
Systematic Theology Literature Survey, 1997–2001

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Introduction

‘True concentration is the fruit of calculated dispersion.’ So runs the quotation from Basil Liddell Hart in what is undoubtedly one of the most helpful theological books published over the last forty years, never mind the last four, *The Greenhill Dictionary of Military Quotations* (Greenhill Books, 2000) edited by Peter G Tsouras. What follows is an attempt to discuss a number of books published over the last four years in the field of systematic theology in order to facilitate ‘calculated dispersion’ in the reading habits of *Foundations* subscribers.

Apologies and Qualifications

1. I make no claim whatsoever that what follows is comprehensive. As Frederick the Great said, ‘petty geniuses attempt to hold everything’ (*ibid.*, p. 105) and since I am no genius and wish to avoid pettiness, what follows is selective, subjective and a lot more dispersed than calculated. Feel free to play ‘unforgivable omissions’ and expect high scores.

2. I am not trying to review the works mentioned—that has been done elsewhere in this and other journals. Rather I am bringing to readers’ attention a number of pieces which appear to me to be important and, generally, give a reason why I think they are noteworthy.

3. There is, of course, material overlap between the sub-disciplines of theology. I do not propose to deal with ‘Jesus studies’ which belong to a New Testament literature survey even though some fascinating work is being done here which will have important implications for systematics. Similarly, I have kept away from biblical theology. In the theological programme, ethics rightly falls under systematic theology but it will not be covered here as the sheer volume of publications in ethics warrants a separate review. If, however, one is looking for a one-volume introduction to Christian ethics then be assured that nothing has been produced in the last four years which betters the dense but rewarding *Resurrection and Moral Order* by Oliver O’Donovan (Apollos, 1994, 2nd edition) and the more accessible and pleasingly theological *Biblical Christian Ethics* by David Clyde Jones (Baker, 1994). Apologetics, too, requires its own survey but mention must be made of one massive and important work, Greg Bahnsen’s posthumously published *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998).

4. Two works published just before the opening date of our survey have been hailed as supremely important contributions in their fields. Time will tell whether these claims are exaggerated but certainly attention should be drawn and given to *The Desire of the Nations* (CUP, 1996) by Oliver O’Donovan and *The Word Made Strange* (Blackwells, 1997) by John Milbank. The prestigious *Journal of Theological Studies* describes Milbank’s work as ‘a simply magnificent achievement ... a formidable landmark.’

5. Articles appearing in journals and periodicals are also not covered here both because the literature is too vast and because what is of lasting importance in journals will eventually generate book-length expositions or responses.

6. I have pitched what follows at the theologically alert and competent pastor and have therefore rarely mentioned mass circulation popular works which will have already hit the radar screen. Similarly, reference to works produced in the secular academy for the secular academy (of which there are far too many) has been kept to a minimum.

Desert Island Dogmatics

If you were allowed only one single author or single volume systematic theology on your shelves which would you choose? How about two? Three? And should anything published in the last four years affect your choice? Even amongst readers of a journal like *Foundations* one suspects that there would be a great variety in the selections made and the reasons given but, for the pleasure of having them at the front of your mind again, let me remind you of some of the leading candidates: John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Robert Dabney, Charles Hodge, William Shedd, Heinrich Heppe, Karl Barth, Louis Berkhof, GC Berkouwer, Hendrikus Berkhof, Herman Hoeksema, Carl Henry, Wayne Grudem, Thomas Oden. (And some runners-up, some of whom lag badly: John Gill, AA Hodge, Augustus Strong, Otto Weber, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Helmut Thielicke, Jürgen Moltmann, Geoffrey Wainwright, Charles Ryrie, Donald Bloesch, Millard Erickson, RJ Rushdoony, James Garrett, James Montgomery Boice).

The last four years have seen some notable contenders enter the lists. Worthy of first mention is Francis Turretin's three volume *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997). This work first published in Latin in 1679–85 was translated into English in the nineteenth century by George Musgrave Giger at the request of his friend Charles Hodge and Giger's 8,000 handwritten pages sat in the library at Princeton available to be consulted by students whose Latin was weak. James T Denison Jr has produced a magnificent edition of Giger's translation and lovers of profound, precise and reverent Reformed theology are greatly indebted to him.

In 1999 a further section of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* was released by the Dutch Reformed Translation Society. Bavinck lived from 1854 to 1921 and his eleven chapter, four-volume dogmatics had great influence upon the likes of Louis Berkhof and GC Berkouwer. Two of the eleven 'chapters' have now been issued as sample volumes. *The Last Things* (Baker 1996) followed by *In the Beginning* (Baker 1999). Prescient of theological developments over the next three generations and always readable, Bavinck's work deserves a wide readership. The translation of the whole work is now complete and the DRTS anticipates the appearance of the first cloth-bound volume in 2002.

Little needs to be said about Robert Reymond's *New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nelson, 1998). Major reviews have been published by Mark Karlberg here in *Foundations* (Spring, 2001) and by Robert Letham in *Westminster Theological Journal* (Fall, 2000) which in different ways undermine the book's claim to be a 'new standard of Reformed theology'. Amongst the criticisms which Letham regards as exposing the book's 'serious and crippling inadequacies' are that the book does not engage with serious theological thought in the academy, discussing neither recent attention to trinitarian theology nor feminist theology, liberation theology, Islam or the charismatic movement; that it is rationalistic and individualistic; that it is flawed by Reymond's

position that the Reformation view of the trinity is radically different from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan teaching; that it opposes the eternal generation of the Son, argues that Calvin rejected Nicene trinitarianism and has a weak sacramental theology.

Two major and recent systematic theologies which have drawn a great deal of attention are Robert Jenson's two-volume *Systematic Theology* (OUP, 1997–9) and Wolfhart Pannenberg's three-volume *Systematic Theology* now in English translation (Eerdmans/T&T Clark, 1991–8). There are many features which these two share: both are dense, demanding, often provocative, rarely comfortable and built upon a non-evangelical doctrine of revelation. Both are 'confessional' in the sense that they are the work of committed insiders writing prescriptively rather than that of pretended objective dispassionate commentators writing descriptively. Jenson has described Pannenberg's work as 'complexly rewarding and sometimes utterly exasperating'. Pannenberg has written that Jenson's work has 'learning that is both vast and profound ... and frequently exciting flashes of insight.' What each has said about the other is not only correct but also true of himself.

Pannenberg is less terse in his expression and more recognisably a post-Enlightenment liberal in his methodology than Jenson. He is also more prone to exploring the historical development of various positions which he invariably does with sureness of touch and immense erudition. Certainly this is not a consistently reliable guide to the dogma of Christian orthodoxy. Equally certainly it is challenging, imaginative and suggestive for those whose foundations are firm.

In these ways, too, Jenson can be a delight. For example, he reminds us, 'As faith is precisely finding oneself beyond oneself, the criterion of its authenticity is necessarily its object and not any form of self-analysis by the believer. The question "Do I really believe?" is already an unbelieving question.' (I.28) A score of qualifications and objections, exegetical, evangelistic, pastoral and dogmatic present themselves no sooner than one has read this statement. But then at least half a dozen fruitful developments and applications also present themselves. This is the joy of reading Jenson. Another example: 'The difference of past and future, and their meeting in a specious present, is the one unavoidable metaphysical fact, the fact of our temporality. As religion is the cultivation of eternity, or some or other bracket around our temporality, triple patterns are endemic in religion' (I.89). Or this: 'God will let the redeemed see him: the Father by the Spirit will make Christ's eyes their eyes ... The point of identity, infinitely approachable and infinitely to be approached, the enlivening *telos* of the Kingdom's own life, is perfect harmony between the conversation of the redeemed and the conversation that God is' (II.369).

Well-marketed and superficially attractive from the evangelical left are Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Eerdmans, 1994, 1999) and Alister McGrath's widely used text-book *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Blackwells, 2001, 3rd edition). These books approach neither the depth and precision of Turretin on the one hand nor the creativity and suggestiveness of Jenson on the other. Over-respectful of apostasy in the academy they strive for mature moderation and achieve a slightly tired fashionableness.

And, of course, it remains a sadness to many of us that there is no complete systematic theology from the pens of either John M Frame, author of *The Doctrine of the Knowledge*

of God (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987) and *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of his Thought* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995) or JI Packer. By way of consolation, we do now have four volumes of the *Collected Shorter Writings* of Packer (Paternoster, 1998–9) and these are predictably reliable, nutritious and inspiring.

Dictionaries/Encyclopaedia

The *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (IVP, 2000) has many helpful features and very many excellent articles but the unforgivable lack of indices, the unevenness of approach in its articles and the glaring gaps in its entry list make it something of a disappointment. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Baker, 1995) is more helpful.

The *Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (OUP, 2000) edited by Adrian Hastings et al. is also a disappointment. Promising much and of prodigious size for a one volume work, it tries to cover too much ground—theological concepts, significant people and movements, biblical cyclopaedia and history of doctrine—and turns out patchy in its coverage and uncertain in its aim.

In contrast, the signs are that the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker, 2001)—which I have not yet seen—will not disappoint. The previous edition (Baker, 1984) remains the best one volume theological dictionary of its type and there is every hope that its successor will fill an important gap on the shelf.

Series produced by particular publishing houses

Paternoster's series of *Biblical and Theological Monographs*, largely consisting of PhD dissertations published as written or only slightly revised, currently has around 25 titles. Items such as 'An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae' and 'A Kierkegaardian Reading of Charles Williams' may not gain a wide readership there are some in the series which deserve notice. Jonathan Bayes' *The Weakness of the Law* (Paternoster, 2000) is an exegetical work focussing upon four passages in Paul which appear to be 'negative' about the law of God and its conclusions provide important support for proponents of the 'third use' of the law. David Powys' *Hell: A Hard Look at a Hard Question* (Paternoster, 1998) is learned and temperate but reaches this conclusion: 'The tentative finding of this study is that the unrighteous will have no life after death, save possibly to be raised temporarily to be condemned. The unrighteous, whoever they prove to be, will find that God respects them in death as in life—true to their own choice they will have no part in the restored Kingdom of God, indeed, severed from the source of life, they will be no more.' Although more a piece of historical theology, G Michael Thomas's *The Extent of the Atonement* will be of interest to those who have followed these (Armstrong, Kendall, Nicole, Helm, Clifford et al.) debates. Thomas argues that the free offer of the gospel is incompatible with absolute personal predestination and that this has produced a radical and as yet unresolved tension at the heart of Reformed thought. His description of the problem may or may not be historically accurate but it is theologically overstated and certainly his proposed Barthian solution is weak.

Zondervan's series *Three [Four] views on ...* has received a number of recent additions. Of particular relevance to current debates are Darrell Bock (ed.), *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Zondervan 1999), JP Moreland and John Mark Reynolds (eds.), *Three Views on Creation and Evolution* (Zondervan 1999), and Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips (eds.) *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Zondervan

1996) although when, as in this last item, John Hick and Clark Pinnock are two of the protagonists, one wonders how precisely the centre of gravity in these debates is determined. With collections of this type the reader must always remember that the centre ground is on castors.

The *Bible Speaks Today* series edited by Alec Motyer and John Stott and published by IVP has made a splendid contribution to the thinking and especially the preaching of evangelicals for over twenty years now. A related series, *Bible Themes* is edited by Derek Tidball and so far just three titles have appeared: Peter Lewis's *The Message of the Living God* (IVP, 2000), Paul Beasley-Murray's *The Message of the Resurrection* (IVP, 2000) and Derek Tidball's *The Message of the Cross* (IVP, 2001). The attraction of the series is, of course, its biblico-theological approach and the corresponding danger is that it is easy for the books to feel sermonic and to avoid the demanding questions which the systematician is required to face.

IVP's other series, *Contours of Christian Theology* was established well before the period covered by this survey with Gerald Bray on *The Doctrine of God*, Robert Letham on *The Work of Christ* and Paul Helm on *The Providence of God* all appearing as far back as 1993. Subsequently volumes appeared covering *The Holy Spirit* (Sinclair Ferguson, 1996), *The Church* (Ed Clowney, 1995), and *The Doctrine of Humanity* (Charles Sherlock, 1996). To this point the series was uneven, not so much in quality as in pitch, with, for example, Helm's philosophical treatment of providence reading very differently from Clowney's more biblico-theological approach to the doctrine of the church. Donald Macleod's volume on *The Person of Christ* (1998) was a very welcome addition to the series. Macleod's passion and reverence combine with his theological precision to warm the heart as well as to stretch the mind. Further volumes on *Revelation* and *The Last Things* are intended but the feeling remains that the series as a whole is something of a missed opportunity—less rather than more than the sum of its parts.

A very different series is currently being issued by Cambridge University Press. The *Cambridge Companion to ...* series endeavours to combine authoritative status reports on scholarship in given areas with original contributions to that scholarship. The series has attracted an impressive array of contributors and a number of the volumes already published deserve attention. The *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (1997) edited by Colin Gunton has essays on the traditional theological loci by writers of the calibre of Gunton himself, Kevin Vanhoozer, Robert Jenson, and Geoffrey Wainwright. The *Cambridge Companions to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (ed. John de Gruchy, 1999), to *Karl Barth* (ed. John Webster, 2000), to *Liberation Theology* (ed. Christopher Rowland, 1999) and to *Ethics* (ed. Robin Gill, 2001) are all as rewarding as they are demanding.

Twentieth Century Surveys

For those seeking an introduction to the development of non-evangelical systematics over the twentieth century two recent publications may be of help. *Contemporary Theologies* (Fortress Press, 1998) by Ed Miller and Stanley Grenz is a very readable survey with chapters on Barth, the Niebuhrs, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, the Death of God, Process Theology, Moltmann, Pannenberg, Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, Global Theology (Hick) and Postliberalism (Lindbeck). It suffers from the common fault of soft evangelical treatments of apostates, namely that of trying too hard to appreciate the positive and to avoid denouncing the heretical.

The Modern Theologians (Blackwells, 1997, 2nd edition) edited by David Ford is a mine of information and insights. Thirty five chapters, each by a different author, cover very many of the significant academic theologians and theological movements of the twentieth century. The book has a strongly ecumenical and international perspective and its value is in highlighting the distinctions, questions and flaws of others rather than in making a positive theological contribution of its own.

On A Few Particular Doctrines

On God and creation

In *The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God's Action in the World* (IVP, 2001) C John Collins discusses supernaturalism, providentialism and occasionalism and argues that the first of these which, he believes, is somewhat out of fashion is yet both exegetically warranted and logically coherent. Collins provides an interesting and helpful introduction to the debates as well as useful background to the growing literature on 'intelligent design'.

Of late there has been a strong renewed interest in trinitarian theology and particularly in the concept popularised by John Zizioulas in his *Being as Communion* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985) of the being of God as 'persons in relation'. As Colin Gunton puts it in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (T&T Clark, 1997, 2nd edition) 'God is no more than what Father, Son and Spirit give to and receive from each other in the inseparable communion that is the outcome of their love. Communion is the *meaning* of the word: there is no 'being' of God other than this dynamic of persons in relation.' (p. 10). Gunton's work is technically demanding but does clarify many of the issues at stake in current trinitarian debate. More accessible and somewhat predictable is Millard Erickson's *Making Sense of the Trinity* (Baker, 2000). Don Carson provides a thoughtful and enormously helpful clarification of the Biblical data and their implications in *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Crossway, 2000)

The Openness of God

The debate around the 'openness of God' gives a dispiriting view of the state of evangelical theology. A time-bound, dependent, changeable God who does not know the future and whose love is measured not by what he gives but by his vulnerability to 'feeling our pain' is a parody of the God of the Scriptures. No surprise, then, that he (she?) should be so adored by liberals whose method and agenda have been determined by Enlightenment humanism and relativism, whose refusal to believe in a sovereign God means that post-Holocaust theology is regarded as qualitatively different from anything that had gone before and whose invention of strategies for avoiding uncomfortable truths has been fuelled by the abuse of hermeneutics and the philosophy-theology divide. But the ready capitulation of so many evangelicals before the charges that, for example, the doctrine of impassibility is a Greek philosophical imposition upon the Christian faith or that the suffering of the divine Christ in his humanity is not enough—God the Father, if he loves, must take our suffering into his divine nature, is dismal. The debate is extremely important and well documented elsewhere. Important additions from the last four years include Gregory Boyd's *God of the Possible* (Baker, 2000); Gerald Bray's *The Personal God: Is the Classical Understanding of God Tenable?* (Paternoster, 2000) which is

characteristically lucid and forthright; Bruce Ware's excellent *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Crossway, 2001); *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock* (Paternoster, 2000), edited by Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson; *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists* (Eerdmans, 2000) edited by John Cobb and Clark Pinnock.

Superior, in my view, to all of these, however, is Thomas Weinandy's *Does God Suffer?* (T&T Clark, 2000) which is a deeply impressive work. Weinandy, a Franciscan who lectures in History and Doctrine at Oxford, handles the biblical data, the philosophical concepts and the theological implications and interplays of both in a masterly fashion. His introductory survey of the literature and the debates is nuanced and scrupulously fair, his development of his argument inexorable and his exposition of the suffering of the divine Christ both passionate and reverent. From a Franciscan comes orthodox and authentically evangelical theology conducted with seriousness and intellectual rigour.

Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspective on Election, Foreknowledge and Grace (Baker, 2000) edited by Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware is a reissue of 14 of the essays which appeared in their earlier two-volume, *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will* itself a response to Clark Pinnock's *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* (Zondervan, 1989). With contributions from John Piper, Jim Packer, Wayne Grudem, Ed Clowney, and Don Carson, amongst others, *Still Sovereign* is an excellent and readable defence of a strong Calvinist position on these issues.

On sin

Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Eerdmans, 1999) will strike some as quirky and others as compromising but will certainly stimulate thoughtful readers. Iain Campbell's *The Doctrine of Sin* (Mentor, 1999) surveys the biblical, reformed and neo-orthodox views of sin and concludes that neo-orthodoxy's view represents a retreat from a doctrine capable of sustaining full-blooded personal responsibility and guilt. Before the period of our survey but an outstanding book is Cornelius Plantinga's *Not the way it's supposed to be: A breviary of sin* (Apollon, 1995).

On atonement and justification

The growing literature on the 'new perspective' on Paul cannot be dealt with here. Instead, mention should be made of *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet* (Paternoster, 2001) edited by David Peterson. This is a robust defence of the doctrine of penal substitution on exegetical and systematic grounds and is particularly welcome in view of the way that the doctrine appears to be one about which some evangelicals are becoming embarrassed. Norman Shepherd's *The Call of Grace* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2000) is more likely to stir memories and passions in North America than in the United Kingdom but its treatment of grace and merit in covenant theology deserves attention.

Eschatology

Unsurprisingly a large number of books on eschatological themes were published around the turn of the millennium. NT Wright's Grove Booklet, *New Heavens, New Earth* (1999) provides a clear statement of his combination of a preterist reading of the synoptic apocalypse with a strong affirmation that Christian hope focuses upon the Christ-centred transformation and renewal and glorification of this universe. RC Sproul's advocacy of a generally preterist position in *The Last Days of Jesus* (Baker, 1998) is, as with most of

what he writes, accessible and cogent. Robert Doyle's *Eschatology and the Shape of Christian Belief* (Paternoster, 1999) has been well received by many although his combination of chronological and thematic treatments at times feels rather schematised. For some, the publication of Jürgen Moltmann's *The Coming of God* (SCM, 1996) was an important event. If nothing else it gave us one of the clearest statements yet of just how radical is his departure from orthodoxy: 'In the divine Judgment all sinners, the wicked and the violent, the murderers and the children of Satan, the Devil and the fallen angels will be liberated and saved from their deadly perdition though transformation into their true, created being, because God remains true to himself, and does not give up what he has once created and affirmed, or allow it to be lost' (p. 255).

The debate over conditional immortality continues vigorously. In addition to David Powys' book mentioned above there are relevant contributions in *'The Reader Must Understand': Eschatology in the Bible and Theology*, (Apollos, 1997) edited by KE Brower and MW Elliott. Two of the main protagonists in the debate, Edward Fudge and Robert Peterson, produced *Two Views of Hell* (IVP, 2000) which gives thorough coverage of the arguments. And the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals (ACUTE) produced another helpful survey *The Nature of Hell* (Acute/Paternoster, 2000) which carefully states what is agreed and what not as well as discussing issues of conditionalism and evangelical unity. It also has a superb bibliography for those wishing to do further research into the subject.

In Conclusion

Do not live another day without ordering and resolving seriously to read Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Thomas Weinandy's *Does God Suffer?*, and Donald Macleod's *The Person of Christ*. And as you do so, remember the words of Thomas a Kempis, (*Imitation*, I.iii.4): 'When the day of judgment comes, inquiry will not be made of us what we have read, but what we have done, not how well we have spoken, but how piously we have lived.'

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Book Brief

Through the tragic events of 11 September Islam has been forcefully brought to our attention. More than ever we need to be informed about this religion. **Patrick Sookhdeo** is a sure guide in his superb little book *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Islam* (Fearn, Rosshire, Christian focus Publications, 2001). Very succinctly this book deals with the origins of Islam, its essential teachings, its variations and sharing the gospel with Muslims and caring for those who become Christians. At the end of the book is a very useful glossary of Islamic terms. This is just the sort of short book one needs to get a grip on a subject like this and to open the way for further study.
