

3:00 P.M.
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April 26, 1960

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Dean Stephen J. England
The Graduate Seminary
Phillips University
~~Ed~~ Enid, Okla.

Dear Dean England,

Thank you for the helpful telephone conversation we had last Saturday. It cleared my mind on several important issues. I think I am now in a much better position to make an adequate judgment ~~on~~ on the matters about which we have corresponded.

Let me first recapitulate my understanding of the offer as it has thus far been set forth, and then clarify my response to it.

I understand that I would be serving as Associate Professor of Theology and Pastoral Care, with primary teaching responsibilities in the fields of pastoral counseling and Christian ethics. The normal teaching load is ~~to~~ ^{ten} hours and the maximum is ~~at~~ twelve hours per semester. I would anticipate carrying ^a load of student counseling in due time which, as it developed or varied would be figured into my teaching load. I understand that this offer, as it is now being presented, is being extended for one year as a temporary position, ^{pending} ~~pending~~ a policy ~~decision~~ decision to be made by the Graduate Seminary Council. I understand that members of the faculty have clearly expressed their desire to transform this visiting relationship to a regular relationship upon approval by the Seminary Council. I understand that this determination of policy is to be made without unnecessary delay. ~~If~~ I further understand that the Seminary hopes

It should not surprise us that a chief feature of the ethics of Rudolf Bultmann should be the idea of the discernibility (Einsichtigkeit) of the demand of God in the moment. Einsicht means insight; if something is einsichtig, one may have insight into it, it is discernible, perceptible. Einsichtigkeit means having the quality of discernibility, or that into which one may have insight. The rendering given this term in the English translation is unfortunate. There it is rendered "intelligibility", connoting an intellectual or scientific process as operative in the process of hearing. Bultmann does not mean to say that one may, by rational analysis, figure out the command of God in a particular situation. Rather he means to say that the demand of God is written into the situation in such a way that in itself it is not obscure but clear and discernible. Insofar as we do not hear it, the fault lies in our hearing, not in the command itself.⁵

One might say that the demand of God is "hearable", following the Biblical analogy, that one hears rather than sees the will of God. It is assumed in the Old Testament that men know of God's will only because God has spoken to them, and thereby made himself known. To see God's will, if that is conceivable, would be to visualize and reason about it prior to the moment of action, and if that were possible, it could be organized into a systematic presentation. But the Hebrew had no word for "visible", and the notion of getting possession or control of God's will was incredible to him. Man hears God's Word only because God speaks to him in the situation in which he exists. The notion that there could be a situation for which God had no will, or in which God did not have anything to say to man, was unthinkable to the Hebrew.⁶

The Good Samaritan illustrates the idea of the discernibility of the demand of God. The priest and the Levite confront the beaten man on the

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and intends in the next several years to reach out more and more toward performing an ecumenical vocation in theological education for Protestant churches in Oklahoma, consonant with the historical interest of Disciples in ecumenicity, while maintaining a responsible relationship of service to the supporting Christian Churches.

I would understand that an incidental part of my servicability to the institution would be to act as a mentor of Methodist students at the seminary toward preparing them for Methodist ordination and conference relationship.

I ~~appre~~ heartily approve of everything in this proposal except the temporary status. The reasons I can hardly bring myself to accept the visiting status are, as I have indicated to you earlier, that it would involve no visible improvement over my present situation, and ~~at least so early in my career,~~ that I do not want to get the reputation of jumping from one visiting post to another.

In your letter of April 19 you ~~suggested~~ said, "If your situation were to remain open beyond that day [May 13], I would like to have the privilege of presenting ~~your~~ your name and asking for a determination of policy which might open the way for you to come here as a teacher... This would be my preference if the way is open from ~~you~~ your viewpoint".

I have decided to follow the alternative you suggested in that letter and allow you to bring the matter up for a policy determination ^{in May}, before I make any final judgment about your proposal.

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I was pleased that you affirmed in our phone conversation that you would not hesitate to ~~bring the matter up for decision~~ request a policy determination in May, even though according to the best prudential calculation it might not be the best time to have it considered. I am quite aware that there may be good reasons for delaying the ~~request~~ for the decision for tactical reasons. The reason this ~~would~~ delay would be uncomfortable for us ^{however} is that we would not know about our status for such a painfully long time, perhaps October or February, ~~and~~ We would not know how to make plans, ~~and above all we would~~ buy a home, etc., until the matter were settled. It is easy for an onlooker to just say "be patient", but as you know this would be a matter of great concern and anxiety on our part. So, after thinking the matter over carefully, I ~~have~~ arrived at the feeling that if the matter is considered of real importance to the seminary, then I think it should not be delayed. And it ~~would~~ be more encouraging to me to see the matter dealt with honestly, fearlessly, frankly and without delay, than for it to be handled with kid gloves. ~~It seems to me that the~~ ~~The issue is certainly clear~~ It certainly is a clear issue which the seminary has to face: ^{whether} will the seminary ^{will} have an ecumenical faculty or not.

Upon consultatinn with several of my colleagass here at Perkins, I have decided that it would be best for me to await the report of that May 13 meeting before proceeding further, even though for me this involves the risk of losing other opportunities. I need not ~~xxx~~ tell you that it is because

position in politics is based on religious illusions and results in
political confusions. ⁸⁴

III

We have explicated these radically different emphases on clarity and ambiguity.

In recent American thought we are much more familiar with the ambiguity position, whereas continental theologians tend to assume the correctness of the clarity pattern. It is unfortunate that these two positions at present are not engaged in any sort of fruitful dialogue. They should be, since neither represents an integral view of a Protestant understanding of responsibility to God, but taken together they provide each other with mutual correctives.

American ethical reflection has tended to proceed inductively, deriving conclusions from concrete particular cases, avoiding the formalism of deductive ethics, whereas continental ethical thought has tended to proceed deductively, deriving conclusions from formal principles and avoiding particular cases. So it is not surprising that American thought, influenced as it is by pragmatism, empiricism and scientism, would be more capable of dealing with the morally ambiguous situation of man than with the formal clarity command of God. And a perceptive observer will not be surprised that continental ethics, influenced as they are by Kantian and post-Kantian deontology, would be more at home with the notion of the clarity of the moral demand. Although much conversation is taking place between American and continental ethics, it is unfortunate that the issue of the clarity or ambiguity of the moral demand is not being discussed, and the tension between these two views is bearing no fruit.

I am deeply interested ~~in~~ in Phillips and the ^{job to be done there} ~~teaching-~~
~~ocation-that-is-obviously-latent-there--present-there~~
~~that I am/stringing-along-with~~ your situation until May 13.
 It is because I can visualize ^{at Phillips} a meaningful teaching and
 counseling ministry ^{there} that I am so concerned to ~~work~~
 want to try to work this thing out, even with the risks involved.

~~This question might need to be raised.~~ If the Seminary
 Council should ~~refuse to~~ ^{decide to delay the} determine ^{issue of} this matter of policy
~~and~~ on May 13, even though you and the administration ^{urgently}
~~earnestly~~ sought their counsel on the matter, then what
 would I do? I would have to decide at ~~that~~ time what
 to do. That would confront me with ~~an awfully~~ difficult
 decision. I suppose I would either go ahead ~~then~~ and
 accept your offer for visiting status, or, on the other hand,
~~it might~~ terminate our conversations at that time and
 accept another position. Due to my uncertainty about how
 long these other options may remain before me, I cannot
 pre-judge that issue.

When I first engaged in conversations with you, I was
 not at all aware that my coming on a regular basis would ^{be}
 hinge on a major policy decision by the Seminary ^{officials.} ~~Council.~~
 It was not until some weeks after our conversations had begun,
 even after I had visited, that it became clear to me that
 my coming would be a new departure for your seminary. Of
 course we at Perkins have a Disciple on our Methodist
 seminary faculty (Herndon Wagers, who is one of our outstanding

Everyone knows how to love his neighbor, Bultmann says, because he knows how he himself would wish to be loved. The commandment merely serves the formal purpose of pointing out to man that he ought to love his neighbor as himself. It does not tell him what to do in order to love his neighbor, since he already knows that, by virtue of knowing what he would wish others to do on his behalf.¹⁶ The phrase "as thyself" is the key to the content of the demand of God in the moment.

The command to love is formal, and yet loving the neighbor is never without concreteness, for it never exists apart from some concrete situation.¹⁷ If one asks "What ought I to do when conflicts of values arise?" or "What ought I do when I have two different neighbors to love and these duties clash?", the answer is found concisely in the phrase "as thyself".¹⁸ This phrase clarifies the extent of what a man ought to do to love in every conceivable situation, Bultmann believes, since every man loves himself and therefore clearly knows how he wishes to be loved. "As thyself" does not tell us what love is, but it shows us that no man can plead ignorance to claim that the demand of God is ambiguous.¹⁹

Whoever continues legalistically to pursue the question "What then am I to do?", seeking for some specific content for the command of love, has refused to hear the call of the neighbor in the moment. We have pursued the matter as far as we can. There is nothing more in particular to say about what the moment demands.²⁰

The neighbor is not the man for whom one feels sympathy, nor the man one might pick out as the one most needy. It is every man, says Bultmann. Yet not every man in general, but every man who meets me in my existing situation in the moment. Every moment, of course, is such a moment.²¹

teachers), and I had just assumed that your situation was similarly ~~interdenominational~~.

I would never have wanted to become the subject of a debate or controversy on this policy matter, and certainly hope that I would never be the cause of divisiveness either in your faculty community or supporting constituents, but it is conceivable that regardless of the ~~xxx~~ outcome of our conversations, it may in the long run be a healthy thing for your seminary to be confronted with a decision such as that for which I have been unknowingly the occasion. After you have asked for a ~~settlement~~ ^{determination} of this matter, ~~we~~ ^{in many ways, then I think we} can resume our conversations from a ~~fantage~~ point that will be clearer for us ~~xxxx~~ both.

On the matter of income, about which we talked in our conversation ~~Saturday~~ ^{last week}, I ~~first~~ want to agree with you that the psychological factor in standardized base salaries for faculty members is an important consideration. I am glad that your school has regulated ranks and salaries on an equitable scale. I would not want to be the source of ~~dissension~~ dissension for any reason, and especially on this issue. So, if your suggestion (that the \$500/year additional income, ^{which} ~~that~~ would ordinarily be ^{provided} in three years under ordinary circumstances, could be advanced, and then bypassed three years hence) were not unanimously acceptable to all who would know about it, I would not consider accepting the additional income. If there were any ~~kind~~ ^{hint} of ~~hesitation~~ or restraint, I would not want this to become a divisive point (since the matter of permanent status is a much more crucial one to me). But, if it were the unanimous judgment

ambiguous. The Christian understanding of forgiveness provides an adequate basis for confident moral action in the midst of life's ambiguities.

I

Kant had the greatest confidence that the voice of moral reason was unambiguous, "distinct", "irrepressible", and "clearly audible" in every man, "even the commonest man".¹ If this were not the case then morality, he thought, would be in complete ruin.² His moral thought operated on the grand presupposition of the Enlightenment that since all men are basically rational, and the reasoning of one man corresponds with the reasoning of all men universally, knowledge of the moral demand is resident and distinct in every man alike. He did not think that it was ever beyond man's power to answer and fulfill the simple demands of the categorical imperative, to "act on that maxim which I can will as universal law." Kant writes, "The decision as to what is to be done in accordance with the categorical imperative must not be so difficult that even the commonest and most unpracticed understanding without any worldly prudence should go wrong in making it".³

Kant thought that he had captured the essence of the rational demand in its simplest form: I must simply act on that maxim which I can conscientiously will as a universal law for all men.⁴ He thought that the rational will would be determined objectively by this imperative, and subjectively it would be determined by reverence for it. The demand is the same for any man in any situation. What reason demands is not vague, Kant says. Everyone knows it, if they would only attend to it. Another way of stating the same basic imperative is that I act so as to treat humanity (whether oneself or another) in every case as an end in itself, and never as a means only.

of all involved that this arrangement would be appropriate beyond question, and would not overthrow the present structure of rank and salary ^{programming} increases, then it would make the decision to come to Phillips Graduate Seminary much less difficult for us, ~~as~~ for reasons which I have spelled out clearly to you already. Does this mean that I ^{probably} would not come if this advanced increment arrangement would not work out smoothly? I would not say that the \$6000 salary is impossible for us to consider, but it would make the decision to come to Phillips ~~xxxxxxx~~ more difficult, needless to say. The fact that I would like to ~~come~~ come to Phillips and am excited about the opportunity ^{and would like to work through these problems} ~~they~~/is doubtless evident from the fact that in ~~doing~~ coming ~~as~~ there I would be rejecting an opportunity with considerably more income and increment at a splendid University, which merely points up and dramatizes my ^{projected} enthusiasm for the work to be done at Phillips.

In closing this lengthy letter, I would like to acknowledge a healthy respect for the denominational tradition your seminary serves, to voice my appreciation for many Disciples friends I have known in the past, and my confidence that I would be perfectly at home in the context of your seminary. Needless to say, if I come I would prefer to be thought of not as an outsider but from the beginning ~~as~~ as one who intends to set himself singlemindedly to the task of serving the church in a teaching a counseling ministry. ^{Always my respected ally} Of course I would not want to conceal or diminish my Methodist ordination in affirming my new relation to a respected and loved sister

IS THE DEMAND OF GOD AMBIGUOUS?

by Thomas C. Oden
Instructor in Theology and Ethics
Perkins School of Theology

The moral activism which in the past has characterized American Christianity has been continually on the decrease since the late thirties, with the McCarthy era perhaps providing the final blow to its vitality. Today American Protestant social ethics are languishing in the tepid atmosphere of impotent confusion, passive bewilderment, and a pervasive sense of moral ambiguity, particularly in those areas in which recent theological reflection has gained a hearing. If there ever was a day when American Protestantism needed to be told that its social programs and causes should not be identified with the will of God, and that all moral action is ambiguous, such is not the need of our day, where the stifling air of an imperative-less ethics has caused all our moral striving to be paralyzed, or at least a bit tubercular. The beatniks hold a mirror to us all, with their frank acknowledgment that there is nothing worth striving for, no cause worth the effort, and no particular reason to justify our existence.

With a perfectionist pre-conception of the moral good, American Protestantism has been robbed of its most reliable basis for moral action, self-righteousness, since it has now learned that its loyalties and causes are not so pure or unambiguously right. Now it is caught in the unexpected situation of being unable to decide and act, since it can no longer deceive itself into regarding its action as unambiguously

This paper was read at Princeton, New Jersey, August 1959, for the National Council on Religion in Higher Education.

Protestant denomination,---and I am sure you would have it that way. I would hope that a real contribution could be made to the cause of ecumenicity by my presence at Phillips, and that Phillips would contribute to my developing ecumenical consciousness. If I should come to Phillips I would want to learn more about the historical self-understanding and tradition of the Disciples, and to incorporate this into my own churchmanship.

Having said all this, ~~now~~ I ^{will} add one ~~more~~ thing more. If the judgment of the Seminary Council is favorable to the encouraging of an ecumenical faculty, you may be assured that I will then accept an offer of a regular full-time teaching position if it is extended. This is said in order that you would ~~not~~ not have the anxiety of going through all this prolegomena without the ^{positive} assurance that I would come. I will come, be assured of that, if the single reservation I have, ^{which I have spoken} about ~~the offer~~, is amended.

With all good wishes I remain,

Yours respectfully,

Thomas C. Oden

The neighbor is defined as "the one who is always already before me",²² rather than one whom I first must seek out and find. Christian ethics understands not that I first go and lay claim on the neighbor, but that he has already laid claim upon me. It sees the existing individual as already in a primary I-Thou relation with the neighbor, which cries out for acknowledgement. The I-Thou relation does not have to be created by man. On the contrary, man's being is from the outset being-with-others (Miteinandersein).²³

The question "Who is my neighbor?" can only be persistently raised out of a misunderstanding of the neighbor, and more profoundly, a misunderstanding of who oneself is.²⁴ For to ask this question is to pretend that the neighbor is not already before me, and that I could exist without him. It misunderstands the I-Thou relation as something which man must first create, rather than acknowledge it as already written into human existence as such.²⁵

In the essay "Das christliche Gebot der Nächstenliebe", Bultmann defines love as "that understanding which discloses who my neighbor is, and in doing so discloses what I ought to do."²⁶ Love, he says, is an understanding of myself in an existential covenant with the neighbor in each situation. Love is not a general understanding of my covenant with man as a whole, but that particular bond which exists with my fellow human being who encounters me in the specific situation in which I now exist.²⁷

Philosophy oversteps its boundaries if it attempts to answer in detail, "What ought I to do?", since the fundamental vocation of philosophical inquiry is to ask about the formal possibilities of man. Bultmann does not hide his admiration for Kant, in this respect, who