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TRASCENDENCE OR INCARNATION IN CHRISTOLOGY.
GUSTAVE THILS, THE FOUNDER OF THE REVUE
THÉOLOGIQUE DE LOUVAIN

Transcendencija utjelovljenja u kristologiji.
Gustave Thils, utemeljitelj Revue *Théologique* iz Louvaina

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Sažetak

*U aktualnom vremenu, koje se nalazi između post-moderne i kasne-moderne, pitanje o sudbini povijesti postaje sve hitnije, do te mjere, da se danas mnogi pitaju mogu li se filozofija i teologija povijesti uzdići na nivo znanosti, istodobno postajući sve nesigurnije s obzirom na sadržaj onoga što je u biti povijest. Ovaj članak želi temeljitom analizom pokazati da problem nije u potpunosti nov, nego se nalazi i u filozofskoj i u teološkoj refleksiji u 20. stoljeću i to analizirajući sva djela jednog od najpoznatijih belgijskih teologa Gustava Thilsa, utemeljitelja i prvog direktora, između ostaloga, slavne revije Revue *Théologique de Louvain*. Članak se bavi trima interesantnim tezama Gustava Thilsa koje su sinteza njegova istraživanja, a govore o činjenici da povijest nastavlja s postojanjem iako je od Kristova utjelovljenja povijest podijeljena na dva dijela: ante i post Christum natum (prije i poslije Kristova rođenja). Prva teza (inkarnacionistička) izjavljuje da povijest nastavlja u mjeri u kojoj se odnosi na svjetsku stvarnost kojom se bavio i Isus Krist. Druga teza, ona eshatološka, potvrđuje suprotno, tj. nužnost ulaska bljeskova vječnosti u vrijeme, dopuštajući "s određene distance" povijesnim procesima bolju interpretaciju duhovnog smisla. Trećom tezom Thils nedvosmisleno izjavljuje da sadržaj povijesti jest trajni impuls koji dolazi od Duha Svetoga, koji dolazi izvana i, dakle, osigurava da povijest postoji i da se o*

njoj može teološki i filozofski promišljati. Thilsova glavna teza jest: Isus Krist utjelovio se u povijesti iako ona nužno mora nestati.

Gljučne riječi: filozofija povijesti; teologija povijesti; kašnjenje parazije; Gustave Thils; Revue Théologique de Louvain; temeljna kristologija; kasni novi vijek;

Anyone wishing to study the historical and salvific *climax* in which the 20th-century Catholic systematic theology developed itself, cannot disregard the theological reflections of the French-speaking Belgian Canon Gustave Thils¹. In 1949 he wrote *La*

¹ Gustave Thils was born in Etterbeek (Belgium) in 1909. After completing theological studies at Malines Seminary he was ordained priest in 1931 and subsequently sent to Louvain, where he gained a doctorate and license to teach with a dissertation on the *Notae* of the Church, under the direction of Professor R. Draguet (1896-1980). After teaching morals and Sacred Scripture at Malines he was given the Chair of Fundamental Theology at Louvain, succeeding Professors R. Draguet and L. Janssens from 1947 to 1979. He also founded the *Revue Théologique de Louvain*, whose first director he was (1970-1976). At Louvain he was one of the first to be interested in the ecumenical movement, and it was precisely because of his specialisation in ecumenism that he was invited to participate in the work of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). During the *Colloquium* on Ecumenism organised in his honour by the theology faculty of Louvain on 27-28 April 1979, Mgr Thils was granted Emeritus status. A prolific theologian also in the field of ecclesiology, Thils left his mark on the Church's life for half a century through his teaching, his writings and his participation in the Council. He died at Louvain on April 12th, 2000: cf. M. SEMERARO, *Thils Gustave*, in L. PACOMIO – L. PADOVESE – R. FISICHELLA, ed., *Lexicon. Dizionario dei Teologi*, Piemonte, Casale Monferrato (AL) 1998, pp. 1230-1231; A. HAQUIN, *Chronique louvaniste*, in *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 31 (2000) p. 318; C. FOCANT, *Hommage à Mgr Thils*, in *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 31 (2000) pp. 467-473. In addition to his works which we use here, we mention: *La notion de catholicité de l'Église dans la théologie moderne*, Sumpt – Bibliothecae Universitatis, Lovanii 1936; *Les Notes de l'Église dans l'apologétique catholique depuis la Réforme*, J. Duculot/Lethielloux, Gembloux-Paris 1937; *Tendances actuelles en théologie morale*, Duculot, Gembloux 1940; *Pour mieux comprendre Saint Paul*, Desclée De Brouwer, Bruges 1942; *Le clergé diocésain*, Desclée De Brouwer, Bruges 1942; *L'enseignement de saint Pierre*, J. Duculot/Lethielloux, Paris 1943; *Nature et spiritualité du clergé diocésain*, Desclée De Brouwer, Bruges 1946; *Jeunesse et Sacerdoce*, Desclée De Brouwer, Bruges 1948; *Christianismes et Christianisme*, Casterman, Tournai 1951; *Histoire doctrinale du Mouvement oecuménique*, É. Warny, Louvain 1955; *Sainteté chrétienne*, Ed. Lannoo, Tielt 1958; *La théologie oecuménique*, É. Warny, Louvain 1960; *Theologica e miscellaneis*, É. Warny, Louvain 1960; *L'infaillibilité du peuple chrétien In credendo*, Desclée De Brouwer, Paris 1963; *Le Décret sur l'oecuménisme du deuxième concile Vatican*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1966; *Propos et problèmes de la théologie des religions non chrétiennes*, Casterman, Tournai 1966; *Synchrétisme ou catholicité?*, Casterman, Tournai 1967; *L'Église et les Églises. Perspectives nouvelles en oecumenisme*, Fides, Paris 1967; *Exégèse et théologie*, Gembloux 1968; *Christianisme sans religion?*, J. Duculot/Lethiell-

*Théologie de l'histoire*², a work that exhibits the author's intuitive capacity to anticipate in time a number of new questions in theology which would only come to maturity in the period immediately following. Indeed, from today's perspective his work has all the hallmarks of an original effort, because it prepared a method within the various theologies of history³ which, until 1950, were still heavily influenced by a few contemporary philosophical currents, especially Marxism, at least in attempting to provide a counter position⁴. Moreover, Thils was not only a theologian of history but a reviewer of other theologians who reflected on the meaning of time and history during that period⁵.

leux, Paris 1968; *L'infallibilité pontificale. Source, conditions, limites*, J. Duculot/Lethielleux, Gembloux 1969; *Unité catholique ou centralisation à outrance?*, Église vivante, Louvain 1969; *La Primauté pontificale. La doctrine du Vatican I. Les voies d'une révision*, J. Duculot/Lethielleux, Gembloux 1972; *Droits de l'homme et Perspectives chrétiennes*, Publications de la Faculté de Théologie, Louvain-La-Neuve 1981; *Existence et sainteté en Jésus Christ*, Beauchesne, Paris 1982; *Une pastorale de l'espérance*, Beauchesne, Paris 1982; *Les Laïcs dans le nouveau Code de Droit Canonique et au Concile du Vatican II*, Publications de la Faculté de Théologie, Louvain-La-Neuve 1983; *Pour une théologie de structure planétaire*, Peeters, Louvain-La-Neuve 1983; *L'après-Vatican II un nouvel âge de l'Église?*, Publications de la Faculté de Théologie, Louvain-La-Neuve 1985; *Présence et salut de Dieu chez les non-chrétiens*, Publications de la Faculté de Théologie, Louvain-La-Neuve 1987; *Prêtres de toujours et prêtres d'aujourd'hui*, Éd. Peeters, Louvain-La-Neuve 1990; *Le statut de l'Église dans la future Europe politique*, Publications de la Faculté de Théologie, Louvain-La-Neuve 1991; *La communion ecclésiale dans le cadre juridique de l'État moderne*, Éd. Peeters, Louvain-La-Neuve 1993; *La sainteté dans et par le siècle*, Éd. Peeters, Louvain-La-Neuve 1994; "...en conformité avec l'enseignement du Magistère...", Publications de la Faculté de Théologie, Louvain-La-Neuve 1994.

² G. THILS, *Théologie des réalités terrestres*. I. *Préludes*. II. *Théologie de l'histoire*, Desclée De Brouwer, Bruges, 1949. A second edition of this work, of which we shall analyse only part II, was subsequently published in 1967². We shall use the Italian translation of the first french edition: ID. *Teologia della storia*, Edizioni Paoline, Alba (CN) 1967 [TH]. The source references of the first french edition are indicated by (=). Where they are lacking, it means that the section quoted is not found in the first edition of 1949.

³ This is admitted also by M. FLICK – Z. ALSZEGHY, *Teologia della storia*, in *Gregorianum* 35 (1954) pp. 256-298, *ibid.* p. 287. "One of Thils' merits is that he disseminated a clear terminology, in part derived from E. DAVENSON, and that he accurately distinguished the various aspects of the problem".

⁴ This, fundamentally, was the problem that had made the theology of history almost unproductive between 1935 and 1950: cf. E. VILANOVA, *Historia de la teología cristiana*. III. *Siglos XVIII, XIX y XX*, Herder, Barcelona 1992, pp. 885-887.

⁵ The reference is to the review published in 1950: G. THILS, *La théologie de l'histoire. Note bibliographique*, in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 26 (1950) pp. 87-95, in which he collects 161 titles of books and articles dealing not just with the theology of history but also the philosophy of history. Significant in

I. INCARNATIONISM OR ESCHATOLOGISM: RECEIVING A HERITAGE

Wearing his reviewer's hat, he noticed the lack of an adequate understanding of the distinction between a theology and a philosophy of history⁶. Agreeing with what R. Aubert (1914-2009) had written the year before, he too recognised that the problems raised by those who study the theological notion of *history* are as numerous as the theologians discussing it, if not even more so⁷. Despite this, there exists a yardstick by which to determine exactly when one is dealing directly with a theology of history: it is, in fact, a matter of discerning whether it answers two precise questions: "When one is faced with the number of studies in the theology of history that have appeared in recent years, one's first impression is of astonishment at their diversity. The profound reason for this is that there are many ways of understanding "history", and many concepts of how theology works. Despite the drawbacks of rigid classifications it is nevertheless necessary to select a classifying yardstick. First of all, the theology of history answers one primary question: does history have a *value*? No, or not at all, reply those theologians who favour the eschatological current in modern theology. Yes, reply those who, fairly exactly, are called theologians of the "incarnation". Once one admits that history has a value, a second question can be asked: does history have a direction? Here also, two overall kinds of answer present themselves: either the theological determination of the stages of human history, or the determination of the internal constants of

this regard is the judgement of J.M. CONNOLLY, *Human History and the Word of God. The Christian Meaning of History in Contemporary Thought*, Macmillan, New York 1965, p. 167: "Gustave Thils, Professor at the University of Louvain, has produced one of the most fundamental and articulate presentations of theology of history ever written by a contemporary Catholic theologian".

⁶ Cfr. TH, pp. 45-48= pp. 26-29. Other theologians of the period had also shown this awareness, however: cf. T. HÆCKER, *Der Christ und die Geschichte*, Piper, München 1949², pp. 11-17; C. JOURNET, *D'une philosophie chrétienne de l'histoire et de la culture*, in *Revue Thomiste* 56 (1948) pp. 33-61, *ibid.* pp. 33-42.

⁷ Thils quotes an article by R. AUBERT, *Discussions récentes autour de la Théologie de l'Histoire*, in *Collectanea Mechliniensia* 33 (1948) [from 1 (1971) *La Foi et le Temps*] pp. 129-149, according to which "il importe de souligner avec insistance que les problèmes soulevés par ceux qui entendent s'occuper de Théologie de l'Histoire, sont en réalité fort divers. Il suffit, pour s'en rendre compte, de considérer les sens très divers que prend la notion d'"histoire" chez les auteurs que nous avons étudiés. Il y a l'histoire du P. Féret. [...] Il y a l'histoire du P. Huby. [...] Il y a l'histoire du P. Daniélou. [...] Il y a enfin l'histoire du P. Montuclard [...]": *ibid.*, p. 149.

the historical movement. Such, in brief, is the current problem regarding the theology of history⁸.

It is still too soon to say whether, by stating his programme in this way, Thils was also making his own classification of the research he was about to undertake, in other words, whether he was placing himself in the incarnationist camp among theologians of history, rather than among those of the eschatological current⁹. The fact is, however, that by answering the two questions, namely whether history has first of all a value and therefore a direction, Thils is able not only to distinguish the theology of history from the philosophy of history; in the case of the former he is also able to delineate the boundaries of enquiry¹⁰. Already in the preface to the work he recognises that there are two forms or approaches to the problem. When the history of salvation is

⁸ TH, p. 63. In another subsequent work of his, Thils was able to reaffirm the same conviction, namely that the theology of history revolves around these two basic questions: cfr. G. THILS, *Orientations de la Théologie*, Ceuterick, Louvain 1958, pp. 154-162.

⁹ This was a task some of his reviewers actually undertook, such as O. VAN ASSELDONK, *Theologie der Geschiedenis in het Verleden en het Heden*, in *Katholiek Archief* 8 (1953) pp. 265-312, *ibid.* pp. 286-287; M. FLICK – Z. ALSZEGHY, *Teologia della storia*, pp. 286-287; E. VILANOVA, *Historia de la teologia cristiana*, pp. 889-890; G. OGGIONI, *Il problema escatologico del cristianesimo: bibliografia*, in PONTIFICIA FACOLTÀ TEOLÓGICA DI MILANO, ed., *Problemi e orientamenti di teologia dommatica*, II, Marzorati, Milano 1957, pp. 960-974, *ibid.* p. 972; J. COMBLIN, *Vers une théologie de l'action*, Vrin, Paris 1964, pp. 102-103; G. PASQUALE, *Jean Daniélou*, (Novecento Teologico 25), Morcelliana, Brescia 2011, pp. 98-121; D. VALENTINI, *La teologia della storia nel pensiero di Jean Daniélou, con bibliografia generale dal 1936-1968*, Edizioni Pontificia Università Lateranense, Roma 1970, p. 205; A. RUDONI, *Introduzione alla Escatologia*, Marietti, Torino 1980, p. 86; A. DONI, *La riscoperta delle fonti*, in R. FISICHELLA, ed., *Storia della teologia. III. Da Vitus Pichler a Henri de Lubac*, Edizioni Dehoniane, Roma 1996, pp. 443-474, *ibid.* pp. 469-474; A. PEELMAN, *Hans Urs von Balthasar et la Théologie de l'Histoire*, Peter Lang, Bern – Frankfurt am Main – Las Vegas 1978, pp. 70-71; according to this last review the principal title *Théologie des réalités terrestres* is what justifies this classification. For a broad overview of the discussion that opened up in those years, see also B. BESRET, *Deux chapitres d'histoire du vocabulaire religieux contemporain en France: Incarnation et Eschatologie 1935-1955*, Desclée De Brouwer, Paris 1964, pp. 23-166, and J. FAMERÉE, *L'oeuvre théologique de Mgr G. Thils (1909-2000)*, in *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 31 (2000) pp. 474-491, *ibid.* pp. 477-481.

¹⁰ For a theology of history the field of enquiry is obviously a specific object, namely the source of Revelation, as Thils explicitly states: G. THILS, *La théologie de l'histoire*, p. 88: "Les théologies de l'histoire se présentent sous des formes assez diverses, parce que leurs auteurs poursuivent un *objectif concret* très varié; toutes cependant ont droit au titre de "théologie" de l'histoire, dans la mesure où elles sont réellement construites en fonction de données puisées aux *sources de la révélation*".

set within a descriptive framework of its fundamental stages – creation, elevation, redemption and glorification – the theology of history fulfils the task of providing *knowledge* of the beginning, end and middle of the entire history of creation. This theology of history is good at explaining the fact: “that” God is active in this world, but is less clear in explaining “what” the world becomes under the action of God¹¹.

The second form is found whenever the accent is placed on the history of humanity, on daily realities, on the *reality of the world*¹². This second form, being eminently dialogical in character, entails at least two dangers according to Thils: on the one hand it does not sufficiently clarify the radical discontinuity that exists between man’s work in the world and that of the Lord’s Spirit, which is universal. On the other hand, it does not ensure in advance what place is to be assigned to history or to the economy of salvation and is for that reason very difficult to construct¹³.

Discrediting the interpretation given by some of his contemporaries regarding his *Théologie de l’histoire*¹⁴, Thils opts instead for the first form of doing theology about history, both because it recaptures the primacy of salvation history¹⁵ and because it studies the “fundamental law” of the Christian order, namely the kind of influence exercised by the Spirit on this world in the state of becoming. Indeed his work, after two introductory chapters, is essentially structured around three poles: the action of the Spirit in the Christian believer; the latter’s positive intervention in this world once he is enlightened by the Spirit, and the search

¹¹ Cfr. TH, pp. 11-12= pp. 7-8.

¹² Cfr. G. PASQUALE, *Finding Reason in History. For a Philosophy of History as a Science* (Academical Philosophical Studies), Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin 2014, pp. 67-81.

¹³ Cfr. TH, p. 12= pp. 7-8.

¹⁴ Cfr. O. VAN ASSELDONK, *Theologie der Geschiedenis*, p. 284; P. HENRY, *The Christian Philosophy of History*, in *Theological Studies* 13 (1952) pp. 419-432, *ibid.* pp. 419-422.431.

¹⁵ Thils does not repeatedly use the technical expression “salvation history”, but rather limits himself to speaking more simply of “history”. However, this should not lead us to think that he distances himself from the sensitivity, widespread after Vatican Council II, which saw in that expression a synthetic category and an appropriate *theologumenon* by which to rethink the whole of theology, in accordance with the dimension of salvific historicity. His theology of history is rather a search for a balance between the assimilation of this latter dimension and the need – which in those years amounted also to a *Leitmotiv* – for dialogue with “worldly” reality.

for the *underlying motive force* of history as it emerges from the interchangeable activity of these two subjects. In this way Thils eventually manages to shed light on what for him constitutes the theology of history.

II. APPROACH IN THE THEOLOGY OF HISTORY: DISCONTINUITY AS AN ATTRIBUTE IN THE UNFOLDING OF SALVATION HISTORY

Thils considers first of all that the human spirit is now aware of the existence of a process of historical becoming, and that therefore time and its duration take on meaning. Time is thought of as a prime reality, not only because in it one can verify the reality of *events*, but also because it is easily possible to predict how a particular maturation of the process of becoming will give rise to *happenings*. The same human spirit, furthermore, nourishes the hope of being able to bring to the world a value that is genuine and sincere, since humans desire their actions to be "efficacious"¹⁶. Nevertheless, this leaves one important question in the background, mainly on account of the impact of this new sensitivity on the theology of history. To be specific: "Everything that has been written about the Christian meaning of history for many years testifies to the lack of a traditional body of thought previously systematised in antiquity or in the medieval period. [...] Is there a theology of history? Is there a Christian philosophy of history? Many authoritative interpreters of Christian thought reply in the negative. And the discussion is by no means closed. [...] If the world possesses an idea of genuine history, it owes this to Christianity: this is the conclusion of authors who have studied the meaning of history in various systems of thought"¹⁷.

The question raised by our author can be better defined if understood in this way: he admits that a *system* of theological thought on the value of history has been lacking for centuries, but he does not on that account deny the role of Christian theology at the time in bringing out the genuine value of historicity in general, and probably, in creating the epistemological foun-

¹⁶ According to Thils, this conviction is a summary of the notions received from Hegel's philosophy of history (1770-1831), from the historical materialism of Marx (1818-1883), from the creative evolutionism of Bergson (1859-1941), from Spengler's theory (1880-1936) on the rise and fall of civilisation, and from the task of temporality which had entered anthropology according to Heidegger (1889-1976), mentioned in TH, pp. 16-22= pp. 9-13.

¹⁷ TH, pp. 22-23= pp. 14-15.

dations of historicism in the last century, precisely through reciprocal contact and influence¹⁸.

More precisely, Christianity has reappropriated the value of time, altering the Jewish concept and completing it by means of the fulfilment and crowning brought about by the incarnation of the Word and the insertion of humanity into Christ: all our temporal acts are also acts of the Son of God, who has truly become one of us¹⁹. In other words, what is specific in Christianity's re-evaluation of history is the fact that it reinstates the dimension of the singular and the particular in history²⁰, present and future²¹, continuity and discontinuity. The question of meaning is implicit within these pairs of opposites. In the last pair in particular, Christianity stresses the *discontinuity*²² when within the time

¹⁸ The second draft of *Théologie de l'histoire*, entirely recast by the author, which appeared in Louvain in 1967², presents some unpublished sections in comparison to the first edition, precisely those sections that attempt to incorporate the new elements brought in by Vatican II, while leaving the general structure unaltered: cfr. TH, pp. 38-43= pp. 22-26. Some features of existentialist philosophy of history and of personalist philosophy are studied in greater depth, features which he had only mentioned in a preliminary way ten years earlier. Among these features are the historical structure of man as an incarnate spirit, intersubjectivity and its constitution in time and, nonetheless, that "human time is "our human way of being present to the world and of exercising our human tasks within it": TH, p. 42. Despite this, although there was nothing to fear from existentialist philosophy, Thils would never fully ratify the demands of existentialism that had found their way into theology, as he had hoped in another of his works, G. THILS, *Orientations de la théologie*, p. 163: "En ce sens, la théologie ne doit pas craindre la philosophie existentielle. Elle a tout avantage à ne pas oublier la richesse irréductible de *l'expérience* de la foi surnaturelle. Elle a tant à prendre dans l'étude du sujet croyant pour garantir le *réalisme* des belles synthèses objectives médiévales". Italics ours.

¹⁹ Cfr. TH, p. 24= p. 15.

²⁰ In this regard, Thils refers to the famous work by J. GUITTON, *Le temps et l'éternité chez Plotin et Saint Augustin*, Boivin, Paris 1933, p. 359, which gave this expression of Christian personalism, basing it on the dimension of historicity: "Un échange se fait: le Christ est né, il est mort comme l'un d'entre les hommes; mais à son tour l'homme vit, souffre, meurt et doit revivre comme il a fait. Alors une dignité nouvelle vient revêtir d'en haut les événements les plus ordinaires. Le temps de *chaque existence humaine* reçoit une qualité supérieure, et dans ses moindres parcelles. L'ordre moral n'est plus général et abstrait, il devient *personnel et historique*", with our italics.

²¹ In this sense he refers back to the linear concept of time in the biblical history of Revelation, following the presentation of O. CULLMANN, *Christus und die Zeit. Die urchristliche Zeit- und Geschichtsauffassung*, Evangelischer Verlag, Zollikon-Zürich, 1948², pp. 43-52, even though he does not fully share it.

²² The particular principle of discontinuity as a phenomenon typical of the Christian division into phases of time, indeed as a characteristic of life in the world, had been highlighted – in a statement that still remains representative today – also

line the upward and downward movement of the becoming process includes authentic stages, unique moments during which something new appears and remains, even if only for a solemn instant that allows divinity to enter time and produce within it a definitive cut or break: “Christianity recognises discontinuity. By taking flesh, Jesus Christ entered time. We can put a date on his appearance: *Anno quintodecimo imperii Tiberii Caesaris* (Lk 3:1). A unique event, never to be repeated; *εφάπαξ*, once and for all (Rm 6:10; Hb 7:27; 9:12; 10:10). His appearance has brought into the universe something totally new. [...] No Christian can reject this vision. The Nativity, as a historical fact, is insignificant, null; it is the “scandal” without precedent for the Jewish world, the unheard-of *μωρία* for Greeks (1Cor 1:18). But its “theological” importance is considerable, inexpressible, and the purely external and late transformation of our calendar is but a pale symbol of the inner newness that transformed humanity in the moment of the Incarnation of the Word of God. Yes, an unquestionable discontinuity marks the Christian vision of history”²³.

The movement imposed upon historical becoming by means of discontinuity is therefore rooted, in Thils’ view, in the insertion of an element of total newness which, while itself also being historical in nature, nevertheless takes on the character of unexpectedness. In theological language more familiar to us today, one would speak of the newness of the gift that comes from above (Jm 1:17; 3:15), a gift which, in virtue of being new, is distinguished by gratuitousness and expressed in the grammar of amazement. This also happens, according to Thils, in the case of miracles. As essentially divine events that are also profoundly historical, they perpetuate within the ongoing flow of history the novel aspect provided by discontinuity, heightening the paradox of “discontinuous continuity”, of which the earliest Christian community was always aware²⁴.

by G. FESSARD, *Théologie et histoire*. À propos du temps de la conversion d’*Israël*, in *Dieu vivant* 8 (1947) pp. 37-65, *ibid.* p. 40: “Continuité et discontinuité, cette opération éclate aux yeux du chrétien qui cherche à comprendre le monde et l’histoire. Mais elle plonge ses racines bien plus profond, jusque dans le domaine de la pensée”; cfr. also ID., *L’Histoire et ses trois niveaux d’historicité*, in *Sciences ecclésiastiques* 18 (1966) pp. 329-357, *ibid.* pp. 349-357.

²³ TH, pp. 34-36= pp. 22-24.

²⁴ Thils justifies this statement by recalling the scientific drudgery ancient theology had to submit to in order to determine the canon of Scripture. It was compelled to accept the hermeneutical toil of uniting the two Testaments, which are, con-

III. METHOD IN THE THEOLOGY OF HISTORY: THE PRINCIPLE OF THE “EXIGENCY” OF THE GOAL OF HISTORY INHERENT IN ITS MOVEMENT

The “discontinuous continuity”, however – contained and confessed in the rule of faith of the primitive Christian community²⁵ – appears paradoxical in the face of scientific and philosophical reflection about history in general, just when it also emerges as a dynamism inherent in history itself. Indeed the historian, in the course of reflecting scientifically on history, tries to circumscribe the factor determining the flow of events by isolating it – the causal explicative intentionality – from all the factors that can direct humanity’s process of becoming²⁶. In philosophical reflection, the philosopher of history tries to go beyond the plane of phenomenal realities by moving from a physics of history to a metaphysics of the same²⁷. Moreover, if the philosophy of history remains aware of the necessary links between phenome-

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cretely, two economies of salvation. He also refers to Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-200) who is mentioned from this same point of view by J. DANIELOU, *Saint Irénée et les Origines de la Théologie de l’Histoire*, in *Recherches de science religieuse* 34 (1947) pp. 227-231.

²⁵ This expression is intended to convey that in the Creed the historical events of the *mirabilia Dei* are recounted and proclaimed as the faith of the Church. Therefore the Creed, as such, amounts to a profession of faith by the Church regarding the historical events brought about by God in salvation time: cf. J. WICKS, *Simbolo della Fede* in R. LATOURELLE – R. FISICHELLA, ed., *Dizionario di Teologia Fondamentale*, Cittadella, Assisi (PG) 1990, coll. 1149-1152.

²⁶ The mention of “causal explicative intentionality” gives us a glimpse of what H. RAHNER (1900-1968) had already had occasion to write in an article which was extremely famous in those years *Id.*, *Grundzüge katholischer Geschichtstheologie*, in *Stimmen der Zeit* 72 (1947) pp. 408-427, *ibid.* p. 410: “Es ist ein sozusagen unausrottbares Ideal der Geschichtsschreibung, das Geschick der ganzen, einen Menschheit zu einer historischen Sinnggebung zusammenzufassen”. According to the author we are examining, the position of H. Rahner is “truly theological” with regard to the Catholic theology of history, since – expressed according to the two antithetical forces of a universal tension – it ensures that it is possible to pass from a multiplicity of events to the unity of history: cf. TH, pp. 73-74= pp. 50-51. Regarding the universal tension, it was again H. Rahner who wrote in: H. RAHNER, *Grundzüge katholischer Geschichtstheologie*, p. 410: “Wir versuchen, indem wir uns die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Augustinus zu eigen machen, in drei dialektisch voranschreitenden Ideen die Grundwerte einer *katholischen Sinndeutung der Geschichte* herauszuarbeiten. Die Geschichte der Menschheit ist das göttliche Drama, das da ausgeht von der “Paradiesischen Einheit”, hindurchschreitet durch die “Diabolische Aufspaltung” und heimkehren soll zu einem “Himmlischen Endziel””. Our italics.

²⁷ Cf. G. PASQUALE, *L’interrogativo teologico posto alla storia dal concetto di “periodo assiale” in Karl Jaspers*, in *Lateranum*, 80 (2014) n. 3, pp. 575-593.

nal realities, or if it wished simply to express an appreciation of historical realities linked to a particular anthropology, this would not yet mean that it would thereby have become a metaphysics of history. It can enter that realm only by tackling the general problem of meaning; the famous question “why?”²⁸.

For Thils, then, one can never succeed in determining *one* precise metaphysics of history, just as one can never discover, analogically, a *Christian* metaphysics of history. Rather, there will be various metaphysics of history, some dependent on whichever typical interpretation of the world the philosopher has made his own as a system (deductive metaphysics of history), others connected with the immediate empirical experience which changing events present to the philosopher (inductive metaphysics of history)²⁹. Similarly, theology of history could mean, in the first place, a theological reflection on the historicity of man or, secondarily, the interpretation of the world and its history starting with Revelation, or, thirdly, the study of the Christian meaning of what is called “the world”, expressly excluding from this review the history of the Church and the history of salvation³⁰.

Now, these three types of theology of history, which can also be linked with the various metaphysics of history by reason of similarity, have not yet answered the question inevitably raised for philosophical thought by the affirmation of “discontinuous continuity”. It is at this point that Thils has recourse to the principle of *exigency*, in other words, the need to concede a relative immanence of the goal of history in its very movement³¹. He espo-

²⁸ TH, pp. 50= pp. 30-31.

²⁹ The section where Thils demonstrates the non-existence of a metaphysics of history is totally absent in the first edition of 1949. Most probably, he must have felt the effects of the debate that was then under way between historical science and the theology of history, which we have already mentioned, and therefore felt obliged to strengthen the epistemological justification of the theology of history as such. In this new section moreover, the author uses a terminology which had never appeared in the previous edition – as for example when he uses the expression “historicity of man” – which therefore confirms the thesis according to which he had allowed himself to be provoked *retroactively* by existential philosophical thought, which after 1950 also influenced Catholic theology: cfr. TH, p. 53= p. 33.

³⁰ Cfr. TH, pp. 54-55= pp. 34-35.

³¹ To establish the principle of the exigency of a goal inherent in the movement of history in no way signifies that the latter is in opposition to the principle of discontinuity enunciated a moment ago. Discontinuity cannot in itself be absolute. Rather, it is one element that interprets God’s saving actions which create the line of salvation history. In this sense, the observations of CH. DUQUOC, *Escha-*

uses the conviction that while the designs of the Lord are mysterious and the decisions of human freedom, by which human beings interact, are unforeseeable, this does not oblige us to wait for the parousia before we can write a theology of history.

Therefore the principle of exigency enables Thils to link up “his” theology of history with the famous question “why?” – a question he always inevitably postpones to the realm of ultimate causes – and to underscore in an original way the eschatological relationship that is written into the very process of the world’s becoming. This he does, both because it makes it possible to define history in terms of its openness, and above all because eschatology always inescapably remains as a dimension that permeates all theology, and therefore the theology of history³². In reality, Thils uses the principle of exigency above all to establish his research method, before actually embarking on his unique

tologie et réalités terrestres, in *Lumière et Vie* 9 (1960) n. 5, pp. 4-22, *ibid.* pp. 19-20, are useful. He comments favourably on the text we are analysing here: “Avec toutes les nuances nécessaires, il semble que soit dans cette direction que s’orientera la théologie de l’histoire. En effet, il paraît difficile de ne pas admettre une relative immanence de la fin de l’histoire à son mouvement même. *La discontinuité n’est pas absolue*, du moins au plan de l’histoire ecclésiale. Mais comment entendre ce rapport? Est-il nécessaire de dégager une rationalité immanente et une marche irréversible à tout le mouvement historique? Ce n’est pas requis. En effet, *cette raison immanente n’est pas une nécessité*, mais une exigence. Elle n’est pas à définir selon le mode des sciences de la nature, mais selon celui des sciences de l’esprit. Le terme “exigence” pour désigner le rapport eschatologique inscrit dans le devenir même du monde a le précieux avantage de définir l’histoire par son ouverture. Il existe un sens à la marche du monde. Mais ce sens n’impose pas nécessité: il peut être récusé, comme peut l’être toute exigence qui fait appel à une liberté. Le sens de l’histoire défini théologiquement par l’eschatologie est toujours en possibilité d’être récusé. Le refus de l’exigence va donc contre le sens de l’histoire théologiquement défini: la liberté de l’homme dans la reconnaissance d’autrui, liberté et reconnaissance médiatisées par la grâce”. (Our italics). The article, written in the interval between the two editions of Thils’ work, remains for that reason a privileged review of the latter’s thought.

³² “In Christian theology eschatology is treated separately, at the end of dogmatics. But, for the reasons we have given, it constitutes also the whole of theology or, at least, a formal-structural principle operating in every theological treatise. [...] We can understand the history of salvation and revelation only by living it and seeing it as a progressive process whereby the saving promise becomes progressively more radical”: K. RAHNER, *Il problema del futuro*, in Id., *Nuovi Saggi*, IV, Edizioni Paoline, Roma 1973, pp. 645-671, *ibid.* p. 647 (=Id., *Die Frage nach der Zukunft*, in Id., *Schriften zur Theologie*, IX, Benziger Verlag, Einsiedeln – Zürich – Köln 1970, pp. 519-540, *ibid.* p. 520); cfr. also Id., *Theologische Prinzipien zur Hermeneutik eschatologischer Aussagen*, in Id., *Schriften zur Theologie*, IV, Benziger Verlag, Einsiedeln – Zürich – Köln 1961, pp. 401-428, *ibid.* pp. 419-428, and S. UBBIALI, *Escatologia*, in *La Scuola Cattolica* 126 (1998) pp. 109-135; 127 (1999) pp. 839-868, *ibid.* pp. 852-854.

approach to the theology of history. His method consisted essentially in questioning the data of Revelation, as he himself says: “Let no-one be deceived: the theology of history may teach us that temporal history will either remain for ever an unfathomable “mystery” for humanity, or else it obeys certain established general guidelines. A “theology of history” therefore will not give us, *ipso facto*, the assurance that we can remove the mystery, as some people sometimes think. And the reason is this: a “theology of history” is not *a priori* necessarily optimistic. It will be optimistic or pessimistic depending on whether the data of revelation have shown that there are *divine* reasons for being so. To work out a “theology” of history means *to question revelation*, without in any way pre-judging the results of this research”³³.

3.1 *Revelation, Questions and Replies: In the Beginning is the Flesh, at the End will be the Spirit*

To ensure a coherent circularity between history’s inmost goal and its actual movement, Thils reads the data of biblical revelation through the prism of a comprehensive, all-embracing vision. Thus, he notices the teaching of Revelation that at the end all will be “according to the Spirit” (Ep 2:18-22; 4:4; 1Cor 15:28). In this way he can legitimately presuppose that the values “of the flesh” represent the starting point, or at least the point of existential beginning³⁴. Thils’ hermeneutic, in truth, consists in underlining that the movement involved in the becoming pro-

³³ TH, p. 55= pp. 34-35. The italics are ours. “Indecipherable mystery” must be understood here in the sense of Ep 3,9 “the mystery kept hidden through all the ages”; for its biblical significance, cf. G. BORNKAMM, “musthion”, in G. KITTEL, ed., *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, VII, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1964, pp. 645-716, *ibid.* pp. 692-706; G. FINKENRATH, *Geheimnis-μυστηριον*, in L. COENEN – E. BEYREUTHER – H. BIETENHARD, ed., *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*, II, Verlag Rolf Brockhaus, Wuppertal 1971, pp. 476-479; R. PENNA, *Mistero*, in P. ROSSANO – G. RAVASI – A. GIRLANDA, ed., *Nuovo dizionario di teologia biblica*, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 1988, pp. 984-993.

³⁴ This is an emerging conviction that G. THILS had already expressed in the first part of the work *Id.*, *Théologie des Réalités terrestres. I. Préludes*, Desclée De Brouwer, Bruges 1949, p. 85 (= *Id.*, *Teologia della realtà terrene*, Edizioni Paoline, Alba (CN) 1968, p. 103), when he wrote: “Correlatively, it seems legitimate to admit that the *starting point* of this evolution must be seen in everything that is not according to God, in other words, in all that is death, darkness, falsehood, in the New Testament sense of these terms so much so, that we can say that a person living in Johannine darkness, even in the age of enlightenment, has not “evolved” in accordance with God”.

cess can be explained according to the Christian vision by the dynamism triggered by the Holy Spirit, and, more precisely, by various antitheses constantly presented to us by Sacred Scripture: light-darkness, love-hatred, freedom-slavery, spirit-flesh and others besides. According to Thils, these antitheses, brought into being by biblical reflection, enjoy the prerogative of ontological and universal importance.

On the ontological level, in fact, life, love, freedom and spirit are prior to their respective antitheses, not so much on the chronological or thematic level but in so far as they represent divine reality and to the degree that they are a theological definition of reality³⁵. In fact there is more: since they come to us from God and from Revelation these theological categories are themselves *primary*. On the other hand, as far as their universal importance is concerned, they designate *the whole* of reality, both created and uncreated, and concern above all religious values, although these latter are sometimes confused with sacred or cultic values.

Of all biblical antitheses therefore, the spirit-flesh contrast can be taken as emblematic for the analysis of the historical becoming process: "Thus, the law of the entire Christian life will be entirely expressed in the spirit-flesh antithesis, in the biblical sense of those terms: Πνευμα-Σαρξ. The theological starting point is "sarx", the ultimate point of achievement, "pneuma"³⁶.

Despite this, Thils takes pains to observe that there exists another philosophical pair of opposites from which the theology of history, thus structured, must keep its distance, namely

³⁵ What does it mean for Thils that the antitheses of Sacred Scripture are a "theological definition of reality"? While admitting that reality shows itself through its intrinsic complexity, it would be inappropriate to think that reality could be theologically interpreted through constant oppositions. Reality is "multi-form", not "anti-form". Now, in a comment on Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, (G. THILS *Théologie et réalité sociale*, Casterman, Paris 1952, p. 48= Id., *Teologia e realtà sociale*, Edizioni Paoline, Alba (CN) 1968, p. 51) he clarifies the issue better and so expounds his own correct theological interpretation of the Bible: "By means of these antitheses, the sacred authors intend to define creation, in which they distinguish the divine values, those in accordance with the Spirit of God, from those elements which are in opposition to God, opposed to His will. These antitheses therefore do not have specific adequately circumscribed applications: every civilisation in fact, in its temporality, is at the same time light and darkness; light on account of whatever within it is in conformity with the divine will, darkness because of whatever is disorder, whatever contradicts the Lord's will. Thus, every civilisation is love and hate, *truth and falsehood*, life and death and, consequently, it is "earthly" and "heavenly".

³⁶ TH, p. 81= pp. 56-57.

the famous contrast between spirit³⁷ and matter. In actual fact, between the two types of antithesis there remains an essential difference: in the scriptural pairs of opposites, not everything that is of the Spirit is necessarily “spiritual”, following the accepted meaning of the biblical word πνευματικοφ, since it is quite true that there can be realities of the human spirit, such as intelligence and will, which are still truly under the dominion of the σαρχ. Thus, correspondingly, some “fleshly” realities, such as those assumed by the unique Person of the Word, the Son of God, or the transubstantiated matter of the Eucharist, are truly divine, spiritual realities. Neither can it be said, according to Thils, that the biblical pair of opposites, on the basis of the division that determined its reception, historically depended only on Manichaean influence. Rather, one should vigorously reaffirm that the etiological roots of the very idea of a “spiritual” Πνευμα are above all Judaeo-Christian³⁸.

3.2 *The Action of History as Translation of the Effects of the Spirit*

As mentioned above, the interpretation of the biblical spirit-flesh antithesis as a reality pervading the whole of Sacred Scripture enables Thils to begin expounding the first centre of attention in his research into the theology of history, namely the action of the Spirit in the Christian believer. Man truly has the capacity to write and to “make” history³⁹, precisely because his creativity, which unfolds by acting upon a given piece of reality – a *res* – far from being dampened by contact with the absolute, is, on the contrary, fostered by it.

However, this statement opens up a problem that is found repeatedly, not only among theologians. In essence it revolves around the question of how the two actors of history now on the scene interact. Some twentieth-century theologians evidently

³⁷ This position reflects Thils’ wish to distance himself from any interpretation in terms of irreconcilable opposites in a Manichean sense. What he wishes to point out is that the spirit πνευμα must be kept distinct, on this level, from the spirit ψυχη: cfr. TH, p. 85= p. 60.

³⁸ Cfr. TH, pp. 86-87= pp. 61-62.

³⁹ These expressions too, of undoubted existentialist character, do not appear in the 1949 edition. (cfr. TH, p. 89= p. 63). Furthermore, Thils even goes so far as to say: “the pneuma-sarx antithesis therefore rules Christianity: its dogma, its spirituality, its general concept of the world”: TH, p. 88= p. 62.

give an eminently theological reply *ex parte Dei*; others, such as Thils, stress the aspect that makes the existential dynamic *ex parte hominis* more explicit. In other words, Thils, while underlining the transforming dimension of the Spirit – which makes the human person not only a new creature but even a “different”, entirely renewed creature – places greater emphasis on the *translation* which the transcendent working of the Holy Spirit requires of man. That is, he stresses the Spirit’s effects on man’s learning, affective and bodily faculties and external activities. In fact, says Thils, “There is more – and here we arrive directly at the theology of history – the becoming of this innermost activity of man and of his external action, to the extent that it truly represents a “becoming”, is in its turn under the directing impulse of the Spirit”⁴⁰.

3.3. *The right Interpretation of the Incarnation, starting from Eschatology*

Having arrived at this point we must remember in any case that in Thils’ thought this emphasis has an altogether special importance. In the first place, it is justified by the totally universal scope of the Christian economy, which makes it impossible to establish any separation between “Christian” values and “human” ones. Rather, the distinction should be between “profane” and “religious” values, either of which can be “Christian” in the sense that they do not escape the universal Christian order of which Christ is the centre, since all things were created through Him (Jn 1:3; Ep 2:10)⁴¹. In the second place, however, it is interesting to note how Thils uses this emphasis, with all its correct biblical justification, to absorb the tensions that existed between the eschatological and the incarnationist currents, and incorporates the latter into the first, which is the only truly theological one⁴².

⁴⁰ TH, p. 93= pp. 66-67.

⁴¹ Cfr. TH, p. 94= p. 67.

⁴² Here then is the process by which Thils organises the reinstatement of the incarnational current within the eschatological: “The temporal history of humanity is, in reality, only one aspect of the life of creatures. It happens however that certain circles are less well disposed to receive this doctrine. Perhaps in reaction to those who on occasion have abused the expression “incarnation of the spiritual” to defend theses belonging to the social order and upholding earthly optimism, some avail themselves of an “eschatological” Christianity, which at times implies

He clearly succeeds in demonstrating that Israel's hope, connected with and nourished by an expectation of "the end of time", comes on the scene precisely with the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Incarnation is the foundation of Christian universalism and triggers eschatology, which does not simply and solely mean "later" but rather begins with our era and lasts for ever, while having already existed for twenty centuries. When one speaks of eschatology one is speaking about our age, about the present time which is also the end-time, the time of the last days⁴³, without forgetting, however, that it comprises two phases: an *inchoatio* determined by the Incarnation, in other words by the first coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and a *consummatio* guaranteed by the real imprint of the Spirit on the whole of humanity. Thus it happens that both phases truly unfold on two levels, in heaven and on earth, thanks to the unity of the universal dominion of the Lord Jesus: the inaugural phase, which we are living at the present time in our everyday life today, is lived in turn in the beyond by the blessed and the elect⁴⁴.

If the divergence between the incarnationist school and the eschatological is insignificant when one analyses the nature of the two phases on the heavenly plane, the gap between the two schools is greater when their nature is examined on the earthly level – obviously the one in which our theologian is more interested – even to the point of arriving at two extreme positions. The first admits that there is no kind of discontinuity, no final sign, between the two phases, but rather a simple, tranquil transition.

a so-called "pessimistic" view of earthly values. Now, the "eschatological" doctrine – which is the only *truly theological* one – does not necessarily imply this radical pessimism with regard to time, in fact it rather seems to us that it is the foundation of a true "optimism" concerning creation"; TH, p. 97= p. 70. Italics ours.

⁴³ There is in the New Testament a very eloquent example that confirms this awareness that, with the coming of Jesus Christ in the Incarnation, the last days, the time of *judgement*, has begun. This is the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor (Mk 9:2-13; Mt 17:1-8; Lk 9:28-36). During this episode, the seal of divinity on the humanity of Christ was manifested, according to Thils, in a complete and so to speak unaccustomed way. At that moment, the Apostles too believed that judgement had begun. *Temporally*, they were of course mistaken – that was not *the* moment – but *qualitatively* they were right, since the glory of Jesus Christ was the glory of the judgement: cfr. TH, pp. 98-99= pp. 70-71.

⁴⁴ Cfr. TH, pp. 101-102= pp. 72-73.

The second, in opposition to the first, actually denies any kind of continuity and speaks of a total heterogeneity⁴⁵.

This divergence can be explained by a theological reason, namely the difficulties caused by the problematic relationship between the natural and the supernatural. The same difficulties also not infrequently appear in that typical linguistic phenomenon whereby words such as “Christian”, “religious”, “supernatural” and others besides are improperly interchanged.

Now, while having made the principle of discontinuity a theme for study, it is clear, to say the least, that Thils cannot hold the opinion that the discontinuity is total or absolute, precisely because of his deep-seated conviction that all things are under the universal lordship of Jesus Christ, and that it is the Spirit’s prerogative to forge a unity between the two phases, the inchoative and the final⁴⁶. Despite this, it still remains for us to clarify what effects such unity has on the earthly level, and hence on the agent who acts on that precise level: man.

3.4 *The Fruits of the Spirit as Dominion over Time in the Likeness of God*

The discontinuity implicit in the history of salvation, the need for a relative immanence between the becoming of history and its end and the awareness of the opposing dynamism between Spirit and flesh, have thus been in the forefront of questions posed to Revelation with regard to a “theology” of history. They have also shown that there cannot be an absolute break in continuity within the one action of the Spirit during the age of eschatology, between the first and second phases of which the Christian believer has to live. One should rather add, according to Thils, that he shares in Christ’s universal lordship, over time as over all created reality, precisely because Christ has made him a spiritual man. It is in this way that he becomes a sharer in the Lord’s power over time and over all things that stretch out along the time line⁴⁷. The hallmark of this sharing, in fact, is that it is

⁴⁵ Cfr. TH, pp. 104-105= pp. 75-76.

⁴⁶ Cfr. TH, pp. 109-110= pp. 80-81.

⁴⁷ One should note, once again, the influence of the technical expression “time line”, which is surely owed to the work – completed two years previously – of O. CULLMANN, *Christus und die Zeit*, pp. 43-45.

a work of *translation* and *manifestation*⁴⁸ in human life and activity of that which the Spirit is in Himself⁴⁹.

Returning once more to the question put to the data of Revelation, it is easy to see that the Spirit is the wellspring of many qualities: it is a source of unity – including political unity – not uni-formity⁵⁰ between the two branches of Israel⁵¹ and of unity among all believers in the risen Lord Jesus Christ; a source of holiness which coincides with the divine life of the Father; a source of universality, a kind of permanent nostalgia for the future life, for strength and transcendent peace. Now, these “fruits of the Holy Spirit”⁵² become existentially perceptible, according to Thils, for the very reason that the greatest and most significant of them coincides with the spiritual man’s way of being and acting. To put it in other terms, it is the spiritual person’s concrete way of being and acting that reveals eschatology, or the faith-filled awareness that the messianic end-times have already arrived. Moreover, in the external manifestation of the fruits of the Holy Spirit the human person will translate the lordship of God, in a way that *resembles* it, on the earthly level⁵³, continuously anticipating the second or final phase in the

⁴⁸ Here the word “manifestation” is used once more, although in those of the author’s works we are examining it is not used in a consistent way when he speaks about the fruits of the Spirit. In fact it seems as if – even on the level of language – he is transposing his search for a balance between the incarnational and eschatological schools. Very often he speaks of “manifestation”, “translation”, while at other times he uses “prefiguring” or “prelude”, in the latter case opting to postpone any verification of human activity into the future. So, he is able to write: “La question sera de savoir si cette “oeuvre chrétienne” réalisée dans l’histoire en y traduisant les “biens de l’Esprit”, est une *préfiguration*”; G. THILS, *Théologie et réalité sociale*, p. 214= p. 217. Italics ours.

⁴⁹ Cfr. G. PASQUALE, *Teoria e teologia della storia. L’uomo alla ricerca del proprio senso*, (Filosofia – Biblioteca di Testi e Studi – 1066), Carocci Editore, Roma 2016, pp. 596-618.

⁵⁰ Cfr. TH, pp. 118-119= pp. 87-89.

⁵¹ Cfr. TH, pp. 112-116= pp. 82-86.

⁵² It must be observed that only after having alluded to the action of the Spirit on Israel in the Old Testament, and on the believing witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the New, does Thils add to the Spirit the attribute “Holy”: TH, p. 116= p. 86. For Thils the Spirit is therefore “Holy” ever since the alliance with Israel, but the author’s intention is better understood when we remember how he explained the term “spirit” by the headword “pneumatikoj”, which, as is now clear, does not immediately refer back to “spirual” being.

⁵³ Resemblance to God, in the last analysis, is founded on the incarnation of Christ, in whom the effects of the Holy Spirit achieved their full expression. The context is therefore Trinitarian: “What this means in reality for man in the world is

inaugural or first one: “Ultimately therefore, man’s power over nature and physical forces ought normally to flow from a fullness of grace and likeness to God. And if this dominion is at times exercised by a person lacking in any sort of divine life, it is nonetheless, by its very nature, no less a visible “translation” or temporal “expression” of inner holiness, as external charity and all the virtues are”⁵⁴.

For Thils, the way in which a person implements this in real life seems to have a dimension that *implicitly* anticipates the future: whatever he does, by the very fact that a man acts, he is inescapably introduced into the flow of historic becoming and propelled towards a horizon of unimpaired optimism⁵⁵. But then, what future is Thils speaking of?

IV. THE PROPHETIC VALUE OF A THEOLOGY OF HISTORY

In this way, Thils’ reflective way of proceeding has led not only to the rediscovery but the reinstatement of the incarnational dimension of human activity in history. He bases this reinstatement on the eschatological value of this activity at the end of time, and on the fact that it operates existentially in a spiritual manner. However, it is fairly easy to wonder whether such human activity is merely an anticipation of the future, or whether it also has a prophetic dimension, precisely because of the eschatological foundations on which it rests. Human history, in reality, is basically the fruit of man’s creativity, and it is within that creativity, within the best that it represents, that one must look

not easy to describe. For the Christian, however, the search finds support in the existence of a man in whom the action of the Spirit did express itself: Jesus of Nazareth, our Lord. God has given us a “sign” of His nearness, which in no way compromises His transcendence: the humanity of Christ. The creative Word, through whom and in whom all things exist, reveals its human proximity. This data of Revelation is of paramount importance in order to discover the meaning that God imprints upon His work. In fact, in one case, God’s activity in history takes concrete shape for us: He makes Himself human. It is possible to locate the action of the hidden God in the world: it assumes historical consistency”; TH, p. 131= p. 96; cf. also CH. DUQUOC, *Eschatologie et réalités terrestres*, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁴ TH, p. 120= p. 89.

⁵⁵ In those years Thils was writing yet another work, in which he repeatedly returns to the optimistic dimension of Christian life, founded mainly on the historical fact of the Incarnation, which brings hope and the certainty of hope. (Rm 5:5): cfr. G. THILS, *Transcendance ou Incarnation? Essai sur la Conception du Christianisme*, É. Warny, Louvain 1950, pp. 27-49; pp. 68-69.

to find the famous *underlying principle*, the fundamental norm of action, the essential prophetic sign of history⁵⁶.

But this underlying principle has already been identified, through Revelation, in the permanent spirit-flesh antithesis; it follows, therefore, that it is the *implementation* of this principle in practice that will reveal whether the antithesis does have a predominantly prophetic value. From a static point of view it will be on the basis of their “spirituality” that a person or group of people can ultimately be judged, just as, from a dynamic point of view, it is only at the end that one can form a judgement of their actions in general. This spiritualising activity is therefore made specific by bringing to the world spiritual values, by acts both meritorious and non-meritorious, which nonetheless constitute real progress⁵⁷. In fact, as Thils points out: “To refuse to give ferments of spirituality to the world is equivalent to refusing to co-operate with Christ in the profane domain as such. Such co-operation, of course, can be done in different ways: directly, by those who operate *in mundo*, or indirectly, by those who sacrifice themselves *pro mundi salute*. But since the temporal development of the world is an incontrovertible fact, to abstain from it or to refuse it is the same as opposing it. [...] Anyone can say at any time that their activities – taken as a whole or in detail – possess a “Christian” significance, not only because they are meritorious but because in the earthly order they bring about the complete Christian order. [...] As for theology, it will need to keep in mind this soul, which is the action of the Spirit in man and in the world”⁵⁸.

⁵⁶ Cfr. G. THILS, *Transcendence ou Incarnation?*, pp. 22-27. Also the first part of the last chapter of *Id. Théologie de l'histoire* does not appear in the first edition of the work. As we shall show, many other completely new sections of this last chapter show how Thils tried to enter into profound dialogue with the surrounding theological establishment, which in the interval between the first and second edition had changed significantly. For this reason Thils quotes pre- and post-conciliar documents which he sees as particularly consonant with his view.

⁵⁷ TH, p. 135= p. 99; cfr. also G. THILS, *Transcendence ou Incarnation?*, pp. 63-68.

⁵⁸ TH, pp. 135-136= pp. 99-100. In other studies he subdivides more accurately the possible categories of spiritualising activities within human society in general. There can in fact be “Christian” acts in a particular sense which are not necessarily meritorious, acts that are “Christian and meritorious” in the full sense, meritorious acts performed by non-Christians, evil acts that, paradoxically, contribute to progress, and acts of the renunciation of progress which are an obstacle to it: cf. G. THILS *Orientations de la Théologie*, 159-162.

While aware that it is somewhat risky to put forward a theological reflection on a given civilisation, the Christian is strengthened in his hope to continue his action, precisely because he can have a certain clarity about the meaning of universal history, especially as regards the return of creation to God⁵⁹. This is why one can and must speak of human activity in history having prophetic, and not merely anticipatory, importance, even though this means placing oneself within the sometimes obscure becoming of universal history and hence within the very heart of the *mystery* which we have tried to examine.

Despite this, we know already that resurrected humanity will be in-formed by the Holy Spirit, to the extent of attaining all the qualities and fruits, already anticipated, of the same Spirit⁶⁰. He is already present in history, in mystery. It would therefore be quite improper to believe that: “the “after” life will be absolutely different from that of “today”. The life of God [*divine*] remains God’s life. The Spirit’s hold [*emprise*] over us remains that of the Spirit. Faith knowledge, even though it is *per speculum in aenigmate*, is still knowledge: *cognoscimus*. Therefore we may normally expect to see the whole of a person, and hence societies and the world itself, welcoming the Spirit and being thereby transformed. It is the contrary that would need to be demonstrated”⁶¹.

⁵⁹ This is also the opinion of T. Haecker (1879-1945), who, along with Thils, writes: “Der Christ kann kraft der Offenbarung längst über den Sinn der Universalgeschichte, nämlich *als der Rückkehr der Kreatur zu Gott*, einigermaßen im klaren sein und zu gleicher Zeit in einem beängstigenden Dunkel sein über den partikularen Sinn der Geschichte einzelner Völker, die noch im Prozesse liegen – dieses Wort auch juristisch verstanden – und der erst im dramatischen Verlaufe und *ganz erst an dessen Ende offenbar werden wird*, wenn er auch in einer Ahnung oder in einem Mythos oder in Intuitionen der Dichter dunkel schon gegeben sein mag”: T. HAECKER, *Der Christ und die Geschichte*, pp. 105-106, italics ours. Cfr. Also G. PASQUALE, *Opus historiae, opus Trinitatis. La Trinità come liturgia divina d’amore nello scorrere del tempo*, in *Communio. Rivista Internazionale di Teologia e Cultura* 28 (2000) n. 2, pp. 19-40, *ibid.*, pp. 28-32.

⁶⁰ The encyclical *Populorum progressio* – quoted by Thils in the second edition of his research – invokes this goal as an example of a development that would be positive in any case. It is the transition by which “*homines a minus humanis vitae condicionibus in humaniores transeant*”: PAOLO VI, Lettera Enciclica *Populorum progressio*, numero 20, (26.3.1967), in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 59 (1967) pp. 257-299, *ibid.* p. 267; cfr. also G. THILS, *Théologie et réalité sociale*, pp. 208-215= pp. 211-218.

⁶¹ TH, p. 141= p. 103.

According to Revelation it is certain that, at the end, the whole of humanity – and therefore the history it weaves – will be the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit (Ep 2:18,22). However, when it comes to applying that certainty to the real facts of historical becoming, we find at least two typologies of interpretation. There is a first group of theologians who in tracing the universal history of the world see it as bathed in a beneficent divine determinism or, what amounts to the same thing, in divine Providence. In it they discover a progressive line that allows one, by turning towards the future, to glimpse the succeeding lines of development, which are predictable on the basis of the intrinsic dynamic of the line itself⁶². On the other side, there is a group who deny any possibility of finding even the thinnest line of continuity within the succession, still less of foreseeing the development within it. Future history is therefore so intrinsically correlated with the arbitrary decisions of human freedom that any interpretation of its successive stages would be reckless to say the least.

Thils, while not saying so explicitly, seems to incline towards the first of these positions⁶³. In line with the biblical data he is

⁶² To avoid erroneous interpretations we have to remember that G. Thils does not attribute to these theologians the risky attempt to determine the successive *stages* within the line of progress. “Les théologiens qui estiment pouvoir donner quelques prudentes indications sur la direction de l’histoire, s’efforcent de déterminer, non point les étapes successives, mais les *constantes intimes* de son évolution. Prenant comme point de départ – hypothèse ou postulat! – le fait de l’évolution en sa signification générale, ils essaient d’en indiquer les orientations foncières et ce, d’après les sources inspirées de la révélation. Le terme de l’évolution s’exprime, d’après ces auteurs, par les mots: unité, libération, sainteté et élévation morale, conscience supérieure, etc.”: G. THILS, *Orientations de la Théologie*, p. 158. Italics our.

⁶³ As he in fact explicitly declares in G. THILS, *Orientations de la Théologie*, p. 158. In the theological section of another work written many years later, Thils’ personal opinion on the matter can be easily and more clearly gathered. Note that to the two positions he adds a third: “Les eschatologies “universelles” sont de trois types. D’abord, la destruction totale – incendie, froid, immersion des terres – en antithèse avec la création. Puis, les histoires “cycliques” avec le “mythe de l’éternel retour”: accablante monotonie de ces sagesse antiques, pour qui le déroulement des temps n’est qu’un “devenir sans substance”, une “suite de générations et de corruptions, s’enchaînant selon ce principe que ce qui se rapproche le plus de l’éternel, c’est que la génération elle-même toujours se refasse”. Enfin, il y a les histoires “linéaires”, pour les quelles le temps passe irrémissiblement, et qui ont une fin, un terme. La tradition judéo-chrétienne est de cet ordre; mais on rencontre des perspectives du même genre dans quelques textes égyptiens et certaines croyances manichéennes et mazdéennes. Dans la révélation biblique, en effet, toutes les figures, toutes les images relatives à ce statut céleste nous ouvrent à un à-venir de plein accomplissement, dans la ligne de ce que signi-

convinced that there is a line of temporal evolution of the world which is determined by continuous progress, either because, as anyone can see from Revelation, good truly does dominate evil (the beast is *already* mortally wounded), or because the line of progress must be understood in its evangelical sense. This last insight, placed thus within his theology of history, actually turns out to be quite original. In fact Thils explains that the idea of progress must be understood as depending on the gospel teaching on the beatitudes, and that for this reason it creates an interesting analogy between the messianic expectation that marked the history of the Jewish people for centuries, and the “spiritual orientation” that is a feature of universal history and will achieve its purpose at the appropriate time⁶⁴. Ultimately, this spiritual orientation is based on an optimism justified by the nature of God, by reason of the lordship of Christ, and on the certainty that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world (Jn 14:16-20; Mt 28:20).

The justification for Thils’ theology of history, therefore, is eminently trinitarian⁶⁵. Undoubtedly his theology has the value of a prophetic statement, because the Christian has reason enough to act upon and to mould the real world, spurred on by irrepressible hope. Thils takes his place, it can now be said here, among those who certainly favour the incarnational dimension, but its basis, for him, lies in the Christian’s original and heightened awareness that he finds himself acting in the last times.

CONCLUSION

Gustave Thils’ book *La Théologie de l’histoire* has been described as a search for a new method in the theology of history, spanning the fifties, a time of imbalance between the eschatological and incarnationist currents. To achieve his purpose, Thils above all contributed to ensuring the autonomy of theology of

fient les vocables: joie, vie, amour, vérité, harmonie, bonheur, intégrité. Plénitude, etc.”; cfr. G. THILS – J. BARREA, ed., *Une pastorale de l’espérance. Théologie-stratégie*, Beauchesne, Paris 1982, p. 37.

⁶⁴ Cfr. TH, p. 145= pp. 106-107

⁶⁵ Borrowing the image from a classical example, G. Thils had already stated that the earthly Jerusalem can be an image of the Trinity if it allows itself to be modified by the divine profile that shapes the heavenly Jerusalem. The latter therefore remains the *medium* between the Trinity and the earthly Jerusalem: cfr. TH, pp. 116-118= pp. 86-87; cfr. also G. THILS, *Théologie et réalité sociale*, pp. 47-56= pp. 50-59.

history from philosophy of history, basing the first on an inquiry into history starting with the data of Christian Revelation. It is this data that guides the theologian in his analysis, by means of certain basic principles: one is the phenomenon of discontinuous continuity, which comes about because of the insertion of certain historical facts “from above”. These facts, while unsubstantial in themselves, are considerable in the eyes of believers. Another is the principle of exigency, the need for an intrinsic goal to exist, inscribed into the historic process of the world’s becoming. This should explain the paradox of human freedom, which is unpredictable, and that of the mysterious action of God, who thus makes history appear discontinuous. Finally there is the principle of “ontological” certainty that, at the end of the process of becoming, there will be dominion by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit (as is deduced from Sacred Scripture) is itself the intrinsic goal of the movement of history and is the one who endows human activity as historical subject with a likeness to the action of God Himself, through the practice of the beatitudes.

Therefore, the method devised by Thils for studying the theology of history could be defined as an attempt to establish the autonomy of the theology of history *vis-à-vis* the philosophy of history, and to do so by means of a factor indigenous to theology, namely the supernatural presence of the Holy Spirit. Hence the theology of history will find it necessary to identify an ultimate goal within the historic process of becoming. Methodologically, this need is also the prerogative of the philosophy of history, in so far as it seeks ultimate meaning. Theology however seeks answers from outside, from Revelation, and therein lies its method.

From this viewpoint Thils’ theology of history cannot simply be classified as “incarnational”, unless one ignores the statement that, for him, eschatological doctrine is “the only one that is truly theological”⁶⁶. To do so would also ignore everything he did to reintegrate the incarnational into the eschatological current. Attention to worldly realities, which for Thils remains an area of particular interest, needs to be reinterpreted in the light of two of his insights: first, his conviction that the eschatological dimension has begun in our time and lasts for ever, or more precisely, that it does so in virtue of being eschatological; secondly, the prophetic significance and importance of Christ’s action. When

⁶⁶ TH, p. 97= p. 70.

the Christian, moved by the Holy Spirit, acts in history, he rises above it because his hope-filled attitude betrays the certainty of something expected: to be precise, the expectation of something “new”.

TRASCENDENCE OR INCARNATION IN CHRISTOLOGY.

Gustave Thils, the founder of the *Revue Théologique de Louvain*

Summary

In the present time, which is between the post-modernism and late-modernism, the question of the fate of history is becoming ever more urgent, to that extent that today many ask whether it is possible to raise philosophy and theology of history to the level of science, which is at the same time increasingly uncertain considering the content of what essentially history is. The aim of this article is to thoroughly analyze and show that the issue is not entirely new, but it is both in philosophical and theological reflexion of the 20th century, which is evident in the analysis of all the works of a famous Belgian theologian Gustave Thils, who was, among other things, the founder and first editor of the well-known journal *Revue Théologique de Louvain*. The article deals with three interesting theses of Gustave Thils, which are the synthesis of his research and speak about the fact that history continues to exist although Christ's incarnated history is divided into two: ante and post Christum natum (before and after Christ's birth). Reading Thils, the first thesis (the incarnative) states that history continues to the extent it refers to the world reality, which Jesus Christ deals with too. The second thesis, the eschatological one, confirms the opposite, i.e. the necessity of entering into the time of flashes of eternity, allowing historical processes, “at a certain distance”, to better interpret spiritual meaning. In the third thesis Thils unambiguously declares that the content of history is a permanent impulse that comes from the Holy Spirit, coming from the outside, and, therefore ensures that history exists and that it can be theologically and philosophically contemplated. Thils stands for neither the first nor the second thesis, but, using a balanced dialectics between transcendence and immanence (incarnation), he certainly con-

tributes to the restoration of Christology as such. Therefore, the main thesis is this: Jesus Christ has become incarnate in history though history is bound to disappear.

Key words: philosophy of history; theology of history; delay of the Parousia; Gustave Thils; Revue Théologique de Louvain; fundamental Christology; Late Modern Age