

Introduction

“KANT’S PHILOSOPHY CAN BE understood apart from the life of its author, but in the case of Schleiermacher, a look into his biography is an essential aid to interpretation.”¹ Such is the verdict of Wilhelm Dilthey on the work of the father of modern theology. To show that this intriguing dictum regarding the life of Friedrich Schleiermacher holds equally true in the case of Helmut Thielicke is the *broad* aim of this book. Its *specific* goal is to demonstrate that Thielicke’s theological thought is permeated by a particular biographical period which, in turn, was saturated with multiple encounters with definite phenomena that no human being can evade: death and suffering. I will argue that Thielicke’s existential default mode, which culminated—to borrow a phrase from Kierkegaard—in his “sickness-unto-death,” lasting from 1929 until 1933, should be regarded as constituting if not the very *heart* of his theology, then at least a life-giving organ within the overall Thielickean organism of thought, without which his theological program would not have become what it is.

The fact *that* these encounters are reflected in the theology and proclamation of Thielicke indubitably becomes clear through his own explicit confessions, and even simply by throwing a cursory look at his manifold literary output. To explicate *how* these existential encounters with man’s finitude are theologically processed, not just in his obvious publications dedicated to this theme, but rather implicitly, indirectly, and possibly subconsciously, *this* is the exciting question arising out of the “that.” It is also the concrete task I aim to fulfill in what follows.

To state the obvious—and quite contrary to the Cartesian mind-set—such an undertaking cannot claim to reach a level of “objective certainty,” which is a *contradictio in adiecto*, anyway. As philosopher and theologian

1. Wilhelm Dilthey, as rendered by Thielicke in *MF&T*, 166–67. See also *MF&T*, 273.

William Lane Craig points out, science *per se* does not deal with “certainty,” the latter being a psychological property neither necessary nor sufficient for knowledge.² Instead, the question is whether the premise at hand is more probable than not, given the evidence available.³ I am thus concerned with warranted belief, i.e., with a justified degree of *probability*.

Correspondingly, in terms of methodology, I subscribe to presumptive or circumstantial evidence—what the Germans call *Indizienbeweis*. I therefore try to ascertain a high degree of probability regarding my central thesis: that major areas of Thielicke’s theological thinking were decisively and often subtly impacted by definite “real life” encounters with the phenomena of death and suffering. In other words, I simply apply the exegetical principle that a text is interpreted best in its context to Thielicke’s theology. I claim that it is best interpreted when seen against the background of his *Sitz im Leben*, i.e., his existential context. More precisely: in light of his “*eschatological* existence,” which will be established in part I. In parts II and III, moreover, my aim will be to make the existential foundations of major theological convictions of Thielicke explicit, while at the same time providing a systematic overview of his theology.

It is worthy of note that this study would not have been possible on just any randomly chosen theologian. This is true not merely because many other theologians have not encountered suffering and death to a “sufficient” extent that could enable them to come to a similar theological focus. Rather, the project at hand became feasible because Helmut Thielicke possessed one specific character trait not shared by many in his field: his passion for autobiographical anecdote and narrative. Whereas outstanding thinkers such as John Calvin⁴ or Karl Rahner⁵ tended to keep personal things private, Thielicke, in contrast, was quite outspoken about

2. See Craig, “Defenders—Doctrine of God, Part 3: Excursus on Natural Theology” (31:05–34:11), and “Part 11: Scientific Confirmation of the Beginning of the Universe” (3:54–6:18). See also Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 29–30, 80–81. Thiede emphasizes that even in the natural sciences, “certainty” is a myth (see Thiede, *Gekreuzigte[r] Sinn*, 98n20, 102n44).

3. This is one of the claims of Joseph Butler (1692–1752) in *Analogy of Religion*: that probability is the essential guide in life. See also John Henry Newman, who was greatly influenced by Butler in this regard: “Absolute certitude . . . was the result of an *assemblage* of concurring and converging probabilities” (Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, 20).

4. See McGrath, *Calvin*, 34, 98. Interestingly, McGrath only uses one brief autobiographical segment from Calvin’s foreword to the *Commentary on the Psalms* to draw inferences from his theology (McGrath, *Calvin*, 98–101). How much more should it then be possible to do the same in the case of Thielicke, who provides plentiful material in this regard?

5. See Rahner, *Erinnerungen*, 10, 11, 24, 31–32.

both his inward and outward life. This particular characteristic proved to be indispensable for this study, which seeks to investigate how his life experiences impacted his thinking *in concreto*.

I try to achieve this goal by way of ten chapters, subsumed under three major parts devoted to his life (part I), theology (part II), and proclamation (part III)—the first serving as starting point and basis for the latter two. Whereas part I offers an original and fresh account of Thielicke’s life through the lens of his own afflictions and “near-death experiences,”⁶ a theological analysis of select aspects of his overall program—in light of the said biographical account—will be attempted in the second and third parts. Those two parts, focusing on Thielicke’s theology and proclamation, respectively, were structured on the basis of his early work report, *Auf Kanzel und Katheder* [*At Pulpit and Lectern*], where he differentiates between both tasks in spite of their intrinsic inseparability, more on which is to come later (see especially chapter 8). As will be seen, Thielicke’s verdict on Friedrich Schleiermacher, that “the pulpit and the rostrum are the two crucial points in the ellipse of his spirit,”⁷ applies directly to himself, too.

In the introduction to his anthropology, *Mensch*, it is telling that Thielicke asks the rhetorical question of how one could write about man without revealing those traces that “the trap of one’s own existence” left behind.⁸ Indeed, this is the purpose of the second and third parts: to explicate those aspects of Thielicke’s massive theological output that disclose the impact of a Wayfarer’s life in the face of death, as unfolded in part I. By initially placing his historic-confessional *context* and soteriological starting point under scrutiny, his pneumatological *focus* then leads to the trinitarian and christological *center* of orthodox Christianity, finally moving to the homiletical and pastoral *dimension* of man *sub specie aeternitatis*. In this structural manner, the nucleus of my argument—namely, that Thielicke’s “theological work was always only a superstructure placed upon the experiences and sufferings of [his] life”⁹—is to be unfolded with regard to his very specific experiences of death and suffering.

6. By “near-death experience,” I do not have the conventional use in mind; that is, chiefly, an out-of-body experience after a person’s heart has stopped beating and brainstem activity has gone silent. To call such events NDEs, in fact, is a misnomer since we are really talking about death experiences. In contrast, and in the true sense of the term, I simply mean the experience of life-threatening events; of events bringing one *near* death.

7. *MF&T*, 178.

8. *Mensch*, 20.

9. *Wayfarer*, 85 [115].

I commence part II with an analysis of Thielicke's conversion and thought within his denominational *context* in chapter 4. The twofold aim of showing both his basically Lutheran frame of thinking as well as its principal conformity with his own early experiences of life shall thereby be pursued.

I then move on to Thielicke's theological starting point of saving trust (*fiducia*) in Jesus Christ, highlighting not only its deeply existential embeddedness but also that, without it, much of his later system would not have been realized in the way that it was. Afterwards, attention naturally shifts to that "uncontrollable power"¹⁰ without which personal faith could not come into being: by concentrating on Thielicke's pneumatological *focus*, both the Spirit's indispensable role for Thielicke's thought as well as the experiential saturation of his cognitive process are to be acknowledged. Since a person's saving faith and the work of the Holy Spirit go hand in hand, however, both will be treated together in chapter 5. In the sixth chapter, I will take up the task of examining Thielicke's understanding and defense of divine *personhood* in light of his "eschatological existence" and pursue the issue of supralapsarianism, which arises out of the former. In chapter 7, the thematic development segues into Thielicke's *personalistic* answer to the problem of evil.

Part III concentrates on his homiletical and pastoral handling of the problem of theodicy. Whereas chapter 8 highlights Thielicke the preacher, *sub specie existentiae*, chapters 9 and 10 shed analytical light on four main pastoral loci under the aspects of evil, *sub specie malis*, and eternity, *sub specie aeternitatis*, respectively. Despite Thielicke's statement that the relation between life and thought was later to reveal itself more immediately and openly in his sermons rather than in his systematic thought,¹¹ interest is nonetheless directed slightly more towards the latter.

There are three reasons for this structural move, the first two of which really represent two sides of the same coin. First, the bulk of postgraduate research has focused on Thielicke's prominence as a preacher, a datum to be returned to in chapter 8. Out of the major number of contributions dedicated to Thielicke's preaching, the doctoral dissertation of Michael Calvert (in 2014) has given specific attention to Thielicke's sermonic handling of the problem of evil and suffering.¹²

The flipside of this heightened interest in Thielicke the preacher—and, *ipso facto*, the second reason for the chosen structure—is a corresponding scarcity of research on Thielicke the systematic theologian. Yet, by

10. *EvF III*, xxvii.

11. See *Wayfarer*, 85 [115].

12. See Calvert, "Preaching and the problem of evil."

approaching the recognized focal point in Thielicke's pastoral care and sermons via its existential embedment, I hope to make an original contribution in this area whilst avoiding a too-extensive treatment of the same at the cost of Thielicke's worthwhile but undervalued systematic theology.

The final reason is, at least in part, personal: in relation to the proposed thesis, I found it to be a more exciting and innovative challenge to focus on Thielicke's theology as a whole, rather than concentrating on one particular area. It is more challenging to try to discover the hidden dimension than that which, in the words of Thielicke, is "immediate" and "open." That the impact of his "eschatological existence" makes itself felt in a more subtle but nevertheless equal way in his systematic thinking is to be demonstrated in part II.

In terms of the primary sources, this research mainly relies on material published in German, Thielicke's mother tongue. An exception was made for his three volumes of systematic theology, *The Evangelical Faith*, his survey and evaluation of significant developments in modern theology, *Modern Faith & Thought*, and an essay collection titled: *Freedom*. Whereas *EvF* and *MF&T* found their way into the English language in an almost unabridged way by means of experienced translator and theologian, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, the latter collection, *Freedom*, was specifically put together for an English audience and, in this form, is not available in German. In the case of Thielicke's autobiography, *Wayfarer*, both the German original and the English translation were used. Hence, whilst it is the usual procedure to cite from *Wayfarer* with the German equivalent added in square brackets [*Zu Gast*], it occasionally happens that this process is reversed whenever I was dissatisfied with the rendering. All other translations are my own unless otherwise noted. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, Thielicke's own practice of referring to humanity as a whole in masculine terms (e.g., man, his, him) is applied throughout this book as well.

Finally, three motives lie behind my specific choice of "conversation partners" as engaged in each chapter. Not only are theologians and philosophers included (1) who noticeably influenced Thielicke's thought, thereby contributing to his intellectual development, and (2) who (obviously) add to the discussion at hand in a substantial way. But, I have also chosen personalities in and outside the field of theology (3) who tragically, and in varying degrees, experienced personal suffering themselves and whose accounts could therefore serve as a basis of comparison for Thielicke's own attempts at making sense of things.