A dozen years or so ago when I was a student in seminary, we used *Christian Dogmatics* edited by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson as the main text for our introduction to systematic theology. At that time there were no serious single author Lutheran systematic theologies. And indeed it did not seem that any were soon to appear on the horizon. Little did I know that Robert Jenson was probably already hard at work on his two volume opus, *Systematic Theology* (1997–99) and that Ted Peters’ *God—The World’s Future: Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era* would appear in 1992, thus unleashing a storm of systematic theologies. In addition to the already named offering by Jenson, Bradley Hanson of Luther College (Decorah, IA) published his *Introduction to Christian Theology* in 1997 and Robert Kolb produced *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition* in 1993. In addition to these volumes Hans Schwarz published *Christology* and *Eschatology* in 1998 and 2000 which are not, to be sure, full blown systematic theologies; they do however represent an update of or rather a supplement to his 1986 volume, *Responsible Faith: Christian Theology in the Light of 20th-Century Questions*, which is a comprehensive systematic theology. Moreover Schwarz’s two books give some insight as to how two theological loci are handled and how other loci might be handled.

Behind all of these works stands the scholarship of Wolfhart Pannenberg. More than any other twentieth century theologian, Pannenberg has influenced the shape and direction of Lutheran theology. I will say more about Pannenberg later. For now it will suffice to say that Pannenberg’s emphasis on the openness of history and of God, his eschatological understanding of theology and proleptic view of history, as well as his ecumenical interests have impacted Peters, Jenson, Hanson, and Schwarz. This brief mention of the influence of Pannenberg occasions the first area I wish to examine the theologies of Hanson, Jenson, and Peters: their influences. From there I will consider how each of them sees the task of theology and the method of the theological enterprise.

**Influences**

The twentieth century has, for Lutheranism, been a movement towards unity. At the beginning of the century there were literally dozens of Lutheran bodies in the United States. At the end of the century there are considerably fewer—arguably only two major Lutheran bodies (the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church—Missouri
Synod). Lutheran theology reflects this interest in ecumenism. Each of the theologians here considered looks beyond the Lutheran heritage. Both Peters and Hanson state that they have ecumenical interests and indicate an interest in interreligious dialogue. Jenson has similar ecumenical interests although he is less interested in interreligious dialogue. He candidly admits his abiding interest in Eastern Orthodoxy (some of his positions are “reinventions of Orthodox wheels”) and confesses that on those questions which divide Catholicism and Protestantism he “more often espouse[s] the Catholic side.” Unlike Peters and Hanson, Jenson is less interested in the world beyond the church despite his statement that his theology is, as all theologies are, contextual. Jenson’s theology, he rightly argues, is contextual in that it does not take place in a historical vacuum; it takes place in time and space and therefore must have some relationship with the context in which it is written. Each of these theologians’ ecumenical convictions can be seen in a cursory examination of the indices. One sees, in addition to Luther, references to Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin (more so in Peters and Hanson), Karl Barth, the Cappadocians (esp. in Jenson’s work), Wolfhart Pannenberg (Peters and Jenson), and Karl Rahner (Peters and Jenson). It could be fairly said that Lutheran systematic theology seeks to address the entire Catholic church and is less interested in preaching to the Lutheran choir. It seeks to share its gifts with the wider church and it seeks to graciously receive the gifts of the wider church, if not the world.

**The Task of Theology**

How a theologian sees the task of theology inevitably shapes how his or her theology looks. More than that, it shapes the content of that theology. Robert Jenson is, without a doubt, the preeminent theologian of the three theologians here considered. Jenson flatly states that he seeks, in his theological endeavors, to get beyond the confessional or denominational nature of theology. Indeed such theologies which seek to be “Lutheran” or “Roman Catholic” or “Reformed” are not theology at all. Theology, for Jenson, is in service of the church. It is not in service of the Lutheran expression of the church or the Roman Catholic or the Reformed expressions. Indeed “a theologian who described her or his own work as ‘Lutheran’ or ‘Reformed’ or whatever such, and meant by that label to identify the church the work was to serve, would either deny the name of church to all but his or her own allegiance or desecrate the theological enterprise.”

As already mentioned, Jenson’s theology is ecumenical while still Lutheran. Jenson admits that his system is a Western system, however the influence of Eastern Orthodoxy is to be seen as well. Not only that, he is attentive to Roman Catholic theology and is even sympathetic to it. Nonetheless he remains Lutheran in many of his commitments. Finally Jenson argues that his theology is contextual insofar as all theology is contextual. The context that he attends to is the postmodern culture of nihilism which threatens the very existence of faith and meaning.

If theology is in service to the church, the question then emerges: How does the theologian serve the church in doing theology? What is the content of theology? What is theology to say? Jenson writes:

> The church has a mission: to see to the speaking of the gospel, whether to the world as message of salvation or to God as appeal and praise. Theology is the reflection internal to the church’s labor on this assignment … theologians … are normally among the speakers by whom the gospel comes to pass.

That is to say that just as the mission of the church is to speak the gospel, so it is the task of the theologian to speak the gospel. The gospel, according to Jenson, is to be understood as the story of God, the story of the God of Israel who liberated the Israelites from bondage to the Egyptians and who raised Jesus from the dead. Who God is is closely related to what God does.

Peters sees the task of theology similarly. He writes: “Theology is the church thinking about what it believes.” Where Jenson speaks about the gospel narrative at the center of the theological task, Peters speaks about explicating Christian symbols. I will say more about explicating Christian symbols later, but for now it is important to note that where Jenson more or less dismisses context or at least only allows a role for it in
the background Peters clearly gives context a role on the foreground if not center stage. His entire first chapter, “Addressing the Postmodern Person,” attends to context. For Peters, the central hermeneutical question is:

How can the Christian faith, first experienced and symbolically articulated in an ancient culture now long out-of-date, speak meaningfully to human existence today as we experience it amid a worldview dominated by natural science, secular self-understanding, and the worldwide cry for freedom?9

Peters responds to the challenges of and is in conversation and dialogue with the sciences.10 The central theme of this chapter and indeed the book is postmodernity.11 He considers first the challenges of modernism (critical consciousness, individual freedom, objectivism and relativism, doubt, and plurality or pluralism) before considering the “challenge of the postmodern mind.” Peters identifies two types of postmodernism: deconstructionism and holism.12 Holism was a feature of the first edition of God—The World’s Future, deconstructionism was not mentioned. In this second edition, holism is more prominent and clearly is a theme which receives attention throughout the book.

The task of theology in Hanson’s Introduction to Christian Theology is even less explicitly connected to the church than in Peters’ systematics. Hanson states that “theology is personally involved reflection on a religious faith.”13 Hanson unpacks this statement by saying that reflection is critical reflection, that it is reflection on a specific faith, and that it is personal reflection. Hanson is clearly committed to Christian-ity. He writes that “in this book the religious faith examined is the Christian faith.”14 However nowhere that I can see does Hanson mention, suggest, or imply that theology is done in the service of the church or its mission.

I will mention in passing here Hans Schwarz and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Hans Schwarz, in his 1986 systematic theology, Responsible Faith, argues that theology has three functions: critical concern for truth; an enlightened apology for the Christian faith; and as a means to glorify God.15 His theology, like that of Peters, is contextual. This is clear enough from his discussion of what it means for theology to be apologetic. Apologetic means

Obviously the doxological function points to the churchly nature of the task: “the task of theology is … intimately concerned with the message which the church proclaims and the faith which it holds … Theology pervades all the church’s life and action.”17 Of the theologians here considered Schwarz perhaps best balances the claims of the church and its tradition with the claims of the world and its context (assuming that these claims are polar opposites).

Pannenberg sees the task of theology as reflecting on the truth of revelation, that is to say, it has to do with the revelation of God. “Theology deals with the universality of the truth of revelation and therefore with the truth of revelation and of God himself.”18 Insofar as God is the subject of theology, there are similarities between Pannenberg’s and Jenson’s understandings of the task of theology. That said, Pannenberg does not link theology so closely to the church as does Jenson. Pannenberg links theology to salvation history:

At the center of this revelation stands Jesus Christ who is God’s final revelation. The task of theology then has to do with reflecting on the truth of the message and ministry of Jesus who is the revelation of God.
The Method of Theology

It is on the matter of method that there are some interesting differences between Hanson, Jenson, and Peters. Neither Schwarz nor Pannenberg (both of whom are German) seem to be aware of John Wesley and his argument for four sources for theology: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. If they are aware of Wesley’s quadrilateral, they do not mention it. For them the primary question has to do with the relationship between scripture and tradition (or history). Reason is certainly in the background for without reason, they could hardly embark on their deliberations. On the other hand, both Peters and Hanson acknowledge Wesley’s quadrilateral if not explicitly at least implicitly. Jenson, on this matter, is closer to the German theologians. His focus is on scripture and tradition.

Peters explicitly names John Wesley and Richard Hooker in identifying scripture, tradition, experience, and reason as sources for his theology of “evangelical explication.” By evangelical explication, Peters means “a three-step movement from the compactness of primary understanding through analytical exposition toward theological construction.” The first step has to do with simply understanding at the level of primary symbols, especially biblical symbols. Among the primary symbols are physical symbols such as the cross, bread, wine, and water as well as metaphorical symbols like the “word of God,” the “lamb of God,” and the “kingdom of God.” The second step is analyzing these symbols. What do we mean when we talk about the “word of God”? What is the cross and its significance? Finally the third step is to construct a vision of reality as it ought to be, the reality these symbols point to. Evangelical explication is explicating Christian symbols (cross, kingdom of God, salvation, etc.) in such a way that these symbols are received as good news.

Hanson utilizes a variation of Wesley’s quadrilateral. Hanson’s quadrilateral consists of Christian tradition, Bible, experience, and culture. Hanson substitutes culture for reason. Since Hanson does not mention Wesley here, his reasons for this substitution are unclear. By the inclusion of culture Hanson wants to acknowledge that the context in which one lives shapes one’s theology: “everyone who carries on theological reflection does so as one shaped by a certain culture … Culture influences our theological considerations in at least two respects: what issues we think are important and what we regard as evidence in determining truth.” A person experiences culture. It is unclear to me how the inclusion of culture at the expense of reason as a source for theology is advantageous. Simply including culture under the rubric of experience ought to be adequate enough. More than that, the omission of reason is a dangerous omission in that Hanson’s quadrilateral is so focussed on the individual that a communal corrective of any type is missing. If a person is not accountable to a community then theology becomes individualistic. The individual interprets what the Bible means for himself or herself. The individual’s personal history and experience of culture becomes a source of theology. That Hanson does not explicitly connect the task of theology to the community of faith, the church, only serves to reinforce the individualism of his theology despite his concern for community and society.

In this sense, Hanson’s method undercuts his own concerns. It becomes clear, particularly in his chapter on the church, that Hanson is concerned that believers are part of a community, that their perspective goes beyond themselves. To be fair, Hanson includes tradition among his sources for theology; but tradition, he admits, is a slippery thing. It can mean the devotional practices of one’s family, the hymnody of one’s denomination, or the teachings of the great theologians. However without an emphasis on reason and with the emphasis on individual experience it is difficult to make the case for a social or communal accountability and responsibility.

If Hanson’s weakness is that he overemphasizes experience and culture thus making the individual the arbiter of faith, Jenson’s weakness is that the individual and his or her context disappear in his theology. Jenson clearly names scripture as a source for theology although tradition is clearly a secondary source for theology. Scripture is the norma normans non normata (the norm which is un-normed). The question is that of how scripture is properly understood and appropriated in the life of the church. Here Jenson names tradition as guarantor, or more accurately he names the Spirit working through the lit-
urgy, dogma, and the ministerial office as guarantor of the gospel. While Jenson acknowledges that he is shaped by context, clearly his sources do not allow for explicit consideration of context in explicating the gospel story, the story of God.

Pannenberg is more akin to Jenson on the matter of method insofar as he is interested in the sweep of history. Jenson speaks of story where Pannenberg speaks of history. In many respects they are speaking of the same thing although the language is telling. Jenson is more interested in grammar, language and metaphor. Pannenberg is more interested in facts and what might be called a scientific or critical investigation of these facts. In any case God—or, one could argue, God as Trinity—is at the center of their theologies. At the same time, Pannenberg’s theology is much more apologetic than Jenson’s. Pannenberg’s concern for a scientific, critical theology brings him into dialogue with thinkers that Jenson for the most part is uninterested in.

On this front, Hanson and Peters are more like Pannenberg. They too are interested in contemporary culture and intellectual life. They are aware of developments in the sciences as well the humanities and their implications for theology. Hanson has a chapter dedicated to the reasonability of belief in God in which he addresses the challenges from Freud, the sciences, indeed all intellectual quarters. Indeed science also plays an important role in his consideration of providence as well as many other topics. Peters, it is clear from the discussion on the task and method of theology, is very interested in contemporary intellectual life. He spends no little amount of time and energy exploring the contributions of postmodernity as well as often considering the implications of science. The interest in science extends to Schwarz as well. In Eschatology he engages physicist Frank Tipler (among others) on the question of eschatology.

Conclusion

Among the questions one might ask by way of assessing these Lutheran systematic theologians and their theologies is: What makes their theologies Lutheran? On one level, that is perhaps a question for a different essay. Interestingly none of these theologians seeks to develop a narrowly “Lutheran” theology. Each of them writes from the perspective of one who has been trained in Lutheran schools and has taught in Lutheran schools. However can one point to a certain feature or characteristic of their theologies that defines them as Lutheran theologies?

My initial instinct is to say no. None of them appropriates a historical theme or concept of Luther’s and establishes it as an organizing motif or theme (e.g. theology of the cross, justification by faith, law and gospel) for their theology. Moreover for the most part, none of these theologians repeatedly return to Luther as a well from which to draw upon. While they all cite Luther or even the Lutheran confessions and rely upon him at many points, this reliance is not determinative for their theologies as Robert Kolb’s is in The Christian Faith. Nonetheless I wonder if there is not something about their theologies which can be identified as Lutheran.

Luther’s doctrine of the two realms may be helpful. Luther argues that there are two realms: the sacred and the worldly (or secular). Christians dwell in both realms just as God is sovereign of both realms. Each of these theologians, to lesser or greater degrees, takes both these realms seriously. For all of them context is important. Each of them is in conversation with the demands of their era and setting. Each of them takes seriously the intellectual climate in which they live. Even Jenson who is the least contextual of these theologians rightly argues that his theology is contextual. One must take his claim seriously if for no other reason than that he consistently and rigorously argues for the legitimacy of the gospel as the story of God unfolding in history. The story of God is a story which gives meaning in a world bent on meaninglessness, a story which inspires faith in a world bent on faithlessness. All of these theologians understand themselves to be inhabitants of the world as well as of the church.

As to the realm at God’s right hand, the sacred realm, all of these theologians have a deep sense that their work serves the church catholic. The ecumenical commitments of their work—even when unstated as is the case with Schwarz—is unmistakable. The three American theologians—Hanson, Jenson, and Peters—clearly seek to reach an audience beyond the
Lutheran church in the United States. They are familiar with Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox and Reformed and Methodist theologians as well as the early church theologians. These three American theologians cite non-Lutheran theologians as easily as they cite Luther and each other. Even Hanson, whose theology is less overtly churchly than the others, clearly demonstrates facility with and interest in non-Lutheran theologians.

Current Lutheran systematic theology is characterized by breadth. It is characterized by breadth of vision and breadth of interest. Lutheran theologians, if Hanson, Jenson, and Peters are any indication, are moving beyond the parochialism that characterized American Lutheranism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lutheranism in the United States now understands itself as one denomination in a nation with a multitude of denominations. Lutheranism in the United States now understands itself as a church in a nation, it understands itself as a church with a role to play in the larger society. Lutherans understand themselves as Christians who can just as easily express themselves in other denominations and who can learn from these other faith traditions. In the same way, Hanson, Jenson, and Peters understand themselves as theologians in a church which spans many denominations. They understand themselves as theologians in a nation which has political, social, cultural, and intellectual needs and gifts which go beyond or are outside that of the church. They are theologians who recognize that their offerings are provisional and partial and therefore they receive graciously and with humility the gifts and contributions from all quarters both within and without Lutheranism and the church in the service of proclaiming the gospel.

Endnotes

1 Hanson writes: “I have strong ecumenical interest;...I am deeply concerned about better understanding and closer relations among the various Christian traditions...In addition, I share an even wider ecumenical interest in dialogue and mutually respectful relations with adherents of religions other than Christianity.” See Bradley C. Hanson, Introduction to Christian Theology, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), vi-vii. Peters writes: “I wish to maintain an ecumenical and an ecumenic mood...I use the term ecumenical to refer to interdenominational yet still intra-Christian relations...The term ecumenic...points to the window of faith that opens out toward the world beyond. It opens out to the universe that lies beyond the church. It is interreligious, concerned with non-Christian religious views.” see Ted Peters, God—The World’s Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era, 2nd Ed., (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), viii-ix.


3 William Stacy Johnson, “Barth and Beyond,” Christian Century 118, no. 14 (2 May 2001):19 says that Jenson is “perhaps the most creative contemporary theologian with leanings toward Barth.”

4 Jenson, Systematic Theology, Ivii.

5 Jenson states that “where typically Lutheran and Reformed positions diverge I am more likely to draw from the Lutheran side”; see Systematic Theology, Ivii.

6 Jenson, Systematic Theology, I:11.

7 The citations are numerous. The reader might begin by looking at Systematic Theology, I:4, 44, 59, 167–70.


9 Ibid., 7.

10 Peters, God—The World’s Future, 9 says that “modern science may not require outright atheism, but it does go about its business without reference to things divine”. This, Peters acknowledges, is not as true in our postmodern age. Nonetheless the relics of modernist thinking are still to be found.

11 The first edition of God—The World’s Future carried the subtitle “Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era”; the second edition is subtitled “Systematic Theology for a New Era”. As to the reasons for the change, one can only guess. I would hazard to say that Peters has changed the subtitle to account for the debate on what “postmodernism” is.

12 Peters titles these subsections “The Deconstruction of Modernity” and “The Reconstruction of Wholeness”. The titles are a little misleading. “The Deconstruction of Modernity” needs to be understood as the deconstructing of modernity and not as a product of modernity. The emphasis in the second section, “The Reconstruction of Wholeness”, is on wholeness and only secondarily on reconstruction.

13 Bradley C. Hanson, Introduction to Christian Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 4.

14 Hanson, Introduction to Christian Theology, 4.


16 Ibid., 36.

17 Ibid., 38.


19 Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, I:59.

20 Peters, God—The World’s Future, 35.

21 Hanson, Introduction to Christian Theology, 8.
22 Hanson, *Introduction to Christian Theology*, 5–6.


24 Jenson says that theology “is best described as a sort of grammar. The church, we may say, is the community that speaks Christianese, and theology formulates the syntax and semantics of this language. Doctrinal statements function as accepted rules of proper usage; theological opinions of individual theologians or schools are attempts to point out such rules.” See Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, I:18.

25 Pannenberg writes: “If we decide for “story,” however, we make an interest in the reality of what is narrated secondary. But this is not in keeping with the realism of the OT (and NT) traditions. Theology can honor the realistic intention of the biblical accounts only if it takes seriously their witness to the divine action in real events which come upon people and in part were fashioned by them, inquiring into the divine action in the reality of what we call history today. We may not be able to do this without taking a critical view of the historicity of many of the details and stories in the biblical texts, but if theology seeks God’s historical action in the sequence of events which the Bible records, and as they appear to modern historical judgment and according to their reconstruction on the basis of historical-critical research, it will be closer to the spirit of the biblical traditions than if it treats the texts simply as literature in which the facticity of what is recorded is a subsidiary matter.” See Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, I:231; emphasis mine.

26 Christoph Schwöbel writes that “one of the distinctive marks of Pannenberg’s theological reflection is the awareness of the necessity for interdisciplinary cooperation with the human sciences and, to a certain extent, with natural science, in which Christian theology interacts with the intellectual efforts of its time”. See Christoph Schwöbel, “Wolfhart Pannenberg,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed., edited by David E. Ford (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 203.

27 For example, Hanson provides a brief and helpful overview of John Polkinghorne’s understanding of the universe and God’s relationship to it as well as of the anthropic principle; see *Introduction to Christian Theology*, 92–95. In addition Hanson utilizes Polkinghorne’s appropriation of the physical concept of “regime” in discussing miracles (p. 97).

28 A cursory examination of the table of contents as well as of the notes will quickly make it apparent that Kolb is trying to develop a theology which is grounded in the scriptures and the Lutheran confessions. See Kolb, *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House).