

## Foreword

It is an honour to be able to say a few words of introduction to this collection of papers from John Heywood Thomas, on behalf of those who have already known him as minister, teacher, and friend, and of those who are reading his work for the first time. Readers will find here a learned mind at work on a set of questions that arise in our reflections upon birth, death, and the future of the world, as well as a pastoral heart seeking to discern in the midst of these perplexities how human beings may be guided to their proper home in God. Such questions seem to have a particular urgency in our time, which makes this collection as a whole so fitting. Not only have there been unprecedented advances in technologies across a range of fields giving rise to possibilities for the manipulation and prolongation of life far beyond anything previously imagined. But these have been accompanied by a proper anxiety concerning human responsibility and freedom of choice that haunts moral debates and heightens the tensions between differing and often opposing points of view. Moral decisions in such matters as abortion, assisted suicide, stem cell therapy, and anthropogenic climate change, to name only a few, seem now to have become hardened into ethical stances, even ideologies, that are not conducive to genuine enquiry or thoughtful responsiveness to complex dilemmas. In consequence, society is diminished. An effort to speak calmly and intelligently about these and similar issues is all the more to be welcomed for its encouragement of individual reflection and political discussion alike.

The guiding conviction of this collection is that the work of theologians has a uniquely significant role to play in developing moral awareness and in shaping informed public debate on these issues. This is a conviction that cannot be taken for granted in the current situation, and we owe a debt of gratitude to Heywood Thomas for presenting a

most persuasive and thought-provoking case for it. He does this, not so much by staking out a claim for territory or for some high ground above the fray. Rather his writing is an example of how moral thinking is carried out in the light of faith. It is an example worth following closely. His papers illustrate how reflection upon issues of life and death is essentially a search for human self-understanding—one that is difficult, because we ourselves are at stake in what we are trying to understand, and necessary, because in this undertaking that which most belongs to human being is exercised and so made real. For we become more fully who we are in the very act of thinking about who we are, just as we are directed towards the meaning of our lives in deliberating on this question itself and letting ourselves be led by what is learned there. Philosophy and theology are partners in these exercises of thoughtfulness. Their joint efforts disclose how human being is itself at risk in these pressing and stubborn questions of life and death. And they show how a deepening moral awareness brings the human being to its own fulfilment at the very limits of experience where we are stood before the divine.

The collaboration of these disciplines of thinking is but the beginning, however, of an open and generous invitation, extended at various points in these papers, to all scholarly disciplines to bring to a common table the findings of their research and to ponder together their implications. This kind of dialogue, this thinking through together with others, is a way of reciprocal enrichment and of active engagement in what forms society as a whole. While such conversations have in the past been entrusted to the academy (though this also may no longer be glibly assumed), the extent of their ramifications is far-reaching, touching immediately on the next generation of those who will in their turn play a leading role in their own societies, and spreading out more widely into the prevailing ethos by which social and political affairs are continually being shaped. Here too, Heywood Thomas conveys how theology that is grasped by God's self-revelation may hold open a way for humanity to be led into its most complete realization and final end in God's own life. Being essentially a pointer to this end and a guide to those who would find it, theology takes on a two-fold responsibility in public debate. It searches for the deep underlying assumptions that have brought about our contemporary understanding of human being and the world in which we are placed, bringing these into the penetrating but gracious light of God's word. Then it runs out ahead to discern where this is going, to discover that to which this self-understanding is directed, and to hear

from that future God's promise to us of finding true life in Him. So it is not accidental that the final word of Heywood Thomas's text here is that great prophetic proclamation—all things will be made new.

There are many other good things to commend in this collection—its frequent references to poetry and works of art, its attention to the writings of numerous philosophers and theologians who have wrestled in their own time with these issues, its continued reflections upon the contributions to theology of Paul Tillich and Søren Kierkegaard, and not least its expressive style, which will fondly remind those who have been Heywood Thomas's students of his measured and searching manner of teaching. In a time when theology is having to demonstrate the value it adds to the academy and to argue for its constructive impact on the wider society, these papers are both resistance and promise of higher things. For in the end, Heywood Thomas shows his readers how theology turns these demands back against their sources, against the ruthless commodification of knowledge and the predominance of the age of technology that sustains it, so that these may be broken open to their own presuppositions and be granted the possibility of taking another direction. Questions of life and death and the future of the world are among the most poignant and crucial ones of our day, for we know ourselves implicitly to be at risk within them. Yet these papers are written in hope that we may not give up thinking altogether, that we may not completely forget to wonder about such ultimate questions and to search out their meaning, and further, that we have already been met in our own endeavors of understanding by a loving God in whom finally we are saved.

Susan Frank Parsons