6
Active Modes of Eternal Life

I  Introduction

As there are possible modes of eternal life with an interior focus, so there are possible modes of eternal life with an exterior focus. The division between interior modes and exterior modes corresponds to what St. Francis de Sales calls the ‘two principal exercises of our love towards God, the one affective, the other effective, or ... active.’\(^1\)

Exterior modes may be characterized, using the descriptive phrase that Hick applies to active saintliness, as having a ‘practical engagement in social or political action.’

In the two sections of this chapter that follow, with the aid of biographical and sometimes autobiographical material from the lives of four extraordinary individuals who may have lived active eternal lives, two possible modes of exterior or active eternal life will be presented: a life of charitable action in the next section and a life of social or political action in the third section.

II  Charitable action

One mode of engaged or active eternal life may be embodied in a life of charity. Such a life does not embody charity in the popular sense of occasional and relatively painless giving or charity in the sense of philanthropy, which may be followed as an avocation by the extremely wealthy. It embodies charity as an engaged way of life

\(^1\) St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Bk. VI, Chap. 1, p. 231.
characterized by active love for the poor and suffering. As St. Teresa’s life was a life of prayer and St. Anthony’s was an ascetic life, so there are historical examples of lives of charitable action. One such life is that of Albert Schweitzer.

Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) was by any account in several ways an extraordinary individual. Among his accomplishments, he was an influential theologian, an expert on the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, and a celebrated organist. He was also a philosopher. He studied Immanuel Kant and wrote a philosophical thesis on Kant’s philosophy of religion. Schweitzer’s theological works, especially his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, had a serious impact on Protestant theology in the early twentieth century.

In 1896, when he was twenty-one, as he tells us in his autobiography, Schweitzer was inspired by a thought: he could consider himself justified in pursuing ‘science and art’ until he was thirty (he regarded his theological approach to be scientific), but after that, he should devote his remaining life ‘to the direct service of humanity.’ This he accepts as the ‘meaning [that] lay hidden for me’ in Jesus’s saying that ‘Whosoever shall lose his life for My sake and the Gospels shall save it’ (Mk. 8.35). In 1905, he honored his resolution and took up medical studies as a beginning student to prepare himself to be a ‘jungle doctor.’

After six years of medical study, he passed the exams and became a medical doctor. In 1913, after briefly studying tropical medicine in Paris in 1912, he and his wife departed for a missionary station in Lambaréné. Lambaréné, then accessible only by riverboat, is about one 150 miles up the Ogooué River in West Africa in what would become Gabon but was in 1913 a part of French Equatorial Africa. Schweitzer in the next two years established a small hospital at the station and as the hospital’s only doctor provided medical care for local Africans, but he also oversaw the maintenance of the hospital. Africans with a range of illnesses and injuries came to Schweitzer’s hospital, and over the next fifty years, the hospital grew. Other doctors and nurses joined him, and a leprosaurium was established. The hospital that Schweitzer founded exists today and has continued to expand in

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