Chapter 1

Theology and Matters of Life and Death

The words of the Psalmist that the lines had fallen to him in pleasant places express my own feelings on the good fortune of my being the successor of so many distinguished occupants of Nottingham's Chair of Christian Theology.[1] This is not the place nor am I the man to pay a proper tribute to them and their several contributions to the life of the University, to scholarship, and indeed to British culture. However, it would be remiss indeed of me were I not to seize the opportunity of paying at least a token tribute to the work of my immediate predecessor, Professor A. R. C. Leaney. His scholarship was typical of the tradition of biblical criticism that has been one of the great contributions of British theology—minute, careful study used as the basis of a fine understanding of the Bible. What is interesting to observe is that during the early 1970s, the years of greatest change in English theology since 1900, the chair was occupied by this scholar whose researches in the New Testament were uncovering its links with late Judaism. I want to point to this as something of a parable. The days of biblical theology are passed because it has given way to a new and, in a way, a more philosophical understanding of the historicity of religion. I am not belittling this tradition of theology, which dominated English academic theology for so long. On the contrary, I am just old enough to remember the exciting after-math of what was called in the 30s The New Theology. The liberation of theology from the bondage of a narrow and dogmatic outlook was very largely the work of those theologians who turned to the study of the Bible in the light of the new method of biblical criticism. This is a gain that those theologians

1. The Inaugural Lecture of the Chair of Christian Theology, Nottingham, delivered on 15th January 1976.

fought hard to secure and every theologian now—irrespective of his allegiance to any school, party, or church—is in their debt. This new liberal outlook has become the permanent heritage of theology. However, though evolution's law may be the preservation of balance its result is undoubtedly change. The very preoccupation of theology with the historical and literary study of the Bible has undergone an evolutionary development into something that can be called a more comprehensive and synoptic study. The treatment of the Bible as a piece of literature spawned work on semantics and the very structure and purpose of the writings. As discussion of text, form, and meaning took note of sociological thought so the historical study of biblical content enlarged and transformed the cognate study, comparative religion, into the phenomenological and multi-faceted study that religious studies is today.

What I have to say can be stated quite simply, though it may be very difficult for me to expound and argue it. I want to say that theology is concerned with questions about life and death and that as such it is a study that is, as Paul Tillich used to say, on the boundary with other subjects. I shall have something to say later about what I have learned from my study of Tillich and Kierkegaard, but let me suggest that when the history of twentieth-century theology comes to be written it will be because of his vision of theology as a borderline study that Tillich will be seen as one of that very small band of really great theologians. There are several ways in which his fulfilment of his own aim has left some unfinished business for contemporary theology. There is, for instance, his concern for a theology of healing where the theologian faces not only the difficult problems created by the increasing use of psychological categories in our everyday language but also the thorny problems raised by advances in medical technology and by a widening of the notion of healing. There is also the boundary with politics and sociology where Tillich showed himself more aware than any other theologian of our day of the necessity for the Christian church to stand in a dialectical relationship with Marxism. For it is remarkable that in a world where Marxism is perhaps the most powerful single intellectual force and could even perhaps ironically be described in Marx's own terms as a bourgeois ideology English-speaking theologians have seemed unaware of its existence. Finally, I would mention Tillich's unique work as a theologian of culture. It is true that with an abstraction that was typically German he concentrated on the relation of theology to philosophy, but, even so,

he did raise for us the problem of the relation between theology and all expressions of culture.

Let me begin my argument by saying something about biblical theology. It will, I think, be agreed by historians of Christian thought that the concept was originally formulated as a slogan of reform. In his erudite paper *The Meaning of "Biblical Theology"* Gerhard Ebeling quotes Spener as evidence for saying that the concept was not a criticism of either the content of orthodox dogmatics or of its form as systematic theology. Rather, it was a criticism of the adulteration of theology by the accretions it had gathered. He quotes Spener as saying that much had been "introduced into theology which is alien, useless and savours more of the wisdom of the world . . . presumptuous subtleties in matters whereof we ought not to be wise above the Scriptures." "The whole of Theologia must therefore be brought back to the apostolic simplicity," to the true "simplicity of Christ and his teaching."[2] Thus the slogan of a biblical theology was the call not for a creation of something different from systematic theology but for the reform of systematic theology itself. However, what was thus originally merely a criticism of the scholastic form of theology soon became a demand for a rival kind of theology[3] and it was impossible to call a halt to this development. As Ebeling puts succinctly it,[4] that development was dominated by self-contradictory tendencies. Biblical theology rejected any directives for its own work from dogmatics but it was obliged to claim the respect of dogmatics and in fact was guided by a strong dogmatic interest. Ebeling's masterly analysis of the history of the concept clearly shows, I think, how biblical theology as it developed carried within it the seeds of its own destruction. What brings that about is the modern interest in the methodology and conceptual framework of theology. Therefore, it seems to me that an opposition between biblical and systematic theology is false.

There is a very obvious sense in which the programme of biblical theology is dubious whether it is the theology of the whole Bible or of only one or other of the Testaments. I am not here discussing the problem of specialization. My objection is based not on such pragmatic considerations but on a logical point. Even if we had a polymath, a modern Erasmus, who could cover the whole area of biblical scholarship

2. Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, 84f.
3. Ibid., 87.
4. Ibid., 88–89.

it does not follow that what he is able to produce is a biblical theology. What is described as theology is in fact at best a history of theology and at worst a history of religious ideas. If we assume for a moment that such a thing as the theology of the New Testament is possible then this means that the theology of John and the theology of Paul are one and the same thing. This clearly is not the case. Further, it can be objected that this use of the term "theology" is an example of our tendency to confuse the terms "religion" and "theology." I shall return to this point later; but for the moment what matters is that very often when we mean to refer to a man's religious convictions we talk of his theology. The furthest thing from our mind in such usage is that there is any sophistication of either belief or argument involved. Thus it is a confusing use of the term, suggesting a continuity between the ideas of religion and the concepts of theology that does not exist. I am not arguing for a separation of theology from religious faith but merely pointing out that it cannot be the case that an essential part of religion is sophistication of either its ideas or argument.

The other aspect of the confusion of religion with theology concerns the comparative study of religion. In a most perceptive and illuminating article published in *Religious Studies* Professor Zwi Werblowsky argues for a symbolic understanding of religions as systems of meaning and makes the point that this raises a problem about what is called *theologia religionum*.[5] The student of comparative religion operates from a point outside religion no matter what religious commitment he may make as an individual believer. The theologian, on the other hand, argues Werblowsky, must operate from within a religious system.

> Trying to give a reasoned account of their faith, theologians have to consider all relevant aspects of reality, and this reality includes the fact of the existence of "other" religions. Hence theologians must formulate what their respective religions believe not only about God, the soul, salvation, etc., but also about the other religions. They all have, explicitly or implicitly, a "theology of religions." What all these have in common is that each view, articulated from within a particular tradition, assumes its own religion to be the summit and apex of the pyramid.[6]

5. Werblowsky, "On Studying Comparative Religion," 145–56.
6. Ibid., 152.

His comments on this phenomenon are various. First, he contends that this kind of study reflects a philosophical judgment about other religions rather than a genuine understanding of their specificity and certainly it is not a matter of empirical investigation and generalization of the results. Secondly, he characterizes this study as theological in its orientation and here the term theological seems to me to imply a certain authoritarian definition of meaning. Thus he says that the orientation is evident in the long catalogue of books and articles whose titles begin "Christianity and . . .," "Judaism and . . .," etc. That is, the assumption is that there is only one norm of religious meaning and the facts of religion are to be surveyed with reference to that. Professor Werblowsky refers to the contemporary eirenical mood of scholars but adds that this kind of development does not change the essential nature of the perspective.

> The ultimate imperialism of even the most profoundly generous ecumenical mind is well illustrated by William Temple: "All that is noble in the non-Christian systems of thought, or conduct, or worship is the work of Christ upon them and within them." An extremely sophisticated version of this doctrine is presented by Raymond Panikkar; e.g. *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (1964), or *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (1970). After reading about the "unknown Christ of Hinduism" all one can do is to wait for a Mahayana Buddhist to write on the unknown Buddha of Christianity. Sooner or later the point is reached where even theologians have to ask themselves whether they wish to be taken seriously or whether they are engaged in inventing new variations of the old Humpty Dumpty game.[7]

What I have said about biblical theology has served to show how theology, even at its most empirical, must be speculative. This was one of the fundamental lessons I learnt from Tillich. It was not so much that he was seen as a speculative theologian because he created one of the two or three systems of theology that the modern world has seen but that his whole output since the celebrated 1919 lecture on the theology of culture was an attempt to fulfil a speculative task. Characteristically he thus met a need of theology that he did not state except by implication. It seems to me that the real interest of biblical theology was its preoccupation with historical method and it is ironic that the development of historical studies of religion is what finally killed it. Be that as it may, it was surely the conviction that we were able to found a theology on the facts of history

7. Ibid.

that was the attraction of biblical theology. Therefore, the interest of biblical theology and its relevance as a theological methodology was that it offered an answer to the basic philosophical problem of how we know the truth of the theological claims. It is a further irony that the popularity of biblical theology reflects the death of the old-fashioned idealism that dominated British philosophy and theology until 1920 and the consequent neglect of philosophy by theology. Though Tillich condemned the practice of modern philosophy to reduce all questions to epistemology he himself offered in *Systematic Theology* vol. II such a philosophical validation of the cliché of biblical theology that we do not have a biographical account of Jesus in the New Testament evidence. It is clear that without such work the whole effort of biblical criticism produces for theology nothing more than castles in the air.

There is, however, a more fundamental matter of theology that seems to me to reveal the speculative character of theology. Discussing Professor Werblowsky's paper I mentioned that he saw religion as a scheme of symbols bearing meaning. This reminds me that throughout his writings Tillich emphasized the importance of the concept of meaning for understanding religion. I am not here concerned to expound Tillich's work, but it can be justly said that one of the remarkable features of his work is the combination of a new scientific understanding of religion with both a sensitive sociological understanding of his world and a passionate concern for Christian communication. He tells us that he was painfully aware that after 1918 "the whole house was in ruins." Like Marx before him he condemned the Christian church of his day with the authentic voice of a prophet; and when he represented the Christian faith to his contemporaries he did this in a very Marxist way. Without ever trying to dissociate man from the world to which he is tied Tillich describes religion as the experience of the absolute—that is, man's ultimate meaning and the basis of his meaning. This is not to look outside the world for this reality of meaning any more than it is a matter of identifying it with the world. Tillich deliberately rejected the description of religion in terms of a relation to a supernatural object called God because he felt that this was a misleading way of expressing its revelation of ultimate meaning. At the very heart of man's existential situation then, Tillich argues, is man's quest for meaning. In this way, too, I should want to see theology as concerned with the speculative problem of the meaning of existence.

To talk about meaning is at once to be in dialogue with philosophy, and there is a real danger that the theologian engages in a diatribe against

rather than a dialogue with the philosopher. Even now there is a great deal of nonsense talked by theologians about linguistic philosophy. The great temptation for theology is that of canonizing old-fashioned and therefore moribund philosophies. I have myself argued that linguistic analysis is a necessary part of theology; but it would be quite wrong to argue that this is an exhaustive account of the method to be employed in philosophy of religion. Even so, if method it is then we must say that it cannot be elevated into some doctrine of meaning. It is thus perfectly possible to avoid a narrow and doctrinaire empiricism that would maintain that the question "What is the meaning of existence?" is a meaningless question. That it is a speculative question rather than a merely practical problem seems to me worth emphasizing because the ready recognition by the theologian of its practical character tempts us to construe the question as nothing more. It was said by more than one person who survived the horrors of Nazi concentration camps that they were able to endure their suffering because it meant their active struggle against the evil of Hitler's regime. Tillich once told me that he felt his own work as a teacher of theology had been worthwhile when he was told by a former pupil that it was the recollection of that teaching which had enabled the young man to endure the agony of the concentration camp. Obviously the theologian wants to stress the practical dimension of faith. The noble army of martyrs praise God, says the Te Deum, and we pray that we should praise Him not only with our lips but in our lives. The Westminster Confession makes the point with characteristic economy, saying that man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. There is good reason, then, for wanting to stress the practical interest of the question; but equally, I feel, there can be no doubt that questions such as "Why is there a world at all?" form part of the question of the meaning of existence and that these are clearly speculative. It would be idle as it would be foolish of me to claim that I am inaugurating a new development in theology in the way in which Kant in his Inaugural Dissertation of 1770 outlined the prolegomena to any future metaphysic. Yet though I cannot in the same way claim that this preceding year has been my year of great light it has become increasingly clear to me that my task as a theologian is not only speculative but inescapable and inevitable. When I say that it is an inevitable task I mean more than that it is a natural function of human reason. It was, I think, one of Kierkegaard's great achievements that he both understood this point that Kant had made about metaphysics and went further in his own understanding of it. In *Philosophical Fragments*

he portrays the condition of human reason as that foolhardiness of passion that pushes it forward to its own destruction. The end of reason's quest is the Paradox. The inevitability of the theological task is born of the fact that there is here a congruence of human quest for and the divine revelation of the meaning of existence. The basic significance of religious assertions is their truth and the clear implication of the truth of the assertion that God's goodness is absolute is that the universe is, as F. C. S. Schiller said, friendly.

The claim of Christianity that the meaning of life is disclosed in the life, death, and resurrection of a Jewish carpenter is not a practical statement or a historical assertion. It is not indeed a dialectical conclusion so that St. Ambrose could well say (and Newman could embellish the title page of *The Grammar of Assent* with the saying) it did not please God to save us by dialectic. Yet speculative or metaphysical this certainly is, as is indeed the very understanding of the nature of history that it contains. In his immensely learned work *The Grand Design of God* Dr. C. A. Patrides has shown very clearly how crucial a theme for the whole history of Western thought and English literature in particular is the Christian view of history. The detail of his evidence gives clear confirmation of Karl Lowith's contention in his book *Meaning in History* that the idea of progress is the secularized version of the Christian doctrine of providence. The idea of progress had no place in Greek thought, where the model adopted for understanding nature and life was a circle rather than a line. Probably the only exception is the difficulty raised by Aristotle[8] concerning the measurement of time by the orbiting of the stars and this, as far as I know, was nowhere else discussed.[9] Linear thinking emerges with the christological and christocentric understanding of history in the New Testament.[10]

T. S. Eliot puts it memorably in "The Rock":

> Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time,
> a moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history:
> transecting, bisecting the world of time, a moment in time
> but not like a moment of time.
> A moment of time but time was made through that moment:
> for without the meaning there is no time, and that moment of time

8. Aristotle, *Physics* Bk. IV 223 a 21ff.
9. See R. Weil, "Aristotle's View of History."
10. See, for instance, Oscar Cullman's *Christ and Time*, 51–60.

gave the meaning.[11]

It has been remarked by several critics that the Victorian legacy to twentieth-century thought of an obsession with time has resulted in dramatically different literary expressions.[12] I shall take only one example, which will also serve as a link with our next topic. This may strike some as a ludicrous example, but to my mind there is a marvellous profundity in the description of Lord Cut-Glass.

> Lord Cut-Glass, in his kitchen full of time, squats down alone to a dogdish, marked Fido, of peppery fish-scraps and listens to the voices of his sixty-six clocks, one for each year of his loony age, and watches, with love, their black-and-white moony loudlipped faces tocking the earth away. . . . His sixty-six singers are all set at different hours. Lord Cut-Glass lives in a house and a life at siege. Any minute or dark day now, the unknown enemy will loot and savage downhill, but they will not catch him napping.[13]

Dylan Thomas has not been sufficiently appreciated as a religious poet, though critical opinion fastened quite early on the startling echoes of Christian language in his imagery. No one can, however, deny that the concluding stanzas of Poem on his Birthday express a majestic and courageous resurrection faith:

> That the closer I move
> To death, one man through his sundered hulks,
> The louder the sun blooms
> And the tusked, ramshackling sea exults;
> and Every wave of the way
> And gale I tackle, the whole world then,
> With more triumphant faith
> Than ever was since the word was said,
> Spins its morning of praise, . . .
> . . . Oh,
> Holier then their eyes,
> And my shining men no more alone
> As I sail out to die.[14]

11. T. S. Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 107.

12. See the bibliographical riches of Dr. C. A. Patrides, *The Grand Design of God*, 138–39, n.36.

13. Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, 65.

14. Dylan Thomas, *Miscellany Two*, 36.

This leads me to what I want to say next; namely that the question of the meaning of existence is as concerned with the meaning of death as it is with the meaning of life. Sociological accounts of twentieth-century attitudes to death will be of the utmost importance for the historian of religion. One may observe that it is a remarkable fact that as the general view of death has become more and more secularized there has been a corresponding growth of a taboo on the subject and indeed a depreciation of the ritual of burial. I readily confess that if I may speak in this perplexing way I should prefer to witness my own funeral procession led by a carriage with two black horses, a not unfamiliar sight in my childhood, than by the most opulent Rolls, Cadillac, or Mercedes. But I am not talking of foibles or personal taste when I say that the modern funeral, hedged around by widely shared taboos, is a refusal to value death. To turn from sociology to philosophy, it may have been Wittgenstein's intention to rule out of court questions about the experience of death when he said in the *Tractatus* that in death the world does not change but ceases, and that death is not an event in life.[15] However, what he said is so puzzling that he can well be credited with the distinction of being the one philosopher who has faced the problem of death, because this oracular aphorism is like a signpost that leads away from itself in an opposite direction. When I say that Wittgenstein is the only philosopher to face this problem I mean, of course, the only one in *this* country, because we can find lengthy and illuminating discussions in the works of the existentialist philosophers and in the less well-known treatment of the theme in the work of Kierkegaard. Heidegger sees death as the end whereby man's existence becomes complete. Man's capacity to anticipate death, to see it as the context within which every moment falls, is the basis for any attempt to grasp his existence as an organic unity.[16] For Jaspers, too, death is the fulfilment of being, an occasion that can enable man to be most truly himself.[17] Sartre, however, will have none of this high valuation of death.[18] It is I, he says, who give my death meaning and not death which gives me meaning. All this is very instructive; for there is in existentialist philosophy a very clear understanding of the way in which metaphysical beliefs are determinative of human behavior. What these philosophers

15. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.431, 6.4311.
16. Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 279–90.
17. Cf. Jaspers, *Philosophie*, ii, 220–29.
18. Cf. Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, 617–33.

tell us about death can be properly called the commendation of a particular policy of behavior, but not because it is something different from a metaphysical assertion about the meaning of death. This is where I see this discussion as making a contribution to both philosophy and theology. Whereas so much traditional metaphysics is concerned with establishing that a man shall live again after he dies these philosophers attend to the more immediate problem of what is meant by death itself. They did this, I believe, because they found in Kierkegaard an example not only of a general method that would imply such an approach but also an example of such a particular discussion. Indeed, I should argue that the insights of all the existentialist philosophers (even those of Sartre) are derived from Kierkegaard, that solitary Christian soul whose agonies in the nineteenth century were so prophetic and indeed determinative of twentieth-century thought. As well as the fugitive references to the subject in the *Journal* and in some of the works there is a lengthy discussion in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* which is so careful a piece of analysis of the various ways in which one talks of death that one might forget that it was written in 1845. For example, one can predict somebody's death, one can compose an elegy about somebody's death, or one can conduct a funeral service after someone's death: we still have not established a paradigm of what it is to understand death.

> I had better think about this, lest existence mock me, because I had become so learned and highfalutin that I had forgotten to understand what will sometime happen to me as to every human being—sometime, nay what am I saying: suppose death were so treacherous as to come tomorrow! Merely this one uncertainty, when it is to be understood and held fast by an existing individual, and hence enter into every thought, precisely because . . . I make it clear to myself whether if death comes tomorrow I am beginning upon something that is worth beginning—merely this one uncertainty generates inconceivable difficulties.[19]

Kierkegaard is saying two things about death. In the first place, there is a difficulty in this matter of understanding death, which is due merely to its uncertainty. Secondly, properly to understand death we must see that death is *my* death or *your* death. It is the second point that is the more important for him and consequently colors the first; but the two points are made. The unpredictability of death makes it the context

19. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 148.

for any moment of human experience. Thus the supreme oblivion of the figure of Jesus in the Gospels to the threat of a totalitarian government, an occupying force, that could and would eradicate him is more than stoicism. The life that agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane was consistently lived in the context of that moment of time when he was on the threshold of eternity. As Teilhard de Chardin says, "The great victory of the creator and redeemer in the Christian vision is to have transformed what is in itself a universal power of diminishment and extinction into an essentially life-giving factor."[20]

A Christian theology of death will clearly take as its point of departure this memory of that death and the relation of Jesus' temporal existence up to that point to what followed. The identity of Jesus who is crucified with the Christ who is raised is a presupposition of the doctrine of redemption and eternal life. This may seem a very obvious point, but there is an interesting and not very obvious implication. As I have said, there is a relation of consistency between ante-mortem and post-mortem accounts of Jesus in the Gospels and what strikes me as interesting here is the relation of his temporal and non-temporal existence. Whatever we say about the resurrection it was not in any simple sense a temporal event, and it is not surprising that in the history of Christian apologetics the argument for immortality from the story of Jesus' three days' sojourn in the tomb has been very popular because we can see in the doctrine of Jesus' resurrection the way in which time and eternity are linked in the Christian faith. The particular point I want now to make concerns the ethical use of this metaphysics. To quote Kierkegaard once again, he contrasts the way in which the existing individual asks the question of immortality with the abstract way in which the Hegelian metaphysician does. "So [the existing individual] asks how he is to behave in order to express in existence his immortality."[21] Presenting Christianity, as he said, from the side of God there was nothing that Kierkegaard condemned so consistently and vehemently as that bourgeois confusion of Christianity with the values generally accepted by society or some such convenient tradition. In castigating this morality he made us aware of a deeper kind of morality, not what he calls a summary of police ordinances but more an imitation of the Pattern. Kierkegaard's view of Christianity is often described as an extreme asceticism and very often writers make free use

20. Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin*, 161.

21. Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 157

of such easy and ambiguous adjectives as pathological and masochistic. To my mind the truth of the matter is that he gave full value to the metaphors that are familiar to us in the language of liturgy and Christian devotion—that we die to the world in order to be raised again to life in Christ, that we no longer live but Christ lives in us.

The second point that I mentioned in Kierkegaard's discussion is that the language of death is self-involving language. Death is mine, despite all Sartre's perfectly proper protests against the way in which romantic literature personalized death. A theology of death must be characterized by realism rather than romanticism. "I will die" is not a statement that can be exhaustively analyzed into statements about my body. So the problem of the meaning of death becomes the old problem of the nature of man, a problem that gains an urgency because the different views will yield different expectations of his destiny. When I say that it is impossible to reduce "I will die" to statements that are matters of publicly verifiable assertion, purely empirical meaning, I am not suggesting that we must regard man as a synthesis of two substances—body and soul. I am saying merely that "I will die" does not function in the same way as "This body will disappear." We are not talking of a series of events of which description could be given but of a series of events which taken together will disclose me to myself. No account of myself in terms of scientific discourse can be adequate; for it does not exhaust the subjectivity that is my self-awareness. One obvious point that was made by Wittgenstein's dictum that death is not an event in life is that I cannot say at any time in my life "I have died"; but there is a sense in which it is true to say "The body which was mine ten years ago has ceased to be" and an obvious sense in which we can refer to objects saying that such and such an object has ceased to exist. I cannot, that is, describe my death as an event in the world in the way in which things that occur are events in the world and even someone else's death, however much I am involved, is such an event. As Kierkegaard puts it,[22] one would have to be extremely absent-minded to imagine that you did not know that you were dead until you tried to get up. The fact of my own death is not such a something in general. The ethical point that Kierkegaard made is linked with the metaphysical one. Asking the question of immortality is for the existing individual a deed, an act. The attitude to death, then, is not merely something that colors the series of events which is my life: it

22. Ibid., 149.

is part of that series. Tillich approaches this kind of position in his little classic *The Courage to Be* when he says that there is in much contemporary culture an anxiety about death to which the only solution or cure is this ontological courage.[23]

It may be said that I am speaking very loosely here when I speak of the ethical dimension of the problem of death. That this is not so will be clear if we reflect that here once again Kierkegaard stands very close to Kant and echoes that same sense of the profound mystery of human freedom which Professor MacKinnon has reminded us is so characteristic of Kant.[24] Part of the mystery of man's freedom is his ability to sacrifice it, and it is precisely of that sacrifice and its opposite which I speak in this matter of the ethics of death. I find a startling example in the brilliant poem written by Sylvia Plath in the last week of her life.[25] I shall quote only part of "Edge":

> The woman is perfected,
> Her dead
> Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
> The illusion of a Greek necessity
> Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
> Her bare
> Feet seem to be saying
> We have come so far, it is over.[26]

Calling this a pathological attitude does not help. The wisest comment is that of A. Alvares: "Poetry of this kind is a murderous art."[27] It is an example of a determined rather than a free attitude to death. Talk of the analogical nature of a religious language is a commonplace but here is an area that is perhaps too little noticed. Not only in Paul's letters but in the whole homiletic tradition and in the classics of spirituality there is a very important analogical use of the language of death. What makes it important is the ontological basis of the analogy, something perceived by the now largely forgotten von Hugel in his *Essays and Addresses*.[28]

23. Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 40 et passim.
24. Cf. D. M. MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory*.
25. Ted Hughes, "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems," 195.
26. Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*, 85.
27. A. Alvares, *Art of Sylvia Plath*, 67.
28. von Hugel, *Essays and Addresses*, Vol. 2, 227–28.

I have spoken of various matters of life and death on which theology seems to me to have something to say. In the course of the discussion it has become clear that in so doing theology moves on the borders of such fields as philosophy, literature, politics, and sociology. This may be clear enough evidence of that combination of practical and speculative interest of which I spoke earlier. But let me end this lecture by taking as an example a border area that cannot fail to illustrate the way in which theology is a borderline study that transcends the distinction between theory and practice—I refer to the area of medical ethics. Clinically induced death, whether of unborn children or of ailing elderly patients or incurable patients, is a subject that has been very much in the news. This is a complex subject which easily and quickly illustrates the importance of philosophical and theological discussion of matters of life and death and not simply of a code of practice. In both cases there is a pressing need for clear definition of life and death. When does the foetus become a person? When has a person died? When does physical existence cease to merit the term "life"? Already we can see how the old issue of the soul, which we have once before mentioned in this lecture, comes to the forefront of our discussion. Indeed the theological problem is the self same problem as that which confronts the medical practitioner as he decides his course of action. One reason, then, for coupling the problem of abortion with that of euthanasia is that the logical and metaphysical problems are basically the same. The nature of the ethical choices is also very much alike. Therefore, I want to take the much less controversial problem of transplant surgery. We are not clear in our minds—whether we are doctors, priests, theologians, or laymen—about either the practice of transplant surgery or the kind of legislation needed to promote good medical care yet also protect the rights of the individual; but most of us take a favorable view of it. Assuming that the obvious problems are answered satisfactorily why do we still feel some slight hesitation about giving our consent to a transplant operation? Is this feeling for the human remains an expression of a true insight that cannot be disregarded? There seems to be no obvious theological reason for viewing a corpse as in any sense sacred. It is the living body that is what the apostle calls the temple of the Spirit, and it would be naïve indeed to imagine that there is any connection between the treatment of a corpse and the expectation of the resurrection of the body. Yet it seems to me that we cannot treat a human corpse as merely a piece of scrap. On the contrary, it must be treated in the full recognition that not even the death that this body has

suffered removes the person from the presence of God. Therefore, we cannot speak of that person except as a person. Similarly we cannot treat the token of the person's presence with anything less than respect. In the history of religion there are two kinds of considerations to be seen at work in the practices associated with death. One is that certain things must be done as part of the proper ongoing life of the society. The other is that certain things must be done because they are duties towards the departed. Socrates' death is a very good example of this. Socrates probably, if we are to take Plato's picture of him as our guide, viewed death as a release from the body: and characteristically he said to Crito immediately before he died, "I owe a cock to Asclepius: do not forget it." To which Crito replied, "It will be done." (*Phaedo*, cf. *Euthyphro*, *Apology* and *Crito*). Socrates' obligations towards his friends had been discharged and he is here putting upon Crito an obligation towards him, an obligation which Crito accepts gladly. To return to our problem, the fundamental question with regard to transplants is whether the body of the person who has died in some sense belongs to him any more. Socrates was not asking Crito to bury him in any particular way; but had he done so the obligation would have been just as clear as the liturgical one. If someone says that he does not wish his body to be used for transplant surgery we should generally say that this wish should be respected. But if there is no specific obligation does it follow that there is no obligation at all? I am not in any way arguing against the use of bodies for transplant surgery. What I want to make clear is that the respect we feel for a body is based on its recognition as a token of the person's presence and that the basis for that is the Christian belief in the solidarity of the human race before God. This is the basis that makes Professor Paul Ramsey argue in a most polemical but illuminating way that there are limits beyond which medical practice should not go.[29] Though the body is indeed not sacred it has made possible that personal act which is death and as such it is the symbol of that person's moral value. This is why I do not think that moral philosophy gives an adequate account of obligation to the dead. Mr. J. D. Mabbot has well shown[30] that the act-utilitarian account does not give any reason for fulfilling an obligation to someone who is dead. What we need is some guarantee of this being properly seen as an interpersonal relation. It is because I think that theology can illumine our understanding of such

29. Ramsey, *Fabricated Man*, and *Patient as Person*.

30. Mabbot, "Moral Rules," 211.

ordinary human experience that I suggest that it has relevance for the moral problems of medical practice.

Philosophy was once known as the handmaid of theology. To my mind it always will shape, as it always has shaped, theology. But we have reached a period in the history of theology when we need to echo the kind of ecumenicity that Dante gives his Christ when the ancient heroes too are given their place in paradise by the Son of Man. So to the sociologist, the poet, the literary critic, the political theorist, as well as to the philosopher I would extend an invitation to lend me their aid as I undertake *ministerium verbi divini*, the theologian's task of the service of the Word of God.