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Fiorenza's Contribution to Theological Methodology

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The subject of theological methodology is currently in hot debate, among liberals and conservatives, Catholics and evangelicals, Calvinists and Arminians. All these groups share a common source in the scripture, an early common heritage, the contemporary world situation and almost five hundred years of interaction. Therefore, there are many common factors which unite these groups and many contemporary interests which draw them forward.

There are also many areas in which these groups are all divided. There are various thoughts about the nature and purpose of systematic theology, various starting points (revelation, the contemporary situation, ascending or descending Christology), and certainly many philosophical, doctrinal and praxis differences.

In the midst of this ambiguity and occasional conflict we all need to listen to each other to best represent Christ and His church in our work. Theologians of many communities are united in their interest in theological issues, often to the exclusion of other religious thinkers (eg. biblical scholars, philosophers of religion, ethicists). Hence the various communities of people familiar with theological terminology and current theological controversies and investigations becomes a select macro-community sharing a common theme (theology) and an overlapping vocabulary. Liberals and conservatives can learn from each other. Evangelicals and Roman Catholics can learn from each other. Liberationists and the established church can learn from each other. The doors to rational, critical reflection and dialogue on the great themes of theology and caring for the church need to be open doors. Such openness does not necessitate compromise or "watering down" of one's theology.

It is in the context of such critical openness that evangelicals can examine the contribution which Fiorenza has recently made to theological methodology.¹ Fiorenza examines three classical paradigms of doing theology and five recent approaches. From this brief survey he then makes four recommendations for future directions in theological methodology. I shall present his background points in summary fashion, his four recommendations and then interact with his presentation.

I. Three Classical Paradigms of Theology

Fiorenza presents the history of Roman Catholic theological methodology under three schools: Augustine, Aquinas, and the Neo-Scholastics. Fiorenza sees these schools as most influential in western academic theology. The common themes of these three schools are identified (Fiorenza, pp. 5-8) as 1) finding the primary source in the scripture (although differing in interpretation), 2) experience of a community of the faithful at given points as well as the community of theologians, and 3) reliance on a basic approach or procedure to interpret scripture, tradition and experience (any one of which constitutes a background theory). These three themes are not new, John Warwick Montgomery specified these and more a generation ago.² But Fiorenza's retelling of the story of theology is interesting and the conclusions he draws about methodology are helpful.

Augustine

Augustine moved theology forward by differentiating between wisdom (*sapientia*) and knowledge (*scientia*). Wisdom has as its object God. Knowledge is rational insight and is based on experience, authority, and signs. Such knowledge leads to wisdom: comprehension of the divine. Knowledge proceeds from visible to the invisible, from appearances to reality (12).

This analytic procedure reveals Augustine's neo-Platonism. Epistemologically and hermeneutically Augustine wrote as if our knowledge of the divine aided us in interpreting any individual sign of the work or presence of God (14). Thus, there is an interactive relationship, almost a dialectical relationship, in our growth in perennial wisdom.

Today theologians are facing the tension between objectivity in interpretation and the necessity of recognizing the personal factors in any interpretation. Even those who follow Augustine in theological content often differ from him in his idealistic orientation.

By scholastic (late medieval) times, theologians had changed to view the content derived by faith from authority as probable; that is, as more certain than opinion, but less certain than knowledge (which is still defined as derived from reason and experience). The scholastics, using a variety of sources, placed the determinative authority in the theologian (not in the council, the bishop, or the laity). This formulation is not as clear in pre-Thomistic scholasticism as it became in the neo-scholastics.

Aquinas

Aquinas fundamentally changed the nature of theology in the first article of the **Summa** by defining theology as a science, hence knowledge. Thomas applied the medieval principle of 'resolution' to the articles of faith. God's revelation gives an axiologically certain faith and from this faith can be gained knowledge by theological deduction (22). In this way the authority of the articles of faith derived from divine revelation is passed on to the science of theology. If doctrine makes use of scripture properly, then its conclusions are necessary. Presson³ suggests that Thomas' view of the authority of scripture is often overlooked in Roman Catholic/Protestant debates. This shift limits the role of philosophy. Philosophy can only show that the truths of faith do not contradict reason or experience. Since philosophy operates in the realm of the observable and the rational it is not able to judge revelation or faith. Thomas assumed that a basic harmony exists between natural reason and revelation (27). Disharmonies result from errors in philosophy.

This position puts the practical authority in the persons of theologians, the ones who do correct deductive work from the scriptures. Under the Augustinian framework the authority was in the hierarchy of bishops who derived truth from revelation and passed it down with authority as from God.

Neo-Scholasticism

The controversies concerning the papacy, conflicting councils and, eventually the Reformation led to a change in theological methodology. John of Torquemada, Johann Eck, Bartolome Carranza, and Melchior Cano sought to determine catholic truths by appealing to scripture, tradition, the early councils, and the teaching of the main popes (28). This first step in the neo-scholastic methodology relying on defining truth based on variety of sources is a very different background theory than Augustine's biblically based Platonic reason or Aquinas' biblically based Aristotelian categories.

In the nineteenth century Dennis Petau took the second step toward neo-scholasticism when he developed a conception of theology as a deductive science (29). Theology advances in knowledge by deducing conclusions from premises of faith by means of premises of syllogistic reason. In this schema a theologian collects and synthesizes all truth and then uses philosophy as the intermediate link toward truth statements. Where Aquinas and other theologians used syllogisms or reason as a rational method for explicating truth, Petau made it the fundamental method of deriving truth (a new background theory). In practice this led to the starting point for theological methodology being the most recent declaration of the Roman bishops, i.e. canonical tradition (30), which is presented with rational and experiential supports. Only disputed points are settled by appeal to scripture or councils.

This method blends 1) the scholastic probable authority of truth with 2) the probable authority derived from factual evidence and 3) the conclusions of practical reason with 4) a philosophical method of induction. Since 'all truth' is probable on this approach, the councils lead us to truth for the moment via the conclusions of the majority of bishops, not the theologians or the scriptures themselves.

Fiorenza's Conclusion

The three historic approaches display common elements: appeal to tradition and scripture, the scientific character of theology, the importance of the community of the church, and the role of human experience. But the approaches differ in 1) the combinations of these elements, 2) the basic of starting point, and 3) the philosophical background theories. These differences have mutually exclusive effects on the theological methods.

Modern research has cast doubts on the certitude of neo-scholastic theology by increasing awareness of the historical character of human thought, and by developing phenomenological, hermeneutical and existential shifts in the role of philosophy within theological method (34).

II. Five Contemporary Approaches to Theology

In the last century the role of transcendental theology (the focus on a priori conditions of human knowledge and human subjectivity and the limitations of human knowledge) characterizes much of Roman Catholic theology. This movement (Marechal, Bouillard, de Lubac, Rahner, Lonergan and Schillebeeckx [38]) recovers Augustinian and Thomistic elements but with a different background theory. Rahner has become the chief spokesman for this position. Rahner begins with an analysis of human persons, their knowing and willing and their existential orientation to reality instead of the scripture or the early councils. Transcendental theology is anthropological whereas Augustine and Aquinas were theocentric and biblical.

A second modern movement is toward hermeneutical refinement. Hermeneutical theories argue that language is constitutive as well as expressive (44). Therefore, religious experience is seen as a culturally based linguistic phenomenon experienced in a community of discourse. This brings more crisis to the nature of community, the commonality of experience and the role of tradition. The meaning of discourse is no longer identified with the agent's self-interpretation of actions or beliefs (46). The metaphysical shift is away from words of revelation or faith or from reason to the primacy of the experience of interaction itself.

Third, analytical approaches to theology focus on the significance of epistemology (Lonergan⁴), the role of models for theology (Dulles⁵), or the role of decision (Walter Conn⁶) in constituting and interpreting experience (48-49). Lonergan's conception of conversion coupled with his realism seeks to hold in balance the tension between objectivity and subjectivity. This means that the role of these metatheories is to adjust the background theory, not to form a new methodology. Fiorenza does not seem to recognize how important this point is.⁷

The fourth modern approach Fiorenza calls correlation (55). This method comes from Tillich's correlation of data, logic and experience. Catholic theologians (Schillebeeckx, Kung, Ruether and Tracy) have adapted this in various directions (57-60). This method assumes the authority and validity of the tradition, correctly interpreted, and seeks to apply it to the present. But it recognizes a greater distance between past message and present situation than did traditional theology (61).

The fifth approach Fiorenza presents moves in the direction away from continuity with tradition. Liberation theologies begin with social-political situations, critique tradition from the perspective of the oppressed, and focuses on praxis, not knowledge, as the goal of theology.

The ambiguity of the five approaches of contemporary theology and the challenges of the present situation lead to three internal problems in theology: pluralism vs unity, rationality vs existential orientation, and power vs oppressiveness. Fiorenza says that the task of Christian theology is the elaboration of the Christian vision and identity in the face of the challenges and problems. But to move the task forward, we must revisit and revise theological methodology.

III. Toward a More Comprehensive Theological Method

Fiorenza defines three criteria in reconstruction of a theological methodology. Reconstructive methodology helps theologians interpret scripture, tradition, creeds, councils, practices, and past theological reflection. It also brings us into relation with philosophical and scientific discourse today, with ongoing experience and practice of faith in the world, and with other communities of discourse.

The first element of methodology Fiorenza presents is background theories. These theories are implicit philosophical assumptions, hypotheses and judgments concerning the nature of knowledge, science and faith. The methodological differences in background theories has become a matter of explicit discussion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But only a few authors have approached this discussion from a vantage point which takes into account not only Christian theology but also philosophy, culture and sociology (76), that is, from the true task of systematic theologians. Fiorenza does not adopt any position within the background theories but presents the necessity of formalizing a position as necessary to any specific proposal for a theological method. This clarification of the

need for sharp thinking about one's philosophical method and theological starting point is well taken. Fiorenza's contribution is to clarify terminology and place a historical perspective on this element.

The second element Fiorenza suggests are retroductive warrants. In philosophy and rhetoric a warrant (justification) is retroductive if it offers the most feasible and comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon, accounts for unexpected data, and enables the philosophical endeavor to move on in practice (77). Fiorenza relates this to Newman's illative sense (Aristotle's prudent practical judgment) and to the desire of liberation theologies to relate to the total human experience. Fiorenza does not present or discuss any specific retroductive warrant nor does he discuss any from the eight positions he has surveyed. This lack is unfortunate because it could be the most creative point in his proposal.

The third element Fiorenza includes is the community of the church. Under this heading he is really seeking to answer the question: whose judgment is of greater value? The First and Second Vatican councils moved away from the judgments of particular theologians or schools of theology and back to the determination of the bishops in council.

In a two paragraph conclusion, Fiorenza asks theologians to reconstruct the integrity of the church's theological tradition in light of background theories, retroductive warrants, and in the catholicity of the church as a community of discourse. Theologians must decide what is paradigmatic about the tradition in relation to these three elements and in the context of the five approaches in order to form a truly catholic theology (85).

IV. A Critique of Fiorenza's Recommendations

Fiorenza's contribution is manifold. He calls us to a renewed focus on the history of theology and offers a useful summary of the major story. A protestant parallel might be to tell the story of the growth of theology since 1517 by focusing on two or three main figures who have had the most influence in one wing of the Augustinian tradition, eg. Luther and Calvin, or Luther and the Anabaptists. This could be very misleading, for example Barth would be a minor variation on Calvin. Wesley, the Pentecostals, movements like the Evangelical Free Church and others would all be minor variations on the Anabaptists. If the story is told carefully then these affiliations would be true and could show relationships which are often ignored. Of course, the focus is on theological mainstreams, not examinations of the great variations in practices. Fiorenza tells the story of the history of theology, as he sees it, very well.

Fiorenza's conclusion highlights three main elements of theological methodology: background theories, retroductive warrants, and the community of the church. If we correlate his earlier summary of the common elements from the three schools of theology, he is including personal and corporate experience in the community element. He is including the foundational starting point and the philosophical method under background theories. The retroductive warrants includes the issue of the scientific character of theology and the question of the relative value of human experience. But he fails to develop this correlation well.

Fiorenza's primary contribution is to further the modern discussions the issue of warrants by pointing out the need for deeper review. Protestants have debated this in journals for decades.⁸ We have just begun to interact across fields to discuss warrants as they are used in jurisprudence and rhetoric. But Fiorenza does not include any discussions outside systematic theology nor does he draw on any of the non-Roman Catholic discussions. This is symptomatic of the lack of any interaction with protestant thought. Fiorenza is writing a book on Roman Catholic theology. But the conclusions he draws are generalized to all of theology. In the two volume work of which this is part, there is almost complete disregard of protestants, even when there are substantial works where protestants have written specifically to interact with Roman Catholic theology. Thirty years after Vatican II there should have been more presence of dialogue. His paper and the books continue to pointedly ignore protestant thought and yet draw conclusions as though speaking for all of theology.

From the brief conclusion presented it is difficult to know how to take some of the points Fiorenza makes just prior to the conclusion. For example, he refers to the issue of the locus of authority. Should our present theological decisions be made by theologians, church leaders such as the bishops, or do the laity have a role to play? Is the basis of decision in scripture, in rational argumentation, or in consistency of practice and integrity with all humanity? These are important questions and theology cannot be rethought until these questions of authority and procedure are settled.

But none of these short-comings should take away from what I consider to be the second of Fiorenza's primary contributions: the discussion of the background theories and warrants also needs to be related to discussion of the scope and involvement of the relevant

community of interest. In the Roman Catholic case the discussion might well be around how to involve the various groups (theologians, bishops, hierarchy, laity) in the formation of theology.

As an example of application within protestant circles, especially in broad-based groups we need to be concerned with inclusion of all the possible members and of involvement of those members in the discussion. Are all evangelicals, or at least all theological groups, represented in our discussion, or are only a clique or narrow cadre of persons represented? In the papers and in the journals, does the selected authorship represent widespread involvement or something more narrow (Christian political correctness)? This point relates to Hauerwas' *Community of Character* (1981).⁹ Are we forming a healthy, wide-based community which will continue to foster maximal involvement, or are we becoming more narrow and top-down as time passes? Hauerwas suggested that it is the story we tell about ourselves and the image we come to believe represents us collectively which inculcates our values and perpetuates our existence. I am not faulting any group on any of these points, I only wish to acknowledge that what constitutes our 'community' is a relevant item of discussion for our health and for the future.

In summary then, evangelicals can learn from Fiorenza about the importance of telling the story of theology in a connected way, focusing on background theories, warrants and the community of discourse, and doing new systematic theology in light of these factors.

Endnotes

¹Fiorenza, F.S. and Galvin, J.P., eds. (1991). *Systematic Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

²Montgomery, John Warwick. (1965). "The Theologian's Craft," *Concordia Theological Journal*, .

³Presson, P.E. (1970). *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and Revelation in Aquinas*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

⁴Lonergan, B. (1972). *Method in Theology*. NY: Crossroads.

⁵Dulles, A. (1983). *A Church to Believe In*. NY: Crossroads. Also, *Models of the Church*. NY: Doubleday, 1974.

⁶Conn, Walter. (1981). *Conscience*. Birmingham: Religious Education Press. Also, *Christian Conversion*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986.

⁷For example, see my article on realistic theism (BEPS 11, 1988, 17-31) in which I attempt to show how E.J. Carnell, James Collins, and Hilary Putnam can be useful, but none of them allowed to be determinative in developing a new version of theistic realism.

⁸For an excellent summary see the dissertation by Gary Stanley (USC, 1991, *A Rhetorical Analysis of Pat Robertson's Candidacy for the Presidency*).

⁹Hauerwas, Stanley. (1981). *A Community of Character*. South Bend: Univ. of Notre Dame.

This book--the first of its kind--provides an overview of Fiorenza's theological biography, from early influences and original insights to a comprehensively systematic project to reconstruct the foundations of theology, and explicates the major contours of Fiorenza's vital contributions to theological method, foundational, systematic and constructive theology, and the practical function of religion in society and politics. Start your review of *Reconstructing Theology: The Contribution of Francis Schussler Fiorenza*. Write a review. rbautista is currently reading it Oct 21, 2018. Later contributions to the scientific method were made by the philosopher Rene Descartes. Although some disagreement exists regarding the exact characteristics of the scientific method, most agree that it is characterized by the following elements: 1) Empirical approach. 2) Second, the research problem must be capable of being tested empirically (i.e., with data derived from direct observation and experimentation). A "true" experiment includes several key features: 1) one or more experimental groups; 2) random allocation to control and experimental groups; 3) pretest of the groups to ensure parity; 4) post-test of the groups to see the effects on the dependent variable; 5) one or more interventions to the experimental group(s)