

Frederick Herzog: *Understanding God: The Key Issue in Present-Day Protestant Thought*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1966. 191. \$4.50.

In his first book, *Understanding God*, Dr. Frederick Herzog demonstrates a thorough acquaintance and deep penetration of the most recent trends of modern Protestant thought, both in its neo-positivistic, Anglo-Saxon, linguistic wing and its western European, hermeneutical wing. The author shows himself to be an incisive and penetrating critic, especially in the first 35 pages in which he subjects Bishop Robinson, Gollwitzer, Van Buren, Hamilton, Cobb, and Hordern to an immanent critique. This type of critique also appears in other sections and is used as a preparation for the author's own solution to problems he sees raised but inadequately answered by the theologians he subjects to critique. To attempt this kind of task in a short book of 191 pages normally renders a book superficial; but with his ability to get right at the heart of a man's conception and to present it clearly, along with rich footnoting and a clear limitation of purpose, Herzog succeeds in his attempt to be comprehensive, critical, and suggestive.

The author states the focus of the book in these words, "Understanding God is a phrase that seeks to characterize the recent efforts of interpreting the word 'God' together with the attempt to state our position" (p. 13). It seeks to reorientate systematic theology by providing a hermeneutic of the word "God" and of the use of the word "God".

The divisions of the book are: I, The New Quest of God; II, The Limitation of the Historical View of Jesus; III, Historico-Ontological Hermeneutic in the Fourth Gospel; IV, Historico-Ontological Hermeneutic Today; V, Hermeneutic and Ethic; VI, The Present-Day Task of Systematic Theology. The chapters in which the author's own systematic proposal comes to clearest focus are: The Ontological Aporia (p. 40), The Historical Aporia (p. 60), and the whole 3rd division with its chapters: History in the Fourth Gospel, The Ontological Dimension of the Fourth Gospel, Nonecclesiastical Interpretation, The Diakonic Deed, The Poetic Word, The New Interpreter (pp. 65–88).

The author lets us know immediately where he stands when he comes to grips with the idea of hermeneutic. Wilhelm Dilthey's definition of hermeneutic as interpretation provides the vein in which the theological question about God is discussed (pp. 13, 14). With this decision the author places himself closer to the German hermeneutical theologians such as Fuchs and Ebeling, rather than Van Buren, Hamilton, and Altizer. His structural conception resembles strongly the fatal and much discussed correlation of revelation and existence of the existentialists,¹ c. g., Fuchs and Ebeling. By using Pannenberg and Moltmann he enriches his conception and also brings mild criticism to bear on Fuchs and Ebeling.

The structure of the author's conception becomes clear on the one side in the meaning of the phrases, "the ontological aporia" and "the historical aporia". Man is in a struggle for the truth of being. Man has an awareness of being. The author comments on this when he says, "Besides sensing himself and the world, man senses being. This is not an irrational experience. It *antecedes* man's reasoning. It is best described as prerational or precognitive, a primordial urge, a sixth sense, as it were It is not the result of his reflections on a supreme being. It is an immediate awareness transcending any encounter with nature or other human beings. It also

¹ For interesting discussions of this correlation see *De realiteit van het geloof*, by H. M. Kuitert, and *Von Bultmann naar Fuchs*, by S. U. Zuidema.

transcends the historical ethical dimensions of human life A knowledge of God, so called, what ever its contents may be is already a reasoned articulation and lies beyond the prior awareness of being. The first hermeneutical step is the examination of this awareness. Theological hermeneutic dare not even presuppose that the awareness is the question of God” (pp. 36, 37).

Man’s awareness of being as a primordial ontological experience must be fully articulated if the hermeneutic of God is to be unlocked. The burden of his critique on all contemporary theologians is that they have not done this radically and critically enough, with the bad result that God and being become facilely identified or not identified, without the need of a hermeneutic of the word “God” coming to clear focus.

Upon examination the awareness of being as a primordial ontological experience shows *aporia*. By *aporia* the author means puzzlement. The tragic discovery of man is the “radical questionableness” of his being. Herzog illustrates this with the recent film, “The Pawn Broker”. The figure “had been an inmate of a concentration camp in World War II. Having lost wife and children, he comes to the U.S. where he operates a pawn shop in Harlem. He has isolated himself completely from human intercourse. There no longer seems any point to his life. The past has made him a corpse among the living. But he continues to *be*. It is this hanging on to being in the face of its radical questionableness which provides theology with the primal level for understanding the word ‘God’. Man’s understanding of God presupposes a complete lack of understanding” (p. 43).

Now the concern to come to grips with the “ontological aporia” in theology is never unrelated “from the historical concern related to Jesus of Nazareth”. At this point the rather obvious question arises: Why to Jesus?, a question which the author himself raises but does not answer. This is the question left unanswered by all existential theologians, as far as I know, and is of importance because of the radical critique of the Christian tradition, including Jesus himself, in which these men often engage. As Zuidema suggests, their preoccupation with Jesus more than likely has much to do with a conscience formed at their mother’s knee in a pietistic Lutheran home and now troubled by a humanistic science ideal.

In dealing with the historical concern related to Jesus, the theology of the new and old quest for the historical Jesus comes into review. The result is historical *aporia*. The author summarizes this when he says, “History as such does not directly speak of God, in a resurrection [à la Pannenberg, whom he has been discussing] as little as in a cross. We have little choice but to join the disciples in their movement from one historical aporia (the cross) to the other historical aporia (the resurrection) Where history itself shows that the theological question is unanswerable in terms of either historical interpretation or historical fact, systematic theology begins. As historical datum the resurrection underlines the puzzlement of God’s involvement in history. On purely historical grounds it is quite unintelligible why a resurrection should tell us more about God than a cross. On the plane of history we are forced to view the end of Jesus’ life in terms of the radical historical limitations of every man’s life: the end might be a death without significance—as well as being the end of the road of possibility” (pp. 62–63).

So far in the correlation of existence and revelation, we have only dealt with the existence side. The conclusion is a radical *skepsis* and *aporia* (puzzlement) about being, man, and the world (including history). This conclusion can be gained, it is interesting to note, apart from any appeal to revelation, by a neutral method. Here the uncritical dogma of the autonomy of theoretical thought is tacitly presupposed,

although the author is supposedly dealing with prejudgments and ultimate presuppositions of method. Only when this negative judgment about the possibility of finding an answer to questions of God, man, and the world has been arrived at by this natural method can the answer come from revelation. In fact, the key for what is revelation concerning God must now be used to answer the situation of *aporia* (puzzlement) ascertained by this neutral scientific method of investigation. Only that revelation which provides the answer to this situation of *aporia* can truly be revelation.

Now the author finds his model for an ontological historico-hermeneutic in the fourth gospel. In the fourth gospel we have a hermeneutical concern. John is seeking to provide an answer to the disciples' puzzlement over the resurrection and the cross. John structures the sayings and deeds of Jesus in terms of his basic answer, which he summarizes in his hermeneutical prologue, John 1:1–18. The various words of Jesus are related to the Word, the particularity of Jesus' history takes "the shape of a primordial" deed. The quest for meaning finds "concrete answer in the shape of Jesus' deed" (p. 71). The particular history of Jesus is brought into relationship with the Word, and this Herzog views as related to the fourth evangelist's concern with ontological *aporia*. The evangelist is here trying to understand reality as a whole, and therefore Herzog can speak of an ontological dimension in the fourth gospel. It is also not surprising that Herzog prefers reading the Hellenistic, Philonic view of the $\epsilon\upsilon\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ into John's usage of the $\epsilon\upsilon\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ terminology in the prologue, rather than the Old Testament idea of the $\epsilon\upsilon\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ as word of the Lord. The fourth evangelist was concerned with cosmology and ontology, as was Hellenistic Judaism. He says, "We may therefore say that right at the beginning of the gospel the author, by introducing the logos concept hopes to show how the God-idea is related to man's quest for meaning. Without the experience of being, one cannot understand the quest for meaning. It is on this score that present-day hermeneutic overlaps with the Biblical hermeneutic" (p. 74). Later he says, "Having pondered the ontological foundation of his gospel, the author tries to show that the most intimate relationship exists between Jesus' history and the Word. Jesus claims man's quest for the primordial word. He is its true content. He overcomes man's ontological *aporia*. He illumines the God-idea. What man has tried to name in the experience of being as 'God' now appears in a new light. Jesus is the interpreter of the God-idea, of every naming of man's primal experience. Thus he is called, 'Son of God'." (p. 75)

The author works this hermeneutic out in more detail by showing that the fourth evangelist provides a nonecclesiastical interpretation, by which he means that the fourth gospel is a polemic against the official theology and ecclesiastical establishment of Judaism. The communication of the significance of Jesus' history to the Hellenistic Jews of the Diaspora meant a radical re-interpretation of the ecclesiastical terminology of Judaism. The author now uses John 13 as a model of the content of a historico-ontological hermeneutic as a nonecclesiastical interpretation of the Gospel. In the footwashing of Jesus, the new diakonic deed of waiting on his disciples is portrayed. He says, "Only in this radical diakonic deed could costly love be embodied, could God be incarnate as costly love" (p. 80). The author points to the interesting comments of our Lord concerning this diakonia in John 13:31–34 and shows that the deeds without the accompanying word are mute.

Now "the words of Jesus are poetic in the sense of creative words" and come with creative force. He points to the Greek form of the Apostles' Creed in which God is called the $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma \kappa\upsilon\tau\omicron\varsigma$ of heaven and earth. He says, "The creator is thus the true poet. The creativity which broke forth out of Jesus' words was also experienced as breaking

forth out of his death — in the event of the resurrection ...” (p. 81). “The art of creating life is, of course, the theme of the healing stories ...”. “Jesus’ word creatively inaugurates a new life. In his word men were confronted with a reality that fulfilled their primordial quest Thus finally the evangelist sees the Father present in Jesus’ word. In Jesus’ healing of the man thirty-eight years sick, the Father himself is acting. In his word it becomes plain that Jesus is subservient to the Father. ‘The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise.’ (John 5:19) The creativity of the Father is reflected in the poetic word of the Son: ‘For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.’ (John 5:21) In the poetic word of the raising of Lazarus it becomes manifest that there is a primordial word as articulated in John 1:1–3: ‘The word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him.’ But the primordial word can never be known in the abstract. It is always ‘known’ in the experience of Jesus’ word as poetic word. Here Jesus’ history fills the empty vessel of man’s ontological quest. It fills it in such a way that being is felt in its dynamic creativity. Only then can the word ‘God’ be added as its name tag” (pp. 82–83). “The most radical poetic word is spoken when Jesus says: ‘I and the Father are one.’ (John 10:30) The Father is present in Jesus. The Father is in Jesus. In Jesus’ words and deed. The Father is also the Father beyond Jesus. But who he is is incarnate in the Son. In this way the Father is God. He is the true poet, and his Word is the primordial poem” (p. 83).

In this way then Herzog tries to correlate revelation to existence. The hermeneutic in the gospel of John provides the model for a new hermeneutic of the word “God” lacking up till now in radical linguistic and hermeneutical theologies. One interesting point in the author’s treatments is his bringing into focus and review all the data in John’s gospel referring to Jesus’ relationship to God the Father. Over against the “God-is-dead theologians” who try to use the life of Jesus without reference to God, Herzog shows conclusively that Jesus’ life and consciousness are fundamentally tied up with his relation to God, his Father. This gospel then provides the model for a hermeneutic of the word “God”. Some feeling for the way he works with the gospel of John and his method of re-interpreting it has been given, I hope, in the quotations. There is much of value and interest which has to be left out of this review. I hope that his style of working is clear. I would like to subject this style to a brief critique.

The author is a radical theologian. Of this there can be no doubt. His view of Scripture and his use of higher criticism distance him from the biblical, Reformed camp. But this book, like the books of many of these radical theologians, places before us a challenge. The correlation of existence and revelation, although the author does not use this terminology, underlies all his discourse. It is a modern adaption of the religious ground-motive of nature and grace to the nature-freedom scheme of modern humanism. It is therefore a very complicated dialectic. That the author is trapped in this dialectic is clearly shown by the fact that he is more than willing to join in the quest for a hermeneutic. He clearly shows that he understands hermeneutic in the irrationalistic and historicistic sense, pointing to the work of Dilthey as ground-breaking in this respect. He allows for a thorough historicism, but his theology is then to provide the only way of escape. That his historicism is thorough is indicated in his ideas of ontological and historical aporia. Tragic defeat and puzzlement are the end of man’s quest for existence. In his desire for an ontology he is like the German theologians who are orientated to the later Heidegger and are also seeking to overcome historicism; but as a good theologian he must disqualify this ontological

quest which he has made as philosopher, à la Heidegger and Jaspers,² by his view of revelation. His view of revelation is severely limited by his idea of existence, so that it can hardly even be called revelation. The uncritical dogma seems to be the autonomy of theoretical thought, which the author allows and which he then seeks to overcome by his idea of revelation, howbeit too late and in vain.

This book should challenge us because it shows again that theologians must know the history of philosophy, the history of theologizing, and their interaction. It shows clearly the need which every Reformed Christian theology has for an equally Reformed and Christian view of philosophy and the special sciences. If Reformed theology does not have a Christian philosophy which supplies a proper view of the place and nature of theology, a philosophy of history (especially with norms of differentiation and integration), a philosophy of societal structures, *etc.*, which therefore gird it on every side-if it does not see the need for this undergirding, it is doomed. It is by its lack of concern and interest for a Christian philosophical foundation that it already shows that it has fallen prey to the religious ground-motive of nature and grace and is moving toward accommodation with the ground-motive of nature and freedom. It needs this foundation of a Christian philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of history, and philosophy of language, if it is going to do battle with the new social theology, hermeneutical-historical theology, or the language theology. If it does not have an undergirding in Christian philosophical thought, it will continue to find one in a humanistically inspired, eclectically gathered, theologically baptized direction. Reformed theology today thinks too much that it can go its course alone without getting involved with philosophy. This is the myth of the nature-grace ground-motive, à la Aquinas, Barth, and Berkouwer. Without facing the challenge which this book presents, Reformed theologians will not be able to do battle and exercise real critique on Herzog and, what is still more serious, will remain ineffective in leading the people of God and challenging a post-Christian world.

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²For the difference between the irrationalistic idea of ontology and the classic idea see Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.), Vol. II, pp. 18–30.