

Why is my understanding of systematic theology appropriate?

The understanding of systematic theology as including critical reflection on the claim of witness to be credible as well as appropriate exactly corresponds to the logical structure of witness as such and therefore to any and all witness, including formally normative witness. Why? Because any witness at all makes or implies the claim to be credible to human existence as well as appropriate to Jesus Christ. But, then, any witness simply as such makes critical reflection on both claims alike not only possible but necessary—as soon, at least, as they are sufficiently problematic to require critical validation. Consequently, to understand theology as just such critical reflection—on the credibility or truth of witness as well as on its appropriateness—is only to take witness at its word and to make fully explicit the understanding of theology that any witness itself already necessarily implies (cf. *Doing Theology Today*: 18).

No critical reflection on Christian witness can be fully appropriate to the logical structure of such witness that exempts its claim to credibility or truth from critical validation. Conversely, to insist that theology, in the strict sense of critical reflection on Christian witness, must include critically validating this claim, along with the other validity claims distinctive of Christian witness, is simply to take this witness at its word in thinking out what critical reflection on it would have to be in order to be fully appropriate to it (cf. 76).

That Christian faith itself requires a certain kind of critical reflection, and that theology—in the usual sense of professional, or even academic, theology—is simply the expert form of such reflection, seems clear enough. Moreover, the service to faith distinctive of dogmatic theology is precisely to test the claim expressed or implied by any witness to be truly Christian. But there is no good reason to suppose that this is the only service to faith that systematic theology exists to perform. On the contrary, the critical reflection that faith requires includes answering for yet another claim equally essential to faith itself and hence also expressed or implied by any Christian witness—namely, the claim to be true, in the sense of being genuinely credible or worthy of belief, not only by Christians, but by any and all human beings

whatsoever. Therefore, systematic theology properly performs the service to faith of also conducting a more or less expert test of faith's own essential claim to universal truth. One may suggest, naturally, that conducting this second test is the proper business of apologetic theology rather than dogmatic theology, which is rightly restricted to testing faith's other claim to be truly Christian. But however we assign the different tasks of systematic theology, conducting the second test belongs as essentially to them as conducting the first, and for exactly the same reason: because of the claims to validity expressed or implied by Christian faith and witness themselves.

To contend, however, that assertions of faith must be somehow verified if faith's own claim to truth or credibility is a valid claim does not require one to hold that faith itself can be verified—unless what is meant by this is simply such *indirect* justification of faith by verifying its assertions as is in fact possible—and, under certain conditions, necessary and even urgent.

But would not any verifying of faith's assertions in effect relieve women and men of the risk of faith? No, theology's critically validating faith's assertions as true would no more relieve anyone of the risk of faith than would its critically validating a particular witness as truly Christian. In this case, exactly as in the other, all that theology could do would be to clarify the decision of faith—in such a way, namely, that all who are willing to risk making it can do so with confidence and in good conscience, knowing that it is a decision in keeping with the truth, rather than contrary to it—just as, in the other case, all that theology can do is so clarify what is and is not implied by the decision of faith that anyone willing to assume its risk can confidently and conscientiously make it—as a decision of *Christian* faith, rather than some other faith (cf. 253 f.).

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Why is my understanding of systematic theology credible?

The test of whether an understanding of theology is credible is whether it can be validated as such by the truth about human existence. The problem, however, is that there is nothing like a consensus about what is to count as such truth, either in principle or in fact. But precisely in a situation all but overwhelmed by the plurality of understandings of the truth, no claims to

truth are likely to be regarded as exempt from the requirement that they be critically validated. By the same token, no theology is likely to be accepted as critical reflection in the full and proper sense of the words that excludes critically validating the credibility of the witness on which it affects to reflect. On the contrary, any understanding of theology that insists on its including such validation is bound to seem more credible than any understanding that in principle excludes it (cf. 18 f.).

In societies and cultures that for long periods are relatively stable and more or less isolated from significantly different social and cultural patterns, the validity of claims to truth as fundamental as religious claims typically are is not likely to seem in need of critical validation. Although the claims in fact *are* problematic—no less so, indeed, than any other human claims—the underlying plausibility structures are sufficiently intact and unchallenged that the claims are not experienced *as* problematic. But in a situation such as ours has now become, marked by rapid social and cultural change and encompassing a plurality of societies and cultures striking in their differences, there is a heightened consciousness of the historicity and relativity of all social and cultural forms, including those of religion. In this sort of situation, religious claims to truth are likely to seem even more problematic than most others, and at least as problematic as they actually are. Consequently, the felt need for the critical validation of these claims if they are to be accepted as valid is acute enough that no reflection on the validity of Christian witness can credibly claim to be fully critical that exempts its claim to truth or credibility from such validation. On the other hand, to hold that theology in the strict sense must critically validate all the claims of Christian witness, including its claim to be credible, is simply to take seriously our own situation in determining what theological reflection has to be if its claim to be fully critical is still to be accepted as credible (cf. 76 f.).

Addendum

Why is my concept of theology sound?

As for the reasons for the soundness of my concept of theology, they must be two kinds of reasons, purporting to show that it is both credible and appropriate. So far as its credibility is concerned, suffice it to say that it seems to be in full compliance with standards of critical reflection that are currently widely accepted. Thus, unlike most other concepts of theology, it requires the theologian neither to make the prior commitment of Christian faith nor to appeal at some point to special criteria of truth other than those given generally in our common human experience and reason. But if this much, at least, can be said for its credibility, there seem good reasons to think that it is also appropriate. This is so, at any rate, if the exegetical argument is sound that in the apostolic witness attested by scripture it is typically assumed that the claims of the Christian witness are true, in the final analysis, for the very same reason that any other claim is true—namely, because they express explicitly and fully what anyone to whom they are addressed at least implicitly understands, and, but for willful suppression of the truth, would also be led to affirm by her or his own experience and reason.

Certainly, this is the assumption when the Johannine Jesus is represented as saying, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me; if any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God, or whether I am speaking on my own authority" (Jn 7:16 f.); or again, when Paul represents the method of his own witness of faith by saying that "by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing" (2 Cor 4:2 f.) (cf. *On Theology*: 141).