

Editorial

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Topical Issue: “Inductive Theology. How Systematic Theologies Can Relate to Everyday Life”

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1 Introduction

If theology is understood as a reflection on faith and questions of meaning and values in the light of the theological tradition, then theology is related to current beliefs, lifeworlds, and orientations. Through empirical, narrative, historical, and hermeneutical research, theologians try to connect the Christian tradition to everyday reflection and experiences. One could therefore distinguish between theology in a broad understanding – referring to all forms of religious reflection – and academic theology as a methodological viable attempt to reflect on theology in a broad sense in the light of the Christian tradition and scripture.

As simple as this statement sounds, it is difficult to determine how this relationship is concretely defined in contemporary systematic theology. Internationally and in other disciplines of theology, the search for connections between the lifeworld and theological reflection has led to a variety of approaches: In approaches of “lived theology,” “ordinary theology,” “lived religion,” “public theology,” “narrative ethics,” “liberation theology,” “constructive theology,” or even “pragmatist theology,” the current lifeworld is moving into focus as the starting point and subject of systematic theology. But how can we describe the importance of the reference to the world and daily life and the understanding of modern theology in systematic theology? Where and for what purpose empirical observations and results of social developments or “lived theology” are taken up for systematic theological research? Is there a task for coherence or systematization of individual orientations and empirical observations? Do theologians face the task of connecting daily life observations with the traditional sources (incl. the scripture)? And if so, what is the function? How does it change systematic theological research, approaches, and aims?

The reference to the world and daily life plays a role in different approaches to theological research: It comes into view as the world of human experience, as an environment to be interpreted, or as a source of theological questions itself. In some approaches, quantitative and qualitative research is also a component of theological work – so far, mainly in practical theology. However, in Systematic Theology, there is a noticeable gap in the connection between traditional research and reflection on dogmatic topoi and the methodologically grounded research on the experience of faith in everyday life and the ecclesiastical access to theology. Dogmatics works mainly historically and often has little interest in a more detailed analysis of the present, or it rarely goes beyond general observations. Theological ethics, on the other hand, is strongly oriented towards reference disciplines and is thus very much concerned with questions of applied ethics and normative answers. In systematic theology, there is no broad tradition of including inductive research perspectives such

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as empirical questions, cultural hermeneutic research, social science research, etc. in one's own world of thought. Where and for what purpose empirical observations and results of social developments or "lived theology" are taken up for systematic theological research? Is there a task for coherence or systematization of individual orientations and empirical observations?

The "systematizing" perspective – in contrast, for example, to a systematic, ethical, or dogmatic perspective – may express the ongoing process in which observations of the present are interpreted and appropriated with Christian traditions. On the one hand, it claims the constitutively unfinished character of this undertaking. On the other hand, it is not focused on the interpretation of one or more dogmas. Systematizing theology does not aim at reading the texts or the religious experiences into a certain system or at interpreting them in view of dogmas, but relating perspectives and experiences into collage-like sets of interpretation. Thus, it is primarily a hermeneutical task of Systematic Theology to illuminate the processes of understanding.

Acknowledgements: In May 2023 we invited 20 researchers to meet online and in person in the Institute of Social Ethics at the University of Zurich, coming from Germany, Great Britain, Norway, Peru, the USA, South Africa and Switzerland to discuss different approaches of theological research, which have in common to embrace the importance of the reference to the world in their research. Our workshop followed a problem-oriented approach: The questions outlined were discussed under different "labels" – coming from different perspectives and contexts worldwide. In the theological research landscape, various approaches can be noted that attempt to introduce the contemporary into dogmatics and ethics and mark it as relevant for systematic theological research: Public Theology, Everyday Theology, Empirical Theology, Experiential Theology, Ordinary Theology, Constructive Theology, Narrative ethics, and qualitative research in ethics. We tried to gather all these different approaches, to collect and coordinate the different answers of inductive approaches to challenge systematic theology.

Our concern was not so much the definition of a certain approach and its demarcation, but rather bringing different problem descriptions into the discussion: What are commonalities in the direction of questioning, epistemological interest, and understanding of theology? What are the accents of the different approaches? In this way, we came closer to the common questions and got into a fruitful exchange. We have compiled some of the contributions from the workshop in this topical issue. In the meantime, the group has constituted itself as a working group of the WGTh (Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie) and continues to work on an understanding, theory, and methodology of inductive systematic theologies.

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