

Granted that theology is properly done *on* a perspective rather than *from* it, why does the idea persist that it is done *from* a perspective as well as *on* one?

One reason for its persistence, I suggest, is that, while theology certainly does not—and cannot—reflect from the *same* perspective on which it has the task of reflecting, it nevertheless does reflect from a perspective as well as on one, the two perspectives being *different* and not the same.

Their difference can be clarified by employing a properly philosophical analysis of the structure of inquiry of the sort provided, in the case of religious inquiry, by the somewhat different analyses of William A. Christian and Alasdair McKinnon. According to these analyses, religious inquiry, like any other, has its roots in a certain human interest involving a basic supposition, which in turn makes possible a basic question and a corresponding basic commitment. These basic elements together constitute the inquiry in question as the *kind* of inquiry it is, and as such they may be said quite appropriately to constitute the perspective *from* which the inquiry is done. But religious inquiry also includes—indeed, properly consists in—consideration of alternative possible *answers* to its basic question. Any such answer can be analyzed as involving some suggestion that suggests a basic proposal as to how the basic question is to be answered and allows for the explication or elaboration of this proposal in terms of doctrinal propositions. All of these elements together constitute any answer to be considered in the process of religious inquiry and, as such, may be said quite appropriately to constitute the perspective, i.e., really one of many possible perspectives, *on* which religious inquiry is done.

Employing this analysis, then, one can distinguish **the perspective of the question *from* which** Christian theology is properly done—this being the religious and, ultimately, the existential question—from **the perspective of the answer *on* which** Christian theology is done—this being the answer which is specific to Christian faith and witness. Being a special case of religious inquiry, Christian theology can be done only from a religious or existential perspective. But being Christian *theology*, rather than Christian faith and witness, Christian theology cannot be done *from* the perspective of

such faith and witness, but only *on* it, as critical reflection on the claims to validity that it itself makes or implies as, and just because it is, the perspective of Christian faith and witness.

Among the other consequences of recognizing this is that one can see more than one sense in which "faith seeking understanding" is an appropriate characterization of Christian theology (notwithstanding the sense in which it is clearly inappropriate). Not only is it the case that the Christian witness of faith can become the object of theological reflection only insofar as it indirectly becomes the subject of such reflection as well (cf. *OT: 2*)<sup>1</sup> it is also the case that it is indeed faith which is seeking understanding through theological reflection, even though the faith in question is not—and cannot be—specifically *Christian* faith, but is, rather, *religious* faith, or, at the least, the existential faith without which we neither would nor could exist as the kind of faithing and understanding beings that we in fact are.

October 1992

Christian theology is not done from a Christian perspective but on a Christian perspective.

Of course, the Christian theologian may very well also be working from a Christian perspective, since Christian theology, after all, is a task of the church devolving upon all Christians and claiming the full-time attention of any Christian having a special calling to do it. But the fact that the Christian theologian's own perspective may indeed be Christian is of no relevance whatever to what it means for her or him to do Christian theology. To do Christian theology is simply to reflect critically on bearing Christian witness, so as to be able to validate (or invalidate) the claims that bearing this witness itself makes or implies to be valid, i.e., to be adequate to its content, and, therefore, appropriate to Jesus Christ and credible to human existence, and to be fitting to its situation. The only strictly necessary condition for doing this is not that one have a Christian perspective or any other perspective as such, but only that one be able and willing to ask the question—the existential question—to which all expressions of a Christian perspective, or of any other perspective, are, in effect, the re-presentation of an answer.

Because this is so, however, there is no good reason why doing theology should not occur in the context of the university and be subject to the same fundamental conditions as any other academic field or discipline. On the other hand, if doing Christian theology involved doing it from a Christian perspective rather than on such a perspective, there would be the best of reasons for excluding it from the university and denying its parity with other properly academic fields and disciplines.

12 December 1990

4/25/1