Theologians in Conflict*

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It has always been a gratifying task of young theologians to overthrow idols among the theologians of the preceding generation and throw them down from their pedestals. Professor Wingren in his book, *Theology in Conflict*, is delightfully swinging his iconoclastic mace against three such giants, viz. Nygren, Barth and Bultmann.

His book does not offer an examination of the total systems of these theologians. This is, of course, not possible in a book of 170 pages. Nor is it necessary for the overthrow of their theologies. He confines himself to an analysis of some fundamental presuppositions underlying their systems. He has chosen what he calls the anthropological and hermeneutical presuppositions on which each of them has built his theology.

In the case of Barth, Wingren has found that the fundamental anthropological assumption is that of the absolute difference in kind between God and man. Barth describes the relationship between them as the antithesis between the superior and the inferior. Man has no knowledge of God; and this is the plight of man: his ignorance of God, unless God reveals Himself. The decisive theological category, therefore, is that of Revelation, which takes place in the Incarnation. It is characteristic of Barth's theology that there is no devil and no kingdom of evil. This is so, says Wingren, because these were absent in the 'liberal' theology. Barth has just turned that theology upside down. The 'liberal' theology put man in the centre; Barth has made it his task to put God in the centre. Because God is unknowable apart from His self-revelation, and because this revelation is given only in Christ, Barth so vehemently denies the existence of man's natural capacity of knowing anything about God. But because man's plight primarily is his ignorance of God, Salvation, primarily, becomes impartation of knowledge. Salvation from sin and guilt comes only in the second place.

This 'anthropological' presupposition, naturally, will have a decisive bearing on Barth's hermeneutical principle, his interpretation of Scripture. Within this framework it is impossible to do justice to the New Testament, where the Cross as the triumph

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over evil and salvation from evil, sin and guilt takes the first place.

With regard to Bultmann, Wingren points out that the underlying anthropological presupposition is that of the existentialist conception of man. This philosophy knows nothing of sin and guilt, nor of God and eternity, and Bultmann, therefore, in his interpretation of Scripture, simply has to make an unwarranted 'leap' into the Kerygma. Nevertheless, his existentialist framework prevents him from taking the Kerygma in its depth and totality. He has to treat it as 'mythology', and he is engaged in 'demythologizing' the Gospel, i.e. interpreting it in concrete notions in such a way that they appear as bearers of an understanding of existence. He is able to employ most of the New Testament vocabulary: fall, sin, guilt, salvation, death, resurrection, 'old man', 'new man', eternal life—but all these words mean something different from what they connote in the Bible. Man has 'fallen', yet not from God, but from his own true self; in an existential decision he has to 'die' from his past, the 'old man', and be 'resurrected' to his own true self, the 'new man'; his 'sin' or 'guilt' is his lack of self-realization; and salvation, correspondingly, is just self-realization. And all this takes place within the short span of time from man's birth to his death. The question whether there will be a resurrection in the future is eliminated. It is not only impossible to find acceptable answers to such a question, but the question itself destroys faith. For faith is concerned only with the present 'now'. The decision now is 'realized eschatology'. The question whether something has actually happened in the past in Christ can also be completely eliminated. It is not only impossible to find acceptable answers to such a question, but to ask this question is to flee from the choice which the Gospel places me in now. The personal name Jesus Christ is retained, but as it cannot be existentially interpreted it is to be regarded as a remnant of mythology which has to be tolerated. But, concludes Wingren, the Gospel is by its very nature a message about events that have taken place, and to remove this aspect of it is to remove the Gospel itself.

With Nygren I shall deal a little more in detail in this review-article, because the ideas which Wingren has analysed, and the books he refers to, are not very well known to English readers as they are accessible only in Swedish.

Nygren's perhaps most important contribution to theological research moves in the border-land between philosophy and theology. In one of his earliest works, *Religious a-priori* (1921), he undertook a deduction of the religious category in the Kantian sense of the term. Human experience and cultural life as we know it can be summed up within the comprise of four different categories, viz. those of the theoretical, aesthetical, ethical and religious aspects of consciousness. Kant, as is well known, by his so-called transcendental method of reasoning, deduced the fundamental categories of three of these kinds of experience,

namely the theoretical, the aesthetical, and the ethical. He demonstrated the 'validity' of these kinds of experience. Popularizing the statement it is also possible to say that in these three different kinds of experience we are in touch with different aspects of Reality.

On account of his moralistic conception of religion he was not able, by his transcendental method, to deduce the fundamental category of religion. Instead he tried to prove the legitimacy of religious experience by way of 'postulate' from ethics. The ethical experience 'postulates', demands, the reality of that which is experienced in religion, viz. God, the soul, and immortality (the moral proof of God's existence). But this is a somewhat doubtful demonstration, and whereas the validity of the theoretical, aesthetical and ethical kinds of experience has never been seriously questioned, the validity of the religious kind of experience has been denied in wide realms of modern thinking. In other words, it has been denied, or at least questioned, that we in the religious experience are in touch with Reality; the religious experience may be pure imagination and delusion.

Already Schleiermacher attempted, though not quite successfully, to deduce the religious category. Nygren, it seems more convincingly, has renewed the attempt. He reasons as follows: If it can be proved that a certain kind of experience, which cannot be subsumed under any other kind of experience, is necessary for the validity of the other kinds of experience, then this (first mentioned) kind of experience must be accepted as valid. Now, the theoretical, aesthetical and ethical experiences are each one *sui generis*, i.e. an experience of one of these kinds cannot be had in the same way in any of the other kinds. But if an experience shall be regarded as valid, or, popularly speaking, as a contact with Reality, there must be something of *eternity* in it. Truth is not real truth if there is nothing of eternity in it. Similarly beauty is not real beauty if the character of eternity is absent. In the same way, nothing is really good if it is not eternally good. But the experience of eternity is a religious experience. It is nowhere experienced in the same way as in religion. The religious experience, therefore, is *sui generis*, and its category is the category of eternity. It is found to be necessary for the validity of the other kinds of experience. The religious experience is thereby proved to be a kind of experience of first-grade validity.

All this is a scientific, philosophical, argument. It is the business of philosophy of religion to establish the fundamental religious category. Strictly speaking, this is the only thing the philosophy of religion can do. Just as philosophy can only establish the category of beauty as the category of aesthetics but cannot establish scientifically what is beautiful, because that is a matter of taste, or as philosophical ethics can establish the category of the good but cannot demonstrate scientifically what is good, because that is a matter of valuation, so also the philosophy of religion can only formulate the question of eternity, but that is a

formal and empty question to which the historical religions must give the concrete answer. Philosophy cannot decide which of the different historical religions gives the right answer, or the best answer. The choice of religion, ultimately, is not a merely theoretical matter, but a decision in which the whole personality is involved.

The task of Christian theology, therefore, will be that of *describing* the Christian answer to the religious question. And this can be done in a quite objective, scholarly and scientific way. It will give a contribution to scientific historical knowledge. For this purpose it will be necessary, first, to search for the fundamental motif of the Christian faith. Here Nygren's 'motif-research' comes in. In his books *Philosophic and Christian Ethics* and *The Scientific Foundation of the Method of Christian Theology* (neither of them translated into English) he has established *agape* as the fundamental Christian motif, which gives the Christian answer both to the religious and the ethical questions. In his famous *Agape and Eros* he has offered an historical analysis of the way of the Agape-motif in the Church through the ages up to the Reformation inclusively.

Wingren has not attempted any criticism of Nygren's philosophical deduction of the religious category. Others have tried to do that but with small success. It seems that Nygren has convincingly vindicated the validity of the religious experience. In a time when this form of experience is widely questioned this is an important achievement.

But Wingren criticizes Nygren's theological method for violating the interpretation of Scripture. By making a philosophically deducted category the foundation of theology he has forced Scripture, says Wingren, to answer questions which are foreign to it. Agape does not answer the question of eternity but the question of *guilt*.

So far as I am able to see, Wingren in this point is a victim of a misunderstanding. It is true that philosophy does not ask the question of guilt. Can it be asked apart from Scripture? Is it not so, that only through Revelation I became aware of my sin and guilt? Scripture reveals both the question of sin and guilt and its answer: *agape*, self-giving and forgiving love.

Thereby it has also given the answer to the religious question as formulated by philosophy: What is my relation to eternity? It is difficult to see how thereby any foreign viewpoint has been forced upon Scripture.

But Wingren maintains that just that aspect of Scripture which reveals sin and guilt, viz. law, has been ruled out by Nygren's interpretation of agape. Nygren contrasts *agape* to two other kinds of historical religion, viz. *eros* and *nomos*. By the first is meant a religion in which man is seeking after God, and trying, by his own resources, to discover Him and climb up to Him by means of meditation, prayer and other devotional practices, as in Platonism and many other kinds of mysticism. The other one is a religion in which man by works of the law (*nomos*

seeks moral perfection in order to merit his salvation, as in Judaism, Pelagianism and other forms of legalistic religion.

Wingren's contention is that Nygren, through his motif-research, in opposing *agape* to *nomos*, necessarily gives an inaccurate interpretation of Scripture by ruling out law, through which knowledge of sin and guilt came. Here Wingren seems to have committed the almost unbelievable blunder of equating Nygren's *nomos* with law. As we have already pointed out, *nomos*, in Nygren's theology, stands for *a certain type of religion*, viz. that of self-righteousness through works of the law, not for law itself, within or outside Scripture. On the contrary, Nygren repeatedly maintains that *agape* is operative and its message becomes meaningful only against the background of law. With St. Paul he would be able to say: 'Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law' (Rom. 3:31). Wingren's contention that Nygren, by his theological method, is forced to an inaccurate interpretation of Scripture cannot be maintained.

Wingren, further, criticizes Nygren for having 'stopped in history', for having limited the task of theology to a study of the historical forms of the Christian faith. Two demands are implied in this criticism. First, theology ought to study, not only how *agape* has worked itself out in past generations, but how it is to be worked out in our own time in relation to the problems confronting it now. Secondly, theology ought not to fight shy of the question of the *truth* of the Christian faith, that means practically, that theology ought to undertake to prove that the Christian faith alone is true religion. In order to meet these requirements, as well as to rectify the inadequacy of Nygren's interpretation of Scripture, Wingren demands the demolition of the philosophical foundation and the whole framework of Nygren's theology. He contends that the proper subject of theology is not the fundamental Christian motif, but Christian preaching, in its relation to the central Christian truth and its application to present-day problems.

Whether *Christian preaching* is a more appropriate subject of theology than the fundamental Christian motif seems doubtful. Also in that case the study of this motif cannot be omitted. With regard to the first demand mentioned above, it may be discussed whether this task belongs to theology proper or, like preaching, can be better dealt with in the disciplines of practical theology. Anyhow, there is nothing in Nygren's method that prevents theology from undertaking it.

With regard to the demand that theology should undertake research as to the truth of the Christian faith, it would of course be desirable if it could be done. But is it possible scientifically to establish the superiority of the Christian faith? If it is not possible, it is certainly not the fault of Nygren's theological method. The fact is that it would demand a scientific standard measure of religious truth, but, so far, it has not been possible to discover any such standard. Nor is it likely to happen, because

it would imply that man had succeeded in circumscribing the divine reality within the borders of human reason—which is impossible. Nygren's method has taken account of this fact. His theology has its weaknesses, but they are not to be found where Wingren is looking for them. It may, for instance, be asked why Nygren has excluded not only the 'Eros-religion' from Christian theology—which is of course quite correct to do—but also 'Eros' in the sense of man's longing and seeking after God. A synthesis need not at all be synergistic. Is not man's seeking after God only the reflex in man of God's seeking him? Nygren has always shown a tendency to be too logical, too straight. He forgets that we are living in a spherical universe, and he easily is running off along a tangent.

There are many fine observations in Wingren's work, particularly with regard to Barth's and Bultmann's theologies, and a study of his book is rewarding. But to his own old teacher he has done less than justice.

Books and Publications Received

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