

CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY: A DIALOGUE WITH LANGDON GILKEY'S *REAPING THE WHIRLWIND*

Langdon Gilkey's recent book, *Reaping the Whirlwind. A Christian Interpretation of History*,¹ invites discussion, since in it he develops a methodology for a Christian theology of history and implements this methodology in his interpretation of history. In the brief time I have to open this discussion I would like to present to you my understanding of Gilkey's (1) prolegomenon, (2) his interpretation of the purpose of theology and of the classical Christian eschatological symbols, and (3) his application of these symbols to the interpretation of history in our time. In each of these sections I will present questions and difficulties I have with Gilkey's views. The following discussion will offer opportunity for dialogue not only with Gilkey's book but with my understanding and evaluation of his position.

(1) *The Prolegomenon*. In the contemporary Western world, history is understood naturalistically. That is, it is thought to be solely man's production and to have man alone as its goal. This view has been growing from early modern times and the beginnings of modern science. The notion of process central to history in modern consciousness involves an understanding of the "relation of the forms of life to the process of time and of change" (188) different from that of Aristotle and medieval theology. For Aristotle, there was growth in the individual, but specific forms were changeless; both antiquity and Christian thought found in such changeless forms a basis for "natural law." In early modern science, however, with its "call to useful knowledge, knowledge that would effect changes in man's life for his own welfare" (190) there was implicit a sense of new possibilities and of an open historical future. In this view, forms of life and culture seemed relative to their space and time rather than absolute and normative. There are successive forms in history, and the meaning of this succession came to be interpreted by the theory of progress. The meaning of history is "the perfection of the humanum, a concrete, historical community of justice, peace, freedom and communion" (202). Time, the "prime locus of being" (200), is the passage toward this. Actually, in recent decades there is not the confidence, even in the United States, that there was earlier that change assures progress. Recent experiences, such as a loss of power in the United States relative to the rest of the world, an energy crisis and a sense of social decay in our cities, have induced a more pessimistic view of the future.

In his prolegomenon, Gilkey contests the totally naturalistic interpretation of history current in our time. As in his earlier book,

¹L. Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind. A Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Seabury, 1976). Numbers in the text refer to pages of this book.

Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language,² he had pointed to experiences of ultimacy in man's individual life, so here he points to experiences of ultimacy in the political communities of our time. For example, a political community tries to assure its being; it seeks meaning and political leaders claim moral worth for their policies—all of which show experiences of ultimacy or ultimate concern. These experiences of history and of history's relation to ultimacy call for a philosophy of history to express its meaning. In this philosophy, we should interpret the structures of political communities in terms of the polarities of destiny and freedom. We should adopt an ontology that can express modern awareness of the process character of historical existence and the openness of the future; for this, Gilkey subscribes to Whitehead's philosophy, with some adjustments. And since history manifests experiences of ultimacy, we have to speak of history religiously. In fact, we must speak of history theistically since, as Whitehead asserts, an adequate philosophical explanation of the interrelation between actuality and possibility in history demands the principles of creativity, eternal objects and God (see pp. 112-13). While Gilkey basically agrees with Whitehead here, he thinks that we cannot have certainty on this subject without the explanation of evil that is offered by Christian symbols.

There is much of value in Gilkey's prolegomenon. For example, it is essential that we develop something of a phenomenology of man's experience of ultimacy in social and political life as well as in individual life if we are going to show the relevance and meaning of a Christian theology of history. And we must have an ontology that can explain, as a philosophy should, something of the historical process. Moreover, it is understandable that Gilkey would think that the only plausible metaphysics is a modern one that derives from an experience of process and the relativity of forms.

Are there not, however, reasons to think that in such a prolegomenon we need some resources of Thomas's philosophy or one similar to his? For example, the basis for talk about God that Gilkey offers us is anthropological—man's experiences of ultimacy in individual or social life. And when the only access to God is through such experiences rather than also through the cosmos, a philosopher or theologian may easily deny the assertive and objective character of much of our language about God. This is the case with Gilkey. While he speaks objectively about God, he adds statements that this is to be taken symbolically and not as objective statements of fact.³ Also I question whether Gilkey has

²L. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

³See L. Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth. The Christian Doctrine of Creation in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), pp. 357-58, fn., where he expresses his agreement with Tillich on the symbolic character of our statements about God:

We would agree that the one absolutely nonsymbolic statement about God is the general principle of negative theology "not this and not that"—i.e., everything we say of God is to be negated as well as affirmed. But we should note that this statement is fundamentally negative, not affirmative: it says "no" to literal knowledge. It does not

criteria sufficient for judging the interests and activities of a political community, as a political philosophy that retains some continuity with Thomas's has. Gilkey's own political philosophy is associated not so much with an acceptance of something normative for political goals in an enduring human nature as with a kind of liberalism that centers on conflicts of interests among groups.⁴ This does not seem sufficient for the problems that face political communities in our time; we need some human criteria for judging what contributes to the common good or what is just, beyond the vagaries of the conflict of interests. A "natural law" position is not necessarily wedded to a static view of man; it can integrate our modern awareness of historicity and change in man and among men and societies, as we see in the social teaching of the Church.

(2) *Christian symbols and the nature of theology.* The interpretation of history by religious and theistic symbols is not sufficient, because there is an experience of estrangement and alienation in history; destiny is at times warped.

affirm even the transcendent being of God, for this is itself an inference, and must be expressed by symbol; it merely denies his likeness to creatures. In this statement, therefore, the category of being is not involved at all—in such a mere negation, the "being" or "reality" of the divine is still in doubt, as in the "negative" form of Mahayana Buddhism represented by Nagarjuna. Thus the categories of ontology cannot be derived from this unsymbolic but essentially negative statement, any more than can the categories of history and persons. Both are unrelated to this negative assertion, and both are symbolic, drawn from different areas of our finite experience.

The reason, then, that Tillich chose the ontological categories as basic seems not to be that they are implied by this statement, but rather that his experience of renewal is fundamentally the experience of ontological renewal, of "new being"—rather than the more personal experience of mercy and forgiveness. And on the basis of that experience, he thinks of God as the source of that experience, as the "Ground of Being." Thus the basis for his central language about God is the same as that here advanced, namely that we think of God ultimately in the terms where we know him most directly. Only for Tillich that experience of revelation is the essentially ontological experience of alienation overcome by "new being" rather than the essentially personal experience of guilt overcome by forgiveness and love.

In *Reaping*, Gilkey accepts much of Whitehead's philosophy. But it is not clear how he interrelates the language Whiteheadians use of God, which is literal and assertive, with his continued agreement with Tillich that all language about God is symbolic. His position seems to be quite different from that of Thomas who used assertive though analogical language objectively of God, and yet Gilkey calls for a translation of religious symbols into an ontology (that of Whitehead, save for some modifications). Does the ontology in this case function any differently from a symbol? It would seem that it does not function as it does for Thomas, since the latter's statements about God are grounded upon objective statements about the cosmos and not directly upon religious experience that gives rise to symbolic statements about its origin.

⁴We shall see below that Gilkey finds norms for political action in the eschatological kingdom. He suggests that the "natural law" be reinterpreted in this context. See L. Gilkey, *Catholicism Confronts Modernity. A Protestant View* (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 152-53. While there is value to this view, it does not seem to provide a basis sufficiently distinct from Christian theology to evaluate political action in a way that enters into dialogue with opposing views, and it seems to collapse the Christian and the human excessively. In a number of places in *Reaping*, Gilkey seems to read too quickly from Christian symbols to a liberal political conclusion without the mediation of adequate analysis of the concrete situation or of his philosophical principles involved. For example, he cites "The direct intuition of a revolutionary situation" (287).

For this reason [Gilkey writes] in understanding history we shall attempt to use the religious symbols not only of creation and of providence, relevant to the polarity of actuality and possibility, of destiny and freedom; but also those of sin, Christology, grace and eschatology, relevant to the problems of a warped freedom and an obscured destiny—categories not directly derivable from the given structure of ordinary experience, which being in self-contradiction calls for a rescue from beyond itself (127).

Here is the basis for the use of specifically Christian symbols and thus a Christian theology of history. These Christian categories cannot be proved but they can be validated. We can show that symbols other than Christian are not sufficient and that the Christian

system of symbols provides both the basis for a creative existence in history and for an intelligible understanding of the many facets of history's mystery, i.e., by their coherence and by their 'adequacy' to the full range of 'facts' present in common human experience (128).

It is not an easy project to understand our contemporary historical experience by means of the ancient Christian symbols; in fact, this poses a hermeneutical problem that involves an analysis of four levels of meaning. The first of these is to recover the historical meaning of Christian symbols, "the symbolic picture of God, of his relation to the world, history and man, and man in *that* relation, *coram deo*" (141). Gilkey studies Augustine's and Calvin's theologies of history as a help toward this understanding, as well as the Israelites' articulation of God's providence, their own sins, God's forgiveness and his bringing about new possibilities out of judgment and nemesis.

It is here that I have my greatest difficulties with Gilkey's account, and first with his general interpretation of what Christian symbols signify. In another book he writes:

A religious symbol here is a notion which, as Paul Ricoeur has said, invites conceptuality and factual content, but does not itself contain them. . . . These Christian symbols do not tell us facts; rather, they set all the facts we know, by inquiry, experience, or anticipation, into a Christian form. . . . Christian symbols express the way in which ultimacy forms and manifests itself for us as Christians; they name the totality and the mystery in which we exist.⁵

Is Gilkey stipulating here what Christian symbols can mean, or is he saying what they meant to the primitive Christian community? Let us take the Christian symbol of the resurrection that we express in our creeds and that is proclaimed in the New Testament. Can we say, as

⁵*Catholicism*, pp. 100-01. In the same book, he writes that: "The canon of the autonomy of human understanding, and thus the integrity of the sciences, which we all accept in our daily life and therefore must accept in principle in theology as well, requires us to admit that a dogmatic statement, a doctrine, even a sacred 'story of the incarnation,' cannot assure us of any of the factual elements ingredient to the doctrine. To deny this is to deny our own integrity as assenting members of a modernity that trusts in science and autonomy, an assent in ourselves that is undeniably apparent every time we go to a doctor or fly in an airplane" (98). Similarly: "If fundamental theological notions are thus 'symbols,' forms in terms of which experience is to be thematized, then clearly they are, not unlike Kant's categories, 'empty' unless they receive content from our experience" (101).

Gilkey's theological method holds, that this does not entail or assert any factual content? We are faithful to the New Testament statements about the resurrection of Jesus, we suggest, only if we understand them as expressing God's symbolic action, not if we understand them as man's symbolic expression of an experience of ultimacy nor if we understand them as restrictedly objective statements. The resurrection account or proclamation is not man's symbolic expression of his experience of ultimacy as some myths distinguished from history may be; Paul, for one, is very clear about this (e.g., I Cor 15). Nor are the accounts of the resurrection simply objective statements. In fact, the proclamation of the resurrection in primitive Christianity has some of the characteristics of myth. Its power is communicated to Christians through ritual and a kerygma that has a sacramental value; it is reenacted in ritual; it is a divine foundational act that men share through ritual and belief; the numinous is present to men through the preaching of the resurrection. The resurrection is presented as God's act antecedent to and independent of the believer—an act of raising the crucified Jesus to a new physical transformed life beyond the snare of death. But this act of God is not simply objective, for it is a symbol of God's dispositions toward Jesus and those united through belief with him. It symbolizes God's promise to the followers of Jesus that they shall share his destiny. It symbolizes the power of God that he shares with them through Christ, and it effectively symbolizes this since through it God gives what it symbolizes. This act on God's part is symbolic also in the sense that it results within the believer not simply in objective knowledge but in participative knowledge, transforming religious knowledge. It is then not empty but assertive and has factual content. The full dimensions of the resurrection, including as it does God's raising of Jesus and Jesus' entrance into his kingdom, are trans-historical but real. Moreover, history itself extends beyond what modern historical science with its limited questions and criteria can establish; and primitive Christians offered human testimony to the fact that the risen Jesus had encountered his disciples in space and time as a basis for the call to believe in him.⁶

⁶ For Gilkey, the encounters that the resurrected Jesus had with his disciples and their testimony to this seem to have no place in foundational theology or in systematic theology proper. According to his methodology, it seems that the only meaning proclamation of the resurrection can have in the New Testament is as a symbol of *common* human experience of ultimacy—not as expression of the resurrected Jesus' encounter with members of the primitive Christian community. In one place, he speaks of "the biblical symbols and the fact of the resurrection" (*Reaping*, p. 296), but this phrase calls for a revision of his theological methodology, for it is inconsistent with it.

Some may say that Gilkey's position is essentially the same as Rahner's in this matter. Rahner holds that by a transcendental revelation available to all there is made known to us, though non-conceptually, what God reveals. What the Christian accepts in categorical revelation through the Christian community is the same as this transcendental revelation. The process involved in inviting someone who is not yet explicitly Christian to the acceptance of Christianity is through showing him that the Christian revelation and faith simply articulate what he already accepts if he is really open to God's revelation.

The difficulty with identifying Gilkey's view with that of Rahner in this matter is that Rahner certainly accepts the Christian symbols as assertive. Jesus Christ is God's symbol of himself and thus the resurrection of Jesus is God's symbol. And what is controlling in

Secondly, I have difficulty with Gilkey's notion of Christian theology. I do not think that its purpose is only to give a Christian form to what we know from elsewhere, namely from our common human experience, even including experiences of ultimacy. A Christian theology of history does not only give us a coherent interpretation of our experience of history; it is based on the good news that tells of God's purpose to establish his kingdom—a mystery we cannot know from elsewhere. We shall return to this below.

Thirdly, I do not think that it is helpful to present Augustine's and Calvin's theologies of history as classical Christian interpretations without giving a detailed critique of their interpretations of St. Paul. Where such a critique is lacking, the impression is given that the classical Christian interpretation of God's relation to human freedom found in St. Paul has to be denied if we are to take seriously modern man's sense of his personal freedom. In fact, Augustine and Calvin misinterpreted Paul on the question of God's predestination. Paul's theology is more easily applicable to modern understandings of human freedom than theirs are. I have defended elsewhere the view that Paul taught that God predestined all those whom he united to Christ through justification, but that even predestined Christians could reject the gift that was already theirs and so lose their share in the kingdom.⁷

(3) *The meaning of Christian symbols for our time.* After gaining the eidetic or historical meaning of traditional Christian symbols, we must recognize that our age differs from earlier ages and we must relate these historical symbols to our time. There are three steps in this hermeneutical task. We must use these symbols to thematize, shape, illumine and direct our own actual experience, since theology must "in some regard [be] based on and related to modern historical consciousness" (136). Furthermore, in this translation of historical symbols, we must give an "interpretation of the symbol in terms of modern and so credible ontological categories" (145). And finally, we must interpret the meaning of Christian symbols for praxis on the ethical and political levels. We can note some of the distinctive features of Gilkey's theology of history by recalling his dialogue with other theologies of the modern period, his interpretation of providence and eschatology and some of the practical implications this has.

Gilkey presents his own reinterpretation of Christian symbols only after showing strengths and weaknesses of the reinterpretations advanced by Protestant liberalism, neo-orthodoxy and recent

Rahner's interpretation of Christianity is the explicitly Christian proclamation, not a revelation that we find in non-Christian common human experience. This differs from Gilkey's position, if I understand him correctly, for he holds that Christian symbols have no factual content but are forms that schematize our human experience of ultimacy, and that they are to be interpreted under the controlling factor of this human experience.

⁷ See *Predestination, Grace and Free Will* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1964), pp. 52-70. In this book I argue that Thomas's interpretation of predestination in a way that, in effect, is contrary to human freedom is due to his interpretation of Scripture in dependence on St. Augustine. His philosophical and theological explanation of God's knowledge, will and providence is basically in accord with human freedom.

eschatological-liberation theologies. For example, he notes the over-optimism and naturalism of Protestant liberalism that interpreted the kingdom as the "achievement of a moral society based on love rather than on natural desires or parochial interests" (213). For Barth and neo-orthodoxy, on the other hand, the eschatological goal of God is sharply and radically differentiated from the future of human society, and history itself is radically secularized and seen as the area of meaninglessness. Here God's eschatological event, found in the death and resurrection of Jesus and accessible only in faith, is not in history but rather breaks upon us vertically from above and "gives to each moment, and so to history made up of such moments, their meaning" (218). Recent eschatological theologies since the early 1960's represent a critique of the "privatized, individualistic theology of encounter, reconciliation and personal decision" (227) and present us with "a futurist eschatology . . . oriented politically toward radical social change in the name of a historical kingdom to come" (226). In dependence on the apocalyptic tradition, these theologies hold that the eschatological influence will touch history itself and radically transform it rather than grow out of history's present as a possibility within it. Human nature is understood on a temporal axis rather than in relation to transcendence, and God is interpreted eschatologically. He is not the God of the present, i.e. the "theistic" God, for as such he would be the enemy of freedom; rather, he is the God of the future.

Gilkey finds all three of these attempts to reinterpret traditional symbols "one-sided" (233). In his attempted synthesis, he first reinterprets the symbol of providence as a corrective for recent eschatological and liberationist theologies. We cannot accept classical interpretations of God's providence and sovereignty in history, because these do not acknowledge the contingency, relativity and transience of history as we know it today. Gilkey reaches back into the Old Testament for an understanding of how God is a cause in history. There it is asserted again and again that in Israel "both traditional structures and new possibilities . . . [are] the major results of Yahweh's activity in Israel" (246) without, however, denying the freedom of Israel, for God is essentially self-limiting in his dealings with Israel. A translation of this symbol of God's providence into a modern ontology is offered us through Whitehead's philosophy, for he interrelates human autonomy and God as giving to each occasion an ordered vision of possibility that is beyond present actuality and yet in relation to it (252). This symbol of providence interprets our modern experience, since the "sense of ever-new possibilities, of creative change from what has been, has been the genius of our liberal culture" (251). Israel betrayed God's gifts, and so freedom became sin and nemesis followed; similarly in our time it is because of sin that destiny in society is experienced as evil, for judgment follows sin. Thus the symbol of providence must be supplemented with other Christian symbols such as incarnation, atonement and finally eschatology. It is in the person of Jesus that "the ultimate character and direction of history is illumined" (268). In his person, he shows us the norm of

history; in the nemesis he suffered on the cross, he shows us the problem of history; in his victory over sin, estrangement and death, he shows us the resolution of history and its goal.

To correct neo-orthodoxy's divorce from history, Gilkey emphasizes a futurist and socially oriented eschatology. Counter to progressivist notions of history (e.g., in Marxism and liberal theology), a perfect society on earth is impossible; external social changes will not assure that men do not sin and so bring nemesis upon themselves and their society. This possibility of nemesis results not in a meaninglessness of history, but rather—since all are unrighteous—in the conclusion that meaning in history must come from acceptance, forgiveness and healing and so “more from the principle of justification and grace than from the promise of eschatological fulfillment” (283). The kingdom becomes present in grace. Providence continues to give us an awareness of latent possibilities even in the worst of circumstances. And the eschatological kingdom gives both norm and lure for the direction of the transformation of society. Characteristics of the kingdom, such as being, community and responsible concern or love imply goals for political action:

To me [Gilkey writes] they imply for the immediate future . . . a new synthesis of individual self-actualization with the common good, of socialist economic responsibility and universal participation with democratic self-determination and freedom (289).

Eschatology is relevant also because it enables us to recognize that new structures that we bring about in history are less than God's ultimate goal; and so it keeps history open. Without the transcendent kingdom, politics becomes demonic.

What God's “ultimate future” (295) may be is the most difficult question of theology. What is sure is that if death negates such an ultimate goal, then our experience of relation to ultimacy within this life is an illusion.

Some sort of eschatological hope is thus implied in our direct experience of ultimacy in the present as well as entailed by the biblical symbols and the fact of the resurrection. . . .

If, then, God brings into himself, into his enlarging experience and life, what the creaturely world has achieved through his providence—a theme richly elaborated by Whitehead and Tillich and fully in accord with the classical tradition—then the wayward but creative course of culture and so of history, as well as the wayward life of individual persons, finds everlasting fulfillment and completion in the experience of God. . . . The new that has been achieved in time finds its lodgment and so its eternal meaning in the eternity of God's experience (297).

Gilkey adds that any ultimate division between persons who “participate in God and those who are condemned to hell” is incompatible with divine love; it would imply “an ultimate partiality . . . and an arbitrariness” (298-99). In his final chapter, Gilkey shows some implications of this Christian interpretation of history for our understanding of “the symbol of God” (300), but in this paper we may set this aside.

Our summary of Gilkey's interpretation of history has, I hope, given some indication of its richness and the illumination that his theol-

ogy does give to our modern experience. However, I would like to conclude this paper with some difficulties I have with his interpretation.

In his interpretation of the ultimate future, does not Gilkey seem to restrict this to what Whitehead's philosophy will allow? Neither Whitehead nor Tillich seem to have clearly held that human beings would enjoy a personal afterlife.⁸ Gilkey goes on to say that there will be no ultimate distinction between the good and the evil. But what this very indirect and possible suggestion of a personal afterlife may mean I do not know. In so far as this may suggest a personal afterlife, Gilkey should show how this view is consistent with his theological methodology, since according to this Christian symbols are of themselves empty of factual content and must receive their content from common human experience and its articulation by a modern ontology such as that of Whitehead. By his combination of great uncertainty about man's personal life after death and certainty that there will be no eternal loss or tragedy, does not Gilkey reduce seriously the significance of life with Christ that has been central in Christian life and Christian theology? Man's present individual and social life seems ironically to have less significance as a result.

When he speaks of the impact of eschatology on the present, I have similar difficulties. What do the Christian mysteries of the incarnation, grace and redemption mean if these symbols tell us nothing factually beyond what can be asserted on the basis of common human experiences—even granted that we include here experiences of ultimacy? While Gilkey reacts against naturalistic interpretations of contemporary human experience, is there not a reductionism in his theology? Counter to his view, there was an assertive value to statements in the New Testament about redemption, the incarnation and grace, and these were based on uncommon experiences—historical and communal experiences that mediated a divine revelation that was specifically Christian. These are not only man's symbols; they are man's expressions of God's symbols that revealed the divine intent and plan; and, according to the traditional Christian doctrine of inspiration, there is a divine guarantee for the validity of these scriptural affirmations. Gilkey does not do justice to the Christian claim that God reveals himself and intervenes definitively for the salvation of man through Christ and his Spirit. Not surprisingly, then, Gilkey does not give much place to a consideration of the Church as mediating God's ultimate future to us in history.

⁸Russell Aldwinkle questions Tillich's accord with Christian tradition on this matter in *Death in the Secular City. Life after Death in Contemporary Theology and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 89-91; and Lewis Ford and Marjorie Suchocki deny that Whitehead asserted a personal afterlife in "A Whiteheadian Reflection on Subjective Immortality," *Process Studies* 8 (Spring 1977), 1-13. Gilkey interprets the resurrection as symbolizing: "the final kingdom, which is not in history but which we believe is fashioned out of history's concrete achievements in the infinity of the consequent divine experience" (*Reaping*, p. 318). The content of this symbol is found in a common human experience of ultimacy that, in accord with Whitehead's philosophy, involves a horizon of "the consequent divine experience," though not a personal existence beyond death.

In his ethical and political reading of Christian symbols Gilkey gives much that is worthwhile. But he seems to read directly from these symbols to a praxis that is quite liberal, without the mediation of a political philosophy that can give a basis for human rights and duties or for evaluating which individual or group interests are legitimate and which are not. The recent social teaching of the Church, it seems to me, is correct in being based on a view of the human good and its implications for political communities, and not simply on Christian symbols.⁹

While I have serious difficulties with Gilkey's theology of history, I want to emphasize that I have learned much from his writings and have found them very stimulating. As a matter of fact, when I first read Gilkey's book, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, I had few difficulties with it, but the more I studied it the more perplexities and difficulties I had. His theological methodology is quite restrictive, although at times he seems to want to say more than the methodology he articulates allows him to assert. If this methodology were revised to accord with his reference in one place to "the fact of the resurrection," the critique he has effectively made of modern naturalism would have a more fully Christian character than it presently appears to have.

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⁹ See J. Gremillion, ed., *The Gospel of Peace and Justice. Catholic Social Teaching since Pope John* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976).