

I have long reasoned in the matter of prolegomena that my understanding of theology is as appropriate as it is credible. Why? Because Christian faith itself claims to be worthy of belief, or true, for the same reason, in general, that any other truth claim is a valid claim—namely, because common human experience and reason somehow support it as they do not support its contraries. The question I want to ask is whether Gerrish doesn't reason in very much the same way in arguing for—in effect, the appropriateness of—his "revised model of dogmatics" (73 f.)—even if (unfortunately, by my standards!) he is nothing like as clear about the need for his model to be credible as well as appropriate.

Thus, just as I argue that it is because Christian witness itself claims to be credible as well as appropriate that Christian theology has the systematic task of validating its credibility as well as its appropriateness, so he argues that it is because Christians believe in Jesus Christ that they trust in the reliability of the natural order, and because they view nature as the theater of redemption that they are reassured that human existence is not chaotic but ordered and meaningful—in short, that it is because Christians believe what they believe that a dogmatics, or a dogmatic system, has to have the threefold structure he takes it to have, as the presentation (moving from the more abstract to the more concrete) of elemental faith (in the Introduction) through theistic faith (in Part 1) to Christian faith (in Part 2).

My main problem with his argument, however, is that one need not deny what he denies in order to affirm what he affirms. One need not deny that, from the other standpoint of credibility, as distinct from that of appropriateness, the three kinds of faith are, in fact, related, as he says, "like the foundation, the first story, and the second story of a house," so that "a dogmatic system" is something like "a complicated proof in which one first lays a philosophical foundation, then erects a full-blown natural theology upon it, and lastly finishes off the building with the truths of revelation" (74). Depending on the standpoint from which it is viewed—of credibility as distinct from appropriateness—the understanding Gerrish rejects can be as valid and important as the understanding he accepts and argues for.

31 May 2000