

# Albrecht Ritschl on Theology as System

## Considering the structure of modern theology

### 1. Introduction

For those who today take for granted the existence of a discipline called ‘systematic theology’, it may come as a surprise how late this term was introduced into theological parlance. I cannot here pursue in detail the question of when precisely this happened, but there is little doubt that this designation rose to prominence in the course of the nineteenth century. Regular references to chairs in ‘historical and systematic theology’<sup>1</sup> or to subject groups (*Seminare*) in Systematic Theology occur only from the 1850s.<sup>2</sup>

As a term to describe academic work, ‘systematic theology’ or variations thereof were introduced in the early decades of the century. Friedrich Schleiermacher in his *Speeches* could still use the term ‘system’ pejoratively for the kind of sectarian and doctrinarian approach to religion he so passionately rejected in this classic text.<sup>3</sup> The same is no longer the case in *The Christian Faith* where the author demands (in the first edition of 1821/22) that Dogmatics show its *wissenschaftlichen* character in the systematic arrangement (*systematische Anordnung*) of individual doctrines.<sup>4</sup> The second edition (1830/31) concurs equating the ‘presentation’ of dogmatic theology’ with ‘a system of doctrine’.<sup>5</sup> In 1829, Carl Immanuel Nitzsch published his *System der christlichen Lehre*, which may be the first book to refer to theology as a ‘system’ in its title. Substantially the same title is still used by I. A. Dorner for his *System der christlichen Glaubenslehre* first published in 1879-80. At the outset of this work Dorner referred more specifically to ‘systematic theology’ which he glosses with *theologia thetica*, a traditional Lutheran term for doctrine or dogmatics.<sup>6</sup> Books entitled *Systematic Theology*, or the like, were not published until the final decades of the nineteenth century.

To think of Christian doctrine as a system and to consider it the theologian’s task to develop the Church’s teachings in systematic fashion, then, is the product of nineteenth-century German developments. Thanks to the international prestige this tradition obtained during this period,

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes Wischmeyer, *Theologiae Facultas: Rahmenbedingungen, Akteure und Wissenschaftsorganisation protestantischer Universitätstheologie in Tübingen, Jena, Erlangen und Berlin. 1850-1870* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 102, n. 226.

<sup>2</sup> The Faculty of Theology at the University of Erlangen introduced such a unit in 1873: *Ibid.*, 62, n. 109.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799), edited by Günther Meckenstock (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 68. ET: *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, edited and translated by Richard Crouter (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der Kirche im Zusammenhang dargestellt* (1821/22), edited by Hermann Peiter. Kritische Gesamtausgabe I/7.1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), §31, p. 108.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der Kirche im Zusammenhang dargestellt. Zweite Auflage* (1830/31), edited by Rolf Schäfer. Kritische Gesamtausgabe II/13.1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), §20, p. 150. ET: *The Christian Faith*, translated by James S. Stewart and Hugh Ross Mackintosh (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 94.

<sup>6</sup> Isaak August Dorner, *System der christlichen Glaubenslehre*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Hertz, 1879-81), §1 (vol. 1, p. 1).

these methodological decisions were subsequently adopted by theologians around the globe.<sup>7</sup> Today this tendency is often viewed critically or rejected outright. The topic of the present article, however, is less the question of what justification, if any, there can still be of a systematic approach to Christian doctrine. Instead, it will be asked what it means to approach theology in this manner. What is a ‘theological system’ and what does it signify to treat Christian theology as a system. Given that the historical origin of this approach lies with nineteenth-century German theology, it makes sense to address this question specifically with regard to the scholars who initially chose this way to present their theological teaching.

One of the most prominent among them was Albrecht Ritschl. Ritschl (1822-1889) is today rarely studied in any depth, but he was the central figure in German Protestant theology during the final decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Together with the so-called Ritschl School, a group of younger theologians that included Wilhelm Herrmann, Adolf Harnack and (to an extent) Ernst Troeltsch, Ritschl exerted remarkable and lasting influence on twentieth century theologies in Germany and beyond.<sup>9</sup> It is hard to think of another nineteenth theologian apart from Schleiermacher who cast such a long shadow over the subsequent practice of his discipline. It therefore matters supremely that Ritschl was emphatic about the necessity to present theology as a system.

In what follows, I shall offer a detailed analysis of Ritschl’s demand that the theologian ought to ‘construct’ a system and consider its significance for the shape of his theology. As will become clear, the systematic shape of theology was for Ritschl a wedge issue that permitted him to subject some individuals and traditions to a sharp critique while aligning himself with others. Among those singled out for criticism are Philipp Melancthon and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Yet Schleiermacher, perhaps ironically, also emerges as perhaps the most important influence on Ritschl’s concept of the theological system. The paper will conclude with reflections on advantages and disadvantages of developing theology as a system in the tradition Ritschl represented and shaped.

## 2. Ritschl and the rise of the systematic approach to theology

Ritschl’s commitment to a strictly systematic shape of theological science is expressed with aplomb in the following lines:

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<sup>7</sup> It is remarkable that in the US, Charles Hodge published his *Systematic Theology* already in 1827-3: *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1872-3).

<sup>8</sup> On Ritschl and his theology cf: Philip Hefner, *Faith and the Vitalities of History. A Theological Study Based on the Work of Albrecht Ritschl* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); Rolf Schäfer, *Albrecht Ritschl: Grundlagen eines fast verschollenen dogmatischen Systems* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1968); James Richmond, *Ritschl: A Reappraisal* (London: Collins, 1978); Folkart Wittekind, *Geschichtliche Offenbarung und die Wahrheit des Glaubens: Der Zusammenhang von Offenbarungstheologie, Geschichtsphilosophie und Ethik bei Albrecht Ritschl, Julius Kaftan und Karl Barth (1909-1916)* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), Part I; Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany: From F. C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: OUP, 2013). For an overview of more recent research on Ritschl cf. Christophe Chalamet, ‘Reassessing Albrecht Ritschl’s Theology: A Survey of Recent Literature’, *Religion Compass* 2/4 (2008), 620-41.

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We are able to know and understand God, sin, conversion, eternal life, in the Christian sense, only so far as we consciously and intentionally reckon ourselves members of the community which Christ has founded. Theology is bound to take up this point of view, and *only so is there any hope of constructing a theological system which deserves the name*. For in order to comprehend the content of Christianity, as a totality composed of rightly ordered particular data, we must occupy one and the same standpoint throughout.<sup>10</sup>

This text is to be found at the outset of the third (and final) volume of Ritschl's *opus magnum*, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*. In volumes one and two, Ritschl had treated in great detail first the historical development of these doctrines (vol. 1), then their biblical basis (vol. 2). The final volume bears the subtitle *Die positive Entwicklung der Lehre*, thus promising to present what would today be called the 'constructive' or indeed 'systematic' shape based on (a) Ritschl's historical critique and (b) his exegetical grounding of a biblical theology. The 'doctrine' to be constructively developed here is in the first instance the doctrine of atonement to which the whole work is dedicated. Yet Ritschl makes it clear on the first page, in his preface, that he has been 'compelled' to give 'an almost complete outline' of dogmatics in order properly to elucidate the key doctrines at the centre of his work.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, he begins his presentation in his first paragraph with a discussion of 'The standpoint of Systematic Theology in the Christian community'.<sup>12</sup> The above citation appears in this section and thus at a crucial junction in Ritschl's monumental project.

The prominent place of his reference to the 'theological system' indicates the centrality this idea has for Ritschl's understanding of his own discipline. It is therefore worthwhile to subject these lines to a close reading. Ritschl is quite careful here in his use of language. Having written of a 'system of theology which deserves the name' (*ein System der Theologie, das diesen Namen verdient*) he adds as an apparently equivalent expression the following: 'the content of Christianity as a totality composed of rightly ordered particular data' ([*der*] *Inhalt des Christenthums als ein Ganzes in der richtigen Gliederung der einzelnen Data*).<sup>13</sup> This suggests that the theological system has two main characteristics.

First, it must somehow embrace or include the whole phenomenon under investigation. In the case of theology, this whole is Christianity. Note the breadth of Ritschl's phrase here. It is not merely a set of doctrines the theologian has to systematise; it is a religion understood as a historical and social formation *including* its ideas but not limited to them. The task is thus encyclopaedic, but Ritschl's point, on closer inspection, is not so much to insist on numerical completeness, the inclusion of every minute detail in the huge historical reality that Christianity has become over the centuries. When he writes that the theological system must represent the content of Christianity *als ein Ganzes*, his intention is to emphasise the organic wholeness of the

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<sup>10</sup> Albrecht Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung. Dritter Band: Die positive Entwicklung der Lehre*, 2nd ed. (Bonn: Marcus, 1883), 4. ET: *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: The Positive Development of the Doctrine*, translated by Hugh Ross Mackintosh and A.B. Macauley, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 4. In what follows, the German original will be cited as *RuV* III and the translation as ET. Emphasis in the citation is the author's.

<sup>11</sup> *RuV* III, iii; ET: vii.

<sup>12</sup> *RuV* III, 1; ET: 1.

<sup>13</sup> *RuV* III, 4; ET: 4.

object of his study. The published English translation offers ‘as a totality’, and I think this captures the meaning of the German quite well.

In any event, the second expression Ritschl adds to his characterisation of the theological system makes it explicit that the ‘system’ must be more than an aggregate of individual bits of information. As Ritschl puts it, in a theological system Christianity is known as a totality composed of ‘rightly ordered particular data’ (*in der richtigen Gliederung der einzelnen Data*). Here his emphasis clearly is on structure or order; we could say it is on the formal aspect whereas the initial characterisation was perhaps more focused on the material side. We are meant to understand that these two sides belong together. After all, the ‘content of Christianity as a totality’ must be perceived in its particular structure or order. One without the other will not produce a system.

As a first approximation we can thus say that the theological system must be able to integrate an enormous amount of data (to use Ritschl’s own term) by organising these bits of information in such a way that the whole appears as a ‘totality’, an organic oneness. How does Ritschl think this ‘systematic’ perspective on Christianity is gained? Let me begin with a negative determination. Ritschl does not, I think, conceive of a system in terms of a single principle from which everything else can be deduced. Such a notion of system was popular with some idealist philosophers, notably J.G. Fichte.<sup>14</sup> There is, however, no indication that Ritschl felt attracted to this approach. The theologian does not start from a single assumption but from a mass of ‘data’: revelation in Scripture, the historical development of doctrine, the faith of the community and its practical realisation in the Christian life. The theologian *begins from* these realities which must be brought together into a coherent whole: this is what ‘constructing’ a system means for theology. The systematic unity of the ‘content of Christianity’ must thus in an important sense be intuited. Ritschl admittedly does not use the terms intuition or *Anschauung* here, but he does refer to a single viewpoint (*Standpunkt*) which is necessary to perceive the ‘content’ of Christianity in its oneness. The theological system, then, is the presentation of Christianity as a whole whose unity can only be seen by adopting a unique point of observation. The viewpoint which Ritschl thinks facilitates such a perception is famously that of ‘the community which Christ founded’ (*die Gemeinde, die Christus gestiftet hat*).<sup>15</sup>

Why does Ritschl insist so emphatically on the need to adopt this ‘single’ (*einen und denselben*) viewpoint within the Christian community? I think we here have one instance of what one might call the ‘two-layered’ character of Ritschl’s theology. At one level, there is complete commitment to the principles of modern science as he understood it. Thus far, the need for a single viewpoint is justified methodologically from the requirement to achieve a systematic presentation of Christianity. Ritschl’s demand that theology must be conducted from the standpoint of the Church must not therefore be interpreted as a return to the principles of confessional dogmatics. At the same time, his methodological decision speaks to his conviction that the results of properly *scientific* work in theology ultimately coincide with the truth of Christian orthodoxy. The ‘standpoint’ is important insofar as it alone helps us avoid the unsystematic patchwork of *doctrines* in favour of a proper theological system, but its

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<sup>14</sup> E.g. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, translated by Daniel Breazeale (Oxford: OUP, ??), §1, p. 157-9.

<sup>15</sup> *RuV* III, 4; ET: 4.

identification with the Christian community indicates that modern theology promises to be a continuation of and improvement on traditional theology, not a rupture from it.

### 3. The Schleiermacherian background

The analysis of Ritschl's conception of the theological system can be further sharpened by contextualising his work in the wake of Schleiermacher's ground-breaking contribution to the discipline. Pride of place in this connection belongs to the *Speeches On Religion* although the *Glaubenslehre* too is part of the historical background to Ritschl's teaching. Given Ritschl's frequently harsh criticisms of his predecessor, it is easy to overlook just how crucial Schleiermacher's thought was and always remained for Ritschl's own theological endeavour.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, whereas for the first generation of Schleiermacher's students it was the *Christian Faith* that provided the principal point of reference among his publications, Ritschl is part of the shift to an interest in Schleiermacher's early work to which scholars such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Rudolf Otto made major contributions.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Ritschl's interest in the *Speeches* while in the process of drafting volume three of *Justification and Reconciliation* is evident from his publication of a small book on Schleiermacher's classic in 1874, the very year in which the final volume of Ritschl's systematic masterpiece also came out in its first edition.<sup>18</sup>

Few things perhaps are as obvious in the *Speeches* as is the significance its author attached to the notion of the organic whole. After all, the point of religion as *Anschauung* is that in this act the universe is perceived as precisely such a totality.<sup>19</sup> Nor does it need elaboration to establish that for Schleiermacher the standpoint from which this whole can be intuited is crucial.<sup>20</sup> These fundamental ideas are developed in the second speech; I shall here take them for granted. What is, however, less frequently studied is the particular way in which these ideas shape Schleiermacher's approaches to the so-called 'positive', that is, historical religions in his fifth speech. But it is this part of the *Speeches* which for Ritschl was crucial, as he himself testified.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. J. Zachhuber, 'Friedrich Schleiermacher und Albrecht Ritschl: Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten in der Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts', in *Zeitschrift für neuere Theologieggeschichte* 12 (2005), 16-46, here: 18-24.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Dilthey's depiction of this transition in the fragment of a preface to the (planned) second edition of his epochal Schleiermacher biography: Wilhelm Dilthey, *Leben Schleiermachers* I, edited by Martin Redeker, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1970), 549. Ritschl seems to have read Dilthey's work when it was first published in 1870 and acknowledges its significance in his 1874 *Schleiermachers Reden über die Religion und ihre Nachwirkungen auf die evangelische Kirche Deutschlands* (Bonn: Marcus, 1874), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ritschl, *Schleiermachers Reden*.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, 82; ET: Crouter, 25: 'To accept everything individual as part of the whole and everything limited as as a representation of the infinite is religion.' Cf. also Christof Ellsiepen, *Anschauung des Universums und Scientia Intuitiva: die spinozistischen Grundlagen von Schleiermachers früher Religionstheorie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, 83; ET: Crouter, 26: 'Can you say that one must look at a thing a certain way just because one had to look at something else in such a manner? Others may stand right behind you, right alongside you, and everything can appear differently to them. Or do by chance the possible standpoints on which a mind can stand in order to observe the universe progress in measured intervals so that you can exhaust, enumerate, and precisely determine the characteristic of each? Are there not infinitely many of these, and is not every entity only a continual transition between two others?'

<sup>21</sup> Ritschl, *Schleiermachers Reden*, 4.

Having initially defined religion in the broadest possible way – including sharp attacks on its limitation to organised religion in the traditional sense – Schleiermacher uses the final part of the *Speeches* to counterbalance his initial emphasis on the universality of religion with an affirmation of their realisation in historical formations. His polemic is here against the Enlightenment notion of ‘natural religion’ which he castigates as abstract and empty, and against which he extols the determined form religion has taken on in the historical religions.<sup>22</sup>

This, in turn, raises the question of how individual religions can be ‘determined’. ‘How do they differentiate themselves from one another’?<sup>23</sup> How can we understand and define them in their uniqueness? Schleiermacher initially answers this question in the negative:

Something cannot be a determinate form of religion simply because it contains a determinative quantity of religious material.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, it is futile to define, say, Christianity by an enumeration of doctrines or rituals. Schleiermacher is emphatic about this point, no doubt because he is aware that he is here pushing against the weight of a long-standing tradition which, needless to say, is alive and well in today’s world including the world of academic theology.

What is the alternative? Schleiermacher sums it up as follows:

Let me say it briefly: An individual instance of religion such as we are seeking cannot be established other than through free choice (*aus freier Willkühr*) by making a particular intuition of the universe the centre of the whole of religion and relating everything therein to it. Thereby the whole suddenly takes on a determinate spirit; everything that was previously ambiguous and indeterminate is fixed ...<sup>25</sup>

It is this approach and this approach alone, Schleiermacher argues, that will guide us in understanding how particular religions are manifestations of *religion*. We need to understand each religion as one particular intuition, taken from one particular standpoint; on this basis we can reconstruct such a religion as a total intuition of the universe. Note Schleiermacher’s emphasis here on contingency. The decision in favour of this single perspective is ‘through free choice’. This does not mean that the rise and persistence of the great religions for Schleiermacher are a matter of chance. In particular, as will become clearer later on in his text, there are (he believes) *objective* reasons to see Christianity as uniquely significant.<sup>26</sup> Still, it is crucial that the unique viewpoint on which the unity of a religion is being built cannot be deduced but is, as such, ‘freely’ chosen.

As far as these principles are concerned, I would argue, Ritschl does not disagree with Schleiermacher at all. On the contrary, Ritschl’s advocacy of a ‘system of theology’ rests firmly

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<sup>22</sup> Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, 164; ET: Crouter, 98.

<sup>23</sup> Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, 167. ET: Crouter, 100.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, 171. ET: Crouter, 104.

<sup>26</sup> Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, 184-6.

on Schleiermacherian roots in its understanding of a system as reconstructing a whole or totality of the ‘content’ of Christianity based on the choice of a standpoint ‘in the Christian community.’<sup>27</sup>

This principal agreement can further be illustrated by Ritschl’s subsequent account of his opposition to more traditional approaches to doctrine. He specifically addresses Philipp Melancthon and his *Loci communes* which became the paradigm for dogmatics in the Lutheran tradition.<sup>28</sup> Ritschl’s critique of this tradition is radical and cannot here be presented in all its details. For the present purpose, however, Ritschl’s main objection is the alleged lack of ‘systematic’ coherence in these theologians, and this lack, in his view, corresponds to (or may even be caused by) the shifting viewpoints from which the different *loci* are constructed.

In Ritschl’s analysis, traditional Lutheran (and indeed Reformed) dogmatics changes its standpoint three times. Such accounts begin with reflections based on purely rational principles adopted from natural theology and thus a ‘standpoint within either a natural or a universally rational knowledge of God’.<sup>29</sup> Their doctrines of God’s properties and of humanity’s original state all reflect this viewpoint.<sup>30</sup> Human sinfulness is, Ritschl claims, taken as a quasi-empirical statement which is derived from the fall of Adam on ‘thoroughly rational grounds’.<sup>31</sup>

At this point, the second standpoint is adopted where theologians view their subject-matter from the ‘fact of universally inherited sin of the human race’.<sup>32</sup> From the tension between humanity’s sinfulness and God’s righteousness the Lutheran scholastics deduce the necessity of salvation. Their next step is the discussion of person and work of Jesus Christ, and only here, according to Ritschl, they begin to consider their object based on genuinely Christian experience. This third standpoint, then, is the one Ritschl wishes to prescribe to the whole of dogmatics. Yet his judgment on this final stage in the conceptual journey on which the early modern theologians take their readers is hardly appreciative. They do too little too late, so to speak, and remain beholden to the standard of their earlier, rational principles even where they approach their subject matter from a properly theological viewpoint.

Ritschl concludes this analysis with the following words:

No system can result from a method which thus traverses three separate points of view in accomplishing the different parts of its task.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The impression gained here on the basis of the *Speeches* is fully confirmed in *The Christian Faith* also. Relevant there are §§7-11 where the ‘essence of Christianity’ is developed by situating this particular religion in the plurality of historical or ‘positive’ religions; and §20 on dogmatics as system.

<sup>28</sup> Ritschl, *RuV* III, 4. Cf. Philipp Melancthon, *Loci communes*, translated by Lowell J. Satre, in: *Melancthon and Bucer*, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 18-152. Note that this translates the first edition which Melancthon later heavily reworked. It is the third edition (*tertia aetas*) from 1543 which became foundational for the later Lutheran form of scholasticism which Ritschl judges so harshly.

<sup>29</sup> *RuV* 4; ET: 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ritschl, *RuV* III, 4-5. ET: 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *RuV* III, 5; ET: 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ritschl, *RuV* III, 5. ET: 5.



A detailed investigation of Ritschl's critique of traditional Lutheran orthodoxy, which is carried out extensively across his whole oeuvre and merely summarised in the present passage, would be the task of a separate study. That said, it seems evident that failure to present doctrine as a system lies at the heart of this critique. Melancthon and his followers, Ritschl claimed, were unable or unwilling to intuit Christianity from a single viewpoint, specifically from the standpoint 'within the Christian community' and thus missed its internal unity and coherence. This line of argument traces closely the critique advanced in Schleiermacher's *Speeches* against traditional theology.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, Ritschl's opposition to 'natural' or 'rational' approaches to religion equally mirrors the scathing terms used by Schleiermacher at the outset of the fifth speech.<sup>35</sup> In Ritschl's contemporaneous book on the *Speeches*, the author singles out these passages for particularly enthusiastic praise.<sup>36</sup>

We can therefore conclude at this point that Ritschl's proposal to present a 'system of theology' is fundamentally following the blueprint presented for the first time seventy years earlier in Schleiermacher's youthful writing. Both in the idea of a system as a coherent, organically structured whole grasped by a single intuition *and* in his emphasis on a single viewpoint or standpoint from which to intuit such a whole, Ritschl follows the founder of modern theology.

#### 4. Luther as example

The emphasis on a systematic approach to theology in the precise sense in which it has here been described, served for Ritschl as a tool of criticism and polemic. As we have seen, Ritschl considered the traditions of Lutheran and Reformed orthodoxies which emerged from the mid-sixteenth century onwards as principally lacking in a systematic perspective. Likewise, Ritschl's theological critics in his own time are rebutted along the same lines. Their objections to his own work fall flat, Ritschl claims once it is recognised that these criticisms are merely the result of their inability to appreciate the significance of a systematic approach to theology:

When they confront *a rounded exposition* of theology, represented on a single surface, with their many-angled mirror, of course they get nothing but a broken reflection. But the blame falls not on one who has ventured to employ the *systematic method* in theology, but upon the critics who cherish the belief that their own *fragmentary knowledge*, which loses itself in a variety of tentative efforts, complies with the conditions of systematic thought.<sup>37</sup>

Ritschl here uses the time-tested rhetorical strategy of arguing that his opponents' limitations are the cause of their failure to recognise the superiority of his own approach.

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<sup>34</sup> Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, 67-8; ET: Crouter, 12-3. Note again, however, that Schleiermacher here and elsewhere in the *Speeches* (especially its first edition) speaks pejoratively of the notion of 'systems of theology' as a kind of discourse in which 'everything amounts to cold argumentation and nothing can be treated except in the tone of an ordinary didactic controversy'.

<sup>35</sup> Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, 164-5; ET: Crouter, 98-9.

<sup>36</sup> Ritschl, *Schleiermachers Reden über die Religion und ihre Nachwirkungen auf die evangelische Kirche Deutschlands* (Bonn: Marcus, 1874), 4. Cf. J. Zachhuber, 'Schleiermacher und Ritschl', 27.

<sup>37</sup> Ritschl, *RuV* III, 5, ET: 5-6. Italics mine.



He does not, however, only use the notion of system as a cudgel to beat those he disagrees with. The importance of this formal principle of his theology is equally evident where he seeks to align himself with a predecessor. This is most obviously the case with Luther. Ritschl may have been the first theologian to have combined sharp criticism of the Lutheran *tradition* with an appreciation of the reformer himself, a principle that was to become extremely popular in twentieth century German Lutheran theology.<sup>38</sup>

[A] system proper must all the more certainly be conditioned by the fact that every part of theological knowledge is construed from the standpoint of the Christian community, since only so can the worth of Christ as Revealer be employed throughout as the basis of knowledge in solving all the problems of theology. This constituted the new principle which Luther set forth in various passages.<sup>39</sup>

There is admittedly an almost humorous dimension to the claim that of all theologians it should have been Luther who pioneered a ‘systematic’ approach to theology as to most students it would perhaps appear that Melancthon, for all his faults, became so important for the Lutheran tradition because he *systematised* what in Luther was a jumble of ideas produced in the heat of his many controversies.

Yet Ritschl’s point here is not so much to claim that Luther’s presentation of doctrine was always coherent but that he possessed a uniquely appropriate standpoint from which to view Christianity as a whole. Luther’s theology was a better system than Melancthon’s because he *saw* something important about the Christian faith that his friend and rival (along with many others before and after) missed. To reiterate, this does not mean that Luther was correct in all his utterances. On the contrary, when it came to specific doctrines, Ritschl had no problem sharply to criticise or reject ideas he found in Luther’s writings.<sup>40</sup> Luther’s advantage over the subsequent Lutheran tradition, however, consisted in his insistence that there was

[...] no ‘disinterested’ knowledge of God, but [...] only such knowledge of Him as takes the form of unconditional trust, [can be recognised a religious datum]. This knowledge, however, is so exclusively bound up with Christ, that whatever knowledge of God exists alongside of it does not, as the Scholastics suppose, arrive at a neutral idea of God, but issues solely in contempt or hatred of Him.<sup>41</sup>

I observed earlier how Ritschl’s theology operates on two levels insofar as he combines an uncompromising affirmation of modern scientific principles with an insistence on the impeccably Christian character of his theology. Both these levels are in evidence in the present place. For Ritschl, reference to the person of Jesus Christ has to stand at the centre of any theology worthy of its name. A proper theological system therefore must be christocentric, and the failure of post-Reformation dogmatics to arrive at a systematic perspective is *as much* due to

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<sup>38</sup> As found, e.g., in Karl Holl, Emmanuel Hirsch, or Gerhard Ebeling.

<sup>39</sup> *RuV* III, 6. ET: 6.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

their dilution of the single focus on the saviour on which Luther had so strongly insisted as it is the result of their lack of methodological and theoretical sophistication.

Yet christocentrism is an idea that still permits for a variety of interpretations. I will use the remainder of this article to explore at least the contours of how Ritschl understands the focus on Christ that results from theology's adoption of the viewpoint from within the Christian community. As we shall see, in fleshing out his idea of a theological system, Ritschl defines his own position in rather sharp contradistinction to that adopted previously by Schleiermacher.

### Ritschl's theological system

In paragraph two of *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* III, Ritschl offers a more detailed exposition of the principles of his system. He announces his attempt there by saying that the *form* of systematic theology is bound up with the idea or *Begriff* of the Christian religion.<sup>42</sup> It is important here to see that by speaking of 'religion' Ritschl presupposes all that was said about organic unity and coherence of this phenomenon in the previous section. His understanding of religion, thus, is once again fundamentally inspired by Schleiermacher; in fact, Ritschl cites in the present place Schleiermacher's definition of the 'essence of Christianity' in § 11 of his *Glaubenslehre* as a major turning point in the history of theology.<sup>43</sup>

Yet this appreciation is heavily qualified. For Ritschl complains that Schleiermacher's determination of the Christian 'standpoint' is one-sidedly approached from the perspective of self-consciousness or feeling. The systematic perception of the whole of Christianity is not, however, only a matter of consciousness or 'faith' if narrowly understood as a mental phenomenon. It is also very much a matter of a specifically Christian practice. For this insight, Ritschl (known as the archenemy of pietism<sup>44</sup>) remarkably cites none other than Philipp Spener, one of the founders of this movement:

Spener, however, claimed for theology a yet wider point of view – it is to make good its derivation from the Holy Spirit in virtue of the truth that 'whoever willeth to do the will of God will know the truth of Christ's doctrine' (John vii. 17). This implies a complete revision of the matter of theology; for the traditional system was and is not adapted to this ethical proof of the truth of Christianity. What Spener's principles indicate, however, is the way to such a conception of the Christian view of the world and of life as can hope for success only when it is attempted from the standpoint of the community of believers.<sup>45</sup>

This is perhaps Ritschl's most significant modification to the Schleiermacherian tradition, but it has been little understood and not found much sympathy. It is, nevertheless, a remarkable claim. Ritschl does not merely claim that Christian faith and Christian practice go hand in hand. He does of course think that, but he was well aware that Schleiermacher had been entirely agreed on

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<sup>42</sup> Ritschl, *RuV* III, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Ritschl, *RuV* III, 9. Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube* (1830/31) § 11, KGA I/13.1, 93; ET: *The Christian Faith*, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Ritschl's three volume *Geschichte des Pietismus* (Bonn: Marcus, 1880-1886) is principally devoted to the proof that this religious movement was a distortion of the faith of the Reformation.

<sup>45</sup> Ritschl, *RuV* III, 8. ET: 8.

this point as well. Where he finds Schleiermacher lacking is in the consequences this insight has for the shape of theology. What does it mean for the shape of theology – or more precisely ‘the system of theology’ – that theory and practice are two sides of the same coin?

This question, Ritschl thinks, is insufficiently addressed in the *Glaubenslehre* because of its theoretical reliance on the ‘feeling of absolute dependence’ which in Christianity is aligned with faith in redemption through Christ. This one-sidedness in Schleiermacher’s approach to theology as system is responsibly, according to Ritschl, for a long list of subsequent failures: Schleiermacher, Ritschl urges, eventually lapses back into natural theology, adopts a ‘neutral idea of religion’ and an ‘abstract’ notion of monotheism. Ultimately his understanding of Christianity is reductive because it refers everything ‘solely to redemption through Jesus’ and not also, constantly, to Jesus’ goal of founding the kingdom of God and thus a particular form of practice.<sup>46</sup>

It is against this one-sidedness that Ritschl pitches his own idea of Christianity which in its entirety is focussed equally on faith *and* practice and can therefore be compared to an ellipsis with two foci, Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God.<sup>47</sup> The former, we might say, stands for the faith-dimension, the latter for the practice-dimension of the religion.

What does that mean for Ritschl’s system? An examination of his entire systematic work would be needed fully to answer this question, but in outline the consequences can be described as follows. While the focus on Christ represents God and his work as *other than* the believer, the focus on the Kingdom presents the *deus pro nobis*, God as in community with his people. Any emphasis on transcendence, we might say, therefore has to be balanced out with an emphasis on immanence. Moreover, any emphasis on the *individual* relation of the believer with Christ in faith needs as its complement the recognition of the fundamentally communal character of Christian existence as practice. Christian language of sin, despair, and fear of God has to be countered with the notion that reconciliation between God and humankind has in important ways *already* happened. Differently put, faith and works cannot be juxtaposed the way this has often happened in the Protestant tradition.<sup>48</sup> Once again, one can see Ritschl take up a concern initially voiced in the Pietist movement, but whereas for Spener, Francke, Zinzendorf and others, this ideal could only be realised through small groups specifically dedicated to working towards the kingdom (the *ecclesiola in ecclesia*), Ritschl saw the possibility of aligning Christian and bourgeois morality in the modern world.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

For the purposes of the present paper, the detailed doctrinal judgments Ritschl arrived at on this foundation may not ultimately matter too much.<sup>50</sup> Rather, the key question is what the ultimate

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<sup>46</sup> Ritschl, *RuV* III, 9, ET: 9.

<sup>47</sup> *RuV* III, 11.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. in this connection Ritschl’s lecture on Christian perfection: *Die christliche Vollkommenheit: Ein Vortrag*, edited by Cajus Fabricius (Leipzig: Hinrich’sche Buchhandlung, 1924).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Leif Svensson, *A Theology for the Bürgertum: Albrecht Ritschl in Context* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020).

<sup>50</sup> For more detailed discussion of Ritschl’s doctrine of God in the context of his systematic principles see Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth Century Germany: From F. C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 236-49.

shape of Ritschl's theology tells us about his idea of a 'system of theology' and potentially about a systematic approach to theology more generally. To address this question, let me first summarise the argument of the paper so far. Ritschl, we have found, is emphatic about the need for theology to be presented in systematic form. By this he means form of presentation in which the whole of Christianity appears in its organic unity. A system *in this sense* can only be accomplished by adopting a unique viewpoint from which to intuit the phenomenon in its wholeness or totality. In the case of Christianity, this viewpoint, Ritschl insists, has to be located 'within the Christian community'.

This notion of a system as an integrated whole that is viewed from a specific standpoint, it was further argued, was earlier introduced by Schleiermacher, and it is from the 'father of modern theology' that Ritschl adopted this methodological imperative. At the same time, Ritschl sought to improve on Schleiermacher's systematic theology by insisting that not one, but two principles had to be kept in view throughout the whole of dogmatics. In this way, Ritschl clearly believed, all the advantages of a Schleiermacherian system could be retained while adding more complexity to his representation of Christianity.

There is no doubt that this conception of a system based on a single viewpoint yet built around two different foci, is extremely ambitious and complex. At the outset of this paper, I argued that the appeal of the systematic approach rested to an extent on its beautiful simplicity – a large and complex entity, Christianity, appears in the system as coherently structured and ordered. Ritschl clearly adopted the systematic approach with this idea in mind. As we have seen, he eagerly chastised other theologians for the absence of stringency and coherence in their own work.

Yet he also recognised the dangers of simplification this can entail. In Schleiermacher and especially in the more epigonal characters who followed in his wake,<sup>51</sup> he encountered a *systematic* theology which was insufficiently faithful to the complexity of Christianity because it was one-sidedly focussed on its faith-dimension. By stipulating the more complex idea of a system with two separate organising principles, Ritschl above all promised a more integrated theory corresponding to the complex nature of historic Christianity. His system aimed to include not only Christian doctrine but Christian practice, both fully reflected in their historical development.

Ritschl thus aimed to combine coherence, aesthetic beauty, and stringency of the *system* which he found prefigured in Schleiermacher with a fuller account of the complexities of Christianity than Schleiermacher had, in Ritschl's view, been able to offer. Was this combination, however, as successful as the author had hoped? Did Ritschl improve on the complexity of Schleiermacher's theology while staying faithful to the systematicity the latter had pioneered? One may well suspect that the answer to this question has to be given in the negative. It seems that in Ritschl's system, complexity ultimately stood in the way of simplicity, beauty, and unity. In many ways, Ritschl's system appears to have been too complex to be appreciated as such.

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Zachhuber, Schleiermacher und Ritschl, 20-2.

Evidence to support such a suspicion can be found in the observation that, despite the existence of a Ritschlian school, few if any of the theologians who followed him even tried to build on the system he had presented. Wilhelm Herrmann, one of the most prominent members of this school, went so far as to say that nobody ever even tried to do so.<sup>52</sup> Rather, theology after Ritschl soon returned to models that were closer to Schleiermacher. When Karl Barth surveyed the state of German theology in the early twentieth century, his conclusion was that ‘Schleiermacher’s influence was incomparably stronger in 1910 than in 1830’. Ritschl, Barth cruelly concluded, ‘has the significance of an episode in more recent theology, and not, indeed not, that of an epoch.’<sup>53</sup> While Barth, admittedly, had his own reasons to be dismissive about Ritschl to whom he owed more of a debt than he was willing to admit, the parallel between his and Herrmann’s observations indicates that whatever Ritschl bequeathed to his theological heirs, it was not his system.

If this analysis is accepted, one could go further and find here a fundamental problem with systems in theology (and possibly elsewhere). There is, one may surmise, *in every system* a tension between the desire to bring the heterogeneous elements of reality into a coherent unity and the need to leave appropriate room for the complexity, heterogeneity, and diversity of the world the system aims to explain. This tension, it would then appear, leaves systems inherently unstable as they *either* open themselves to the critique of unduly simplifying a more diverse reality *or* stand accused of being themselves excessively complex and hence unwieldy or even unintelligible.

Such a conclusion goes against the grain of much recent critique of systematic theology which has frequently considered this approach characteristic of the dominating rationality of (masculine) modernity. At least the kind of system envisaged by Ritschl in the Schleiermacherian tradition reveals itself, however, as a surprisingly vulnerable attempt to perceive the reality of Christian faith and practice in its wholeness while accounting for its diversity and complexity. Its weaknesses, which Ritschl perceptively noted in Schleiermacher but which – in different ways – were on full display in Ritschl himself, may not therefore prove fatal to the systematic approach itself. Instead, they can be seen as underlining the need for constant revision and readjustment of the delicate balance any theological system has to strike between unity and simplicity of vision on the one hand and the acknowledgement of plurality and heterogeneity in the history and present of Christianity.

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<sup>52</sup> Wilhelm Herrmann, ‘Christlich-protestantische Dogmatik’ (1906), in: E. Troeltsch and P. Hinneberg (eds.), *Die Kultur der Gegenwart 1/4.2: Systematische christliche Religion*, 2nd edn. (Berlin: Teubner, 1909), 129–80, here: 158. Cf. Zachhuber, *Theology as Science*, 278–80 on Herrmann’s presentation of Ritschl’s theology in this essay.

<sup>53</sup> Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens and H. H. Hartwell (London: SCM, 1959), 390.