

RELIGION AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Four Existential Theologians
edited by Will Herberg. Doubleday. 312 pp. \$1.25.

by Frederick D. Wilhelmsen

Not only vision but courage as well is needed by any man who would take upon himself the task of compiling a reader in existentialist theology. Will Herberg, in giving us his *Four Existential Theologians*, has thrown a bridge between the European Continent and the United States of America; he has given to the American public the fruit of a movement in theology whose origins are in Europe but whose future belongs to the North American continent. I say this because here, within a society frankly pluralistic in structure, will be debated the future of any Protestant-Catholic-Jewish dialectic in the theological order.

That this dialectic has limped badly in the past cannot be laid only to the reluctance of Protestants and Catholics to talk to one another; it can be laid as well to something far more profound: the principled refusal of Protestantism to engage the Catholic world in a conversation carried out in the terms and language of scholasticism. The spectacular rise of existential analysis has thrown into the hands of both great religious bodies an intellectual instrument, a methodology, that both can use, not only for their own proper ends, but also to further an understanding and comprehension without which religious peace must remain a pious dream.

Herberg's vision, as indicated, is strengthened by courage. Not everyone will be satisfied with the selections he has made nor even with the men he has chosen to

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represent existentialist theology. My own reservations are themselves a compliment to the editor's courage. While Nicolas Berdyaev, Martin Buber, and Paul Tillich are certainly representative of Orthodox, Jewish, and Protestant theological existentialism, it is difficult to understand why Mr. Herberg chose Jacques Maritain as representative of Roman Catholic existentialist thought.

If existentialist thought is characterized by a preoccupation with anguish, death, communion, tragedy, nostalgia, loyalty, fidelity, it is difficult to see how Maritain can be considered representative of Catholic existentialism. While these elements function within the vast scope of his achievement, they can hardly be called central to his thought. On this score, I would have preferred Gabriel Marcel. And if existentialist thought is marked by a talent for, and an insistence on, philosophizing and theologizing *within* the concrete rather than *from* the concrete, I believe that Romano Guardini would have been a happier choice.

Be that as it may, Herberg perhaps proves his point by including Maritain's famous meditation on subjectivity and alienation. Never knowing any *subject*, any person, precisely as such, precisely as interiority, the human person is doomed to fall short of his built-in drive for a communication and a love that breaks down every barrier and that swarms through to the very center of the beloved. Only in God where I am known even as I am can I find that communion with all history and all mankind that I desperately need.

Maritain's eloquent pages on subjectivity echo, without repeating, Martin Buber's life-long concern with the "I-Thou" relationship. Convinced that I become an "I" only when I utter the name of a "Thou," Buber's Jewish person-

alism itself echoes the existentialist insistence that man exists only within a world and that he cannot be understood apart from the world which is his. For Buber this implies a dependence of my very knowledge of external reality on my communion with a world of persons. Jewish personalism in its perennial opposition to the Greek emphasis on Nature and the Greek tendency to reduce man to Nature is the traditional bone-work underlying the nervous delicacy of *I and Thou*.

If union in love dominates the thought of Martin Buber, disunion and sin can be said to lie at the center of the mind of Nicolas Berdyaev. When we set aside the many prophetic inanities that plague the corpus of Berdyaev's work, there remains a solid center of doctrine worth the meditation of any man who has ever been stirred to think on the mystery of sin. For Berdyaev, sin is "objectification," "thingification." When I cast a person forth from my heart and look upon him *as if* he were a reality distant from my being and foreign to my life, I have sinned against that man; I have sinned by expelling him from my life.

For me, the most exciting section of *Four Existential Theologians* is that devoted to Paul Tillich. Here we have a man who has brought to the service of Protestantism the very latest discoveries in existential analysis. And he has done this, as he says in his introduction to his sermons, as a Christian apologist. Here we have the best in modernity wedded to the finest in tradition; we have science exercised in the name of humility.

A review is no place to explore the ontology of Tillich, but let it be said that this ontology is rooted in the human situation, in man as he courageously faces the hideousness of death and the ghastly possibility of annihilation. There

is a meaning, says Tillich, even to the meaninglessness of life as lived in torture by those who know not the True God and who know that they know Him not. "The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt."

The Protestant and Politics by William Lee Miller. Westminster. 92 pp. \$1.00.

by **Bernard Murchland**

"We must dirty our hands," Albert Camus wrote in his early days as a rebel. With that statement he summed up his vigorous plea for social commitment in an absurd world.

In this slender volume, William Lee Miller calls for political awareness with Camusian energy. He also indicates the absurdity of the present political scene in America. And he sees both in the broader context of Christianity's relevance to all political activity. "Christianity," he writes, "gives no precise answer to any of the dilemmas of life—certainly not the political ones. But it provides what's more important: direction, understanding, commitment. There is no 'Christian' position—but there *are* better and worse positions, relatively just and relatively unjust acts, and the Christian should seek what is good and just."

Mr. Miller's preliminary concern is to establish the non-political character of the American citizen and censure his fellow Protestants rather severely (and humorously) for the part they played in creating it. A curious combination of idealism and individualism, Miller argues, accounts for its distinctive traits.

Thus the traditional American

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When American philosophers and theologians begin to take seriously the cross of anxiety and anguish; when they come to see that the insane and those menaced by insanity often live more profoundly the human situation than those whose lives are untroubled by doubt and free from

emphasis on private success and rugged individualism has militated against public responsibility; a successful two-party system has tended to abolish political extremes; an immensely productive economy has given the business man a veto over the politician; and the recent emergence of technology has made the scientist the archpriest of modern society. As a result: "a nation with a most unpolitical tradition has now become the nation that most urgently needs political understanding."

The particular value structure that is honored in American society is the root cause of the political absurdities that abound among us. Nor have most attempts to relate religion to politics done much other than further muddle a confused situation.

The confusion runs all the way from the familiar "politics is dirty" attitude, found among some religious groups, through the moralizing errors of the conservatives (with their monstrous judgmental looseness), on to the crusading, my-country-right-or-wrong, God-is-on-our-side zeal of the "patriots."

Mr. Miller indicts a lengthy litany of such attitudes. And in explaining the relationship between religion and politics he is careful to avoid the pitfalls of moral specificity. The Christian faith is essentially rooted in the broad reality of God's transcendence and immanence. It does not relate itself to concrete situations in the form of offering clear-cut answers, ideals or principles. Rather it offers creative variations of the key virtues of love and

tragedy; when they see that risk and failure are fundamental human categories; when they begin to face the issues Paul Tillich has faced—American philosophy and theology will have come of age. Will Herberg has forwarded this future maturity of American intellectual life.

justice. Understood thus, religion furnishes invaluable insights into the nature of man and history—insights without which political maturity is impossible. Man is in no sense a simple creature; he is a complex in whom conflicting demands (of individuality and sociality, sin and virtue, reason and the irrational, historical pressures and present challenges) mysteriously co-exist.

And here we find the chief merit of Mr. Miller's book—its solid argument for Christian realism, which is primarily, and most sanely, a matter of taking all points of view into consideration, including the Ultimate one. It knows that we are rarely granted the luxury of an either-or choice in human, and especially political, affairs. It accepts limitations and urges on us the courage to endure the endless efforts, frustrations and new beginnings that are necessary to realize anything human. This kind of realism in the political domain stems indisputably from the special awareness of God the Christian has. The Christian God is not a Greek idol, a pagan monolith, an abstract principle (like Aristotle's Prime Mover) from which lesser principles are more or less univocally derived. He is rather the ultimate challenge in every situation. In a word, He is Love.

I would like to see William Lee Miller further develop these principles, here briefly adumbrated. It would be an important contribution in a time when we all fear some nameless horror; a time, too, in which we all suffer deeply from the lack of *real* leadership.