

What is to be said about the difference between systematic theology and moral theology?

About as far as I have got in addressing this question heretofore is to say that "moral theology properly asks how one is to exist and act in relation to one's fellow beings in any situation whatever insofar as one understands one's existence in accordance with the Christian witness," while systematic theologians are concerned with the past traditions of Christian witness only "insofar as they formulate the general principles of existence and belief to which all Christian tradition more or less adequately bears witness" (OT: 97 f.).

The insight expressed by these formulations is that systematic theology and moral theology significantly overlap at the point of their common concern for "how one is to exist," or for "the general principles of existence," while they differ insofar as the second, moral theology, is also concerned with "how one is to act," or, better, "how one is to act and what one is to do," and the first, systematic theology, is also concerned with "the general principles of belief."

In terms that I now incline to use, I could say that systematic theology and moral theology significantly overlap in their common concern for Christian self-understanding (=faith), while they differ insofar as they each also have to do with a distinct, albeit inseparable, aspect of Christian life-praxis (=witness), systematic theology having to do with the *belief* aspect of life-praxis, moral theology, with its *action* aspect.

If this accounts for their difference, however, it is clear that they are not, and cannot be, sharply different. Not only is self-understanding as inseparable from belief as it is from action, but belief and action themselves are also inseparable and mutually require one another. Therefore, to explicate Christian self-understanding and Christian life-praxis insofar as it is belief, as systematic theology has the task of doing, cannot possibly avoid also explicating to some extent Christian life-praxis insofar as it is action. And so, too, the other way around: moral theology can accomplish its task of explicating Christian self-understanding and Christian life-praxis insofar as it

is action only by also explicating to some extent Christian life-praxis insofar as it is belief.

It is an interesting question in this connection whether the analysis of faith as necessarily having the two aspects of trust and of loyalty, and hence of hope and of love, casts any light on the difference between systematic theology and moral theology. Could one say, for example, that even in their common concern with faith (=Christian self-understanding) systematic theology and moral theology are already different, in that the first is concerned with faith in its first relatively *passive* aspect of trust or confidence, and hence of hope, while the second is concerned with faith in its second relatively *active* aspect of loyalty or fidelity, and hence of love?

In any event, the difference is nothing like as great as that between historical, systematic, and practical theology. Nor is it very much like the other difference between dogmatics and apologetics, since moral theology as much as systematic theology has to validate the claim of witness to be (practically and/or theoretically) credible as well as appropriate—and vice versa.

One other thought that may be relevant to understanding the difference is that systematic theology is closer, in a way, to historical theology even as moral theology is closer, in a way, to practical theology. Granted that systematic theology and moral theology are alike in being concerned with general principles rather than particular facts, the general principles of self-understanding and belief with which systematic theology is concerned are themselves historically determined and are accessible only through particular historical experience and reflection, while the general principles of self-understanding and action with which moral theology is concerned are themselves practically ordered and are applicable only through particular practical experience and reflection.

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