet in seeing him face to face the incomprehensibility of God will equally become luminously evident.¹⁷

Moreover, as also seen in the above example, one of the primary reasons theological issues become *problems* is that two or more “truths” are seen as seemingly incompatible. God cannot, for example, be one and the Son be God. Or, Jesus cannot be both God and man. Some systematic theologians would solve the *problem*, as did Arius, by denying one of the truths. Others, who seek less radical solutions to theological *problems*, propose that such incompatible “truths” must be held dialectically, that is, that even though they are incompatible, yet both must nonetheless be maintained. The opposition between the truths are held together for the sake of preserving “the mystery.” Thus, for example, despite the fact that God’s immutability does conflict with his becoming man, yet both must be held because there is a “mystery” present. I believe that such a dialectical approach to theological issues on the part of systematic theologians is ill-conceived. Such a proposal still approaches theological issues as problems or riddles, but now ones that cannot be solved. To address the mysteries of faith as true mysteries, as did Athanasius, is to clarify why two or more seemingly incompatible truths are not incompatible, and why they actually complement one another.¹⁸ This demands of Christian systematic theologians far greater creativity, imagination, and philosophical insight than either of the other two approaches.

Systematic Theology and the Development of Doctrine

I have attempted to clarify the relationship between the *auditus fidei* and the *intellectus fidei* within the context of the rather confused state of modern systematic theology. I would like to conclude, in the light of the above, by presenting a positive rendering of what I consider to be the proper vocation of a Christian systematic theologian.

Christian systematic theologians, by their vocation, are major, but not the sole, players in the grand and marvelous undertaking of developing Christian doctrine. But if such is their calling, what are

the ingredients that foster and encourage this theological enterprise? Discerning the nature of doctoral development can help us define the task of the systematic theologian and so clarify the *intellectus fidei*.

First, inherent within the very nature of Christian revelation is the principle that faith seeks understanding.¹⁹ Precisely because rational persons are the beneficiaries of this revelation, they are eager, impelled by the Spirit of truth, to deepen their understanding of what they believe. Such searching and querying is a sign, not of a lack of faith, but of an authentic spiritual vibrancy. Christian systematic theology cultivates this growth in the understanding of revelation, and so discloses its deeper significance. Systematic theologians, their reason guided by faith (the *auditus fidei*) and the light of the Holy Spirit, clarify and advance what has been revealed by God, written in the scriptures, and believed by their fellow Christians. In so doing they wish to make what has been revealed more intelligible, lucid, and relevant to the Christian community. They are performing the *intellectus fidei*.²⁰

Second, Christian theology also wishes to defend, by reasoned argument, what has been revealed against those who question, distort, or attack it. It is precisely this climate of controversy that forces systematic theologians, as the history of Christian doctrine abundantly demonstrates, to address doctrinal issues in new ways in the light of contemporary debate. This relationship between controversy and growth should not surprise us. The principle that faith seeks understanding was often most clearly observed, for example in the fourth- and fifth-century trinitarian and christological controversies, when theologians were forced to clarify the truths of faith, not simply for the edification of believers, but in order to protect and demonstrate the reasonableness of what had traditionally been believed. Here the *intellectus fidei* acts as a defense on behalf of the *auditus fidei*, but in so doing actually clarifies and enhances it.

Third, Christian systematic theology also wishes to demonstrate the interrelationship between the various truths of faith. This too clarifies and expands the understanding of the truths related. For example, the study of the relationship between the risen Jesus and ecclesiology not only helps the theologian, as well as the Christian community, grasp more deeply this relationship, but also clarifies what it means for Jesus to be the risen Lord and for the Church to be his body.

Fourth, the work of individual systematic theologians is not done in isolation. They work within a historical context and within the Christian community. Clarity and understanding grows within the history of the Christian church and within the context of the community of believers. What may come to greater clarity in one historical era will differ from what becomes clearer in another. Again, for example, the early Church experienced a growth in understanding with regard to the incarnation and the Trinity. During the Reformation, the Church's recognition of the nature and importance of faith and justification increased. This does not mean that these issues were never addressed previously nor does it imply that they will cease to be addressed in the future, as if all has now been concluded. Rather, this only specifies that certain key theological questions or issues were raised and certain important communal concerns for the Church were addressed at specific times, and that through this historical and communal process, with the help of theologians and church authorities, a new clarity was achieved.

Fifth, personal prayer and communal worship likewise foster theological understanding. Liturgy is a living expression of what is believed, and so through participation in it one grows in an understanding of the faith. Historically, liturgy at times expressed an intuitive apprehension of the faith that actually preceded and exceeded the later explicit intellectual exposition. For example, the baptismal formula and the doxologies clearly expressed the Church's belief that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were all equally God. When some in the early church doubted or denied that the Holy Spirit was

God equal to the Father and the Son, one of the principle arguments offered by theologians on behalf of the Spirit's divinity was the Church's ancient liturgical practice.²¹ Here we see that liturgical prayer and practice not only fostered the faith, but also that it later became a primary source for theological reflection and argument. This illustrates the well-known formula: *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief)—as the church prays, so the church believes. This equally implies that Christian systematic theologians must not only be worshiping members within the Christian community, but that they must also pray as the Christian community prays, that is, giving the same assent to the understanding of the content of these prayers as does the Christian community. The law of the Christian community's prayer, both past and present, must be the law of belief for the systematic theologian. If the systematic theologians are to perform properly the *intellectus fidei* on behalf of the Christian community, they must pray in unison with that community, that is, with the same belief that these prayers express.

All of these various ingredients advance the growth of theological understanding and contribute to what John Henry Newman was first to call "the development of doctrine."²² It is precisely this dynamic interplay between the *auditus fidei* and the *intellectus fidei* that accounts for this development. This dynamic interplay, while found within the whole Christian community as it prayerfully ponders the truths of the Gospel through the ages, should be found especially among Christian systematic theologians. They, through their *actus fidei*, have united, in their very person and as their vocation in service to the Christian community, the *auditus fidei* and the *intellectus fidei*. However, as was stated in the beginning of this essay and argued throughout, it is only when Christian systematic theologians make an authentic *actus fidei* in the *auditus fidei*, as it has been traditionally proclaimed and doctrinally interpreted by the Christian community, that they can genuinely perform the *intellectus fidei*—the doing of Christian systematic theology.

Notes

While some of the content of this article appears in Chapter Two of my book, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 2000), this article thoroughly recasts and substantially expands what is written there.

1. *Fides et Ratio*, 1998, n. 65. See also the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 10.
2. J. Webster, "Editorial," *International Journal of Theology* 1, no. 1 (1999): 2.
3. A. Dulles, "Principles of Catholic Theology," *Pro Ecclesia* 8, no. 1 (1999): 74.
 J. Webster, in his inaugural lecture as the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity, argues that it is the Christian theologian's docility to this "given" that allows him or her to contribute properly to the intellectual life of the university. It is only from within such a faith stance that the Christian theologian authentically contributes that which is particular and unique to the Christian theological discipline. See his *Theological Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 18–25. See also G. Loughlin, "The Basis and Authority of Doctrine," *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. C. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 52–59.
4. C. Gunton, "A Rose by Any Other Name? From 'Christian Doctrine' to 'Systematic Theology,'" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1, no. 1 (1999): 22. A. Dulles is of the same mind: "Even in its positive phase, in which it establishes its data through biblical and historical research, Catholic theology operates by the light of faith, reading the sources from the perspective of the believing community" ("Principles of Catholic Theology.")
5. See T. Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993); *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995); and "The Human 'I' of Jesus," *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (1996/97): 259–68.
6. A classic example of this would be Hegel's reinterpreting the whole of the Christian Gospel in the light of his philosophy. A more contemporary example is that of process theology. In both instances the traditional content of faith is filtered through a philosophy that is alien to the faith and its philosophical presuppositions, and so, in radically distorting it, gives rise to an entirely new "Gospel." Similarly, those who deny the traditional doctrines of Creation, the Trinity, the incarnation, the bodily resurrection, etc., for whatever philosophical reasons, have equally distorted the received Gospel.
7. In his essay, "A Rose by Any Other Name?" Gunton traces the historical path through which the doing of doctrinal theology came to be seen as the doing of systematic theology (4–23). While Christian theology has always, in some sense, been systematic (Gunton notes Origen, Irenaeus, Aquinas, and Barth), yet I wonder if the change of name does not connote a somewhat changed perception in the nature of Christian the-

ology? The emphasis is now placed on the philosophical systemization of Christian theology rather than on the elucidation of its doctrinal content. I will have more to say on this a little later.

8. See G. Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, I, Reflection & Mystery* (London: The Harvill Press, 1950), 204–19.
9. J. Maritain states, “The problem aspect naturally predominates where knowledge is least ontological, for example, when it is primarily concerned with mental constructions built around a sensible datum—as in empirical knowledge, and in the sciences of phenomena.” *A Preface to Metaphysics* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1939), 6.
10. Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, I*, 211.
11. Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics*, 7. Maritain also states:

Where the problem aspect prevails one solution follows another; where one ends, the other begins. There is a rectilinear progress of successive views. . . . Where the problem aspect predominates I thirst to know the answer to my problem. And when I have obtained the answer I am satisfied: *that particular* thirst is quenched. . . . In the second case where the mystery aspect predominates I thirst to know reality, *being* under one or other of its modes, the ontological mystery. When I know it I drink my fill. But I still thirst and continue to thirst for the same thing, the same reality which at once satisfies and increases my desire. Thus I never cease quenching my thirst from the same spring of water which is ever fresh and yet I always thirst for it. (*A Preface to Metaphysics*, 7–8)

For Maritain God is the fundamental mystery, and our thirst can only be satiated when we see him face to face. See *ibid.*, 5 and 8–9.

12. However, even in the field of science there remains a sense of “mystery” and, I believe, many scientists are coming to this awareness. The more science unlocks the “mysteries” of the universe, the more mysterious it becomes. New knowledge always leads to new and baffling questions. Science may solve *problems*, but its solutions often create even greater *mysteries*.
13. Systematic theologians are not the only ones who fall prey to this mentality. Scripture scholars are notorious for allowing their “hidden” philosophical presuppositions to govern their exegesis, Bultmann being the classic case in point.
14. Gunton, “A Rose by Any Other Name?” 8.
15. Jensen, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 36.
16. I am aware that some theologians would argue that before Nicea there was no uniformity of faith as to the nature of the Son’s divinity. There was rather fluidity, if not ambiguity, as to what was to be believed. I would argue that while there was a fluidity as to the theological expression of the Son’s divinity, there was not a fluidity, or even an ambiguity, as to what was believed. The Church was convinced, due to the New Testament proclamation and the tradition that arose out of it, that the Son

was truly God even if it had not yet theologically properly integrated that belief with the equal belief that God is one.

17. This is in keeping with the writings of the great Christian mystics of the East and the West who maintain that the more one grows in union with God, and so comes to know him ever more intimately, the more incomprehensible he becomes. The mystics are fond of such phrases as “luminous darkness” and “the rays of divine darkness.”
18. I attempted to demonstrate this principle in my book *Does God Change?: The Word's Becoming in the Incarnation* (Petersham: St. Bede's Publications, 1985). There I argued that the immutability of God is not in opposition to the incarnation, but rather that *only* an immutable God can actually come to exist as man. I have attempted a similar task in my book *Does God Suffer?* Here I argue that the impassibility of God is not a detriment to his being loving, but that only an impassible God can be truly and fully loving.
19. St. Augustine was the first to articulate this principle. He wrote “Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that you may understand” (*Tractatus in Joannis Evangelium*, 29, 6). He also wrote: “For although no one can believe in God unless he understands something, nonetheless the faith by which he believes, heals him, so that he may understand more fully. For there are some things which we believe only if we understand and others things which we understand only if we believe” (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 119). See also, Augustine's sermon on Isaiah 7:9 and *De Trinitate*, 1,1–2 and 5,2,2. St. Anselm articulated the principle more succinctly: “For I do not seek to understand in order to believe but I believe in order to understand. For I believe even this: that I shall not understand unless I believe” (*Proslogion*, 1).
20. In the light of faith seeking understanding, Pope John Paul II states his understanding of the task of systematic theology:

For its part, *dogmatic theology* must be able to articulate the universal meanings of the mystery of the One and Triune God and of the economy of salvation, both as a narrative and, above all, in the form of argument. It must do so, in other words, through concepts formulated in a critical and universally communicable way. Without philosophy's contribution, it would in fact be impossible to discuss theological issues such as, for example, the use of language to speak about God, the personal relations within the Trinity, God's creative activity in the world, the relationship between God and man, or Christ's identity as true God and true man. (*Fides et Ratio*, n. 66)

21. See, for example, Basil the Great's treatise *On the Holy Spirit* where he argues for the divinity of the Holy Spirit from the Church's doxological practice.
22. See John Henry Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).