# DOING SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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Sometimes, when I am asked what I do for a job, I answer that I teach systematic theology. In most cases, I have to admit, this brings the conversation to a rather sudden end. But in some cases the people I talk to try to get beyond this cryptic answer. Knowing that academics, and especially those from my background, have an inclination to use abstract though somewhat incomprehensible concepts, they ask whether I could give an example of this strange activity from my work in recent years. I could answer that I have done some work on liberal theology at the turn of the century. "So you are really a church historian", my conversation partner could say. Well aware that church historians are not so favourably disposed towards systematic theologians trying their hand at historical research, I could answer: "No, not exactly. Apart from trying to understand a specific theological conception in its historical context, I have to relate it to the biblical message and have to find out how the biblical sources are used in presenting an adequate account of Christian faith today." "So your work is rather like that of a biblical scholar", might be the reply. This makes me feel slightly uneasy, since I know that biblical exegetes are sometimes tempted – and not without reason – to summarize the excursions of systematic theologians into their field under the heading "amateur's night". And I try to explain that I am not so much concerned with the biblical texts in their original historical situation, but with the present validity of the truth-claims they imply. This, however, would seem to be trespassing on the land of the philosophers. I do not want to spell out all the possible exchanges with my – by now wholly imaginary – conversation partner. The difficulty in giving a straightforward answer to the question what "doing systematic theology" means should already be sufficiently clear, namely, that systematic theology seems to be a strange mixture of all theological and some non-theological disciplines, borrowing bits and pieces here and there but never achieving a methodologically unambiguous coherent strategy. My main problem is therefore whether and how it is possible to give an account of doing systematic theology which presents it as an activity that is at least so coherent and intelligible that it would seem justified calling someone a lecturer in systematic theology.

My first suggestion is very simple and it accounts for my rather inelegant title "Doing Systematic Theology". Systematic theology should not primarily be understood as a system of theological doctrines or theories, but as an activity. And since this activity is dependent on working with certain materials and using certain tools, systematic theology has the character of a craft which in some rare cases achieves the quality of an art.[1] On this view, teaching systematic theology would not consist in presenting certain fixed doctrines, but in demonstrating and practising certain skills with the aim of enabling students to learn to practise this craft by themselves. The objective of studying systematic theology should be to acquire competence in doing systematic theology. And this would imply the ability to work with the materials of systematic theology in a way which is informed by certain criteria and methods. This view of systematic theology does not rule out that the activity of doing systematic theology results in a set of systematically ordered arguments and propositions which could be called a systematic theology. But this result is always dependent on the craftsmanship and expertise applied in the activity of doing systematic theology. I shall therefore try to show how the activity of doing systematic theology is related to the nature of Christian faith and which criteria would define competence in doing systematic theology. Nevertheless my account of this craft has more the character of leafing through the rule-book and sorting out the toolbag of systematic theologians. A more concrete description of doing systematic theology would mean analyzing or presenting a concrete example of this activity, and this would have to be much more specific than my general topic, "doing systematic theology".

### I

One could define systematic theology as the self-explication of Christian faith with respect to the truth-claims and norms of action that are asserted, presupposed or implied by it. As Christian *dogmatics* systematic theology is the rational reconstruction of the forms and contents of Christian faith. As Christian *ethics* it is the reflection on the possibilities, aims and norms of action connected to the truth-claims of Christian faith. These truth-claims describe the situation of the agent in the world within the framework of the central Christian beliefs about the nature of reality and human destiny and thereby prescribe the basic orientation of human action in the world. The fact that our fundamental beliefs and convictions about the nature of reality determine our possibilities of action as well as the aims we try to achieve provides the essential connection between dogmatics and ethics which makes it possible to summarize both under the heading "systematic theology". In the rest of the paper I shall concentrate exclusively on systematic theology as dogmatics although this makes my account of doing systematic theology necessarily incomplete.

This view of systematic theology as the self-explication of Christian faith makes it dependent on Christian faith in its various expressions. Therefore, the work of the systematic theologian is never purely constructive. It is the rational *re*-construction of what is given in the manifold expressions of Christian faith as they are presented in prayer, confessions of faith and Christian proclamation.[2] The reconstructive character of systematic theology implies that the propositions of systematic theology are always dependent on the assertions of Christian faith, and that the truth-claims of the assertions of systematic theology are derived from the truth-claims of Christian faith.

The definition of systematic theology as the self-explication of Christian faith immediately raises the question what it is about the nature of Christian faith that makes the rational reconstruction of its contents possible and necessary. The possibility of systematic theology as the self-explication of Christian faith is given in the role of linguistic communication in the constitution of faith and in the linguistic character of its expressions.[3] In the Christian tradition faith is interpreted as a gift of the Spirit. The divine spirit authenticates the gospel of Jesus Christ as the revelation of the true relationship of the

creator to the whole of creation, and thereby makes possible the unconditional trust in God which determines the whole of the life of the Christian believer. On this trinitarian view of the constitution of Christian faith, which reflects the trinitarian structure of God's being and action, faith is constituted by divine action and passively received by the believer. Its character is the active acknowledgement of its divine constitution in all spheres of life.

It is one of the fundamental elements of this understanding of the constitution of faith that the divine action in creating faith is the authentification of the human proclamation of the *external word* of the gospel of Jesus Christ by the *internal word* of the witness of the Holy Spirit. Faith presupposes the proclamation of the gospel, the linguistic communication of the content of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. And in this sense Christian faith is *fides ex auditu*. The rhetorical puzzlement of Paul's question: "How could they have faith in one they have never heard of?" (Rom. 10,14) is an apt illustration of the strength of his conclusion: "We conclude that faith is awakened by the message, and the message that awakens it comes through the word of Christ". (v. 17)

It is the linguistic character of Christian faith-expression that makes its self-explication possible. Everything that can be expressed in a semiotic system (a system of signs like a musical score or a blueprint) can be explicated. But only what is expressed in a linguistic system is capable of *self*-explication. The reflexive character of language distinguishes it from most of the other semiotic systems and this is the reason why we normally have to use language in order to explicate non-linguistic semiotic systems. The fact that faith presupposes and implies the linguistic communication of the gospel makes the self-explication of faith in systematic theology possible.

The necessity of the self-explication of Christian faith is given in the fact that the act of faith presupposes certain truth-claims about the object of faith and its relation to reality which determine the character of faith as unconditional trust. The *fides qua creditur* implies the *fides quae creditur*: "belief in" implies "belief that".[5] The truth-claims implied in Christian faith are ontological in character, they concern the constitution and structure of reality. This makes it necessary for the Christian community to justify that the assertions of faith imply genuine truth-claims and that these truth-claims concern *what there is*, the nature of reality. And this necessitates the self-explication of Christian faith in systematic theology.

Furthermore, faith is claimed to be the basic orientation for the totality of human existence. This claim would be immediately falsified, if human rationality as an essential dimension of human existence would somehow be excluded from this existential orientation. And in order to show that faith does not exclude but includes rationality, the self-explication of faith as the rational reconstruction of the forms and content of Christian faith is required.[6]

Both the possibility as well as the necessity of the self-explication of Christian faith are implied in its character

as a communal and a missionary faith. The existence of a Christian community of faith presupposes that the linguistic communication of the contents of faith is possible. The missionary character of Christian faith presupposes the claim to universal validity which is implied in the ontological character of the truth-claims of Christian faith. And it necessitates the self-explication of Christian faith for those belonging to the Christian community in order to justify its self-transcending character, and for those who are outside the Christian community and who are invited to accept the Christian Gospel as the truth for their lives.

Apart from these structural characteristics of Christian faith one can also point to the experiential situation in which the necessity of the self-explication of Christian faith arises. The Christian gospel claims that Jesus Christ is the revelation of God's reconciling love which overcomes the contradiction of human sin and enables justified humanity to live in community with God. This claim alone raises a host of philosophical problems about the relations of the eternal and the temporal, the necessity and the contingent and the universal and the particular. Existentially more important is that the world as we experience it seems to contradict this view of reality harshly. The existence of evil and suffering seem to call either the nature of God as love or his power into question. It is at this point that Christian faith has to become reflective faith, if it wants to remain faith.[7] And this is the existential anchorage for the rational reconstruction of the contents of Christian faith in order to explore ways how the apparent contradiction between the claims of Christian faith and our experience of the way things go in the world can be resolved.

## II

After we have seen how the relationship between systematic theology and Christian faith can be characterized in such a way that systematic theology can be understood as the self-explication of Christian faith, we can now attempt to characterize the *task* of systematic theology. Although systematic theology is a theoretical activity, it is provoked by very practical problems and its final aim is a practical one.[8]

The need for the self-explication of Christian faith arises out of the concrete experience of dissensus in the Christian community concerning the interpretation of the forms and contents of Christian faith. There has never been a time in the history of the church when there was no conflict and disagreement about Christian faith. Usually these conflicts concern the foundations of the community of faith and its relationship to those outside the community. When both kinds of problems are taken together they raise the question of the identity of the Christian community.[9] The reasons for dissensus can take a variety of forms. They may be located in internal difficulties with the practice of Christian faith, they can result from the way Christian faith is presented to those outside the Christian community, and they can be the result of external pressures on the Christian community. Whatever its causes, the dissensus becomes the starting-point of systematic theology when it concerns the interpretation of the fundamental truth-claims of Christian faith. The task of systematic theology in this

situation of dissensus is to achieve a new consensus in the community of believers which reaffirms the foundations of that community in such a way that the difficulties which called the old consensus into question can be resolved. In trying to achieve this new consensus systematic theology has to suggest an adequate interpretation of Christian faith which can be acceptable within the Christian community, which defines its relationship to those outside the Christian community, and thereby affirms the identity of the Christian community.

If systematic theology is called to its task by the existence of dissensus in the Christian community and if its task consists in helping to achieve consensus, the task itself would seem to have a two-fold character. On the one hand, it can be seen to consist of the attempt to justify the present validity and relevance of Christian faith in our situation today. This could be dubbed the historical-hermeneutical task of systematic theology. On the other hand, the task of systematic theology can be seen to consist in giving reasons for validating the intelligibility and coherence of the truth-claims implied in Christian faith. This could be called the systematic-analytical task of systematic theology. This two-fold character of the task of systematic theology reflects two central characteristics of Christian faith: firstly, that it is grounded in a particular historical event and exists in a historical community which describes its identity by referring to this event; and secondly, that it implies a comprehensive view of reality which is claimed to be both coherent and universally valid.

Both aspects of the task of systematic theology are clearly interrelated and overlap constantly in the actual practice of doing systematic theology. Nevertheless they must be clearly distinguished, because the present relevance and acceptability of a given statement is not identical with its truth. If the distinction between these two tasks is blurred, this usually results in two common types of mistakes in systematic theology.

The first type is very often found in programmatically revisionary conceptions of systematic theology. It usualy amounts to asserting that the recent history of human self-interpretation in the West renders certain ways of expressing the Christian faith impossible. "After Feuerbach (Kant, Marx, Freud . . .) we cannot have a realistic (metaphysical, personal . . .) understanding of God anymore . . ." would be an example of this type of reasoning. It is based on the category mistake of conflating an alleged historical necessity with logical necessity. And taken seriously, the task of validating the alleged historical necessity would be more difficult than demonstrating the logical possibility or coherence of the statement which is said to have been rendered impossible.

The opposite mistake which can sometimes be found in the work of those who see their task in defending traditional Christian doctrines is to prove the logical possibility of a given statement without paying any attention to the question whether this statement is still an authentic and relevant expression of faith in the Christian community today.

After we tried to characterize the task of systematic theology we can now take a closer look at the *criteria*[10] which determine the actual practice of doing systematic theology and which make it possible to assess whether and to what extent systematic reflection has solved its task. I want to suggest that the criteria of doing systematic theology are grounded in the characteristics of Christian faith.

First of all, Christian faith refers to Jesus Christ as its historical ground and as its focus of belief. This inherent Christocentricity, which should not be confused with christocentrism as an organizing principle in presenting a systematic theology, is grounded in the confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ. This implies seeing Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of God in which the relationship between God the creator and sinful humanity is restored by God's reconciling love, so that human beings can live in accordance with their created destiny as far as they participate in the reality of salvation in Christ. Christian faith has always insisted on the particularity of God's revelation in the historical individual Jesus of Nazareth who is confessed as the Christ, as the one who is seen by Christians as the realization of God's righteousness which was expected in Israel and as the salvation for all mankind. This means, on the one hand, that God's revelation in Jesus Christ cannot be transformed into a transhistorical metaphysical or moral principle. On the other hand, this implies that all Christian beliefs are shaped by the fundamental role ascribed to Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of God.

This essential feature of Christian faith accounts for the crucial importance of Scripture for Christian faith. It is understood in the Christian community as the authentic record of God's revelation in Jesus as the Christ, as the witness of the response of faith to Jesus which is summarized in the title-term "the Christ" and as the fundamental interpretative framework of Old Testament narrative, law, prophecy and wisdom which provided the basic categories for the interpretation of God's action in Jesus Christ. The essentially christomorphic structure of Christian faith justifies the role of the Bible as the book of the Church, because it is the book of Christ.

Secondly, Christian faith is characterized by its historical and communal character. The historical character of Christian faith comprises two elements: on the one hand, Christian faith is constantly referred to its origin; on the other hand, it is historical in the sense that it perceives its historical ground and focus through the tradition which mediates its significance. The communal character of Christian faith is not only an implication of the linguistic character of its central expressions. It can be traced back to the social content of Jesus' message of the Kingdom as the community of God and reconciled humanity, which entails the restoration of the created sociality which is threatened by the disruptive effects of sin.

The historical and communal character of Christian faith are closely interrelated, since the Christian community understands itself as constituted by God's revelation in Jesus Christ and since it determines its

identity by referring to its historical origin. Nevertheless, Christian faith as a communal and historical faith exists in different Christian churches and these churches differ from each other precisely in the way how they construe the reference to Jesus Christ as the origin of the Christian community and how they understand the structure of the Christian community. Whatever the reasons for their separate existence, Christian communities usually state these reasons (which are implied in their construal of Christian identity) not in dogmatic treatises but in confessions of faith which function as the authoritative traditions for the practice of Christian faith. In the historical existence of Christianity the Christian community has its identity only in the form of a confessional and denominational identity. And through this specific confessional community and its authoritative traditions the community of faith is perceived and interpreted.

Thirdly, Christian faith is not only characterised by its reference to Jesus Christ and by its historical and communal character, but also claims to be relevant for the present situation. This claim finds its expression in various forms, ranging from relevance for the individual life-style to the issues discussed in society at large. Implied in this claim to relevance is the conviction that the beliefs implied in Christian faith provide the fundamental orientation for the questions and needs of our present situation. Again, this characteristic is not unconnected to the other two features mentioned above. The relevance of Christian faith is understood as the relevance of Jesus Christ, his message, deeds and suffering, as the revelation of the relationship of God the creator to humanity for our present situation. And it is one of the motives for the adaptation of the Christian community to the changing conditions of relevance in human history. On the strength of its claim to relevance the historical community of faith participates in historical change and becomes itself a major force of historical change.

The fourth characteristic of Christian faith is that it implies a view of reality which claims to be intelligible, meaningful and coherent. We have already mentioned that this is shown by the character of Christian faith as a missionary faith. The claim to intelligibility and coherence is a corollary of the role of linguistic communication in constituting and expressing Christian faith. Intelligibility and coherence is furthermore a necessary condition for the character of Christian faith as asserting genuine truth-claims. A given statement can only function as a truth-claim if it is logically and semantically correctly construed and if it has a propositional content which has not been falsified. The assertions of Christian faith are not exempt from this requirement.

The basic condition for intelligibility or coherence is that the law of non-contradiction – paradoxically known as *principum contradictionis* – is observed.[11] This principle is much more than a theorem in the propositional calculus. It states the fundamental condition for all linguistic, and indeed, semiotic, communication. In its most basic form it refers to the semiotic act of signifying something *as* something. The law of non-contradiction states that this is only possible if the same sign is not ascribed to the thing signified and denied at the same time

and in the same respect. If this law is violated, communication becomes meaningless and, in fact, impossible. That Alice and Humpty Dumpty can continue their conversation after Humpty has announced "When I use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less" is only possible, because he remains fairly conventional in his choice of meanings and does not consistently violate the law of non-contradiction. (Long words, like "impenetrability" which he chooses to mean "that we've had enough of that subject, and it would do just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life" are, of course, an exception.) The character of Christian faith as *fides ex auditu*, as being constituted by communication and as resulting in communication, implies the claim the Christian faith is internally coherent and intelligible at least in the minimal sense of not violating the law of non-contradiction.

The fifth characteristic of Christian faith is that its ontological truth-claims are not restricted to one aspect or sphere of reality but refer to reality as a whole. Their ontological character is the reason for their claims to universal validity. As ontological truth-claims the assertions of Christian faith must be compatible with all other true propositions. And this formal requirement is strongly emphasized by the comprehensiveness of Christian faith. Without this compatibility Christian faith could not be a form of life which determines the whole of the believer's existence, it would have to inhabit a special sphere without any connection to the other spheres of life. But precisely that is excluded by the ontological character of Christian truth-claims.

IV

My main contention is that these five characteristics of Christian faith determine the criteria of systematic theology as the self-explication of Christian faith. They enable us to assess whether systematic theology is done in a competent or in an incompetent way. One could divide the whole set of criteria into two groups. The first group – the criteria of adequacy – belong to the historical-hermeneutical aspect of the task of systematic theology. The second group – the criteria of coherence – concern the systematic-analytical task of systematic theology.

Let us first turn to the criteria of adequacy. The first criterion of this group is that the assertions of systematic theology should be in accordance with scripture.[12] It is the function of this criterion to make sure that systematic theology conforms to the fundamental structure of Christian faith as referring to Jesus Christ as its historical ground and thematic focus. Reference to Jesus as the Christ is only possible through the medium of scripture. This implies that the conformity of systematic theology to scripture cannot be understood as reference to a canon of infallible texts. This strategy and attitude would be more adequate within an Islamic framework where the Qur'an is indeed identified with the revelation. For Christian faith the authority of Scripture is "excentric" (*J. McIntyre*), in so far as it refers back to the authority of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Conformity with Scripture is a criterion for the adequacy of systematic theology, because God's action in Christ is not accessible in any other way than through the medium of scripture.

And this determines the way in which this criterion should be used in systematic theology. Scripture should be used in such a manner that the texts are explored with respect to the way in which they report, express and interpret the expectation and experience of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. And this perspective determines the way in which systematic theology solves the problem of the unity and diversity of the witness of scripture.

In using adequacy to the scriptures as a criterion for doing systematic theology, scripture is viewed in a two-fold perspective. On the one hand, the Bible is the book of the church and systematic theology has to refer to its use in the church today. On the other hand, it is a collection of texts which all have their own origins and which are shaped by the historical, cultural and sociological circumstances of their respective milieu. In combining both aspects in its use of scripture systematic theologians are heavily dependent on the work of their exegetical colleagues. Only if the original intention of the texts and their present use in the church can be combined in a unified perspective, can conformity with scripture function as a genuine criterion of doing systematic theology. But it should always be kept in mind that conformity with scripture is only the manner in which the conformity of systematic theology with God's revelation in Jesus Christ can be established. In this way this criterion functions as the criterion of *authenticity* for a Christian systematic theology.

The second criterion of this group is the conformity of systematic theology with the authoritative traditions of a given historical community of faith. The authoritative traditions to which the systematic theologian appeals safeguards the continuity of systematic theology with the history of the church and its connection to the community of faith. The authority of these traditions is usually implied in their own self-ascribed status. As confessions of faith they intend and claim to be in accordance with the fundamental witness of faith in scripture. Their authority is therefore derivative. If the authority of scripture is secondary to the primary authority of God's revelation in Christ, the authority of authoritative traditions is tertiary.[13]

The authoritative traditions of the Christian churches summarize and interpret the Christian gospel in order to present the consensus of a specific Christian community concering the understanding of God's revelation in Christ. On the path from dissensus to consensus they present the old consensus, and it has to be examined how far the interpretation of the old consensus can help in achieving a new consensus. If it is precisely the validity of the old consensus which is called into question it has to be asked how far the old consensus is really in accord with scripture or whether it has to be expanded and corrected. If this examination comes to a negative result a new consensus will have to be established in a new authoritative tradition. But this is a task for the church in which systematic theology can only lend a helping hand.

As a summary of the fundamental truths of scripture the authoritative traditions of the Christian churches provide a framework for interpreting scripture and can be used as the fundamental set of rules for the use of scripture in a given Christian community. It would, however, be disastrous if this grammatical use of the

authoritative traditions would be played off against the ontological character of Christian truth-claims, because their regulative function is precisely that of determining what should be regarded as a genuine Christian truth-claim and how it should be interpreted.

Since the authoritative traditions guaranteeing the historical continuity of the Christian community are themselves historical documents, the systematic theologian has to depend on the help of the church historians for their interpretation. Only if the historical character of these traditions and their claim to authority for the present can be combined in a unified perspective, can the appeal to authoritative traditions function as a criterion for doing systematic theology. And since the historical continuity of the community of faith is only given in different churches and denominations, this criterion established the confessional identity of a systematic theology.

The third criterion of adequacy is that the self-explication of Christian faith must be adequate to the present situation. This criterion, which states the relevance of Christian faith for today, has frequently played a major role in modern theology – especially since modernity defined its self-understanding by its discontinuity with the preceding history of Christianity. Nevertheless, this criterion is highly problematical. Demanding an independent criterion to secure the adequacy to the present situation for the self-explication of Christian faith would imply that Christian faith does *not* in itself entail its validity and relevance for today. And this would be an implicit challenge to the claim to universal validity of Christian faith which is grounded in the ontological character of the Christian assertions about God's revelation in Jesus Christ. This would deprive the whole enterprise of systematic theology of its basis. Therefore it is necessary to interpret the present validity and relevance of Christian faith as an *implication* of the universality of the fundamental truth-claims of Christian faith.[14] If Christian faith claims to be valid for the whole of humanity at all times, it must also be valid for us today. This, in turn, implies that relevance cannot be treated as a criterion for the *content* of the self-explication of Christian faith, but rather as a criterion for the *presentation* and *exposition* of the self-explication of Christian faith which spells out its relevance for today.

The application of these criteria constitutes the historical-hermeneutical aspect of systematic theology. As criteria of adequacy they function as norms for doing systematic theology. Apart from that, they can also be used as descriptive tools for distinguishing certain types of systematic theology. The priority ascribed to one criterion and the virtual neglect of one or both of the others characterizes biblicism, traditionalism and modernism. While it is probably unavoidable that any given way of doing systematic theology displays tendencies towards one or the other of these types, this nevertheless implies the danger of neglecting the internal relatedness of these criteria and consequently misconstruing their respective status.

Furthermore, the status attached to these criteria differs from one Christian denomination to another. Therefore these criteria also function as instruments for

characterizing the distinctive denominational character of a given way of doing systematic theology.

We must now turn to the *criteria of coherence* which describe the systematic-analytical aspect of the task of systematic theology. The first criterion of this group is the interal coherence of the concepts, propositions and arguments of the self-explication of Christian faith. I have already tried to show that this criterion is presupposed in Christian faith in so far as the linguistic communication of the Christian gospel is a presupposition for the possibility of Christian faith, and in so far as intelligibility is a necessary condition for the truth-claims of Christian faith.

The necessity of operating with this criterion is given in the fact that Christian faith is presented in a wide variety of modes of expression which comprise almost all linguistic forms: narratives, parables, metaphors, analogies, etc. The task of the self-explication of Christian faith with regard to its internal coherence is to explore the relations between these sometimes *prima facie* contradictory or at least paradoxical modes of expression by determining their respective meaning. This implies the task of offering a *conceptual* reconstruction of the basic forms of linguistic expression in the church. The translation into conceptual language is inevitable, because only concepts can be sufficiently clarified with respect to their intension, their content of meaning, and their extension, their reference to what they signify. And this clarification has to go all the way from concepts to propositions and to the connections of propositions in arguments. Interpreting the use of this criterion as conceptual reconstruction implies that the self-explication of Christian faith does not aim at asserting anything different from the primary expression of Christian faith in prayer, confessions of faith and Christian proclamation, but it intends to say the same thing differently, namely in a conceptual way. The material identity should be preserved in the normal difference.[15] It can be that the difficulties of the conceptual reconstruction of the primary expressions of faith shows that these primary expressions seem to be inadequate in a certain respect. However, the criterion by which it could be decided that they have to be changed is not the fact that they do not fit the theoretical model employed in their conceptual reconstruction, but that they misrepresent the revelation of God in Jesus Christ which can be disclosed in the process of reconstruction.

It is this criterion of internal coherence which accounts for the systematic character of systematic theology and which justifies the rather pretentious name "systematic theology". Much of the heated debate about the "system" in systematic theology falls flat if the system is seen as the natural consequence of the claim to internal coherence implied in Christian faith.

The last criterion, the external coherence of systematic theology, which tries to validate the compatibility of the assertions of Christian faith with all other true propositions is the most problematical of all criteria of systematic theology. We have already seen that this criterion is logically necessary, because it is implied in the character of Christian claims as presenting genuine truth-claims which must be compatible with all other true propositions. The theological necessity of this criterion could be developed by pointing to the fact that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the revelation of the creator and that it is the inherent rationality of his creative action which makes the rational structure of the world and of the human mind possible. External coherence is also an existential requirement, if Christians do not want to live with a divided mind which keeps their religious belief in intellectual quarantine isolated from the knowledge on which they rely in all other matter – a kind of holy, or rather unholy, schizophrenia which is totally incompatible with the character of Christian faith.

Although the necessity of this criterion is as evident as the fact that it does not subject the self-explication of Christian faith under an alien law but is required by the nature of Christian faith itself, it is nevertheless exceedingly difficult to operate with this criterion. The main difficulty is that we can never be entirely certain that what we believe and claim to be true is actually true. The fallibility of human beings forbids the rigid use of this criterion. The difficulty is not peculiar to systematic theology. Think how many scientific discoveries of recent times would have had to be rejected at the time when they were first introduced, because they openly contradicted what was believed to be true at that time.[16]

There is no easy way of resolving this dilemma. There are, however, a number of considerations which help to resolve at least some of its difficulties. First of all, if we do not look at the problem as the abstract relationship of different propositions but try to understand it as a kind of coherence that is required for our basic orientation in the world, we can see that this coherence can incorporate change (the acquisition of new knowledge and correction of former convictions) without the collapse of the whole belief-system. Secondly, we have to pay attention to the specific logical status of the propositions of systematic theology as the reconstruction of the propositional content of Christian faith. Because basic propositions of systematic theology assert, presuppose or imply ontological truth-claims, they do not have the same status as empirical or theoretical statements about particular entities, classes of entities or universal properties of classes of entities. Their respective logical status determines the rule for ascertaining the compatibility of the propositions of systematic theology with other truth-claims. The abortive controversy about "science *vs.* religion" in the second half of the 19th century is a striking example of the category mistakes that can occur if one does not pay attention to this distinction and to the self-misunderstanding of religion and science which it produces. Thirdly, it has to be kept in mind that even as a criterion of truth coherence is only a necessary and not a sufficient criterion.[17] This should make us careful to recognize the limitations of this criterion and not to collapse all the other criteria into this single criterion. And fourthly, our difficulty is a forceful reminder of the general fallibility of all human knowledge from which the self-explication of Christian faith cannot claim to be exempt. To keep this in mind would not have to be a disadvantage, if it makes us aware that even the most skilful use of these criteria must be accompanied by that humility which is appropriate to the subject-matter of theology and a necessary requirement for doing theology at all.[18]

## V

The use of these five criteria constitutes the activity of doing systematic theology. In my view, each of these criteria represents a necessary element of doing systematic theology and jointly they provide a sufficient basis for characterizing the activity of doing systematic theology. These criteria can be used for different purposes in the actual process of doing systematic theology. They can function descriptively as a guideline for the conceptual description of the content of Christian faith. They can be used analytically in examining and evaluating historical and contemporary examples of systematic theology and for testing their relevance for the present task of systematic theology. The descriptive as well as the analytical use of these criteria serves as the basis for their normative use in proposing a rational reconstruction of the forms and contents of Christian faith which helps the Christian community to overcome its dissensus and achieve a new consensus.

It may well be possible that these criteria are incomplete or that they have to be interpreted in a different way. But this discussion is itself a task of systematic theology which thereby reflects its relationship to Christian faith which makes systematic theology possible as well as necessary, and whose characteristics determine the criteria of doing systematic theology. Any suggestion to introduce different criteria or to modify the proposed criteria necessarily involves construing the characteristics of Christian faith in another way and therefore belongs also to the self-explication of Christian faith.

These criteria also help to determine the methods used in systematic theology. Systematic theology does not have a special method of its own. Rather, the use of specific methods depends on whether they are adequate for applying the criteria of systematic theology. And since these criteria suggest certain methods, exegetical and historical methods for the criteria of scripture and tradition, philosophical methods for the criteria of coherence, systematic theology cannot do better than to apply these methods as they are developed in their respective disciplines. Nevertheless, these methods will be used for achieving a different aim, that of the self-explication of Christian faith as the rational reconstruction of its forms and contents with respect to the truth-claims it implies. If one talks about *the* method of systematic theology, one usually refers to the specific combination of methods borrowed from other theological disciplines for the task of systematic theology.

One question still remains to be answered. If the criteria and the methods of doing systematic theology can be described in this way, what are the criteria for assessing the result of doing systematic theology, namely, a conception of systematic theology? It follows from the account I have tried to develop that a conception of systematic theology must satisfy the same criteria as those of doing systematic theology *and* the additional criterion of giving reasons for the way it uses these criteria. The only additional criterion is a strictly methodological one.

This way of presenting the activity of doing systematic theology might provoke the question whether it is not unnecessarily complicated compared to the striking simplicity which characterizes the greatest examples of systematic theology. I could only answer by pointing out that even the simplest activities like tying one's shoe-laces seem to be extraordinarily complicated once we try to describe them. I am, however, wondering whether the next time I am asked what I do for a job I should not answer that I teach Christian Doctrine.

1. Cf. J. P. Clayton, "Tillich and the Art of Theology", in: J. L. Adams, W. Pauck, R. L. Shinn (eds.), *The Thought of Paul Tillich*, San Francisco 1985, pp. 278-289.
2. Cf. I. U. Dalferth, *Existenz Gottes und christlicher Glaube. Skizzen zu einer eschatologischen Ontologie*, Munich 1984, pp. 16-30.
3. Cf. W. Härle, "Widerspruchsfreiheit. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Glauben und Denken", *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 28 (1986), pp. 223-237, esp. p. 229ff.
4. For the view of divine agency presupposed here cf. my article "Divine Agency and Providence", *Modern Theology*, 3 (1987), pp. 225-244.
5. I have discussed this relationship in more detail in "Die Rede vom Handeln Gottes im christlichen Glauben. Beiträge zu einem systematisch-theologischen Rekonstruktionsversuch", in: W. Härle, R. Preul (eds.), *Vom Handeln Gottes*, Marburger Jahrbuch Theologie I, Marbnrg 1987, pp. 57-81, esp. pp. 61-64.
6. Cf. W. Härle, op. cit., p. 230.
7. Cf. C. H. Ratschow, "Das Christentum als denkende Religion", *Von den Wandlungen Gottes. Beiträge zur systematischen Theologie*, Berlin 1986, pp. 3-23.
8. This is especially emphasized in E. Herms' exposition of the character and task of theology, cf. *Theologie – eine Erfahrungswissenschaft*, Munich 1978, and *Theorie für die Praxis – Beiträge zur Theologie*, Munich 1982.
9. Cf. S. Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity. Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth*, London 1984; see especially pp. 11-34 about the relationship of conflict and identity.
10. In German-speaking theology the discussion about the criteria of Christian dogmatics was inaugurated by A. Jeffner, *Kriterien christlicher Glaubenslehre. Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung heutiger protestantischer Dogmatik im deutschen Sprachbereich*, Uppsala 1977.
11. For the following argument cf. W. Härle, op. cit., pp. 227f.
12. Cf. W. Härle, "Lehre und Lehrbeanstandung", *Zeitschrift für evangelisches Kirchenrecht*, 30 (1985), pp. 283-317, pp. 301f. See also Jeffner, op. cit., pp. 34ff. and D. H. Kelsey, *Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, New Haven 1976.
13. Cf. W. Härle, ibid., p. 303.
14. This has been demonstrated with exemplary precision in Härle, ibid., pp. 304f.
15. Cf. I. U. Dalferth, op. cit., p. 25.
16. Cf. W. Härle, *Systematische Philosophie*, Munich-Mainz 1982, pp. 180ff.
17. Cf. W. Härle, ibid., p. 183 and my article "Wahrheit", *Taschenlexikon Religion und Theologie*, Göttingen ⁴1983, pp. 283-289.
18. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I, chap. I, 2.