

PRESENT PROSPECTS FOR DOING CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Schubert M. Ogden

I've been asked to open a discussion today on present prospects for doing Christian theology. And I've naturally assumed not only that by "doing Christian theology" in this context was to be understood, more exactly, "doing Christian systematic theology," but also that I was expected to address the topic by exercising my own expertise as a Christian systematic theologian. It lies in the nature of the topic, however, that an answer to the question it implies calls for the exercise of more than one kind of theological knowledge and skill, and that mine as a systematic theologian extend to only a part, even if an important part, of what's called for.

To estimate the present prospects of any undertaking requires, whatever else it requires, a descriptive, and, in that sense, historical, understanding of all the relevant factors in the present situation as they bear on the chances of the undertaking's future success. And this is true even if the other main requisite is a normative, and, in that sense, systematic, understanding of the undertaking itself—of what it is to do it, and of how it ought to be done. So, to give anything like an expert answer to our question calls not only for such systematic theological understanding, but also for historical theological understanding of the present situation and of how the factors in it are likely to affect the chances of doing what doing Christian theology, and, more exactly, doing Christian systematic theology, is supposed to do.

To expertise in that kind of theological understanding, however, I make no pretense. Although I have opinions about the present theological situation, and will, in the nature of the case, have to rely on them if I'm to answer the question before us, I should not think to make knowledge claims for them, having done no more than I have to test them by relevant evidence and argument. But my part in our discussion is exactly that—one part; and we may all hope that others among us will be better furnished to supply the requisite historical theological expertise that will otherwise be wanting.

Not—I hasten to add—that this is the only point at which my part in our discussion very much depends on the rest of you playing yours. Aside from the fact that I can speak only very briefly and summarily in this opening statement, the normative question of what Christian theology is supposed to do and how it should be done ceased long since to be a noncontroversial question. Although, in my opinion, a certain traditional understanding of doing Christian theology continues even today, in one form or another, to predominate not only in the church and the world generally, but even in the academy, it no longer remains unchallenged. Through the efforts of a number of Christian theologians, including myself, this traditional understanding was for a time, at least, relativized by proposals of a new, revisionary understanding of what it is to do Christian theology. I'm speaking of the time along in the 1980s, when there was much ado ecumenically, across national and cultural as well as confessional

boundaries, with developing, as was said, a "new paradigm of theology," to which this new understanding of doing Christian theology was central. But, as we all know, the relativizing of a theological position by a counterposition is mutual; and, so far as I can see, the years since have shown only that the traditional understanding, though challenged, has prevailed. There is every reason, therefore, why any proposal for answering the normative question, including the one I shall make here, also needs the careful criticism of other Christian theologians, including, I presume, some of you, whose expertise, like my own, lies in doing Christian systematic theology.

But now to the burden of what I want to contribute to our discussion. I ask you to keep in mind what I've already said or implied more than once, that I take the phrase "doing Christian theology," to mean, for our purposes, "doing Christian systematic theology." I also ask that you allow me henceforth, for the sake of simplicity, to use the shorter phrases, "bearing witness" and "doing theology," whenever I can, on the understanding that what I shall mean by them, unless I indicate otherwise, is what is made more explicit by the longer phrases, "bearing Christian witness" and "doing Christian systematic theology" respectively.

I begin with the familiar analysis of the term "theology" as deriving from the Greek expression meaning "*logos*" about "*theos*," or, in English, thought and/or speech about God. Allowing that we may speak nonverbally as well as verbally—actions speaking, as we say, louder than words—we may define "theology" in a broad sense as covering everything that is thought and/or said or done about God, or about the ultimate reality about which the concept and/or term "God" is itself a way of thinking and/or speaking. In a similar way, what is meant by "*Christian theology*," in this same broad sense, is whatever is thought and/or said or done about God *by Christians*, on the basis of their special experience as such.

But the terms "theology" and "Christian theology" are both commonly used—in fact, more commonly used—also in a strict sense, to refer, in the case of "Christian theology," not to everything that Christians think and/or say or do about God, but to only some of it—specifically, to such of it as is employed in more or less critically appropriating, or critically reflecting on, all the rest of it, this remainder being distinguished by some other term such as "Christian witness." So "doing Christian theology," in this strict sense, may be defined as the praxis of more or less critically interpreting the meaning of Christian witness—or, more exactly, the praxis of bearing Christian witness—and then of more or less critically validating the claims to validity that bearing witness necessarily makes or implies just as and because it is bearing witness.

However, I use the qualifier, "more or less critically," advisedly. In the case of Christian theology, just as more generally, critically appropriating, or critically reflecting, by way, first, of critically interpreting meaning and then, second, critically validating claims to validity, may always be done more or less critically, depending on the level on which it is done and therefore on the

criteria employed in doing it. To appropriate, or to reflect, critically on either level is to make judgments by employing criteria. But if it is done on the first, relatively less critical level, the criteria employed are simply the consuetudinary criteria commonly accepted over time in the relevant context of self-understanding and life-praxis, which, in the case of doing Christian theology, include criteria of validation such as the canon of scripture and, in one way or another, what has traditionally been distinguished from "scripture" as "tradition." If, however, critically appropriating, or critically reflecting on, bearing witness is done on the second, relatively more critical level, the sole criteria employed both in interpreting the meaning of bearing witness and in validating its claims to validity are the ultimate—or, if you prefer, primal—criteria of human experience and reason as they require to be differentiated to fit the relevant context and the particular case. Experience as well as reason based on experience is not simply one thing, but many things; and the appeal solely to it that is of the essence of any relatively more critical way of appropriating or reflecting on bearing witness, as any other life-praxis, requires to be made in suitably different ways.

Now my contention is that "doing theology" is to be understood normatively not only in the strict sense, but also as more, rather than less, critical appropriation of, or reflection on, bearing witness. Doing theology in the proper sense, in other words, is the special case of critical appropriation, or reflection, on the second, more critical level, where what is being appropriated, or reflected on, is bearing witness on the first level, together with whatever theology in the strict sense is also being done on that level. This means that doing theology, in my understanding, begins with the relatively more critical interpretation of the meaning of bearing witness and then proceeds to the relatively more critical validation of its claims to validity—specifically, its claims to be adequate to its content, and therefore both appropriate to Jesus Christ and credible to human existence. Because, however, doing theology so understood is more rather than less critical, its sole criteria, also, are the ultimate, or primal, criteria of experience, which means, with respect to validating the claim of bearing witness to appropriateness, specifically Christian experience of Jesus as the Christ; and with respect to validating its claim to credibility, common human experience of existence as such.

I forego developing an argument that this is how doing theology in the normative, and so proper, sense is to be understood. 'Been there and done that, many times over, as my books, *On Theology* and *Doing Theology Today*, especially, will show. Suffice it to say here only that, if bearing witness itself is the kind of life-praxis it certainly appears to be, then something very like my understanding of doing theology would seem to be the only understanding that itself will prove to be appropriate when judged by specifically Christian experience of Jesus Christ as well as credible when judged by the criteria of common human experience.

But if I now assume this normative understanding, and also rely on my opinions about the present theological situation, such as they are, the only answer I can give to our question is that present prospects for doing theology are

rather dim. The main reason for this, of course, is that, in my opinion, as I've said, the predominant normative understanding of doing theology even in our situation today is the traditional understanding, by which I mean the understanding, according to which, theology even in the strict sense is to be done relatively less, rather than more, critically. To do theology, in other words, is to critically appropriate bearing witness, or to critically reflect on it, not by employing the ultimate, or primal, criteria of experience and reason, suitably differentiated according to particular context and case, but rather by simply employing the customary criteria for determining the meaning of bearing witness as well as its validity, its appropriateness and its credibility. But, then, in direct proportion to the extent to which this traditional understanding still predominates even in our theological situation, the only way of doing theology whose present prospects are bright is, in my understanding, really a way of doing something else. It is really a way of bearing witness, inasmuch as it is done on the same primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis on which witness is borne, as distinct from the secondary level of critical reflection and proper theory, on which, I hold, doing theology properly is done.

I underscore, however, that this assessment of present prospects for doing theology as not very bright depends as much on my opinions about our present theological situation as on my understanding of how doing theology ought to be done. And opinions are merely that—opinions. So it's entirely possible that a different, more reliable, descriptive or historical understanding of our situation, and of the various factors in it, would yield a more optimistic assessment, even assuming something very like my normative or systematic understanding. But, leaving any proof of how real this possibility is to others of you in our subsequent discussion, I want to voice yet another of my opinions—or, better, to report one of the observations I've repeatedly made that has gone to form the opinions I've already expressed.

Nothing in my experience more strikingly indicates the continuing predominance of what I've called the traditional understanding of doing theology than the hold it evidently has all across the theological spectrum—on the theological left as well as on the theological right. Without explaining the typology I'm assuming in putting it this way, I'll say simply that it is constructed by reference to the two basic claims of bearing witness: to be appropriate to Jesus Christ and to be credible to human existence. Whereas, then, the center of the theological spectrum is conceived to be occupied by theologies of a type equally concerned with both the appropriateness and the credibility of bearing witness, theologies on the right are conceived as belonging to types concerned more or less one-sidedly with its appropriateness, while theologies on the left are conceived to belong to types more or less one-sidedly concerned with its credibility. In my experience, theologies of all types can be done more or less critically in pursuing their respective concerns. But theologies belonging to types on the left have regularly shown themselves to be no more critical in validating the claim of bearing witness to be credible than theologies belonging to types on the right are in validating its claim to be appropriate. Instead of appealing solely to the ultimate, or primal, criteria of common human experience and reason based on experience, they determine the credibility of bearing witness simply by

its agreement with some particular philosophy or world view that happens to be current and choice in the particular communities in and for which they are working—in much the same way as theologies belonging to types on the right are content to judge the appropriateness of bearing witness simply by its agreement with criteria customarily employed in the church, such as scripture, or scripture and tradition, instead of employing solely the ultimate, or primal, criteria of specifically Christian experience.

I won't take the time to argue this point in any detail. But I think you'll agree with me that theologies on the left, such as certain recent liberation theologies, with their uncritical employment of Marxist theory, or feminist theory, and their demand that theologians already be committed to the corresponding forms of liberating praxis in order to do theology at all, provide textbook examples of what I'm talking about. And the same is true, I submit, of many self-styled pluralist theologies that uncritically appeal simply to some secular philosophy, or philosophy of religion/philosophical theology, to determine whether or not the claim of bearing witness to be credible is a valid claim.

In any case, I've yet to experience anything in theologies on the theological left, any more than on the right and in the center, that would cause me to change my opinion that the traditional understanding of doing theology is still very much alive and well in our situation today. But, then, assuming my revisionary understanding of how theology ought to be done, I simply cannot be optimistic about present prospects for doing it. So long as the traditional understanding prevails, and praxis accords with theory, the chances of theology's being done, as I maintain it should be done, are slim.

I want to close by pointing up an implication of my argument that I shouldn't want anyone in this group to miss. I'm drawing entirely on memory in speaking of "this group," because I haven't found anyone so far who has been able to confirm what I want to say. But I distinctly recall that, in the early to mid-1990s, when I attended several of its meetings as a guest of my old friend, Noble Kime, announcements of meetings and associated mailings regularly reached me under a superscription giving it some such title as "the group for the advancement of empirical theology." Unfortunately, I can no longer find, or no longer have, the file in which I kept these mailings. But, as I say, I'm morally certain that, at that time, "the Potthoff group" was really only the nickname of the group whose formal, if perhaps not official, self-designation explicitly identified it, in some terms or other, with furthering the cause of empirical theology. Anyhow, the long and close association of the group with empirical theology is hardly in doubt; and the implication I want to point up is that my plea, in what I've said today, for a more rather than a less critical way of doing theology might very well be taken as pleading for a more rather than a less empirical way of doing theology. If, as I've argued, the criteria employed by a more critical way of doing theology are solely the criteria of experience and reason based on experience, then my plea for a more critical theology is by clear implication also a plea for a more empirical theology.

Of course, we all do well to remember Whitehead's quip that "the word 'experience' is the most deceitful in philosophy," and that an analogous comment can and must be made about the phrase "empirical theology." Just as important, we need to keep in mind the significant breakthrough made by Popper's proposal that the term "empirical" be used in its strict and proper sense, to mean "falsifiable by experiential observation." But what I take these and other similar cautions to amount to is that the legitimate motive in the cause of empirical theology, which the Potthoff group, in its way, has been committed to advancing, is that theology should always be done, as Karl Barth once put it, *ab ovo*, from the egg, by returning ever again anew to its primal sources in experience: to specifically Christian experience of Jesus Christ and to common human experience of existence as such.

So I cannot but hope that, even if you tend to share my assessment, you may well have your own reasons for wishing, as I do, that the prospects for doing Christian theology in this critical, experiential way were a good deal brighter than they unfortunately seem to be.