

On the prevailing understanding, confirmed by accepted theory as well as customary practice, only one of the two main tasks of systematic theology is regularly recognized. As is evident from the widespread agreement that theology is rightly understood and practiced as, in Anselm's phrase, "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quærens intellectum*), it is usually supposed to be concerned solely with explicating the *meaning* of Christian witness and not also with establishing its *truth*. Thus, even when theology is more or less clearly distinguished from witness as a "second act" of critical reflection, the only task assigned to it is critically validating the one claim of witness to be appropriate to Jesus Christ. The other no less essential claim of witness to be credible to human existence is commonly held either not to need theological validation or to be incapable of it. Being based either in revelation, and thus on the authority of scripture and/or the church, or in the experience of faith of Christians, the credibility of Christian witness is regarded as the basic presupposition of doing theology rather than as one of its possible conclusions.

To be sure, mainstream Christian theologies have typically allowed that the credibility of the necessary presuppositions of witness can be, in one way or another, critically validated. But aside from the fact that critically validating their credibility has usually been regarded as a pretheological task, instead of as a task of theology proper, the credibility of witness itself, as distinct from its necessary presuppositions, has been excluded from the scope of theological reflection.

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According to the understanding of theology that continues to be widely represented by theologians even today, the apologetic task of validating witness as credible either is not acknowledged as a proper theological task at all or else is held to be reducible, in effect, to the properly dogmatic task of validating witness as genuinely appropriate. Thus, even though theology is understood to be critical reflection on witness, it is regarded as involving only the first and second of the three phases into which the process of systematic theological reflection is to be distinguished, i.e., its historical and hermeneutical phases, to the exclusion of its

third philosophical phase. Consistent with this, then, the credibility of at least formally normative witness is assumed to be already accepted by the theologian as a necessary condition of the possibility of her or his doing theology at all.

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Throughout its history right up to the present time, theology has been understood and done more as a form of rationalization than as a form of critical reflection. This assumes, of course, the usual pejorative sense of the term "rationalization," according to which it designates the process of giving reasons for positions already taken as distinct from the process of determining in a reasoned way whether positions already taken are, in fact, as worth taking as they claim to be. If theology has been conceived to have any proper critical function at all, it has been restricted to criticizing particular witnesses of faith by reference to whatever has been understood to constitute normative Christian witness, whether scripture alone or, on some interpretation or other, scripture and tradition.

True, there has been an important difference between classical Roman Catholic and classical Protestant theology. Whereas the first has been assigned the task of rationalizing the positions taken by a particular institutional church—namely, the Roman Catholic Church—the second has been expected to rationalize the positions of that visible church which, being always only more or less visible in the various institutional churches, can never be simply identified with any of them. Notwithstanding this difference, however, in neither case has theology been allowed, much less assigned, the task of critically reflecting on the positions taken by the church in such a way as to ask and answer the more radical question as to their validity. On the contrary, theology has been and, for the most part, still is expected simply to assume the validity of the church's positions and then to occupy itself with giving reasons for them, or, at any rate, arguing *from* their assumed validity rather than arguing *for* it—just this being the sense almost always given to Anselm's famous phrase, taken as describing theology's task: "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*).