Hermeneutics

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Abstract and Keywords

Hermeneutics concerns the act of interpretation. It is closely related to, though not to be identified with, the science of semiotics, which is the study of meaning. Hermeneutics presupposes that the act of meaning will be plural, requiring choices to be made. The first section of this article focuses upon the pre-modern hermeneutical tradition, when issues to do with the interpretation of texts were implicitly present and functioned either as biblical hermeneutics in engagement with scriptural texts or as an extended form of biblical hermeneutics in engagement with the world. The sections that follow discuss the modern hermeneutical tradition, when theological kinds of hermeneutics need to negotiate their proper validity in dialogue with secular accounts of meaning. The article concludes with a discussion of the state of hermeneutics today, when Christian claims to validity in interpretation are shaped by community, narrative, tradition, and concern for the 'real'.

Keywords: interpretation, semiotics, biblical hermeneutics, scriptural texts, Christianity

HERMENEUTICS concerns the act of interpretation. It is closely related to, though not to be identified with, the science of semiotics, which is the study of meaning. Semiotics reflects upon how meaning comes about; it deals with signs and the ways in which they signify. Hermeneutics, on the other hand, already presupposes that the act of meaning will be plural, requiring choices to be made. Hermeneutics is inherently problematic in its conception therefore, and tends towards the question not only of how meaning is constituted but also, and more importantly, how we should seek to find the right meaning in any particular case.

Judged from the perspective of systematic theology, interpretation appears to be a deeply Christian exercise. After all, on many accounts faith begins with the question that Jesus poses to Peter (Matt. 16: 15): 'Who do you say that I am?' The implication here is that there was more than one way of understanding the identity of Jesus. When Peter answers, 'You are the Messiah', and Jesus tells him that it is not flesh and blood but the Father in heaven who has revealed this to him, then the issue of *how* the right answer is to be arrived at is already made thematically present. According to Christian tradition, in the

post-resurrection period it was the Holy Spirit who took on this function of guiding the judgements of those who encounter Jesus so that they will understand or interpret him in the right way.

In the account that follows, we will discover that hermeneutical questions have arisen, and do arise, in all kinds of different Christian contexts. The Bible itself has moments of interpretation built within it. The New Testament writers were inevitably engaged at critical points in devising new ways of interpreting the Jewish scriptural tradition they had inherited, and some Pauline texts, for instance, (p. 495) thematize their own hermeneutical practices. The story to be told about hermeneutics will move between exegesis and doctrine, exegesis and theology, and extra-biblical philosophies of interpretation. There was something indeterminate about the Greek god Hermes, who gave his name to the discipline of hermeneutics. Hermes was known as the god of those who wander or travel. He was the divine shepherd: the god of paths. But he became known also as the god whose skills were felt in the rhetor's art, and in practices of financial transaction. His cunning also won him a reputation as god of deceit. We shall find that the practice and theory of interpretation is no less polymorphic than this winged god of the Greeks.

Despite the hermeneutical nature of so many of the early Christian doctrinal debates, which sought foundation in their varied readings of scripture, hermeneutics as a formal discipline only began at the end of the eighteenth century, with the work of F. D. E. Schleiermacher. Prior to this point the principles of deciding between interpretations (as we have defined hermeneutics) were manifested implicitly, within Christian practices of interpretation. The theoretical justification of these practices was generally attributed to the action of the Holy Spirit. In 1810 the University of Berlin was founded, an event in which Schleiermacher took a prominent part. Within this new environment of a professional academic community working within different disciplines but united around the principles of *Wissenschaft*, or the dispassionate, public, and evidenced pursuit of knowledge, such an implicit and internal hermeneutics was bound to raise more questions than it answered. It was Schleiermacher who thematized and made reflexive the act of interpretation, and in doing so, perhaps inevitably, set the question of deciding between the possible meanings of scripture within a broader context of hermeneutics as such. In other words, Schleiermacher believed that the hermeneutical question could only be addressed from within an overarching account of the rules which govern the proper understanding of all texts, especially those which were composed in societies very different from our own. A distinction can usefully be drawn therefore between Christian hermeneutics before and after Schleiermacher.

In the first section of the discussion which follows, we shall focus upon the pre-modern hermeneutical tradition, when issues to do with the interpretation of texts were implicitly present and functioned either as biblical hermeneutics in engagement with scriptural texts or as an extended form of biblical hermeneutics in engagement with the world. We shall then pass on to a discussion of the modern hermeneutical tradition, when specifically theological kinds of hermeneutics were embedded within a more general account of interpretation and needed to negotiate their proper validity in dialogue with secular ac-

counts of meaning. We shall conclude with a discussion of the state of hermeneutics today, when Christian claims to validity in interpretation are shaped by community, narrative, tradition, and concern for the ‘real’.

(p. 496) I. THE PRE-MODERN TRADITION

The pre-modern tradition of Christian hermeneutics began in the requirement felt by the early church fathers to read the Jewish scriptures they had received, which came to be called the Old Testament, in the light of the church's faith in Jesus Christ. This led to the rise of different kinds of typological readings whereby Jewish prophetic or messianic texts, together in some cases with other biblical genres, were read as making anticipatory reference to the messianic advent and significance of Jesus Christ. In the anti-Marcionite writings of theologians such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, we also find the evolution of a more sophisticated type of Christian hermeneutic grounded in the fuller unity of doctrine and scripture. Concealed within such early reading practices were further practical hermeneutical judgements about how to interpret those passages of scripture which resisted easy inclusion within an overarching Christian history of salvation. Such ‘difficult’ texts were to be read in the light of other, more accessible and tractable passages. The use of allegory also served as an interpretative tool for refiguring Old Testament texts in the light of New Testament affirmations.

Allegory is in itself the most distinctive characteristic of pre-modern hermeneutics. It represented a multilayered, generally non-competitive sequence of readings and attained a considerable notoriety in the modern period on account of its alleged arbitrariness. In practice, the allegorical method led to a rampant diversity of possible readings on the one hand and to a painful constraint through the authority of precedent on the other (as theologians laboriously repeated each other's readings). But within the contexts of its own times, allegory was a way of understanding that was based upon a combination of ancient cognitive and ontological principles which constituted its basic coherence. The hermeneutical importance of allegory comes into view in the insistence of this tradition that there exists a graspable continuity between the ways in which we can discern the possible meanings of scripture on the one hand, and the structure both of the human mind and of the perceptible world on the other.

The character of pre-modern hermeneutics, hovering between Bible and world, becomes evident as we glance at two of the greatest hermeneutical theologians of the ancient world: Origen and Augustine. Origen believed that he could discern a process of reading and understanding that was internal to scripture itself, above all in the Pauline texts. In 1 Corinthians 10: 1–11 Paul himself reads passages from Exodus and Numbers concerning the wanderings of Israel in the desert as ‘examples’, or *tupoi* (‘types’), for us today. In Galatians 4: 21–31 Paul understands Hagar and Sarah, Abraham's concubine and wife, to represent the old and new covenants respectively. Hagar ‘corresponds to the present Jerusalem’ while Sarah is ‘the Jerusalem above’. On this occasion, their symbolic meaning is described as an ‘allegory’ (*allegoroumena*).

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(p. 497) At the root of Origen's hermeneutic is his belief that the gospel itself exists on two levels. Drawing upon Revelation 14: 6, Origen holds that it is simultaneously a ‘temporal’ and an ‘eternal gospel’. Although in themselves one, the existence of these two faces of the gospel reflects our own inability to comprehend the divine self-communication in its purity. We are forced to rest upon the earthly or fleshly gospel, with its material signs, as a point of access to the eternal or heavenly gospel, which is the truth as it exists before God and in the presence of the saints (*On First Principles* 4. 25, in Origen 1973). The human mind, which rises from Old Testament signs to the mediated meanings of the temporal gospel and finally to the truth of the eternal gospel, is itself substantially changed in the process. Having received a participation in the divine Logos through the creation, the mind, in its ‘logos-like’ characteristics, becomes conformed to the divine, creative Wisdom. As Origen likes to point out, Christians can only read scripture in the right way by virtue of their possession of what is called at 1 Corinthians 2: 16 the ‘mind of Christ’ (*Commentary on John* 10. 27, in Origen 1989; *Commentary on Matthew* 14. 11, in Roberts and Donaldson 1990: ix. 501).

The Origenist view of scripture was one which placed the interpretative act, as a modality of both human and divine knowing, at the centre of Christian identity. But it was grounded in the relation between the self and the objects of its knowing in general, and not just in the reading of scripture. Indeed, the act of interpretation, for Origen, was itself a participation in the cosmological and Christological heart of the world. An important theme here is Origen's development of the concept of the *epinoiai* (‘titles’). In Book One of his *Commentary on John*, he argues that *Sophia* or Wisdom is prior to all the other names or ‘titles’ of Christ. In an exegesis of John 1: 1, ‘In the beginning (*arche*) was the Word (*logos*)’, Origen laid down the principle that *arche* here signifies ‘Wisdom’ and that, as the site or place of the *logos*, it is clearly prior to and distinct from it (*Commentary on John* 1. 22). Wisdom designates the nature of Christ as the one who understands the manifold and generative ‘speculations’ of the Godhead which are identified with primal creation. *Logos*, on the other hand, designates Christ in so far as he *makes known* to us the ‘secret things of His Father’ (*On First Principles* 1. 2, §§2–3; *Commentary on John* 1. 22, 42). This distinction between generation and revelation is further strengthened by Origen's attribution of ‘power’ specifically to Wisdom. He repeatedly points to 1 Corinthians 1: 18–31, where Christ is linked with the divine power and wisdom, and to the Wisdom of Solomon, which speaks of Wisdom as the breath of the power of God (*On First Principles* 1. 2, §§4–12; *Commentary on John* 1. 23). Origen's identification of Wisdom with the *energeia* of God draws out the extent to which Christ as Wisdom is not only the final term of our knowledge, as the highest mystery, but also the generative ground of the creation. Wisdom is thus also the dynamic principle of our own return to that ground through exegesis of the created order in the light of scripture's revelation of its ultimate origin and end.

We find the same link between scriptural exegesis and our understanding of the world in Augustine's theology, albeit in a more pessimistic register. The Johannine (p. 498) description of Jesus as ‘the true light’ (John 1: 9) is a central text for Augustine's reflections on knowledge, signs, and the world. We find that Augustine first developed textual strategies of allegorization for countering the literalistic claims of the Manichees. This exegetical

practice was later coloured by Platonic hierarchalism, though, paradoxically, Augustine's exegesis tends to place greater emphasis upon the literal sense of scripture than we find in Origen, with a clear commitment to history and to the created world as the ultimate semiosis of the divine creativity.

In both *De magistro* and *De trinitate*, Augustine views human knowledge under the aspect of subjectivity, and does so in ways that show our dependence upon the internal presence of the power of Christ for the correct functioning of our understanding. But in *De doctrina christiana* and, more importantly, in his commentaries on Genesis, the focus of his attention lies on the exterior aspect of the act of understanding, on the nature of the world itself. One of the functions of Augustine's emphasis upon the literal sense of scripture is that it allowed him to read the biblical signs as literal signs which point to events in history, thus transposing the primary act of interpretation away from the biblical text to the world itself, in its historical manifestations. Such textual signs, or *signa translata* as Augustine called them, can be received by the reader in an entirely literal mode while at the same time they point to events in the real world which called for a radical and Spirit-filled act of interpretation. The thrust of this hermeneutic was to show that Christ himself was the true meaning of history, and that the demonstration of this was the true meaning of scripture.

In an exegesis of Vulgate Psalm 103, which occurs in both the *Enarrationes* and the *Confessions*, Augustine understood the phrase ‘like a skin it is stretched out’ (v. 2) to refer to the claim of Isaiah 34: 4 that ‘the heavens shall be folded together like a book’, and thus to be an allusion to the scriptures, which are ‘your words which are not mutually discordant, and which you have placed over us by the ministry of mortal men’ (*Confessions* 13. 15. 16, in Augustine 1991: 282). Scripture stands over the creation, and creation itself is a scriptural semiotic, as appears from the many passages in which Augustine speaks of the way in which created things point to their creator. In *De civitate dei*, for instance, he speaks of the ‘eloquence’ of events which point to divine action in the world (*City of God* 11. 18, in Augustine 1998: 472).

Our own subjective state is an essential precondition for our capacity to understand the true meaning of the world as the creation of God which is transcendentally open to him. As Augustine elaborates in *De doctrina christiana*, we can either ‘enjoy’ (*frui*) the world in God and thus grasp it in its ground in him, or ‘use’ it (*uti*) according to our own limited and self-centred purposes. The world, like signs in general, constitutes for Augustine an opportunity to be transformed by the grace of God, which is given with the sign. We can respond positively to the ways in which God speaks with us through signs, in what Augustine calls *admonitiones*, events in life which seem to us to communicate God's providence. This serves to remind us that it is through signs and creatures, whose meaning is **(p. 499)** ultimately realized through scripture, that God summons us to the highest and most spiritual love.

Origen and Augustine are not representative of pre-modern hermeneutics as a whole, which is a highly diverse phenomenon. But emphases within their work show the pre-

modern concern of Christian hermeneutics with the question of how we are to understand scripture when we read it within a world that is itself theophanic in ways which scripture teaches and illustrates (according to the pre-modern mind). Within such a context, the issue of the relation between the hermeneutic of scripture and the hermeneutic of the world comes to the fore. Indeed, the act of reading scripture has a cosmological resonance, and the world itself is read from within the scriptural text. The multilayered character of both world and text is, through allegory, realized also in the human mind. Thus to be a Christian is in some fundamental sense to be one who interprets, and to be part of a community whose acts of interpretation are necessarily open to, and dependent upon, the sanctifying illumination of the trinitarian God, who is author of text and world alike.

The consummate representative of a pre-modern Christian hermeneutic is not in fact a theologian but a writer. In the *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri (1993), we find the richest and most complex representation of the Christian universe. The human act of interpretation is once again at the centre of this view of the cosmos. Dante had already highlighted the theme of interpretation in his early work, *De vulgari eloquentia*. Here he gave a definition of language which showed that he understood language to be material and thus itself to be part of the sensible universe (I. 3, in Dante 1996). Therefore, when he came to represent that universe as a continuity between the material and spiritual dimensions of the cosmos, language itself—the language in which he himself composed the *Divine Comedy*—came to participate in the world-reality he was depicting.

The *Divine Comedy* is a multi-sided work which has been read in very many different ways. But at the centre of its meaning is a continuity between the physical world that surrounds us and the heavenly world of God, angels, and saints. That this is not merely the ‘physicalization’ of what should be left incorporeal is shown by the fact that Dante, at the end of his upward journey, receives a glimpse of the Trinity itself. What is proposed here then is that the world is rooted in God and, by its very nature as the creation, can communicate God in a cosmic, theophanic display. This model of the universe, which is so alien to modern thinking, is in fact the classical model of the pre-modern world. It is not Dante's invention but reflects that fusion of Genesis, Ptolemaic astronomy, and Aristotelian physics which gave the patristic and medieval world its distinctive, Christian cosmology. Nor is it Dante's own idea that the world in its materiality should be thought of as sign, ordered to the creator. But what is particular to Dante is the understanding that, since language is material, and since the human body is intimately bound up both with language and the material world of which it is a part, the linguistic act of **(p. 500)** interpretation stands at the heart of what it is to be human: to be a speaking creature in a signifying world of God's making.

The *Divine Comedy* is a massive work but Dante's hermeneutics can be lightly sketched. When Dante, as the figure in his own work, loses his way in mid-life ‘in a dark forest’ (*Inferno* 1. 1–2) early in the morning of Good Friday, he enters the underworld. He discovers that it is a dark and fragmented place of shattered rocks and hideous landscapes (or perhaps ‘habitats’ would be a better word), where severely contorted human figures are im-

prisoned. Their contortions and misformations are not arbitrary but closely correspond to the nature of their sins, so that those guilty of concupiscence for instance in the second circle of Upper Hell are buffeted in the gales like ‘starlings’ and ‘cranes’ (*Inferno* 5), while the simoniacs in Lower Hell are inverted (*Inferno* 19) and the fortune-tellers have twisted necks (*Inferno* 20). They thus symbolize the divine justice. This establishes a continuity between the human body, the world or environment, and the moral state of the subject. But language also comes into play here, for it too is broken. Dante speaks of ‘sighings, complaints and howlings’ in Upper Hell (*Inferno* 3. 22), and among the thieves of Lower Hell there is a dislocation of voice and speech such that Dante hears ‘a voice, which did not seem designed for forming words’ (*Inferno* 24. 65–6). The lack of language reflects the isolation of the sinners. In purgatory the light begins to return. The human body is now also manifest as an instrument of penance, as the sinners labour uphill towards the ever-increasing light. The landscape is severe and exhausting, but it also contains brief episodes that seem to promise heavenly beauty. The penitents engage each other in conversation, and music is present in the singing of penitential psalms. What we find here is the return of a kind of community between human beings which is grounded in a cosmic *consonantia* (to use Robert Grosseteste's word) or harmony that is itself the cosmic expression of a sovereign divine order of creation, fall, and redemption. By the time Dante reaches the heavenly spheres, we can speak of a topography of light. As Dante ascends through these spheres, the human bodies become increasingly light and diaphanous: in fact, they become increasingly angelic. Language itself is manifest primarily in what the medievals understood to be an angelic mode. (Since angels do not need to use language in order to communicate, the angelic modes of speaking are purposeful praise of God and teaching of the divine truth.) Music, song, praise, and instruction permeate the light-filled air of the higher realms. When finally Dante comes to the highest sphere, the *Divine Comedy* presents the sense of a complete harmonization of divine light, divine love, and divine life. Human communication (with its concomitant task of interpretation) becomes rarified until it takes on the characteristics of angelic community and finally finds itself in praise and awe before the Blessed Trinity, which is the ineffably radiant and living enactment of the perfect love ‘which moves the sun and other stars’ (*Paradiso* 33. 145).

Dante's understanding of language as material, and thus as part of the world rather than something which is set over against it, allowed him to present his own work as an instrument of what we may call ‘right interpretation’ under God. (p. 501) In other words, his own creation took on something of the role played by scripture in Origen and Augustine. Indeed, he makes very abundant use of scriptural allusion throughout the *Divine Comedy*. He writes himself as author into his own account of how the world works, as someone who paramountly receives teaching and *learns*. And Dante makes the point about the artist that his art is not the child of God (which is nature) but ‘the grandchild of God’ (*Inferno* 11. 99–105).

II. THE MODERN TRADITION

The nature of Christian theological hermeneutics is such that it is impossible to offer an overview without taking account of the literary strand to that tradition. There are also many literary figures of the modern period who put their art at the service of Christian faith (John Milton and John Donne, to name only two), but two outstanding theologians in particular chose to integrate artistic creativity into their own highly original contributions to theology. J. G. Hamann and Søren Kierkegaard both show the influence of early Romanticism, with its intensified understanding of the transcendental possibilities of art, language, and the poetic. But both need also to be seen against the background of the many fundamental changes in science, culture, and politics which came to characterize the emergence of the modern world from the sixteenth century.

In the history of hermeneutics, we can see two moments which seem both to contribute to those world-historical changes and to reflect them. The first is Luther's affirmation of the perspicuity of scripture, which led to a privileging of the plain or literal sense of scripture (while of course preserving the Spirit's role in both the origin of scripture and its true understanding). The second was the evolving disjunction between history as depicted in the Bible and the sense of history that was developing among the European peoples during the eighteenth century (to which Hans Frei drew our attention in his critical study *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974)). The former moment opened the door to Pietism in exegesis but also to later explorations of the literal meaning of scriptural texts from an un-Spirited perspective (e.g., Strauss and Semler), while the latter led to narrativist readings which take the Bible to have no necessary connection with history or the empirical world (e.g., Bultmann and the postmoderns).

Luther's proclamation of the principle of *sola scriptura* led to a deep-rooted change in the understanding of the relation between scripture and the church and that between scripture and theology. Protestant dogmatics would later give clearer expression to the hermeneutical principles which Luther articulated or practised in diverse forms throughout his voluminous writings. Scripture now had ‘normative (p. 502) authority’, which meant that it was the sole source of theology. It also had ‘causative’ authority in that it became itself, as mediator of divine truth, the primary vehicle of the divine power to judge and to save. The authority of scripture, which was self-authenticating and independent of any criteria other than those implicit in it as the Word of God, was evidenced by its divine origins. The biblical authors were commanded or impelled to write, and, for the early Lutherans, what they wrote was inspired by the Holy Spirit both in terms of the *forma* (or meaning) of the words and their *materia* (or particular character). This theory of the ‘verbal inspiration’ of the Bible in its entirety came to be frowned upon in later Lutheran tradition, but it was a seminal part of the early post-Reformation period which both took the authority of scripture away from the ecclesial mediations of their Catholic interlocutors while also defending its inerrancy against the Socinians. The Lutheran tradition also came to stress the role of the Holy Spirit at work within the mind and heart of the faithful reader. To some extent this can be seen as a response to the Catholic emphasis upon the role of the Spirit in the church, as an intrinsic part of scriptural authority.

The early Lutherans likewise denied that the canon, to which they strongly held, though in a new form, resulted from any act on the part of the church. It was rather given by God and was independent of any human judgement.

It was also against the Catholic understanding of the role of the church in the reception of scripture that the Lutherans stressed the *sufficiency* of scripture. This meant that nothing other than scripture was necessary for salvation; it was an elaboration of *sola scriptura*. Sufficiency led further to scripture's *clarity*, which perhaps meant little more than that the mediation of the church was not required for the individual believer to understand the Bible's meaning. The words in themselves were perspicuous enough, and the light of Christ sufficiently active. It did not mean that the Bible was without difficulties, which required application of the principle that scripture interprets scripture. But it did signal a Lutheran emphasis upon the plain sense of scripture which under all circumstances was to be given priority over allegorized or mystical readings of the text. Any text could have only one plain-sense meaning (although of course there could be figurative meanings where this was intended by the author). As far as possible therefore Lutheran theologians sought to preserve the text of scripture from criticism or relativization by establishing its ultimate authority and truthfulness. As the Word of God, scripture mediated Christ directly to the believer, through the Spirit, and was thus the guarantee of our salvation in this world.

The Reformation turn to the plain-sense meaning and to history led on the one hand to a Spirit-guided hermeneutic which replaced the role of the church as authoritative mediator of scripture's many meanings, and it established exegetical practices which strongly reflected the new spirit of individual commitment and piety. On the other hand, it also led to more rationalist and individualistic forms of exegesis. These could raise sharply critical questions about the content of scripture (p. 503) and its traditional interpretations, as shown by the work of the deist Reimarus, which was first published by G. E. Lessing in 1774–8. But it could also be harnessed to new kinds of large-scale theological projects of the kind set out by Schleiermacher. Indeed, the contribution of Schleiermacher, who founded hermeneutics as a formal discipline in the modern sense, turned on the contemporary notion of *Wissenschaft*. As a commitment to a new ‘science of knowing’ (to borrow Fichte's phrase), *Wissenschaft* seemed to promise a hermeneutical turn with far-reaching consequences for Christians. *Wissenschaft* would dictate that biblical texts be approached from within a hermeneutical horizon which was effectively indistinguishable from that which needed to be applied generically for the responsible reading of all manner of ancient texts. The text as such was seen to be the product of a particular mind or minds which required precise localization within the intermeshing fields of reliable knowledge concerning the contexts in which the text was produced. Responsible reading of the biblical text entailed the recreation of a historical environment within which the original meaning of the text was formed. Originality constituted authenticity. This evidently contrasted starkly with the Spirit-led allegorizing hermeneutic of the classical period of Christianity on the one hand and with the Spirit-centred plain-sense hermeneutic of Pietism on the other. It was Schleiermacher too who drew the natural consequences of this reorientation. Effectively, Schleiermacher applied the concept of *Wissenschaft* in its

other contemporary sense, as ‘system’ or ‘systematic knowledge’, in order to defend Christian belief against excessive vulnerability to the kinds of radically secular outcomes which were likely to follow from the application of a secular hermeneutic to the scriptural word. Powerful, ‘scientific’, philosophical systems were in the air, stemming from the work of Immanuel Kant and its idealist and Romantic aftermath. Part of Schleiermacher's achievement therefore was the realization that, with the emergence of the historical-critical method in biblical exegesis, to which he himself in no small degree contributed, a commensurate turn to ‘system’ would be required if Christian faith was to retain its authenticity and accountability without recourse to a positivist reading of scripture as unadulterated ‘history’.

The insights which Schleiermacher had brought to bear came into play again when, in 1835, David Friedrich Strauss published his highly influential *Life of Jesus*. This drew extensively upon historical-critical sources and came to the conclusion that very little can be known about the actual historical life of Jesus of Nazareth. But, Strauss argued, the biblical text remained an intensely historical document nevertheless, since it could be viewed as an expression of the historical consciousness of early believers. What this text was essentially *about*, then, was not the historical detail of a particular life, but rather the historical nature of human consciousness itself, incorporating elements of both the infinite and the finite into a self-realization of new profundity.

The tension between philosophical ideas and the historical character of scripture, the historical reliability of which was increasingly being put into (p. 504) question, came into view again in the work of F. C. Baur. Baur was a Hegelian, but against both Hegel and Schleiermacher he argued for a unity of the ‘ideal Jesus’ with the historical one. What mattered to Hegel was the idea of the unity of the infinite and the finite manifested historically in the finite spirit of those who believed that Jesus Christ embodied this union (it does not have to be a genuine embodiment). Baur disagreed and stressed the importance of the historical Jesus as the one in whom this realization was first accomplished and therefore first entered history. As a result of these new strategies, principally Lutheran theologians working in nineteenth-century Germany moved further away from the exegetical project, constructing ever more ‘systematic’ accounts of faith which accorded with the felt need to express the Christian faith in terms of *Wissenschaft* as a ‘scientific system’. At the same time, they accepted that *Wissenschaft* as *historical* method would increasingly remove the text of scripture from the interests of theology, leaving it finally as a resource for a ‘theological’ or ‘subjectivist’ homiletics and the fostering of Christian belief among the faithful.

In the first half of the twentieth century two important new voices were heard. Rudolf Bultmann was a New Testament specialist who also became the chief advocate of a new kind of theology based upon the influential existentialist philosophy of Martin Heidegger (Bultmann 1961). Heidegger had presented a powerful new model of the self as being fundamentally temporal, hermeneutical, and language-centred. Bultmann's achievement was to link with the New Testament texts this new anthropology (which he certainly believed to have a relevance and applicability far beyond the immediate contexts in which

Heidegger was writing). Bultmann did so through the principle of *kerygma*. Scripture itself thus became an instrument of supernatural disclosure of a kind which made sense within a Heideggerian account of the self. The radical openness towards death which characterized human authenticity for Heidegger, for instance, became for Bultmann the eschatological *telos* of scriptural hermeneutics. This was a text which mediated radical human authenticity, and thus fulfilled its kerygmatic promise. It is important to note that, for Bultmann, scripture did not find its principal anchorage in historical events which were independent of it, but rather, and somewhat like Baur—who shared Bultmann's scholarly interest in text and theology alike—in the kind of historical consciousness which came to expression in it. The *Christus praesens* of Bultmann's biblical theology is primarily a modality of disclosive existence which is manifest in the text of scripture itself.

The second voice was that of Karl Barth. Barth's use of scripture is an extensive topic, but, like Bultmann's, it includes a turn to the kerygmatic (Barth 1956: 457–740). The kerygmatic in Barth's case is not supported by, or articulated as, an extra-biblical system. Barth rejects the very possibility of such an alignment. But it remains kerygmatic nevertheless in that Barth does not seek to justify his particular readings of scripture in terms of any consensual readings of the day or in terms of any current debates. Barth's reading of scripture has to be seen as being at one with (p. 505) his theology: if his theology is in itself and reflexively proclamation, centring in his theology of the Word, then the Bible is its principle resource and the medium of its transmission. Barth's theology therefore *is* his exegesis, a deeply systematic, generative, and expansive inhabiting of scripture in the service of a theologically reflexive return to proclamation.

Bultmann and Barth point the way to further significant changes in the relation between text, interpretation, and theology in the modern world. But we cannot get a grip on the kind of changes which have taken place in recent decades, and which continue to be formative in our culture, without also taking account of the work of non-theologians such as Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.

In an important essay published in 1966 on ‘The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem’, Gadamer argued against Schleiermacher's view that hermeneutics is about clarifying communication, proposing instead that ‘being’ is coterminous with ‘world’ and both are reducible to language, which ‘is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and the all-embracing form of the constitution of the world’ (Gadamer 1976: 3). This marked a key point in the evolution of hermeneutics, since it sought to establish that hermeneutics is not about texts, or not only about texts, but is also about the way we experience the world.

Gadamer took up and developed the notion of the centrality of interpretation in his classic work *Truth and Method*. He argued that world is itself given by, or is a function of, language: ‘In every view of the world the existence of the world-in-itself is implied’ (Gadamer 1979: 406). Here too we find the celebrated formula: ‘Being that can be understood is language’ (Gadamer 1979: 432). Gadamer's contribution was the idea that interpretation is engaged in every act of understanding. If the classical position was that the human

mind perceives and understands its objects within a horizon which traverses a spectrum from inerrant objectivity to arbitrary subjectivity, then Gadamer established the principle that our understanding is always from a point in a historical process: it is therefore never free of subjectivity. We understand things from the ground of our own situatedness. Gadamer spoke of understanding in terms of 'a fusion of horizons' whereby our own situatedness could become reconciled with the situatedness of another, the author of a text, for instance. It is important to note that, for Gadamer, our subjectivity or inescapable 'point of view' was not a weakness in understanding to be avoided at all costs, but was rather the sole means by which we can arrive at an understanding of some other 'point of view'. In historical terms (which Gadamer himself set out), the universalization of interpretation had its roots in Kant's account of aesthetics. Kant allowed that it is only from within a tradition of interpretation, which presupposes some degree of subjectivity, that we can come to an understanding or appreciation of a work of art. Kant contrasted this with other kinds of cognition. Gadamer's achievement was to rethink Kant's account of aesthetic judgement, the third *Critique*, in terms of a general theory of understanding, grounded in a much keener sense of the extent to which language shapes both (p. 506) the world and our knowledge of the world—one of the characteristic insights of the modern period.

The second contemporary philosopher who has profoundly influenced hermeneutics, and particularly theological hermeneutics, is Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur's hermeneutics grew from his early engagement with the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, in whom he identified the contrasting instincts of an idealist and a realist. The conclusion Ricoeur drew was that the way forward for philosophy lay between these two. In other words, in our experience we are confronted with the real, though not directly. If we are to study the real in depth, we need therefore to identify the place in our experience where there is most *resistance* (hence Ricoeur's early interest in the will), and we need to be alert to what he later calls 'the arduous detours' of analytical interpretation (Ricoeur 1992: 19).

Ricoeur differs from Gadamer to the extent that he engages as a hermeneutical philosopher with scripture itself (perhaps on account of his Protestant background). Ricoeur is careful to define his own work as 'philosophical' and not 'theological'; nevertheless, the kinds of insights he brings to texts and to scriptural texts continue to have a pervasive influence upon many areas of theological concern. One of his chief contributions is the idea of 'second naïveté', which he coined as a riposte to the 'masters of suspicion' (Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud). The tendency of these thinkers was to deconstruct the text against the background of extra-textual drives or forces. The text thus lost something of its autonomy and imaginative potentiality by being reduced or held to account by powerful ideologies of origination, which invite us to understand the text as being itself under the control of or subject to more fundamental powers of culture, society, or the unconscious mind. Ricoeur's 'second naïveté' (in contrast with a 'first naïveté' of uncritical reading) acknowledged the existence of deconstructive critique but turned our gaze back again to the text in its integrity and inviolability. The second outstanding contribution Ricoeur made to the understanding of texts is linked with the first and finds its fullest expression in the article 'Towards a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation' (1981). Here he argues that the reveal-

ing moment is not something outside the text, nor is it the historical referent of the text, but is rather what he calls the ‘world of the text’. That is the whole sphere of reference and interconnection which unfolds for the one who reads the text. This denotes not the world as given, in a first order reference, but the world as possibility, in a second order reference (Ricoeur 1981: 43). Ricoeur sets forth an argument for the ‘poetic’ text as revelation, which ‘alone restores to us that participation-in or belonging-to an order of things which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject’ (Ricoeur 1981: 101). Poeticity contests the teleological systems which bind language to the world and restores the sentient self to a new and originary engagement with world as an opening of *possibilities*. The distinctively religious character of the opening engendered by biblical texts resides, for Ricoeur, in the circulation of all the different biblical discourses around the (p. 507) name of God: ‘narration that recounts the divine acts, prophecy that speaks in the divine name, prescription that designates God as the source of the imperative, wisdom that seeks God as the meaning of meaning, and the hymn that invokes God in the second person’ (Ricoeur 1995: 227). God remains unknown, however, as the ‘vanishing point’ of the circulating voices that testify to him, and as term of all the extravagant and hyperbolic ‘limit-expressions’ that are testimony to him (Ricoeur 1995: 228–30).

There is no doubt that Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy constitutes a powerful aid to theological hermeneutics (as well of course to philosophy more generally). But there are some areas of difficulty. It is the case for instance that Ricoeur understands ‘poeticity’ to be a property of all texts, or at least of all texts which have the capacity to cause a world of ‘second reference’ to emerge for the reader. This will include texts other than those of scripture. Ricoeur does in fact comment on the problems this raises in an intriguing article in which he draws attention to the extent to which sacred texts reverse the ordinary order of interpretation. In other words, most texts represent the deposit of fixed signs from an oral environment of speech and present interaction. As a hermeneutical philosopher, Ricoeur understood himself to be engaged with written utterance, which could not be illumined by the authorial voice. In the case of sacred texts (Ricoeur is thinking of liturgy) the movement is the other way, however. Here the written text is taken back into some kind of orality and spoken relation. Ricoeur the philosopher designates this domain as the province of the theologian (Ricoeur 1995: 68–72).

III. HERMENEUTICS TODAY

And so we come to the question of Christian faith, systematic theology, and hermeneutics today. From some perspectives very little will seem to have changed. The problematic of the relation between scripture, assessed by the historical-critical method, and theology remains. There are signs of a significant recontextualization of the problem, however. There are biblical scholars who affirm the role of the church community as the prime community of interpretation (e.g., Francis Watson 1994). This serves to reduce the possible tensions between ‘scientific’ exegesis and the living, worshipping community who actually receive the scriptural texts (and who will indeed often include in their number the

practitioners of the historical-critical method). In harmony with this we have also seen the emergence of more theological modes of reading scripture (e.g., Brueggeman 1997; Moberly 2000). There is often an explicit or implicit debt to Paul Ricoeur. It may be that we will continue to see a softening of the divide between systematic theology and biblical science.

(p. 508) One reason why this might be so is that the rise of narrativity as a primary mode of knowing in our society is providing an incentive for theologians to revisit scriptural sources. The questioning of the traditional conceptuality of reasoning which is pervasive in our society, and which obtains also in the domain of formal logic with its 'vagueness' and 'fuzzy set logic', have made it more difficult for theologians to rely purely upon the kind of systematic knowledge which was characteristic of, for instance, nineteenth-century Lutheran theologians or indeed of the highly influential Protestant and Catholic theologians of the mid-twentieth century. Their work was perhaps conceived at a time when epistemology rather than deconstructive language and culture-centred forms of thinking were in the ascendancy.

The greater understanding of the role of tradition in the formation of knowledge proposed by Gadamer (and the social scientists) and 'theologized' by Hans Frei (1974) and George Lindbeck (1984) makes it more difficult for biblical scholars to detach themselves from the contexts in which the books they study are used and read, namely, the churches or what we might call scriptural communities. Paradoxically, it is pressures such as these which have led scholars such as John Webster (2003) to argue for a return to the kind of 'dogmatic ontology' of scripture which was developed during the Reformation on the one hand, and advocates of the neo-Rabbinic hermeneutics of Peter Ochs (1998) and 'scriptural reasoning' to argue for a radical reshaping of Christian hermeneutics through Jewish-Christian-Muslim encounters on the other.

The third element in all this is the question of interpretation and the real. In the pre-modern texts we looked at, the assumption could always be made that, however semiotic and therefore interpretative the Christian understanding of the world became, it would always retain a dimension of resistance and of universality which required the philosophical terminology of the 'real'. Reality in this sense belonged to the meaning of the creation. If that has been called into doubt by the modern primacy of language, with its inherent multiplicity and divergence, then it nevertheless remains the case that Christianity is a religion which needs to make certain kinds of historical claims. Are we comfortable with theologies which efface not just the ontological urgency of doctrine about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, but which also might serve to lessen the imperative to meet the (real) needs of the suffering other? Perhaps also there are pressures from globalization which lead to the need to re-establish the values of practices and norms which may give communities of contrasting beliefs grounds on which to meet? The language of the real goes far beyond the narrow concerns of verificationalism and rationalism. It can also serve to ease what is one of the most difficult Christian problems of all: if interpretation is at the heart of Christian existence, shaping it from within, then how are we to jus-

tify practising one interpretation rather than another? If all is interpretation, is all interpretation wrong?

The Christian community today has one task before it which earlier times either did not have or did not experience with the same keenness. We live in a society (p. 509) which understands interpretation to be both a necessity and a right. There is no greater misconception about who we are today than that we are anti-foundationalist. We are not. But our foundationalism is not any one interpretation or set of interpretations: it is rather interpretation itself. The structures of the democratic state assume and safeguard the primacy of the interpretative act. If interpretation has always been at the heart of Christianity ('Who do you say that I am?'), then we now live in a culture for which interpretation is also foundational, though interpretation which is not in general constrained by tradition and community, as it is in the Christian case.

It is axiomatic therefore that the challenge before the churches is to articulate the grounds on which any one interpretation is to be preferred to another. It is to explore the boundaries of legitimate diversity both within the Christian communities themselves, and between them, and it is to explore the fluid boundaries and new interpretative relations between Christianity and the multiplying worlds in which it sits. This is perhaps an invitation to link doctrine more closely with the practices of holiness and the self-communicating wisdom and Christ-shaped virtues of discipleship which can most claim to be a universal language of meaning among humankind.

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