

WHAT IS THE PROPER TASK OF THEOLOGY?

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I propose to answer this question by considering it as the first of four questions, the other three of which must also be considered if the first is to be answered at all adequately.

1. What is the proper task of theology?

The proper task of theology in the sense explicitly conveyed by the words, "Christian theology," is the fully reflective understanding of the Christian witness of faith as decisive for human existence.¹

In general, to be reflective means to take something that appears to be the case and then to ask deliberately, methodically, and with a view to giving reasons for one's answer whether it really is so. But there is also work for reflection to do whenever something is said to be the case, as is in fact done in the more spontaneous witness of faith on which theology critically reflects. Thus theology, properly so called, is the deliberate, methodical, and reasoned attempt to determine what is meant by the Christian witness of faith and whether or not this witness expresses, as its claim to decisiveness implies, the ultimate truth about human existence. On my view, both the nature of human beings as such and the claim implied by Christian faith itself demand this attempt to determine the meaning and truth of the witness in which faith spontaneously finds expression. But these also seem to me to be the sufficient conditions of the theological task, there being no necessary conditions of its possibility other than the given witness of faith constitutive of the historic Christian community and the given fact of human existence as including our distinctive capacity of fully reflective understanding, and hence of asking, among other things, about the meaning and truth of this witness.

Viewing Christian theology in terms of its task, then, one may distinguish theology as the process of critically reflecting on the Christian witness of faith from theology as the product of such reflection. As the product of critical reflection, theology is simply the fully reflective form of the Christian witness of faith itself. As such, it consists in a system of assertions critically formulated and rationalized, its constitutive assertion being "Jesus is the Christ," which is properly interpreted to mean that the ultimate ground of human existence and of all existence is "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."² But, as the

¹On this definition of the theological task, as well as on all that follows in this paper, see the more extended discussion in my essay, "What Is Theology?" The Journal of Religion, LII, 1 (January 1972), 22-40.

²See my essay, "The Point of Christology," The Journal of Religion, LV, 4 (October 1975), 375-395.

process of reflective understanding necessarily presupposed by any such system of assertions, theology is not constituted by any assertion, not even the Christian witness's constitutive assertion of the reality of God in Christ, but is constituted, rather, by the twofold question of the meaning and truth of the Christian witness.

I would observe in passing that the distinction between theology as process and theology as product closely parallels the distinction made by Protestant orthodoxy between theology as a faculty of the intellect and theology as a system of teaching or doctrine. Although I prefer to speak of a process of reflective understanding rather than of a faculty of the intellect, so as to take account of the social, public character of theological reflection, the necessary condition of the possibility of any such process is evidently the distinctively human capacity to understand, and so to ask and answer the reflective question of meaning and truth.

2. What is the method by which theology accomplishes its proper task?

The method by which theology accomplishes its proper task is the complex method required to answer its twofold question of the meaning and truth of the Christian witness of faith.

The method of any reflective discipline is primarily determined neither by its data nor by its object but by its task, which is to say, by the question it asks and seeks to answer. This becomes evident in the case of theology from the consideration that the same data and object on which it critically reflects may also be reflected on from the standpoint of other, more or less different questions--e.g., the question asked by the philosophy of religion, or philosophical theology, as distinct from Christian theology, or the question asked by a human science like sociology insofar as it becomes the sociology of religion. But, if an answer to the second question of the method of theology depends on answering the first question as to its task, the task of theology is not fully understood until one has understood its method.

By "theology" here I mean the one, integral process of reflective understanding, as distinct from the product thereof, that encompasses the three disciplines of: (1) historical (including exegetical) theology; (2) systematic (including moral) theology; and (3) practical theology. These disciplines are distinguished as disciplines within the one field of Christian theology by the particular questions they ask, each of which is essentially involved in the twofold question constitutive of theology as a process of critical reflection. The three questions constitutive of the theological disciplines may be formulated as follows: (1) What has the Christian witness of faith to the truth of human existence already been? (historical theology); (2) What is the truth of human existence attested by the Christian witness of faith? (systematic theology); (3) What should the Christian witness of faith to the truth of human existence now become? (practical

theology). Although it is possible to state in general terms the method proper to theology understood as comprehending these three questions, it must be recognized that there are also particular methods peculiarly appropriate to each of the three disciplines.

Because the task of theology is to ask the twofold question of the meaning and truth of the Christian witness of faith, its method is, in its first essential aspect, a hermeneutical method, and that in two different but closely related respects. In the one respect, it is the hermeneutical method required by a critical interpretation of the Christian witness of faith attested by the apostolic witness as documented by Scripture and tradition. By "critical interpretation" in general I understand interpreting what is said in terms of what is meant, including its transcendental implications, or the necessary conditions of the possibility of such meaning. Thus the method of theology in this respect is the method required to critically interpret what the apostolic witness says in terms of what it means, including what that, in turn, necessarily implies. In the other respect the hermeneutical method of theology is the method required by the same kind of critical interpretation of human existence as such, as expressed in the whole of culture and history, including religion. Because theology asks not only about the meaning of the Christian witness but also about its truth, it must perforce determine the claims implicit in universal human experience, by reference to which the truth of the Christian witness can alone be determined. But this it can do, clearly, only by way of a general, philosophical hermeneutic of culture and religion, as well as a special, theological hermeneutic of the apostolic witness of faith.

The method of theology in its second essential aspect, then, is the constructive method required to answer just this question of the truth of the Christian witness. If this witness is true, as its claim to be decisive for human existence implies, it is so only because the claims expressed in the apostolic witness of faith both confirm and are confirmed by the claims implied by all human existence and experience. Consequently, the method of theology must be the constructive as well as hermeneutical method that such mutual confirmation of the apostolic witness and universal human experience necessarily requires. If "philosophy" is understood comprehensively, so as to include all secular human understanding, in the special sciences and the arts, as well as in philosophy proper, one may say that the method of theology in its second or constructive aspect is and must be essentially the same as the constructive method of philosophy.

3. By what criterion is the adequacy of theology in accomplishing its proper task to be assessed?

The criterion by which the adequacy of theology is to be assessed is the twofold criterion of (1) appropriateness to the Christian witness of faith as normed by the apostolic witness; and (2) understandability to human existence in terms of universal human experience.

Like the method of theology, the criterion for assessing its adequacy is determined by its proper task, which means, of course, by the twofold

question it asks and attempts to answer. Thus the criterion of theological adequacy is itself twofold in character. Both aspects of the criterion, however--appropriateness as well as understandability--are in different respects situation-invariant and situation-dependent. They are situation-invariant in the sense that, regardless of the historical situation, theological assertions to be adequate must be both appropriate and understandable. And yet both aspects of the criterion are also situation-dependent in the sense that their specific requirements are always a function of some specific historical situation.

Thus what may be said to be appropriate to the Christian witness in one time and place may not be said to be so in another. This is clear, for instance, from the consideration that the apostolic witness, which is the norm of appropriateness, can no longer be identified by us today with the traditional canon of the New Testament. In creating this canon, the early church was guided by the criterion that that alone can be finally normative for the Christian witness which is "apostolic," in the sense of being original witness to Jesus as the Christ. Given the historical methods and knowledge generally available until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the early church's judgment that the writings comprising the New Testament canon were in this sense apostolic was a reasonable judgment. But, given the methods and knowledge available to us today, we now recognize that this judgment is, in fact, more or less mistaken. None of our New Testament writings as such is in the strict sense of the word "apostolic." At the same time, literary critical analysis of these writings, and especially form-critical study of the Synoptic Gospels, enables us to establish, within limits, what should be judged apostolic witness by the early church's own criterion of apostolicity--namely, the so-called Jesus-tradition, or "the Jesus-kerygma," that makes up the earliest layer of the Synoptic tradition. It is by reference to this apostolic witness that we today, in our historical situation, must determine the appropriateness of theological assertions.³

And so, too, with what we today may and may not hold to be understandable in terms of universal human experience. Many theological claims

³This is true, I should maintain, even if a proto-form of "the Christ-kerygma" should prove to be at least as early as "the Jesus-kerygma" documented by the Synoptic Gospels. For it is in the Jesus-kerygma that the Jesus who is the subject of all Christian witness, and hence the explicit source of all that is theologically normative, is attested without explicit christological predicates--the Christ-kerygma as such, as Willi Marxsen has shown, being merely implicit in the "that" of the Jesus-kerygma, as distinct from its "what." Because all explicit christological predicates not only interpret their subject but, more importantly, are also to be interpreted by it, it is the Jesus discernible precisely in the Jesus-kerygma by which the appropriateness of all explicit christology and, consequently, all other theological claims must finally be judged. See further Willi Marxsen, Das Neue Testament als Buch der Kirche (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1968), pp. 108 f., 111 (English translation by James E. Mignard as The New Testament as the Church's Book [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972], pp. 112 f., 115).

that in earlier situations could quite reasonably be regarded as true can no longer be so regarded, given the changes that have since taken place in what it is reasonable to believe. And this must be said even though one fully recognizes the difference between assertions that really are true in terms of human experience and assertions that merely conform to currently accepted canons of truth. For, if the claim for the truth of a theological assertion is to be made good at all, this can only be done by means of a critical discussion with the canons of truth prevailing in the existing historical situation.

This implies, of course, that the specific requirements of understandability or truth that theological assertions must meet are the same requirements as are binding on logically the same kind of assertions made in any other field or discipline. Thus the requirements of understandability for historical theology are in no way different from those for history generally, and the claims of systematic theology can be established as true only by meeting the same requirements that must be met by any true claim of philosophy or the special sciences.

It is crucial to recognize, however, that theology has both the right and the responsibility to make its own independent contribution to the ever-new task of formulating specific requirements of understandability. To this extent, theology may never simply "borrow" its specific criteria of truth from the cognate forms of secular human understanding.

4. In what context does theology carry out its proper task?

The context in which theology carries out its proper task is the context defined by the twofold question that constitutes it as a distinctive process of reflective understanding.

Here, again, it is precisely the task of theology, in the sense of the question it asks and attempts to answer, that proves to be determinative. For the context of theology, just like its method and criterion, is determined by its proper task. Among the other things this implies is that the question often discussed of where theology properly belongs--whether in the church or in the academy, and, if in the latter, whether with philosophy or with history or with the special sciences or with the arts--is not a fruitful question. For theology properly belongs wherever it is in fact located by the twofold question that is sufficient as well as necessary to constitute it as a distinct field of human reflection.

But this is not all that can be said about theology's context, and it is only by considering what may be called its several contextual factors that the theological task itself can be fully understood. For the present, however, it must suffice to say that the several factors that go to make up the context of theology all fall into one or the other of two groups, which reflect the twofold question that theology asks and tries to answer and, behind that, its necessary and sufficient conditions as a process of reflection in the Christian witness of faith and the human existence for which that witness claims to be decisive, and hence

true. Thus one may distinguish such factors as the following as belonging, respectively, to the two groups: (1) revelation, faith, church, the apostolic witness, Scripture, tradition; and (2) experience, reason, culture, religion, academy, history, philosophy, the special sciences and the arts. It should be evident that, in pursuing this fourth question of the context, or the contextual factors, of theology, one must perforce retread the ground covered only by all the loci of traditional prolegomena--not only the locus on theology, but also the loci on revelation, on faith, and on Holy Scripture.