Carl Michalson: *Worldly Theology. The Hermeneutical Focus of an Historical Faith*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967. xii, 243. $5.95.

In this book Carl Michalson combines his many gifts to present a stimulating new projection of a radical theology. He demonstrates a thorough acquaintance with modern theology, including such figures as Heim, Gogarten, Bultmann, Barth, Ott, Tillich, Bultmann's followers, and the linguistic school. For a systematic theologian he has a better than average knowledge of modern philosophy. He deals extensively and compellingly with historicism, existentialism, linguistic analysis, the later Heidegger, and Kierkegaard. Besides this he devotes a solid chapter, "Holiness and the Maturity of Faith," to the theology of John Wesley (pp. 127–158).

Michalson writes much more effectively and artistically in this book on theology than the average systematic theologian. He constantly intersperses examples from modern literature. He has the good habit of giving concrete cases and illustrations of what he states abstractly. This is far from being the usual dullish theology book.

Michalson is a very radical theologian. He is not afraid to deny the resurrection of Christ and the second coming of Christ as they have been confessed by the historic Reformed faith. In this he is in close proximity to Bultmann (pp. 177, 210-211). He seeks radically to re-interpret futuristic eschatology and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit (pp. 210–211). He disqualifies future eschatology by viewing it as apocalypticism. He uses Scripture against Scripture and believes that the Scriptures themselves are critical of the mythical apocalypticism (*e.g.*, life after death, resurrection, bodily resurrection, the bodily return of Christ) which is found throughout the New Testament. He takes his model for theology and its hermeneutical focus from the realized eschatology of Jesus in the synoptic gospels and opposes this radically to the thought of the early church concerning Jesus found in the rest of the New Testament. He borders on blasphemy in his re-interpretation of the sacrificial character of Christ's death (pp. 193–197). All this should suffice to emphasize the radical character of his theology.

The book is set up in an interesting way. The first three chapters are generally philosophical, dealing with history, existentialism, and linguistic analysis, in that order. All of these subjects are treated with reference to modern theology. Chapters 4–8 deal with various theologians: Karl Heim, Bultmann, the later Heidegger, Heinrich Ott, Kierkegaard, and Wesley. In chapters 9–12 Michalson gives his own approach to theology. Chapters 9–11 are more exegetical and stick closely to the New Testament. Michalson has a rather deprecatory view of the Old Testament and conceives of it as Jewish "pre-understanding" of the gospel. Chapter 12 gives his own more systematic arrangements of the theologian's encyclopedia in the light of his definitions of what theology should be.

There is hardly any criticism of the views presented until the chapter on the later Heidegger and the theology of Heinrich Ott. Here Michalson starts to show the general drift of his position.

Michalson claims in chapter one to be a firm advocate of historicism. He does not beat around the bush in this respect. He deals with Ernst Troeltsch and Wilhelm Dilthey. He develops as an essential prerequisite for his theology the notion of "understanding" or "pre-understanding" in the historistic sense. In dealing with the theology of Ogden and Cobb he expands "understanding" to include the new theology of the word or speech as event. Jesus is a speech event. This is what becomes increasingly important in the book until in the last chapters he elaborates it fully.

Michalson's historistic hermeneutic comes to the fore in his radical limitation of the scope of theology to history as opposed to nature. The term "world" in the title of the book does not have the usual cosmological significance but is strictly to be taken in the existentialistic sense. He says: "World is the mode of one's being-in. Thus there is the scientific world, the sports world, the art world. Yet, like the horizon, a world is not the creature or the product of man but rather makes the discoverability of man a possibility. For 'world' is the kind of reality which has a fundamental expressibility—in acts, gestures, and words. The end of the 'world' to which eschatology refers is the end of the world which occurs when, through his symbolic action and his parabolic speech, Jesus of Nazareth exposes the life of man to the horizon of God's imminent kingdom, giving man a whole new mode of being-in" (p. 206).

His depreciation of the natural sides of the cosmos as opposed to the historical is seen on pp. 205, 207, 217. This characteristic division between history and nature is found in all existentialists. The term "history" for existentialists is of a much more complex character, but all hold to this strong division between nature and history. By this they testify to their background in historicism with its unique methodology. It was a method of *Verstehen*, a hermeneutic which was to distinguish it sharply from the methodology of natural science. He says: "Modern science is a twin phenomenon with the Reformation because it defines man's relation to the world in similar terms. In both modern science and Reformation Christianity man is responsible *for* the world, not *to* it. By liberating man from the worship of the world, Protestant Christianity effected a kind of demythologizing of the world, called secularization, setting science free for unrestricted experimentation with the world. Subjectivism emerged at the point at which modern science confused its freedom from the world with lordship over it. Subjectivism is a world view which binds modern science as a fate in the same way the law bound the pre-Christian man, for it bases man's independence from the world upon man himself, making man the source of meaning for all reality" (pp. 179–180). Later he says: "One of the significant points of arrival in contemporary theology is the almost general consensus that the reality of faith is historical. The logic of faith is a fully historical logic, which means that faith ought to be interpreted as history, with the kind of thinking appropriate to historical reality. At first the position may seem reductionistic. Is not reality more than history? Is there not a world of nature as well, and is there not a realm of being? The answer is that systematic theology pursued on the model of history ought not deal with nature, because nature by definition is reality insofar as it is not history, that is, insofar as it does not involve the question of meaning for man, as history does. The consequence for theology is that physicalistic concerns, hitherto included by theology in the discussion of such topics as creation, providence, miracle, and sacrament, ought to be eliminated in the interests of dominantly historical concerns….Not even so-called 'acts of God' have a claim upon theological consideration, for if they are not history they are not meaningful for man. Thus they classify as nature, and ought not be discussed by theology. The being of God-in-himself, his nature and attributes, the nature of the church, the nature of man, the preexistent nature of Christ—all these conjectural topics which have drawn theology into a realm of either physical or metaphysical speculation remote from the habitation of living men should be abandoned. Not that the concerns they express should be evaded. Every doctrine which has existed in Christian theology embraces some historical intention. The task of an historical hermeneutic, an historical mode of interpretation, is to disengage the historical intention from the non-historical expression and to conserve and elaborate the intention. In the process, nothing meaningful is lost; but a good deal of

meaningless discourse in theology may be terminated. Such a program can be called a hermeneutic" (pp. 217–218). From this quotation it is clear how a historistic reduction destroys the gospel and also that a scriptural philosophy which sees the natural and cultural sides of the cosmos as subjected to the law-order of the sovereign God of creation is necessary to bolster Reformed theology.

Like all historistic theologians Michalson tries in a theology of grace to transcend his view of the nature pole of the nature-grace ground motive, here of course transposed to the historistic freedom-nature motive of modern humanism. He says: "Where history has been given the sense of absoluteness in life, the very structure of historical existence is changed. It is the intention of the Christian proclamation that mankind should receive its life from beyond itself, which is a life by grace. That would be to have a history in an ultimately meaningful sense. The failure of the world to get that hint from the Christian faith expresses itself in either revolt or resignation" (pp. 185–186).

Jesus brings the eschaton; he is the eschaton, and through the speech of Jesus a new historical *Verstehen* is brought into being. Sin is not conceived so much under the biotic analogy of regression as under the historic analogy of anachronism. He says: "In the new age there is only one sin: anachronism. One who lives after the appearance of the new age by the framework and standards of the old age is not living 'up to date'" (p. 175).

The historistic element in Michalson's thinking is given full sway in his view of faith as "leap" and as "risk," in which all worldly securities are abandoned. In this regard his admiration for Kierkegaard knows no bounds (pp. 197–198, 206, 126). But abandoning the world and condemning it to relativity in the light of an "absolute relation to the absolute" is performed in order to receive back the world. He is trying to complete the "double transcendence" or "double movement of infinity" of Kierkegaard (p. 126).

This comes to the heart of Michalson's theology. A sentence re-occurring constantly is "freedom from the world and for God is the reality of faith because it makes man responsible for the world, not to it." The uniqueness of Christianity is found precisely in this, that responsibility for the world is made possible through the speech event, in which in the words of Jesus God is present and man's response of mature sonship is brought about.

Worldly faith is one in which man is enabled to be responsible for the world and not a slave to it. The historistic "pre-understanding" of the man-come-of-age determines the questions to which the gospel is now forced response. The gospel that responds is one that is a radical falsification of the true gospel because this false gospel satisfies the autonomous secular man's questions and situation. Form criticism and the new historistic hermeneutic play the Scriptures off against the Scriptures, and the end product is a gospel which states that the secular man without God is ahead of the church to whom were committed the oracles of God.

In a world where the personality ideal of existentialism is having its impact on the humanistic establishment, by calling for freedom, humanity, individual conscience, more individual participation and responsibility, and even overthrow and revolution, Michalson wishes to present to the modern secular man a theological justification of the ways of the secular, godless man to God.

In an age of co-existence between world powers, where neo-pragmatism with its oftentimes evolutionistic foundation proclaims optimistically the surprises of the spirit of the scientific community, and neo-existentialism brings attention to the responsibility of man for his fellow man, Michalson seeks to resuscitate Christianity's

influence by re-crowning his systematic theology as the queen of the millennium of the future. For his understanding of the idea that Christianity brings man to responsibility for the world, Michalson says he is indebted to Friedrich Gogarten (p. 179).

That Michalson does not succeed in overcoming historicism is seen clearly in the admission he makes at the end of the book. He says: "You may say to me, then, 'you allege as Christian what any modern man can know without that faith', I do not wholly deny it. Modern man his learned to get along without God in all the important affairs of his life, assuming a fully historical existence which is an existence in which man holds himself responsible for the world. I could, of course, attempt to register as a matter of history that modern men have not, in fact, known responsibility for the world without Christian faith. The eschaton is an *historical* reality. Why, then, should it seem strange that its effects are manifest even where its sources are unacknowledged? But I would rather say, in a less defensive vein, that devotees of Christian faith do not deplore modern man's apparently independent courage and responsibility. For Christians are not bent upon converting men to Christ. That evangelistic drive is abandoned with the abandonment of direct Christology and with the dawn of the eschatological horizon. Christians are responsible for announcing the eschaton and thus for bringing the world to expression as creation, as responsible sonship. Therefore, when we hold out faith to men, we do not do so in the expectation of taking something from them, or even of giving something to them which they do not have. We do so to confirm and strengthen them in what they could indeed already in some sense have. So may their sonship he brought out of latency and fate into patency and history, and their joy become final by being made full" (pp. 215–216).

Michalson's view of dogma found in chapter 12 is very problematic and is at loggerheads with his view of systematic theology.

There are two things which are of importance in this book for Reformed theology. First, it points out the fact that theology as a special science must be kept in close contact with the results of the special sciences, especially as they are directed by a Christian philosophy. Reformed theology which conceives of itself as completely independent of biblical, Reformed philosophy will remain in splendid and holy isolation from the true terrain of its work and will not be able to do battle with historistic, political, linguistic, social, biological, and ethical humanistic theologies. It will not be able effectively to challenge the modern man, nor even to give a proper account of the elements of truth that are reflected in his position.

Second, Michalson's emphasis on sin as anachronism and the eschaton as new historical consciousness is a fruitful one. Repentance in Scripture involves a change of mind, a change of historical awareness brought by the gospel. This should be fruitfully used by modern Reformed thinkers. The emphasis of Michalson that through the gospel man is given back the world and made responsible for the world in Christ is not often recognized by apocalyptic, world-flight, evangelical theologies.

Peter J. Steen
Trinity Christian College,
Palos Heights, Ill.