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The Moral Crisis of the West

*Reflections from Helmut Thielicke
and Francis Schaeffer*



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Though I wrote this essay almost 20 years ago, when I was living in a different place and carrying different responsibilities, I am more convinced than ever that our understanding of human nature is central to most of the big questions facing all of western culture. Our civilization lacks a coherent explanation of what we are as humans, and this unanswered question casts a shadow across politics, business, finance, education, the arts, and medicine. The French political philosopher Chantal Delsol writes, “The twentieth century is the story of the dismantling of the idea of humanity, a process that gave rise to the disintegration of the essential common world that took so many centuries to build. This disintegration served as the prerequisite and foundation for the possibility of totalitarianism.”¹ Further, “if humanity is no longer sacred, everything becomes possible, from hatred to mass assassination.”² She sees the problem of adequately describing our humanness as cultural, political, moral, and ultimately religious, for, “perhaps the biblical tale does indeed represent the only guarantee against the temptation to displace the human species. It is nothing more than a story, one might object. Yet dignity does not exist without this story, for dignity was discovered or invented along with it, and all our efforts to establish other foundations have turned out to be very poor substitutes.”³

One of the urgent intellectual needs of our generation is a restatement of a biblically informed view of what

humans are, which is done in a manner that shows how the biblical view of a person relates to our various cultural problems. Without such a new proclamation of our humanness, our societies will continue to see humans as only biological/economic creatures (a tendency seen too often both in the political left and the political right), which will make the practical solution of our various economic and social problems even more difficult. Perhaps this little essay will prompt a reader or two to attempt such a restatement of the biblical view. In fact this essay prompted me to make some further small attempts to describe humans in light of the biblical narrative. This includes “Adam and Eve: Who are You?” which I wrote for the Theological Commission of Hope for Europe (2002), “Who or What is Man?” which I wrote for the World Reformed Fellowship (2003), and *Human Rights: A Christian Primer* (Bonn: Culture and Science Pub., 2008) which I wrote for the World Evangelical Alliance and the International Institute for Religious Freedom.

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The Moral Crisis of the West

Reflections from Helmut Thielicke and Francis Schaeffer

Thomas K. Johnson

About nine blocks from our home in Iowa City stands the Emma Goldman Clinic for Women. The work of this clinic contributes to the grisly statistic that there are 2.5 or 3 abortions per live birth in the Iowa City area⁵. Even if John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene are right, that the immediate future looks very bright in economic, political, and artistic terms,⁶ we face a moral crisis of vast proportions. The situation approximates that of the prophet Amos a few decades before the destruction of Israel – a political/economic boom during a moral/spiritual collapse – and cries out for an adequate response from the church.

A precise analysis of this moral crisis is crucial, for how we analyze the crisis will undoubtedly influence how we respond to it. Two recent Protestant theologians who have reflected on the moral crisis of the West are Francis Schaeffer and Helmut Thielicke. While there are differences in their assessments of modern culture, Schaeffer emphasizing the loss of rationality and moral absolutes and Thielicke focusing on the problem of autonomous spheres of life, there is substantial agreement on one major point: Western culture is endan-

gered by its reduced view of human dignity, which is, in turn, a symptom of the modern secular worldview. Thielicke's and Schaeffer's explanations of the origins of this problem complement each other and together suggest a comprehensive response. We will begin our comparison with Thielicke.

Helmut Thielicke

Thielicke contrasts two views of human dignity: the Christian view, which emphasizes "alien dignity," versus what he calls non-Christian functionalism.⁷ The term "alien dignity" is borrowed from Martin Luther.⁸ It means that people have a dignity that does not come from anything within themselves, a personal dignity that arises from how God views that person. A deaf, mute, blind, retarded quadriplegic has infinite value in God's eyes, because Christ died for him/her.⁹ That person is the apple of God's eye, and anyone who touches that person must do so in kindness or risk incurring God's anger.

We should notice that Thielicke's term "alien dignity" is analogous to the alien righteousness we receive when

we are justified by faith. We are justified not because we have any achieved or inherent righteousness, but because Christ's alien righteousness is credited to us by God. Likewise, the person with no achieved or inherent dignity has dignity credited to him/her by God.

Typical non-Christian functionalism makes a person's value dependent on one's function in society. If a person makes a large contribution to society, he is valued highly. If he makes only a small contribution to society, he is valued only a little. If he makes no contribution or is a burden to society, he is to be disposed of, provided the public outcry is not too great.¹⁰

Thielicke claims that it is typical of modern secularism to have a functional approach to human value and dignity. Each worldview takes some dimension of creation and interprets all of reality in light of it, making each a different type of idolatry.¹¹ Marxism made the economic substructure of society its idol,¹² while National Socialism picked the German race and blood. People are then valued in light of the aspect of creation that has been idolized. Marxists value people who are economically productive, while Nazis value people with pure Aryan blood. As much as Marxists and Nazis are different, they join in denying alien dignity and valuing people only in terms of their function in society.

The functional view of human dignity has had hideous effects in the 20th century. Closest to Thielicke's experience was the Holocaust.¹³ Millions of people

who could not make a social contribution valued by the Nazis were eliminated. Also related to a functional view of human dignity are sexual abuse and promiscuity, for these reduce the other person to a function, not seeing the other as a whole person before God.¹⁴ Similarly, the practice of abortion follows quite naturally from a denial of alien dignity.¹⁵

The way in which one comes to "see" the alien dignity of another is by faith in Christ. When we come to faith, the Holy Spirit miraculously opens our eyes to see God's grace. He also opens our eyes to see Christ in our brother, to see that Christ died for the other person.¹⁶ Awareness of the alien dignity in others enables Christians to love their neighbors and even their enemies.¹⁷ The new eyes given by the Spirit lead believers to care for and protect the non-functional members of society rather than discarding them.

Awareness of the alien dignity of each individual was once a driving force in western culture, leading it to its heights. And even after secularism displaced Christianity as the dominant worldview, the power of the notion of alien dignity continued for a time. But today the cultural effects of an awareness of alien dignity are rapidly disappearing.¹⁸

Francis Schaeffer

Schaeffer also frequently contrasts Christian and non-Christian views of human dignity. Over and over he

argues that the Christian has a basis for seeing himself and others as having dignity and personality by virtue of having been created in the image of God. Non-Christian systems, on the other hand, have no place for human dignity or personality. This is so, even though non-Christians experience themselves and others as personal. In contrast to Thielicke's theological interpretation of the problem, Schaeffer offers an historical sketch of how the problem arose, coupled with an analysis of the results of anti-Christian views of human nature.

Modern man, from Leonardo Da Vinci to the present, begins from himself (not from God's revelation), with Man as the only integration point, and tries to find all knowledge, meaning, and value on the basis of human inquiry alone.¹⁹ Like Michelangelo's statues, modern man wants to tear himself from the rock and be autonomous and free. But with Hegel and Kierkegaard came a division between rationality (which had proven incapable of producing an integrated and meaningful view of life) and all that is distinctly human, e.g., purpose, love, morals, personality, dignity.²⁰ The distinctly human was relegated to an irrational leap in the dark. Moreover, many modern naturalists take a further step, reducing everything to mechanics and particulars alone.²¹ But without universals, no meaning or morals or anything distinctly human remains. All that is left, in the modern secular mind, is a cause-effect nexus encompassing everything, including man. Schaeffer often calls this "the uni-

formity of cause and effect in a closed system." This is especially seen in the social sciences. Ironically, the line of thought that began with man's quest for freedom ends with the complete loss of human dignity as seen in Skinner's behaviorism.²² In Schaeffer's terms, modern man has fallen below the line of despair because he "has tried to build a system out from himself, but this system has come to the place where there is not room in the universe for man."²³

The cosmology that frequently accompanies modern humanism claims that impersonal matter and energy have always existed and that, with enough time and chance, man has evolved. But this view reduces man to an accidental bundle of molecules, no different from any other bundle of molecules.²⁴ Humanity and personality disappear from view, for it is difficult to maintain belief in a real humanity while affirming an impersonal ultimate.

Unable to live with these results of western humanism, many moderns are turning to various forms of eastern mysticism and pantheism. But pantheism, rather than elevating man, also reduces him to the impersonal for "if we begin with less than personality, we must finally reduce personality to the impersonal."²⁵ Pantheism, like western naturalism, provides no ultimate basis for personality because it has no personal God in view. And pantheism has no basis for distinguishing man from nature. Again, there is no basis for human dignity.²⁶

Such views, when held by large numbers of people, are not without result, for one's thought world inevitably shapes one's actions.²⁷ The chief result observable in today's society is a practical disregard for human life. While the bane of abortion represents a prime example of such disregard, other examples are not difficult to find, e.g., personal cruelty, racism, the abuse of genetic knowledge, infanticide, euthanasia, child abuse, incest, child pornography, slavery, and the notion that some lives are not worthy to be lived.^{1 24}

Schaeffer recognizes that, despite what the secular prophets are saying, most people assume for themselves and others some measure of human dignity. He insists, however, that the only firm basis for such an assumption is what God has revealed in Scripture.

Conclusion

We may now draw some conclusions from this brief survey of Thieliicke's and Schaeffer's views on the question of human dignity. I would not want to defend every detail of the arguments of Thieliicke or of Schaeffer. Thieliicke, for example, may be mistaken to root the notion of alien dignity in redemption rather than creation, for this view betrays an undue dependence on Karl Barth's ethics, contains an implicit universalism, and seems much harder to argue in a pluralistic society than simply saying we are created in God's image. As for Schaeffer's approach, I, like many

of his readers, sometimes wonder if he does not categorize some thinkers and the flow of western thought a little too neatly. In general, however, I think that Thieliicke's theological interpretation and Schaeffer's historical sketch and analysis of the consequences of ideas can be readily joined as complementary. Thieliicke has provided a key insight into the dynamics of modern secularist systems in his claim that they tend to view individuals in terms of the significance of their functions, as determined by whatever idolatry underlies the given system. From Schaeffer we gain the helpful observation that, while western rationalism provides no basis for human dignity or the experience of humanness, the escape from reason into irrationality also fails to give a basis for human dignity.

If the analyses of Schaeffer and Thieliicke are, in the main, correct, it follows that our culture-wide moral crisis cannot be solved by direct political action alone. Thieliicke's framework would emphasize evangelism and public preaching, for it is through conversion that one is enabled to see Christ in the other. And the preached Word tends to relativize idolatrous worldviews and their effects. Schaeffer's emphasis on the effects of ideas would emphasize training Christians in a comprehensive biblical worldview and in practicing the truth more consistently. At the same time, it would encourage Christians to challenge secularist worldviews by unveiling their presuppositions, their irrationality, and their incompatibility

with normal experience. When such activities are conjoined with direct political involvement, which both Schaeffer and Thielicke practiced, the result will be a more comprehensive response to our time through: evangelism, public preaching, careful teaching of Christians, Christian scholarship,

lives marked by respect for human dignity, and political action to protect the defenseless and restrict the effects of the secular mind. And respond we must! For who knows if we, like Amos, are not seeing preliminary judgments that point to the wrath to come in our time?

Annotation Anmerkungen

¹ Chantal Delsol, *The Unlearned Lesson of the Twentieth Century: An Essay on Late Modernity* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), p. 15.

² Delsol, p. 21.

³ Delsol, p. 21.

⁴ *American Family Association Journal* (July, 1988), p. 11. In 1980, the last date for which I have precise statistics, the ratio was 2.84 to 1.

⁵ *Megatrends Two Thousand* (New York: Morrow, 1990).

⁶ *The Evangelical Faith*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena: The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p. 382. *The Evangelical Faith*, vol. 2: *The Doctrine of God and of Christ*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), p. 46.

⁷ *Theological Ethics*, vol. 1: *Foundations*, trans. and ed. William H. Lazareth (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1979), pp. 171–194.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹ *Nililism: Its Origin and Nature – with a Christian Answer*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Brother, 1961), p. 84.

¹⁰ *Nililism*, pp. 17–20.

¹¹ Thielicke's fascinating critique of Marxism appears largely in *The Freedom of the Christian*

Man: A Christian Confrontation with the Secular Gods, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), and in *The Hidden Question of God*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1977).

¹² "Why the Holocaust?," *Christianity Today* 22/8 (January 27, 1978): 8–14.

¹³ Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, vol. 3: *Sex*, trans. J. W. Doberstein (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 20–26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 230–232.

¹⁵ *The Evangelical Faith*, vol. 3: *Theology of the Spirit*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 54–65.

¹⁶ Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 3: 32.

¹⁷ Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, 2: 46–47.

¹⁸ *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 1: *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1982), p. 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁰ *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 5: *A Christian View of the West* (Westchester, Illinois, Crossway Books, 1982), pp. 114, 115.

²¹ Schaeffer, *Complete Works*, 1: 373–384.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²³ Schaeffer, *Complete Works*, 5: 180, 181; Schaeffer, *Complete Works*, 1: 358–362.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

²⁵ Schaeffer, *Complete Works*, 5: 18–19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–236, 281–293, 325–342.

The Author

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