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Thielicke: Preacher and Theologian

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THE WRITINGS OF Helmut Thielicke, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Hamburg, are beginning to command considerable respect and reputation in the English-speaking theological world. Indeed, it may be that in time he will come to rank with names such as Barth, Tillich and Bultmann as another German 'giant' of twentieth century theology. If this proves to be the case, many impatient with the trends of much recent theology may have cause to rejoice. For in Thielicke faithfulness to the original apostolic gospel and adeptness at presenting that gospel in a way relevant to modern needs and modes of thinking are combined to a degree sadly lacking in many other modern theologians. The essence of his message and the secret of his success is the good news of the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, news that can never pale in wonder or power for Thielicke.

Thielicke's fame both in Germany and the English-speaking world (he is still probably better known in America, where most of his books have been translated, than in England) does in fact rest as much on his capacity as a preacher as that of a theologian. His sermons attracted especially eager audiences during the Second World War, when his freedom of travel and speech was restricted because of his opposition to Nazi policies, and Stuttgart, the city in which he was ministering, was being bombed by Allied Forces. Some of these sermons were later published in *The Prayer that Spans the World—Sermons on the Lord's Prayer*. As Professor in Hamburg since 1954 he has regularly preached in the large St. Michael's Church to congregations of 4,000 people—and this in a reputedly non-churchgoing city. Series of his sermons were the first of his writings to be translated into English, chiefly by the American John W. Doberstein. Perhaps the best of Thielicke is found in his sermons on the parables of Jesus, entitled *Das Bilder Buch Gottes* ('God's Picture Book') in the German version and *The Waiting Father* in the English translation. The latter is in fact

a particularly appropriate title, for the theme of the Heavenly Father who lovingly awaits the return of the lost, suggested of course by the parable of the prodigal son, is one that runs persistently through the whole book and indeed the entirety of Thieliicke's work.

Especially noteworthy in Thieliicke's style of preaching is the direct relating of his subject-matter to present-day situations and modes of thought and feeling; his 'devil's advocate' technique of building up an opposing point of view only to knock it down in turn; and his sensitive handling of the problem of suffering, an experience which Thieliicke has obviously tasted firsthand—as a young man he suffered for many years from serious illness, and Nazism could not but leave its traumatic marks on one so opposed to it. The language of his sermons is almost invariably fresh, imaginative, and compelling. The same cannot always be said of his more academic work; like most Teutonic theologians Thieliicke is apt to pursue his points in more repetitive and roundabout ways than seem strictly necessary. His *magnum opus*, the six-volume *Theological Ethics*, took him 21 years to complete and runs to over 3,000 pages; it is the most extensive work of systematic theology in the twentieth century excepting Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. Both Barth's *Dogmatics* and Thieliicke's *Ethics* might, one feels, have suffered some compression without loss; yet their abnormal length need not prevent the more casual reader from dipping into either work with considerable profit.

At present Thieliicke is working on a three volume dogmatics, *The Evangelical Faith* of which only the first volume, 'Prolegomena: The relation of Theology to modern thought-forms' (translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley), has so far appeared. In his preface Thieliicke calls this first volume an attempt at 'clearance work in a cluttered situation'. It is largely devoted to discussing critical questions raised for theology by the post-war demythologisation and death of God debates; but in doing this Thieliicke also lays the foundations for the more constructive doctrinal stages which are to follow, the doctrine of God and Christ (volume 2), and the doctrines of the Holy Spirit, the church and eschatology (volume 3). This first volume is well worth some attention here.

Cartesian and Non-Cartesian Theology

IN calling his dogmatics *The Evangelical Faith* Thieliicke's intention is not to display narrow sectional loyalties ('Evangelische' means 'Lutheran' in a German context) but to show that his primary interest is in the object of faith, that in which faith believes and by which the subject is changed into a new creation, rather than in the subject of faith himself. He says his prolegomena is directed against theologies seemingly obsessed with analyses of so-called modern man and which are consequently

dependent on conditions of his understanding. Thieliicke's division of theology into different types is original and instructive. He finds the popular terms 'modern' and 'conservative' unhelpful, observing that 'Any adult theology is trying to be modern, for the word it has to expound and to unfold systematically contains within itself the element of address and ongoing re-interpretation' (p. 33). Instead, Thieliicke calls 'Cartesian' those theologies usually described as modern, those which find their new point of departure in the *I* as the subject of experience and understanding. This overriding emphasis on appropriation rather than content of the kerygma is something Thieliicke finds misplaced. He writes: 'Intensive preoccupation with the question of method blinds us to what methodologically purified perceptions show us' and quotes Karl Rahner: 'They are continually sharpening knives and no longer have anything to eat' (p. 52).

Thieliicke sees the dangers of the Cartesian approach as being particularly evident in the work of Rudolf Bultmann. This is not the first time he has criticised Bultmann though it is worth mentioning that his criticism has been more sympathetic and charitable, and none the less penetrating for that, than some of the lambasts which have been hurled against the Marburg professor. Thieliicke was a participant in the wartime debate on demythologisation inspired by Bultmann's essay of 1941, 'New Testament and Mythology'. Thieliicke's contribution, 'The Restatement of New Testament Mythology' may be found in H-W. Bartsch's collection of essays belonging to the debate, *Kerygma and Myth* (1972, SPCK). Bultmann had insisted that much in the New Testament is myth and needs to be recognised as such. Thieliicke didn't dispute a basic distinction between 'the husk of mythology' and 'the kernel of revelation'. But he drew the distinction between mythology and literal truth at different points than Bultmann. He faulted the self-consciousness adopted by Bultmann as normative for modern man, a belief in a closed system of reality, on the grounds that 'Such an outlook really leaves no room for an historical revelation in time, at least not in the sense of an intervention on the plane of reality, including reality external to man, and an intervention which changes that reality, as in miracle' (p. 146). For Bultmann man's self-understanding is primary; it is from changes in this, the experience of judgment, decision and release for 'authentic existence' and 'openness to the future' as and when God illuminates men's minds through the preaching of the kerygma that the Christ-event is deduced. Knowledge of the event is no necessary precursor to experience of Christ; indeed it cannot be, since (on the basis of Bultmann's exceedingly sceptical approach to the historical value of the Gospels) we have no sure knowledge about the event.

In his wartime essay Thieliicke subjected Bultmann's thesis to a number of searching questions. He asked: 'Is the history recorded in the New Testament just a vague reality which underlies the Christian

consciousness, the contours of which can no longer be recovered, or is it not rather the event "par excellence", quite apart from any subjective consciousness?" (p. 148). The event 'par excellence' is of course that of the Word become flesh. Again, 'If faith in the resurrection is only the reflex of an experience of an encounter, and devoid of any objective historical basis, it is in the last resort vulnerable to all the attacks of the psychologists' (p. 153). Thieliicke stressed that the resurrection is not *just* an event of the past; it must still be authenticated in the encounter with which Bultmann is so much concerned. But the actual, historical resurrection is what makes possible a present-day encounter with Christ, and Thieliicke saw the life of Christ as making sense only in the light of the resurrection. Bultmann had defined mythology as a way of representing the other-worldly in terms of this world, and the divine in terms of human life, with a consequent need for unravelling of the myth, but Thieliicke suggested that the distinction between the human and the divine is not an absolute one.

Does not every attempt at demythologising, seeking as it does to probe the dividing-line between the eternal and the temporary, the divine and the human, come up against a barrier which has been put there by God, and beyond which it dare not ask any more questions? This barrier is the mystery of the God-man (p. 157).

Much of the same ground is covered in Thieliicke's section on Cartesian theology in *The Evangelical Faith*. He makes the point that the events described in statements of faith such as the Apostles' Creed are primarily a history *on* man and only derivatively a history *in* man. The stress of faith should be not on adoption of Christ's history into *my* self-understanding but rather on my adoption into *Christ's* history by implantation into the continuity of the salvation-event. Thieliicke suggests that 'the final secret or difficulty of Bultmann's theology is that he has no doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Only when this doctrine is properly worked out does one have to reckon with the thought that the Word does not just ring a bell in our existing pre-understanding but it creates its own hearers, so that there is a new creation' (p. 60). The Spirit works with the prior self-understanding of man but is not controlled by it. On the contrary, the Spirit breaks down the Kantian axiom 'You ought, and therefore you can' by which man lives and reveals that God says 'Yes, you ought, but no, you can't', and makes man wholly different by a new creation.

Thieliicke proceeds to a discussion of myth in which he argues—as he did in his essay 'The Restatement of New Testament Mythology'—that on the understanding of myth as the transcending of a merely objective aspect of reality, it is highly questionable whether such a category can be abandoned if a specific dimension of reality is to go on being described. In fact the resurgence of myth in modern poetry and literature suggests it is a category that is far from dead. More to the point, Thieliicke agrees that the event of divine self-declaration is bound

to include the element of myth, because the concepts used cannot exactly fit the reality. This is why all the Christological titles undergo a shift of sense when used of Jesus. Myth is 'a legitimate mode of expression to the extent that by symbolical indirectness it gives expression to the fact that what sustains our reality cannot be adequately expressed by the vocabulary of this reality' (p. 82). But Thielicke does not think the basic notion of incarnation is to be regarded as mythical. Incarnation may be confused with myth, but it is really supermythical: it points only to itself. Yet faith cannot *prove* the real presence of God in history, which is what the notion of incarnation is concerned to affirm. 'What compels faith to acknowledge the presence of God is rather the testimony of the Holy Spirit which smites it by the Word that has set up tent among us (John 1: 14)' (p. 82). Analysis of myth may help us to decide what does and does not belong to the category but ultimately only the gift of faith can enable us to see the miracle of incarnation.

The incarnation and illumination of it are the basis of talk about God for Thielicke. The incarnation is a miracle of God's love, for in it God overcomes himself, since his mercy saves us from the threat of his holiness.

Hence I have to speak about God in himself, in his eternity and transcendence. I do not do this with speculative intent or out of metaphysical curiosity or epistemological naivety. I consider God in himself in order to express in the form of praise the fact that God for me is a miracle of history which God has posited and which cuts right across my possibilities (p. 171).

Ontically the dimension of God as 'existing' precedes his resolving upon the Word and his self-determination as my God. Noetically this position is the final stage in a reflection which begins with actual encounter with God. God *is* in order to *act*: the point may seem so obvious as to be hardly worth making, yet it is one that some recent writers, notably Herbert Braun, who denies the transcendent reality of God, have refused to accept.

Thielicke thinks theology needs to be grounded in the fact of the new creation brought about by the Spirit; one who has not experienced this new creation can only go astray theologically. He thus criticises Cartesian theology's tendency to reverse Anselm's 'credo ut intelligam' formula. Because the Christ-event can be viewed in more than one way, being both 'a datable event in history' and 'the eruption of eternity' (p. 210), it demands the category of faith if it is to be the object of true knowledge. Non-Cartesian theology believes that illumination of the real identity of Christ, provoking faith, will take place in proclamation about Him. Nevertheless, the proclamation Thielicke approves (and practises) is one that includes critical and contemporaneous appropriation. 'A past which is conserved traditionalistically is an alteration' (p. 12). Real fidelity, and real love for

one's neighbour, is achieved when the old truth is related to questions that agitate modern man. Thielicke's protest against the pride of place currently being accorded to hermeneutics does not mean that he considers the problems of appropriation and interpretation irrelevant.

Christian Secularity

IN the second half of this volume Thielicke traces the idea of 'the death of God' from its beginnings in Jean Paul, Wetzell, Jacobsen and Nietzsche through to recent American writers of the 1960s. This second section begins with the observation that 'the problem of appropriation which dominates the modern period arose out of a sense that the world is a closed nexus of experience which does not include God as a perceptible object. Since God is not in this nexus but transcends it, the question is raised whether and how far he can have a place among the certainties which the world's nexus of experience imparts' (p. 221). Thielicke sees Kant as having played an instrumental role in this. Though he did not deny the existence of God, Kant made damaging attacks on the familiar ontological and cosmological arguments for the existence of God and stressed upon men the non-objectifiability of God in the immanent sphere. For a man such as Heinrich Heine, Kant was a prophet of the death of God. Thielicke characterises Heine's understanding of Kant thus: 'To have banished God from the empirical realm of theoretical reason is to have killed him and hence to have killed existence itself. To try to fetch God back by other forms of assurance, by the postulate of happiness, is a mere trick' (p. 272). Thielicke argues that the secular mind now does not necessarily deny God any more than Kant did. But it does not reckon with him as a magnitude that has a place in this world. Consequently, 'when God is relegated to a transcendence which is remote from immanence while man is tied to immanence, which he can enjoy directly as the object of knowledge and action, being is divided into a worldless God and a godless world. The worldless God who is not related to existence is irrelevant to me' (p. 291). Predictably enough, because God is deemed irrelevant doubt gradually gathers as to his transcendent existence also.

Thielicke accepts the inconclusiveness of Descartes' and Anselm's attempts to prove God's existence; he accepts Kant's thesis of God's non-objectifiability in the world. But again he sees the incarnation as the solution to the problems raised. The incarnation explodes the notions both of the worldless God and a Godless world: it sets forth

the immanence of God in this world, which does not integrate him into it but lets him be God, and maintains his distinction from the world. . . . In the incarnation of the Word God and secular reality are brought together. In it we thus have the secularity of God. God surrenders his

transcendence in favour of his condescension. He does it, however, without becoming identical with the world (p. 292).

Thielicke again takes issue with Braun in whom the noetic and ontic dimensions are confused. Braun argues that because God can be experienced only in his secularity he 'is' secular. Thielicke in contrast insists that the one who condescends is more than what he condescends to be.

It must by now be obvious that Thielicke parts with Lessing's famous dictum, echoed by Kant, in grounding the God-world relation in 'an accidental truth of history' rather than 'a necessary truth of reason'—though by 'accidental truth of history' Thielicke includes not only the event of Jesus Christ but the individual event of disclosure about Jesus Christ. However, he does not see the God-world relation epitomised in the incarnation as something that lends itself to simple systematisation. Ontological schema which employ the notion of 'natures' to illuminate the incarnation err in this respect. Thielicke thinks, for example, that 'the attempt to systematise the unity of God and man in Christ, and hence indirectly the unity of God and the world, fails in both Luther and Zwingli. It fails either because the schema breaks down (Luther) or because it triumphs (Zwingli) and this triumph entails intolerable reductionism in the soteriological statements' (p. 373). What he means by this latter is that Zwingli said each action of Christ was according to either his divine or human nature, not both. Thielicke follows Luther in believing that no such distinction can be made, that everything Christ experienced was in the totality and unity of his person; but unlike Luther he abandons the attempt to speak of Christ in terms of 'natures', using only personal categories. Thus it is more appropriate to say that Jesus is God become man than that he is God-man in two natures, human and divine. The point Thielicke wishes to safeguard is that in becoming man God still transcends the relation he himself establishes.

Thielicke accepts the need for Christians to be fully involved in the world, and in the final chapters of the volume he makes suggestions for 'a Christian Secularism'. He criticises other versions of Christian secularism produced by Harvey Cox and Friedrich Gogarten on the grounds that they accept the world in its non-Christian condition and on its non-Christian presuppositions too easily. Thielicke thinks Christian participation in the worldly order of social obligation, economic relations or indeed sexual relations takes place in recognition that these are ultimately of *penultimate* value—even though such value is considerable. The promise that 'all things are yours' is grounded in the comprehensive statement that 'you are Christ's' (1 Cor. 3: 23); and 'The chains of unfreedom are not primarily broken by liberation from bonds but by acceptance of the true commitment which sustains our being' (p. 339). Christians in short need to be mindful of where their true loyalties belong. But for those who are faithful to Christ, there

is much that they can contribute to the world, not least in helping the world to see itself in the right perspective. The volume ends:

The message of redemption is secular or it is nothing. It presents God in the world or it is sound and smoke. But to present God in the world does not mean equating him with the world. For—if we may repeat the decisive statement which we have tried to develop in this book—only that which transcends the world can make us worldly. Or, even more directly, only he who did not think it robbery to be equal with God (Phil. 2: 6) and who left his eternity can direct us to time. And only to him who overcomes the world in his name is the world given back as an inheritance in which he is to keep the faith and to prove his freedom (p. 385).

The opening volume of *The Evangelical Faith* is not an easy book. Only an unusual measure of familiarity with modern theological and philosophical concepts could make it so. But it is a significant work, perhaps even deserving of the accolade 'tour de force'. For in a theological generation that has come to speak of God in ever-decreasing tones of conviction, Thielicke is not afraid to proclaim his faith from the housetops. That the incarnation is fundamental for his readiness to speak of God so surely is no accident.

Eradication of the incarnation as an outdated concept has been characteristic of much recent writing in the Christological sphere, notably that of John Hick, John Robinson and Maurice Wiles. The force of Thielicke's argument is that the concept of 'the Word become flesh' is essential not only for a proper understanding of Christ—as may not unreasonably be argued from the evidence about him—but also for a correct comprehension of God. God in Christ reveals himself as the God outside time and space who for the love of men humbles himself to an existence *in* time and space. This is the miracle to which the Spirit testifies—and Thielicke is surely right to insist that it is only as the Spirit informs our response to the Christ-story that the mystery of the incarnation and God's relations with the world is revealed.

Thielicke's stress on the primacy of God in revelation and regeneration is a characteristic he shares with Karl Barth; but the similarities between the two are limited. Thielicke does not eschew apologetics and the need to address man in his own particular situation as is the tendency in Barth. Further differences appear in their treatment of ethics, the field in which Thielicke has spent so much of his time and to which attention is now drawn.

Ethics between two Aeons

THIELICKE'S massive *Theological Ethics* is the outcome of a self-set task of 'declining the doctrine of justification through all the case forms in which it appears within the grammar of our existence' (p. xiv, Preface to 'Foundations'). His concern is that if the liberating

significance of this doctrine for all dimensions of life is not indicated, Christians are in danger of succumbing to a sort of schizophrenia, a compartmentalising of their public and private lives. The first volume of his *Ethics* in the abridged English translation is entitled 'Foundations', and is devoted to an exploration of the basic theological questions upon which ethics depend. For beyond the specific question 'What shall we do?' lie the more fundamental ones 'How are we to understand that reality within which our doing must take place?' and 'What does our being-in-the-world mean?'

One of Thielicke's initial observations is that the specifically Christian element in any action consists not so much in what is done but the motive with which it is done. All truly Christian action stems from a disposition of love and fear for God, a state of being for which man is essentially dependent on God rather than can create for himself. Man must first be the object of justification before he can be the subject of sanctification.

Fundamental to evangelical ethics is the fact that we as Christians stand in a field of tension between two aeons, the present world which is one day to pass away and the coming world which will replace it and already makes inroads upon it. Christians are called out of their old lives into a new existence, but still have to live in a far from perfect world with all the circumscriptions on action that brings; they stand in a relationship both of continuity and discontinuity to the old aeon. Part I of 'Foundations' ends:

The theme of ethics is this 'walking between two worlds'. It is in the strict sense the theme of a 'wayfarer's theology', a 'theologia viatorum'. It lives under the law of the 'not yet' but within the peace of the 'I am coming soon' (Rev. 22: 20). Theological ethics is eschatological or it is nothing (p. 47).

For Thielicke the Christian stands no longer under the dictatorship of a legalistic 'You ought', but in the magnetic field of Christian freedom, under the empowering of the 'You may'. But the freedom which the Spirit brings is no caprice—it is incompatible with certain conditions and attitudes. The Spirit cannot work in us to transform our lives if we persist in such activities as fornication, 'sitting at the table of demons' or denial of Jesus as Lord (instances taken from Paul's attitude in 1 Corinthians 6: 9; 10: 21 and 12: 3).

The love that motivates our action is the reverse side of God's love for us; it is indeed his love in us. The miracle of God's love is that 'For us he ceases to be the author of the Law (an object of fear and hate driving us to despair) and becomes instead the author of the Gospel (the epitome of the fatherly heart made palpable and objective in Jesus Christ)' (p. 67). Thielicke upholds the basic Lutheran concern for a sharp distinction between Law and Gospel, as against Karl Barth who viewed the law as following the Gospel—the Law to Barth being the 'form' in which the Gospel is lived. Thielicke maintains the

historicity of revelation whereby the Law preceded the Gospel and also the tension between God as author of both Law and Gospel, a paradox that 'is never overcome except in the flight for refuge, in the moment of faith, in the overcoming of God by God' (p. 118). The Law still has continuing value for the Christian in that it serves to relate the individual spheres and stages of existence to the fact of justification; it has regulative significance in reminding one of the ways in which obedience may be exercised. Thus 'The condemning judge has become a helper. It contains regulations for the execution of the first commandment, for the execution of faith. It seeks to prevent faith from falling into self-contradiction and consequently into hypocrisy' (p. 139).

Thielicke proceeds to a discussion of the *Imago Dei* in man and argues that this is to be construed primarily in terms of man's relationship with God, rather than as something ontological. The destruction of the *Imago Dei* at the Fall involved the breach of a relationship rather than the loss of certain ontic qualities. Thus man experiences 'not a quantitative loss of reason in the sense that he sinks to the level of the irrational creatures, but a qualitative alteration in the sense that reason now serves only to make him "even more brutish than the brutes"' (p. 163). Thielicke stresses this in opposition to much Roman Catholic theology which maintains the partial retention of the *imago* after the Fall; Thielicke does not deny man's continued possession of such qualities as personality and responsibility but wishes to draw attention to the completeness of the breach between God and man created by sin—a breach which is only repaired in Christ, in whom the immediacy of the father-son relationship is both manifested and reconstituted for us. Thielicke thinks Catholic theology detracts from the significance of specific events—notably the Fall and the incarnation—in its adherence to the dictum 'Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it'; such an assertion fails to do justice to the Pauline statements 'whatsoever is not of faith is sin' (Rom. 14: 23) and 'if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation' (2 Cor. 5: 17) because it does not observe the radical difference between the pre-Christian and Christian conditions.

The doctrine of original sin is taken with full seriousness by Thielicke. Original sin means that sin is not something that stands before us as an open possibility which we may lay hold of, but is rather something that is invariably with us from the outset of our lives. While man acts on his own responsibility, he does so under a compelling necessity. Thielicke acknowledges the mystery of how evil originated in the world—this, however, cannot be used as an excuse for avoiding acceptance of responsibility for evil: '... the interposing of the objective way of putting the question (asking about the causal origin of evil) carries with it the tendency to do away with one's own personhood, to provide relief by viewing the person as a mere effect' (p. 289). This will not do—man must say 'I' to the unrighteousness with which the world

clothes him before he can subsequently say 'I' to the righteousness which Christ graciously bestows upon him.

Conscience and natural law are examined and rejected as satisfactory modes of revelation by which man may know what God wills of him. In the realm of conscience Thielicke writes: 'My conscience cannot know God as the one who is gracious to me. It can know God only as judge or else as "the good Lord" whose goodness-in-general is without personal application to me' (p. 327). The so-called eternal law, similarly, seems to be something of a negative abstraction. 'Might it not be that, while we know perfectly well that certain things ought not to be, we cannot say with the same assurance what ought positively to be?' (p. 398). Only restoration to our original relationship with God through Jesus Christ can write God's will upon our hearts. Even then the ambiguity of our position 'between two aeons' means ethical decisions are not always obvious for us. In particular, the Sermon on the Mount makes apparently impossible demands on us, because it addresses us as though we were still in our primal state or as though the new aeon had already dawned.

Here Luther and his doctrine of the two kingdoms enter the discussion. For Luther saw a discrepancy between the radical demands of the Sermon on the Mount and the structure of this world's orders. He thought that once we enter the sphere of the 'orders' (e.g. of the family, or the state) certain factual requirements hold sway which direct the way our concrete fulfilment of the law takes place (e.g. the necessity to discipline errant children, or take punitive action on the criminal). As Luther saw it, love in the sphere of politics could prevail only in compound with power, and needed to be exercised in a strictly rational way—a fact that could make a non-Christian prince better at his duties than a Christian one. Luther thus distinguished sharply between conduct in 'official' and 'personal' spheres—the obligation to obey the injunctions of the Sermon on the Mount literally being much less rigorous in the former than the latter—and this has been an influential distinction, faithfully carried out in practice by, among others, Bismarck. In view of the excesses of modern German history it is not surprising that this distinction has been called into question. In December 1939 Karl Barth voiced the opinion that Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms had given German political development an extra inclination towards evil and darkness. He wrote: 'The German people are suffering from the heritage of the greatest German Christian, from the error of Martin Luther concerning the relationship between the law and the gospel, the secular and the spiritual order and authority . . .' Barth advocated instead a strictly Christocentric approach to political ethics. He described the relationship between church and state as analogous, the state reflecting a mirror image of Christian truth and reality, and being provided by the church with a rationale for humanity, justice, democracy, etc.

Thielicke is a faithful Lutheran. He stands by Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, but only with significant emendations. The state and the tactics of force that it necessarily employs do not belong to the creation ordinance; their validity stems from what Thielicke calls the 'Noachic ordinance', whereby God 'condescends' to the fallen state of the world, tolerates the laws of conflict by which man lives in the world, and makes use of force in order to restrain force. His institution of, for instance, capital punishment in Genesis 9: 5, 6 is to be seen not in terms of his 'real' or 'original' will but in terms of his will as adapted to the fallen state of this world. God gives man the political order 'so as to preserve him from self-destruction, and to secure for him the sheer possibility of physical existence. Christians thus understand the political order in light of the love of God, and they acknowledge it with gratitude' (p. 145). The political order serves the cause of physical existence, which creates the possibility of repentance and the realisation of salvation. Luther too saw the state as possessing a subordinate function within salvation history—where he erred, in Thielicke's view, is in not noting the temporal limitations to the function. It is the fall of man which necessitates the political order, and the parousia of the Son of Man which will bring it to its end. The present aeon is called into question by the coming aeon as exemplified in the Sermon on the Mount, but up until the parousia full implementation of that aeon is impossible—because evil is still far too ingrained in the present world. The Sermon on the Mount is a constant reminder that all that we do in this world, right down to our innermost thoughts and dispositions, is open to the incursion of evil and in need of God's forgiveness.

A Situational Ethics

IN part III of his 'Foundations' Thielicke illustrates the complexity of ethical decision. He highlights what he calls 'borderline situations' in order to demonstrate that Christian action is not always simply a matter of obeying clearcut laws. We have to realise that '... so long as we are here below, we are implicated in innumerable, suprapersonal webs of guilt, that we live in the half-light of the orders of this world, that we are actors in a thousand plays which we individually have not staged, which we might wish would never be enacted, but in which we have to appear and play our parts' (p. 436). War is an apt illustration of this obscurity. Thielicke writes: 'War is obscure in its objective nature. It is not obscure merely because those who are to observe and judge it are clouded in intellect, blinded by passions, and radically deceived so far as their information is concerned. It belongs rather to the very nature of war that there should be an endless changing of opponents, that there should be concealment and deceit, and that there

should be a deep involvement in a historical guilt which recedes further and further into the distance the more we pursue it' (p. 414).

Because of the complexity of such situations evangelical ethics cannot tell Christians what they are obliged to do, simply what they may do. Ethics may show—as Thielicke tries to show—what is ultimately at issue in each particular case, and mark out an appropriate channel. 'Ethics does not solve problems; it intensifies them by showing what is the point of any particular decision' (p. 621). It has the task of clarification. But Thielicke believes that when it comes to the point of taking concrete action decision-taking is simplified by the gift of the Holy Spirit. This gift is usually enjoyed not when we theorise from without but when we are thrust into the midst of crisis.

Thielicke's is a 'situational' ethics. It is an ethics that finds its centre in love for God and one's fellow-men but this in certain circumstances may express itself in unusual forms. Christians living in totalitarian States have not infrequently found themselves in borderline situations. For instance, with regard to helping persecuted friends or saving others from persecution the 'camp of truth' may see need to resort to the 'camp of falsehood's' own false methods. Deceit of an interrogation officer may be a lie in the cause of truth; Thielicke quotes Bonhoeffer: 'What is worse than doing evil is being evil. It is worse for a liar to tell the truth than for a lover of truth to lie' (p. 620). This may seem to open the way to excessive relativity and subjectivism in the realm of ethics, but Thielicke has important safeguards not always found in proponents of 'situational ethics'. He lays down limits to authentic conflict in a borderline situation: under no circumstances can a Christian deny Christ or blaspheme God (such denial involves him in guilt with respect to his persecutor), nor can it ever be right for him to use torture as a means of eliciting information from an enemy (because torture eliminates a man's personhood). In addition, the Christian must not imagine that a wrong means, even when used to secure a right end, is thereby made 'right' or 'justified'. In a borderline situation both alternatives may bear the mark of guilt: the point about the borderline situation is that there *is* no escape from guilt, e.g. either I mislead an opponent or I surrender my cause and friends. It may be the lesser of two evils to mislead one's opponent; but the Christian has to recognise that he still participates in the world's guilt and is in need of forgiveness. As he so often does, Thielicke quotes Luther: 'Sin boldly, but believe even more boldly and rejoice in Christ.'

The 'foundations' of Thielicke's ethics are worked out in greater detail in his succeeding volumes which include sections on politics, economics, law, art and sex. True to his understanding of the world 'between two aeons' he shows an aversion from political and economic extremes. Enthusiastic radicalism is too idealistic in intent—it overleaps the present condition of the world and fails to make allowance for man as he is in his fallen state. Laissez-faire capitalism is guilty

of the opposite extreme, of wallowing in a fallen creation, and prolonging the present state of the world beyond reason. Between these two extremes a wide variety of political approaches may be legitimate, though all should have the common aim of bringing the present world under the critical searchlight of the world to come. In another area, in *The Ethics of Sex* Thielicke emphasises the cruciality of the creative power of *agape* for the outworking of the *eros* relationship. He writes: 'The mystery of sexuality reveals itself only when the mystery of humanity and what it is intended to be is revealed and only when love—in the fullest sense of the word—is perceived to be the very theme of life itself' (p. 51). Only in the responsible context of a marital relationship can this be truly realised. Each volume of ethics contains detailed analysis of borderline situations which pose the most problematical ethical questions, e.g. in the volume on politics, resistance to state authority and war; in the volume on sex, birth control, abortion, artificial insemination and homosexuality.

Thielicke's *Ethics* is a work of enormous erudition and considerable weight of argument. Its length may always prove a deterrent to its popularity but is in part attributable to the fact that Thielicke views ethics as a sphere sadly neglected in the past by Protestant as opposed to Roman Catholic theologians, and in which he therefore has need of laying his theological foundations very carefully. His central emphases, on the primacy of the God-man relationship of justification by faith for the outworking of ethical action, and on the darkness cast on so much ethical action by the conditions of the present world, are certainly points worthy of the place he gives them. There is also no doubt that he achieves his aim of giving Christian faith 'a concrete secular expression' by exploring the different areas of life with comprehensive thoroughness. If any broad questioning of his conclusions is to be made it is whether his balancing of the old and new aeons is quite as it should be; whether the Sermon on the Mount is allowed to interpret the old order as much as Jesus intended that it should; whether, in short, Thielicke does not sometimes give way too much to the 'pressure of reality'. An instance might be taken from *The Ethics of Sex*, where Thielicke interprets Jesus' injunctions against divorce and remarriage in the Sermon on the Mount as a call to repentance rather than as legal ordinances to be followed in an absolute sense. It may be that Jesus expected rather more in the way of literal obedience as well as repentance than Thielicke concedes.

Blend of the Old and New

THIELICKE remains a theologian and preacher from whom much can be learned. He is a 'liberal', in the sense that he accepts the basic premises of biblical criticism (though not some of its proponents' more

sceptical conclusions) and recognises the need to see the Bible in its historical context, with the attendant relativity that may give some of its statements. He is equally certainly 'evangelical' in that he sees in the Bible God's authentic Word, focussing his attention on *the* Word incarnate, Jesus Christ, in whom God makes our existence his and in whom he is crucified and raised for our salvation. The cruciality of Christ for faith is evident not only in his larger volumes but with particular poignance in his sermons. Thielicke's is a modern voice recalling us to past certainties; we do well to listen to him.

Recommended Reading (of works translated into English):

- The Evangelical Faith*, volume I (Eerdmans, 1974)
- Theological Ethics*, volume I—Foundations (Fortress, 1966)
- Theological Ethics*, volume II—Politics (Fortress, 1969)
- The Ethics of Sex* (James Clarke, 1964)
- The Waiting Father* (James Clarke, 1960)
- How the World Began* (James Clarke, 1964)
- Encounter with Spurgeon* (James Clarke, 1964)
- The Prayer that Spans the World* (James Clarke, 1965)
- I Believe* (Fortress, 1968)
- How Modern should Theology Be?* (Fontana, 1970)