

WORLDLY THEOLOGY: REFLECTIONS ON CARL MICHALSON

Carl Michalson died in a plane crash near Cincinnati, Nov. 8, 1965. A teacher of systematic theology at Drew University since 1943, Michalson apparently was that versatile individual at ease in the classroom, at the conference table, and at discussions in any remote corner of the globe. Despite travel and diversified activities, Michalson had consistently done the reading and research necessary for growth and pertinence in theological dialogue—not an easy task today, when one glances at the endless proliferation of theological literature.

Though Michalson is reasonably well known among Protestants, especially Methodists, he is rarely mentioned or quoted by Catholics. Thus it might be worth while to offer some random comments or observations generated by the twelve posthumously published essays gathered together under the title *Worldly Theology*.¹ A second reason for somewhat lengthy commentary on Michalson's book is the fact that this staunch believer manifests a certain cryptic yet open puzzlement in the face of what we call secularization or worldly theology, a demeanor not uncommon among theologians today.

FIFTY YEARS OF THEOLOGY IN RETROSPECT

As major theological influences during the last half century, Michalson cites the dearth experienced in world culture, the translation of Kierkegaard, and the discovery of the new world within the Bible. Historicism is the key to the unitary impact of these three theological factors.

Michalson's return to Troeltsch and to his definition of "historicism" is one of the very few explanations of the subterranean importance of Troeltsch's influence on all modern theological thinking. (In 1966, Benjamin A. Reist published *Toward a Theology of Involvement: The Thought of Ernst Troeltsch*, the first major work in roughly forty years on the thought of Troeltsch.) Historicism, for Troeltsch, meant that history is the only reality man knows. If there is a poverty experienced in world culture and its ethos, be it expressed by the Hippies or by those who at times are tempted to immerse themselves totally in the world, historicism teaches culture the transitory nature of life and condemns any plans seeking to evade or eliminate such finitude. Yet in known historical reality one moment escapes transiency and the relativity of time—that moment is the presence of God in Jesus. Historicism thus understood is responsible for the rediscovery of the Bible, for historicism asks the Bible if its message can support human life with meaning and significance.

¹ Carl Michalson, *Worldly Theology: The Hermeneutical Focus of an Historical Faith* (New York: Scribner's, 1967).

At Barmen in 1934, the Barthians, for evident reasons, moved away from historicism and its implications. Whereas people such as Gogarten, Heim, and Emil Brunner were affirming the *Deus pro nobis*, that nothing is true in history that does not involve the reality of man, that revelation is history, and ultimately that history is revelation, Barth proclaimed his "no." Subsequently he built his *Dogmatics* on a Trinitarian foundation and the thesis that we know God only in and through Jesus Christ. In a way this was a definite flight from historicism.

Bultmann restored a nuanced balance through his proposal that the past is only truly historical when the past is significant for the present. One might note here that once again Bultmann had anticipated the modern theological movements which insist that revelation is still taking place. Many modern theologians hold this while admitting that the principle of discernment may not be incandescently evident. Bultmann's concept was that the death and resurrection of Christ take place when man assumes a new understanding of himself through dying and rising. Thus *Historie* becomes *Geschichte*. In any case, historicism, modified somewhat by Bultmann, has definitely formed our current theological climate.

While Tillich attempts a historical approach by asking questions of current importance, Michalson claims that Tillich's approach is not historical because he uses categories which antedate the stress on historical consciousness. The process theology introduced by Whitehead and practiced by Reinhold Niebuhr comes much closer to a historical interpretation. The New Quest is likewise genuinely occupied with matters of history, when it extends the search for the historical Jesus to the realm of purposing, willing, desiring, achieving—for it is these activities that constitute man as a historical being. Further, the New Quest assumes as a legitimate historical phenomenon, and thus accessible to historical research, the fact that a man may be known by the reactions he brings about in other men.

So too, from another angle, logical positivism asserts that "only those sentences are meaningful which can be perceptually verified" (pp. 9-10). The empirical stress is evident—so too the emphasis on the element of experience in history. There is a broad interrelation between the stance of logical positivism and demythologizing. Each is a principle of interpretation.

Secularization represents a favorable response to historicism, and one that has generated among some theologians hope in a worldly faith. If we are indebted to Bonhoeffer for the idea of a religionless Christianity, Gogarten has systematized the explanation that the world is given over to the responsibility of man. And it is precisely the point of any secularization theology to show that the world is, after all, only the world. While Kierkegaard regarded secularization as a deleterious influence, Nietzsche, the forerunner of the

death-of-God theologians, saw secularization as an inevitable and necessary good. Michalson's stand on this latter point is both cautious and carefully optimistic.

RELATION TO AMERICAN AND ACADEMIC SCENE

Is the richness of theology during the last fifty years venturing a visit to the American scene, Michalson asks? Tentatively he answers in the affirmative. One of the most notable fruits of theological growth within the American Church is what Michalson calls the Church within the Church. Here his ministerial experience in the United States itself and Japan is evident. These smaller churches, also a phenomenon within Roman Catholicism, seek an understanding of their faith through cult and the liturgy and through a very simple return to the Bible as the book of revelation and salvation. That this in many cases involves a dissatisfaction, if not rejection, with highly institutionalized churches is evident.

Interestingly enough, one observes a similar concern for religion as a meaningful factor in human life on the academic level. Faculties of religion or theology are no longer isolated or confined to seminaries or other strictly religious institutions. It is becoming more and more evident that because religion speaks to the realm of human meaning, it deserves its place on the academic scene. This, according to Michalson, means that theology is being done in freedom. The point of this rather new intrusion is that "questions of faith are more and more accepted in America as *bona fide* questions, even to the extent of being granted a hearing in the humanities curricula" (p. 15). And if once again the theological and religious questions have been returned to the university, there has been a correspondingly insistent theological voice raised in American literature and art. Witness the demands of students to hear Edward Albee or James Baldwin or to dialogue with theologians in a setting of modern art or in confrontation with the plays of Sartre, Ionesco, or Brecht. The point perhaps here is that every individual, at one time or another, asks himself the questions "Who am I?" "Why am I?" "Is there another reality in this world besides myself?"

This reviewer would here pause to interject some personal observations on the phenomena described above by Michalson. The broader question is the nature, portent, and respectability of the religious question, be it posed in the university curriculum or in the world of the arts. In a pluralistic society where true religious freedom is affirmed, and where the catechetical or propagandizing approach should be minimal, questions about the meaning of individual and societal existence will receive a favorable hearing on the college campus. But if theology is merely an unsubtle form of catechism,

then the theologian may expect to be barred from the university. Sociologically, it seems that the establishment of faculties of religion, of departments of religious studies, the search for theologians on the part of secular universities, all are indications of the justifiable modesty of the nonreligious disciplines as they seek to explain man and his universe. For they are admitting, though not necessarily committing themselves to any particular religious persuasion, a possible religious dimension to man and his universe. If there is even the remote possibility of the religious aspect to man and his world, then this area is the concern of the academic community.

But more is involved. Whereas many of the more human disciplines—I refer, for example, to psychiatry, psychology, political science, education, and others—were quite self-assured with their answers to the meaning of man, they are today, like most academic people, more modest. This, of course, means that theology in the college and university must be a reputable and equally modest academic discipline, even though it has committed religious overtones. The catechetical approach or the denominational approach will disappoint and disillusion both the faculty and students.

COMMUNITY OF INTERPRETATION

This brings up the problems of the relationship of the seminary or scholasticate to the university. It is, I think, increasingly evident that seminaries and scholasticates must be part of university life. The evident supposition in most discussions on the subject is how much the seminary would gain from such a move. Perhaps the correlative deserves equal emphasis: the university, particularly the Catholic university, stands to gain by the acquisition of first-rate students and first-rate personnel. If in the Catholic university there is an identity crisis, it might be solved or at least alleviated by the presence of theologians, both students and teachers. In many seminaries conducted by religious orders and congregations (the same practice is, I am told, true, though more haphazardly, in confessions other than the Roman Catholic) it has been the practice to select very capable candidates to teach in the seminary. Normally these were teachers of philosophy and theology. Many local and provincial administrators came from this category, but very few, if any, college administrators emerged from this group. Thus, in many instances, it was possible for the Catholic college to go its way independently of its strongest theological capital, and possibly even its potentially strongest administrative or advisory forces—those many industrious and intelligent people who were shipped off or volunteered to go to seminaries.

But concern for translating the seminary to a particular university must

not blind one to the necessity of a truly university approach to theology, and this on two levels. Theology concerns itself with questions about human existence, both individual and communal. The first level in establishing the community of interpretation is to have theology practiced where it can be constantly in dialogue with all other branches of learning, or what Josiah Royce called "the wisdoms of the world." This has always been the case in German universities and may perhaps account for the consistently fruitful German theologies. Secondly, a community of interpretation simply cannot exist in a strictly confessional atmosphere where one world view is assumed to have a complete and antecedent monopoly on truth. Rather, theology must benefit by consistent dialogue with various denominations and sects and with unbelievers. One learns by dialogue not so much with sameness as with difference. From the students' standpoint, one may pursue the idea further by affirming that the theological options represented by the Orthodox, the Jew, classical forms of Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and even unbelief should be experienced in the classroom.

Michalson notes that to a certain extent many colleges and universities have made rapid progress by inserting theology or religious studies into the community of interpretation called the university. Today theology is open to philosophy. In fact, some universities have treatises on philosophical theology. One indigenous philosophy, the pragmatism of William James, has inspired the religious education movement. And Whitehead's process philosophy has assumed the proportions of a theological position. Perhaps part of the reason why the theological question is accepted in the academic arena is because of the determination of so many theologians "to express the Christian faith without supernaturalism" (p. 18). Or again, theology may be more of a university concern today because there is no older dogmatic system completely sufficient to answer today's question, nor is there a new theology yet formulated—a situation reminiscent of the 1920's, when the recently deceased Friedrich Gogarten used the descriptive term "between the times." Or in Michalson's words: "We live between the time of the theology which no longer makes sense to us and the time of a theology which has not yet clearly dawned" (p. 19).

Living between the times is manifested by varying theological emphases on the American scene. There is the "process theology" of Schubert Ogden and John Cobb. There is the "hermeneutical theology" introduced by James M. Robinson. There is the "secularizing theology" introduced by Gogarten and practiced quite differently by people such as van Buren and Cox. Michalson's point here is to illustrate "how in American theology God has been successively telescoped" (p. 23). As Michalson sees it, the telescop-

ing movement proceeded from God's metaphysical independence to the historical reality of Jesus to the responsible relations of Jesus' followers to their society. The next step is perhaps God's disappearance. Thus the emergence of the death-of-God theology, though not necessarily a dialectical outcome of the telescoping process, which asserts that God has let Himself die. Or, in Hamblin's words, we have the "experience of the absence of God."

An optimistic Michalson sees in the aforementioned theological emphases the situation whereby we are helped "to focus our perspective" (p. 25). M. sees as a task and achievement the emergence of faith as a worldly reality. Hence the title of the book and the ordering of the chapters.

APOLOGETICS

It might even be observed that the effort to create a worldly theology is an effort in apologetics, a term that hardly finds favor in any quarter and that used to be facetiously defined as an exercise in shooting where the enemy was last seen. In any case, Michalson turns to an essay on Karl Heim, who illustrates what he calls "the theological significance of worldly enterprises" (p. 52). For Heim, though he was called a rationalist, sought to establish "a philosophical basis for the Christian view of life" and consistently attempted to articulate the "Christian faith in terms comprehensible to contemporary culture" (p. 54). He approached theology as a phenomenologist, existentialist, and ontologist. His description of theology as a "science of the ultimate" is well known.

What perhaps is less well known is his stress on the Christian revelation as a rational event. According to Heim, the apologetic approach in theology has three functions. First, there is what he terms the offensive phase, whereby apologetics unmask "the idols which the world destructively reveres" (p. 65). The next phase is preaching the positive Christian message. The final obligation, the phase of consolidation, is "to provide a Christian view of life" (p. 65). No one could quarrel with Heim's assertion that apologetics "answers the call of Christ to preach the Gospel to the world" (p. 67). It is known that Heim claimed that Barth "chilled the life of modern man with a 'sublime monotony'" (p. 69). This opposition of the two theologians is based on diverse orientations to the task of theology. Though Michalson sees the same type of opposition between Heim and Bultmann because Bultmann disavows apologetics in favor of a hermeneutic which is the "sum and substance of the theological task" (p. 69), there is little doubt in my own mind that Bultmann disavows the term and espouses the practice.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING AND THE MEANING OF FAITH

Certainly no exegete of the last fifty years has been as concerned as Bultmann with the problem of interpretation. His demythologizing is a principle of interpretation or hermeneutic. One must first of all interpret the Bible and then interpret the reader either potential or actual. Heim's explication of the task of apologetics is not too far removed from the Bultmannian approach.

True it is that Bultmann points out the fact that every interpreter takes his own concerns and interests to the task of interpretation, so that there is no truly objective interpretation. Michalson considers Bultmann's major contribution to hermeneutics to be his emphasis on preunderstanding. Here the influence of Dilthey and Herrmann is evident.

One might pause here to note the unity of effort shared by Bultmann and the earlier-mentioned theological emphases in the United States. Whether it be a death-of-God theologian or a worldly theologian such as Gogarten or, to some extent, Michalson himself, all these exegetes or theologians are still concerned with the credibility of Christianity. In any terms this has always been considered an apologetic concern. The surprising thing is that with so much effort expended to make Christianity credible, there is the growing sensation, perhaps unsubstantiated by critical scientific studies, that Christianity in its past organized form is becoming more and more incredible. And this among younger people, both those involved in theological studies and those who see theology, however well exercised, as remnant of a moribund past. Here one can hardly confine his thought to the merely speculative order. I have in mind a certain disenchantment of both Catholics and Protestants, and in many instances Jews, with the only religion they ever really knew—some form of an organized religion. Among Catholics one notes on Catholic university campuses a rejection of what was once called authority, be it the control exercised by clerics in making theology and philosophy obligatory subjects or the more indirect control exercised by a hierarchical Church. This antipathy is augmented when both priests and nuns, dissatisfied with either their work, their state of life, themselves, or the Church, leave to seek fulfilment elsewhere. The residuum of their discontent cannot but affect the ordinary believer. And the actions of believers may confirm the attitudes of the unbeliever. For what is essentially at issue here is the gradual dissolution of the sacred cosmos. The precise point of a sacred cosmos is to give ultimate meaning to human existence. When the meaning begins to evanesce, one is faced with the possibility of meaninglessness or chaos, the one factor calculated to destroy man more effectively than mechanical weaponry.

The serious theological question becomes "What is the phenomenon of our times which encourages a disaffiliation from or disenchantment with the Church?" No one, in my opinion, has effectively or convincingly answered this question. Perhaps the clearest statement of the sociological phenomenon involved is found in Peter Berger's most recent book *The Sacred Canopy*.

One may quarrel about the extent of disaffiliation or one may invoke a remnant theology as explanation. But the disturbing reality remains. And this brings me to the major thesis of Michalson, the possibility of a worldly theology. Assessed frankly, however, the reader of Michalson has the feeling that nowhere does he articulate a truly worldly theology, a theology which will in some sense replace the sacred cosmos which at one time provided credible and meaningful structure for human existence. Nor has any other theologian, apart possibly from Gogarten, delineated a convincing worldly theology. And the fact that such a theology has not been formulated leaves one with the uncomfortable feeling that a worldly theology is impossible at our present stage of theological development. In any case, one must continue to ask what theology is and what that approach is which deals with the credibility of religion. For it is reasonably clear that any attempt to formulate a worldly theology is essentially an effort to make religion acceptable to modern man.

NATURE OF THEOLOGY

Heinrich Ott remains somewhat within the classical Protestant tradition in explaining the nature of theology. Systematic theology is not scientific but is more comparable to prayer. According to Ott, systematic theology supplies the exegete with the proper questions and is therefore a handmaiden to exegesis. For Ott, systematic theology is the understanding the exegete brings to the text.

Michalson asks three questions about Ott's attempt to develop theological hermeneutics as an ontological enterprise. Is the analysis of being properly a preunderstanding which provides the meaning of the text or is it a hindrance? Secondly, will doctrinal questions be continually subject to revision by the text? Thirdly, is it theologically justifiable to separate the Christ-event from the message about the Christ-event?

I personally do not find Ott's description of systematic theology in relation to exegesis satisfactory. I am prescinding here from the extremely complex issue of the relation of systematic theology to biblical theology. And I would suspect that Bultmann's description of exegesis of a text as dogmatics, preaching, and apologetics goes beyond the more traditional

descriptions of exegesis and assumes under exegesis some of the tasks traditionally reserved to systematic theology. Yet his description of exegesis is congenial to me if for no other reason than experience of the poverty of a so-called systematic theology which is remote from the inspired word.

Yet if we are to talk in terms of a worldly theology or, as a matter of fact, any type of theology, then we must say something about the nature of theology and especially its relation to apologetics. Let us begin by a primitive and necessarily arbitrary description of theology. Theology is the activity of the man of faith, either actual or potential, seeking an understanding of the word of God transmitted in the world. Some years back it was asked whether a nonbeliever could pursue the study of theology. The ordinary answer was that the nonbeliever could study theology but not in a perfect fashion. Today it would seem more adequate to say that since every man is saved by faith, every man has a direct relation to the virtue of faith. Either he actually possesses faith or he is potentially related to the state of belief. Or, if one prefers, the question about God is at the heart of all human existence. And where a man asks the question basic to human existence, he is beginning the theological enterprise on the level of lived spiritual reality, though not necessarily on the level of theoretical speculation.

It is quite clear that the Bible, both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, are theological works heavily layered with the apologetic attempt at religious persuasion. Exegetes today are in agreement on this point. Thus the apologetic attempts of the inspired writers should in some way be normative for theologians of a later date. Assuredly we may understand theology as an intellectual habit—the attempt to understand the word of God as this word is transmitted in the Church and the world. Apologetics is a particular use of the habit of theology to render the demand for faith persuasive to the concrete existential man in the historical now.

The Christian demand for faith specifies a personal dimension, a relation of one personal being to another personal being. It is not the theologian or any other finite being who makes the Christian demand for faith, but rather God Himself calling His creature. But as we know from the New Testament, salvation somehow is achieved by a form of incorporation in the Church. Thus the individual theologian in the social community must articulate the dimensions of the demand for faith as well as its relation to incorporation within the Church. Hence the theologian orchestrates a dominantly objective demand to a particular subject. The objective dimension and pole is God Himself and His saving activities, the process of salvation expressed in human language and deeds. This objective pole is primarily the term of

speculative theology. The subjective dimension and pole is the intelligent, willing man subject to the influence of the light of grace. This subjective pole is primarily a religiously orientated being, someone who is called, who is determined from outside himself. Apologetics will be determined by this contextual bipolarity. Hence any attempt to formulate a worldly theology in terms of Michalson's thesis will do well to operate in this contextual bipolarity.

Here it may be useful to distinguish the habit of theology from the particular use of the habit which we have called apologetics. The habit of theology exists primarily in the speculative intellect as a good of the intellect. Apologetics exists primarily in the practical intellect and is directed to a good of the will. The habit of theology seeks intelligibility by asking the question "What is the thing in itself?" e.g., the mercy of God in itself. Apologetics seeks credibility, "What is this thing in relation to me?" e.g., God merciful to me. Whereas the habit of theology is primarily objective, apologetics is primarily subjective. Therefore the habit of theology is an ascending movement to system, theory, notions, the atemporal, abstract, transcendent. The habit of theology exists in the world of theory. Apologetics, on the other hand, is the descending movement to the singular, the thing, the real, the temporal, the concrete, the individual. This use of the habit of theology is in the world of intersubjectivity. The habit of theology seeks a notional assent in the speculative order and is religious by context. Apologetics seeks a real assent in the world of decision and is religious in itself. While speculative theology seeks an understanding of the divine-human encounter, apologetics seeks to facilitate the divine-human encounter. Therefore it may be said that apologetics is theology. And we do not find diverse formal objects for theology and this particular use of the habit of theology. If there is diversity, it is in the realm of consciousness.

The apologetic use of the habit of theology is directed to the existential man in the historical now. Since the demand for faith is directed to all men of all historical periods, apologetics seeks to relate the demand to the here-and-now concrete individual in his present human situation, in his own cultural climate, ethos, and orientation. Man himself is historical because he may think, choose, and so determine his own existence. He lives in a historical moment which relates his historicity to a particular time and place. In addition to being a historical individual from the standpoint of his own decisions and choices, he is historical in the sense of being the product of his times. To a certain extent each man is formed by historical circumstances beyond his control, by a world that he inherited rather than

created. Nonetheless, he remains an individual with limitations, gifts, desires. So he creates the world and is created by the world. He has his being in the historical now which is the climate of the time, which must inevitably modify both the man and the apologete. Thus apologetics becomes a sort of dialogue conditioned by the apologete, by the man to whom he is speaking, and by the history in which both find themselves.

These are some limited observations occasioned by Michalson's book. They are meant to serve as a tribute to a dedicated theologian and preacher of the word who was always involved in the mainstream of religious and human thought.

University of Notre Dame

P. JOSEPH CAHILL, S.J.