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Theology and Personality

3 Through a glass darkly

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The debate on the relation between theology and personality impinges upon all branches of theological study. In this article, a New Testament scholar argues that, in the hermeneutical process, our apprehension of the truth is mediated through the peculiar circumstances of our existence.

THAT the hermeneutical enterprise has always been part of the Jewish and Christian tradition will be denied by very few. The Hebrew and Aramaic scriptures of what Christians call the Old Testament have been a central pillar of Judaism since at the latest the first century AD, and these together with the writings making up the New Testament have inspired Christian faith and practice down the centuries. Hermeneutics implies the recognition that a text may not speak immediately to us in our situation and also takes seriously the factors which predispose us to interpret a text in a particular way and to prefer one text or one tradition to another. Even if the hermeneutical task is as old as the traditions themselves, the crisis facing the scriptures in the Church today is greater than at any point in history. Whereas for many generations of Christians the necessity of the hermeneutical task at one level or another was obvious because of the view of scripture which was accepted in the Church, today attitudes to the Bible are so varied that a simple appeal to its authority cannot by any means guarantee the validity of the hermeneutical exercise. While there are, of course, those who say that they have few problems in granting to scripture a unique authority in defining Christian faith and practice, it has to be said that probably the vast majority of Christians, either tacitly through neglect, or explicitly by their rejection of certain of its precepts as being outmoded, no longer find that much of the scriptural heritage impinges directly on the issues which are confronting them day by day.

It is tempting to say that the reason for this lies quite simply in the irrelevance of much of the Bible's contents. No doubt there is some truth in this. Nevertheless it seems to me to be very dangerous to suppose that what in fact fails to offer us a *direct* answer to our predicament must, therefore, be irrelevant. Inability to offer direct answers in no way implies irrelevance. A conclusion of this kind fails to do justice to the possibility that the insight derived from one particular historical situation may also contribute illumination to another. But such illumination is not normally of the order of prescriptive advice; nor is it easily come by. It results from the full acceptance of the setting and purpose of the original statement, with all the limitations that implies, and an awareness of all the circumstances which cause me to ask the questions which I ask. Thus we are not dealing in the Bible with the theological maxims of a type which have a universal immediacy of application, though we are not denying that advice coined for very different circumstances may engage me and inform my own interpretation of reality.

The denial to the biblical material of a universal and immediate applicablity will strike many as shocking. Yet I feel the frank recognition of this will alone enable our traditions to speak for themselves and confront us in a new way. What is more, it seems to me that at times these traditions demand that they be understood in this way. Let me offer an example.

In 1 Corinthians 13:12 Paul talks about 'seeing in a glass darkly, but then face to face'. This verse exhibits as plainly as any in the New Testament the conviction of most early Christians that their perspective was conditioned by their eschatological beliefs. It has now become one of the accepted facts of New Testament study that in their understanding of salvation the early Christians experienced in this age the glory of the age to come (2 Cor. 1:22). At the same time they still looked forward to the coming of God's kingdom, which was still in the future (1 Cor. 6:9 and Gal. 5:21). Although the transforming power of the Spirit bringing about a new creation was already at work (Gal. 6:15), much of their conduct, particularly as it related to secular affairs, had to be accommodated to a world order which did not recognize the values of the kingdom. Thus while it may be true that Paul had glimpses of what he thought ought to be true in the present (and probably would be the case when the kingdom came), he reckons on many occasions in his letters with the circumstances of the present as an inhibiting factor on the perception and practice of the demands of the kingdom. In 1 Corinthians 7:26 he suggests to the Corinthians that 'in view of the impending distress it is well for a person to remain as he is'. As far as Paul is concerned, the nature of Christian existence is entirely conditioned by the recognition that, while God may indeed have acted eschatologically in Christ and through the bestowal of the Spirit, all that has been offered is only a foretaste of much greater glory still to come. Paul would, therefore, have echoed the words of the Series II Communion Service 'we look for the coming of his Kingdom'. In the present the Christian still has to walk by faith and not by sight (Rom. 8:24f). While his hope may have been grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, Paul recognizes that the dual polarity of Christian eschatology demands that statements made about human existence and articles of belief are provisional. Not until the Kingdom came could the Church deal in certainty and purity. To this extent the Church differed from, say, the Qumran community which separated itself from the world to guarantee its eschatological purity. In contrast the early Christian approach to doctrine reckons with the fact of its incompleteness and in its ethics accepts the need for pragmatism and accommodation. It recognized that the attempt to come to terms with and explain the act of God in Christ was necessarily provisional and incomplete and the working out of the consequences of it for Christian ethics of necessity involved the tempering of idealism by the need to live in a world which did not accept its precepts.

In the light of this it becomes easier to see why statements of theology need to include the qualification which Paul himself used: 'I think I have the Spirit of God' (1 Cor. 7:40). We have to recognize that the theological enterprise, whether it be carried out by New Testament writers or any other generation of Christians, is an incomplete one. Indeed, at the heart of the Christian doctrine of the Spirit is the conviction that our understanding of Jesus is not merely a recitation of past statements and principles, as Paul himself recognized (1 Cor. 9:14). Certainly the Spirit will call to mind the character

of Jesus (John 16:14), but he will also guide us into all truth (John 16:13). The theological enterprise is both backward and forward looking. It recognizes that the truth has been manifested in Jesus and in what Christians have maintained about him but that there is no essential truth which can somehow be disentangled from the early Christian expression of it and re-expressed in our own terms without diminishing the overall impact of that gospel. Rather we must seek to understand what it is that our predecessors in the faith have sought to assert about God's act in Christ and, clearly recognizing the provisional nature of our own response, seek to understand what that divine initiative demands of us. Obviously there is a danger that cultural accommodation may swallow up the gospel (that has always been a problem for Christians from the first century to our own), but there is also the real possibility that the process of understanding these ancient religious texts may so affect our outlook on the world that our perspective may be radically changed. As a result the categories which are part of our expression of religion and our priorities can be examined in the light of the traditions to which we are committed. Clearly our circumstances will prevent us from reading biblical texts in quite the same way as the first readers, but our critical study of the scriptures and our concern for God's world can mean that an interaction between us and the text can yield insights of great creativity and transformative value both to ourselves and the impact of the traditions on us.

Let me try to illustrate what I mean by an example from the book of Revelation. John was obviously a writer who was very much at home in the thought-world of Jewish apocalyptic. I cannot agree, however, with those who regard Revelation as a thinly christianised Jewish apocalypse, for it seems to me that John's theological convictions have thoroughly transformed the use of imagery in his apocalypse.

From a consideration of Jewish apocalyptic it is apparent that there are several types of vision. First of all, there is the report by a seer of what he has seen in the world above, usually after a mystical ascent. Then there is the communication to the seer of divine secrets by an angelic intermediary, in which visions of any kind play no part. Finally there is the dream-vision in which the seer sees various objects which afterwards in an interpretation he is told have no real existence either in heaven or on earth but are merely symbols of persons and events which are to take place on earth. The vision in Revelation 4 is a good example of the first type of vision. John glimpses the activities in a world normally hidden from human perception, a world where God enthroned in glory is surrounded by the heavenly hosts and acknowledged as lord.

Jewish apocalyptists normally make a clear distinction between visions of heavenly reality and visions in which the various objects are merely symbols of earthly persons. Thus for the Jewish apocalyptist the throne and the living creatures around it are to be understood as an attempt to describe in human language, albeit inspired from the insights communicated by scriptural passages like Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6, the character of the divine court in heaven. These, therefore, are no mere symbols but a report of what things are actually like in the world above. But the distinction which is almost always maintained in Jewish apocalyptic between the report of the heavenly vision and the symbolic vision is completely shattered in Revelation 5. If

John had followed the normal conventions of apocalyptic, he would have described the figure who is brought to God as an angel or a man (cf. Dan. 7:13). Instead, in Revelation 5, we have the introduction of the language of the symbolic vision. The creature brought before God is compared not with a man but an animal, though there can be little doubt that the lamb symbolizes the crucified messiah. This juxtaposition of visionary types has to my knowledge few, if any, parallels in Jewish apocalyptic literature. It is only when one appreciates the awkwardness of this juxtaposition that one can begin to appreciate that within the framework of the apocalyptic tradition inherited by John the eschatological impact of the death of Jesus has transformed the accepted pattern of thought. For John the Christian belief that Jesus, the crucified messiah, had inaugurated the new age had so affected the normal apocalyptic literary conventions that, in order to communicate the impact of Jesus not only on man but also on God's relationship with man, the hitherto accepted pattern of the use of Jewish apocalyptic imagery is shattered. It is an indication of the way in which successive generations accept their traditions but modify them to reflect the basic convictions arising from their own experience of God and the world. Revelation 5 is certainly an expression of the truth which all generations of Christians have accepted, but it is couched in language which is unfamiliar to us. The fact is that, in order to understand the profound significance of the event of Jesus Christ for John, we have to come to terms with his thought-world. It is only when we do that we find that the intensity of the significance of Jesus Christ for him shines through the imagery he uses. .

Revelation presents many difficulties for the modern reader of the Bible, as the thought-world is so far removed from our own in its revelatory claim, its imagery, cosmology and eschatology. In my opinion it only poses the problem of interpretation in a form more acute than with other biblical writings. We have to accept that the theological claims made by a previous generation are *their* claims and not ours and reflect concerns, language, and thought patterns which are usually not ours. To say this is not, however, to declare that their claim can have no bearing on our understanding of reality. That is the danger of a view which supposes that no contact is possible. Experience tells us otherwise; two thousand years of it at that!

Nevertheless the task of theology is no easy one. We may long for an authoritative statement from the Bible or elsewhere, but the fact remains that such statements are not normally available, and, what is more, we delude ourselves if we think that we can find any statement which is going to speak directly and clearly to our generation. John, the visionary of Patmos, expressed the overwhelming importance of Jesus of Nazareth in the imagery of apocalyptic, whose suggestiveness and nuances defy the precise and prosaic exegesis of modern interpreters. The use of this medium of expression by John should serve as a reminder that the reality about which we speak is elusive and impossible to delineate with as much precision as we would like. It is one of the features of much recent biblical hermeneutics that particular attention has been given to the parables of Jesus. Here, of course, is the classic example of theological truth being communicated, not by dogmatic propositions, but in suggestive stories designed to meet the hearer half way and so broaden his perspective that he can view the world in a different way. Jesus did not choose to speak of the Kingdom of God directly.

That he was speaking about a reality which he himself knew and which he considered his contemporaries ought to be able to witness there can be no doubt. Yet this divine reality was not to be accepted on the basis of propositions but by means of pictures suggestive to some but to others enigmatic and even obscure. That is, and always has been, the nature of our language about God and his ways with men. At the heart of the Christian gospel there stands God's communication in the form of a man rather than revealed propositions. God, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, has spoken through a Son, a man who lived at a particular point of human history using the language and ideas of his own day. If we take the Incarnation seriously, it means that we are bound to take Jesus' historical situation seriously, for we have to admit that the revelation of God was communicated through a life lived in a culture very different from our own. While we must look back to Jesus, the Word made flesh, we are not asked to accept his culture in its totality as determinative for the attitude we take to our own. *We* are his witnesses, the ones sent by him, who in the power of the Spirit are certainly called to understand the message of Jesus to the best of our ability, but to proclaim it, not to Jesus' generation, but to our own, with full awareness of the issues which dominate our thoughts.

In making the point that our pursuit for truth is much dependent on our circumstances I am not wanting to assert that we cannot ever glimpse the truth, rather that our apprehension of it is mediated through the peculiar circumstances of our existence. To make this point is not the same as saying that we should not be committed to a particular course of action because we need to take account of all sides of the argument. Perhaps theologians have a bad reputation because they never appear to come down from the fence. Theological study will certainly indicate how difficult it is to find the answers, as it will present us with the bewildering complexity of competing opinions and the difficulties of the hermeneutical process. Thus while it may prevent us from thinking that there are easy answers to many of the questions which confront us, it does not absolve us from wrestling with these problems and taking a stand for or against particular courses of action. If in faith we believe that in Paul's words 'we have the Spirit of God', then in the context of a life of prayer and faith we are bound to take the difficult decision of following out what seems to us the path of discipleship. To put our religious life in these terms seems to me to imply that we need to go on learning. Let us make our stand, therefore, but also be prepared to have our position examined by scripture, tradition and the challenge presented by God's world.

By concentrating so far on the provisional and partial nature of the way in which we express our faith in God and communicate the significance of God's ways to others I do not want to make the mistake of ignoring the importance of Jesus' *acts* as well as his parables as a manifestation of the Kingdom of God. We need to be reminded often of Paul's words to the Corinthians: 'My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and power' (1 Cor. 2:4). Too often we suppose that doing theology is a matter of plausible words of wisdom only. Putting it another way I would suggest that frequently we emphasize the verbal aspect of the interpretative process at the expense of the practical. When theology ceases to be an articulation of the divine imperative for human action and becomes solely an explanation of the meaning of doctrines and beliefs, it

rapidly becomes arcane and abstract from human life. When theology loses sight of the obligation to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness it has ceased to interpret the meaning of God's act in Christ and its demand upon the contemporary Church and world.

All of us are engaged in the struggle to understand the call of Christ in our day. The fact that Jesus sought to couch his message in the form of parables rather than dogmatic pronouncements means that the mode of theological pronouncement cannot but be partial and dependent on description rather than prescription. The language of the parable is in fact to see through the glass darkly. By using it we confess that we are groping to find ways of understanding God's demands upon us, but we also affirm that we wish to meet our hearers where they are, for that is the way of the parables of Jesus. Perhaps our efforts will not succeed (and the notorious exegetical crux in Mark 4:11f is testimony to this), but the task of theology is to engage in this difficult process. After all, the disciple is not greater than his Master, whose teaching is full of suggestive parables. It is because we demand certitude that we are unwilling to run the risk of the misleading illustration. But that is at the very heart of the theological enterprise, for our hope is that at some points our theological constructions may correspond with the divine reality and illuminate for others the faith and hope for which we exist.

God in the After Silence: An Introduction to the Poetry of R. S. Thomas

MICHAEL J. TOWNSEND

The writings of the Welsh priest and poet R. S. Thomas explore a number of areas of deep concern for contemporary Christians. His poetry deals with the mystery of unbelief, the meaning of priesthood, the vitality of religious symbols, the presence or absence of God in our world and the problem of alienation. He is not afraid to probe and to ask difficult questions. Although easy answers are not available Thomas helps us see how the cross stands at the centre of our dilemmas. His poetry is direct in impact, stimulating the heart and enlarging the vision. It is a voice we should do well to heed.

R. S. THOMAS was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1937 and has held only three parish livings since then, all of them in his native Wales. His love-hate relationship both with Wales and his parishioners forms an important part of his thematic substance, the nature of his church's relationship with the population colouring the poet's approach to people and reinforcing his sense of alienation. As a recent writer remarks concerning the Welsh, 'It was supremely through the life of their dissenting chapels, built by their own hands, that they found a road to personal maturity and independence which owed little or nothing to the English establishment and which often aroused its hostility'.[1] In such a situation Anglicanism, especially before