

by Osmo Tiilikä

Dr. Tiilikä is Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of Helsinki, Finland. He is known as a stalwart defender of Biblical Christianity in his country, and has long been actively identified with evangelical student witness in the University, more recently in the Suomen Evankelisluterilainen Ylioppilaslähetys.

## CURRENT TRENDS –

### *Existentialist Theology*

As far as I can see, there are two predominant trends in current systematic theology in Europe: the existentialist interpretation of the Scriptures (including mutatis mutandis the programme 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 discussions on faith and history, 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 existentialist 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 eschatology (in his earlier studies) and in the so-called axiologic eschatology of Paul Althaus. No doubt there are points of contact between these interpretations and Luther's concentration on the subjective side of the possession of grace: *pro nobis, pro me*. However, Luther did not consider biblical history insignificant, not had he any idea of modern existentialist speculations.

### *Heilsgeschichte*

In contrast to the existentialist and related theological trends, *Heilsgeschichte* 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 incarnation and His redemptive work (Christ is *die Weltenwende*) 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 *πρόθεσις*, *Heilsplan*. The *Heilsgeschichte* theology was already developed by Irenaeus (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. Künneth, 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. Pannenberg and the 'theology of hope' of J. Moltmann 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 Melancthon 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<sup>1</sup> *theothetical theology* (*Θέλημα* or *Θέλησις*; cf. the terms monotheletical and duotheletical christology). What is theothetical 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 fulfil 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 beibringende Gerechtigkeit*. Only on this ground can the biblical term *δικαιοσύνη* be properly understood. The entire revelation consists in the proclamation and fulfilment 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 consummation 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 theocentric.

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).

#### *Fulfilment at the end*

The unity and christocentricity of the revelation do not, as will be clear from the above, concern only the past<sup>2</sup> 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 fulfilment 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*

Theoethical 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 theoethical 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*. *Heilsgeschichte* theology and *theoethical* theology start from a theocentric point of view and link up the *fides quae* aspect of faith with that of *fides qua*. The main thing is what *God* does to fulfil His holy will, *what* we believe in. May God Himself aid us in the matter of *how* we believe.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>) *Systemaattinen teologia* I-II (Systematic Theology); Helsinki; 1951, 1954.

<sup>2</sup>) 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 *typos*-images of Christ: the list is long: from Justin Martyr, to Augustine, Pascal and Luther, and later Hengstenberg, Franz Delitzsch, König, Procksch, Vischer, Hebert, Hodgson, Pythian-Adams, etc.