

“Become What You Are”: Helmut Thielicke’s Relational *Imago Dei* as a Response to Existential Anxiety and Germany’s Postwar Economic Miracle

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Abstract

This paper considers the theological anthropology of the German theologian and ethicist Helmut Thielicke (1908-1986) as a response to the existential anxiety experienced by Germans following World War II. The paper contends that Thielicke viewed the *Wirtschaftswunder* (the postwar economic miracle) with its accompanying prosperity, materialism, and individualism as a challenge to apprehending and expressing authentic selfhood and life’s true purpose. The German people’s already war-ravaged psyche, their guilt and shame over the Holocaust, and the harsh early postwar economic conditions had engendered an existential anxiety that needed alleviating. And while the *Wirtschaftswunder*’s productivity and soaring standard of living would restore the nation’s self-respect and offer an ameliorated identity and destiny, Thielicke observed a resultant further exacerbation of the people’s anxiety. Incessant activity and newfound affluence did not provide true personal identity nor a sincere ethical or meaningful purpose to life. To support Thielicke’s grasp of the economic and existential situation the paper draws on the works of numerous historians of postwar Germany along with those of Thielicke’s colleagues within the Freiburg Circle, the ordoliberalism economists whose economic policies, leavened with Christian ethics, formed the basis for Germany’s Social Market Economy and the *Wirtschaftswunder*.

For Thielicke, human existence is relational, yet often personal identity is related to worldly phenomena exclusively, including the many and various manifestations of the *Wirtschaftswunder*. Thielicke contended that mundane impersonal relations do not define the human person, nor do they constitute true being. Instead, he viewed a person to be a person only in relation to another person. Genuine personhood is principally one’s transcendent relation to God and subsequently one’s loving relations with other human persons. For Thielicke this understanding of the human is grounded in the biblical doctrine of the *imago Dei* and the notion that the *imago* reflects God’s own interpersonal, loving, and self-giving relations within the Trinity.

The paper further contends that for Thielicke the *Wirtschaftswunder*’s individualism and resultant indifference to the poor and ill contrasted with the aiding of others he observed during the war and the early postwar period. Thielicke opposed also how an individual’s moral responsibility to care for the needy had now been relinquished to the

machinery of the state. Delegating compassion and community to impersonal social welfare programs forfeited the identity of both the fortunate and the economically deprived. If a person's true identity reflects divine relationality it is asserted by living in communion with God and loving community with others. As Thielicke declares, "Become what you are."

The paper concludes by espousing the continuing relevance of Thielicke's notion that personal relationships founded on a relational *imago Dei* constitute authentic human identity and destiny. Such a Christologically-normed anthropology is a vital and hopeful response to the current culture's existential anxiety and the attempt to fashion identity and extract meaning from worldly, impersonal relations. Thielicke's proposal also encourages attending to the plight of others (whether economic or emotional) by fostering loving personal relations. In doing so, it avows the image of God as the authentic humanity of every person.

Key References

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