What, exactly, are "formally normative Christian witness" and "the 'right' philosophy," respectively? How are they similar, and how are they different?

"Formally normative Christian witness" is the earliest, the original and originating, and therefore constitutive instance (or instances) of bearing Christian witness, which, as such, expresses (or express) specifically Christian experience of Jesus with unique appropriateness. Consequently, it (or they) is (or are) uniquely, which is to say, formally, normative for determining whether any other such instance is appropriate. "The 'right' philosophy," on the other hand, is the philosophy (or philosophies) that correctly explicates (or explicate) so-called common or generically human experience of existence/ultimate reality. Consequently, it (or they) is (or are) normative for determining whether any instance (or instances) of Christian witness, including "formally normative Christian witness," is (or are) credible. "Formally normative Christian witness" and "the 'right' philosophy" are therefore similar in that each designates what must be appealed to in order to determine what is authorized by the ultimate, or primal, criteria of doing Christian theology—more exactly, Christian systematic theology. Whereas the first designates what doing theology in this sense has to appeal to in order to determine what is authorized by specifically Christian experience and reason based on such experience, and hence is appropriate, the second designates what doing theology has to appeal to in order to determine what is authorized by common or generically human experience and reason based thereon, and hence is credible.

But if this is how "formally normative Christian witness" and "the 'right' philosophy" are similar, how are they different? They are different in that "formally normative Christian witness" designates an instance (or instances) of bearing Christian witness that, as much as any other, is (or are) something actually given as a *datum* for critical reflection, whereas "the 'right' philosophy" is not a datum for critical reflection, but rather an *objective* of it, something that is ever to be constructed anew precisely by doing it. "The 'right' philosophy" is the objective, namely, of doing the kind of critical reflection proper to doing philosophy, and doing it correctly, as it ought to be done. This means that the

way in which "the 'right' philosophy" is always to be distinguished from any particular philosophy (or philosophies) that has (or have) more or less successfully attained its (or their) objective is something like the way in which, according to orthodox Protestant theology, "the visible, or 'true,' church" is always to be distinguished from any particular institutional church (or churches) in which, in the words of the Westminster Confession, it "hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible."

To say, however, that "the 'right' philosophy" to which doing Christian systematic theology must appeal always has to be constructed anew, and constructed by doing philosophical reflection, is emphatically not to say that constructing it is to be left to professional philosophers only. On the contrary, the task of constructing "the 'right' philosophy," so far as doing Christian theology is concerned, belongs inalienably to the systematic theologian, although she or he will be only prudent to look for whatever help is to be had from anyone who does philosophy, especially those who do it professionally. In much the same way, the task of critically identifying and interpreting "formally normative Christian witness" ever anew cannot be left solely to those who do history, or even historical theology, professionally, since it, too, is an inalienable task of the Christian systematic theologian. Nor is this any the less so because she or he, again, will act only prudently by accepting help wherever it is to be found and, certainly not least, where history is being done professionally, either by fellow theologians, which is to say, historical theologians, or by secular historians.

And yet real as this difference is between "formally normative Christian witness" and "the 'right' philosophy," it is important not to exaggerate it. For there is a certain respect in which, for all of this difference, they are quite similar. Even granting, as I have, that "formally normative Christian witness" is a datum, not a construct, of theology's critical reflection, one must still allow that it can actually function normatively only if it is critically interpreted, or, as we could also say, critically construed. In fact, such interpretation, or construal, is necessary not only in order to communicate the meaning of "formally normative Christian witness" to some third party, but also in order for the interpreter her-

or himself to understand it sufficiently to be able to use it as a formal norm. In its own way, then, determining whether or not a given witness is appropriate requires appealing, not to a datum, but to an interpretation, or a construal, of a datum, and in that sense, to a construct, in something like the way in which determining the credibility of witness likewise requires appealing, not to a datum, but to a construct—the construct I call "the 'right' philosophy."

There is a further respect in which "formally normative Christian witness" and "the 'right' philosophy" are similar as well as different: both are, in their respectively different ways, *"normed* norms" (*normæ normatæ*) and are, therefore, also always *"to be normed "* (*normæ normandæ*). They are normed and also always to be normed, however, not by any other *norm or authority*, properly so-called, but solely by the *primal sources* of the relevant norms or authorities, i.e., by specifically Christian experience of Jesus in the case of "formally normative Christian witness," and by common or generically human experience of existence/ultimate reality in the case of "the 'right' philosophy."

To be sure, it is only by appealing to "formally normative Christian witness" that systematic theology can determine, finally, what is, in fact, authorized by specifically Christian experience of Jesus. I say "determine, *finally,*" because, although all the rest of the tradition of Christian witness may also more or less appropriately express what specifically Christian experience of Jesus authorizes, *how* appropriately any of it does this can be determined only by appealing to "formally normative Christian witness." In this sense, such witness is irreplaceable—its being irreplaceable being just what is meant, in fact, by its being uniquely appropriate and, therefore, *"formally* normative." And yet, even in the case of irreplaceable/uniquely appropriate/formally normative witness, a distinction is to be made and consistently carried through between the *content* of witness—the self-understanding/understanding of existence decisively re-presented through Jesus—and its own particular *formulations* of this content, which are normative only because of their content and only because, or insofar as, they formulate their content appropriately.

In somewhat the same way, it is only by appealing to "the 'right' philosophy" that any systematic theology can finally determine what is, in fact, authorized by common, or generically human experience of existence/ultimate reality. Here, again, the qualification, "*finally* determine" is necessary because, although all religion and culture may more or less credibly express what common human experience authorizes concerning existence/ultimate reality, *how* credibly any of it does this is to be determined only critically, by appealing to "the 'right' philosophy." Nor is this any less the case because "the 'right' philosophy" itself, as we have seen, is never simply given as a datum, but remains to be constructed ever anew by critical philosophical reflection on all that human beings think, say, and do, explicitly and also implicitly, in understanding themselves and leading their lives. And yet "the 'right' philosophy" is right, if it is, only because of *its* content, and because, or insofar as, its formulations credibly formulate its content: the self-understanding/ understanding of existence/ultimate reality that is given implicitly with human existence itself, by simply existing as a human being.

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