

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR CONNELLY—I

There is no question about the basic issue with which Professor Connelly is concerned. He himself tells us in the opening sentence of the body of his paper, "The precise point at issue is theology's right to scientific existence." Although he is far from claiming that this is the only issue even for contemporary theological reflection, he is emphatic that "theology's task at this time is to account for its own scientific foundations." The principal question of his paper, therefore, is whether theology can "come to grips with its own self-understanding and defend its right to scientific existence without falling victim to reductionism, whether of the secularist variety or of the positivist variety, biblical or doctrinal."

In reflecting on this basic issue, Professor Connelly is led very quickly to the question of faith and theology. This is because, in asking for the "scientific foundations" of theology, he concludes that the only satisfactory answer is faith, understood as the believing reception of God's self-communication in Jesus Christ. In developing this answer, however, Professor Connelly is sensitive to doubts whether he may not have succumbed to a positivist form of reductionism, and thus forfeited "theology's right to scientific existence." Consequently, he finds himself involved in considering an alternative answer to the question and in working out a counterargument against it.

Specifically, he argues as follows: If Christian theology is to be understood without falling into either form of reductionism, it must be understood to be "bipolar" in origin, in that it originates both in "the Christian fact" and in "human experience." But not to suppose that the Christian theologian must himself be a Christian believer is to emphasize "the pole of human experience," while not taking seriously "the pole of the Christian fact," and so, in effect, to deny theology's essential bipolarity. Therefore, not to make this supposition is to fall victim to a form of reductionism in understanding theology—namely, its secularist form. Nor does it suffice to say simply that "theology has a close connection with the witness of faith." For to say this while denying that the faith the theologian understands is his own is to separate the

fides quae creditur from the *fides qua creditur* and “to imply that theology is concerned with the content of faith but not with the act of faith.” Moreover, “to consider only the content of faith” is “to leave undifferentiated the theologian and the scholar of religious phenomena.”

Professor Connelly’s conclusion, then, is that it is as necessary for the Christian theologian to be a believer as for the Christian believer to be a theologian. As he himself formulates this traditional conclusion, however, it is not only nuanced but significantly qualified. It is nuanced by borrowing from what he speaks of as “a reflection on Lonergan’s functional specialties,” namely, the reflection that, although “the unconverted is not to be excluded from the functional specialty which is history,” “it belongs to the converted to do the task called historical theology.”¹ And it is qualified by endorsing the two “riders” offered by Gerald O’Collins: that, since belief and unbelief are not mutually exclusive, “no one is the complete believer or the complete unbeliever”; and that “theology may obviously be studied after a fashion by one who professes unbelief.”

Even as thus qualified, however, Professor Connelly’s conclusion is clearly intended to be distinct from the alternative understanding of faith and theology against which he argues. His paper, he tells us toward the end, has made “two assertions”: not only that “faith does not exist without theology,” but also that “theology does not exist without faith.”

Assuming now that this is a fair, if sharply focused, account of Professor Connelly’s central argument, I wish to make the following comments.

First of all, I am not in the least convinced by his reasoning that to deny that the Christian theologian must himself be a Christian believer is to deny, in effect, the essential bipolarity of Christian theology. As a

¹It is with good reason that Professor Connelly speaks of the source of his nuance as he does, since there clearly is nothing in Lonergan’s own account that corresponds to the distinction between “the functional specialty which is history” and “the task called historical theology.” Lonergan’s position, however incoherent, is that, although the unconverted may indeed do history, it itself nevertheless is one of the eight functional specialties of theology, “functionally interdependent” with every other. See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), pp. 141-4, 268.

matter of fact, I question whether this conclusion follows even from Professor Connelly's own understanding of the relevant terms. For what does he mean by "the pole of the Christian fact," which one who denies that the theologian has to be a believer allegedly fails to take seriously? Unfortunately, the answer is not entirely certain, since his discussion at this point is confusing. At one place, he says that for him "the Christian fact embraces both the inner word of the grace of faith and the outer word of Christian witness," and yet he speaks elsewhere of "the law of grace," one of the two elements of which is "the outer word of communication which is called the Christian fact or the Christian witness of faith." But taken either way—as referring to both "inner word" and "outer word" or to "outer word" alone—"the Christian fact" includes no reference to the faith of the theologian such that to deny that he himself must be a believer is also to deny, or not to take seriously, "the pole of the Christian fact." Of course, one might so define this pole as to include the theologian's faith, and it is arguable that Professor Connelly implies such a definition in reasoning as he does. But, aside from the fact that such a definition clearly is not covered by his explicit statements, to have recourse to it would be to patently beg the whole question. If what is in question is the essential bipolarity of Christian theology, it will hardly do to exclude by definition the view according to which this bipolarity is adequately accounted for solely by reference to the *object* of the theologian's reflection, as distinct from him himself as the subject thereof. On this view, theology is and must be bipolar simply because the same is true of its object, which, immediately, is the Christian witness of faith and, ultimately, is the human existence for which that witness claims to be decisive. Merely to grasp the possibility of such a view, however, is to see at once why Professor Connelly's reasoning fails to carry conviction.

This is so, at any rate, unless one can be persuaded, as I am not, that his objections to separating the content from the act of faith are well taken. As for the basic theological point itself, I am frankly perplexed that Professor Connelly should insist on the inseparability of the content and the act of faith even while invoking the traditional distinction between mere *fides* and *fides caritate formata*. Anyhow, in my own ecclesial tradition—specifically, the Homilies of the Church of

England as extracted by John Wesley²—the parallel distinction between “a dead faith” and “a quick or living faith” allows for the possibility that one might profess a flawless orthodoxy (and, in that sense, have the content of faith) even while utterly lacking the faith that works through love (and, in that sense, not make the act of faith). So far as I can see, then, Professor Connelly and I alike are bound to recognize at least some sense in which the content and the act of faith can be separated.

But what of his objection that to define theology simply by reference to the witness of faith is to imply that it is concerned only with the content, not with the act of faith? The reply, I think, is that theology so defined may very well be concerned with the act of faith, indeed, must be concerned with it, albeit precisely as theology, i.e., as the reflective understanding of it. Although the act of faith is indeed distinct from its content, the very fact that one can say this makes clear that it, too, in its way, falls within the scope of theological understanding. Moreover, one can plausibly maintain that no theological distinction is more important than just that between the act of faith itself and its implicit content, which it is theology's task to make fully explicit.

There remains the objection that to define theology without reference to the theologian's own act of faith is to leave him undifferentiated from the religious scholar. But here, too, I can see only either a begging of the question or a *non sequitur* in reasoning. Unless one simply defines the theologian's difference as due to his own act of Christian faith, which is the very thing in question, one must reckon with the view which holds that this difference may be fully accounted for solely by reference to the *question* that the theologian, and he alone, is called to answer. Of course, other scholars of religious phenomena can affirm that their disciplines, too, are closely connected with the witness of faith, and Professor Connelly is correct that this by itself “does not make their disciplines theological.” But what discipline, other than Christian theology, however closely connected with the Christian witness, is itself constituted by the question as to the meaning and truth of that witness? Even if other scholars of religious phenomena are led to ask this question, it is not as the constitutive question of

²See Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 123-33.

their very inquiry but simply as a question arising within the horizon of their larger question as to the meaning and truth of religion as such, which they would be bound to pursue even if the Christian witness were not to exist at all. Christian theology, on the contrary, would not be so much as possible, in that it would have neither object nor data, but for the prior fact of just that particular witness with its claim to be decisive for human existence, and hence meaningful and true. Because this is so, however, there is no need whatever to appeal to the theologian's own act of faith to differentiate him from the scholar of religion generally. Provided only that he pursues the question that he, and only he, is called to pursue, there can be no question about the distinctiveness of his inquiry.

This brings me to Professor Connelly's qualification of his conclusion, which I have already ventured to speak of as significant. I have done so because, if I am correct, his qualification is such as to render the meaning of his conclusion so uncertain that its difference from the alternative is no longer at all clear. The difficulty, quite simply, is this: if "no one is the complete believer or the complete unbeliever," what are we to make of the claim that the believer alone can be a theologian? Specifically, how much belief must the theologian have, short of being the "complete believer," in order to be a theologian? And what reason is there to suppose that this is any more than the belief that even the unbeliever must have, since even he cannot be the "complete unbeliever"? Professor Connelly simply ignores these obvious questions, even though without clear answers to them what he wishes to claim is not only uncertain but sufficiently uncertain that it may be only verbally different from the contrary claim he wishes to exclude.

Nevertheless, assuming, as I must, that he intends to draw the contrary conclusion, I also have to say that he by no means removes the doubts that one may have about this conclusion—in particular, the doubt whether theology as he understands it may really claim to be a science, or, at least, a form of reflective understanding, as legitimate as any other. Professor Connelly assures us, to be sure, that "the commitment of faith is not incompatible with a commitment to the critical procedures of scientific investigation." But where does he ever explain why this assurance is reasonable, even though theology, as he claims, is such as to require the personal faith of the theologian as a necessary

condition of his investigation? Surely, it is not in general a requirement of the "critical procedures" of what today counts as a "scientific investigation" that anyone engaging in it must already be committed to the assertions it alone can critically establish, as distinct from being able and willing to ask the question to which all such assertions are the answer.

My point, of course, is in no way to suggest that theology's right to exist must be defended at all costs in face of modern doubts. Although I do indeed believe that this right must be made good in the context of what, by the best contemporary standards, may be said to constitute a legitimate form of reflection, I entirely agree with Professor Connelly that the only Christian theology whose right to exist is worth defending in this way is the theology that is given implicitly with Christian faith itself. Thus, in the earlier argument of mine that he has criticized,³ it was by no means only, or even primarily, an apologetic concern to assuage secular doubts that led me to my contrary conclusion. I first argued, rather, quite aside from such doubts, that there are two good reasons why the traditional requirement that the theologian must himself be a believer should be abandoned. The first reason derives from an argument, which Professor Connelly tries to take into account, that such a requirement entails an unacceptable confusion of faith and good works, while the second depends on an argument, which he completely ignores, that this requirement proves on analysis to be implicitly self-contradictory. My reasoning in the second argument, briefly, was as follows: If it were true that one must first believe the Christian witness before he can understand it theologically, there could be no difference between disbelieving the witness and not understanding it, in which case there also could be no difference between believing the witness and understanding it—wherewith the original hypothesis could only be false, there being no basis for asserting that belief is prior to theological understanding. Whether or not this reasoning is as sound as I still believe it to be, drawing attention to it here should serve not only to make clear what I, at least, take to be a serious omission from Professor Connelly's counterargument but also to correct any impression that either of us may have given that the basic issue as I see it is merely

³See "What is Theology?" *The Journal of Religion* 52, No. 1 (January, 1972), 22-40.

apologetic.

At the same time, the point I wish to make is that this issue does have its apologetic aspect and that Professor Connelly does not adequately deal with it under that aspect. What is wanted is not merely his assurance that theology as he intends to speak of it may still legitimately claim to be a science but an argument in support of this assurance that effectively removes the doubts that keep others of us from sharing it.

I have this final comment. Professor Connelly says at one point, "Religious studies can survive the death of God and even thrive. On the contrary, if God is dead, so is theology." One may question, I think, whether the contrast he asserts here is really so sharp. If "God" be used, as it often is, to designate, not the ultimate reality as interpreted in specifically theistic terms, but simply the ultimate reality—what is otherwise called "the transcendent" or "the supernatural"—then it is arguable that "God" expresses the constitutive concept of religion as such, without an application for which religious studies, also, could not survive, at least as systematic and practical, as distinct from merely historical kinds of inquiry. But, be this as it may, I, too, would wish to claim that the reality of God, in the quite specific theistic sense of "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," is the constitutive assertion of any Christian theology worthy of the name, even as it also constitutes the distinctive witness of faith of which any such theology is the reflection. Yet, if I am right, this claim is entirely consistent with the alternative understanding of theology for which I have been arguing, provided only that one distinguishes, as he must in any event, between theology as a system of assertions and theology as a process of reflection or inquiry. As a system of assertions theology can in the nature of the case be nothing other than the fully reflective form of the Christian witness of faith itself, whose constitutive assertion, therefore, can only be the reality of God as represented in Jesus Christ. But, on the assumption that theology as a process of inquiry is as legitimate in principle as any other, what constitutes it cannot be an assertion, not even of the reality of God in Christ, but only the question to which this assertion and the whole system of assertions it constitutes are the answer. More exactly, the necessary conditions of Christian theology as a process of inquiry are always only two: the given witness of faith constitutive of

the historic Christian community; and the given fact of human existence, as including man's distinctive capacity of fully reflective understanding, and hence of asking, among other things, as to the meaning and truth of this witness of faith. Consequently, despite Professor Connelly's argument to the contrary and despite my entire agreement with him about the constitutive assertion of Christian theology, I remain convinced that the understanding of theology I have defended is not only necessary but sufficient to secure it its right to exist precisely as Christian theology—as a process of inquiry that would be neither possible nor necessary except for the Christian witness of faith and that, therefore, it identical with none, even though it is cognate with all, of the other legitimate forms of human reflection.

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