

Dogmatics

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Dogmatics is a field within (systematic) theology that deals with the development of the content of Christian faith and its responsibility to the present. Against the background of dogmatics' historical developments, we focus on what characterizes dogmatics as an academic (*wissenschaftliche*) discipline (such as systematicity, positionality, contextuality, interdisciplinarity), the tasks and goals it pursues, the sources (Bible, practice of faith, experience) and norms it refers to, and the subjects that it deals with. In light of the plurality internal to dogmatics, we discuss the position of dogmatics in the context of systematic theology and also thematize the status of dogmatics as an academic discipline. Finally, our own understanding of dogmatics in the context of the SysLex project is presented and explained as followed: "Dogmatics means theologizing in the face of the present as a reflective endeavor related to the Christian faith and its practices. This process gives rise to a dialogical context that, within academic dogmatics at least, aims at increasing coherence and at methodologically grounded dispute around and between categories of interpretation. Dogmatics finds a central – but not the only – place in academic theology (*wissenschaftliche Theologie*)."

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Editorial Note

Links to other media and further information regarding this topic can be found in the German version of this article.

1. Problem-Oriented Introduction

As a field within (systematic) theology, dogmatics deals with the development of the central content of Christian faith and its responsibility to the present moment. How can we speak of God at all, especially in our present situations? Who is Jesus Christ? What does it mean to understand the Bible as “Holy Scripture”? What happens in the Lord’s Supper? Among others, dogmatics deals with these problems both systematically and in an academically verifiable, critical, and constructive way. Since the first Protestant dogmatics, Philipp Melanchthon’s ^{GND} *Loci Communes rerum theologicarum* of 1521, the so-called “loci method” has established itself as the structural principle of dogmatics in European Protestant Christianity. The various topoi of dogmatics (prolegomena, doctrine of God, doctrine of creation, anthropology, doctrine of sin, Christology, etc.) are treated here side by side and usually according to a specific classificatory scheme (*Gliederungsschema*).

As a reflection on, and self-examination of, Christian beliefs, dogmatics in many respects occupies an intermediate and mediating position: between current experiences of faith and the traditional teachings of the Church, between lived faith and academic reflection, between the exegetical-historical sub-disciplines and the practical and applied theological subjects, and between theological and interdisciplinary thinking and research (cf. art. Theology).

The name “dogmatics” traces back to the Greek term dogma (“true belief”). In this sense, dogmatics concerns itself with the content of Christian beliefs as well as the teachings handed down in tradition and churches. However, the term must be distinguished from the pejorative term “dogmatism”, i.e. a rigid and uncritical adherence to doctrines.

[1] For this reason, other names have been used to describe the work of dogmatics, each with a different focus.

Examples include: *Systematic Theology* (e.g. Paul Tillich ^{GND}), *Glaubenslehre* (e.g. Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher ^{GND}) or – especially in the Catholic tradition – “teaching on the truths of faith.”

2. Historical Overview

Even though the designation of “dogmatics” as a subfield of theology dates back to the 17th century, the term nevertheless refers to one of the “oldest branches of theological endeavor.” [2] Drawing upon Acts 17, the early Church (for example, in the works of Clement of Alexandria ^{GND} or Origen ^{GND}) already presented the Church’s teaching in a holistic manner and as an answer to the fundamental questions of existence. [3] In general, spurts of systematization in dogmatic thinking always occur when the presentation of the Christian faith is challenged by an “outsider,” as it was, for instance, by the pagan environment in antiquity, in the course of consolidation in the confessional age, or under the conditions of the Enlightenment in the modern period.

Throughout the Middle Ages, major dogmatic works were produced – from the *Sentences* by Peter Lombard ^{GND} to the *Summa Theologiae* by Thomas Aquinas ^{GND} – that developed various structural principles and methods of dogmatics. The focus increasingly turned to the logical examination of Church teaching through conceptual analysis, the demonstration of non-contradiction, the systematic ordering of statements, and so forth. Classic Protestant orthodoxy further developed these characteristics, and they have survived to this day, for example, in Roman Catholic scholasticism. [4]

For much work in German Protestant dogmatics in the modern period, the Age of Enlightenment – in particular the “change of perspective” [5] brought about by Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher’s ^{GND} *Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums* – has been formative for the understanding of research in dogmatics. As a “functional reconstruction of the

Christian faith from religious consciousness,”^[6] dogmatics’ primary focus is here no longer on the presentation of the contents of the authoritative Holy Scriptures but on “Christianity as one of the historical forms of religion.”^[7] An understanding of dogmatics as an engagement with the event of revelation moves to the center after the publication of Karl Barth’s  *Church Dogmatics*. According to Barth, the object of dogmatics is not human faith or religious consciousness but the Word of God that became flesh in Jesus Christ.^[8] A fundamental pluralization and diversification of approaches to dogmatics (e.g., liberation theologies, feminist theologies, contextual theologies, etc.) took place in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century.

Current challenges to work in dogmatics pertain to the increasing pluralizing tendencies in dogmatics (dogmatics as contextual theology) and the accompanying questioning of its Eurocentric Western focus, the various orientations of dogmatics between ecclesiastical normativity and practical normativity,^[9] its distinction from the philosophy of religion, and, in general, the question of the orienting power of such work – in contrast to, or in conjunction with, its neighboring discipline of ethics and also in relation to an increasingly differentiated and pluralistic present.

3. Dogmatics as Academic Discipline (*Wissenschaftsdisziplin*)

Dogmatics is first and foremost an academic discipline characterized by a specific working method, objectives and tasks, as well as sources and norms.

3.1. Specifics of Work in Dogmatics

- Dogmatics proceeds **academically** (*wissenschaftlich*) insofar as it reflects on its methods and hermeneutics, maintains an analytical distance from its content, and strives for an intersubjectively comprehensible presentation.
- Dogmatics pursues a **systematic approach** insofar as it presents its content in a coherent overarching framework in which the various topics are meaningfully related to one another so as to form a structured whole.
- Dogmatics is **dogmatic** insofar as it is committed to a “truth” experienced in faith. That is, it does not arise from itself but is committed to the pluralistic and contextual reality of believers’ faith and the Christian churches.
- Dogmatic work deals with **normative statements**, i.e., with what can be considered the “space of possibility”^[10] (*Möglichkeitsraum*) of Christian speech. It therefore takes the “risk of affirmation”^[11] (*Wagnis der Affirmation*). In this respect, however, it is always bound to the theme of authority, which it must critically reflect upon.
- Dogmatics has a **person-relative character** (Martin Hailer ). Due to its reference to faith, work in dogmatics is always to be understood as involved speech (in the sense of *assertio*), even when the positions and convictions of others are being reflected upon.
- Dogmatics must accordingly always be understood as **positional** work insofar as it takes place within a specific historical context and its socio-cultural, milieu- and gender-specific conditions.
- Dogmatics is thus always **related to the present** (*gegenwartsbezogen*) and remains open to new questions and challenges as well as their creative resolution.
- Dogmatics operates in an **interdisciplinary** manner, both in terms of its close relationship to other theological subjects and in terms of its dialogue with related disciplines (e.g., philosophy, sociology, history, political science, gender studies, and many more).

3.2. Tasks and Aims of Dogmatics

Dogmatics faces the challenge of reflecting on Christian teaching and discourse about God in a constantly changing world, relating it to the present, and articulating it in a systematic form. Dogmatics therefore adopts specific tasks: (a)

It gives an account of the content and manner of discourse about God. (b) It is responsible for contemporary discourse about God in light of both the diverse testimony of Holy Scripture and the experiences and convictions of faith in the tradition (e.g., Church teachings and confessions) as well as in the present. (c) Against this background, dogmatics develops and interprets Christian teaching in material dogmatics, either by *synthetically* processing and presenting dogmatic teaching points (so-called “loci”; see below) or by *analytically* structuring the dogmatic teaching material according to a guiding principle.

Depending on the theological perspective, the goal of dogmatics can be understood and defined in very different ways: (a) Dogmatics can be understood as a “description of one’s own experience of the faith event (*Glaubensgeschehen*),” which, in a reflexive manner, enables “the self-understanding of human beings as finite beings” (Christian Danz ^{GND}).^[12] According to this framing, the primary goal of dogmatics is not to provide doctrinal instruction but instead to reveal the life-shaping power of the Christian tradition for individuals in the present. (b) With a stronger emphasis on providing solace in the face of humanity’s need for salvation, dogmatics can also be understood as an intellectual account of the Christian faith that interprets reality soteriologically (i.e., in terms of salvation and redemption) and inquires into the “comforting truth”^[13] (*tröstliche Wahrheit*) (Ulrich Körtner ^{GND}) of God’s actions and the faith based on them. (c) The goal of dogmatics may be viewed as an act of “scientific self-examination of the Christian Church”^[14] (Karl Barth ^{GND}). Here dogmatics is framed as a theological discipline and theology as a function of the Church. So understood, dogmatics examines the content of theology as discourse about God, a task which is unique to the Church. According to this understanding of dogmatics as “church dogmatics,” the “Church” should not be confused with the “institution of the Church.” It is understood instead as a community created by the word of God and serving it.

Protestant dogmatics seeks to determine neither the faith of individual believers nor the proclamation and practice of the Church as an authoritative teaching authority. It sees itself more so as a theological academic discipline (*theologische Wissenschaft*) that reflects on the Christian faith in its biblical, historical, contextual, and systematic form, critically examines it, and presents it in a manner that is comprehensible in the present day. In addition to providing theological guidance for proclamation, practice, and social and interreligious dialogue, the intention is to enable believers to develop their theological imagination as well as their own independent ability to speak and think.

3.3. Sources and Norms of Dogmatics

In carrying out this kind of theological reflection and articulation, dogmatics draws on various sources that can carry very different degrees of normativity and authority:

1. The Bible: according to the traditional Reformation understanding, the testimony of Holy Scripture as the primary source and foundation (*sola scriptura*) not only forms the starting point for dogmatic considerations but also always remains their critical counterpart and normative standard (*norma normans*). There are other sources for dogmatics (e.g., beliefs, tradition, contemporary challenges, etc.) in addition to Scripture. A hermeneutical circle between the various sources of dogmatics emerges here, with Holy Scripture holding a special status.^[15]
2. Jesus Christ: Protestant dogmatics can orient and interpret the multifaceted testimony of Scripture christologically. It does so, for example, by placing “what motivates Christ”^[16] at the center of scriptural interpretation, as Luther ^{GND} did, or by understanding “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in holy scripture” as the “one Word of God,”^[17] as stated in the First Thesis of the Barmen Theological Declaration. This makes Jesus Christ the substantive center of, and normative basis for, all dogmatic statements.
3. Tradition: In addition, dogmatics also refers to the larger horizon of ecclesiastical tradition by taking into account “sorting answers”^[18] (*sortierende Antworten*) (Martin Hailer ^{GND}) – that is, important doctrinal decisions, confessional writings, traditions of faith, and significant theologians – and incorporating them into contemporary theological discourse. Church tradition is used as a guide. However, as a “standardized norm”

(*norma normata*) it is always critically examined in light of Scripture. Having no independent normative character of its own, it derives its normativity from biblical revelation.

4. Experiences: Lived faith practice (cf. art. Christian Spirituality) and religious experiences are also a source and critical counterpart for dogmatic reflection. In this way, they link up with the biblical testimony, which is itself a reflection of certain experiences. One's own experiences therefore enter into constructive tension with Scripture and tradition and thereby function as a motor for dogmatic thinking (cf. in particular, contextual theologies).
5. Reason: In dogmatics, faith is also accountable to the forum of human reason, without the latter being understood as an authority over revelation. By helping us to understand better the contents of faith, to organize them, and to place them in dialogue with tradition and the modern world, reason supports dogmatics in the sense of "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*, Anselm of Canterbury ^{GND}).
6. Non-theological discourses: by incorporating insights from philosophy, religious studies, the humanities and natural sciences, art, culture, literature, and media, protestant dogmatics allows non-theological discourses to play a complementary role. Such discourses offer models of thought, comparative perspectives, and alternative forms of expression that aid reflection and the articulation of faith and its contents in the present context. In addition, they make possible an interdisciplinary dialogue that highlights the relevance of the Christian faith for various areas of life and both challenges and enriches dogmatics as an academic discipline.

The path from sources, historical and contemporary texts, and experiences to dogmatics is complex and proceeds via careful hermeneutical work. It is not a matter of mere repetition of biblical and historical statements or personal experiences and ideas but rather of reflective engagement, reformulation, and responsibility in the context of the present. In doing so, dogmatics strives to make the Christian faith comprehensible and relevant for today.

3.4. Subjects in Dogmatics

The question of the subject matter of dogmatics is not without controversy. There is, for instance, heated debate as to whether God in se (*Gott selbst*) can be the subject of dogmatics. While some theologians affirm this, others emphasize that God's nature (cf. art. Divine Attributes) transcends all human knowledge and therefore cannot be the direct subject of a theological discipline. Christian faith and the Christian religion, the dogmas handed down in the Church, church proclamation, and a Christian perception of the world can become the subject matter of dogmatics. Here dogmatics does not inquire primarily into the truth conditions of statements about God *in se* but rather into how humans can linguistically pass on God's promise. As noted earlier, dogmatics is traditionally divided into so-called "loci" (concepts or themes). Such a division is not without its problems for theological thinking, since a division into individual "themes" may neglect or obscure the internal connection between the individual statements of faith, reproduce blind spots in dogmatic reflection, or make it more difficult to connect with modern terminology. If the synthetic approach of the loci method is chosen, then an initial structuring of dogmatic thinking might be helpful. Arranged differently and with different focuses, the following theological loci may be discussed:

1. Prolegomena (introduction) or fundamental theology: the nature and task of theology, theological knowledge and methods; Scripture, tradition, revelation
2. Doctrine of God: e.g., attributes of God, doctrine of the Trinity, creation, and doctrine of providence
3. Theological anthropology: e.g., human beings as creatures and images of God and as sinners
4. Christology as the teaching on the person and work of Jesus Christ: e.g., incarnation, proclamation, reconciliation, cross, and resurrection
5. Soteriology as the teaching on salvation: e.g., God's saving action in Christ, grace and justification, faith and works
6. Pneumatology as the teaching on the Holy Spirit: e.g., the work and gifts of the Holy Spirit, faith, and discipleship
7. Ecclesiology as the teaching on the Church: e.g., the nature and mission of the Church, the sacraments of baptism and communion, ministries and ecumenism, mission

8. Eschatology as the teaching on the last things: e.g., death and resurrection, the Final Judgment, heaven and hell, the completion of creation.

As an alternative approach to the loci method, a central theme can be developed, with key theological subjects (such as reconciliation, liberation, covenant, vulnerability, ecothology, etc.) determining the project. Non-European theologies also frequently criticize the European-influenced loci method for being too strongly tied to Western thought structures. For example, Latin American liberation theologies replace the loci method with a contextual approach that takes social justice as its starting point, and postcolonial theologies decentralize the European loci in favor of indigenous narratives (e.g., ancestry in African theologies).

4. Plurality in and Profile of Dogmatics

4.1. Dogmatics in the Context of (Systematic) Theology

According to the customary differentiation of theological subjects in the German-speaking context, dogmatics belongs to the area of systematic theology.

Also included within systematic theology are the areas of “ethics” and the “philosophy of religion.” The necessity of determining the relationship between the various subjects of systematic theology emerges from this differentiation:

While dogmatics is responsible for reflecting on Christian models of thought and their present relevance, ethics reflects on human morality (evaluation) and customs (action). Ethics deals, on the one hand, with the description of moral and ethical issues and, on the other hand, with the analysis of them, e.g., through the questions “What is good?” (evaluative ethics) and “What is right?” (deontological ethics). It therefore engages in dialogue with the applied disciplines of material ethics and philosophical ethics and is simultaneously concerned with the academic self-examination of its subjects and methods. In dialogue with philosophy and religious studies, the philosophy of religion, in turn, focuses on the clarification of the fundamental terms and concepts of theology and religion.

4.2. Dogmatics in the Context of International Theology

Accordingly, dogmatics is only one dimension of systematic theology – not only in terms of the latter’s internal differentiation but also in terms of how systematic theology is understood in the broader international context. In English-speaking countries, “dogmatics” is a rarely used term and refers primarily to the study of historically developed Christian dogmas. In contrast, the term “theology” refers to what was described above as dogmatics and is often contrasted with “ethics.”

Instead of the encyclopedic mode of differentiation commonly found in German-speaking countries (i.e., differentiation based on the definition of theological disciplines), a diverse field of different *theologies* has developed internationally. With varying goals and focuses, many of these theologies address theological questions across the usual subject boundaries:

Constructive theologies, for example, are dedicated to developing genuinely theological models of thought based on contemporary issues. Often in relation to the biblical texts, liberation theologies reinterpret theological terms in light of their ethical-dogmatic and church-liturgical implications. These forms of theology are increasingly finding a place in the German-speaking debate where they often critically examine the term and traditional concept of dogmatics.

These considerations make it clear that there is only dogmatics in the plural: there is no uniform “dogmatics” in the sense of a fixed body of faith or teaching in Protestant theology. The field of Protestant dogmatics in the past and present is correspondingly pluralistic.

4.3. An Outline of Dogmatics in the Context of SysLex

Within the spectrum of these diverse contexts and areas of focus, the current authors' understanding of dogmatics can be defined as follows:

Dogmatics means theologizing in the face of the present as a reflective endeavor related to the Christian faith and its practices. Dogmatics has a central – but not the only – place in academic theology. With this definition, the present authors put forward their own understanding for discussion on the basis of, and in continuation with, what has been outlined above. Here is definition broken down into its parts:

“Dogmatics means theologizing (*Theologisieren*)...” The term and concept of theologizing originates from religious education, where it was introduced to acknowledge the reflection on God and the faith among children and young people as an independent form of theology.

The term emphasizes the procedural nature of dogmatics: dogmatics exists only as intermediate steps in a process. They are the result of, and an invitation to, theologize: It is this process of reflecting on God and the questions, concepts, or experiences derived from it that is the focus and to which dogmatics, in all their diversity, bear witness. This process develops a dialogical context that, within academic dogmatics at least, aims at increasing coherence and methodically grounded debate about and between interpretive categories.

“... in the face of the present...” Dogmatics exists within a specific context. This context shapes theological reflection both in the way theology is practiced and in the choice of topics. Dogmatics is therefore oriented toward the present at any given time. Since most of the “presents” of the dogmatics we know are now in the past, this orientation toward the present leads constitutively to historicization: that is, it is necessary to understand all dogmatics contextually and in relation to their respective present.

“...as a reflective endeavor...” Theologizing is not just any activity; it is reflexive. As such and in the literal sense of the word “thinking” (*nach-denkend*), dogmatics accompanies something else. This something else that is reflexively accompanied is the Christian faith and its practices.

“...related to the Christian dogma, the Christian faith, and its practices...” Theologies and dogmatics have developed from religious practices and beliefs. Historically speaking, this thesis is unproblematic. In terms of content, however, it is controversial: (How or how closely) is dogmatics related to dogma, i.e., the teachings of the Church and beliefs? The definition presented here proposes a middle way: dogmatics is not reflection on dogma or faith in the sense that it is only related to dogma or can only be practiced by believers. However, it is related to dogma and faith insofar as it asks questions from the perspective of faith and acquires its premises when it reflects on dogma as present and past models of thought. In this sense, dogmatics as a specific form of “scholarly theology” also relates to the Church as a wider place and forum for theology. At the same time, it relates to forms of lived theology. While the communication of faith is at the forefront of Church preaching, reflection on this faith as well as the responsibility to understand it stand in the foreground for academic theologies. Accordingly, there may be mutual criticism between academic theology and the Church, without one of the places of theology being superior to the other or having authority over the other.

This account of dogmatics is reflected in the criteria that are programmatically applied in SysLex. In the present lexicon, dogmatics is understood as *oriented toward the present* (*gegenwartsorientiert*) in the sense that current topics of debate are addressed as theological topics and are reflected upon in the light of dogmatic models of thought from the past and the present. SysLex understands dogmatics as problem-oriented (*problemorientiert*). The respective articles take classical topics and concepts of systematic theology as their starting point and subsequently seek to examine them in relation to concrete and presently relevant questions concerning Christian religious practice and systematic theological scholarship that the authors themselves raise. It also presents various positions on dogmatic questions in a dialogue-oriented (*dialogorientiert*) manner. In this way, SysLex reflects the procedural character of

dogmatic thinking and questioning as ongoing theologizing in the different spaces and thought-contexts of theologies.

Recommended Literature

For recommended literature, see the [German version](#) of this article.

Citations

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