

Sven Grosse:

*Theologie und Wissenschaftstheorie*

(PADERBORN, VERLAG FERDINAND SCHÖNINGH, 2019)

The truth claim of Christianity has always been associated with a need to acquire general knowledge. The church established the first universities in Europe to systematize and pass on that knowledge – these institutions, however, had marginalized theology over time, due to secularization. Today, theology is in need of serious apologetic efforts to make itself accepted as an academic discipline. Meanwhile, it struggles to meet the methodological requirements of scientificity. Therefore, the monograph of Sven Grosse, which examines the relationship between theology and the theory of science, can be considered as a fundamental step forward in the above-described direction. The author of the recent monograph *Theologie und Wissenschaftstheorie*, senior professor at the Department of Historical and Systematic Theology at the State Independent Theological University of Basel, Switzerland, says that theology is the pinnacle of all scholarship, and that every analysis and formulation of it must be based on God's revelation i.e., on the Holy Scripture. On the other hand, the author is convinced that theology as an academic discipline cannot be pulled out of its ecclesiastic context and so it should help the Church to cope with its fundamental challenges, and vice versa, the Church is responsible for the purity of its academic research.

With respect to the definition of science (*Wissenschaft*), the starting point for Grosse's analysis is Heinrich Scholz's paper – first published in 1933 –, in which Scholz, at that time a systematic theologian, laid down the minimum and maximum requirements by which a discipline could be called academic. These requirement postulates were then adamantly rejected by Scholz's friend and colleague Karl Barth, the renowned theologian, and the author of the book, Sven Grosse, partially agrees with that rejection. Namely, on the basis of Aristotle's research methodology, Scholz specified minimum requirements as the "proposition postulate" (*Satzpostulat*), the "coherence postulate" and the "verifiability postulate." In addition to these three, Scholz listed two other requirements, which are open to controversy: on the one hand, the "independence postulate," which means that academic research has to abandon prejudice; and on the other, the "concordance postulate," by virtue of which academic research must take into account things

that seem impossible for physics and biology. According to Scholz, the fundamental maximum requirement for science is, then, that it should organize its axioms and theses into a coherent system.

In the first and most extensive part of the volume (*Wissenschaft und christliche Theologie in Konfrontation und Integration*, 9–111), Sven Grosse explores contradictory and integrative elements in the relationship between academic learning and Christian theology by dint of the postulates formulated by Scholz. Theology, says Grosse, has to put up with a number of paradoxes that breach the principle of contradiction but that kind of tension can be resolved in virtue of Barthian dialectics. Theology is a talk of God, hence it obviously also puts forward statements that are usually referred to the sphere of incomprehensible. The Swiss theologian points out that theology can be viewed as an academic discipline because God, who is love, allows man to know His revelation and, through the revealed knowledge, man can cross the borderline of the incomprehensible toward a knowledge of God. The “concordance postulate,” which allows for the examination of things and events whose investigation is unjustified by natural scientific norms, actually confirms that God sometimes runs interference with history and the lives of human beings, even in the form of miracles.

Now there are areas of theology common with philosophy. But Sven Grosse proves point by point that philosophical reasoning is never complete when it talks about the existence of God, the Trinity, the death of Christ, and the commandments regulating human behaviour. For him, the philosophical and theological approaches are different while both are based on the attributes of God: wisdom for philosophy, freedom for theology (90). At the same time, Christianity is asserted to be not only a religion but also an intellectual struggle to seek out the truth, and in this sense, it must include some of the more philosophical methods.

The Swiss professor considers Scholz’s “verifiability postulate” and his so-called “independence postulate” together. Our certainty of the truth of Christian theology is based on the idea that it is not our finite rationality’s task to examine the verifiability of theological truth. Theology is subject to the judgment of God’s omniscience and infinite reason, and the verification of theological statements as well as the antecedent knowledge required for that verification is divine business not human. Hence it is not possible to speak of a disprovability of doctrines of faith. The ultimate testing power lies with God: He carries the ultimate certainty.

Next, the second part of the volume looks for possible niches or places for theology to occupy in the system of academic disciplines (*Die Theologie im System der Wissenschaften*, 115–174). As is well known, Thomas Aquinas considered theology to be the supreme form of learning and wisdom. Since the Enlightenment, however, this approach has been under many kinds of attack. Schelling and Hegel, influential philosophers of the German Idealism attempted to include the several aca-

demic disciplines into a “genetic” structure. Sven Grosse relies primarily on them when he seeks to enforce a structure which is founded on theology. He finds this new systematization on God’s self-revelation, with his main cornerstones being Creation and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ (145). These doctrines, to Grosse’s mind, constitute a good basis for a classification of the different disciplines. On these premises, the entire field of academic research at large can be derived from theology because according to Scripture, God has accomplished every kind of science: *poiesis*, *praxis* and *theoria*. Whatever has been manifested in creation and studied by an academic discipline has had its origin only in God.

Hence in the system of scholarship, theology is either the pinnacle or at least the heart, the centre. Different disciplines branch out from here. Karl Barth’s opposition to Scholz’s model, which subordinated theology to an external concept of learning, seems justified now, since theology is born from the revelation that God, the Creator sent Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world, and our certainty of this rests only on the Word of God. Nevertheless, the created world is part of this salvation story, being a system that can be rationally examined and systematized. The increase of theoretical knowledge can contribute more and more to the glorification of God (175).

Part 3 of the volume examines the internal structure of theology as a branch of academic research (*Die Binnenstruktur der Theologie als Wissenschaft*, 175–264) and with that, it discusses the issues of the classical *prolegomena*, namely Scripture as the source of theological cognition. In particular, Grosse examines Scripture as a historical narrative, then again, as a text and, finally, as a source that also points us to the philosophical path. After all, the Bible is a text which serves as a source of knowledge while it does not cease to be a historical account – so there are obviously common areas for both philology and historical research. Insofar as it is a knowledge of God, theology also touches upon specific areas of philosophy. As a text and a historical account in which God has revealed himself, however, the Bible falls out of the scope of these disciplines on the grounds that its essential meaning and purpose is the sanctification and salvation of the chosen people in Christ. Therefore, God designated the Church for the interpretation and understanding of Scripture. Sven Grosse constantly emphasizes the importance of the role of the church regarding Christian theology.

Since theology is “wisdom,” it is also “systematic” and “reflexive,” and again, as it is wisdom it can be seen as “metatheory” (245). Its method is a result of its philological and historical character as it reaps its knowledge from the text of Scripture. Another way of theology is the philosophical method, when it uses philosophical guidelines in the quest for the final truth (247).

The third part succinctly summarizes various approaches of *prolegomena* and provides methodological guidelines in a short subchapter (*Die Methode in der*

*Theologie*, 247–249), which has been desperately lacking for students and learners of Protestant theology so far. Apart from a monograph by Gijsbert van den Brink<sup>1</sup> the interested reader will find some important references only in the *prolegomena* like, for instance, in the great introduction titled *Systematic Theology* by Wolfhart Pannenberg.<sup>2</sup> No wonder that due to these shortcomings, theology has been attacked so fiercely by the natural sciences and, in fact, it would be utterly necessary to develop the academic character of theology in the form of a new, 21<sup>st</sup>-century manner. For although it is true that this knowledge is made up of methods used by philology, historical research and philosophy, that fact does not explain the lack of methodological guidelines in theology. No other discipline has admitted that it is deprived of its methodological foundations because they are similar to those of other disciplines. At the end of this chapter, Sven Grosse discusses again the responsibility of the church for theological issues. On special occasions, the Church has to decide on theological issues while the discipline of theology helps the Church and its leaders – so both parties constantly depend on each other.

The last part of the book (*Die Theologie in Kirche und Gesellschaft und die Gestalt des Theologen*, 265–286) puts this issue into a social context. In doing so, it says theology should be one of the outstanding faculties of universities, while at the same time theology should avoid meeting the requirement of “value neutrality,” which is an expectation from outside the church. The last two chapters are dedicated to the figure of the theologian, who must always be guided by love, a love for truth, that is, for God, who is the truth. They also have to display and feel love for other people, especially for their students. As members of the academic community, they have to be guided by a “sacred love”, enthusiasm and commitment to their research. Theologians perform their duties towards the Church and society, that is, in a human community. They have a place inside the Church so they are not exclusively “scholars of religion or religious studies” (281).

The thoroughness with which Sven Grosse explores his subject requires a look at practical issues beside the more theoretical and systematic elaborations. After all, he is already in the field of ecclesiastics as he aims at classifying disciplines and examining the competence and supervision of theology. In this, he follows Calvin. At the same time, however, the reader wonders whether we are not sometimes further away from an actual theory of theology’s scientificity. Certainly, Sven Grosse’s book fills a gap in determining the place of theology as an academic discipline, and this is particularly important in today’s secularized academic landscape where

<sup>1</sup> G. van den Brink: *Philosophy of Science for Theologians. An Introduction*. Frankfurt a. M., Peter Lang Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> W. Pannenberg: *Systematic Theology*. Vol. I., London, T&T Clark International, 2004, Chapters 1–4, 1–257.

theology is considered as a little brother. It struggles, together with the humanities, to obtain the title of truly objective scholarly research. On the other hand, our author also expresses his mind on the issue of how the relation between the Church and theology is to be conceived as he puts forward two cornerstones, primarily Scripture as the paramount source and, second, the requirement of integrating theology into the Church, that is, into the body of Christ. This is in line with the original concepts of the Reformation, with the basic Calvinist principles. In fact, this seems to be the only possible way for theology to take if it wants to remain true to its task and calling from God.

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