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Another Theological Journal?

MICHAEL HULL

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This inaugural volume of the *Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal* is yet another attempt on the part of the people of God to write about God and the things of God.

There is, to be sure, a surfeit of theological writing. Consider, for example, the number of commentaries on any biblical book. We see immediately the impossibility of counting how many there are at this moment, whilst also knowing the impossibility of reading a fraction of them in a lifetime. We also know that Christians will go on writing commentaries – and other theological works – until the eschaton. We hope that the church will be the richer for it.

Our devotion to the Holy Scriptures and our theological writing have marked us from early on. The *Quran* refers to us as ‘people of the book.’ We Christians, we theologians, have no trouble with such a moniker. For Christians – and indeed for our forebears in faith, the Jewish people – God’s revelation has been inextricably linked to writing and, consequently, our theology is inextricably linked to reading and writing.¹

We Christians are perforce theologians. The vocation of theology is part-and-parcel of our baptismal calling. We who are baptized into the Lord naturally desire a fuller and deeper knowledge of our faith, of the ‘things hoped for’ and all that has been ‘prepared by the word of God’ (Heb 11.1–3). In baptism, we are incorporated into Christ and into the Christian community as God’s adopted sons and daughters by the Holy Spirit (John 3.5 and Acts 2.38). As St Paul writes, ‘For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit’ (1 Cor 12.13; cf. Gal 3.23–29). It is the same Spirit under whose inspiration the Holy Scriptures were written (John 20.31; 2 Tim 3.16; 2 Pet 1.19–20). It is Christ who opens our minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24.25), and the Holy Spirit who guides us (John 14.26).

¹J. R. Green’s words are *mutatis mutandis* noteworthy for us: ‘No greater moral change ever passed over a nation than passed over England during the years which parted the middle of the reign of Elizabeth from the meeting of the Long Parliament. England became the people of a book, and that book was the Bible. It was as yet the one English book which was familiar to every Englishman; it was read at churches and read at home, and everywhere its words, as they fell on ears which custom had not deadened to their force and beauty, kindled a startling enthusiasm’ (*A Short History of the English People* [London: Macmillan & Co., 1874], p. 447).

It is no surprise, then, that our faith should lead to questions and attempts at answering those questions, albeit in writing. First Thessalonians, the earliest extant piece of Christian literature, is (at least in part) St Paul's attempt to answer questions from the Thessalonian community. Paul did not want them to be 'uninformed' (1 Thess 4.13). A thousand years later, St Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) speaks of his task in writing as 'faith seeking understanding'². Although Anselm does not use the term 'theology' per se, it is clear that he is writing at the prompting of faith's desire to understand more of the things that have been accomplished among us in Christ, just as those walking on the Road to Emmaus wanted to understand (Luke 1.1–4 and 24.13–35). Every baptized person, on one level or another, rightly seeks a fuller and deeper understanding of his or her faith. Such an understanding runs the gamut from childhood catechisms to rigorous theological inquiries. As we read in the Psalms, 'O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; to see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary' (Ps 63.1–2; cf. Ps 42.1).

We mostly use the term 'theology' to refer to the formal and disciplined study of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. St Paul points out that there are many gifts within the community (1 Cor 12.27) and that each gift is given for the benefit of all (Eph 4.7–16). We grasp the need for theologians. We presume theologians to be persons of faithfulness (alive in Christ) and competence (learned), whose efforts build up the body of Christ (1 Cor 12.1–4). We are aware that the things of God are hard to understand and that theologians make mistakes (2 Pet 3.15–16). Moreover, we embrace all learning. Whether its source be those who do not admit the revelation of God in Jesus Christ or those engaged in religious studies (where faith is ancillary to the phenomena of religious expression), whilst we acknowledge our Christian faith and theology as different. We see the theologian's zeal expressed by Richard of St Victor (d. 1173): 'Let us hurry from faith to knowledge. Let us endeavour so far as we can to understand what we believe'³.

Moving from believing to understanding is no easy thing. Thinking and expressing that thinking in writing are massively difficult and time-consuming processes. Clear writing is always the result of clear thinking, and clear thinking is

² *Proslogion* (written between 1077–78). Anselm's words from the proem – *fides quærens intellectum* – originally served as the title of the work.

³ Richard's words – *Feramur itaque ad perfectionem et quibus ad profectum gradibus possumus properemus. De fide ad cognitionem satagamus in quantum possumus ut intelligamus quod credimus* – are found in the prologue of his *De Trinitate* (probably written between 1162 and 1173).

hard to come by. The American historian David McCullough says it well. 'Writing is thinking. To write well is to think clearly. That's why it's so hard'⁴. In terms of writing about the things of God, we may compare writing theology to Jacob's struggle with God (Gen 32.22–32 and Hos 12.4). Jacob wrestles with a mysterious figure, seeking to know the figure's name and thus his identity. In the end, Jacob is simultaneously blessed and wounded. The same may be said of us in our theological writing. We write in an effort to understand, an effort by which we are blessed and hobbled all at once. If there is a proliferation of writing among us Christians, it is to a good end, namely, our desire to wrestle with God – at least with the revelation of God insofar as we know it – as Jacob did, so that God might reveal himself to us in some way and we might survive an encounter wherein God 'maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole' (Job 5.18; cf. Ps 147.3; Hos 6.1).

Our *Journal* is such an endeavour, wherein we seek to understand what we believe in writing. We Christians, we theologians, have ever been concerned with texts and words, and so we shall be until the Lord returns. Words, after all, are the instruments with which God reveals himself to us, even coming and dwelling among us as the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth (John 1.14). A surfeit of theological writing? Yes, indeed. It is in grace and truth that we add to the abundance, with the hope of contributing to the life of the people of God, like the precious oil spoken of in Psalm 133.

⁴ 'David McCullough Interview: The Title Always Comes Last', an interview with US National Endowment for the Humanities Chairman Bruce Cole in *Humanities* 23.4 (July-August 2002). (Find it at <https://www.neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture/david-mccullough-interview>).

A Critical Spirit and the Will to Believe: Habits of Mind in Literature and Theology¹

DAVID JASPER

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It is, perhaps, a common experience that as one grows older the habit of talking to oneself becomes more frequent. I wonder if the same might be true of Christian theology as its terms, its resonances and its form in worship becomes less and less familiar in our society. And as we simplify its terms in attempts to remain, somehow, relevant, so theology becomes thinner and more infantile. Ulrich Simon, many years ago Professor of Christian Literature at King's College, London, once remarked that confronted with irrational forces "we require the whole weaponry of language", but, he goes on, "theologians resent this richness of approach."²

And so I begin with Simon (a German Jew who became a Christian priest, his family victims of the Holocaust), and his forgotten book *A Theology of Auschwitz* (1967), where the devout Christian theologian encounters depths of evil in human affairs that seem beyond the language of any Christian consolation. It is a shocking moment as he, a priest, speaks of the "tormentors" of his family and millions of their fellow Jews:

Not for them are the strains of the *Requiem aeternam*, not for them the absolution from sin and the enjoyment of bliss... The chant to the king of tremendous majesty for pity, for salvation, cannot be sung for them. No archangel descends to collect their souls in the world-wide offering of sacrifice and homage. In the darkness the shades blend with the blackness until complete indifference engulfs them. May they never arise again!³

These are hard words to speak and hear – *sunt lacrimae rerum* – but the world is like that, and how is it, how can it be, then made bearable? George Steiner once said that absolute tragedy is rare in literature, but it does exist, and it is there, perhaps that a start must be made. In English there is one play of Shakespeare that might make

¹ An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a lecture in Chichester Cathedral on 18 February 2016.

² Ulrich Simon, *Atonement: From Holocaust to Paradise* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1987), p. 6.

³ Ulrich Simon, *A Theology of Auschwitz* (London: Victor Gollanz Ltd., 1967), p. 75.

that claim to be an absolute tragedy – *Timon of Athens* – and one Hardy novel – *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and of its central character Michael Henchard, “poor, guilty, repentant, unwise,” Ulrich Simon wrote that “he moves in a universe of Biblical imagery without the demands and consolations of religion. Like Hardy, Henchard is his own man in an alien land, a man whom God has forgotten and abandoned.”⁴

Simon’s last book, which I edited, was entitled *Pity and Terror* and it sought to find a synthesis between Christian existence (and its theology) and tragic involvement. Its strange last sentence reads: “Christianity is tragic because of the Cross, and tragedy becomes Christian through the Resurrection.”⁵ But the book itself provides little evidence that even Simon himself was truly convinced of this claim. It is too easy, too glib, the Cross itself already too interpreted. Actually we need to take one further step backwards to the raw material of tragedy, where even theology cannot reach, to a dense moment in human experience resented by the theologian and engulfed by blackness and complete indifference. And here, where theology is seemingly impossible, its call is the most insistent.

And so on to literature written *de profundis*. To spread the canvas of our conversation I begin with a domestic example, a brief poem by David Scott (himself a priest) on Dean Tait of Carlisle whose five daughters died in March 1856 from scarlet fever.

Quite put aside were any thoughts
of the state of the Cathedral roof.
Instead, a quiet agony, waiting
for the stethoscope’s final figure of eight,
and the click of the doctor’s bag.
He never thought there could be this routine
to death: the prayer book, the size of his palm;
his wife, half in doubt because of the fever,
hiding the sick-room drawings away;
and at their prayers each day
in a borrowed house, they tested
the Bible texts against a silent nursery.⁶

⁴ Ulrich Simon, *Pity and Terror: Christianity and Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 118.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁶ David Scott, *A Quiet Gathering* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1984), p. 57.

It is a poem that begs little comment, its precise images rising against any argument. A second example returns us to Simon's Auschwitz. At the end of André Schwarz-Bart's novel *The Last of the Just* (1959) a sealed freight-truck full of children makes its way to the death camp. Among the few adults is Ernie Levy, the last of the thirty-six just men whom God has chosen to bear the burden of the world's suffering. Knowing what is to happen to them the next day he tells the frightened, starved children stories of the Kingdom:

There, children can find their parents, and everybody is happy. Because the country we're going to, that's our kingdom, you know. There, the sun never sets, and you may eat anything you can think of. There, an eternal joy will crown your heads; cheerfulness and gaiety will come and greet you, and all the pains and all the moans will run away....⁷

An older woman, a doctor, in the box car, rails at Ernie for telling lies to the children who, she knows, will only face appalling sufferings and finally a terrible death when they reach their journey's end. The narrative continues.

Rocking the child mechanically, Ernie gave way to dry sobs. 'Madame,' he said at last, 'there is no room for truth here.' Then he stopped rocking the child, turned, and saw that the old woman's face had altered.

'Then what is there room for?' she began. And taking a closer look at Ernie, registering all the slightest details of his face, she murmured softly, 'Then you don't believe what you're saying at all? Not at all?'⁸

But this is literature, where there is no truth but only the telling of stories. Here the truth claims of theology have no part, though they are there waiting under the surface of despair. But not yet, not for the moment, and there is even no place for God, but there are only stories to comfort the children on their journey to a terrible death the next day.

⁷ André Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*. Trans. Stephen Becker (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961), p. 396.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 397-8

When the 'new atheist' Richard Dawkins was read the story of Ernie Levy's 'lies' to the children he was asked, 'What would you have said to them?' He replied that he would have said the same thing. He would have told them stories of heaven.

But place this alongside another image. My teacher Professor Ann Loades once spoke in a lecture of an old lady in a nursing home.

Porridge time came around one morning and in bustled one of those guardian angels, a nurse. "Come on dear," said the 20-year-old to the 70-year-old, "Eat up your nice porridge." The woman sat unspeaking while the nurse tried to push the spoon into the unwilling mouth. The ward was quiet, the helpless looked away while the helper forced in the porridge. The woman turned her head, wordlessly, tears streaming down her face. The nurse, momentarily defeated, angrily turned to the helpless for support. "She's got to eat it, it's good for her".⁹

I think of my years of teaching English literature to students because it is good for them. But, as the poet Peter Meinke, himself a teacher of literature, warns us:

Everywhere there are lies, I lie to my classes, I say
 Eat this poem. Eat that poem. *Good* for you.
 I say, sonnets have more vitamins than villanelles,
 I give green stamps for the most vivid images.¹⁰

Is the comfort of literature then simply all lies – something made up, unreal worlds that have no relation to the truth? And how, then, does this relate to theology? At a lecture I once attended on his remarkable novel *Quarantine* (1997), which returns us to Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, the writer Jim Crace once remarked that the book was praised by critics for its accurate and detailed descriptions of the Judean desert. "Actually," he said, "I just made it all up in my garage in south London. That's what novelists do. Make things up."

And so what of truth? What is truth? I am minded of R. S. Thomas's image of the parish priest as he "picks his way/ Through the parish, " limping through life/ On his prayers." No-one believes him and he hardly believes anything himself, wounded

⁹ Ann Loades, "Simone Weil – Sacrifice: A Problem for Theology," in David Jasper, Ed. *Images of Belief in Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 135-6.

¹⁰ Peter Meinke, *Liquid Paper: New and Selected Poems* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), p. 65.

and blinded by the broken glass of his vows. Yet Thomas the poet, who is also perhaps the priest himself, writes, looking down:

‘Crippled soul’, do you say? Looking at him
 From the mind’s height; ‘limping through life
 On his prayers. There are other people
 In the world, sitting at table
 Contented, though the broken body
 And the shed blood are not on the menu’.
 ‘Let it be so’, I say. ‘Amen and amen.’¹¹

The poet, even, perhaps the priest, must be allowed to speak for himself though no-one seems to listen – let it be so. The truth is crippled, but shining yet in the stories to the children of Ernie Levy told in the dark reality of the boxcar where there is no room for truth, and the words spoken tell only of a dream, or, and this perhaps is the essence of Theodor Adorno’s sentence that poetry is impossible after the Holocaust (more accurately, but I think less acutely, Rowan Williams renders this as the *barbarity* of such words), utterance slips into an endless night of silence. Think only of Dan Pagis’ poem on the Eve of the boxcar written on “an empty page that takes away the wend of our word” (Karl A. Plank).

here in this carload
 i am
 with abel my son
 if you see my other son
 cain son of man
 tell him that i¹²

Her words are never spoken and even as they dribble into silence, they and that silence speak on many levels – of love, of forgiveness, maybe? True prayer, the origins of theology, is found not on the edge of words, but even more radically beyond that limit: as my old friend Tom Altizer, a crusty, ancient death of God

¹¹ R. S. Thomas, *What is a Welshman?* (Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1974), inset.

¹² Karl Plank, *Mother of the Wire Fence: Inside and Outside the Holocaust* (Louisville: WJK Press, 1994), p. 20.

theologian, once wrote of this moment; “Then speech is truly impossible, and as we hear and enact that impossibility, then even we can say, ‘It is finished.’”¹³

In the impossibility there is still the truth of Christ’s final and first word. Returning to Thomas’ priest, it may be that his crippled soul is enough, the only possible way forward, and through him and his broken vows, painfully, we also must begin to learn the hard truth (that word will not leave us, finally) uttered in the *Kyrie* of Thomas’ poem *Mass for Hard Times* that on the slope to perfection, “when we should be half-way up,/ we are half-way down – Lord have mercy.”¹⁴

From Dean Tait, testing the Bible texts against the silent nursery, to the *Death Fugue* of Paul Celan (translated in the art of Anselm Kiefer into the powerful but silent images of the golden hair and ashen hair), to the stories of heaven, that Ernie Levy tells but does not believe, to the nurse who *has* to believe (like the professor of literature and his wholesome sonnets) in the goodness of the porridge to nourish the dying woman, we will ourselves to believe in the comfortable connection between word and deed that lies at the heart of all theology – that language is, finally, performative. But R. S. Thomas, his truth always insistent, speaks of a drier reality in the *Agnus Dei* of his *Mass*:

God is love. Where
there is no love, no God?
There is only the gap between
word and deed we try
narrowing with an idea.¹⁵

But on what altar does one sacrifice an idea? Only when our words have the courage to falter – though no less intelligent – does truth again seek its place. I once wrote a chapter for a book of essays on theology and literature, and the editor, a professor of literature from Oslo and a very old friend of mine, sent it back saying that people would not understand the end of it, or worse still, would find it offensive. It was a reference to Imre Kertész’s novel *Fateless* (2006) which tells the story of a young Hungarian Jewish boy who survives the horrors of Auschwitz. Returning home to what remains of his family in Hungary he realized that people only ever spoke of the

¹³ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 96.

¹⁴ R. S. Thomas, *Mass for Hard Times* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992), p. 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

utter misery of the camps, but it was not that that had kept him alive, nor was it anything so unrealistic as an idea or even faith. Rather –

Even there, next to the chimneys, in the intervals between the torments, there was something that resembled happiness. Everyone asks only about the hardships and the “atrocities,” whereas for me perhaps it is that experience which will remain the most memorable. Yes, the next time I am asked, I ought to speak about that, the happiness of the concentration camps.¹⁶

It was this image that offended, or perhaps worried, my colleague: its scandal, its presumption in us who have known no such horrors in our lives: even its heartlessness, perhaps.

But set this scandal beside the monstrosity of Ulrich Simon, a deeply devout Christian priest, and his liturgical condemnation of the camp guards, his refusal to them of the *Requiem aeternam*. “May they never rise again!” Simon’s book, *A Theology of Auschwitz*, was dedicated to Bishop George Bell and Victor Gollancz, “who perceived and fought the great evil.”

But it is at these profound moments in language, in literature, where there is either silence, or impossibility, or the challenge to truth, or the deep shame of the failure to understand, the shock – that theology, perhaps, begins again, the priest even now “hanging on it his thought’s icicles,”¹⁷ that deadly narrowing of God’s love to a mere idea. And it is here – a moment that I will never truly understand – that I have spent my life trying to reflect upon literature and theology, finding myself always somewhere between thought and prayer. And so I return once again to Ulrich Simon and an essay of his that I first read thirty-five years ago in a book edited by Michael Wadsworth entitled *Ways of Reading the Bible* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981). The essay was called “Samson and the Heroic,” and it attracted the criticism of a literary critic whom I much admire, Professor Gabriel Josipovici of the University of Sussex, who, on the theme of heroism and sacrifice, comments on “the pious remarks of theologians such as Ulrich Simon” and his “rousing stuff [that] makes for good sermons, perhaps, but only at the cost of removing from the Bible its profound and irresolvable ambiguities.”¹⁸

¹⁶ More Kertész, *Fateless*. Trans. Tim Wilkinson (London: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 262.

¹⁷ R. S. Thomas, “The Priest”.

¹⁸ Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 125.

Actually I have always believed that there is less of a distance between the pulpit and the lecture hall than is often suggested, and without entering into the issues that it gives rise to here, there remains much truth in Ian Ramsey's remark, made many years ago, that "a theology which cannot be preached is about as objectionable as preaching which cannot be theologically defended."¹⁹

But to return now to Simon: a Jewish theologian once suggested that one of the tasks of theology is "to foster dissonance reduction."²⁰ I think that this is indeed often the case, but I am less convinced that, in a dissonant world of agonizing guilt seeking forgiveness, it entirely should be so. Theology *begins* in the complex darkness of the soul bereft of God, in the God-forsakenness of Psalm 22:1. Simon in his essay on Samson writes of the heroic in the context of the absolute tragedy of the First World War:

... even before the guns fired and decimated the ranks of the newly arrived volunteers they had suffered a spiritual shock from which they could not recover again. There were no heroes, no bloody heroes, and if you wanted to be one you were a crazy idiot. The vast literature about the war depicts this collapse of the mental strife.²¹

In spite of Josipovici, Simon is perfectly well aware of "the ambiguity of the stuff." Here is a searing example of that literature of that war to which he refers. Before the outset of the war, the poet Wilfred Owen had been a lay assistant to the vicar of Dunsden in Oxfordshire, reflecting on the possibility of Holy Orders. On 4 July 1918, four months before his death in action, he wrote to Osbert Sitwell of his duties as a training officer.

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work – teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst till after the last halt. I attended his Supper to see that there were not complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb, and stands at attention before his

¹⁹ Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language* (London: SCM, 1957), p. 180.

²⁰ Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 84.

²¹ Ulrich Simon, "Samson and the Heroic", in Michael Wadsworth, Ed. *Ways of Reading the Bible* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981), p. 165.

accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.²²

Perhaps all true theology has to begin with betrayal, the Judas in all of us. Before his death Owen wrote, “My nerves are in perfect order.” And it is in this dark place that Simon makes his turn. His hero is Samson, and, as he says, “biblical stories ... never proceed according to a predictable pattern.” What we see in Samson, Simon writes, is an “innocent stupidity” – a man unsuited to the role of a Moses, or a David or a Jeremiah. It is this figure, this “foolish giant” who bears the burden of heroism, so that it is through him (and this is what Josipovici misses) is carried the rousing stuff that makes for good sermons. Simon is no fool. He concludes on another deeply disturbing note – more especially in our own age of suicide bombers and terrorists.

The Samson story is wrongly understood if it throws a blanket of indifferentism over all suicide pilots or bomb-carrying terrorists. Rather, its abiding theme is the propriety of violence and the ultimate justification of self-sacrifice. The young fighter pilots of England, who were ‘the few’, rose to the sky in the true spirit which they inherited from the Bible, Shakespeare and Milton. Without that brand of godly heroism a race is doomed.²³

Josipovici, it seems to me, misses the unresolved, shocking ambiguity of Simon’s words as they are both offered and withdrawn. There are no bloody heroes – and yet without this godly heroism, with its dimension of the tragic (which Christian theology has never truly absorbed) we are doomed. Theologians, the self-appointed guardians of their theology, resent the richness of poetic paradox and its language that make, for us the world bearable.

Josipovici, however, sees the point in literature more clearly in his meditation in his work, *The Book of God*, on the end of the book of Job. The mistake of Job’s so-called comforters is to assert that there is meaning, while Job knows perfectly well that this is not the case.

Therefore I have uttered that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42: 3-6. NRSV)

²² *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, Ed. C. Day Lewis (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), Introduction, p. 23.

²³ Ulrich Simon, “Samson and the Heroic”, p. 166.

God, on the other hand asserts both that there *is* meaning, but that it cannot be known, only accepted, by human beings. His point is best grasped by Muriel Spark at the end of her novel *The Only Problem* (1984), whose hero, Harvey Gotham, is writing a book on Job and its only problem of how a loving Creator can permit the unspeakable sufferings of the world. Spark has understood that the beginning and end of the book of Job do not form any kind of frame, but rather, in Josipovici's words, are an "assertion of the fact that meaning will never be able to catch up with life." He goes on:

The book of Job is about the impossibility of man's ever understanding the causal links (the story), and yet his need to trust that God does indeed uphold the world, that there is a story there of which we are a part. It shows that man must neither simply accept that there is a story nor refuse to believe that there is one, but that it is his duty constantly to question God (and himself) about it. In Kierkegaard's wonderful phrase, it keeps 'the wound of the negative open.'²⁴

One is reminded, of course, of Rowan Williams' wound of knowledge (or even Walter Lowe's wound of reason), but the wound of the negative is something even more, more painful, darker, necessary. It is where we begin, as all of our greatest theologians from Augustine to Barth have finally had to concede.

And the greatest of preachers also. One only has to think of Bishop Lancelot Andrewes whose sermons, as T. S. Eliot reminds us, "force a concrete presence upon us." Many today have returned to the sermons of John Donne, but few to those of his contemporary Bishop Andrewes, difficult because they are wholly absorbed in the object, finding the darkest place where speech both ends and begins. Of the Wise Men of St. Matthew's Gospel Andrewes says:

It was no summer progress. A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey in. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, *in solstitio brumali*, "the very dead of winter."²⁵

And it is the poet Eliot who picks up and expands these images in *Journey of the Magi*, knowing that it is all folly, but glad of another death. As in George Herbert

²⁴ Gabriel Jospovici, *The Book of God*, p. 290.

²⁵ Lancelot Andrewes, quoted in T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*. Third Edition (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p. 350.

and in Donne himself in his poetry, theology is in our midst before it can even be spoken, yet, at its best, as in Herbert's *Prayer*, "something understood" – that is, I think, something taken to heart before it is comprehended.

This essay has been deliberately built upon layers of literary texts, taken, not quite at random from my shelves, but widely scattered, joined not so much by the stream of time, but, in the well-trying image of E. M. Forster, seated all together in a circular room, finding speech between silence and words. I began with one of my favourite modern poets, the Anglican priest David Scott and his image of Dean Tait "testing" the explanations of the biblical word against the silent nursery of his five dead children. Scott, as a parish priest, knows that healing (and after all, what else are we concerned with?) begins when words are used and fail, or a truth (we are back to that at last) is found in difference, often where it is least expected. In his poem *Parish Visit*, Scott writes of words in the presence of death, where no words are ever adequate. Here is the poem in full, its words allowed their space here. Listen to its careful particularities:

Going about something quite different,
 begging quiet entrance
 with nothing in my bag, I land
 on the other side of the red painted step
 hoping things will take effect.
 The space in the house is ten months old
 and time has not yet filled it up,
 nor is the headstone carved.
 He died when he was twenty
 and she was practiced at drawing
 him back from the brink
 cajoling in spoons of soup.
 We make little runs at understanding
 as the winter afternoon
 lights up the clothes on the rack;
 we make so many
 the glow in the grate almost
 dips below the horizon,
 but does not quite go out.
 It is a timely hint
 and I make for the door and the dark yard,
 warmed by the tea,

talking about things quite different.²⁶

All priests and writers (not to say preachers) should be sensitive to the timely hint. There is much more left to say than has been said, but sometimes those words themselves intrude, too anxious to do us good when they are simply cold porridge. A wise priest will learn that all too quickly. But one more text before I briefly conclude. I have mentioned already the novelist Jim Crace, one of the best writing in English today. He explicitly professes no religious belief, but his novels, time and again, send out a challenge to the theologian, often with dark and precise humour. For example, his novel *Being Dead* (2010) begins and ends with a middle-aged couple lying in naked embrace, but murdered, on the beach where they had first made love 30 years before. The book is prefaced by a short poem by Sherwin Stephens entitled “The Biologist’s Valediction to his Wife.”

Don’t count on Heaven, or on Hell.
You’re dead. That’s it. *Adieu*. Farewell

I’ll Grieve, of course,
Departing wife,
Though Grieving’s never
Lengthened Life
Or coaxed a single extra Breath
Out of a Body touched by death.²⁷

And yet the novel itself, we find, becomes a beautiful love song within the ordinary, in it the lovers’ bodies stilled, but not their love or their story. “These,” says the last sentence, “are the everending days of being dead.” One might be tempted to begin to write of resurrection, but it would be too soon, premature. Theirs is, as George Steiner once said, “the long day’s journey of the Saturday”²⁸ from aloneness to rebirth, during which we must learn patience – and compassion. For literature and art have risen out of an immensity of waiting, which is that of man.” And this, like everything else, must be learnt.

And finally there is Crace’s novel *Quarantine* (1997) which begins with words from a book entitled *The Limits of Mortality* by Ellis Winward and Professor (the title is quite specific) Michael Soule.

²⁶ David Scott, *A Quiet Gathering*, p. 77.

²⁷ Jim Crace, *Being Dead* (London: Picador, 2010), Frontispiece.

²⁸ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), p. 232.

An ordinary man of average weight and fitness embarking on a total fast – that is, a fast during which he refuses both his food and drink – could not expect to live for more than thirty days, not to be conscious for more than twenty-five. For him, the forty days of fasting described in religious texts would not be achievable – except with divine help, of course. History, however, does not record an intervention of that kind, and medicine opposes it.²⁹

But, as another character from fiction, Ernie Levy, said, “There is no room for truth here.” Grace spins his yarn of the survivor in the blistering heat and rocks of the Judean desert where four travellers and the wicked Musa (who is quite possibly Satan himself) are working out their fates. And there is another – a mysterious figure from Galilee – the Gally - who seems bent upon his own death. Musa returns to the living, assuming that this madman has died in the desert. But then – so the story as told by Grace goes –

Musa looked towards the distant scree again. He told himself this was no merchant fantasy. His Gally was no longer thin and watery, diluted by the mirageheat, distorted by the ripples in the air. He made his slow, painstaking way, naked and barefooted, down the scree, his feet blood-red from wounds, and as he came closer to the valley floor his outline hardened and his body put on flesh.³⁰

It is not quite the end of the novel, but it is enough for now. If you asked Jim Grace, I suppose he would say that he had just made it up. That is what novelists do, after all. The tone – cynical, poetic, familiar – is, of course, up to the reader, he would say. History is against us, and medicine opposes the vision. But its beauty disturbs and so, we might ask, “what if...” But its claims on us are fragile and easily broken, as Grace reminds us in his final image that brings us back to earth, of the troops and traders in “the evening peace that’s brokered not by a god but by the rocks and clays themselves, *shalom, salaam*, the one-time, all-time truces of the land.”³¹

Here, I think we must begin and I must end. I have suggested that theology truly begins in impossibility. The impossible is hard to endure unless made bearable by humour (which can be misplaced), or the depths of words in paradox and irony, though words can also console and might be all we have in the end as they weave

²⁹ Jim Grace, *Quarantine* (London: Penguin, 1998), Frontispiece.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

³¹ *Ibid.*

visions of heaven before the universal darkness buries all. Sometimes we need the shock, the scandal before the penny drops as Ian Ramsey, again, once put it. We live in very literal times. As one of my old teachers in Cambridge, Professor David Frost once said (it was a long time ago!), “John Robinson would never have got a hearing in Cranmer’s day, because few then took images quite so literally.”³² And so I have asked you for a return to the literary, the poetic, and to live, like Lancelot Andrewes, within the images themselves – where the impossible might begin to seem possible again, and be spoken of. And here theology stops talking to itself but to another.

³² David L. Frost, *The Language of Series 3*. Grove Booklet No. 12 (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1973), p. 10.

Prayer and Social Action

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Michael Ramsay famously described prayer as coming consciously into the presence of God. Through prayer we are helped to walk more closely with God. All have a common vocation to salvation. Christians tread the path of sanctification, being more and more formed in the image and likeness of God. They are called to mirror and reflect the glory of God in the world and to be channels of the love of God to all whom they encounter. Christians pray in the confidence that God is real and was revealed in Jesus Christ. All that Jesus did – his *kenosis*, life and teaching, his death and resurrection – shows us what God is like, challenges us to a personal relationship with Jesus our Saviour and points the way to the kind of life that we should be leading as followers of Christ.

Sometimes in prayer there are no words. Mary stood at the foot of the cross. God was present in the suffering of her Son and in her suffering. Jesus gave his followers the words of the Lord's Prayer. They were asked to pray very clearly that God's will be done on earth and that the rule of God on earth should come. Later in the prayer, they were asked to affirm that God's rule was already present. The Kingdom is a gift from God, but Christians are called to live in the light of the Kingdom that is promised and to live and act as the children of God and part of God's family with Jesus as the elder brother. If there is one text that encapsulates this vision, it is John 10.10 where Jesus says, 'I have come so that they may have life and have it in its fullness'.

What do people need in order to have life and have it abundantly? Some of the crucial things are required. There is the biblical picture of each person sitting under his or her own vine and fig tree and not being afraid. Physical security and safety are essential as are spiritual and religious freedom. Food, drink, shelter, warmth and clothing are needed for human survival. Loving relationships enable people to grow as human beings. Access to education and health care is important for human development. All need the opportunity to use their skills and talents productively and to provide for themselves and others. All need the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their life, future and world.

Two simple tests may be used to look at any situation and assess its justice. Firstly, are the outcomes of the situation in line with Kingdom values? Secondly, are the dispositions being encouraged in line with Kingdom values? If the answer to either of these questions is negative, then something is wrong somewhere. We may not have the analysis to pinpoint what is going wrong, nor a full-scale alternative

programme to right the wrongs, but we do know that the present situation will not do and needs changing. Prayer, coming into the presence of God, helps us to discern that which is of the Kingdom, that which is a sign of the presence of God's rule.

In the light of human needs, our present world falls very short of enabling people to have life and have it in its fullness. War and violence are widespread. In many areas people lack basic security. Many people lack access to clean water and to adequate nutrition. Poverty, homeless and unemployment cripple people's possibilities of life. Social structures that do not allow people to participate effectively in civic life restrict their chances of exercising responsible citizenship.

The Prayer of the Church

The liturgies of a church give insights into a church's comfort zone and analysis of society. Scottish Episcopal Church prayers often identify the victims and pray for them (the poor, the homeless, refugees etc.). Scottish Episcopal Church prayers tend to bless those in power (the queen, the high court of parliament) and pray that they may have compassion and an awareness of the common good. The preferred model of social action here seems to be aimed at of individual charity, not the upset of the current distribution of wealth and power. Wider social change seems to be left to the benevolence of the powers that be. The preferred model of society is that of Isaiah or of Psalm 72 in which the mighty are not to be cast down but are to exercise a righteous rule. The rich are not to be sent empty away but are to give a bit more of their surplus in alms to the poor. However in history those in power have rarely been seized with an altruistic concern for justice or given up power or riches of their own freewill. Change has come through pressure from below from those who have been marginalised, exploited and excluded. To take one example, in our own generation we have seen that the place of women has significantly changed, changed primarily because women themselves refused to be treated as second-class citizens. Justice needs to be struggled for in every generation as, in a sinful world, power tends to corrupt and structures that in one generation may be liberating in the next may be exploitative.

Jesus in the Beatitudes does not bless those in power. Instead he blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Mary in the *Magnificat* looks to a God who will fill the hungry with good things, who will pull down princes from their thrones and exalt the lowly. The first apostles were accused of trying to turn the world upside down. John the Elder looked for the thousand-year rule of the saints.

The public prayer of the Scottish Episcopal Church should be more overtly supportive of those thirsting and working for righteousness and justice. It should also recognise that pressing for justice in an unjust world leads to conflict with those who profit from the injustice. The blessed peacemakers witness to the need for

loving and non-violent conflict resolution and reconciliation. Ground down apathy in the face of injustice is not shalom (Exodus). Christians are called to proclaim the gospel, not to avoid conflict at all costs.

Jesus was saddened at the spiritual blindness of some of the Pharisees he met. Prayer can be a way of helping us to see more clearly. Often our own social setting can blind us.

Many of us have not been hungry; many of us have not know someone who is homeless or at their wits end through poverty. Yet it is often the individual encounter with those who are the victims of injustice that can fire people with a concern that the world should be differently ordered. For some church people, volunteering at a food bank has been an eye opener. It has provided a setting in which they could listen to the stories of people who are marginalised in present day Scotland. A face and a person are much more powerful challenges to prayerful reflection and action than a concern for abstract social justice.

It is easier to see the speck in our brother's eye, to see the faults of previous generations, than to be aware of our own shortcomings. Why did the church accept slavery for so long, or a second-level existence for women? Present day Christians can look back and say that was wrong. Yet in our own generation, we broadly accept poverty in the midst of wealth, possession of weapons of mass destruction, apathy in the face of massive threats to the environment and attitudes to immigrants, unborn children and the elderly that deny their humanity and corrode our human solidarity. We all may be guilty of corporate sin and enmeshed in it.

Michael Ramsey sees penitence as consciously coming into the presence of God in the awareness of how far we fall short of being the kind of people that God wants us to be and of the shortcomings and faults in the society and the world that we are offering to God. He writes, 'Within our confession of our sins there will come sins of attitude or complacency or idleness of thought. We are not sinning if we are unsure of the answers to hard questions. We are sinning if we do not think or care. All this is part of a ministry of reconciliation'¹.

The church is called to be a sign and an instrument and foretaste of the Kingdom. A sign and a foretaste in that it should show forth what the Kingdom and Kingdom relationships should be to the wider world and help people to have a foretaste of the reality of Kingdom living – enthused with hope and living in solidarity with others; an instrument in that it should be witnessing to and working for the coming of the Kingdom. The first Christians had all things in common – the sharing values of the family triumphed over the contract and market values of the society in which they were living. That sharing was also shown when one Christian

¹ Michael Ramsey, *Be Still and Know* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1982), p. 110.

community shared with another – as St Paul noted, the surplus of one met the needs of the other (2 Cor 8.14).

The people of God are also called to be an instrument of the Kingdom and that is a much more difficult area to discern. Christians are generally good at individual responses to the person or situation that is directly set in front of them. Family, friends, the congregation and neighbours – these are those with whom people interact most regularly and with whom they share. In any setting, Christians can reflect on what would Jesus do in that situation and can also be willing to see Jesus coming to them through another person. Although there may be a tendency to try and discriminate on grounds of deserving or undeserving and reject solidarity if people do not conform to our expectations, common humanity is paramount, be it at a food bank, a beggar in the street or a financial appeal for a disaster. Jesus's love for us is unconditional and that is the basic touchstone for Kingdom relationships. However although Jesus loves us as we are, he loves us too much to want to leave us as we are and challenges each one of us to holiness. Our relationships and other people are crucial to our growth in holiness. As John Wesley emphasised, individual holiness and social holiness cannot be separated.

The Common Good

In much Christian teaching, people and public authorities have a responsibility to promote the common good. A recent definition of this is in the encyclical letter *Laudato Sí* (2015; nn. 156 and 157), Pope Francis writes:

‘The common good is “the sum of those conditions of social life in which allow social groups and their individual members.... thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment” [*Gaudium et Spes* n. 26]. Underlying the principle of the common good is respect for the human person as such, endowed with basic and inalienable rights ordered to his or her integral development. It has also to do with the overall welfare of society and the development of a variety of intermediate groups applying the principle of subsidiarity..... ‘The common good calls for social peace, the stability and security provided by a certain order which cannot be achieved without particular concern for distributive justice; whenever this is violated, violence always ensues. Society as a whole and the state in particular are obliged to defend and promote the common good’.

The pope spells out clearly the consequences of this approach in the next paragraph (158) in which he writes, ‘In the present situation of global society, where

injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and imperatively, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.' And in number 159 he states that, 'the notion of the common good also extends to future generations... We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity'. The pursuit of the common good will underpin the pursuit of a society in which people can have life and have it in its fullness and in which Kingdom values can be more clearly expressed and lived.

When we pray 'thy kingdom come' and 'thine is the kingdom', the Lordship of Christ is affirmed. That gives the courage and hope to live in the light of the kingdom that is promised, a kingdom in which all can have life and have it in its fullness and in which the common good takes precedence over sectional interests. A previous pope, John XXIII, wrote, 'There are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgement on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what in the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: observe, judge, act' (encyclical letter *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, n. 236).

The framework within which such judgements are made includes the individual, the local, the structural/social and the cosmic. For example, in respect of climate change, the first step is to review the situation and determine whether there really is a problem. Given that the judgement is that there really is a serious problem with climate change, then what can be done? At the individual level a person can, among many other actions, wear warmer clothes, avoid flying and recycle. At the local level the local congregation can become an eco-congregation. The major problems arise at the structural level. The individual Christian can rightly look to the wider church to give suggestions and advice. Arising from an analysis of causes of the problem, some intermediate ways forward can be suggested. In Scotland such proposals would include better building insulation, moving away from the use of fossil fuels for energy and greater use of renewably generated electricity for transport. They would include transitional targets for reducing carbon emissions, which, if achieved, keep global warming within reasonable bounds. All within a cosmic vision of the three persons bound together in love, which recognises the power and transcendence of God the Holy Trinity, in which lies the hope of transfiguration, from glory to glory.

What Should We Do?

Any prayer has to be for discernment. Human judgement is fallible and provisional and what one generation sees as obvious to pray for, the next may be cautious about. For example, many in the church were deeply sceptical about the introduction of the National Health Service; now it is routine to pray for the NHS in church. During the First World War church prayers in both Germany and England reflected a very clear belief that God was on their side and prayers for the enemy dead were deeply suspect. Today people are much more willing to accept that the love of Christ spans national boundaries. So prayers for the success of particular programmes or policies should always be tempered with humility. Christianity is always in critical dialogue with any human institution. While the views of some political parties may negatively place them beyond the bounds of Kingdom values (for example, where racism is espoused) the church should be extremely cautious about giving its support to any specific political party.

The church has tended to adopt an ‘attic and basement’ approach to social change which in many ways neutralises the effectiveness of its stated concern for social justice. In the basement, the ways in which individuals should treat other individuals (love them) is clear. In the attic, the values of the Kingdom are affirmed as values to which all societies should aspire. Recent Church of Scotland and Scottish Episcopal Church supported projects which concentrate on desirable values fit easily into this model without in any way threatening effective social change. However in the absence of the analysis and judgment called for in *Mater et Magister*, such love cannot be effective. Hélder Câmara commented, ‘When I feed the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist’. Answering that question requires informed analysis and judgment, but, following from that understanding, comes insight as to what steps can be taken that will stand a reasonable chance of overcoming that identified challenge.

One task that the wider church can assist with is that of helping individual Christians be more confident as to which intermediate steps should be supported. Often what discourages people from taking action is the fear that they do not know enough about the topic. For example, Christians would want everyone to be adequately housed – but what steps should be taken to achieve this end? As individuals it is difficult to find answers but the churches in Scotland are in a much better position to call on specialist advice and to be aware of all the dimensions that need to be taken into account. Church and Society prayer leaflets can help identify specific aims. However the churches continually need to see how best to make use of the wealth of secular knowledge possessed by their members and to try and ensure that the informed analysis is being done before rushing to theological judgements.

The process of identifying effective transitional demands for the Kingdom is always a difficult, provisional and contentious area. Yet the Scottish Episcopal Church through its bishops, committees and synods has seen fit to put forward certain transitional proposals. Poverty is wrong – and the Scottish Episcopal Church supports the introduction of a real living wage as part of what is needed to reduce and overcome poverty in Scotland. Weapons of mass destruction are wrong and church leaders have condemned them. Carbon emissions need to be reduced if climate chaos is to be averted and the Scottish Episcopal Church accepted the recommendation of its Church and Society committee to commend specific targets to the Westminster and Holyrood governments.

It is often easier to mobilise people round a particular issue or proposal. Part of the task of the people of God is to discern what intermediate aims to prioritise. Such intermediate targets are always part of an ongoing process, and in this process the church itself and its individual members always need to pray to be aware of their own blindness. There is a thread of holiness running through the Old Testament that considers that a righteous person can only be righteous if they are part of a righteous community. Our prayer life is both individual and corporate. Intercessory Prayer is often like a mirror. We begin by asking God about something, or praying with someone on our hearts or sharing a concern with God. We end by being challenged to see how we can be a channel of the love of God towards the person or the situation that we have prayed about.

That also changes the individual's and the church's ability to proclaim the gospel. The greater the congruence between the message being preached, the lifestyle of the individual and the implications of that message for wider society, the more effective it will be.

All these issues are clearly within the political realm. Political, economic and social structures, culture and communications are all under God's judgement. A faith that is divorced from political or economic issues is profoundly limited as is a spirituality separated from social involvement. However Christians and the church must always be aware of their fallibility. No programme of demands can be conflated with the Kingdom. Prayer may well change political attitudes and party affiliations. It would be surprising if it did not. But the prayer comes first and God is always the yardstick for our provisional human judgments.

There is a place for social action and intermediate proposals at the local level to Community Councils, at the county level to County Councils, Health Boards and other bodies operating at that level, to the Scottish Government at Holyrood, Westminster and the United Nations. More could be done by the Scottish Episcopal Church at charge and diocesan level (working with other churches and faith communities where possible) to reflect on, for example, what a plan for greater

sustainability would look like for their local area. Christians contribute much working through other groups but perhaps at the expense of making clear why their concerns come from a firm Christian base.

Awareness of the needs of others, especially in an age of mass communication, can be disabling rather than an incentive to action. Feelings of guilt or helplessness can lead to disengagement or denial. Yet the saving grace of God is enough to overcome all sin – cosmic or corporate and structural as well as personal. All will be reconciled to God. And what will sustain people in continuing to campaign and work for justice in an unjust world?

The Eucharist is the central place where private and corporate prayers come together. Taking and offering, blessing, breaking and sharing are crucial components of the Eucharist. What is offered? We offer our money. We offer ourselves. We offer the bread and the wine. Yet if that offering comes from the exploitation of the poor, then the words of Sirach confront us – ‘to offer a sacrifice from the possessions of the poor is like killing a son before his father’s eyes; bread is life to the destitute and to deprive them of it is murder’ (Eccl 34.20–21). The gifts of bread and wine are laid on the table and we pray that they may indeed become for us the body and blood of Christ. They are offered and blessed, dedicated, given in service to the highest calling of God.

The gifts are shared in table fellowship. That table includes the saints and those who have gone before; it includes too all our sisters and brothers throughout the world. Yet the sharing is very limited. In the Kingdom each would have enough and none would have too much.

The German theologian Ulrich Duchrow makes the point like this: ‘Sitting around the table for the Lord’s Supper are twelve Christians. Eight of them are coloured and four white. On the table there is rice, chicken and vegetables. Three whites (for there is a minority among the whites who are poor) and one coloured (a member of their country’s elite) start the meal by taking all the chicken, most of the vegetables and most of the rice. All that remains for the other 8 are some unequal portions of rice and some leftover vegetables, so that some of them remain hungry. After the meal the remains from the plates of the four rich people are thrown away. The rich also have wine with their meal; the others only a small sip from the little chalice’².

The Eucharist is the foundational prayer of the church, the body of Christ. It is inconceivable that members of the Body should share in the Eucharist through space and time, should acknowledge the presence of Christ with them in the

² As quoted in Charles Elliott, *Praying the Kingdom* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985) p. 140.

Eucharist – through bread and wine, through priest and people – and then go out to ignore the needs of the other, refuse hospitality to the homeless and the refugee or to prepare to maim and kill their fellow Christians.

Yet in Scotland we are part of a country that is doing much less than its fair share in responding to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers.

We are also part of a country that possesses weapons of mass destruction with a conditional intention to use them. These weapons are based in Scotland. The use of Trident would kill and maim thousands of people immediately, and many more through longer-term radiation and the real risk of a nuclear winter. We live in a society that puts many resources into preparing for violent ways to try and resolve conflicts and few into peace building and training for non-violent conflict resolution. Yet in the Eucharist the peace is offered one to another in the name of the Prince of Peace. All is redeemed through Christ. Those who participate in the Eucharist are fed and nourished by Christ himself, they are bound up in the love that flows from the Trinity. They are sent out to go in peace to love and serve the Lord. They are transformed in hope. Prayers for peace and justice in the present world can feel a hopeless and futile gesture. Awareness of the needs of others can be disabling rather than an incentive to action. Feelings of guilt or helplessness can lead to disengagement or denial. Yet the saving grace of God is enough to overcome all sin – cosmic and corporate, structural and personal. And God's promise is that all will be reconciled to God.

Christians are called to be signs of the Kingdom but that is a road, which involves suffering, endurance and perseverance. The Eucharist feeds us for that pilgrimage and challenges us to be transfigured. But there is a wider end in view than that of our own personal sanctification. Charles Elliott in his book *Praying the Kingdom*, looked for a number of ways in which the church can become more sensitive to Kingdom issues³. Christian teaching, both scriptural and in the history of the community of faith is a pre-requisite. People's own stories need to be told and shared, in the recognition that there are many insights into the Kingdom. People can be encouraged to look for and name signs of the Kingdom. There should be a place in the liturgy for naming and affirming mustard seeds and those thirsting for righteousness as well as interceding for victims. Above all he stresses that private prayer is essential to complement corporate prayer and group activity.

Conclusion

Prayer, spirituality, mission and social involvement cannot be disentangled. All are part of our pilgrimage and journey towards God, both as individuals and as part of

³ Elliott, *Praying the Kingdom*, pp. 142–44.

the people of God. A framework is needed within which Christians can reflect on their experience of prayer/spirituality/mission/social involvement and which will assist in discerning signs of kingdom and considering what intermediate steps would help. As church members we do not have to do everything ourselves – we work with others. Space should be made for such conversations to take place, at national, diocesan and local level. Such conversations could also lead to identifying desirable intermediate steps at the county and local level. These intermediate aims would be based on an explicit connection between Christianity, kingdom values, competent analysis and social action. The issue of climate change is one that lends itself to this approach, especially given the recent papal encyclical and the depth of Scottish Episcopal Church thinking on this subject.

In its membership the Scottish Episcopal Church has a wealth of resources and knowledge. More can be done on making space for people to use and share this wealth and in so doing deepen both their prayer life and enable the love and concern of the church to be more effective.

As Augustine and Ignatius of Loyola said, we work and act on the assumption that it all depends on us, and we pray in the recognition that it all depends on God. The knowledge that the Kingdom is a gift from God and not something that we can achieve by our own efforts is cause for great rejoicing. The recognition that the Kingdom is both here and yet to come gives us space and time for celebration in the here and now and to live in the light of the kingdom that is promised. The Eucharist brings all of this together – we are fed and nourished by Christ so that we can be sent out anew into the world. Prayer and social action inextricably entwined.

Atheism: Our Theological Ally (Wrestling with God)

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How can a cleric in good standing with one of the historic mainline denominations of Christianity in Scotland, be so recklessly outrageous as to try to promote atheism? Surely it does not need any help. The recent census appears to provide ample evidence of the rise of atheism and other forms of unbelief in Scottish society. Why on earth should a cleric of all people seek to encourage this apparently worrisome slide of theism? Then I thought: What's new?! Seriously, you may (or may not) be relieved to hear that the title of this article has a touch, but only a touch, of bravado attached to it. I am not, of course, hitching my cassock to the new atheists' gravy train. In fact, I hope you will shortly see, what I am offering here contrasts significantly with the new atheist agenda. However, at the same time, I do not plan to offer a ringing endorsement of the churches' response either.

What I want to attempt in this paper is to trace a developing realignment of theological thinking which hints at a theological outlook that no longer need feel defensive about the proclamations of Richard Dawkins and what Peter Vardy calls 'celebrity atheism'. Further, I am going to suggest that the whole New Atheist Movement and the Church's reaction to it have *both* been based on a faulty theological premise. In a nutshell that premise has been to assume that we can achieve a sufficient security in our knowledge of anything (and that includes knowledge of God), the implication of which is that we quietly ignore Christianity's radically demanding call towards truth. In other words, I am suggesting that the drive towards certainty pushes us further from truth. And this desire for certainty (what Mary Midgley calls, 'the atomistic vision')¹ can lead to the ghettoization of religion, a religion dominated by division and preoccupied with internal doctrinal purity to the detriment of any practical engagement with the world.

As Nicholas Lash once put it:

To suppose that it is the function of theological enquiry to give us 'security' in our believing is to allow the preoccupations of apologetic to distract theology from its proper tasks, to risk trivializing its dangerous responsibility.²

¹ See Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

² Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach* (Eugene, Oregon, Wipf & Stock, 2005), p. xix.

Moving forward in this article, I hope to show that, despite the bravado, what I am suggesting is not a radical departure for theology, but can be viewed, in a certain sense, as theology recovering a sense of itself as an art that is not strictly anti-rational (fideism) but is performed on a stage that is founded on something more than reason (rationalism). To that end, I am falling in line with a number of theologians and philosophers both pre-modern and postmodern who have, prophetically or otherwise, looked beyond the hard dualities of what might be called modernist thinking.³ More importantly, what I am seeking to do is to explore a way of reflecting theologically that takes the world seriously, and actively struggles with and for humanity in the common pursuit of wisdom.

To that end I want to begin with a call to recognise the seriousness of the issue. Too often in the world of apologetics (that world which attempts to defend the Gospel from all comers, and recently that often means The New Atheists), one can be forgiven for thinking that the protagonists exist in some kind of Waterstones-shaped cocoon, arguing over questions pertaining to, for example, the nature of being, or explorations into whether or not we live a free as opposed to a determined existence. I am not suggesting that such questions are unimportant in themselves, but it is all too easy in the rarefied atmosphere of the seminar room to lose touch with what it is we are attempting to reflect upon. Indeed, part of my argument is that we have to make the anti-Cartesian move and not hide away from the world in order to come to any kind of conclusion about the life, the universe and everything. Descartes' motto was, apparently, 'a life well hidden is a life well lived'. On the contrary, I would argue that we have to fully enter the world, to struggle with it, and to learn from our experience of it. So I want to begin by mentioning Bruce Springsteen's *Empty Sky*. (Find it at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gb-zxmuhfS8>.)

The song is a reminder to me that this is a discussion with consequences. Theology, as Lash put it, does have a 'dangerous responsibility'. There are a number of things that are revealing about that song. It is a song with a clear reference point in history, but it also provides a vivid theological framework out of which the chorus finds its disturbing power. We know what the clear historical reference point is (the atrocity of 9/11) but what is this theological framework? The clue is found in the allusions to blood crying from the ground and the creation of weapons from the tree

³ The tension between theology and the philosophical tradition is, of course, exemplified in Tertullian's complaint: "What has Athens got to do with Jerusalem?" The discipline or art of theology has always straddled the divide between the cataphatic and the apophatic. All I say in this article is that we must be aware of this struggle and not attempt to resolve it one way or the other.

of evil and the tree of good. Both images are found in the book of Genesis in the story of Cain and Abel and the Fall of humanity respectively. These testify not only to the collective religious root of this particular instance of human violence, and to the desire for revenge that such violence inevitably engenders, but they also hint at the enduring deep assurance, bordering on certainty, that such sacred texts appear to provide. The irony of this is that the line 'Empty Sky' itself can no longer be read as a straightforward description of the absence of the twin towers, but is transformed by Springsteen into a graphic reminder of the theological anxiety, which pervades human society in the face of such theologically-fuelled atrocities. It expresses what Charles Taylor describes as 'a restlessness at the barriers of the human sphere'.⁴ After events like this, where are our securities? Can there be any assured theological answers, or are we, despite our technical ability to light it up, simply looking at an empty sky? Certainly Richard Dawkins believes it to be so and he cannot wait for the rest of us to wake up and smell the coffee. In a rather distasteful article published in *The Guardian* four days after 9/11, he wrote:

[...] But suicide enthusiasts are hard to find. Even terminal cancer patients might lose their nerve when the crash was actually looming. Could we get some otherwise normal humans and somehow persuade them that they are not going to die as a consequence of flying a plane smack into a skyscraper? If only! Nobody is that stupid, but how about this – it's a long shot, but it just might work. Given that they are certainly going to die, couldn't we sucker them into believing that they are going to come to life again afterwards? Don't be daft! No, listen, it might work. Offer them a fast track to a Great Oasis in the Sky, cooled by everlasting fountains. Harps and wings wouldn't appeal to the sort of young men we need, so tell them there's a special martyr's reward of 72 virgin brides, guaranteed eager and exclusive. Would they fall for it? Yes, testosterone-sodden young men too unattractive to get a woman in this world might be desperate enough to go for 72 private virgins in the next.

It's a tall story, but worth a try. You'd have to get them young, though. Feed them a complete and self-consistent background mythology to make the big lie sound plausible when it comes. Give them a holy book and make them learn it by heart. Do you know, I really think it

⁴ Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 726.

might work. As luck would have it, we have just the thing to hand: a ready-made system of mind-control which has been honed over centuries, handed down through generations. Millions of people have been brought up in it. It is called religion and, for reasons which one day we may understand, most people fall for it (nowhere more so than America itself, though the irony passes unnoticed). Now all we need is to round up a few of these faith-heads and give them flying lessons.⁵

It is mildly interesting to speculate as to why it was that *The Guardian* sought out Dawkins at such short notice, but let that pass. Leaving aside Dawkins' troubling black humour, this is a helpful instance of the very specific problem I am attempting to grapple with in this paper, namely the misrepresentation of what constitutes religion. He makes the modernist mistake of equating religion with a specific set of beliefs, rather than recognising the greater theological subtlety that is required, a subtlety that his atheistic predecessors, beginning with Socrates, more clearly understood and used to great effect to expose what Peter Vardy calls 'bad religion'.⁶ Very few doubt that the perpetrators of the 9/11 atrocities were influenced by bad religion, i.e. in Vardy's terms they were influenced by an understanding of religion that fails to promote human flourishing. With this in mind and to put it bluntly, it appears Richard Dawkins and the new atheists are attacking the wrong God. Unfortunately, Christians, in their defensiveness, have largely found themselves at the same time defending the wrong God.

Both the new atheists and their theistic opponents have found themselves caught up in what Tina Beattie calls a 'perennial stag-fight'.⁷ While I sympathise with Beattie's description of a battle that seems dominated by testosterone, I prefer to call it a charade. The sad reality, however, is that the playing of this game has serious consequences. Charades work when a little information is provided for the players and the point of the game is to gradually or quickly get to a final answer. As it happens, the word 'charade' has a root meaning of 'to chatter', which reminds me of E. M. Forster's biting criticism in *A Passage to India*, of what he called 'poor little talkative Christianity'. The temptation to think that we can somehow talk ourselves or others into 'the faith' is a symptom of the church's submission to a theological mistake - the same mistake that Dawkins makes. But what is the origin and nature of this mistake? Ironically, we need to look to the theological foundations of modern atheism to find out.

⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The Guardian* (15 September 2001).

⁶ Peter Vardy, *Good and Bad Religion* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

⁷ Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), p. 9.

Our theological thinking is always, at best, second-hand. We always come at God from a polygram of angles. These angles are constituted by culture, economics, geography and a whole host of other social and psychological considerations. To switch metaphors, we view God through a kaleidoscope of lenses, or, as St Paul put it, we see through a glass darkly. We subconsciously practice what the poet, Emily Dickinson, preached when she said ‘The Truth must dazzle gradually – Or every man be blind.’⁸ Unfortunately, for the past few hundred years we have tricked ourselves into thinking that we are able to look with 20/20 vision. Now, one would think that 20/20 vision would be better than requiring milk bottle lenses. And of course you would be right, if you are thinking of being able to thread a needle or see your potential lover across a crowded room. But when it comes to our ‘seeing’ God then we enter a very different visual field. Though it had significant and absolutely critical theological and philosophical antecedents, the eye of this particular metaphysical storm can be located in what we now call the Enlightenment.

The temptation for theists is to look at the Enlightenment as the birthplace of atheism. In a certain sense that is correct insofar as it goes, but one must take a closer look to discover the deeply theistic concerns that underpin the Enlightenment project. For example, Descartes’s famous *cogito ergo sum* was itself nothing less than an attempt, in the face of universal doubt, to secure the existence of God. To doubt, let alone deny the existence of God, was not Descartes’ intention. But the theological and philosophical implications of what he was attempting were, shall we say, unforeseen. As the literary critic J. Hillis Miller, borrowing imagery from Nietzsche, puts it:

When everything exists only as reflected in the ego, then man has drunk up the sea. If man is defined as subject, everything else turns into object. This includes God, who now becomes merely the highest object of man’s knowledge. God, once the creative sun, the power establishing the horizon where heaven and earth come together, becomes an object of thought like any other. When man drinks up the sea, he also drinks up God, the creator of the sea. In this every man is the murderer of God.⁹

⁸ Emily Dickinson, ‘Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant’ in *Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Helen McNeil (London: J. M. Dent, 1997), p. 82.

⁹ Quoted in Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), p. 27.

The intention of many enlightenment thinkers including Descartes, Locke, and Kant was indeed to secure the existence of God. But these thinkers did not appreciate that they were playing what now may be called a dangerous modern game. The basic rule of this dangerous game involved changing the way human beings spoke about God, i.e. changing the focus of *theo-logos*, itself. Instead of using the language of analogy, in the way that the Church Fathers, mystics and, significantly, Aquinas did, a change occurred, whereby, rather than travelling the middle way between equivocal or univocal language when speaking of God, a move toward more precise 'clear and distinct' language became desirable. There are probably numerous reasons for this, the massive influence of Aristotle being one, (another more controversial source is Duns Scotus)¹⁰ but a significant explanation is found in the completely understandable desire to move away from the religious blood-letting which soaked the earth of the post-Reformation era. So the argument ran: the more accurately we can speak about God, the less likely we are to fight one another over points of doctrine. But the problem with this well-meaning desire is that it implies a radically different way of perceiving God. As Gavin Hyman summarises it:

If language can now be predicated of God in the same unequivocal way that it is predicated of things in the world, the implication is that God is, in some sense, closer to things in the world, to such an extent, that he becomes a 'thing' himself.¹¹

This is what has been rightly called the 'domestication' of God. And, to be fair, modern theologians recognised the risk they were running. To obviate this particular danger, however, they did the worst possible thing. They accentuated the transcendence of God in quantitative terms. In other words, what the post-Enlightenment theologians found themselves arguing was that God is like us... only bigger. The important thing to note here for our purposes is that this is the God that the modern atheists (and that includes the new atheists) reject. This is the anthropomorphic God that is open to the later charge of projection (Feuerbach),

¹⁰ There is debate as to whether Duns Scotus is responsible for destroying the gulf between God's being and our own. Being, according to Duns Scotus is transcendental and above any genus (including God). Some scholars doubt this connection, see Richard Scott, *Duns Scotus* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 55.

and at the same time, this is the domestic God whose place, in a world that is now more generally understood in materialistic terms, becomes simply superfluous.¹²

This is, to say the least, significant. This rationalistic understanding of God lies at the heart of the atheist/theist debates that have raged over the past 300 years and certainly more virulently in the last century or so. What it points to is that atheism has rejected the wrong God, because the church has promoted the wrong God. To revisit Springsteen's imagery, the competing bows of modern theism and modern atheism are seen to be cut from the same tree. The rational basis of theological debate provided the oxygen for those who, like Feuerbach, wished to rain fire down upon the whole theistic garden.

To take one prominent example of how this relationship developed one need only look to biblical studies. The desire to have distinct and clear ideas in theology encouraged the development of what eventually became known as the historical-critical method of interpretation in biblical studies (or higher criticism), which flourishes from the eighteenth century onwards. However, a famous exponent of such a rationalistic approach to Scripture is found a hundred years earlier in the formidable shape of Bishop Ussher, the distinguished scientist and bishop of Armagh who, in his *Annals*, (1650-54) determined on the basis of astronomical and theological calculations that the world had been created on 23 October 4004 BC. This was of such significance that it was inserted into subsequent editions of the Bible and held such influence that 200 years later, a certain Charles Darwin had to confess that for many years he had assumed that the Ussher dating was a part of the sacred text itself.¹³ To discover that this was not the case and instead to look at the empirical data, as Darwin conscientiously did, was to deal a fatal blow to the rationalist approach to scriptural interpretation, but in many ways one could argue that it was, in truth, a largely self-inflicted blow. You might say that the blow was Usshered in! And it is no surprise that after that knockout blow landed, theists found themselves getting their feet slightly moist with Matthew Arnold at the edge of that rapidly receding Sea of Faith.

When God becomes a proposition in the same way that say, the Big Bang is, then we know what is going to happen – in footballing terms it is Big Bang 1 God 0. What is curious, though, is that we have observed that modern atheism is itself a

¹² One could describe the modern God as the Video Game God, a God we believe to be free but is in fact at the mercy of our modern theological joystick. To echo Bonheoffer this is the *Deus ex machina* – the God of the Gaps.

¹³ St Margaret's Church (Newlands), of which I am Rector, hosts a Bible from 1722 that has Ussher's calculations in the margin.

natural outworking of modern theology. Which, of course, begs the question: What happens when modern theology goes the way of the Dodo?

There are two prophetic figures who pointed long ago to this extinction, one a troubled and troubling atheist, and one a troubled and troublesome theist. Both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard saw the domestication of God to be nothing short of a disaster. But, as you would expect, they each approached this disaster rather differently. Nietzsche's famous parable of the madman announcing the death of God, alluded to earlier, is often taken at face value to be an attack on theism (and, of course, it is!) but it is more than that. It is a horror story because it points to the terrible vacuum, as Nietzsche saw it, that God's domestication and subsequent departure would leave in its wake. He foresaw that the absence of God for the atheist was not necessarily a cause for uncontrolled celebration. He recognised that the notion of God held within it other fundamental concepts, which can broadly be described as theological – truth, progress, presence. If God dies, what happens to these? The madman cries out: 'Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not the night continually closing in on us?'¹⁴ This is Nietzsche's concern – that people recognise how life is not constituted by a void, but by life itself. And it is the same concern felt by Kierkegaard, albeit from a different perspective.

While in Nietzsche's parable, the audience is atheistically apathetic, Kierkegaard's audience is theistically apathetic. Living as he did in comfortable Lutheran Copenhagen, Kierkegaard was scathingly dismissive of the all too confident prevailing religious establishment. To this end even his name becomes an irony. He complained that they lived an illusion of what he calls 'the public' – a place of gossip and impersonal edicts as to what constitutes proper behaviour. Another word he has for it as it pertains to the religious life is 'Christendom'. In this artificial public sphere, the church had, he argued, lost touch with the existential nature of faith as it impacted on life. A key theme for Kierkegaard is that truth is subjectivity. By this he doesn't mean to point to any kind of relativism, but he is insisting that we can only truly know the truth for *ourselves*. So a subjective truth would be something like the impact of reading a line of Emily Dickinson's poetry, or hearing a Bruce Springsteen song. As the gifted Kierkegaard scholar, Edward Mooney puts it:

Kierkegaardian subjectivity is tied to my sense that I care for things that matter. I am summoned and struck by things that make demands

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (London: Vintage, 1974), p. 181.

on my responsiveness. To be subject is to be summoned, struck and responsive.¹⁵

It is this call to a passionate existence which binds the theist, Kierkegaard with the atheist, Nietzsche. Both led furious attacks on Christianity, one in the name of Christ, one in the name of the anti-Christ. Both spoke out against a prevailing nonchalance which transcended the theistic/atheistic divide. Both were troubled by the ease by which people could simply fall asleep. Both are wonderfully described by John Caputo as ‘mad... canaries in the coal mine of modernity’.¹⁶ They dramatically expose the toxic fumes of rationalism as it pertains to both theism and atheism. Both believe that the world cannot rest on its enlightenment laurels, but must look towards what might be called a new or counter enlightenment. The question then has to be asked: What does this new enlightenment look like? To answer this, we turn to Kevin Costner! (Find it at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2pwkI2gO8A>.)

The scene from the film, *The Bodyguard* (1992) illustrates, admittedly somewhat obliquely, what I would regard as an important guiding principle of a new enlightenment, namely agonism. Agonism is a term that is associated more with the political sphere than with the theological. It refers to the need for what is called a ‘conflictual consensus’ among democracies. This is a reaction to traditional rationalistic approaches in political theory which assume ‘the availability of a universal consensus based on reason’.¹⁷ The Belgian political theorist, Chantal Mouffe, argues that this consensus is an illusion, based as it is on the primacy of the individual (a fundamental enlightenment principle), and that a true consensus, if it is ever to be achieved, is one based on mutual struggle. In other words, she is suggesting that it is in the struggle that communities, societies and countries find themselves honestly interacting with one another in a cause which goes beyond antagonism and self-interest.

You will notice from that scene that the key word is ‘talk’. Costner’s character, Farmer says, “I don’t want to *talk* about this again.” Of course, no talking has actually taken place, but a consensus has been achieved, through struggle. We have moved beyond the rationalistic to the agonistic. We have moved beyond the need for isolated individual justification to a visceral encounter with the other. It is in the encounter that a fragile communication takes place. It is fragile but it is nonetheless

¹⁵ Edward F. Mooney, *Excursions With Kierkegaard* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 13.

¹⁶ John D. Caputo, *Truth* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 140.

¹⁷ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 3.

real. The more obviously theological counterpart to the *Bodyguard* scene is found in the book of Genesis, where we encounter Jacob wrestling with an angel and, by extension, God (Gen 32: 22-30). This mysterious wrestling engenders an immediate theological or spiritual awareness in Jacob, and culminates in a change to his identity. Jacob is now Israel. This is a denomination whose existence does not stand isolated from the other, but is perennially associated with the struggle with the other. And this is not a struggle for dominance over the other, but a struggle to receive blessing from the other *in the struggle*. This is the essence of agonistic theological thinking.

It is given a prophetically vivid form in Paul Gauguin's *The Vision after the Sermon* (1888). The contrasting images of the devout women reflecting on the sermon separated by the tree from their vision of Jacob wrestling with the angel begs the question: Are we witnessing an image of the women having a vision or are we having a vision ourselves? To interpret this painting *is* to imagine the vision for ourselves. But this is not, as Walter Brueggemann puts it, a 'totalizing imaginative act'.¹⁸ We cannot simply stand in judgement over this image. It invites us to partake in the wrestling that is part and parcel of the hermeneutical process. Like the women in the painting we are to listen for the word of God for us, and we are to be prepared to struggle with it and be transformed by it.¹⁹ In this sense we are moved away from a modern ontological view of God to what may be described as a hermeneutical approach towards God. In other words, the pursuit of Truth – what the theist may describe as the pursuit of God – is what constitutes the wrestling life of faith.

What is common to human beings, both atheist and theist alike is that to truly live we have to be at the margins. We do not live fixed lives. We discern our truth as we go. None of this is handed on a plate, whether that be based upon a deterministic philosophy or a staunch advocacy of divine revelation. Truth is inevitably truth on the go. Just as Jacob wrestled with God as he was on the way to a showdown with his brother, so we wrestle with God on our journey. We wrestle not to overcome or control but to receive blessing – to experience the fullness of life, and then to wrestle again.

In all of this we find ourselves moved beyond the traditional modern battlegrounds of which the divide: atheist/theist is simply one example. As these

¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture and the Church* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2011), p. 297.

¹⁹ Take note that it is *women* who have this vision. This reminds us of the predominantly male-dominated rationalist debates in recent history. See Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010).

rationally manufactured barriers are exposed, we recognise the common ground between us in the common pursuit of truth. What we discover is that God is liberated from the rationalist ghetto and, in the words of Caputo, becomes an ever-arriving event as humanity struggles to discover its true place in the world. This liberating struggle is best expressed in one of Bonhoeffer's last letters from prison, when he talks of the 'this-worldliness' of Christianity:

By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane.²⁰

Throwing ourselves into the arms of God, we engage in the on-going wrestling, the agonistic struggle which defeats the rationalistic charade and opens us to the world.²¹

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 370.

²¹ We are reminded here, of course, of the Heideggerian notion of *Geworfenheit* 'thrownness'. See Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter (London: Harper Collins, 2001).

‘And a heaven in a wild flower’¹

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Thomas Merton’s photographs have for many years been a way in to contemplative prayer for me, as indeed for countless others. His skill with the camera has been well documented elsewhere² – and you, like me, are probably eagerly anticipating the advent of Paul Pearson’s latest book, *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton*, due to arrive on these shores any day now.

It is often said that Merton’s artistic abilities – seen primarily in his calligraphies and black-and-white photographs – stemmed from his parents’ influence, both of them being artists of note. As is often quoted, Merton wrote of his father’s art: ‘My father painted like Cézanne ... His vision of the world was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure, for the relations of masses.’³ But here I wish to consider two *other* influences upon Merton’s photographic gift; two creative artists in a different medium; two poets, Blake and Hopkins.

‘Merton grew up with (the 18th–19th century English poet) William Blake’.⁴ His father used to read *Songs of Innocence* to him, even though as a ten-year old he found them ‘incomprehensible’.⁵ This early dislike, however, did not last long. As a schoolboy at Oakham he pored over Blake’s poems, and as a student at Columbia wrote a thesis on the topic of ‘Nature and Art in William Blake: an essay in interpretation’. At this stage of his life, the fascination with the visionary Romantic poet went very deep; ‘I think my love for William Blake has something in it of God’s grace. It is a love that has never died, and which has entered very deeply into the development of my life’, he wrote in his autobiography.⁶

¹ This paper was delivered at a day conference entitled ‘Thomas Merton’s Engaged Spirituality: Artistic, Political, Psychological and Interspiritual Expressions’ at the Edinburgh International Centre for Spirituality and Peace on 29 October 2016.

² Chiefly in *A Hidden Wholeness. The Visual World of Thomas Merton* John Howard Griffin (1979). *Geography of Holiness The Photography of Thomas Merton* ed. Deba Prasad Patnaik (1980).

³ Merton, T. *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1999), 3.

⁴ Arcement, E. ‘In the School of the Prophets: the formation of Thomas Merton’s prophetic spirituality’ *Cistercian Studies* 265 (2015), 3.

⁵ *op cit* 2, 86.

⁶ *op cit* 2, 85.

After the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, there is a decade-long lull in references to Blake in Merton's writing. Then in 1959, when visiting Louisville, he 'picked up, on the wing, "by chance", Blake's poems and realized again how much I love them, how much I am at home with him ... I love Blake'.⁷ In 1966, he used Blake as an interpretative lens through which to understand the spirituality and craftsmanship of the Shakers⁸ while between 1965–66 he lectured on the poetry of Blake to the novices in Gethsemani. His anti-poetry – his poems of protest at, and parody of, mass culture and the contemporary Babel – are redolent of Blake; these are to be found collected in *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, the latter book unfinished at the time of his death. Indeed it was in the last year of his life that he really mined the riches of Blake's treasury, in response to being asked to review Thomas Altizer's book *The New Apocalypse: the radical Christian vision of William Blake*.⁹

Blake, we might say, 'accompanied' Merton through his life; Michael Higgins goes so far as to dub Merton 'Blake's twentieth century descendant', citing the earlier poet's visionary poetics and radical spirituality as major influences upon the twentieth-century writer and religious.¹⁰ But it is Blake's insistence upon an immanentist approach that is of interest in this context.

Blake sought the knowledge of things through the particular. 'To generalize is to be an idiot', he wrote; 'to particularize is the alone distinction of merit ... distinct general forms cannot exist; distinctness is particular, not general'¹¹. By 'generalizing' he meant the giving to a particular subject a kind of ideal or typical beauty, a standard beauty – or Platonic archetype – by which all such subjects might be judged. Beauty, Blake argued, does not conform with certain ideal and unchanging types. Instead we must endeavour to apprehend the nature of the *individual* subject and the *peculiar* clarity of everything. To particularize is to see a thing as it is essentially; to apprehend its form which is a revelation of its essence, the ontological secret of its innermost being; to see how it is filled with God's glory.

⁷ Cunningham, L. ed. *A Search for Solitude. The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume 3, 1952-60*, (1997), 315-6

⁸ Merton, T. *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture* (1966).

⁹ Merton, T. 'Blake and the new theology' *The Sewanee Review* 76. No 4 (1968) 673-682.

¹⁰ Higgins, M. *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (1998), 68 and 273.

¹¹ Merton, T. 'Nature and Art in William Blake' in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* ed. Hart, P. (1985), 440-441.

To see the splendour of form in matter is to look through matter into eternity, to see a heaven in a wild flower or the world in a grain of sand. As Blake writes in 'Milton, a poem'

Every generated body in its inward form
Is a garden of delight and a building of magnificence.

Nature, for Blake, was not beautiful in itself as it was for other Romantic poets, but only when assimilated and transformed by the imagination; then a building of magnificence did indeed 'blaze(d) before him in a vision fired with the glory of God'.¹² Material nature, he argued, is not intelligible *per se*; intelligibility, the revelation of the essence of things, is something that is imposed by the creative imagination, the faculty by which we 'penetrate ultimate reality and religious mystery'.¹³ As Ross Labrie writes in his seminal book *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*:

As with Blake, for Merton the font of the imagination, seen as a means of attaining a direct ontological insight into being, awakened the mind at certain times to what, although frequently overlooked, was always and everywhere present.¹⁴

Or as Blake himself put it in his poem 'Jerusalem':

To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination.

As we will see shortly, photography was one means of awakening Merton's mind – opening his immortal eyes – to the extraordinary dimensions of mundane reality, heaven in ordinary. It was a summons to awareness.

The second poet who influenced Merton's photography was Gerard Manley Hopkins, as unlike a poet and a man as Blake as can be imagined; one a 18th/19th century English Dissenter, the other a twentieth-century Jesuit. Hopkins's profound influence on Merton began at Columbia:

¹² *ibid* 451.

¹³ *op cit* 7, xiii.

¹⁴ Labrie, R. *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (2001), 129.

I took up the book about Gerard Manley Hopkins. The chapter told of Hopkins at Balliol, at Oxford. He was thinking of becoming a Catholic. He was writing letters to Cardinal Newman about becoming a Catholic. All of a sudden something began to stir within me, something began to push me, to prompt me. It was a movement that spoke like a voice. 'What are you waiting for?' it said. 'Why are you sitting here? Why do you still hesitate? You know what you ought to do? Why don't you do it? ... Suddenly, I could bear it no longer. I put down the book, and got into my raincoat, and started down the stairs. I went out into the street ... And then everything inside me began to sing - to sing with peace, to sing with strength and to sing with conviction.'¹⁵

This profound connection endured. Merton decided to write his doctoral dissertation on Hopkins, and doubtless would have done so had he stayed at Columbia instead of leaving to teach. But his love of Hopkins overrode that obstruction. On his ordination in 1949 he received an edition of Hopkins's poems from his friend Robert Giroux, who gave him a further book about Hopkins's work some four years later. This suggests that during the period when he was producing some of his most significant early spiritual writing – such as *Seeds of Contemplation* and *The Sign of Jonas* – Merton was continuing to nurture his love of this poet. Not for nothing was the English edition of his autobiography entitled '*Elected Silence*'.¹⁶ As Jeffrey Cooper puts it, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins was infused into the spiritual bones of Thomas Merton'.¹⁷

Hopkins reacted strongly against the ugliness, 'the sordidness of things', in the urban industrial world of nineteenth-century England, and sought refuge in 'the wildness and wet' of the natural world. He cultivated an aesthetic in which the beauty of the world reflects the wisdom of God by means of two levels of apprehension: the naturalistic level on which are perceived the individual identities of particular beings in the immanent world, and the visionary level on which one receives intuitions of the transcendent being of God. Central to that aesthetic are the concepts of 'inscape' and 'instress'. He defined 'inscape' in his *Spiritual Notes* of 1881 as the capacity of all things to be charged with love, charged with God – 'and if we know how to touch them, they give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow,

¹⁵ *op cit* 2, 215-6.

¹⁶ 'Elected silence, sing to me /and beat upon my whorlèd ear' is a line from Hopkins's 'The Habit of Perfection'.

¹⁷ Cooper, J. 'Divining the inscaped-landscape: Hopkins, Merton and the ascent to true self' *The Merton Annual* 18 (2005), 127.

ring and tell of him'. The 'touching' is the instress, the means of revealing and illuminating the inscape. 'Instress is the energy that both maintains and reveals the Inscap. It is the energy that illuminates the relationship between internal and external landscapes'.¹⁸

This draws not only on the Platonic-Aristotelian idea that whatever exists has a proper form – which we saw Blake reacting against – but also on the work of the 14th century philosopher Duns Scotus who maintained that every given thing partakes not only of the form of its own kind, but has its own particular inscape, its 'thisness'. Hopkins's name was oneness – the oneness of a thing – or 'self'.

But Hopkins goes further; the particular existence of each thing is what it has from God; such immanent participation in the divine is an ontological reality because of Christ, the Incarnate Word, 'the archetype and ultimate inscape of created being, the archetype of created beauty'.¹⁹ As Ballinger puts it, 'beauty is Christic self-expressiveness in the forms of the created world'.²⁰ Hopkins could take pleasure in the perception of natural forms or inscapes because they were a medium through which he could instress Christ; as he wrote in his *Notes on the Spiritual Exercises*:

God's utterance of himself in himself is God the word, outside himself is this world. This world then is word, expression, news of God. Therefore its end, its purpose, its purport, its meaning is God and its life or work to name or praise him.²¹

Merton uses the language of inscape on several occasions. In a chapter of *New Seeds* entitled 'Things in their identity', he comments that for animals 'Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of God's wisdom and of God's reality in them'.²² And in his final diary he speaks of 'distant inscaped mountains'.²³

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 129-130.

¹⁹ Ballinger, P. *The Poem as Sacrament: The Theological Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (2000), 234.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Hopkins, G.M. *Notes on the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises* 7 (August 1882).

²² Merton, T. *Seeds of Contemplation* (1972), 20.

²³ Merton, T. *The Other Side of the Mountain: Journals* 94. 13.

Merton calls Hopkins ‘a true Christian poet’²⁴ (along with such other luminaries as Dante, St John of the Cross and St Francis) and goes on to say:

The true poet is always akin to the mystic because of the prophetic intuition by which he sees the spiritual reality, the inner meaning of the object he contemplates, which makes that concrete reality not only a thing worthy of admiration in itself, but also and above all makes it a sign of God. All good Christian poets are then contemplatives in the sense that they see God everywhere in his creation and in his mysteries, and behold the created world as filled with signs and symbols of God. To the true Christian poet, the whole world and all the incidents of life tend to be sacraments, signs of God, signs of his love working in the world.²⁵

The vocation of humankind, Merton believed, was ‘to transform (the world) and draw forth from it the spiritual glory which has been hidden in it by the Creator.’²⁶ Like Blake and Hopkins, Merton knew that to do this, humankind must regain the capacity to ‘see purely’ – a phrase he uses in *Conjectures*²⁷ – the kind of seeing that is unfettered by technology and scientific wisdom:

It is dynamic power, vitality, the self-realization of life in act, something that flashes out in a split second, is seen, yet is not accessible to mere reflection, still less to analysis.²⁸

‘Seeing purely’ is a way of relating to the world, of being in direct sensuous contact with what is outside one, of *experiencing* nature as redolent with God’s radiance. A delightful entry in his journal on Holy Saturday 1958 reveals this desire to see into the heart of things as he reflects upon a wren having landed first on his shoulder and then on what he was reading:

²⁴ Merton, T. ‘Poetry and contemplation: a reappraisal’ *The Commonweal* October 24 1958, 88.

²⁵ *ibid* 89.

²⁶ Merton, T. ‘Art and Worship’ ed. Glenn Crider and Victor Kramer 15 – 21 in *The Merton Annual Vol. 18*, (2005), 19.

²⁷ Merton, T. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1995), 307.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

I want not only to observe but to know living things, and this implies a dimension of primordial familiarity which is simple and primitive and religious and poor. That is the reality I need, the vestige of God in His creatures. And the Light of God in my own soul.²⁹

This ‘mystical identification or co-sympathy with creation’³⁰ – what Merton called connaturality³¹ – is beautifully expressed in one of his poems:

I am earth, earth

Out of my grass heart
Rises the bobwhite

Out of my nameless weeds
His foolish worship³²

Merton understood that the world was charged with the grandeur of God. ‘As we go about the world’ Merton wrote in *Seeds of Contemplation*, ‘everything we meet and everything we see and hear and touch, far from defiling, purifies us and plants in us something more of contemplation and of heaven.’³³ But this liberating vision, he maintained, this sapiential seeing of the Word in created things, requires silence and solitude, a slowing down, an engaging of the senses, a stilling of the restless intellect.

Merton used his camera as a tool for the contemplative vision, ‘the intuition of divine things in and through the reflection of God in nature and in the symbols of revelation.’³⁴ His ‘serious work,’ as he called his black and white photographs, it is ‘a meditation,’³⁵ images which, when viewed without haste or pressure, might accomplish the slow work of communicating ‘a hidden wholeness’ and perhaps

²⁹ Merton T. *op cit* 6, 190.

³⁰ *op cit* 9, 251.

³¹ *op cit* 23, 90.

³² Merton, T. ‘O sweet irrational worship’ *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (1980), 345.

³³ Merton, T. *op cit* 21, 20.

³⁴ Merton, T. *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William Shannon (2003), 67.

³⁵ Griffin, J.H. *A Hidden Wholeness. The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (1970), 3.

reveal some hint of that wordless gentleness that flows out from ‘the unseen roots of all created being.’

He achieves this by not objectifying or appropriating that which is being photographed; he is never imperial or colonizing towards it. Rather he allows the thing to be itself. He goes out to the object and gives himself to it, allowing it to communicate its essence, ‘allowing it to say what it will, reveal what it will, rather than trying to bring it into the confines of self, altering and changing it by the possession of it.’³⁶ Merton the photographer sought to be faithful to the ‘inner essence’ – the inscape – of objects. As he said of his father, he respected the *power of God’s creation to bear witness for itself*.³⁷ But note, too, the beginning of that quotation about his father’s artistic vision; Merton says that it was ‘full of veneration for the circumstances that impress an individual beauty on each created thing.’³⁸ Pure Hopkins.

Merton’s photographs testify to the truth that reality glorifies God by simply being what it is. As he wrote in *Seeds of Contemplation*, ‘A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying Him. It consents to His creative love’.³⁹ And even as I say that doubtless you are hearing echoes of Hopkins’s ‘As kingfishers catch fire’

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying Whát I dó is me: for that I came.

Merton’s images are lucid and simple, ‘without artifice or disguise. Almost all of them are frontal shots – direct and straight, allowing the object its own autonomy and fidelity. His preferred manner of making pictures was in black and white. It gave the photographs textural depth and authenticity, stripped and emptied of drama or distraction. They are chaste and sparing’.⁴⁰

None of them is a manipulated image, but instead respect the power of God’s creation to bear witness for itself. As fellow photographer John Howard Griffin puts it:

³⁶ *ibid*, 50.

³⁷ *op cit* 2, 3.

³⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁹ *op cit* 21, 23.

⁴⁰ ‘Through a glass purely’ Patnaik, D. <http://www.merton.org/hiddenwholeness/> 14.

In his photography, he focused on the images of his contemplation, as they were and not as he wanted them to be. He took his camera on his walks and, with his special way of seeing, photographed what moved or excited him - whatsoever responded in some mysterious way to that inner orientation. His concept of aesthetic beauty differed from that of most men. Most would pass by dead tree roots in search of a rose. Merton photographed the dead tree root or the texture of wood or whatever crossed his path. In these works, he photographed the natural, unarranged, unpossessed objects of his contemplation, seeking not to alter their life but to preserve it in his emulsions. In a certain sense, then, these photographs do not need to be studied, they need to be contemplated if they are to carry their full impact.⁴¹

Merton's photographs are indeed representative of pure seeing⁴², Blakean seeing, Hopkinsean seeing: 'an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding.'⁴³ An unveiling of the hidden wholeness. They remind us of 'the urgency of seeing, fully aware, experiencing what is here.'⁴⁴ Merton advised his friend and fellow poet, Ron Seitz, that when photographing one should

stop looking and . . . begin seeing! Because looking means that you already have something in mind for your eye to find; you've set out in search of your desired object and have closed off everything else presenting itself along the way. But seeing is being open and receptive to what comes to the eye.⁴⁵

Being open and receptive to the 'the holiness of created things.'⁴⁶

Two poets, I have argued, helped shape Merton's eyes for pure seeing, to the immanent power of the particular, to an 'awakening to the Real within all that is real.'⁴⁷ Now, here are words from another poet/priest:

⁴¹ *op cit* 34, 49-50.

⁴² *op cit* 26, 307.

⁴³ Suzuki, D.T. *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings*, Barrett, W. ed. (1956), 84.

⁴⁴ Merton, T. *Turning Towards the World. Journal volume* Victor Kramer ed. (1996), 123.

⁴⁵ Seitz, R. *Song for Nobody* (1995), 133.

⁴⁶ Merton, T. *The Sign of Jonas* (1953), 238.

⁴⁷ *op cit* 21, 2.

Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.⁴⁸

Let us then turn aside, and with Blake, Hopkins and Merton see the transcendent instantiated in the particular.

⁴⁸ Thomas, R. S. *Laboratories of the Spirit*.

Book Reviews

SARAH COAKLEY. *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013). Pages xx + 344. ISBN 978-0521558266. £21 (paper).

Sarah Coakley is a consummate and engaging theologian and this remarkable and imaginative book on the Trinity, 'searching for doctrine's lost coins in dark and neglected corners' (p. 263), is by far the best theological book I have read in recent years. Its scope is interdisciplinary and unconventional. Chapters embrace insights from the Patristic tradition and Christian iconography, charismatic experience and prayer; from gender, feminism and sexuality and the social sciences. In short, Coakley invites us to rethink the doctrine of the Trinity through the lens of 'desire' lived in human and divine relationships – to 'step inside this realm of contemplation of the divine' (p. 26).

Chapter 1 'Recasting 'systematic theology' introduces us to Coakley's key methodological appreciation of *theologie totale*, a kind of 'unsystematic systematics' which is

'the sweated-out significance of embodied (and thus gendered, and socially located) contemplation, not mere verbal play or abstract thought. It attends to the different levels and forms at which doctrine may be purveyed, aware of the ways in which intellect, affect, and imagination are progressively magnetised by the contentful, cataphatic claims of a variety of mediums, yet how they are also constantly judged and purged by the apophatic act of contemplation. But just as importantly, *theologie totale* is keenly aware of the social locations and worldly power – or powerlessness – of those who undertake this ascetic task' (pp. 59-60).

The remainder of the book tests the plausibility of Coakley's approach.

In Chapter 2 'Doing theology on Wigan Pier' we are immediately drawn into Enlightenment feminism and why the social sciences matter to theology. As Robin Gill (my sociology of religion mentor at New College) says, theology ignores sociology at its peril. So Coakley challenges the pitfalls of some postmodern feminism and argues convincingly that doctrine and lived religion in place and time must be understood reflexively together in a *theologie totale*.

Chapter 3 'Praying the Trinity' re-examines the evolution of Patristic Trinitarian traditions – Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen, Athanasius and the Cappadocians – giving a greater priority to the Spirit in prayer, together with a fuller

appreciation of the feminine in the Godhead. This fundamentally challenges the male, hierarchical incorporation model of the Trinity which has served the ordered arrangements of the Church itself. Interestingly for Scottish Episcopalian liturgists, Coakley highlights the importance of the Eucharistic *epiclesis* as a signal from the third century onwards of an incorporative trinitarianism ... the 'mystic' / church vision of the Trinity haunted the celebration of the eucharistic mysteries ... the *lex orandi* as 'incorporation' was ever on offer to the faithful' (p. 133).

Coakley next takes an unexpected turn in addressing the doctrine and experience of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 4 examines 'The charismatic constituency' through qualitative fieldwork in churches in a university town in the north of England, involving participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The insight here is that whilst sectarian forms of Christian fellowship normally go along with a non-trinitarian pneumatology, some charismatic Anglicans were 'nudging towards reflective trinitarianism ... a dawning recognition of the convergence between charismatic and contemplative spiritualities' (p. 181). Nevertheless the biblical preferences of the constituency rendered it hindered of much appreciation of feminist perspectives and rather nervous about discussing things like sexuality and desire.

Chapter 5 'Seeing God through iconography' immerses the reader (and viewer – there are numerous artwork plates) in artistic and symbolic representations across culture and history. The Rublev Trinity, so ubiquitously reproduced in our churches is of course there, but overtaken by a wealth of richer and more curious representations. I now know about the feminist Anna Trinity and the puzzling Winchester Quinity (pp. 239, 247) and a great deal more besides. This is a most engaging chapter.

In Chapter 6 'Reorientations of classic trinitarian thought' Coakley perceives nuances in the gendered understanding of the Trinity articulated by the Church Fathers Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine. Though the concept of Trinitarian mutuality cannot simply be read back into their writings, they perhaps valued gender equality and difference more than has previously been claimed. Alluding to Donne's sonnet 'Batter My Heart', Coakley says 'what we really need to do is stare the entanglement of sexual desire and desire for God firmly in the face' (p. 296).

Chapter 7 'The primacy of divine desire' offers a reprise of the preceding arguments. Coakley hopes to have convinced her readers 'that no trinitarian language is innocent of sexual, political, and ecclesiastical overtones and implications, and that it is a primary task of a *theologie totale* ... to bring them to greater critical consciousness (p. 320), Coakley resists any notion of hierarchy in the Trinity – when humans come into an authentic relation to God as Trinity through

the Spirit we are not imitating God or promoting a false patriarchal hierarchy in the Church or world. To illustrate the point she stands the *filioque* debate on its head, arguing that the issue of 'procession' in the Godhead for Eastern and Western Christendom is misplaced: 'I start with the Spirit's invitation into that Godhead ... with the presumption of the Spirit's mutual infusion in Son and Father' (p. 332).

In all this is a convincing book, encouraging new avenues of theological reflection and spiritual engagement with the Trinity. The book's Coda offers the reader six concluding theses which privilege contemplation's insights: about sexual and Godly desire; about the distinctive activity of the Holy Spirit; about the undermining of gender stereotypes; about a self-effacing, silent waiting; about passionate re-ordered engagement; about a Trinitarian model of power-in-vulnerability.

The extensive bibliographic notes and references, indexes and a glossary of terms contain rich supporting material and are as worthy of attention as the narrative.

It strikes me that amidst our present theological and contextual angst about revising the Canon on Marriage to embrace same sex relationships within the life of the Church this book about the Trinity, sexuality and the self truly transcends the bubble of the Scottish Episcopal Church. Certainly a challenging read, but once acclimatised to Sarah Coakley's particular genre and style, this is one of those books that makes the heart and mind of a seasoned cleric like me come alive with fresh and intriguing insights.

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DAVID JASPER. *Literature and Theology as a Grammar of Assent* (London: Routledge, 2015). Pages v + 262. ISBN 9781472475244. £95 (hardback).

This is a work of memory, lament and, above all, yearning. The immediate focus of the book consists of a retrospective glance back to the origins of the Literature and Theology Seminar begun in Durham University in the early 1980s, and offers a reflection upon its subsequent development over two decades. Jasper helpfully charts the various important contributors to that seminar including John Coulson, Ulrich Simon, Martin Jarrett-Kerr and Robert Detweiler, to name only a few. In this act of intellectual recovery, Jasper attempts less of an apology for the seminar itself and the theological thinking which underpinned it, and more an elegy for a way of approaching interdisciplinarity, which Jasper believes now finds itself overtaken by

a tangled myriad of solipsistic theological agendas. He is seeking nothing less than the recovery of the “soul” of both theology and literature whose common intellectual framework lies in their both being exercises in imagination – (an echo of what Amos Wilder, some time ago, called a theopoetics). Such a framework, Jasper implies, is too easily dismissed as shallow or frothy in an increasingly scientific environment, where even theology finds itself tempted by the reductionism of the laboratory or marketplace. For Jasper, ‘the bottom line’ or ‘the lowest common denominator’ will not do when it comes to theological thinking. Jasper is quietly but forcefully arguing for a recovery of a way of thinking that may be considered naïve, even otherworldly, but which, he suggests, must lie at the heart of a deeply theological profession of faith. This is not, however, a reactionary book. It is more a book calling for a retrieval that may lead us forward. This retrieval is guided by Newman’s *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870), which Jasper utilises as both an intellectual map, and as an example in and of itself of the kind of imaginative theological thinking he both laments and yearns for.

So Jasper leads us, as he often does in his work, on a deeper journey which is signposted by a spirit of provisionality and humility. This imaginative, hermeneutical journey is fraught with risk, as Jasper reminds us, quoting his friend and former Glasgow colleague, Werner Jeanrond: ‘Every act of reading is new, preliminary and risky, and although the grand grammatical structure of the text remains constant the mystery of that sense is appropriated anew time and again’ (p. 74).

Bringing Newman’s adoption of the Illative Sense to bear, Jasper points to the importance of recognising that theological ‘decision making’ (if one may so describe it) is guided less by a desire for security and fixity, and more with the awareness of the inevitable provisionality which life impresses upon us. We are led to wisely live in our world, and such wisdom lies beyond rationality, abiding instead in ‘concrete things’, as Newman puts it.

Such hermeneutical, wise wrestling is set against the backdrop of a history tainted by extraordinary violence and unimaginable cruelty. Acknowledging and bearing witness to the traumas of the twentieth century, Jasper concedes what I might call the uncomprehending and incomprehensible silence of theology, and subsequently pleads for the necessity to seek some form of recovery (repentance?) in order to face with integrity an uncertain future. Such a recovery, Jasper believes, is to be found in language: ‘If theology was immobilised and forgiveness – atonement – impossible, words still call to us to be spoken and written to be held in our memory’ (p. 116).

This recovery of the common framework of imagination and language gives Jasper hope in the face of despair. The study of literature and theology, for him, ‘the

most serious thing I have ever engaged in' (p. 122), is a means by which we can recover a sense of what it means to be human. Words as 'living powers' (Coleridge) or, indeed, sacraments, can recall us to creation, to ourselves and indeed to the mystery that lies over and above these. John Cornwell, in his biography of Newman, points to what he considers to be Newman's most compelling dimension, namely that of a *writer*. This to the extent that, according to one witness, Newman would pray while holding a pen. This image neatly encapsulates Jasper's major theme, which is the reintegration of theology with (and not 'domination over', as in Radical Orthodoxy) all of human activity including the sacramental or spiritual. So, for Jasper, theology as a legitimate and meaningful human activity can only be recovered when it looks, 'not outward to systems but inward to the founding power of the creative imagination and its capacity to transform and illuminate our sense of the "sacred" and its effects' (p. 227).

But looking inward cannot mean ignoring the world and, indeed, a desire to recognise broader cultural influences forms Jasper's concluding appeal for a theology that he hopes will be open to 'new spaces' (p. 249), (as indeed, perhaps more controversially, was Newman himself). Jasper's own recent involvement with Renmin University in Beijing has, no doubt, been a major factor here, and it is clear that there is more to be fruitfully gleaned from his experience in this particular 'concrete' environment.

This is a book of deep learning, replete with nuanced glances to both the literary and theological traditions. But behind and before the erudition comes passion – a passion for theology, a passion for literature and, above all, a passion for the integrity of a life compassionately orientated towards a fragile world. All of which makes this book of memory, lament and yearning, in the very best sense, a work of theology.

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NICHOLAS TAYLOR. *Paul on Baptism: Theology, Mission and Ministry in Context*
(London: SCM Press, 2016). Pages xxvii + 179. ISBN 978-0334054764. £20
(paperback).

This fine study lies within a distinguished tradition of Anglican scholarship that is today sadly in grave danger of disappearing. Beautifully written it combines meticulous scholarship with pastoral sensitivity. Nicholas Taylor sustains his

vocation as both a parish priest and a New Testament scholar with a firm, yet unassuming, grounding in theology and a solid grasp of Christian origins.

In the first chapter entitled “Paul in Context” Taylor not only eloquently places Paul in his time and context but delicately describes how being a Christian in Paul’s world was “primarily a matter of belonging” rather than one of believing or assent (p. 5). Furthermore, we need to move away from the sense of baptism as a rite of passage but approach it in Paul as “a conversion-incorporation rite” (p. 11), in the context of the structure of family and the household in the ancient world. These observations and sensitive warnings concerning our often anachronistic, indeed simplistic, approach to the world of the Pauline letters immediately establish profound reflections for those concerned with baptism in the church of our own time. They also provide a necessary context for the close textual studies of passages from the Pauline literature in the second chapter.

It is in these studies that Taylor’s brilliance as a scholar comes into its own. He has the ability to engage in highly complex issues with clarity and without jargon, offering guides to the immense literature on Paul with proper selectivity and insight. It is to be hoped that such engaging writing will encourage many of us back to our studies, reminding us that what is done there is not an optional extra but the very heart of the pastoral ministry. What emerges from the fragmentary evidence is a clear theology of baptism within the occasional writings of Paul to churches some of which he founded, others, like that in Rome, with whom he had a different pastoral relationship. Taylor is careful to steer us away from false assumptions based on naïve assumptions, for example, concerning ancient burial practice (pp. 59-61), so different from our own and therefore productive of different symbolic significances. Furthermore, we are reminded of how complex and strange was the world of Paul in almost every aspect – religious, familial, social – and how dangerous it is to fall into a kind of primitivism that ‘reads’ Paul and his theology through the distorting lens of our own contemporary, unexplored assumptions.

Thus, as we move on to chapter three and Taylor’s review of the practice of baptism in the Pauline churches we should not expect too much. We know very little indeed of their liturgical procedures or even where, by whom and how baptism was conducted. One thing is clear. Unlike the church of later centuries from the homilies we have of Ambrose and others, the Pauline churches did not regard baptism as the culmination of a period of instructive or preparation, but rather the beginning of the process of participation in the Christian life and community. The picture must remain unclear as the early church was barely to be distinguished from contemporary Jewish communities, but water was a central element and, for Paul, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Taylor is careful, too, to distinguish the record of the

Pauline writings from that found concerning Paul's ministry in the Acts of the Apostles.

In some ways the final chapter on Pauline baptism and contemporary issues is the proper goal of Taylor's careful textual, cultural and theological reflections. His concerns are pastoral and rooted in the parochial ministry that is his own. He has a gift of putting his finger clearly and simply on the key issues. "The question whether Baptism is defined by God's grace or the human response of faith lies at the root of some of the deepest divisions among Christians" (p. 147). It is a call to think theologically, read, and reflect again both in our individual ministries and in the church as a whole. But I was most grateful for being guided back to engage again with H. Richard Niebuhr's classic text *Christ and Culture* – one of those books that sits gathering dust on one's shelves, to one's shame – and its five different approaches to society in the life of the church: "Christ against culture", "Christ of culture", "Christ above culture", "Christ and culture", and "Christ transforming culture". Such, as Taylor suggests, "can helpfully illuminate many of the contested issues surrounding Baptism" (p. 155).

This illustrates beautifully the understated way in which this book draws together all that is best in the church's resources in theology, church history, Scripture and liturgy to feed and sustain the life of the church today. Taylor's book is a gift to us which we should accept with gratitude and careful attention.

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FRANCIS YOUNG. *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*. Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Pp. xiii + 275. ISBN 9783319291116. £63.

Over the last few decades there has been a revival of interest in exorcism, the casting out of demons by Christian ministers, and this revival of interest has been accompanied by a revival in the Christian Churches of the practice of 'deliverance ministry' which includes exorcism. The Bible (Acts 19.13) and the world tell us that there are also non-Christian exorcists, but this revival is explicitly Christian and the author of this book links it to the novel (1971) and film (1973), *The Exorcist*. Francis Young included a chapter on exorcism in his previous book, *English Catholics and the Supernatural* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), and discovered a need for a work that defined exorcism in its historical context and provided a study of the evolution of the liturgical rites of exorcism. The series in which the resultant work has been

published sites it in the growing academic field of the study of magic and witchcraft and distinguishes it from more sensationalist and less worthwhile books on the same subject. It is of interest to liturgists and historians but also to all concerned with the mission of the Church.

The casting out of demons was a central feature of the ministry of Jesus and a practice he expected his disciples to continue (e.g. Matthew 10.8; Mark 16.17; Luke 10.19). Young begins with a definition of exorcism and, as he is writing history not theology, does not discuss the question of the reality and meaning of possession but moves on to the use of exorcistic rituals in the early church. He finds two main families of texts, those used in baptism and blessings, which use the language of exorcism to show that the person or thing is claimed for Christ, and those used in rituals intended to cast out demons and heal the possessed. Although the first written rite of exorcism of the latter type is found in the late-eighth century Gellone Sacramentary, Young argues that casting out demons was associated with charismatic saints until a 'crisis of exorcism' from the twelfth century, associated with a fear of dualism, led to a decline in interest. A study of medieval England bears this out, although it does reveal the Anglo-Saxon practice of the exorcism of Elves and a peculiarly English association of demonic possession with sexual temptation. Exorcism was thus not a 'medieval superstition' but came to prominence in the period of the Reformation when it was often mixed with ceremonial magic and used by Roman Catholic missionaries as a mission tool in Europe (including Scotland and Ireland) and the New World. In 1614 the Roman Church produced a new Ritual containing a liturgical rite of exorcism which preserved traditional prayers but introduced a careful balance between scepticism and belief and made exorcism an exceptional procedure controlled by bishops. In the eighteenth century there was a battle between three opposing views: the sobriety of the 1614 Ritual, popular magic and the extreme scepticism of the Enlightenment. The latter was adopted by some Roman Catholic theologians of the Augustinian tradition who were hostile to the use of 'magical' exorcisms by popular religious orders such as the Capuchin Franciscans. From 1740 there was a campaign by the pope and other bishops to severely curtail the practice of exorcism. For a second time it looked as if the ritual of exorcism would die out but, fed by Romanticism, reaction against revolutionary anti-clericalism and the invention of Satanism, it came to prominence again with the ultramontanism which culminated in the definition of Papal Infallibility in 1870 and set the Roman Catholic Church in opposition to the modern world in all its aspects, including medical explanations of possession. Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) encouraged this revival which lasted until the forces of scepticism again asserted themselves in the 1960s during the Second Vatican Council. The final chapter, noting the persistence of exorcism in other cultures, studies the revival of exorcism

in Western Catholic culture. This has been driven by popular pastoral demand and by the Catholic charismatic movement and it has been supported by articulate exorcists such as Fr Gabriele Amorth, but it is also a response to the challenge to the church posed by both secularisation and alternative non-Christian spiritualities. Such is the revival of interest that a new Rite of Exorcism was published by the Vatican in 1999 and new courses to train exorcists have been set up, as portrayed in the popular 2011 film *The Rite*. The picture given by the book is of a practice, commanded and exemplified by Jesus, which will not go away but which waxes and wanes and takes different forms according to the needs of different cultures.

Although the book analyses Roman Catholic practice and is aimed at historians, this story is of direct relevance to Episcopalians in twenty-first century Scotland. Much of the book concerns our common heritage as Western Christians, but while contemporary British Anglicans prefer the term 'deliverance ministry' (which is broader and less sensationalist), the recent history of this ministry has followed the same trajectory as in the Roman Catholic Church and has responded to the same religious and cultural context in Europe. Mid-century scepticism gave way to a revival of interest encouraged by charismatic currents and attended by excesses and scandals: the book's use of the case of Anneliese Michel in Germany, which ended with her death in 1976 and the prosecution of the exorcists, is paralleled by the 1974 exorcism by an Anglican priest in Barnsley of Michael Taylor, who immediately afterwards murdered his wife. In both cases the scandal led to tighter episcopal control and the mandatory involvement of medical professionals. In Scotland the College of Bishops, like the English House of Bishops, has issued a set of guidelines for this ministry and appointed a number of Bishop's advisors. The popular set of novels (1998-) and television series (*Midwinter of the Spirit*, 2015) by Phil Rickman about a vicar working in this area, Merrily Watkins, is remarkable accurate in its details and reveals the Church at work in a culture where few attend church but many believe in, and believe they experience, things supernatural. *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity* shows that deliverance ministry is an essential aspect of mission in our culture, bringing the healing presence of Jesus to those who need it. It also shows from history that charismatic enthusiasm and official restraint can and should exist in a creative tension which enables the church to serve society. Deliverance ministry is an inexact art, not a precise science, and it is probably good that Young does not get bogged down in the question of authenticity; whether the need is psychological, the result of evil spirits or some combination of these, our society does include many people who can be helped by the resources of the church in this area. This book enables the reader to understand the nature and history of these resources and, by its historical rigour, to get around the spooky sensationalism that surrounds the subject of exorcism. Whatever the

phrase means, 'Casting out demons' is, after all, a clear command Jesus gave his church.

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