

1. The question of the Christian canon, in the sense of the primary norm for judging the appropriateness of Christian witness, is really the question of the irreplaceable Christian witness—the Christian witness that can never be replaced, however much it can and must be interpreted and even reformulated.

2. My belief is that the only Christian witness that is thus irreplaceable is the original and originating and therefore constitutive witness of the apostles. All other Christian witness, including the witness of scripture, by contrast, can be replaced as well as interpreted and reformulated.

3. In the case of a traditional Protestant theology, on the other hand, at least scripture's witness is also irreplaceable, while in the case of a traditional Roman Catholic theology, the witness of tradition and the magisterium are also irreplaceable, and in the case of an Orthodox theology the tradition of the undivided church is also irreplaceable.

4. Since the question of whether there can be a Christian theology at all is the question of whether there is a Christian canon, and hence an irreplaceable Christian witness, there is a limit on any theology—even a revisionary theology—that would be a Christian theology in more than name only. Modern atheisms of either evolutionary or revolutionary type may indeed be revisions of traditional Christian witness and theology. Yet they are not revisionary Christian theologies properly so-called because they acknowledge no Christian witness to be irreplaceable. For this reason, they are properly thought and spoken of as "secularizations" of Christian witness and theology.

5. But, then, the same would be true even of a modern theism—even, indeed, of a modern theism whose understanding of God, self, and the world could not be substantially distinguished from that of Christian theology—unless it acknowledged some Christian witness to be irreplaceable for determining its understanding. Unless it thus acknowledged some Christian witness as canon, it could not be a Christian theology but only a secularization thereof.

6. On the other hand, a revisionary Protestant theology for which the witness of Jesus himself is acknowledged as the real Christian canon would be insofar not merely verbally but really a Christian theology.

14 August 1983; rev. 3 April 2001