Introduction

When one has spent a long time, as indeed I have spent the best part of my life, practising a craft it is difficult to recall how it all began and what motivated it. My father was a blacksmith. His was an ancient craft both in Wales and elsewhere, revered as one of life's foundation skills. He had no difficulty in recalling what had first inspired him to wield a hammer and to shape the black iron into the useful forms of a horseshoe, a ploughshare, and the like. It had been his family's tradition and he was proud to take up his part in continuing that noble line. However, his own history was very much that of the twentieth century as he left the idyllic rural scene of horses and farms to become part of the emerging world of the motor-car, plying his trade in the context of the early spare-wheel which will give South Wales a significant mention in its history. So it was that, as semi-urban and semi-rural children, more akin to our rural surroundings than the town only a few miles distant, I and my family grew up inheriting not so much traditional crafts but a traditional spiritual culture in which craft had a central place. As the blacksmith's shop had been a forum of enquiry and debate so it was that the chapel was as much a source of intellectual enlightenment as it was a means of spiritual development. It boasted a "library"—a mere cabinet of books, the provenance of which I never discovered; but it was for me, a youth who had not yet progressed from the children's section of the town's public library to the adult world upstairs in the grand building known locally as "The Athenaeum," the entrée to the world of spiritual thinking. There in the chapel's library I first clapped eyes on those two spiritual classics, Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*—to give them their proper titles, *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living* (1650) and *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying* (1651). It is fitting to recall that these were in fact written when Taylor lived in South Wales, in Golden Grove

where he was chaplain to Lord Carbery. I say that it is fitting to recall this because I am most emphatically of the opinion that Wales has never admitted her ecumenical debt in spirituality despite the fact occasionally that debt obtrudes in our hymnology. However, it is the lesson rather than the debt to which I would now call attention; for it seems to me that the greatness of these noble works is that their very beauty reminded us by their very titles even that death, like life, is a *task*.

Together with the chapel it is to my grammar school that I am indebted for the motivation to undertake a task for which that intellectual and moral formation proved so great an inspiration. Sometimes it is assumed that unless a school gives very obvious recognition of spiritual values it is interested in neither upholding nor cultivating them. This was not the case with my school because its recognition of Christian background in the Morning Assembly was as real as it was conventional; but it was no more prominent than its profoundly Christian ethos of consistent toleration and wide ecumenicity. It is in particular to my education in the Classics and to my study of French Romantic poetry that I regard myself as especially indebted. True, the works of Shakespeare, Milton, and the novelists and poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries broadened my mind. However, it was the encounter with Xenophon's and Plato's Socrates that first fired my curiosity for philosophy. Some years later I read R. G. Collingwood's wonderful book *An Autobiography* and was humbled to read that he had already become familiar with the work of Kant before he had begun his philosophical studies at University, indeed even before he had gone to preparatory school.

> My father had plenty of books, and allowed me to read them as I pleased. Among others, he had kept the books of classical scholarship, ancient history and philosophy which he had used at Oxford. As a rule I left these alone; but one day when I was eight years old curiosity moved me to take down a little black book lettered on its spine "Kant's Theory of Ethics." It was Abbott's translation of the *Grundledung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*; and as I began reading it, my small form wedged between the bookcase and the table, I was attacked by a strange succession of emotions. First came an intense excitement. I felt that things of the highest importance were being said about matters of the utmost urgency; things which at all costs I must understand. Then, with a wave of indignation, came the discovery that I could not understand them. . . . Then, third and last, came the strangest emotion of all. I felt that the contents of this book,

> although I could not understand it, were somehow my business: a matter personal to myself, or rather to some future self of my own. . . . I did not, in any natural sense of the word, "want" to master the Kantian ethics when I should be old enough; but I felt as if a veil had been lifted and my destiny revealed.[1]

Humbled though I was to read this I recognized the kind of challenge which I had encountered. I too knew that in some way my destiny had been revealed. I had found a way of looking at things, a call to thinking, which was as intriguing as it was inevitable, as inevitable as a vocation.

I cannot pretend that my university career as an Arts and later Divinity undergraduate (those being the days of Divinity studies pursued only after an initial degree) was in any way a dramatic development of the awakening I have described. The beauty of Logic bewitched me and Psychology seemed to be so essentially the modern way of understanding those problems in morals and religion that had puzzled one's forbears. Yet underlying this there was, I think, that sense of Reality which had at the outset shaped my mind and imagination; and, though there have been times when I thought Kierkegaard was an albatross hung on my neck, I must confess that the discovery of his work as the area of my life's study was the flowering of that original sense. When I look back at that, it is almost a particular moment that I recall. I was simply a youth, beginning his studies with the aim of qualifying as a minister. The intellectual requirements were all too well known to me; but so too were the more personal, spiritual qualities that were demanded by ministry. This was indeed what would have motivated the great Puritan character who was my minister to introduce me to Kierkegaard. In my study of Kierkegaard I have become more and more aware of his admiration for—and indeed indebtedness to—Kant. Like Kant he did not think that philosophy was some kind of external trapping, "an adornment of life," to use Kant's happy phrase. Rather it was something that related to the philosopher's own very being. One cannot read Kant's noble essay "What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?" without being aware of its echoes in the very different style of Kierkegaard. Terminology may have changed but for both thought was nothing if it was not thinking for oneself which, for Kant, meant "seeking the supreme touchstone of truth in oneself." That vision is a conviction that has not simply haunted me in my own efforts

1. R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 8–9.

but has inspired me in my work as a teacher of philosophy—within theology as well as on its own.

This quasi-autobiographical introduction is meant to explain why it was that several years ago when I was invited to deliver a series of lectures in the University of Wales, Bangor, I thought it might be profitable to argue for and possibly demonstrate the usefulness of Theology. These and the Southwell Lecture retain their original form, though the argument is updated: otherwise they would lose their sense of occasion. Some years previously the Arts Faculty to which I belonged in the University of Nottingham had been visited by a group of local members of Parliament and much of the talk had been about the *use* which could be made of various subjects. The politicians readily agreed that languages could be useful for the businessman and were even ready to admit that the cultural history of Europe could have some relevance and application. So the discussion proceeded until they turned to my neighbor, the Professor of Philosophy. His comments were terse. "Philosophy is of no earthly use at all," he said, and, indicating me, he continued, "It is not even of some eternal use like Theology." What I want to show is that Theology is of *temporal* as well as eternal use and that it has light to shed on problems that concern us and guidance to offer us in our perplexities as we live out our lives in this world. One of the saddest pieces of linguistic degradation or defamation that we have seen is the way in which politicians especially—particularly when they want to be abusive—refer to the discussions as "theological." What they mean is that such are as abstruse and ridiculously technical as the hoary example of controversy, viz "How many angels can stand on the point of a needle?" That is, they suggest that these are irrelevant discussions: concerned with some ideal eternal world perhaps they would have meaning but they are of no earthly use and in that sense meaningless. My contention, however, is that as theology begins with living religion, the life of faith lived in the real world, so it ends in that strengthening of faith as purposive living which is the great boon of understanding. In her now classical studies of Anselm's work Gillian Evans has shown the saint's remarkable contribution to both university and church as he taught us that faith seeks understanding and that nothing less than this is the goal of theology.

Wales has shown a strange ambivalence towards Theology. As a nation we rightly pride ourselves on our religious history and heritage, agreeing with the poet Gwenallt when he says that here the Holy Spirit was able to make a nest for himself. We remember with pride and

perhaps nostalgia the halcyon days of the Sunday School as an institution. Yet, ancient as Welsh religious history is, it can hardly be said to boast an equal tradition of theological writing that is to be seen as part of the history of European theology. Nor has it fostered an intellectual tradition of theological study in the way that Charlemagne's work created a tradition in Paris. To say this is not to be unmindful of the many instances of significant theology which is our heritage: on the contrary, it is seeing that heritage for what it is. I think of the rather devastating way in which early Welsh philosophical and theological scholarship is viewed by a scholar such as John Marenbon. In his *From the Circle of Alcuin to the School of Auxerre* he highlighted the large complex of problems that contextualized the controversy over universals as a concern stretching all the way back to Aristotle's *Categories*. His Appendix 3 discusses glosses to the *Categoriae Decem* and in his treatment of ninth- and early tenth-century manuscripts to *Bern C 219*. This, he says, is a manuscript from Wales and then he says:

> If B is used as evidence of the Welsh roots of the English cultural renaissance at the time of the 10th Century then the picture which it supplies of the level of interest in logic is unflattering.[2]

The contribution of those churchmen who pioneered Welsh religious writing is wonderful; but this was literature and not theology so that even thirteenth-century texts such as the Red Book of Talgarth are hardly systematic theological writing. Rich beyond measure in theological content as Williams Pantycelyn's hymns are and learned as his *Pantheologia* is even here at the height of the Methodist Revival there is no theological endeavor. The obvious indebtedness of *Golwg ar Deyrnas* to Derham's Physico-Theology would suggest that Williams' theological thinking was derivative. Recently one has been reminded that the torrent of theological controversy in the nineteenth century produced some distinguished work such as that of R. S. Thomas. What is perhaps very telling is that he would still be a forgotten figure had not Professor Densil Morgan given us such a sympathetic picture of his genius in his delightfully informative *O'r Pwll Glo i Princeton : Bywyd a Gwaith R.S. Thomas, Abercynon,* 1844–1928. If my remarks seem to paint a rather jaundiced picture of Welsh cultural history perhaps it is useful to reflect that it took the University of Wales a whole century to integrate the Faculty

2. John Marenbon, *From the Circle of Alcuin to the School of Auxerre*, 177f.

of Theology within its College structure and until the latter part of the twentieth century theological study was confined within biblical studies.

What we know as biblical study was in fact part of what was once called biblical *theology*. The remarkable advances in specialist study of biblical text and history have tended to blind us to the ideal of reflection that inspired the earliest mediaeval critical study of the Bible. The essentially theological context of biblical study is something of which I could not but be aware, old enough as I am to remember the exciting aftermath of what was called in the 1930s "The New Theology." That liberation of theology from a narrowly confining orthodoxy was very largely the work of those theologians who had seen the message of the Bible in the light of the new method of biblical criticism and in relation to a developing knowledge and understanding of the world. The very achievement of biblical criticism as a purely technical apparatus could be said to reflect that advance in *theological* thinking whereby a text was released from an alien control. These gains, which were won by hard effort, put every living theologian in debt to an attitude which can only be described as liberal. This is why I strongly feel the necessity of theology's concern with the issues that occupy the minds and hearts of countless people in our society.

As a scholar, I have spent much of my time and energy working on the thought of Søren Kierkegaard. What I have learned from him is not easy to explain; but of the many lessons the one that stands out so clearly is the hollowness of any pretension by either a philosopher or theologian to be outside existence. We are creatures of time and it is with life's concerns that any proper thinking must be concerned. A privilege for which I shall never cease to be grateful is that I was taught by someone else who recognized his debt to Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, one of the three or four really great theologians of the twentieth century. He used to say that theology was a study that answers questions; and when he described his *Systematic Theology* and his theological system as "a help in answering the questions . . . asked by people inside and outside churches"[3] he expressed the purpose of his system without any mock modesty. Though there must be problems for theological thought posed by the very nature of that eternity in which God dwells—not to mention all those problems that concern the Godhead itself—theology is, for the most part, given its questions by life itself. It was this very awareness that made Tillich insist

3. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, x

that theology was a boundary-science. This understanding of his life-work had a clarity that had been won only at the cost of great intellectual struggle and personal suffering. Committed to be a Christian thinker he had endured the pain of his work as a chaplain in World War I, been fired with the zeal for social reform that inspired post-war political thought, and had taken a first step towards formulating his system by a self-conscious attempt to see theology in relation to "the system of the sciences."

Though he had already passed the age of promise (born in 1886 and dying in 1965) he was, as I recall, at the end of his life full of extraordinary intellectual vigor and mental youthfulness so that in many ways he was still only in his prime. My memory of him in that last summer of his life is of someone who was fully engaged in the work he saw as incomplete. The third volume of *Systematic Theology* had been published and its faults weighed on him. His publishers wanted him to oversee the appearance of a complete English edition of his work. He, however, could not let go of the recently published work and he charged me with the task of letting him know of every page of Volume 3 where he did not say clearly what he meant and what, in my view, should be said. Fifteen years after the appearance of Volume 1 his "younger friends," he said, could assist him in his task. I am convinced that when the history of twentieth-century theology is written Tillich will be recognized as the main inspiration for what might be called a theology engaged with life in the real world. In the discussions that follow such is the theology I see raised by vital problems in medicine and ecology, not forgetting that life's end is a problem one must face and one's departure a problem for those who remain so that life's end is a complex problem of how to live. "Divinity," said Luther, "consists in use and practice not in speculation. Everyone that deals in speculation either in household affairs or temporal government, without practice, is lost and worth nothing."[4] And again, with typical force, he says that "true theology is practical . . . speculative theology belongs with the devil in hell."[5] To appreciate the truth underlying the hyperbole of the remarks one need only recall the subtlety of Luther's own argument in *De Babylonica Captivitate* where logic and metaphysics are put to good use in the argument about wrong practice. To see this is to understand the deep reciprocity between theoretical theology and practice. Theological

4. Luther, *Table Talk*, 179.
5. Luther, *W A*, 1, No. 153.

understanding can and does lead to action; but more significant is the way in which it can arise out of practice and be tested by practice. In *The Alternative Future* Roger Garaudy speaks of "the active nature of knowledge"[6] and such indeed is theological knowledge. Unlike both Plato and Aristotle the Christian theologian cannot give *theoria* superiority over *praxis*. Luther's theology of the cross is illuminating here—he saw the *via crucis* as embracing and transcending the *vita contemplative* and the *vita activa*.

J. Heywood Thomas,
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6. Roger Garaudy, *The Alternative Future*, 89.