CURRENT TRENDS -

Existentialist Theology

As far as I can see, there are two predominant trends in current systematic theology in Europe: the existen­
tialist interpretation of the Scriptures (including mutatis mutandis the pro­
gramme of Entmythologisierung) and
the so-called Heilsgeschichte theology.
The former can be traced back to
the problems presented by historical­
critical exegetics, above all the dis­
cussions on faith and
the "historical Jesus", and the reality and
significance of the
resurrection
of
Christ. The mere
fact that a man named
Jesus of Nazareth once lived and
died and that His disciples believed
in His
resurrection
does not mean
that we are to regard these facts as
salvation events. Revelation can
be seen as a constantly renewed
possibility of finding God
—or 'the
ultimate ground of all being' — and
this means that in such a 'bounding
situation' (Tillich) we are faced by a
personal decision. Jesus as a historic
person, His words and deeds, of
which we have no certain knowledge,
are not decisive questions; it is the
kerygma as apostolic preaching, and
as a message to us in our situation,
that is of importance. The revelation
of God cannot be understood as a
series of His deeds and words through
the ages of patriarchs and prophets
up till the fulfilment in Christ's
coming, and after that, onwards till
His second coming. The existen­
tialist interpretation takes no account
of the horizontal line of history, it is
concerned with the vertical line hic et
nunc. The contours of this pattern of
thought are to be seen both in Karl
Barth's rejection of finalistic escha­
tology (in his earlier studies) and in the
so-called axiologic eschatology of
Paul Althaus. No doubt there are
points of contact between these inter­
pretations and Luther's concentration
on the subjective side of the possession
of grace: pro nobis, pro me. However,
Luther did not consider biblical his­
tory insignificant, not had he any idea
of modern existentialist speculations.

Heilsgeschichte

In contrast to the existentialist and
related theological trends, Heilsges­
chichte theology emphasizes that the
subjective vertical line of faith is
possible only on the basis of the mighty
acts of God in history. These acts,
beginning in ancient times, reached
their culmination in Christ's incar­
nation and His redemptive work
(Christ is die Weltemwende) and they
will reach a new universal climax at
the consummation of the world. The
Christian conception of time is not
a cyclical one without beginning and
end (Greek and Indian philosophy),
it is linear, running towards its
telos. The world with its history is not a
kind of alter ego in comparison with
God, it is not independent, obeying
its own laws. God is at work in all
that happens. He gives history its
meaning; in other words: history
must be viewed in the light of God's
plan and purpose, His σωτηριώς,
Heilsplan. The Heilsgeschichte theology
was already developed by Irenæus
(opposed to Marcion), in certain
respects by Augustine, in later times
by Joachim of Fiore, Cocceius, the
Württembergians J. A. Bengel, F. C.
Oetinger and C. A. Aubereen, and
in the last century it was revived by
J. T. Beck, G. Menken and especially
by J. C. K. von Hofmann. In recent
times it has been represented by
O. Cullmann and W. Künne, in Britain at least by A. G. Hebert, popularized in Germany by E. Sauer and in Switzerland by Suzanne de Diétrich, etc. The school of W. Pannenhe and the 'theology of hope' of J. Molmann seem to be modified efforts in the same direction. According to all these theologians, the resurrection of Christ cannot be eliminated as a myth, nor can faith live without being based on real salvation events. Divine revelation has its locus in history. The present is connected with the past and it points to the future – but all history in itself is only a transition period before the final realization of God’s prothesis. We are saved by hope (Rom. 8:24).

Starting Point
Taking the πρόθεσις τοῦ θεοῦ as the starting point, the holy will of God must be considered as the final factor in world history. Every thematic interpretation of revelation is subject to danger and may easily lead to one-sidedness. The old loci method used by Melanchthon and the Lutheran Fathers and its adaptation to the trinitarian systematization of material (Calvin, Barth, etc.) is, in this respect, more appropriate than an arbitrary concentration on one dominating viewpoint. However, many theologians, beginning with Schleiermacher, have tried to build up a dogmatic system on the basis of one leading idea or conception. The realization of the Kingdom of God is perhaps the theme most used; remarkable among the others are the love of God, grace, the central place of Christ in revelation, union with God, and the work of the Holy Spirit. If anthropology is the starting point, the situation of man (human anxiety, Angst) presents a negative theme. Guilt and forgiveness of sin, death and life, are thematic polarities. Returning to the biblical truth of prothesis: the holy will of God as the theme of a dogmatic system leads to what I have called 1 theotheletical theology (Θεοθελετική θεολογία; cf. the terms monotheletical and theotheletical christology). What is theotheletical theology?

The holy will of God
One of the basic problems facing us as theologians is the meaning of revelation. The second problem, which cannot be separated from the first, is: Why did God give the revelation? We cannot believe that God as the creator mundi plays the part only of a kind of supervisor in history, or that His actions are done lightly or by chance. He has definite purposes in mind. He intervenes in the course of history in order to fulfill His holy will; even more, He not only intervenes but directs history and directs it from the very beginning to the end. We know neither in detail nor exhaustively all the objectives and aims of God’s holy will. We know its direction, however. First of all God’s relation to creation is determined by His love, But His love is a holy love. He wants righteousness and He carries His righteousness into effect. God does not want righteousness because righteousness seems a positive attitude, He wants it because He is Himself righteous. Combined with love, God’s righteousness has a saving and renewing power. H. Cremer said that God’s righteousness is eine rettende und heilbringende Ge-

 Weapons. Only on this ground can the biblical term δικαιοσύνη be properly understood. The entire revelation consists in the proclamation and fulfillment of God’s holy, righteous and saving love; He speaks and He acts. When God made Himself known as the God of the Law, He also made known, in the Law, the practical demands of His righteousness. When He made a covenant with His people, the covenant presupposed that the people obeyed His directions. When He gave the promise of the coming of the Messiah, this Messiah was to begin a new aeon whose people would have new qualifications for a righteous life. When he spoke of the remote future, the ultimate things, he spoke of the triumph of His righteousness. If this guiding principle is not seen, the purposes of God’s plan for the world cannot be understood.

In Christ
Christ is the centre of God’s revelation. In many and various ways God spoke of old to the prophets, but ‘in these last days’ (Hebr. 1:1-2) He has spoken to us by His Son. Even more: God Himself was in Christ (2 Cor. 5:19). The Old Testament cannot be replaced by any notable work of other religions. What God spoke through the fathers and prophets, He spoke as a God who even then was preparing to come ‘near’ in Christ, who thus knew or had decided or included it in His plan – in whatever terms we express it – to accomplish the revelation as one whole. God would not have been content with the preparatory revelation we now have in the OT, not even if this early revelation had been accepted and followed. He did not determine the lines of His future actions at some stage of the OT, which would have indicated His dependence on the course of events and on human attitudes. The coming of Christ was not based on some provisional decision but was the result of an eternal prothesis. The consumption of time 2,000 years ago did not mean that God would have found it timely to send His Son because there existed at that period an expectation of a σωτήρ –saviour and favourable outward conditions, the pax Romana prevailing throughout the orbis terrarum then known, good roads, a common language of culture (Greek), Jewish settlements everywhere, etc. – all of which contributed in a way to facilitate the spreading of the Gospel. No, He provided for these things exactly because He was to send Christ. The entire revelation of the OT presupposed the coming of Christ. Everything that now appears primitive and vague to many, and was later displaced by things of greater perfection, was given because Christ was to come. In this way the OT is linked up with Christ and only to be understood through Him. It is correct to say that Christ is hidden in the OT, which as it were gives birth to Him. The flower comes out when the root and stalk are there. According to the New Testament the world was created in Christ, so from the very outset He has been the prime mover of God’s holy will. The world is being offered salvation in Christ, since He is the only atoner for sin and conqueror of death. The world is to be judged in Christ: the Father has handed over all judgment to the Son.
Thus Christ is the embodiment of the holy will of God. Who has seen Him, has seen the Father. The Christocentric conception is also truly theo-centric.

God does not wish the death of a single sinner. Yet He has allowed man to choose: 'Listen, come, follow me, leave all, believe! He asks: 'Will you be made whole? What will you that I shall do unto you?' A man knows that Christ is of God when he is willing to do His will (John 7:17).

Fulfillment at the end

The unity and christocentricity of the revelation do not, as will be clear from the above, concern only the past but open up much wider perspectives. When, in his day, v. Hofmann in the work *Weis­sagung und Erfüllung* (1841-44) put forward his salvation-historical conception of the revelation, he did not stop at Christ as the fulfilment of the hope of the OT, but stated that Christ at the same time gave a new prophecy, which had to be fulfilled in eschatology. Expressed in new terms, this idea of v. Hofmann's has emerged again in many works dealing with God's world supremacy as a whole. Among the best known is probably Karl Heim's eschatology: God's salvation work is comparable to the building of a bridge over rapids in full spate. For the bridge to arise, a pillar on one side is not enough: such a pillar was already erected through the reconciling work and resurrection of Christ (the latter is the first actually eschatological event). The bridge is not complete until, through the second coming of Christ, a pillar stands also on the opposite shore. Since the first has been accomplished, the second too must be done: God will not fail to complete His work (the full­filment of His will). Thus: as God revealed Himself (N.B. the so-called proto-Gospel, Gen. 12:2-3), this revelation included the promise of Christ's first coming, and by implication also the promise of His second coming. The OT is inevitably followed and fulfilled by the NT, but it is just as inevitable that the latter will be followed by the final victory, also in an external sense, of the will of God. When the lightning has struck, the thunder inevitably follows (Heim). To recapitulate: when God starts the fulfilment of His will, nothing can prevent Him from accomplishing it unto the end, however appalling and destructive (to man) the opposing powers may be. Events as great as these were already in view at the time when God called Abraham out of Chaldean Ur, when He suffered Joseph to be sold as a slave to the Egyptians, when He saved a small Hebrew boy out of the rushes on the Nile, when He carried the psalmists through life's vicissitudes, and taught the people His will through the prophets. Christ is the new Adam, and in Him begins a new generation of men, who, led by the Holy Spirit, obey God's will. In the present age this is fulfilled only to an incomplete extent (we do not yet belong to the triumphant Church, ecclesia triumphans), but one day it will be done perfectly when all is renewed, even creation. Then righteousness will prevail in the new earth and new heavens. An arrow shot from the distant past has as its aim the great finis of this era and the perfection of the new era.

Biblical interpretation

Theotheletical theology does not of course help solve the problems of dogmatics in all details. No theme suffices for that. However, as an example, I should like to touch upon one of the basic problems, the interpretation of the Bible. On a theotheletical basis the doctrine of inspiration is seen in clear outline: inspiration is the influence of the Spirit of God, which has led the Scriptural authors to labour in accordance with the purposes of revelation, that is, in accordance with the will of God. Similarly the remarkable unity of the Bible is revealed: it is not in the first place a question of development in the history of religion, during which man's ideas of God have deepened, but the question of the history of revelation, in which there is a beginning, preparatory phases, and the fulfilment. God has His prothesis and His goals, which are seen in prophetic inspiration. None of the phases can be satisfactorily understood without this total viewpoint.

A graphic example of where we get to if we do not keep this total aspect in view is the discussion about the Servant (Ebed Jahve) of Is. 53. Attempts have been made to find a person or community which the prophet in his time used as a model. The starting point is that historical documents should be explained only on the basis of earlier or contemporary sources. The fact remains, however, that the NT applies the prophet's vision to Christ and speaks of the Lamb of God (Acts 8:32; John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:19; Rev. 5:12, etc.). Isaiah's description is of no major importance if torn out of the context of the revelation as a whole, but added to this whole, it opens up vistas first of all of Christ's passion but also of the Church's road of suffering in Him right up to the ultimate events, which include the message of the Lamb's wedding feast. The length of the span should be noted: according to Revelation, the saved ones sing the 'song of Moses and the Lamb' (Rev. 15:3). Let the reader himself now look, in the light of the above, at the numerous NT passages which speak of the fulfilment of the Scriptures, especially the parts of the earliest Christian sermons included in Acts. This material is surprisingly comprehensive.

Existentialist theology emphasizes the anthropological standpoint and what it says about man's attitude of decision is based on faith in the sense of fides qua. Historiegeschichte theology and theotheletical theology start from a theocentric point of view and link up the fides qua aspect of faith with that of fides qua. The main thing is what God does to fulfill His holy will, what we believe in. May God Himself aid us in the matter of how we believe.

NOTES

1) *Systematische theologien I-II* (Systematic Theology); Helsinki; 1951, 1954.

2) I here refer to several theologians, who in addition to those already mentioned, have dealt with 'christology' of the OT, notably with the significance of some OT characters as typo-images of Christ: the list is long: from Justin Martyr, to Augustine, Pascal and Luther, and later Hengstenberg, Franz Delitzsch, König, Frohock, Vischer, Hebert, Hodgkinson, Pyhian-Adams, etc.