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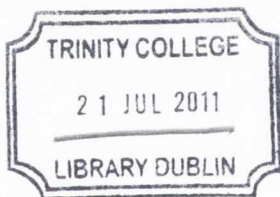
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On Not Hiding Scripture:
A Hermeneutics of Intrusion
and the
Visible Unity of the Churches

Katherine P Meyer
2011

The adult members of society adverted to the Bible unreasonably often. What arcana! Why did they spread this scandalous document before our eyes? If they had read it, I thought, they would have hid it. They didn't recognize the vivid danger that we would, through repeated exposure, catch a case of its wild opposition to their world.

Annie Dillard
An American Childhood



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Summary

The purpose of this thesis is to ask how a freshly conceived and embodied relationship of the churches to their canon of scripture might give new life, integrity and depth to the ecumenical movement. I argue for the development, at the heart of that relationship, of what I am calling a hermeneutics of intrusion, which would have the strength of offering new and compelling ways for the churches to embody a visible unity.

In chapter 1 I begin with a retrospective look at some of the relevant documents which emerged from the 20th century ecumenical movement, and then begin to map a way ahead. I set the wider context for the argument which will follow by examining three areas of current research which help to situate my work: the recovery of occluded traditions of modernity; the nature of the human person as reachable, her life able to be intruded upon by another who acts and speaks from beyond herself; and the notion of idolatry as suggestive for cultural self-understanding.

By looking more closely at the ambiguity at the heart of the notion of what is fixed or canonical, I argue in chapter 2 that it is not only the content of scripture which is normative for the churches but also the internal dynamic of interpretation and dissent which is found in the texts themselves. A healthy discipline of faithful reading will therefore embody this same interpretive restlessness and abundance, and a use and re-use of the texts of the canon in the same spirit of unsettled expectation.

In chapter three I begin by exploring what is meant by the word “authoritative” in the context of the canon, and I go on to examine in detail two recent arguments for the functional authority of scripture, both of which draw on insights from the field of

cultural studies. I propose that the normative character of the canon is enhanced by its own narrative qualities, which encourage reading practices of self-questioning and prompt an ongoing reconfiguration of meaning.

The next step, in chapter 4, is to ask what implications the development of a hermeneutics of intrusion would have for the churches' self-understanding, and in particular, to their commitment to visible unity. I argue that a hermeneutics of intrusion will require and nurture in the churches both an ecumenical self-understanding, and a particular sort of local public integrity grounded in openness to ongoing conversion.

In chapter 5 I situate my argument again within the wider cultural questions elaborated in Chapter 1. I also argue that the liturgy functions as a "site of memory" in which alternative ways to remember are offered, an oral environment for the work of interpretation is nurtured, and the ethical and expansive character of local commitment is affirmed.

Finally, I draw my overall argument into the wider context of the centenary of the 1910 World Missionary Conference, often seen as the beginning of the 20th century ecumenical movement, and revisit what has been a key biblical text for the ecumenical movement, asking how it might be fruitfully read again in light of a hermeneutics of intrusion.

Acknowledgments

My deepest gratitude goes to my supervisor, Dr Geraldine Smyth, O.P., who generously offered support, encouragement and an enhanced perspective at every stage. Her practical and emotional understanding of the pastoral ministry in which I am engaged, the creative energy it requires and the gracious unpredictability of its rhythms, enabled me to flourish as I travelled the long road of this thesis.

I am also grateful to the congregation of Christ Church, Sandymount, whom I now serve. Although they would not call it that, they model an interrupted ecclesiology which is feisty, thoughtful, good humoured, and deeply human. And if it were up to them, the visible unity of the churches would be sung.

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Chapter One

And Sarah Laughed: Towards a Hermeneutics of Intrusion

In the dedication of his book, *Un psychiatre lit la Bible*, Marc-Alain Wolf describes a dream sequence in which a classroom full of young boys, his eight year old father among them, have become utterly caught up in an animated exploration of the Bible and all its newly-discovered linguistic treasures. In the dream, he writes:

The words of the Bible slip off the pages, finding their way into [these young] heads and back out again through their lips. I see the words dancing around the room, constantly moving from one to the other. The atmosphere is one of joy; contagious laughter runs through the boys' bodies and spreads [even] to the books themselves. The books, larger than the tables on which they rest, rise into the air.¹

The dedication goes on to recount something of the life of Wolf's father, who had reached the age of 27 by the time the Second World War began. Before long, Wolf's father had become a prisoner in a military internment camp, and he spent the next five years of hard labour chopping wood, five years during which he had no idea that all around him half of Europe's Jews were being burned to death. When he is finally able to return home, his son reports with some amazement, it is to become a man freed of all animosity, who supports his surviving parents, marries late, and eventually has two children. As the dream continues, the eight year old child father gazes on his grown son and wants only to know who he has become. And the son in turn reflects that the father's one hope for him has always been that he will be able to receive the faith passed on to him, along with his father's respect for the scriptures,

¹ Marc-Alain Wolf, *Un psychiatre lit la Bible* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2005) pp. 8-9. The translation is mine. The dedication in its entirety is pp. 7-11.

and to take his place in the lively community of those whose animated engagement with the text is finally all joy.

The task of interpretation is never an uncomplicated one, any more than the negotiation of one's inheritance is without its own ambiguities and struggles. And if any reminder is needed, one has only to allow the "contagious laughter" of the young boys crowded into their classroom to recall another peal of laughter, this one from Sarah, the biblical matriarch in her nineties who greets the news that she is soon to have a child with the amused and dismissive laughter this unlikely announcement appears to deserve.² And yet within the narrative framework of the story, her laughter cannot be judged simply a moral failure to trust the divine messenger, as do some commentators,³ for her subsequent and ongoing engagement with the persistence of the messenger in the face of her laughter clearly reveals the complexity of her own reactions.

Her laughter, therefore, is more like a fault line, an indication that the ground of Sarah's awareness of the situation in which she finds herself is shifting. In that sense, her laughter no doubt bears tentative witness to many things: amusement, incredulity, disappointment, an unwillingness to engage with a prospect having no realistic hope of fulfilment, confusion, and anger. But most of all, it bears witness to that psychological incoherence which can be a narrative prelude to the most engaging and demanding theological work and personal transformation. That this is likely to be

² Genesis 18.12-15.

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, Revised Edition, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), pp 207-208. See also von Rad's contrast between the "little woman" who tries to lie her way out of the situation, and the "silence" of Abraham, which is "beautiful" because it gives the reader "time for many thoughts". For a more nuanced reading, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*. English trans. by John J. Scullion, S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985 and London: SPCK, 1986), pp 272-282.

the case for Sarah becomes clear after she finally does give birth to her son, Isaac,⁴ and pronounces his arrival to be an occasion for laughter.⁵ Here too, however, the fault line persists, for her laughter remains complicated. On the one hand, it is a response of joy and thanksgiving. And yet, on the other hand, it anticipates the laughter of those in the community around her, laughter which is both a participation in Sarah's joy and a slightly uncomfortable, even embarrassed response to the continuing disjuncture in her circumstances, the underived and inexplicable intrusion of this birth into her life. And yet it is precisely that intrusion, along with the interpretive realignments and ethical struggles it sets in motion, which ensures that Sarah's story remains one of promise, a story whose unguarded words will continue to slip off the pages of its retelling in each new generation, seeking a hearing.

The Canon of Scripture and the World Council of Churches

The heart of this study is an exploration of how the ecumenical movement in its various evolving forms might now be enabled to take on a new liveliness, integrity and depth as the result of a freshly conceived and embodied relationship of the churches to their canon of scripture. I will argue that by embracing what I am calling a hermeneutics of intrusion, grounded in a practice of imaginative and ongoing engagement with scripture, the Christian ecumenical movement may also more easily discover new and visible ways to embody the unity of the churches, ways which are dependent neither on any kind of hegemonic construct nor on a willingness simply to

⁴ The name is derived from the Hebrew word for "laughter".

⁵ Genesis 21.6

settle for what is deemed possible in present circumstances, ways which will honour both Sarah's laughter and the psychiatrist's dream.

The first stage of this exploration, however, requires a retrospective glance at some of the key documents produced by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in the 20th century, and a brief evaluation of some of the ways in which certain assumptions about the relationship between the canon of scripture and the churches were reflected within them.

From the perspective of hindsight, it is clear that one of the ironies of the ecumenical movement in the 20th century has been that the very search for visible unity⁶ which formed its core commitment was nevertheless capable of imposing its own distortions. Where there was wide agreement in matters of life and worship, such agreement was highlighted and rightly celebrated. Over time, however, and somewhat counter-intuitively, this turned out to mean that sustained attention was less likely to be given to these highlighted areas of shared expression and identity, and was more likely to focus on those areas which remained problematic, on those issues and practices which continued to reflect disagreement and division and thus, in the judgment of many, starkly embodied a counter-witness to the visible unity of the churches.

⁶ The Statement on Unity formed part of the report of the 3rd Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in New Delhi in 1961, and spoke of a unity "which is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship . . ."
<http://www.oikumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/new-delhi-1961/new-delhi-statement-on-unity.html>. Accessed 22 April 2010.

In certain ways, of course, this made perfect sense. In retrospect, however, the irony of the situation becomes visible when one realises that those issues and practices judged to have been most problematic at any given time might or might not have been the ones which practicing Christians of any tradition would have named as being most important to the life of faith. There was and is no necessary connection between the potential for conflict embedded in a given set of divergent practices or understandings and their overall significance, theological, pastoral, or otherwise, for the churches which hold or contest them.

This is not at all to suggest that corporate and sustained reflection on difficult issues should be abandoned. Still less is it to encourage those facile attempts to “focus on what we already have in common” which still, sadly, often pass as local ecumenism but which betray not only a fear of conflict but a fear of conversion. It is, however, to point out that the search for visible unity as embodied in the ecumenical movement has itself, at times, acted as a distorting lens. And the unfortunate though understandable result of such distortion has sometimes been that the things which mattered most were given less attention than they might have been, and certainly less attention than they deserved, unless they were the subject of persistent disagreement and misunderstanding.

In the years immediately following the establishment of the World Council of Churches, therefore, it would have made sense to assume that the formal structures of the 20th century ecumenical movement were now well-placed to enable a sustained exploration of the diverse ways in which different Christian traditions had learned to live and engage with scripture. Indeed, such a task might well have been seen as particularly urgent and important, given that the canonical texts shared by both

Eastern and Western churches⁷ must surely have been counted as one of the most visible, though not unproblematic, marks of unity among them.

However, the need to engage with the most immediately problematic areas of theological and practical difference proved to be more urgent than the possibility that a sustained and deepening engagement with scripture might in the longer term provide essential resources with which to address those very areas of difference and division. And so the ecumenical focus of attention came to rest not on the diverse ways in which different Christian traditions had learned to live and engage with scripture, but on the question of the relationship between scripture and tradition, on the relative authority of each, and on what is in fact meant by “tradition” in the first place.

Now that we have reached the early 21st century, and it is clear that the ecumenical movement must continue to engage in a sustained form of self-questioning and must be prepared to embrace an uncertain and profoundly transformed future, it is heartening to recall just how far in some respects we have come. And nowhere is this more clear than when we take a look back at how the problematic relationship between scripture and tradition was conceived in the mid-20th century.

For some time, of course, the stereotypical view had been that Protestants recognise the authority of scripture alone, while Roman Catholics recognise the authority of both scripture and tradition in the life of faith. And as long as this was the way in which the problem was set out, it followed that sustained ecumenical attention

⁷ I am aware, of course, that the lists of writings considered to be canonical by the different Christian traditions do not all agree in full. While these differences are important in some contexts, they do not affect the core of my argument here.

needed to be given, first of all, to the question of tradition, and then to the relationship between scripture and tradition. This was precisely what happened at the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order (Montreal 1963), the report of which was entitled *Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions*,⁸ and which will be examined in more detail later in this chapter. For now, however, it is enough to reiterate once more the dynamic which seems to be at work here. Insofar as the focus of the ecumenical movement is visible unity, it is likely that those matters seen as publicly divisive or problematic will be given the greatest amount of attention, while those convictions which are seen to “unite us already”, such as our shared acknowledgement and understanding of the authority of scripture in Christian life and worship, may be simply assumed, and rarely explored.

The next section of this chapter, therefore, will offer a brief overview of the ways in which the functional authority of scripture has been understood, and at times neglected, in some of the key documents of the Faith and Order Commission. I will argue that although the centrality of scripture for Christian life and worship is consistently assumed in these documents, they tend to focus on those concerns seen as most urgent at the time of their drafting: a right understanding of tradition in the Christian life, in itself and in relation to scripture; the challenges posed by historical critical scholarship; the hermeneutical issues involved not only in biblical study but in ecumenical conversations of all kinds; and the need for an interpretive methodology which serves the cause of visible unity.

⁸ *Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions*. Report of the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order (Montreal, 1963). In *The Bible: Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Ellen Flesseman-van Leer (Faith and Order Paper No. 99; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), pp.18-29.

None of these concerns is unimportant. On the contrary, they are of continuing importance, and the written reflections to which they gave rise have been significant in many respects. Nevertheless, I will argue that a brief survey of these documents highlights critical areas of neglect, and therefore also of possibility, with regard to the ecumenical development of ongoing forms of engagement with scripture by the churches. And it may well be that a focus on such lively engagement as a core ecumenical discipline may be as critical as any other factor in enabling the ecumenical movement and the practice of ecumenism to be transformed and energised for the 21st century.

Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions (Montreal, 1963)

The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, held in Montreal in 1963, issued a report entitled *Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions*,⁹ which is perhaps now best known and remembered for its attempt to distinguish between Tradition (with a capital "T"), tradition (with a small "t"), and traditions (in the plural). Tradition (with a capital "T") referred to "the Gospel itself, . . . Christ himself present in the life of the Church"¹⁰, "God's revelation and self-giving in Christ", and the Christian faith as "a living reality transmitted through the operation of the Holy Spirit"¹¹. "Thus we can say that we exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel (the *paradosis* of the *kerygma*) testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church through the power of

⁹ See note above. The report was first published in *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, ed. P.C. Rodger and L Vischer (Faith and Order Paper No. 42; London: SCM Press, 1964), pp. 50-60. For the sake of clarity, references will be to paragraph rather than to page numbers, since paragraph numbers are the same in both editions.

¹⁰ *Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions*, par. 39.

¹¹ *Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions*, par. 46.

the Holy Spirit."¹² Tradition (with a small "t") was then defined as the process of transmission itself,¹³ and traditions (in the plural) referred to "the expressions and manifestations in diverse historical forms of the one truth and reality which is Christ".¹⁴

The importance of these distinctions and definitions is clearly seen in the way in which they represented an attempt to reframe the whole debate over the relative authority of scripture and tradition, and would be hard to overestimate. And yet the core problem of identifying criteria for the evaluation of patterns of Christian faithfulness in widely differing contexts remains. If Tradition (with a capital "T") cannot be fully contained or embodied within any one confessional tradition, or reading of scripture, or set of doctrinal statements, then what norms can we use to evaluate and critique the practices of the various traditions to which we belong and in which we attempt to embody this living Tradition? Can we speak of Tradition itself coming under the judgement of the word of God?

In one sense, and with the benefit of hindsight, it could be argued that Montreal, in an attempt to deal with the scripture vs. tradition debate in its most popular and pervasive form, sought to mediate a way forward which all could embrace, instead of challenging the self-assurance found on both sides of the debate. Or to put it in another way, if the scripture vs. tradition debate is seen as embodying two mutually exclusive positions with regard to the source of authoritative teaching in the churches, then it is easy enough to highlight the weaknesses of each position. Surely, on the one hand, scripture has no voice apart from the various interpretive frameworks in which it may be heard, and which filter its many accents. And on the

¹² *Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions*, par. 45.

¹³ *Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions*, par. 39.

¹⁴ *Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions*, par. 47.

other hand, tradition, apart from the critical norm given voice by scripture, can become monstrous in its self-assertion and self-promotion. The Montreal definitions were important precisely because they refused this easy dichotomy, and presented scripture and tradition as inextricably linked in a more complex series of patterns than either side in the debate might have been ready to acknowledge.

However, there is a more difficult question to be grasped, both for those who still wish to advocate the priority of scripture for authoritative teaching, and for those who wish to argue for church traditions as authoritative. It is the question of how, within their respective frameworks, the advocates of each position can succeed in holding open the possibility that the voice of the Other, the word of God, will be heard, even when it speaks against human traditions and judges human readings of scripture itself. This is the question beneath the surface of the Montreal debate.

It can certainly be argued that the reluctance of the Montreal report to address this issue stems precisely from the fact that it was the importance and authority of tradition, as opposed to scripture, that was contested, and thus was seen to need further sustained attention. The result was a significant advance in ecumenical understanding and clarity regarding Tradition, tradition, and traditions, such that Tradition in this new sense could now be understood as the source of Christian unity, and scripture was redefined as "Tradition in its written form" and an "indispensable criterion" for the Tradition.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions*, pars. 50, 49.

However, while much was gained in Montreal, something important was also lost, or at least occluded. The richness of what can be meant when we use the word "tradition" in the churches was highlighted by the Montreal report, but the corresponding richness of what might be suggested by "scripture" was not explored. Instead, one could argue, scripture was simply reduced to a series of persistent interpretive problems,¹⁶ and left at that. And once again, the latent potential of a deeper engagement with scripture went unrealised.

Having said this, however, part of the legacy of Montreal is that few in the ecumenical movement, now, would wish to re-inscribe the supremacy of scripture over tradition in any naive or stereotypical sense. It will be difficult ever to see the old scripture vs. tradition debate in the same light again, and for that we must all be grateful. And yet the Montreal report did not ask whether there might exist within scripture itself, inherent in its own dynamic and structures, the resources for a continuing fruitful engagement with the any of the questions the report itself raised but did not seek to answer. In that sense, what a lively engagement with scripture might mean and look like from within the Tradition remains to be articulated and explored.

The Significance of the Hermeneutical Problem for the Ecumenical Movement

(Bristol, 1967)

In the years immediately following the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order (Montreal 1963), the Faith and Order Commission did, however, turn its

¹⁶ *Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions*, pars. 51-54.

attention to issues of biblical interpretation and hermeneutics. Five regional working groups were set up, and at its meeting in Bristol (1967) the Commission received a final report, based on the work of the groups, entitled *The Significance of the Hermeneutical Problem for the Ecumenical Movement*.¹⁷

The main significance of the Bristol report is to be found in its readiness to acknowledge at least some of the wide range of circumstances, conditions, and approaches which affect the interpretation of scripture. In particular, the report notes that scripture itself contains a diversity of perspectives, not all of which are easily reconciled with one another. To some extent, these different perspectives point to the collective richness of the canonical writings, and to some extent they reflect the particular struggles characteristic of different historical situations. However, there are some instances in which they simply bear witness to theological disagreement, and as the Bristol report puts it: "The difficulties raised by this for systematic theology have not been solved by us."¹⁸

The report also implies that although any given set of historical circumstances will influence the interpretation of whatever specific text is under consideration at the time, such circumstances will also affect the very ability of the interpreter to hear or even to notice a whole range of other texts. This is an important consideration, and a dynamic which could profitably be explored, or at least noted, in scripture itself.¹⁹

¹⁷ *The Significance of the Hermeneutical Problem for the Ecumenical Movement*. Report presented to the Faith and Order Commission (Bristol, 1967). In *The Bible: Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Ellen Flessemann-van Leer (Faith and Order Paper No. 99; Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1980), pp 30-41.

¹⁸ Faith and Order Paper No. 99, p 32.

¹⁹ One of the most obvious ways in which this dynamic might be and has been explored is in looking at the ways in which the early church, in seeking to construct an interpretive framework for the events connected with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, turned naturally and urgently to those texts of scripture which provided a way for them to do so. A sustained, recent example of such exploration is

However, this theme is not pursued. And it is difficult not to draw the conclusion that although this report has as one of its aims a frank acknowledgement of the many complexities inherent in the faithful interpretation of scripture, there is uncertainty as to how the resources of scripture itself might be brought to bear on these issues, apart from the seeming impossibility of reaching interpretive agreement.²⁰

Perhaps the most significant and provocative sentences from the Bristol report, however, are found in its conclusion. Having cast a look back over the early days of the World Council of Churches, when the Bible was conceived of as a unity "whose centre was the divine acts of salvation interpreted by a more or less harmonious community of witnesses", and when it was expected that the ecumenical movement would result in the Bible being read "more and more along the same lines", the Bristol report admits that such hope is fading, "even to such an extent that in the eyes of some the new exegetical developments seem to undermine the *raison d'être* of the ecumenical movement."²¹

Such honesty is refreshing, and adds to the trustworthiness of the report. For in its final conclusion, it makes no attempt to minimise or suppress the difficulties to be faced. Rather, and quite hopefully, it suggests that if diversity, persistent,

found in Richard B Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

²⁰ These uncertainties in many ways reflected the same disorientation and ferment visible in the fields of theology and biblical studies. In 1970, Brevard S. Childs published *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970). The crisis referred to was precipitated, in broad terms, by the end of the biblical theology movement, particularly associated in Old Testament studies with the work of Gerhard von Rad, and the continuing challenge posed to theology by historical criticism. Hans W. Frei also published *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* in 1974 (New Haven: Yale University Press).

²¹ Faith and Order Paper No. 99, p. 40. Again, the wider context is reflected in the report's comments. At the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal in 1963, Ernst Käsemann held that one "simply cannot speak of an unbroken unity of New Testament ecclesiology", while Raymond Brown argued for a "*unity in belief* that is present in all stages of New Testament thought about the Church." The italics are his. Ernst Käsemann, "Unity and Diversity in New Testament Ecclesiology." *Novum Testamentum* 6 (1963), p 295; and Raymond E. Brown, S.S., "The Unity and Diversity in New Testament Ecclesiology." *Novum Testamentum* 6 (1963), p 302.

thoroughgoing, and often painful, is the reality, then it is to this diversity that those who are committed to the ecumenical movement must address themselves. And given that the biblical canon itself bears witness to both unity and substantial diversity at the very beginning of the church, the report concludes by suggesting that it may be one of our most important theological tasks "to draw the right conclusions" from this insight.²² And in this way the report leaves open the possibility that there are resources within scripture itself, quite apart from any common interpretive conclusions, which may assist us in this urgent and important task.

The Authority of the Bible (Louvain, 1971)

The Bristol meeting of the Faith and Order Commission (1967) made the decision to undertake a further study process, this time with a deliberate focus on the authority of scripture. The process once again included an initial consultation, followed by a number of regional gatherings, and Roman Catholic theologians were active participants both in the initial gathering and in many of the regional meetings. The initial consultation began with exegetical work on specific biblical texts, and although this exegetical work is not specifically referred to in the final report, and is thus likely to have been seen as preparatory work only, traces of the corporate interpretive process itself may well be visible in the report's conclusions. The final report was presented to the Faith and Order Commission at its meeting in Louvain in 1971.²³

²² Faith and Order Paper No. 99, p.41.

²³ *The Authority of the Bible*. Report presented to the Faith and Order Commission (Louvain, 1971). In *The Bible: Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Ellen Flesseman-van Leer (Faith and Order Paper No. 99; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), pp. 42-57.

The report begins with the by now familiar observation that although the churches all acknowledge the authority of scripture for their work and worship, this joint acceptance of biblical authority has not led to a unity but to a multiplicity of perspectives. Indeed, so great have the difficulties often been, when the churches have sought a common scriptural voice on an issue of urgent contemporary concern, that, as the Louvain report admits, there has sometimes been a temptation "to abandon the appeal to biblical grounds altogether".²⁴ Furthermore, the very meaning of this common affirmation of adherence to scriptural authority is contested, both within and among the various churches, as are the implications which might be drawn from such an affirmation. Once again, the question of how scripture itself might engage with these issues, or provide resources for our own attempts to do so, is not dealt with explicitly in the report. At the same time, however, an important observation is made regarding the character of the biblical texts which helps to point the way forward.

We are deliberately reminded by the Louvain report that all of the events reported in the Bible have already been subject to interpretation in the very process of their being narrated and eventually written down. Thus there is no such thing as an uninterpreted event, and scripture itself is properly understood as a collection of interpretive texts.²⁵ Furthermore, the work of contemporary interpreters is in a very real sense a continuation and prolongation of the interpretive process which we recognise in scripture.²⁶

²⁴ Faith and Order Paper No. 99, p.43.

²⁵ Faith and Order Paper No. 99, p. 48.

²⁶ Faith and Order Paper No. 99, p. 51.

This is an important observation for two reasons. First, it constitutes a recognition, however fleeting and undeveloped here, that the canon of scripture not only defines a textual content, but also validates a process of interpretation which is ongoing and without which the textual content ceases to carry meaning. And second, it suggests that the temporal proximity of the New Testament writings, for example, to the events which they narrate, does not necessarily guarantee that the interpretations they provide will be closest in substance to the Gospel. While an event and its interpretation must always be held together for either to carry meaning, and while the New Testament texts have an irreplaceable importance in this regard, it is at least conceivable that a later interpretation of an event, in its own context, will somehow succeed in sounding a truer Gospel note.²⁷

And it is this last observation which brings us back full circle to the question of the authority of the Bible for the Christian life. The authoritative place of the canon of scripture in the churches may not be able to be justified entirely on the basis of its content (though its content is irreplaceable), or on the basis of its temporal proximity to the events which it narrates (though its historical value for the believing community is unmatched). Therefore we must surely ask ourselves whether or not there are additional grounds, grounds perhaps suggested by the restless interpretive character of scripture itself, on the basis of which the churches can claim an authoritative function for scripture in their lives, and on the basis of which an ecumenical paradigm of lively engagement with scripture can be constructed. The Louvain text hints at this possibility, but leaves it to others to suggest an appropriate way forward.

²⁷ Faith and Order Paper No. 99, p. 49.

A Treasure in Earthen Vessels (1998)

One of the most significant texts to be considered in this chapter is the report entitled *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, which was published as Faith and Order Paper No. 182 in 1998.²⁸ Although the study process which resulted in this report did not begin until more than twenty years after the publication of the Louvain report, the intervening years were indelibly marked by the appearance in 1982 of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*,²⁹ by the consultations which led up to the final draft of *BEM*, and by the reception process which was set in motion by its publication. As a result, the explicit focus of the hermeneutical task in *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels* is seen to be much wider than the interpretation of scripture. Rather, ecumenical hermeneutics is understood to share with other forms of hermeneutics "the goal of facilitating interpretation, communication and reception of texts, symbols and practices which give shape and meaning to particular communities."³⁰

This is an important shift in emphasis, and it signals a changing context for the ecumenical movement. In many respects, the publication of *BEM* and the ongoing reception process set in motion by its initial presentation to the churches have confirmed this shift. Now, in this new stage of the ecumenical movement, we know not only that we are likely to disagree in our interpretations of scripture. We know also that we are likely to disagree in the interpretation and implementation even of documents we have drafted together, and that symbols and practices will continue to carry meanings other than those which we consciously and thoughtfully assign to

²⁸ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An instrument for an ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics*. Faith and Order Paper No. 182 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998). References are to paragraph numbers.

²⁹ *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982)

³⁰ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, par. 5.

them. Ecumenical hermeneutics, therefore, will have to be about the communicating, interpreting, giving, and receiving of our whole lives. It can no longer be about our understandings of scriptural texts alone.

At first glance, this definition of ecumenical hermeneutics articulates a helpful and thoughtful shift in understanding, and bears witness to a growing and deepening fund of shared experience on which ecumenical reflection can draw. However, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels* goes on to make explicit its understanding that this ecumenical hermeneutics is a hermeneutics "for the unity of the Church", and that such a hermeneutics must always aim at "greater coherence" in the interpretation of the faith.³¹ Furthermore, the Church is called to be a "hermeneutical community", whose tasks include "overcoming misunderstandings, controversies and divisions; . . . resolving conflicts; and preventing schisms predicated on divisive interpretations of the Christian faith."³²

In one sense, of course, there is little or nothing in these claims with which it is possible to disagree. But in another sense there are some troubling assumptions beneath these claims which need further exploration. If unity among the churches is understood to give credibility to the Gospel as it is preached in the world,³³ does it necessarily follow that this unity will always take the form of a "greater coherence"? What exactly will be the shape of this coherence, and how will it be recognised?

³¹ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, par. 5, 6.

³² *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, par. 7.

³³ This is certainly a generally accepted interpretation of John 17.20-23 within the ecumenical movement, especially in its local forms.

And it is precisely here that the question of lively engagement with the canon of scripture, and what such engagement, embodied in an ecumenical context, might look like, becomes again urgent and important. Is it possible, for example, that the canon of scripture, as a given collection of diverse and disparate texts, offers another model of coherence, one to which we might well be called to pay attention in an ecumenical context of deepening maturity? And does the very existence of this diverse and disparate collection of canonical texts not challenge the assumption that an ecumenical hermeneutics worthy of its name will always and necessarily further the visible unity of the churches in any immediate sense? Is uncontested, visible unity, after all, our highest value, or does the fact of the canon of scripture in the churches not suggest that it is our task, above all, to keep open places of hearing for the word of God, and that visible unity, differently conceived and constructed in different contexts, can end by either helping or hindering that effort?

In other words, it is certainly true that the broad understanding of ecumenical hermeneutics delineated in *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels* reflects a growing maturity in the ecumenical movement, a more seasoned awareness of some of the complexities and ambiguities involved in our best intentioned attempts to live and worship together across all kinds of confessional and cultural and political boundaries. And yet, at the same time, the report is strangely disheartening and unimaginative in its neglect of the common resource for its task which might be found in the canon of scripture, not in the search for agreed (and thus static?) interpretations of certain texts, but rather in the shape and inner movement of the canon itself. For this shape and inner movement may suggest that a model of unity in diversity does not go far enough, that coherence is not always a fixed but sometimes a restless and temporary quality, and that

whatever else the practice of engagement with scripture might mean in an ecumenical context, it means a holy suspicion even of the idols of unity, and of their potentially hegemonic demands. And then it will be the holy suspicion and its urgency, and not the idols, which finally convince the churches of how much they need one another.

These are some of the questions to which we shall return. In the meantime, however, there is one further observation to be made regarding *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*. It is perhaps a bit harsh, but nevertheless not inaccurate, to suggest that this is a document which reads almost as if it has given up on the possibility that the canon of scripture has a formative and creative function, rather than a conventional one, to play in the ecumenical movement. Scriptural references in the document are infrequent, somewhat tired,³⁴ and never explored in depth. While such sustained exploration was arguably not the purpose of the report, there are paragraphs in the report which could have been significantly strengthened by a canonical reference, and yet any such reference is strangely absent. For example, the claim that contextual interpretations "can contribute to a fuller interpretation of the Gospel and can thereby speak to the Christian community as a whole"³⁵ could well have been enriched and deepened by linking it to the presence in the canon of highly contextual writings like some of the New Testament letters, thus opening the way for a subsequent discussion of catholicity and contextuality, and of how they are comfortably or uncomfortably interwoven in the canon itself.

³⁴ In par. 46, John 17.21 is quoted, it seems, almost automatically, and although it fits easily into the context, it is hard to see precisely what this reference, in this particular place, adds to the discussion. Similarly, the reference to 2 Corinthians 4.7 in par. 2 seems to confuse the apostles' undoubted linguistic and interpretive shortcomings with their essential human fragility and brokenness as "earthen vessels".

³⁵ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, par. 47.

In short, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels* is striking for its lack of interest in the canon of scripture, though whether this lack of interest stems from a fear that ecumenical work with specific texts will end by being divisive, or from some other cause, is never made clear. Sadly, however, this lack of interest does seem to betray a troubling assumption powerfully at work behind the document, namely that the very fact of the canon, that is, the continuing presence of an authoritative, diverse, and often difficult collection of writings at the core of our shared, if contested, Christian identity, is of little relevance to the complex web of hermeneutical, practical and ethical questions which we now face in the ecumenical movement.

The Legacy of the Documents in the 21st Century

The ecumenical movement now fully inhabits a 21st century in which the urgency and excitement and necessity of radical new configurations of ecumenism have become a clear and unavoidable focus.³⁶ It is now largely taken for granted, for example, that in some respects, at least, the centre of gravity of the Church of Jesus Christ is now in the countries and cultures of the South, giving rise to a new sense of global Christianity; that the phenomenon of globalisation, however precisely defined, continues to lead to both the widening of cultural and personal horizons, on the one hand, and the protective re-construction of more tightly claimed identities, on the other; that the very word *ecumenism* remains threatening for some and has become hopelessly dated for others; and that the constructive engagement of religious

³⁶ See, for example, the programme for the conference organised by the Irish School of Ecumenics in June 2010. The title of the conference was *From World Mission to Interreligious Witness: Visioning Ecumenics in the 21st Century*, and the three daily themes were: *From World Mission to World Christianity and Beyond*; *Ecumenical Witness: Cultures of Faith and Public Theology*; and *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Witness*.

communities with one another at all levels is a growing imperative, certainly for the purpose of mutual enrichment and understanding, but also to enable their members to address common or urgent concerns as they arise.

In most respects, the formal structures of the ecumenical movement in the 20th century were not designed or equipped to address these realities. And by the same token, the documents produced as part of the various study processes undertaken by the World Council of Churches, including the Faith and Order Commission reports we have considered briefly here, can now seem dated in these and other respects. However, it will be my argument here that these particular documents, in their struggle (and in some sense, their failure) to place and to keep the canon of scripture at the heart of the ecumenical movement, began a process which is far from being completed, but which holds enormous potential for a re-imagined 21st century ecumenism. Indeed, by continuing the exploration which they began, and, to some extent, then left aside in apparent frustration, we may well discover how a freshly conceived and embodied relationship of the churches to their canon of scripture might lend to the ecumenical project a new liveliness, integrity and depth.

So let me return for a moment to the documents we have already briefly examined. In a certain sense, the great strength of both the Bristol (1967)³⁷ and the Louvain (1971)³⁸ reports is to be found precisely in their inconclusiveness. Bristol, the earlier of the two, is frank in its admission that the very processes of shared biblical study and exegesis in which the ecumenical movement placed such confidence, the round table of Bible study in which such hopes for unity were lodged, led in the end only to an ever-vanishing horizon of agreement. As biblical scholarship continued to

³⁷ See pp 11-14, above.

³⁸ See pp 14-16, above.

reveal the internal diversity of the canonical writings, so the different interpretive perspectives brought to the same text at the round table led to a corresponding, even growing, hermeneutical diversity. And to some it may have seemed inevitable that this newly compounded diversity would contradict the very hopes which had brought the participants to the table in the first place. Faced with a canon of scripture which both united participants and created new distinctions among them, offering them a steady centre whose core turned out to be a greater divergence of perspectives than ever, the Bristol report freely admitted that the way forward was anything but clear.

By the time the Louvain report was published a few years later, honesty had compelled the participants in the study process to acknowledge not only that divergent hermeneutical perspectives were being brought to the table, but also that an uninterpreted reading of scripture is impossible in the first place. Indeed, as we have seen, the Louvain report affirmed that the canon itself is a collection of interpretations, and re-interpretations, of events with which we are already engaging as soon as we begin to listen or to read. If we were to put it differently, we might say that the degree of frustration expressed in both the Bristol and Louvain reports remains their greatest strength, for it is a reflection of their most important insight, namely that scripture, while providing a critical focus for Christian unity, begins to fracture that same unity as soon as it is picked up and handled.

The Bristol and Louvain reports, however, are bracketed by the other two reports we have considered, by Montreal (1963)³⁹, and at a much greater remove, by *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels* (1998)⁴⁰. We have already noted the extent to which the Montreal report broke important new ground by persuasively insisting that scripture

³⁹ See pp 8-11, above.

⁴⁰ See pp 17-21, above.

and tradition, rightly understood, cannot be seen as discrete entities, vying for authority in the life of the churches, but are in fact so closely and reciprocally interwoven as to be inseparable. The new paradigm of Tradition, tradition, and traditions⁴¹ offered a wholly new context for the interdependent and complex relationship between these two often apparently irreconcilable sources of authority for the life of the Christian community. And yet we also noted that the very success of the new paradigm offered by Montreal gave rise to a further question, stirring beneath the surface of the report. Now that we have found a way to give greater coherence to our understanding, how do we ensure that the new paradigm itself remains open to ongoing self-critique? How do we prevent it from becoming self-enclosed in the way that the two previous paradigms of scripture and tradition ended up being?

For the time being, however, the strength of the new paradigm offered by Montreal, and its fruitfulness in the continuing work of the ecumenical movement, meant that such questions were mostly kept at bay. Montreal was followed, as we have seen, by the Bristol and Louvain reports, and then by the constructive work which led, in 1982, to the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, and to the ongoing project of its reception. In the meantime, of course, and partly as a result of the entire *BEM* process, it was becoming increasingly clear that urgent hermeneutical issues were not confined to biblical study. On the contrary, they were increasingly presenting themselves in ecumenical conversations of all kinds, with the result that the constructive field of ecumenical hermeneutics began to be conceived in a much wider sense than before. Not only could biblical texts be heard and read differently, so could

⁴¹ See pp 8-9, above.

agreed ecumenical texts. Furthermore, contexts could change, inviting fresh readings. And the same liturgical gestures, like the same words, can carry widely divergent meanings. Ecumenical hermeneutics would have to be not just about scripture, but about the interpretation and reinterpretation of our whole corporate lives to one another, within the Christian community and beyond it.

It was precisely this insight that provided the grounding for *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, which appeared a full 35 years after the Montreal report. Now visible unity was to be embodied not only in the shared embrace of the Tradition of the Gospel, the *paradosis* of the *kerygma*.⁴² It was also to be embodied in the confident movement towards a greater coherence in the public expression of Christian faith, arrived at through an ongoing interpretive process which now seems to understand visible coherence to be its principal end.⁴³

It is this focus on coherence in the service of visible unity which in a certain sense brings us full circle back to the Montreal report. For like the Montreal report, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels* leaves us with an open question. If, from the perspective of the Christian churches, the construction of visible unity is now allied to a search for coherence, how will that same unity remain subject to healthy critique? How will it continue to be interrogated in a helpful way, and in service to the gospel hope that, seeing this oneness, and in the words of Jesus' prayer, "the world may believe that you have sent me"?⁴⁴

⁴² See pp 8-9, above.

⁴³ A number of thoughtful and suggestive models for full visible unity have of course been proposed over the years, and continue to provoke thoughtful debate. See the brief overview in Thomas F. Best, "Models of Unity", in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. by Nicholas Lossky, et al. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), pp 1041-43.

⁴⁴ John 17.21.

Towards a Hermeneutics of Intrusion: Mapping the Way Ahead

We have already seen that one of the dangers inherent in a focus on visible unity as the goal of the ecumenical movement is the temptation to devote the most sustained attention of the movement to those areas of the churches' life and worship which appear to be inhibiting visible unity in the most public ways.⁴⁵ This is understandable, and it is certainly not wrong. However, it does mean that the goal of visible unity, if embraced uncritically, can easily work to skew the ecumenical project towards an agenda made up primarily of contested items. And we have already noted that as long as the focus remains on the addressing and resolving of difference, the concept of visible unity itself may be insufficiently interrogated. This remains true even when the results of in-depth ecumenical exploration of those areas seen as divisive, such as the eucharist, yield constructive, useful, and even transformative results.

As long ago as 1993, Konrad Raiser, speaking on the occasion of the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands, also noted that, in a very practical sense, the paradigm of divided churches in search of visible unity can let us down, precisely at those moments when the lived experience of unity needs a shape for its expression.⁴⁶ When Christians who embrace different confessional identities and claim membership in churches still formally divided nevertheless experience their profound unity, whether in prayer, in shared efforts on behalf of their neighbours (perhaps alongside those of other religious identities), or even in the sacraments, there are limited ways in which this unity can be publicly

⁴⁵ See p 4-5, above.

⁴⁶ Konrad Raiser, "The Future of the Ecumenical Movement" (June 1993), par 3. A photocopy of a summary of the address is in the library of the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin.

marked and celebrated. Indeed, experiences like these are too often trivialised as partial, as exceptional, or as “pointing to” something else, something more, something which is to come, when in fact, for those who live them, they are whole in themselves, and to be celebrated as such.

It is instructive, therefore, to return to the Statement on Unity which forms part of the report of the 3rd Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in New Delhi in 1961.⁴⁷ Speaking of a unity in the Church of Jesus Christ which is “being made visible”, the statement acknowledges that “unity does not imply simple uniformity of organisation, rite or expression”. At the same time, it affirms the radical nature of this unity which is being made visible: “The achievement of unity will involve nothing less than a death and rebirth of many forms of church life as we have known them. We believe that nothing less costly can finally suffice . . .”⁴⁸

And so the following core question is raised, and remains vital after all the intervening years. And in the wider sense in which the term “ecumenical hermeneutics” is now understood, perhaps it is the most important question of all. How will the churches embody a unity which is not simply structural or doctrinal or even born of daily practice but which is rather a matter of ongoing death and re-birth? How might visible unity be given shape and form, while still allowing room for that intrusive moment which will set in motion another confusing yet longed for death and re-birth? It appears, in other words, that from the very beginning, from the moment at which the New Delhi statement took shape, and then gave shape to the development of the ecumenical movement in the decades which followed, this core question was

⁴⁷ <http://www.oikumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/new-delhi-1961/new-delhi-statement-on-unity.html>. Accessed 22 April 2010.

⁴⁸ Par. 3.

being acknowledged as being at the heart of the movement. How will the churches embody that gift of visible unity in such a way that intrusion always remains a possibility, in such a way as to allow that life-giving interruption from outside ourselves which sets in motion, as it did for Sarah, a hermeneutical spiral of laughter, dying, and vulnerable new life? How will we live our unity in such a way that we can still be reached and addressed from outside? And can we now construct a hermeneutics of intrusion whose practice will be at the service of that unity, but which will, like the words of the Bible in the psychiatrist's dream, insist on repeatedly slipping off the page?

It is my contention in this thesis that the canon of scripture provides a rich but significantly neglected resource for constructing such a hermeneutics of intrusion. I will also argue that a freshly conceived and embodied relationship of the churches to their canon of scripture has the potential to lend new liveliness and depth to the ecumenical movement, while offering to its various local and global expressions a new energy for their 21st century tasks. And finally, I will argue that by embracing such a hermeneutics of intrusion, grounded in a practice of imaginative and ongoing engagement with scripture, the Christian ecumenical movement may also more easily discover new and visible ways to embody the unity of the churches, ways which are dependent neither on any kind of hegemonic construct nor on a willingness simply to settle for what is deemed possible in present circumstances.

At the core of my argument is the claim that the canon of scripture, as a collection of writings functionally authoritative for the churches, is normative both with regard to the historically irreplaceable character of the texts themselves and also with regard to their internal rhetorical processes of ongoing interpretation and

dissent, which enact the primary mode of right reading for the community of faith. In other words, it is not only the content of scripture which is authoritative but also its inner interpretive dynamic. It is this inner interpretive dynamic which I will explore in Chapter 2.

At the same time, the functional authority of scripture is enhanced by a set of narrative qualities which privilege the reading practices of interrogation and an ongoing reconfiguration of meaning. These narrative qualities, which I will explore in Chapter 3, provide a degree of unity and coherence to the readings of the community of faith, and yet at the same time they propose modes of reading which prompt an ongoing process of self-questioning. One of the moral consequences of such reading processes is to strengthen all thoughtful attempts to undermine the certainties of power, whether those certainties focus on the meanings derived from reading or on the lived embodiment of visible unity or ethical coherence.

Furthermore, if a hermeneutics of intrusion can be freshly conceived on this basis, grounded in an imaginative and lively engagement with the canon of scripture understood in the ways I have outlined above, there will be clear implications both for ecclesiology and for liturgical practice. I will therefore argue in Chapter 4 that a hermeneutics of intrusion both requires and nurtures an ecumenical understanding of Christian identity, and provides some constructive indications of the shape that visible unity might take in the coming decades. At the same time, the significance of liturgical practice will also come to the fore, and this in two ways. On the one hand, it is in some sense the local, gathered worshipping community which provides, consciously or not, the strongest set of interpretive controls for the hearing of scripture. On the other hand, however, it is in the regular gathering for worship that the local interpretive

community is faced most relentlessly with an intrusive scriptural word, at once familiar and yet always ready to slip off the page and set into motion that unguarded interpretive struggle which faith has always found to be both costly and full of promise. And so in Chapter 5 I will explore the relationship between a hermeneutics of intrusion and the worship of the Christian community.

Towards a Hermeneutics of Intrusion: Landmarks

All constructive hermeneutical work takes place within a wider matrix of cultural and theological reflection, and so at this point I want to highlight three areas in which work related to my own interests is currently being done, in order to help to locate my own work within a broader landscape. And while I will not be able to treat any of these three areas at length, I hope to show that they may allow my proposals for a hermeneutics of intrusion to resonate more widely within the broadening and deepening field of ecumenics and ecumenical studies.

(i)

The Other Modernity

Much of the popular reflection on cultural change which has taken place in the West in recent decades has centred on the shorthand terms, *modernity* and *postmodernity*, and on the assumed transitions, more or less thoroughgoing, from the thought and life patterns of the one to the ascendancy of those of the other, in almost every area of cultural and intellectual life. While it will be impossible here to do any justice to the complexity of either term, or to the complications of the ongoing

relationship between them, it is important to note that one of the features of contemporary reflection on these transitions has been a more thoughtful interrogation of the concept of modernity itself, and, specifically, the suggestion that the roots and early characteristics of modernity are less homogeneous than has sometimes been assumed.⁴⁹

In very broad and generalised terms, the default understanding in recent decades has been that modernity originated in the period commonly known as the Enlightenment, during the mid-17th to mid-18th centuries. Enlightenment thinking, according to this view, was characterised by a confidence in the ability of human beings to bring reason and independent thought to bear on contemporary issues in a way that would serve the progress of society as a whole. At its best, the project of modernity⁵⁰ was understood to be one of emancipation: from religious superstitions and tyrannies, from oppressive social and political traditions, and from a common life shaped primarily by unthinking adherence to what one had been told or taught. In its place, Enlightenment thinking proposed that a reasonable, logical, and objective set of frameworks for intellectual and political life was both possible and desirable, and would represent progress of a most significant and overarching kind.

The ongoing legacy of this kind of thinking is still everywhere to be seen around us, most particularly in the continuing confidence placed in scientific and medical research, in the assumed superiority of democratic political systems in public discourse (even where they are being undermined in practice), in the repeated (though often

⁴⁹ I am dependent for what follows on a number of sources, and in particular, the following: Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); Ruth Whelan, "The excluded middle: epistemic mutations in late seventeenth-century French thought" (awaiting publication).

⁵⁰ The term is that of Jürgen Habermas.

unexamined) claim that there is such a thing as “our common humanity”, and even in the conviction that there are shared ethical consequences which necessarily flow from such a claim.

Postmodernity, on the other hand, represents a set of challenges to the confident certainty of modern thinking, to its reliance on universal claims, and not least, to its assumption that it is possible for anyone to claim a disinterested or disembodied objectivity in any of the things that matter significantly to them. The term “postmodern” began to be widely used in the 1980s, and is especially associated with the work of Jean-François Lyotard, whose well-known definition of postmodernism is that it is simply an “incredulity towards narratives”.⁵¹ Postmodern perspectives announce their suspicion of overarching or comprehensive accounts of things, often known as “metanarratives”, on the grounds that while such accounts claim to explain, set in order, and reassure, they are actually, in their effects, stifling difference, denying plurality, smothering minority perspectives, and generally doing violence to all that fails to fit into their totalising schemes. Furthermore, they are doing all this while claiming objectivity, attempting thereby to shield themselves from criticism, and hiding their own conscious or unconscious agendas of self-interest and power by making dissent either impossible or ludicrous.

The postmodern, therefore, privileges the partial, the local, the fragmented, the occluded, the dissenting, and the indeterminate. It claims that modernity, far from being an emancipatory project, has on the contrary provided frameworks for some of the worst forms of oppression known to the 20th century, and all while continuing to lay claim to an enlightened rationality which systematically dismisses any alternative

⁵¹ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p 86.

perspectives which might question its hegemony. The effects of a postmodern sensibility in cultural and intellectual life have also been far-reaching. Most significantly, perhaps, any and all claims to rationality, objectivity or universal insight are now themselves almost automatically, and many would say rightly, subjected to questions of their own. The place in which one stands, the interests one holds, and the power one wields, even if unconsciously, are all deemed to be relevant to such claims. It is not that the perspective one holds, the prior convictions one embraces, or the sphere of influence in which one works should disqualify any person or group from attempting to make a persuasive argument for their claims. It is rather that we can no longer claim innocence with regard to the effects of such interests, actual and potential, on the positions we take. At the same time, however, it is evident that the loss of a world of universal claims has at least in some contexts begun to produce a kind of ethical fragmentation which risks being as oppressive as any previously and universally imposed moral demands.

The above accounts of the modern and the postmodern are necessarily brief and incomplete, but I use them only to provide an introductory context for the main point I wish to make in this section. As more sophisticated reflection on modernism and postmodernism has continued to develop, along with further consideration of the complex relationship between the two, one of the claims which has emerged is that a more or less unquestioned association of Western modernity with the 17th – 18th century Enlightenment has itself hidden from our view a somewhat earlier, renaissance tradition of rational thought. This earlier stream of thought shared many of the intellectual commitments of the Enlightenment, but lived and expressed them in a much different way.

In his 1990 book, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Stephen Toulmin made the argument that some of the core insights of 16th century renaissance humanism were lost in the 17th century.⁵² Principal among these was the conviction that a consciousness of the limitations of human thought, and an acknowledgment that our own understandings of things will never be complete, are in no way incompatible with a lively, searching intellectual life. Thus, according to Toulmin, the renaissance humanist was very conscious of the richness and variety of human experience, understood that this diversity made itself felt in a diversity of intellectual perspectives, accepted the ambiguities and lack of closure that result from such an awareness, and displayed a relative lack of interest in the task of refuting other positions while one had the opportunity to sharpen and develop one's own.

Thus free from the intellectual burden of having to make universal or definitive claims, and being content for the time being with being able to make thoughtful, well-argued, and practical ones, the renaissance humanists saw interest and value in concrete, local, and rhetorical arguments, arguments which addressed the needs and concerns of particular contexts in a timely way.

However, Toulmin argues, as the political and economic context grew more uncertain, and religious conflicts more violent, 17th century thinkers began more and more to doubt the tolerant approach of their predecessors and to equate rational thought with a kind of overarching, provable, and universal set of claims which could be used to impose order and structure on a society whose stability was threatening to unravel.⁵³ In other words, the confidence in reason which we associate today with

⁵² Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). See especially pp 28-35.

⁵³ See the summary on pp 80-81.

modernity, and whose origins we trace to the Enlightenment, was itself to some extent an anxious reaction to the chaos and uncertainty of its own time. It was meant, above all, to have a steadying influence, and because it therefore privileged the articulation of general principles, timeless axioms, and universal insights, it had the effect of occluding those streams of renaissance thought which did not serve its constructive interests. Lost from view, at least for the time being, was the possibility that rationality might be thought of in non-systemic terms, or that the values of diversity and adaptability might be as valuable to the health of a society as those of stability and uniformity.⁵⁴

In a similar vein, and with a more specific focus on the history of biblical interpretation, George A. Lindbeck has argued that the 17th century was characterised by a search for ever-increasing hermeneutical certainty which ended by impoverishing Roman Catholic and Protestant interpreters alike.⁵⁵ This turn to certainty, according to Lindbeck, was in part a function of the increasing neglect of the narrative meaning of scripture which accompanied the rise of Enlightenment thought.⁵⁶ At the same time, however, Lindbeck also argues, not unlike Toulmin,⁵⁷ that this search for certainty also had its roots in the terrifying confessional conflict which characterised the period. Roman Catholic interpreters sought clarity and refuge in the magisterium,

⁵⁴ See p 183. A somewhat similar argument has been made by Ruth Whelan, whose specific focus of interest is epistemic change in 17th century French thought. Using the work of the Huguenot, Pierre Bayle, as her case study, she holds that “the postmodernist critique construes the discourse of modernity in such a way as to occult other practices of that discourse which are thereby in danger of disappearing from our cultural memory.” Ruth Whelan, “The excluded middle: epistemic mutations in late seventeenth-century French thought” (awaiting publication), pp 7-8.

⁵⁵ George A Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*. Ed. By James J Buckley. (London: SCM Press, 2002). See especially pp 208-211.

⁵⁶ By narrative meaning, Lindbeck refers to the offering of insight into the life of faith, the world in which faith is embodied, and the character of God through the plotted interaction of various characters. The classic treatment of the growing neglect of the narrative meaning of scripture from the 17th century onward is that of Hans W Frei, to whom Lindbeck acknowledges his debt. Hans W Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁵⁷ See above, p 34.

which on occasion paid as little attention to tradition as to scripture, while Protestant interpreters increasingly narrowed their scope by focusing on the right and duty of private interpretation, and on the claims of factual inerrancy and verbal inspiration.⁵⁸ Lindbeck's point, of course, is similar to that made by Toulmin. Faced with a context of confessional conflict, religious wars, and the violence of rivalry, interpreters of scripture sought a kind of certainty which drew on the more factual and empirical tendencies of emerging modern thought, simply because they were more suited to the perceived need for clarity and confidence among the faithful in chaotic times. And the unsurprising result was that available alternative expressions of rational thought, those emphasizing diversity, adaptability, and local intelligence, were effectively occluded.

(ii)

A Reachable Humanity

If one accepts the argument that the roots of what is known in Western thought as modernity are much less homogenous than has sometimes been claimed or thought, a wide range of implications inevitably follow as the notion of modernity is opened up for further reflection. Some of these implications touch on the area of what might be called theological anthropology, or more simply and specifically, on the question of how the attention of human beings can be caught or seized by someone or something which is outside us or hitherto unknown to us. How, in short, does someone break through what is familiar to us in order to get our attention?

⁵⁸ Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, p 210.

Drawing on Stephen Toulmin's work, William Placher has argued that part of the occluded wisdom of renaissance humanism was a kind of primary awareness of "the mystery, the wholly otherness of God, and the inadequacy of any human categories as applied to God."⁵⁹ This awareness implied, always, a kind of intelligent agnosticism, which was less a not-knowing than a rigorously dignified response to certain enduring mysteries or metaphysical questions in the face of which human categories routinely become inadequate or break apart. Consciousness of such human inadequacies was therefore in no way inconsistent with a fiery passion for further intellectual exploration. What we would now call the radical otherness or "transcendence"⁶⁰ of God, Placher argues, was not one quality among many others which could be attributed to God, but rather stood for the wider reality in which all thought took place, in which all faith and all agnosticism were held. It was only from the 17th century onward, as a certain version of modernity gained the upper hand, that the transcendence of God was reduced, in effect, to one of God's many attributes, capable of being catalogued by theologians, and was thus (and this explains the title of Placher's book) thoroughly domesticated. On the surface, this represented a change in our ways of speaking about God, but in fact, and much more crucially, this was a change in our models of human knowing.

The ongoing re-evaluation of what we mean by the term *modernity* continues to exercise a provocative influence across a range of disciplines, of course, in which similar insights and questions are being raised. One such discipline is that of feminist

⁵⁹ William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), p 6.

⁶⁰ Placher points out that the word "transcendence" was not in use in this sense in the 17th century, and although he has chosen it here because it best conveys his meaning in our own context, he acknowledges that it is an anachronism in the strict sense. See p 6. His argument is made in a fuller way in ch 7, pp 111-127.

theology. In a recent collection of essays,⁶¹ Susan Frank Parsons points out that one of the traits of modernity has been to re-frame all notions of transcendence as projections of human power, thus leaving us “bereft precisely of the vocabulary in which to speak of that which comes to us from beyond ourselves.”⁶² And, one may presume, also eventually bereft, once the words themselves are lost, of any conscious awareness of anything or anyone that comes to us unbidden, that intrudes upon us, that makes claims upon us, or that calls us into question. Such a state of affairs is sadly consistent, she also argues, with a late capitalist world of commodification and entitlement in which other people exist only in relation to my lifestyle, and the divine, thoroughly domesticated, is found only within. Surely in this context, Parsons contends, the real question is how such a construct might be shattered, how God might possibly get through to us, in spite of everything.⁶³

This is, of course, not simply a question about God, and here and there the language of intrusion has survived in other forms. Paul Ricoeur, for example, in reflecting on the power of language to do and to accomplish even as it is spoken, points out the way in which the making of an ordinary promise is in fact the setting up of a claim upon oneself which will come again to meet one, to address one by name and intrude upon one’s life, at some point in the future.⁶⁴ This claim remains operative into the future even though the circumstances of one’s life, along with one’s own desires, may well have changed in the meantime. In this sense, we can be caught up in and confronted even by our own words, if we speak them in the form of a promise

⁶¹ *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶² Susan Frank Parsons, “Feminist Theology as Dogmatic Theology”, in *Cambridge Companion*, pp 114-132. The quotation is from p 121.

⁶³ Parsons, “Feminist Theology . . .”, pp 127-132.

⁶⁴ Ricoeur spoke with Olivier Abel in a radio interview on *Présence protestante: “Le tragique et la promesse”*, 15 and 22 December 1991. The interview is quoted in *Réforme: Hebdomadaire protestant d’actualité*, 26 mai – 1 juin 2005, No 3129, p 8.

taken seriously, and thereby instruct them to come back upon us in new circumstances.

Or as another example, one could cite the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, with his focus on the face of the other person as the one undeniable reality which confronts me with the purest ethical imperative.⁶⁵ In either case, whether I am hearing the words of my own promise come back to me or seeing the face of the human being who stands before me, and apart from any specific reference to God, my life is intruded upon by what comes to me unbidden, making claims upon me, or calling me into question, or both. In both cases, we find traces of a language in which we can be spoken to by that which comes to us from beyond ourselves. And yet this language has been largely submerged in the dominant stream of modernity, with the result, as Parsons argues, that it is often lost to us completely.

Of course the language of intrusion has always been in evidence in Christian conversation on revelation, an area of reflection which addresses most obviously the question of how God becomes known to human persons, or how God gets through to us. And yet one of the effects of the dominant intellectual stream of modernity, positing as it does the rigorously logical and progressively expanding human search for knowledge, has been to relegate the concept of revelation to the sidelines. Here it can continue to serve, for some at least, as a useful container for those claims which people wish to make about the world and about God but which cannot, or cannot yet, be proven or derived by reason alone. For some, therefore, the scope of revelation, as the home of the irrational or inexplicable, has been shrinking for centuries. For others, the notion of revelation is confidently used to justify claims which, by their very

⁶⁵ See Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy", in Sean Hand, ed., *The Levinas Reader*, 1/5 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

presumed nature, can simply be affirmed, and do not need to be subject to disciplined or critical argument.

However, if the less dominant stream of modernity is brought to bear on the question of revelation, the stream in which the world and human life and God become more mysterious the more deeply they are known, the stream in which disciplined intellectual enquiry is exhilarating for the sense it provides of an ever-expanding landscape of exploration, then another picture begins to emerge. In this picture, revelation is no longer reduced to a container for the irrational or the not yet proven. It is more about the consequences of what it means to be human, to be able to be intruded upon by that which remains outside of us, to be able to be, from time to time at least, those to whom God gets through.

When this alternative aspect of modernity is brought to bear on the matter, privileging as it does the concrete, the local, the diverse, the adaptable, and yet also the wondrous in rational thought, revelation can be conceived in a somewhat different light. It is still, fundamentally, about the self-gift, the disclosure of the Other.⁶⁶ And insofar as this disclosure, and our struggle to comprehend what is disclosed, are ongoing, revelation assumes the continuing mystery of the Other, a mystery which cannot be fully possessed, and which therefore ensures that no matter how much is revealed, more remains hidden.

At the same time, however, revelation turns out to be as much a matter of theological anthropology, of what it is to be human before God, as it is about the Other who acts or speaks towards us from beyond ourselves. It is the claim that there

⁶⁶ On the themes of self-gift and disclosure, see Sandra M Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper Sand Francisco, 1991), pp 34-35, 44-46.

are some things, including things about ourselves, which we cannot know apart from the Other intruding upon us from outside. It suggests that one of the things it means to be human is to have an inner life some aspects of which are inaccessible to me apart from the respectful attention which is paid to me by the Other. This sense of being attended to, of being seen, but without envy, is in itself revelatory, both in the sense of revealing to me what I did not previously see or know and also in the sense of opening up before me the wider depths of the mystery in which I and the Other participate.⁶⁷

A hermeneutics of intrusion, therefore, has the potential not only to resonate with the continuing debate over the construction of modernity, but also to address some aspects of the continuing legacy of modernity's dominant construct, which has left us bereft, in the words of Susan Frank Parsons, "of the vocabulary in which to speak of that which comes to us from beyond ourselves."⁶⁸ It therefore allies itself with the theological claim that constitutive of our humanness is precisely a vulnerability to such intrusion. Such vulnerability is not at all the same thing as the claim to endlessly fluid, undefined boundaries which has characterised certain expressions of postmodernism, expressions which hide a world of unacknowledged power relations. It is rather an affirmation that the integrity of personhood is diminished whenever the possibility of being intruded upon in such a way, and thereby invited to engage in the hermeneutical realignments and transformations which are only available to us in the wake of the encounter, is denied.

⁶⁷ For a much fuller discussion of these themes, see Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), especially chapters 3 and 4. Williams is particularly eloquent in this connection on the idiom of the Christian icon: "The skill of looking at icons, the discipline of "reading" them, is indeed the strange skill of letting yourself be seen, be read" (p 185).

⁶⁸ See above, note 62.

(iii)

Resisting Idolatry: The Empowerment of the Ear

A third and final feature of the current landscape which has resonances with my own inquiries is the recent work which has been done, much of it by Jewish scholars, on the concept of idolatry.⁶⁹ Though the notion of idolatry has deep biblical roots, the word itself is not as widely used in contemporary Christian discourse as it might be, and to most Christian believers in the West it is probably experienced as anachronistic, mildly exotic, or both. At the same time, if there is such a thing as a popular understanding of idolatry, it has all the characteristics of a thoroughly modern, even totalising construct, in which the idolatrous Other is objectified and dehumanised, our rightness is grounded in the establishment of the fundamental wrongness of the Other, and our perspective is claimed as the only and obvious right one.

At the same time, however, contemporary explorations of idolatry are raising relevant questions both about the construction of modernity and about the reconfiguring of human understanding which is frequently, if often painfully, set in motion by that which is experienced as intrusive. Marc-Alain Ouaknin, in his book *Les Dix Commandements*, recalls that the Torah was given to the people of Israel as they travelled through the wilderness of Sinai at the mountain of Horeb. Ouaknin traces the etymology of the name, Horeb, to the Hebrew word, *h'arav*, meaning *destruction*, and wonders at the oddity of the association of the gift of the way of life, the gift of Torah, with such connotations of undoing. But of course the mountain of Horeb is

⁶⁹ See, for example, Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margolit, *Idolatry*, trans. by Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991); Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image: A Jewish View* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997); Stephen C. Barton, ed., *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2007); and Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Les Dix Commandements* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1999).

precisely the place in which the Other, the One who comes to the people from beyond themselves, intrudes upon their established, if precarious, patterns of life and gifts them with an alternative. The order embodied in what they know is broken apart and subjected to destruction, just as the name of the place suggests. The new order which is offered is thus order of a different kind, marking and structuring a new life together, to be sure, but forever linking the life which God intends for the people of Israel with a rupture of the familiar.⁷⁰

In a similar vein, Bernd Wannewetsch describes the naming of idolatry as a particular kind of discernment, a piercing judgment which suddenly illuminates and makes clear a truth about ourselves that we were previously, and in retrospect, inexplicably, unable to see.⁷¹ The power inherent in the act of naming something as idolatry is related to the fact that idols are deceptive by nature; ordinary perception and common sense tell us that something is self-evidently one thing, and then we are shocked to hear that it is actually something else. Or we see, simply and predictably, what we expect to see, and what does not accord with our expectations becomes invisible to us, invisible, that is, until the moment of judgment arrives, and we see the thing for what it really is. This discernment, Wannewetsch writes, “is like a flash in its revelatory force, an explosive moment which illuminates the scenery and casts into sharp relief our true character and the nature of our actions.”⁷²

Wannewetsch then takes his argument in another direction, proposing as the ultimate idolatry of late capitalist societies *the desire of desire*, the need to experience constantly stimulated levels of desire, ultimately unrelated to its objects, in order to

⁷⁰ Ouaknin, *Les Dix Commandements*, p 33.

⁷¹ Bernd Wannewetsch, “The Desire of Desire: Commandment and Idolatry in Late Capitalist Societies”, in Stephen C. Barton, ed., *Idolatry*, pp 315-330.

⁷² Wannewetsch, “The Desire of Desire”, p 316.

feel alive.⁷³ For my purposes, however, the importance of his characterisation of the discernment of idolatry as a kind of shocking and sudden illumination lies elsewhere. For it carries significant echoes of the classic biblical understanding that it is the eye, the visual, which leads to self-deception. We can fail utterly to “see” what is in front of us, until our perception is interrupted, intruded upon by a revelatory judgment which rearranges our vision and calls us to a conversion of the eye.⁷⁴

In that same biblical understanding, of course, idols have a physical, visual presence, and can for that reason be immediately compelling. Their downfall, however, is that they are utterly non-responsive, which enables the prophets to undermine their powerful visual presence with the use of ridicule. Psalm 115 provides a typical example:

*Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases.
Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk;
they make no sound in their throats.
Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them.*⁷⁵

The key claim here, of course, is that those who worship such idols are caught up in a deathly “assent to the present”⁷⁶, in contrast to those who worship the living God, and in so doing, assent to a life filled with the energy of becoming. And if this idolatry depends on the domination of the visual, then what best protects a community against idolatry’s deceptions is an empowerment of the ear,⁷⁷ and that vulnerability to the intrusive word which, as at Horeb, is both the destruction of the

⁷³ Wannewetsch, p 320.

⁷⁴ Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, pp 7-9.

⁷⁵ Psalm 115.3-8 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁷⁶ Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, p 135.

⁷⁷ The phrase is Kochan’s. Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, p 159.

familiar order, the assumed metanarrative, and the gift of a new way of living. And such empowerment of the ear will surely also entail the lively development and preservation of the language we need if we are to speak of that which comes to us from beyond ourselves, and of the hermeneutical impulse which echoes Sarah's laughter and which is thereby set in motion in our lives in its wake.

Chapter Two

Speaking of God in the Midst of Destruction:

The Interpretive Exhilaration of the Canon

In 1995, the annual Cheney Lecture at Yale Divinity School was given by Ann B. Ulanov,¹ then Professor of Psychiatry and Religion at Union Theological Seminary in New York. The title of her lecture was "Destructiveness and the Spiritual Life", and her argument, made on both theological and psychoanalytic grounds, was that only by including destructiveness in the spiritual life can that spiritual life survive.

She began by acknowledging that all human images of God are constructed, and that they are best understood as projections funded both by experience and by culture and tradition. As such, they are a human reflection of God's primary creativity, and are able to play a helpful role in a healthy spiritual life, until, that is, the day comes when their incompleteness, and thus their inadequacy, is revealed. This destruction of one's treasured images can be a gradual process, a kind of maturing, or it can come suddenly and painfully in the aftermath of personal or political upheaval, when, as Ulanov puts it, "the worst *does* happen". And then we are left to face the darkness with no functional or adequate images to guide us, our only landmark the gap between what we imagined to be true and what now is. Ulanov points here to the person of Job, whose image of the God of ethical monotheism is destroyed by events, but who has the courage not only to acknowledge but also to enter the gap between his own best understanding of God, and the living God who comes to him.

¹ The lecture was made available on cassette tape from the Student Book Supply, Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut.

And the God who meets Job in the gap, Ulanov continues, the God who comes to us from the other side of the destruction of our projections, is the God who makes all things new.² This is the God beyond projection who is destroyed neither by the harshness of life nor the violence of human image-shattering, and returns to shape the energy of our destructiveness into a fresh perceiving of that which is external to us, that which is Other. And it is precisely out of the energy of that imagining that a renewed spiritual life, one rooted in expectant gratitude and ethical responsiveness, is made possible.

A healthy spiritual life, therefore, carries a paradox at its heart. The more firmly grounded are our images of God, or of the way things are in the world, the more they are shattered in the presence of the living God. And out of the fragments of what has been destroyed, a deeper truth takes shape, one which is new, and yet one which would not have been possible without the shattering of what was once so profoundly valued and embraced. In this sense, then, destruction lies at the heart of a healthy spiritual life.

I begin here because it seems to me that Ulanov's image is a useful and suggestive one as we turn to an exploration of the inner hermeneutical dynamic of the scriptural canon. It is possible to argue that the same movement which Ulanov sees in the development of a healthy spiritual life, namely, one in which images of God are constructed, destroyed, and constructed again, finds parallels in the shaping of the writings known to Christians as the Old and New Testaments. In the shaping of the former, the promise of the land is destroyed by the Babylonian exile, not in the sense of being wrong so much as in the sense of being inadequate to events. Thus the

²Revelation 21.5.

shaping of the writings of the Old Testament over time reflected the painful construction of the deeper truth of the promise. In the shaping of the latter, the promise of the Coming One is destroyed, for Jesus' followers, by the crucifixion, and the shaping of the New Testament letters and gospels again represent a painful re-engagement with the deeper truth of that promise. And so just as Ulanov argues that the destruction of our God images finally reveals the reality and presence of the living God, so the promise, though human expectations of its fulfilment are shattered in various ways, nevertheless turns out to be true, because in that shattering its shape is reconstructed and deepened.

In a somewhat similar way, Walter Brueggemann argues that the "principle of reading as reuse" is central to the textual practice of the Old Testament.³ In the foreground of his argument is the widely held scholarly view that "the Old Testament in its final form is a product of and a response to the Babylonian exile".⁴ This view implies that older materials, or those which purport to be older, whether narrative, prophetic, legal, or liturgical in character, are presented to us as seen through the eyes of those who experienced the exilic crisis. Such material must be read as presented, but also as reshaped and reused by the exilic or postexilic community with its own set of particular and urgent concerns. This practice of reuse, or double reading, was of course later taken up by the Christian community as it sought to make sense of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in light of scripture.⁵

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 75.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 74.

⁵ For example, Richard Hays argues that the shocking reality of the situation in which the apostle Paul finds himself, namely, one in which Gentiles and Jews are found in one community, praising God together, "compels a new reading of Scripture that will account for what has taken place". Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 169.

It is important to point out that this practice of reading as reuse does not imply a progressive, positivistic development, in which a better reading or interpretation succeeds a less good one. It is rather that known texts are called upon and struggled with in new situations, such that they are able to articulate a fresh but often controversial or even counter-intuitive perspective on events. The practice and art of interpretation, therefore, actually requires the presence of contesting voices, as well as the willingness to negotiate among them. Such an understanding of interpretation has obvious implications for any living community of readers, but it is also, and fundamentally, embedded in the canon itself, as texts endlessly echo and quote one another, repositioning themselves in relation to one another, and constructing out of familiar materials readings which are often bold and surprising.

It will be the argument of this chapter, therefore, that to speak of the canon of scripture is to speak not only of a collection of texts and their contents, but also of an inner hermeneutical dynamic or restlessness to which a faithful reading must attend. In other words, the canon is authoritative for the Christian churches not only in terms of its being foundational literature, not only in its witness to diversity within unity, but also in its insistence on an ongoing, unsettling, and open-ended process of interpretation and dissent as a primary mode of faithful reading, even when scripture itself is apparently turned on its head as a result. And it is that process, that unsettled pattern of relationships, which should itself be understood to be canonical. Scripture offers us a diverse collection of texts, many of which themselves bear witness to the ongoing interpretive struggles of the believing community, remembering, partly remembering, using, misusing, and reusing all the texts and stories it claims as its own. And the very pattern and weave of these texts, as they visit and re-visit their defining stories, can help to teach us what the faithful reading of scripture might look like in our

own time. In a very real sense, then, the more true and life-giving our readings of scriptural texts, the more our best readings will sooner or later break apart in the presence of the living God in the world. And in a healthy discipline of faithful reading, our interpretations will be constructed, destroyed, and constructed again, full of the gift and the task of fresh perceiving.

Canon Formation and Canonical Interpretation

To begin with, however, the historical processes of canon formation, and the much more contemporary development of a canonical interpretive perspective associated with Brevard S. Childs, deserve brief but particular mention. Although I do not draw heavily on either in shaping my argument, they are both sufficiently important in the wider fields of biblical studies and theology to warrant attention, and both deserve acknowledgment here.

Canon Formation

The formation of what we know today as the Christian canon of scripture was the result of a series of historical developments. While the Greek roots of the English word "canon" denoted simply a generic standard or rule, something against which one could measure something else, the word had become associated with the Christian rule of faith by the second century, and later came to be used to designate the collection of writings that made up the Old and New Testaments. In contemporary European or North American parlance, if the word means anything at all to the general reader, it is often understood to refer, in a Christian context, to a collection of texts in which some kind of orthodoxy was enshrined by ecclesiastical authorities many

centuries ago, to the exclusion of other perhaps more varied and interesting writings, and in the interests of cohesion, uniformity, and control.

Whether one is inclined to see such an imagined historical process as having been useful, inspired, or coercive, it provides an account of a complex series of historical developments which is certainly too neat. Robert Alter has examined, from a literary studies perspective, the relationship between the 20th century concept of the secular literary canon, understood to consist of a list or collection of (Western) writings deemed to be of classic or enduring status, and the biblical canon. He argues that the development of the secular use of the term actually served to reinvigorate our understanding of the biblical canon and its complexity. This is so even though, or perhaps precisely because, the concept of a literary canon was and remains open to profound criticism on its own terms. Alter suggests that the lively debate concerning the existence and definition of the literary canon actually served to highlight "the ways in which cultures achieve internal coherence through a politics of exclusion"⁶, but at the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, helped to reveal a number of other factors, in addition to the ideological ones, which had helped to shape the literary canon, and by extension, the biblical one as well. It thus becomes difficult not to conclude, Alter argues, that the process of biblical canonical formation could never have been a "simple and assured phenomenon of enshrining doctrine in text"⁷, whether for reasons of internal coherence, institutional control, or anything else.

For those who are interested in the formation of the canon of scripture as a series of historical developments, with all the attendant ambiguity and complexity

⁶ Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 2.

⁷ Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity*, p. 4.

such a designation implies, there are a number of excellent studies available.⁸ For now, however, it is important to acknowledge this rich and conflictual heritage of canon formation, and to establish at the outset that awareness of it will serve to strengthen and inform the argument of this chapter as a whole.

Canonical Interpretation

A second area I wish to highlight briefly is the canonical interpretive methodology whose fullest development is most closely associated with the work of Brevard S. Childs.⁹ The core conviction undergirding this approach is that during the long historical process of transmission and development which led up to the final stages of the formation of the biblical canon, as texts were gathered and commented on, juxtaposed in fresh ways, repositioned within larger units or separated from the ones in which they had once been set, the theological witness of the text was always of paramount importance. In other words, traditions were received as being theologically authoritative, and the primary concern of the communities who passed them on was that these traditions should continue to function authoritatively. It therefore followed that the work of transmission was always and primarily a theological one, a shaping designed to ensure that the text would continue to address itself to future generations and lay an authoritative claim upon them.

⁸ For example: Harry Y Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); and Bruce M Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987)

⁹ See, for example, Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (London: SCM Press, 1992). A particularly appreciative and constructively critical assessment of Childs' work is made by Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) pp. 153-196.

Even in his more recent writings, Childs continues to argue that too often scholars still labour under a dated Enlightenment caricature of the relationship between biblical studies and theology, namely that the former is a critical historical and literary enterprise, while the latter is a speculative and possibly fideistic construct. In the face of such a caricature, Childs wishes to argue that the biblical text is by definition fundamentally theological in nature, precisely as a result of the canonical process highlighted above, and that its very theological content not only compels theological reflection but challenges every form of theological dogmatism.¹⁰ In other words, unlike George Aichele, for example, who argues from the perspective of postmodern semiotics that any canonical collection of texts functions simply as an imposed lens through which a meaningful way of seeing events and objects can be created,¹¹ Childs continues to insist on the inherent theological weight or pressure of the biblical text. This weight or pressure derives from the whole interpretive, canonical process which finally produced the Christian canon as we have it, the process by which an endless series of cumulative interpretive judgments bore down relentlessly on the text as it was handed on, and became in some very real sense sedimented into the structure of the text itself.

And yet while ultimately grounded in a historical process of canon formation in which communities are assumed to have shaped and transmitted texts in ways designed to ensure that they would be theologically compelling and authoritative to future generations of hearers, Childs' methodology ends by minimising the importance of historical context and particularity for theological reflection. Even if, along with Childs, one locates meaning within the text and acknowledges its formidably shaped

¹⁰ Brevard S. Childs, "Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* VI/1, pp. 16-19.

¹¹ George Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001) pp. 1-12.

theological weight, it remains the case that this very theological weight will surely bear down differently on hearers in different contexts. And it is thus hard to see how Childs' methodology is able to accommodate the continuing limitations and surprises of historical particularity, or indeed to what extent it is able to admit that the context of the hearer affects what is heard and how it is heard and how the weight of what is heard is registered. One fears, finally, that Childs has no way to prevent the theological weight of the text from bearing down even on the self-critical elements contained within it. And in the end, as I will suggest in chapter 4, the dominant voice does not always make the most faithful tradent.

And yet in some of his more recent reflections on the exegetical task, Childs does highlight the dialectical nature of the work of interpretation. If it must be affirmed, on the one hand, that the text is itself heavy with meaning, it must also be acknowledged, on the other hand, that any interpreter will come to the text weighed down with her own theological (and other) assumptions, and "the task of good exegesis is to penetrate so deeply into the text that even these assumptions are called into question, tested, and revised by the subject matter itself."¹² And although Childs does not say it, surely the corollary of this observation is that the subject matter, when returned to, will itself be judged differently, its insights differently weighted, even as it remains authoritative. Thus even though Childs is dismissive of the interpreter who "brings to bear on the text his or her own "construal" - whether individual or communal is hermeneutically irrelevant - by which to render an inert composition meaningful for someone"¹³, he nevertheless hints at the possibility of a canonical interpretive space which neither empties the text of its own weight of meaning nor

¹² Childs, "Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis", p.19.

¹³ Childs, p.16. The quotation marks are his.

denies the constructive power of the historically situated tradent or interpreter. And it is precisely the contours of the space opened up by such a possibility that this chapter now seeks to explore.

Canon as Paradox

If we ask how the function and place of the canon might be best understood in an ecumenical context, we need to continue to reflect for a moment on the historical development of the canon as a collection of texts. When reference is made to the historical development of the canon, the focus of interest is usually both chronological and political in nature. On the one hand, there is a concern for the order of events, and thus attention is often paid to the construction of a time-line, and to the appearance here and there of lists of texts clearly considered authoritative by certain groups in the early centuries of the Christian church. On the other hand, there is an awareness of all the divergent political forces which may have been at work in the development of the canon, the geographical differences in the expression of eucharistic faith and in church order which may have affected its formation, and not least, the historical nature of the concept of orthodoxy itself.

However, what is important is to see that there are at least two other aspects of the development of the canon as an historical document to which attention must be paid if we are to take seriously the inner hermeneutical dynamic of the canon itself in developing an ecumenical practice of faithful reading. The first of these aspects is the fundamental paradox at the heart of the biblical canon, a paradox which, as I intend to show, is intimately bound up with the historical nature of these texts.

Gerd Theissen has argued that the formation of the canon, though not completed until the fourth century, was the decisive event in the history of primitive Christianity in the second century. And although Theissen understands this historical development to indicate the increasingly consensual nature of primitive Christian faith, he also maintains that the main characteristic of this canon formation was its conscious affirmation of multiplicity.¹⁴ In particular, the four gospel canon was a revolutionary development, Theissen argues, as it had been common practice up until then for a given local community to have only one gospel, an oral and then eventually written message of good news which was considered a sufficient basis for its own faith and practice.¹⁵

In the same vein, it is important to point out that the Christian canon contains, by deliberate decision, the synagogue Bible, which constituted the earliest sacred scriptures of the Christian church. This conscious embrace of the writings later known to Christians as the Old Testament was significant on two counts. Not only did it affirm that these texts are necessary and irreplaceable for Christian self-understanding and identity, it also publicly identified the Christian church with a text whose meanings were under negotiation. This apparent embrace of interpretive risk and diversity was then mirrored in the formation of the New Testament, not only in the sense outlined by Theissen, but also in the nature of the writings themselves. In his characteristically provocative style, Leander Keck suggests that "what the church canonized as the New Testament was a series of twenty-seven minority reports".¹⁶ That is to say, the

¹⁴ Gerd Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*, trans. by John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1999), p.250.

¹⁵ Theissen, pp. 264, 267.

¹⁶ Leander E. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p.90.

writings of the New Testament represent in many ways a series of fundamental critiques of the way in which churches were already preaching and embodying the gospel, critiques which themselves claimed to be rooted in the tradition. In this sense, and notwithstanding the undoubted encouragement which the reading of an epistle or gospel must often and readily have provided to a small local church, it remains true that such local churches may have also, at least from time to time, had good reason to greet one of the documents which would later become part of the New Testament with less than full enthusiasm.

Here, then, is the fundamental paradox. The first Christian centuries were characterized, perhaps above all else, by a thoroughgoing diversity which must have been as stimulating as it was at times unsettling.¹⁷ So much so, in fact, that the polyphonic nature of early Christianity was at least to some extent recognized and embraced in the process of canon formation. And yet it is undeniable that the very process of canon formation was itself, at least in part, a response to the more uncontrollable side of this same diversity. In the struggle to shape orthodoxy, theological disputes were about many things, but one of the things they were about was authority, and one of the things canon formation was about was recognizing the authority of certain writings such that they might usefully arbitrate between competing claims. The argument is made strongly by Bart Ehrman: "The rise of the Christian canon thus represents one of the weapons of the orthodox arsenal, used to establish the orthodox version of Christianity to the exclusion of all competing views."¹⁸

¹⁷ As we have seen, Ernst Käsemann was one of the scholars particularly credited with drawing the attention of the ecumenical movement to the extraordinary diversity present in the early church. See Ernst Käsemann, "Unity and Diversity in New Testament Ecclesiology." *Novum Testamentum* 6 (1963).

¹⁸ Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 20.

The paradox continues, however, because this is not the end of the story. Once a text is established as orthodox in some sense, whether by coercion or non-controversial consensus, the problems of interpretation replace those of orthodoxy, and internal Christian conversation centers on what a text means rather than on whether or not it should be understood as authoritative. And those who consider their position to be the orthodox one still have a case to make. This results in at least three separate but related developments. First, there is the emergence of what Ehrman calls orthodox polemics, that is, a set of rhetorical practices which support an understanding of the orthodox reading as the most clear and coherent one, the one which is most ancient, has no internal contradictions, and in its embrace, leads to a morally upright and compelling life.¹⁹

Second, the articulation of the orthodox position comes to be increasingly defined by its perceived opposition. So, for example, the humanity of Christ is emphasized not only or even necessarily because it is (rightly) seen to be important in itself, but because there happen to be those within the wider community who are vocally proposing a much more docetic understanding of Christ's being.²⁰ And finally, as texts come to be understood as authoritative bearers of tradition within a polemical context, manuscripts are sometimes modified, either to make them less susceptible to an alternative reading, or simply to make them say more clearly and more emphatically what they were already understood to mean.²¹ Ehrman can thus refer to the "orthodox corruption" of scripture, both as the process by which actual scribal alterations took place, and as an acknowledgment that every reading is an

¹⁹ Ehrman, pp.15-17.

²⁰ The extent to which this same pattern has been evident in the ecumenical movement is uncanny. Too many agendas have been defined by what was understood or expected to be most controversial or divisive, rather than on what was seen to be most important.

²¹ Ehrman, pp. xii, 3-4, 25.

interpretation, a kind of rewriting in our own words which is shockingly analogous to a material, scribal alteration.²²

And so we return again to the paradox at the heart of the canon. On the one hand, there is its exclusive, determining aspect, orthodox in the eyes of those for whom it is authoritative, fixed, and wedded to clear boundaries. In this aspect, of course, the canon has often been allied with social and political power. And yet on the other hand, the very certainty and clarity of this understanding of the canon inevitably give rise to something else, to an equally strong subversive dynamic, rooted in the possibility of variant interpretations and nurtured precisely by the fixity of the text. Once the historical formation of the canon has more or less come to an end, the contexts in which its various writings were completed become more and more distant, at least in chronological time. At one level, the text may no longer appear to speak directly to current issues or questions, but at another level, it must so speak, because it has become authoritative. And thus it is that the very process of canon formation endows the canonical writings with greater depth and richness, and transforms them into a bottomless well of interpretive possibilities through which guidance and insight may be sought by later generations.

Moshe Halbertal underlines this point when he concludes that although canonization is in itself a restrictive impulse, an act of boundary-making and exclusion, it results in hermeneutical openness, flexibility, and accommodation for precisely the reasons outlined above. Halbertal can thus conclude that there is "an interesting asymmetrical relation between canonization and hermeneutical openness. The more canonized the text, the broader interpretative possibilities it offers."²³ And this, then,

²² Ehrman, p. 31.

²³ Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 44.

is the core of the paradox. In a certain sense, the historical process through which the canon takes shape, and the way in which the fixed canon operates within the community, both tend toward exclusion, fixity, closure and control. And yet in another sense, such a canonical impulse is bound to fail, for it embodies within itself those very forces which will necessarily lead to a fresh and shocking interpretive boldness. The very bounded plurality of canonized voices, and the inevitable passage of time into new seasons of hermeneutical desire and longing, will finally issue not in stability but in a kind of interpretive abundance, a canon which is in a deep imaginative sense not closed but furiously, dizzyingly open.

The Return of Scripture

As we examine more fully the implications of such a paradox at the heart of our understanding of the canon, we need to focus on the second crucial aspect of the development of the canon as an historical document, if we wish to take seriously the inner hermeneutical dynamic of the canon itself in developing an ecumenical practice of faithful reading. This second aspect relates to the evidence, found within the canonical scriptural texts themselves, of a rich practice of the interpretation of scripture by scripture itself, that is, the imaginative recontextualisation of key narratives, images, and memories in fresh and often surprising ways.

James A. Sanders has used the term "relecture" to refer to the resignification of key texts for the believing community in a later time and another place.²⁴ Walter Brueggemann, as we have seen, speaks of the "principle of reading as reuse",

²⁴ James A. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text: Canon as Paradigm* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 171-172.

grounded in the paradigmatic reshaping experience of the exile.²⁵ In both cases, texts are relentlessly and endlessly read in relationship to other texts, in a kind of rich interweaving which ceaselessly brings familiar aspects of both into the light of a fresh perspective. In part, of course, such a practice simply reflects the fact that a stable text read in a new context will invariably be heard differently, even where the echoes of its former meanings remain strong. Every individual reader and every reading community stands within a set of interpretive traditions which will shape and guide its readings. And it is also true that such a practice of attention to texts in relation to other texts justifies the wry insight of Nicholas Lash that the one thing that attempts to preserve the past cannot do is in fact to succeed in preserving the past, that once you try not to change something in the interests of preservation, you have not only changed it, you have also made it mean something quite different from what you originally understood it to mean.²⁶

Once these things are acknowledged, however, the question does arise as to how we can speak of the inner hermeneutical dynamic of the canon as being in itself instructive for the practice of reading, without falling into a kind of biblicism which suggests that the text simply means what it says. And I think it is precisely on historical critical grounds that one can argue for such an instructive relationship between text and readers, as it is critical study which has illumined the extent to which the texts and the arrangement of texts within the canon offer diverse models, patterns, and guidelines for ongoing interpretation. Or to put in another way, the canon is instructive not only in relation to what it includes (or excludes), but also in relation to how it works, to the way in which texts throw light on one another.

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 75.

²⁶ Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), p. 54.

These inner interpretive dynamics are many and varied, but it will be helpful here to look briefly at several which are representative. I have chosen these examples, in particular, because they testify to some of the more fruitful results of historical critical scholarship, and I focus on examples from the Old Testament simply because the re-use of scripture in the New Testament is much more obvious and easier to see.

I turn first to Paul D. Hanson's exploration of a section of Exodus sometimes referred to as the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20.22 - 23.33), in which he outlines the likely historical sources for the diverse traditions contained within the section and asks about the significance of their juxtaposition.²⁷ Hanson's argument, briefly, is as follows. Historical critical study of the text makes it clear that different sections of the material have different origins, and that they express, among other things, different ethical positions and assumptions. Some sections appear to reflect prevailing cultural practices, while others are notable for their particular ethical concern for the vulnerable. In the face of these critical observations, several responses are possible. One might, for example, from a history of religions perspective, simply conclude that the Book of the Covenant represents an infelicitous and somewhat crude attempt to combine diverse traditions. Alternatively, from a perspective shaped by the biblical theology movement, one might seek some way to harmonise its various perspectives within a larger framework of some kind.²⁸

Hanson, however, suggests another approach. He argues that the theological centre of this section is the experience of deliverance from bondage, "the confession of the only true God who delivered an enslaved people from oppression to communal

²⁷ Paul D. Hanson, "The Theological Significance of Contradiction within the Book of the Covenant", in *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology*, ed. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 110-131.

²⁸ Hanson, pp. 115-118.

life in covenant with [God]."²⁹ Since this confession constitutes the theological core, the diverse material which forms part of the section has been deliberately gathered and arranged around the confessional material, and yet the effect of this arrangement is not simply to signal the importance of the core tradition. According to Hanson, the effect is much more profound. What happens in fact is that the literary shape of the edited material turns out to have ethical consequences, as conventional cultural practices are drawn into closer proximity to the confessional material and, thus re-situated, become vulnerable to being redrawn in its light.

This process, of course, does not happen smoothly; some inherited cultural practices are significantly transformed, and others not, or not yet. But Hanson's point is that evidence of these cultural practices is deliberately allowed to stand in the text, not because the redactors do not see the internal contradictions which result, but precisely because they do. The decision is made quite consciously to include them, in order to produce the tension which results from their being in direct contact with the core confessional material. In including them, the redactors express the hope that the tension thus produced will itself result in a redrawing of Israel's ethical practices which more closely reflects the humane, liberating, and sustaining dynamic of the deliverance from bondage which is celebrated in Israel's core theological affirmations.³⁰

Israel's core confession is therefore not primarily a celebration of past events, but a resource for a maturing ethical consciousness in the present. There is no attempt to blunt the contradictions inherent in the community's life, and no attempt either at an inclusive synthesis. On the contrary, these contradictions become "clues

²⁹ Hanson, p. 121.

³⁰ Hanson, pp. 120-126.

to the restless nature of a divine word which attacks oppression and inhumanity ever anew, even when expressions of that oppression and inhumanity remain embedded in the scriptural vehicles which have carried that word from its ancient origins on into the 'latter times'."³¹ The result is that none of Israel's sacred traditions is impermeable to the searching power of this word, and that faithfulness to those traditions as they are written down requires a willingness to refuse to set them in stone but instead to submit them to the transforming dynamic which is now inseparable from scripture itself.³²

A second exploration of the interpretation of scripture by scripture itself is found in the work of Gerald T. Sheppard, who examines the use of wisdom literature as a hermeneutical framework for the interpretation of the Torah and the prophetic traditions.³³ Sheppard focuses his work on the apocryphal or deuterocanonical books of Sirach and Baruch, and he begins by highlighting selected passages which contain clear echoes of older, non-wisdom texts. He then compares the older text as it functions in its original setting with the newer, wisdom writings, paying special attention to the way in which the older text is made to function in its new setting.³⁴ The conclusion of this comparative study, as Sheppard demonstrates, is to show how contemporary wisdom traditions provide a new intellectual framework for the reading of Torah, which is obviously understood by its readers to be normative in some significant sense but also in need of interpretive recasting. The practical consequences of the use of this new framework are twofold. On the one hand, the authority of the Torah is itself enhanced, as it is seen to be a source of continuing wisdom and guidance

³¹ Hanson, p. 127.

³² Hanson, p. 128-131.

³³ Gerald T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct: A Study in the Sapientializing of the Old Testament* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1980).

³⁴ Sheppard, p. 17.

for Israel. And on the other hand, the new wisdom traditions acquire an intellectual credibility which is in part grounded in their ability to interpret Torah so helpfully in the present.³⁵

Here again the role of scripture in interpreting scripture comes to the fore, not in a superficial way but in a way which is both complex and intellectually demanding. In a new and radically changed post-exilic hermeneutical context, the authority of Torah is seen to be dependent, in part, on the availability of a fresh interpretive construct being brought to bear upon it. This fresh construct continues to accord canonical status to the Torah, while unapologetically bringing contemporary resonances to bear on its reading. And once again, the whole process, encompassing both the vulnerability and the supple strength of Israel's most sacred traditions and insights, is embedded in scripture itself, canonized, one might say, as part of an effort to ensure that the canonical material itself will not, by virtue of having become normative, lose its transforming power.

A third and extremely suggestive attempt to explore the inner hermeneutical dynamic of the canonical writings is found in the work of James A. Sanders.³⁶ Sanders maintains that the defining characteristic of canonical material is its proven adaptability, that is, its capacity, when repeated in new generations or contexts, to continue to engage the listening community in useful reflection on its own identity. This remains true even and especially when the situation in which the community finds itself constitutes a challenge to its own most cherished assumptions.³⁷

³⁵ Sheppard, pp. 116-119.

³⁶ See Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text: Canon as Paradigm*; and James A. Sanders, "Hermeneutics in True and False Prophecy", in *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology*, ed. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long, pp. 21-41.

³⁷ The notion of adaptability is explored most fully in Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, pp. 9-39.

However, the question immediately raised by this notion of adaptability is a hermeneutical one. How precisely does it happen that authoritative texts and traditions are enabled to speak to new situations? The problem with using adaptability on its own as a canonical criterion is that it begs the ethical question inherent in its use, namely by whom the text can be submitted to adaptation, and in whose interests. Sanders himself poses a form of this question in relation to the problem of true and false prophecy in the Old Testament, and asks how we are to understand the presence and words of both true and false prophets in the canonical writings. How are we to make sense of conflicting prophetic positions, both of which ground their pronouncements in common antecedent traditions (and thus assume their adaptability) but end by announcing very different messages?³⁸ Sanders argues that canonical material, by definition, is material which was "picked up again and again, generation after generation, and found of value",³⁹ and yet he also clearly acknowledges that the same tradition or image can enable insight in one situation while hindering it, or even enabling self-deception, in another.⁴⁰

Sanders responds to these concerns, in part, by addressing more closely the question of true and false prophecy, and of what distinguishes the two in practice. He argues that the true prophets are eventually recognized as such not so much because they are vindicated by events, but because in times of upheaval and destruction of the familiar they are seen to have offered an understanding of God's presence and action which enabled the community to ground itself in some continuing, though shockingly

³⁸ See, for example, I Kings 22.1-36 for a narrative illustration of this phenomenon.

³⁹ Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, p. 83.

⁴⁰ The example given is that of the promise to Abram/Abraham of the land and of many descendants, first articulated in Genesis 12.1-2. In Isaiah 51.2, this promise is recalled in the context of a prophetic reassurance that God can bring God's redemptive promises to fulfillment even when the people are few in number and the promise is contrary to the available evidence. However, in Ezekiel 33.24, the prophet confronts survivors of the exile who, having remained in Judah, wrongly (in Ezekiel's view) hold up the

transformed, sense of its own identity. Such a contested understanding is bound to be uncomfortable and threatening at first, and so it is frequently rejected outright, but over time it turns out to be durable even though it remains shocking, for it offers a way of speaking of God in the midst of devastation.⁴¹

And yet there is still an ethical problem lodged at the heart of this understanding of true prophecy. For if it instils in the community a sense, even a confidence, that God's redemptive presence will be known also in the midst of devastation, it remains to be asked how such a theological affirmation, even if true, can be kept from deteriorating into a kind of sectarianism. A conviction of this kind, that God will be there for us in all circumstances, is pre-eminently adaptable, but it is perhaps also a conviction that can only be maintained, at least in its most unsophisticated form, at the expense of others.

Sanders offers at least two possible ways of addressing this difficulty, and the first has specifically to do with the reuse of texts. It bears repeating, I think, that when Sanders refers to canonical texts as those which have been "picked up again and again, generation after generation, and found of value", he begs a whole host of questions which have to do with *how* such texts are reused and reinterpreted, and by *whom*.⁴² And yet at the same time his claim does assume that canonical texts enshrine a certain healthy hermeneutical open-endedness which is ultimately capable of calling into question both easy and self-serving interpretations, and much more self-critical ones alike. It is as if each biblical text is always anticipating its next interpretive context, and therefore can never be settled or complete in its meaning. And this

promise to Abraham as a way of claiming their right to the land in preference to those who were taken away to Babylon.

⁴¹ Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, pp. 25-29.

⁴² Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, p. 83.

means that even true prophecy must be taken up again and again, as if those who hear it can never be quite certain that they have fully understood.

At the same time, this constant process of recontextualisation is mirrored, in Sanders' view, by what he understands to be the core interpretive paradigm within the Old Testament itself, that is, the ongoing work of "monotheizing", an endless interpretive return to the integrity of God, to God's ontological and ethical oneness.⁴³ To monotheize, in Sanders' understanding, is not only to affirm the oneness of God but also to affirm that there is no part of creation which is outside of God's reach, and thus, crucially, that God is the God of all peoples. Once this core hermeneutical movement is brought into play, the difference between true and false prophecy becomes clear. Both true and false prophets recognise the Mosaic and Davidic traditions as authoritative, and both draw on their insights to affirm God as sustainer and redeemer. The true prophets set themselves apart, however, by their continuing emphasis on the fact that God is also the creator of all the peoples of the earth, and thus radically free with regard to all. True prophecy is thus true because it has submitted itself to and been reshaped by this monotheizing paradigm, and because it now embodies as a result the awareness that God is not only our God but also the God of the enemy, and it is this last admission that the false prophet finally cannot make. By implication, then, every attempt to domesticate God, or to locate any disturbing or alien part of human experience outside of the encompassing of God's integrity, leads to a false hermeneutic, while every movement to monotheize, whether it takes the form of comfort or challenge, bears witness to a hermeneutic of truthfulness.⁴⁴ The

⁴³ The concept of "monotheizing" is a recurring theme in Sanders' work and is discussed in various contexts; see for example Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, pp. 1-8; pp. 186-190; and Sanders, "Hermeneutics in True and False Prophecy", pp. 37-41.

⁴⁴ Sanders, "Hermeneutics in True and False Prophecy", pp. 37-41.

monotheizing paradigm, in Sanders' words, implies no guarantee "that the Babylonians will fail to breach the walls, none whatever", but it does mean that nothing we or they can do puts us or them outside of God's reach.⁴⁵

In short, then, Sanders too is tracing for us an outline of yet another inner hermeneutical dynamic which he finds operative in the canonical writings of the Old Testament. For him, the monotheizing paradigm provides a ceaseless recontextualisation of all readings and interpretations of the canonical material in light of the sovereign freedom of God as creator of the universe and of all its peoples. And in so doing it both honours the text's endless capacity for adaptability, and holds that capacity within a necessary ethical boundary. What is important, once again, is not only what the text says, but what it does and how it works, the inner interpretive process to which it bears witness. And what is canonical is not simply the written text, but the process itself by which the text records its own reinterpretations, and signals to the reader the integrity and inseparability of the two.⁴⁶

As a final illustration of the richness of the inner interpretive dynamic of the canon, I now turn to the New Testament and to the work of Richard B. Hays on the apostle Paul's use of scripture in his letters.⁴⁷ Hays' explorations are rich and detailed, and I will highlight here only certain aspects of his argument. Most fundamentally, Hays underlines the fact that Paul is himself grounded in a tradition of reading and interpretation which assumes that scripture speaks to the living and must therefore be heard and responded to in each new generation and context.⁴⁸ A classic text in this regard is Deuteronomy 5:3: "Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant,

⁴⁵ Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, p. 190.

⁴⁶ Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, p. 65.

⁴⁷ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁴⁸ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, p. 167.

but with us, who are all of us here alive today."⁴⁹ Therefore, although particular words of scripture may be grounded in a defining historical moment, they nevertheless address themselves to those who hear them in the present. Paul acknowledges this hermeneutical principle in his own writings, for example in the letter to the Romans: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."⁵⁰

This interpretive principle is particularly important to the apostle, as he understands himself and his communities to stand within a context of breathtaking freedom, freedom which is rooted in the new thing God has done in Jesus Christ. It is Paul's conviction that in Christ the righteousness of God has been shown forth, and has issued in the radical restructuring of relationships within the eschatological reality to which Paul now understands himself and his communities to belong. There is thus now every theological reason to believe that scripture must always mean more than it says, for the promises of God in scripture have been shown to be both utterly reliable and subject to radical reconfiguration in Christ. It follows, therefore, and as Hays argues, that Paul's interpretations of scripture are imaginative, allusive, and evocative in nature, rather than seeking for tight correlations between events.⁵¹ An image drawn from scripture, such as that of the new creation, functions not as a constraint on the readers' understanding of the present but more as a door flung open to a whole range of possible fresh insights into the unrepeatable times in which they live.⁵²

⁴⁹ All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Copyright by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

⁵⁰ Romans 15.4.

⁵¹ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, p. 155.

⁵² Hays, *Echoes*, p. 159. See references to the new creation in Isaiah 65.17-25 and Galatians 6.15, for example.

Finally, and in keeping with his conviction of the utter trustworthiness of the God of the covenant, Paul reads scripture as a narrative of promise, always tending toward its own fulfillment.⁵³ It is the character of God, therefore, and not any form of human orthodoxy, which provides continuity to the narrative. The narrative is an open-ended one, as God's promises have not reached their final consummation, but it is also firmly grounded in the wholly unexpected new facts on the ground, one of which is the presence in one believing and praising community of both Jew and Gentile. For Paul, then, any faithful reading will have to take account of this transformation, and will be grounded in the embodied reconciliation which it represents.⁵⁴

Even on the basis of this brief overview of Paul's use and interpretation of scripture in his own letters as analysed by Hays, it is remarkable to observe the extent to which Paul appears repeatedly to be drawing on some of the hermeneutical patterns of the Old Testament as we have already seen them elaborated by scholars such as Hanson, Sheppard, and Sanders. Hanson, for example, and as we saw, details the way in which much of the cultural material that forms part of the thick description of the biblical community is brought into contact, through a deliberate process of redaction, with the core confession of the community, that of deliverance from bondage into freedom. The result of this close contact is that the ethical assumptions of the cultural material begin to be reshaped in light of that defining experience of liberation, and fresh ethical norms and demands, though not yet fully realized or embodied, are lodged within the community's ongoing patterns of life. In a similar way, the apostle Paul deliberately brings a whole set of scriptural meaning and

⁵³ Hays, *Echoes*, p. 157.

⁵⁴ Hays, *Echoes*, pp.168-69.

assumptions into the presence of the core confession of the new community, that Jesus is Lord, and sets in motion a process by which these meanings and assumptions are deepened and recast in the light of this confession. In Paul's letters, as in the scriptural texts on which he draws, evidence abounds that this process of embracing new ethical insight is incomplete, and even at times undermined by those who purport to defend it. But the process remains visible, and relentless.

Or again, we have seen how Sheppard argues that in a radically changed post-exilic situation, wisdom literature provided a fresh intellectual framework through which a contemporary reading of the Torah might be structured. It is possible to argue, I think, that in the apostle Paul's radically changed situation, it is the narrative of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection which offers a new interpretive framework in light of which a reconstructed understanding of God's covenant faithfulness can emerge. The parallel, of course, is not exact, but the same interpretive claim is being made, namely, that new and radically changed contexts invite and may require bold new hermeneutical constructs, grounded in the freshness and immediacy of contemporary religious insight or claims, for the reading of scripture.

And finally, we have also seen the way in which Sanders discerns in scripture an ongoing process of monotheizing, of recontextualizing all theological reflection in light of the necessary affirmation that God is the creator of the world and all its peoples, and is therefore God not only of the self-proclaimed elect but also of the so-called enemy. This monotheizing process, in his view, undergirds the equally characteristic adaptability of scripture to new settings, and in doing so provides an ethical grounding and orientation to the affirmation that God is present to Israel as redeemer and sustainer even in situations of devastation and confusion. In a similar way, it can be argued, the apostle Paul embraces this core interpretive paradigm of monotheizing in

his letters, as he struggles to elaborate for his communities the ethical implications, for those who are in Christ, of the twin realities of God's faithfulness to the people of Israel, embodied in Jesus Christ, and the inclusion of the Gentiles in the covenant.

The Living God Among the Fragments

What we are able to conclude from the above overview, then, is that there is everywhere evident in the canonical writings a varied and lively tradition of the reuse and reinterpretation of scripture within scripture itself, an inner hermeneutical dynamic which is as much a part of the canon, and as functionally authoritative for the believing community, as the content of the writings themselves. The diverse expressions of this dynamic do adhere to a common underlying conviction regarding the authoritative nature of the texts under consideration, but what confirms their authoritative nature turns out to be, in part, their availability for reuse. The patterns of their reuse turn out to be diverse and inventive, with the result that they are sometimes internally contested and do not always sit with one another easily. Together, however, they construct and hold open the possibility that any one of a wide number and variety of interpretive practices can be said to be canonical, that is, to be modelled on patterns found within scripture itself.

The canon, therefore, makes scripture's own internal interpretive dynamic of return and reuse both visible and necessary for the community which holds these writings to be authoritative. And somewhat ironically, the canon also enshrines the conviction that for all their historic irreplaceability, these texts do not represent some kind of codification of the past, but an embodiment of the expectation of fresh insight in each new and unanticipated context in which they are heard. And yet there is more to it even than this. For if we return to Ulanov's argument regarding the link between

destructiveness and the spiritual life, the canon also seems to be making this claim: that there is something inherent in biblical truth that is never finally expressed, that is never fully grasped, and that is shattered in any case by the presence of the living God. In these texts and in their hearing, the gift of a truer eye is always ineluctably linked to the breaking apart of our constructs and projections in the face of the real, in the face of the God or the life which does not conform to their shape. And it is out of the resulting devastation, or confusion, or sense of the text's inadequacy that the possibility of a new seeing arises, a fresh perceiving which is supple, healing, and yet true enough to remain itself vulnerable to the relentless presence of the living God.

There is of course a biblical narrative about the loss and rediscovery of scripture, its long disuse and unexpected reappearance, its authorized prophetic reinterpretation and its public re-reading. I turn to it now, as it offers a dramatic way of contextualising the argument I am making. This narrative, which takes place during the reign of the Judean king, Josiah, is found in II Kings 22.1-23.3,⁵⁵ and while the story in its canonical form contains no internal references to specific texts, the episode as a whole brings into focus a number of important insights.

Josiah reigned in Judah from ca. 640 - 609 BCE, and an account of his kingship may have been written during or immediately after his reign, only to be revised at a later stage, possibly during the exile. In any event, however, this narrative now reflects the wider theological preoccupations of the Deuteronomistic historian, including in particular a concern for the worship of the Lord alone in the place that "the Lord your God will choose".⁵⁶ And indeed, the events of this story are set in motion by Josiah's fidelity to the ongoing project of the maintenance of the Jerusalem

⁵⁵ See also II Chronicles 34.1-33.

⁵⁶ Deuteronomy 12.5

temple,⁵⁷ which involved among other things ensuring that the skilled workers who carried out the repairs were properly paid from temple funds. The king's secretary and the high priest were given joint financial oversight of these important transactions, and this particular narrative is set in motion when Shaphan, the king's secretary, is sent to Hilkiah, the high priest, to arrange for the latest round of payments.

However, as soon as Shaphan reaches Hilkiah, the high priest informs him that "I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord."⁵⁸ He gives the book to Shaphan, who reads it. Without comment, Shaphan returns to the king, and reports that the financial transactions have been completed and are in order. The implication is that the secretary, temporarily rendered speechless by the significance and import of the finding, responds as a well-trained civil servant and almost automatically completes the task at hand to the expected standard before returning promptly to the king and informing him of this significant development.

When Shaphan reaches the king, however, he defers to the king's judgment by simply announcing to him: "The priest Hilkiah has given me a book."⁵⁹ Shaphan then proceeds to read the book aloud to the king, thus underlining the spoken, prophetic character of the event, and in keeping with the terrible significance of the finding, the king's response could hardly be more dramatic. He tears his clothes with distress, and immediately sends Shaphan and Hilkiah together, along with several others, to "inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found," for the king has already heard in the reading of the

⁵⁷ See II Kings 12.1-16.

⁵⁸ II Kings 22.8. In 23.2, the scroll is referred to as "the book of the covenant". It is widely assumed to have consisted of an early version of part or all of the present book of Deuteronomy.

⁵⁹ II Kings 22.10.

book a litany of disobedience stretching back for generations, and now bearing down with judgment upon his own.⁶⁰

Here the narrative takes another shocking turn, as five powerful men of the court and temple go and seek the interpretive wisdom of Huldah, a woman and a prophet, as a result of the king's request. Apart from this story, Huldah is not mentioned anywhere else in the Old or New Testaments, but in this carefully constructed narrative her stature as a prophet is reinforced immediately as she begins to speak. Not only does she make use of the prophetic formula, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel," she then refers to the king of Judah simply as "the man who sent you to me."⁶¹ She reinforces an ominous sense of the disastrous consequences which are now set to ensue from Judah's failure to worship the Lord alone, and in referring to the king simply as "the man who sent you to me" she also recognises his embedded complicity in the inherited disobedience of the community. At the same time, however, she acknowledges the moral leadership he has exercised even in his distress, and in a sense, elicits a continuing moral witness from him as she names him a second time, and this time accords him his title, king of Judah.⁶²

This mark of respect, however, is bittersweet, for Huldah proceeds both to acknowledge the king's genuine anguish and remorse, and to insist that although Josiah will not see the worst of the destruction to come, it cannot now be averted. Somewhat surprisingly, Josiah responds to the prophetic message with energy and moral resolve, gathering the whole community together, both leaders and people, at the house of the Lord, reading the book of the covenant aloud in their hearing, leading the people in the making of a covenant in accordance with what they have heard, and

⁶⁰ II Kings 22.11-13.

⁶¹ II Kings 22.15.

⁶² II Kings 22.18.

inaugurating a set of wide-ranging religious reforms. The narrative goes on to describe these in great detail, and finally, to report how Josiah was eventually killed in an unrelated battle. Huldah's prophetic witness is thus confirmed, as Josiah does not live to see the destruction of Jerusalem.

Such a short synopsis cannot do the narrative justice, but it does provide a basis on which to make several observations, both with regard to the inner interpretive complexity of scripture and with regard to practices of faithful reading. First, it is important to note that the finding of the scroll of the covenant represents the recovery of Israel's best knowledge and understanding of God, or in the language of Ulanov, Israel's best images of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And it is precisely this knowledge and this understanding, with all their depth, richness, and validity, which form the basis of the programme of reforms subsequently instigated by Josiah. It is worth noting, too, that the reforms are significant, and were later recalled as having extended well beyond the area of cultic and liturgical practices to that of social justice. The prophet Jeremiah, addressing Josiah's son Jehoiakim some time after Josiah's death, berates Jehoiakim for his economic oppression of the poor and contrasts his behaviour with that of his late father, whose doing of justice with regard to the poor is strikingly equated with knowledge of God.⁶³

Second, however, the recovery and reinstatement of Israel's best knowledge and understanding of God in the form of "the book", while absolutely necessary for the continuing life of the community, does not avert the eventual destruction of Jerusalem. This knowledge and insight is in no sense discredited, indeed quite the reverse. And yet, once the scroll of the covenant is found, it cannot be reclaimed and

⁶³ See Jeremiah 22.13-19.

taken up again in an unaltered form, not because it is in any sense less true, but because those who have gathered to hear it are now in a new place, and thus their best knowledge of God has been both found and shattered.

We might recall here Marc-Alain Ouaknin's claim that the reconstruction of life given by the Torah is always an overturning of the way things have been, an upending of the established pattern that has heretofore held sway. And it is this destruction, this overturning into life, which is made possible each time the words of the Torah are given a fresh hearing.⁶⁴

When the king sends Shaphan to Huldah to inquire of the Lord, it is clear that the import of the finding of the scroll and the reading of its contents has in a significant way already registered not only with Josiah, but with Hilkiah and Shaphan before him. However, Huldah both interprets and authorizes the text, confirming the link between the worship of other gods and the destruction which is to come. Her testimony to the inevitability of that destruction is in effect a claim that the truth of the present situation cannot be adequately faced or lived through simply by reinstating past understandings and images of God. Again, this is not because they are inherently misleading, but rather because in the presence of the living God, they can only be shattered and constructed all over again.

Finally, for those who now hear within a wider context the canonical story of the finding of the scroll during Josiah's reign, followed by the seeking of an authoritative interpretation of its contents from the prophet Huldah, awareness of the destruction and exile which were to overtake Judah within a few short decades is impossible to avoid. When, in Ulanov's words, "the worst happens", the

⁶⁴ Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Les Dix Commandements* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999), p. 33. See chapter 1, p. 47.

commandment to worship God alone in the place of God's choosing is itself shattered, and can only be reconstructed from the place of exile. Here, too, the prophet Jeremiah gives us a fleeting but important perspective on what becomes possible among the fragments. When Jeremiah writes his well-known letter from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon, he exhorts them: "Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce . . . seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."⁶⁵ The letter is taken to Babylon on Jeremiah's behalf by none other than the son of Shaphan and the son of Hilkiah, sons of fathers associated with the exemplary reign of Josiah. And what Jeremiah's letter offers to the exiles, of course, is precisely a fresh perceiving of God. In the wake of devastation, there is a fresh hearing and sighting of the living God among the fragments, a shocking new possibility of what it might now mean to worship God in the place of God's choosing.

Thus what is offered in the text of this narrative is a canonized life of interpretive exhilaration, in which a return to the text is a reproduction neither of current arrangements of power nor of the logic of the way things are, but an embodied expectation that the presence of the living God both destroys and makes new. Thus texts are returned to neither in the confidence of settled authority nor in a spirit of endless indeterminacy but as a way of valuing and ordering interpretive diversity, dissent, and risk-taking in concrete situations. And because questions of power are never absent from interpretive decisions, such diversity and dissent are available to fund that necessary critique of present arrangements which is at the heart of biblical religion. It is therefore the work of the canon to embrace that textual

⁶⁵ Jeremiah 29.5-7

vibrancy which will always bring an alternative perspective to bear, inviting fracture for the sake of insight, disjuncture for the sake of possibility, and destruction for the sake of fresh perceiving. The return to the text embodies this interpretive passion, this hermeneutics of intrusion, whose end is always a lived human encounter with the One whose presence is understood to be both the shattering and the upholding of the community's life.

Chapter Three

Reading Scripture: Departure and Return

The Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice contains within its remarkable specialised art collection a painting by the 16th century artist, Paolo Veronese (1528 - 1588). The painting, now entitled *Meal in the House of Levi*, began its life as a portrayal of the Last Supper, and a quick glance at the monumental painting reveals many familiar iconic features: the long table spread with a white cloth, the figure of Jesus at the centre of the table, and his seated companions on either side casting glances around the room and whispering to one another as events unfold.

However, a closer look reveals some additional and rather less conventional details, including a dog sniffing for crumbs under the table, a couple of guests in the early stages of inebriation, several small children off to one side, a number of rather self-important looking characters who are deep in conversation and seem to be indifferent to the presence of Jesus, and at least one woman. The museum guidebook reports that the painting was originally commissioned for a monastic refectory, and was due to replace a Titian painting of the Last Supper which had been destroyed by fire. However, when certain members of the hierarchy laid eyes on the finished work of Veronese, they erupted with anger at the presence of "buffoons, drunkards, Germans, dwarfs, and similar indecencies"¹ in the sacred scene. Veronese himself, who presumably had some experience in handling religious professionals, quietly consulted a rival congregation, whose members advised him simply to change the name of the painting. And thus, overnight, it ceased to be a depiction of the Last Supper, became

¹ See also *The Rough Guide to Venice and the Veneto*. Written and researched by Jonathan Buckley, with additional contributions by Charles Hebbert and Kate Hughes. Sixth edition. (New York: Rough Guides, June 2004) pp. 89-90.

instead a portrayal of a well-known synoptic narrative,² and received its new title, *Meal in the House of Levi*.

For its viewers, it remained and remains the same painting, with the same powerful physical presence and monumental scale, the same colours and images. And over four hundred years after the death of the artist, its presence and its positioning within the halls of the Accademia testify to a widely accepted sense of the artistic value of the painting and, in addition, suggest that its aesthetic and hermeneutical depths are accessible at some level to all those who are now able to contemplate the painting in its secular setting, even if they remain unaware of the controversy which surrounded its origins. It cannot be denied that, for the contemporary viewer, to know something of the painting's history is almost inevitably to experience it differently, perhaps with a greater awareness of its symbolic ambiguities, perhaps with a sense of the resonances lost to those who know nothing of its unorthodox origins, perhaps with a fresh and envious sense of the possible meanings it now in its current setting makes available to those who contemplate its detailed and complex surfaces for the first time. It could therefore be argued that this work of Paolo Veronese has in its particular historical and contemporary settings taken on something of the resonance of a biblical parable, composed of a set of vivid narrative images which are designed to unsettle the assumptions of those who hear or see them with persistent, unexpected, and burgeoning force. Or to put it slightly differently, the painting may be said to function as a parable precisely as it bears witness to the multiple interpretations, the diverse and successive understandings, which accumulate like brushstrokes around any attempt to fix its meaning in whatever recognisable or repeatable or stable sense across generations and cultures.

² Mark 2.13-17. Parallel accounts are found in Matthew 9.9-13 and Luke 5.27-32.

And yet the painting, in its overwhelming physical reality, remains fixed to the wall in Room 10 of the Accademia. And as for the tourist who visits Room 10, and then carries away with her a postcard of *Meal in the House of Levi*, what reflections might her memories of the painting prompt in her? She might wonder, for example, to what extent a painting ever carries its meaning wholly within itself, embedded, so to speak, within the brushstrokes, and to what extent its meaning will always be shaped in part by what can be recovered of its author's intentions. If we know that the painting was originally planned as a portrayal of the Last Supper, how will its meaning be altered for us, if at all? And if we enter Room 10 having already read in our guidebooks that we are about to see a painting entitled *Meal in the House of Levi*, will we ourselves have already and perhaps unconsciously imposed certain meanings on the scene we see spread out before us, to the necessary exclusion of others? And yet if we do, will the ambiguous iconography of the painting itself be enough to unsettle our interpretive assumptions, and to invite us to engage more consciously with what we see before us?

Our tourist might also, as she leaves the Accademia, reflect on the power of naming, once held by Veronese himself, in response to a request from the monastic community who commissioned the painting, and later transferred in significant measure to the ecclesiastical authorities whose orthodoxies were so intemperately disturbed by his portrayal. And even as she acknowledges the ideological, and even polemical, factors which came into play in the wider and heated Reformation context, she might also ponder the extent to which a recognition of these factors serves paradoxically to highlight the limits of such coercive power on the finished painting, whose iconography continues to offer an interpretive commentary, though a more

subtle one, on its original subject.³

Finally, however, our tourist may reflect on the fact, as she addresses her postcard, that seeing a painting as you sit down to eat day after day in a 16th century monastic refectory and seeing it once in the exhibition hall of a contemporary gallery do not amount to precisely the same experience, and that both are different again from gazing on a postcard reproduction which has fallen through your letter box. And yet it is not possible to say which of these encounters with the painting will turn out to have been more attentive than the others, which more deliberately chosen. And if interpretive significance is in some sense, as the history of this painting suggests, to be found in the encounter between the finished work of art, its original context, the intentions of the artist no less than the pressures brought to bear upon him, and the assumptions and perspectives of those who look from time to time upon the painting itself, then the only inattentive and thus disrespectful encounters will be those which fail to recognise this inherent complexity and insist on one arbitrary meaning.⁴

And it is intuitive and provocative insights of precisely this sort, insights concerning meaning and the making of sense, imagery and affective response, changing cultural perspectives and historical rootedness, which give rise to the more sustained explorations that will form the primary focus of this chapter. More

³ Robert Alter makes a similar point with regard to the 20th century usage of the concept of a literary "canon". He argues that the very notion of a canon has helped to highlight the various ways in which a culture may seek coherence through exclusion of all that does not support an imposed authoritative account of itself. Ironically, however, this very exclusionary process often tends, in a kind of mirror image of itself, to shed light on the anomalies inherent in even the most orthodox accounts. Or in other words and for our purposes, just because you rename a painting does not mean you will be able to control how it is seen. See Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000) pp. 1-6.

⁴ Kathryn Tanner makes a similar point in an article, to be discussed later in this chapter, which explores the possibility of understanding the Bible as a popular text. In response to those who might see such a suggestion as "disrespectful" of the "authority" of the Bible, she argues that the only disrespectful reading, given the multiple layers of meaning and plurality of interpretations which result from both scholarly and popular readings of the Bible, would be one which attempted to rule out any alternatives and to dismiss any aspects of the text which might suggest them. See Kathryn Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," in *Theology and Scriptural Imagination*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998) pp. 132-133.

specifically, these explorations centre on the use by the Christian churches of the collected writings most commonly known to Christian readers as the Old and New Testaments.⁵ And more precisely still, I will be asking what it means for the Christian churches to read these writings as canonical texts, as scripture, and whether a fresh look at our understanding of the functional authority of scripture within the community might offer some new ways forward for the ecumenical movement in both its institutional and its local expressions.

Hearing with Intent: The Functional Authority of the Canon

Having thus begun by acknowledging in a purely impressionistic way the richness and complexity inherent in the work of interpretation of a canonical biblical text over time, I now turn to the core work of this chapter, namely, to engage more deeply with the question of what it means or might mean to read the writings of the Old and New Testaments as canonical texts, as scripture. And by canonical texts, I simply mean texts which have been and continue to be named as authoritative and irreplaceable for Christian life and worship by all Christian traditions.

I begin by clarifying my working understanding of what is meant in this context by an "authoritative" text. I then turn to a considered exploration of two recent but quite distinct arguments, made by Kathryn Tanner and Wesley A. Kort, for the particular functional authority of scripture, arguments which are rooted, in part, in a lively awareness of the inner narrative dynamic which the canon is understood to display. And as a final step in my argument, I will attempt to bring these proposals into dialogue with certain dimensions of the discipline and experience of Christian prayer,

⁵ I am aware, of course, that the lists of writings considered to be canonical by the different Christian traditions do not all agree in full. While these differences are important in some contexts, I will not focus on them here, as they do not affect the core of my argument.

both as a way of highlighting the strengths of what Tanner and Kort are suggesting, and as a way of continuing to piece together a fresh and constructive understanding of the canon, its authority and function in the churches, and its use as a model for the shaping of visible Christian witness in an ecumenical present.

To begin with, then, it is important to clarify that my working understanding of the meaning of "authoritative" in this context is a functional one, that is, an authoritative text is one which functions in a certain way. A canonical biblical text, therefore, is one which is enabled and expected to function in particular ways within the church. Although this is a working definition, it is not an exclusive one, and it does not rule out claims for the authority of biblical texts which are rooted elsewhere, in their provenance, for example, or in their content. However, for the purposes of my analysis, canonical authority is functional authority, and the ways in which this functional authority plays itself out in concrete terms may be experienced as either positive or negative in their effects, or more frequently, as some combination of the two.

The usefulness of such a functional definition is not difficult to discern, largely because it reflects the reality of contemporary Christian life in at least one important sense. For gathered believers in any context, whether of worship, study or decision-making, the existence and to some extent the importance of the scriptural canon is simply a historical given. Whether or not they individually or collectively show enthusiasm for its content or for the current uses to which it is put in their community, its presence must somehow or another be reckoned with. No other writings can substitute for the historic role these writings have had in the history of the church, nor undo the centuries of mutual shaping which they and the communities who read them have undergone. It is not a question of deciding whether or not the canon was or is a

good idea. It is a question of finding some way to live with and in its complicated presence.

There is, however, a certain freedom in admitting that such is the case. For if the canon is not something we have to defend but something in whose presence we are finding a way to live, then there is nothing to prevent us from being honest about recognising its ambiguities, and the unresolved issues which are lodged restlessly at its core, at the heart of the very concept itself. All of the writings which were eventually gathered into the canon were understood to have or were experienced as having, by definition, a usefulness, a meaning or value, a susceptibility to ongoing interpretation or a generative potential beyond their original or current contexts. And yet the act of gathering itself necessarily altered the ways in which these texts might continue to be understood or experienced. On the one hand, the gathering, the historical process of canon formation itself, opened up a wide range of possible new perspectives from which to read any given text, simply by arranging the texts in a new canonical configuration and placing them in a necessary and often unsettling relationship with one another. In this sense, it can be said somewhat paradoxically that the process of canon formation was an expansive one, and not wholly restrictive as is often assumed.⁶

On the other hand, however, this same process of canon formation did indeed invite a series of potentially restrictive consequences. The most obvious of these is the temptation, in the name of an assumed coherence, to minimise or too quickly to reconcile the diverse perspectives and claims which the various texts express. Where

⁶ My position here differs significantly from that of George Aichele, whose argument is that a canon functions primarily if not exclusively in a negative way, setting up a reading context which tightly controls meaning and prevents readers from reading texts with any interpretive freedom. See George Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001) pp 1-12.

it occurs, the effects of such a move can be far-reaching, and more damaging than might at first be assumed. This is because such a move can not only work to flatten the text, to drain it of much of its colour, sharpness, or emphasis, but can lead, in turn, to what James Barr calls "massive decontextualisation"⁷. When this happens, the interpretive act is deprived of its subtlety and richness, and ceases to involve a complex interweaving of all the threads which locate the text: its genre, its use of language, its symbolic echoes, its historical setting and subsequent adaptation, its contemporary hermeneutical context, and the religious commitments or struggles or needs of its readers. Instead, it is only the latter which count, and the interpretation of the text is controlled almost entirely by these convictions and struggles and needs. The result is a form of what is often called proof-texting, the harvesting of canonical texts for the purpose of supporting positions already taken, desires and needs already expressed. These positions and desires and needs will of course always need to be recognised as bringing their weight to bear on any honest interpretive act; the difference here, however, is that they will no longer be questioned or unsettled in any way by the text itself, and will therefore end by relentlessly determining meaning on their own.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the relationship between the canon and the church has never been a straightforward one, and a functional understanding of canonical authority allows room to admit this. It is a truism to point out that the so-called New Testament churches were not in possession of the New Testament, at least not in our canonical sense of the term, but the point is still a serious one. And one of its more obvious implications is that the ordering of the community's life cannot have been shaped primarily in response to or in dialogue with

⁷ James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) p. 81.

the particular set of writings which later became the New Testament. What is even more significant, however, is the need to acknowledge that right from the beginning the historical process of canon formation was subject to a wide range of complex and often contradictory pressures. No monolithic ecclesiastical authority ever had the power definitively to "fix" the canon, but in particular contexts and at various times, groups or individuals certainly did have the relative power to make decisions, or to set forth arguments, or to discredit other views, and thus significantly to influence the gradual process of canon formation. As is now widely acknowledged, for example, the period during which canon formation was taking place was also a period during which questions concerning the leadership of women in the Christian movement were being energetically contested,⁸ and the pages of the New Testament bear visible witness to the scars and denials left by that unresolved struggle. By the same token, however, it cannot be said that any particular text, or indeed any collection of texts such as the New Testament, fully or comprehensively reflects the complexities and ongoing disagreements which marked its own origins, and each text therefore necessarily leaves part of its own story untold.

What is perhaps most important to acknowledge, however, is the extent to which the historical process of canon formation was, if not arbitrary, then certainly subject to all kinds of contingencies, including the fluidity of its own criteria. It is generally accepted, for example, that some early Christian writings were so quickly and so widely circulated among the growing Christian communities of the Mediterranean region that they began to be "canonised" by the frequency of their use, and by virtue of the extent to which they were experienced as having a kind of intrinsic or self-

⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983) pp. 53-56.

authenticating power. Thus no later bishop or council would have had much chance of excluding such writings from the functional canon of believing communities, even had they wished to do so. At the same time, however, other writings which did eventually become accepted as part of the New Testament were the focus of extended theological argument and political debate, much of which might have ended differently. And finally, as James Barr has argued, even though it can be said that all of scripture is an attempt at interpretation, there will always be some traditional material that is resistant to further hermeneutical adjustment, that cannot in a sense be made to fit, but whose place in the tradition is already so firmly established that it must be handed on more or less intact. As Barr puts it, such material was perhaps retained "not because later redactors were able to make changes which would shift its significance into line with their own theological positions and interests, but for the opposite reason, that no one could account for its peculiarities or undertake to edit it into the lineaments of modern ideas, and so, being already holy tradition, it was left as it was."⁹ Needless to say, a contemporary interpreter may have cause either to be grateful or to regret the power of tradition in such a case.

I began this section by clarifying that my working understanding of canonical authority is a functional one, an understanding which allows for an awareness of the complexities of the historical process of canon formation and yet also recognises the assumed presence and irreplaceable role of the canonical texts in the church ever since. I have also argued that a functional understanding of canonical authority allows Christians to honour and engage with the presence of the canon in the church in part by admitting to themselves the degree to which the relationship between canon and church has almost always been an uneasy and difficult one.

⁹ Barr, *Holy Scripture*, p.95.

In this context, then, one final observation is in order. One of the most compelling reasons for a functional understanding of canonical authority in the context of my argument is that I will be paying particular attention in a later chapter to the use of scripture in preaching and liturgy, and one of my working assumptions in doing so will be that most Christian engagement with scripture takes place within a framework provided by the diverse liturgical practices of the church. That is, Christians encounter scripture as it is functioning liturgically. The words and rhythms of the canonical texts are encountered in the participatory work of public worship, in liturgical reading, in preaching, in responsive prayer, in song, and in the personal testimony of believers. By definition, however, these occasions are limited ones, concrete and particular in scope, and even though they may be habitual, they are unrepeatable in their precise settings.

The question of how such canonical texts are actually functioning in these diverse liturgical settings is thus of critical importance. On the one hand, it is often true that such texts help to give form and shape to the gathered community, serving as familiar reference points and focusing narrative identity in widely divergent contexts. On the other hand, however, their authoritative function is not limited simply to the provision of a supply of stable meaning which is then variously applied to the particular settings in which people find themselves. It is perhaps more accurate to suggest that while canonical texts do in part function to give voice to a certain number of core convictions, they do not operate simply as containers of meaning. They are neither depositories of propositional truth, nor lenses through which to gain safe access to an uncontested view of the world. Rather, their liturgical function is to make visible the struggle, lodged within the text itself, with what has happened in a narrative sense, and with how to understand and respond and live with what has

happened, and with what can now be anticipated and hoped for as a result. And in making this struggle visible, the canonical text functions rhetorically, inviting its hearers to attempt to understand and respond in an analogous yet fresh way to what is happening in their contemporary present. The liturgical context thus lends itself not so much to the interpretation of scripture for its own sake as to the ongoing interpretation of the present in light of scripture.¹⁰ If we wish to ask, therefore, what it means or might mean to read the writings of the Old and New Testaments as canonical texts, as scripture, there is no context more important for our explorations than that of public worship, and no more important task than to ask precisely how these texts, deemed authoritative, function within its contours.

Kathryn Tanner: Scripture as Popular Text

As I argued earlier, to claim that the authority of canonical texts within the Christian community is a functional authority is not necessarily to rule out other claims that can or have been made for the status of the scriptural canon. Such claims have been made, for example, on the grounds of presumed authorship or date of composition of particular texts. They have also been made on retrospective grounds

¹⁰ James Barr highlights Jesus' use of scripture as it is recorded in the New Testament, and argues that insofar as scripture was authoritative for Jesus, it was authoritative in this sense, that it functioned both to form and to interpret the present. Its function was not to control religious practice or belief, but quite the reverse: to enable those who followed Jesus to come to a new hearing of scripture, one which would prove to be supple enough, and fruitful enough in its insights, to allow them to embrace and make sense of the fresh announcement of good news which had entered their lives. See Barr, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 68-69. See also Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

of theological content or even divine inspiration.¹¹ While I am not making any such claims as part of my argument, neither am I dismissing the possibility that at least some of them can be persuasively made. What I do now wish to consider, however, are two recent arguments for the particular functional authority of scripture which are grounded, at least in part, in the inner narrative dynamic which the canon is understood to display. Though very different from one another, both are an attempt to negotiate the fertile land found between the extreme horizons of a kind of textual idolatry, in which the canon itself is located out of time, speaking its unambiguous meaning to people of all cultures and generations, and a kind of textual iconoclasm, in which any meaning attached to the text is precisely that, brought to the text by the reader or reading community and attached to it in such a way as almost to render the material text itself interchangeable with any other.

The first proposal is made by Kathryn Tanner, in the context of an exploration of the theological implications which follow from designating the Bible a classic text.¹² While such a claim to lasting literary value can be made on various grounds, Tanner is particularly interested in exploring those theories of classic status which highlight the "timely" character of the text in question, and understand this "timeliness" to be

¹¹ II Timothy 3.16-17 states: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." *New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Copyright by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. It is important to remember, however, that the author of II Timothy could not have had any concept of a fixed canon of scripture analogous to our own, even though all the authors of the New Testament certainly made use of scriptural writings which they considered to be authoritative. It is therefore the case that far from underwriting a claim for the "inspired" status of scripture, these verses rather serve as a reminder that our assumptions about a fixed canon of scripture cannot be retrospectively imposed on the text, and that it is even debatable whether or not the author of II Timothy had a fixed sense of which writings ought to be included in the category of "scripture", and which not. See Barr, *Holy Scripture*, p. 64.

¹² Kathryn Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," in *Theology and Scriptural Imagination*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998), pp. 117-136. See also David Tracy's understanding of the Bible as a classic text in *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986).

rooted in a quality of indeterminacy (thus, the "timeliness of indeterminacy").¹³ Texts of this kind are classic texts because, in common with all classic texts, they have a proven appeal or resonance across both generational and cultural boundaries. Classic texts characterised by the timeliness of indeterminacy, however, are texts which are unambiguously historical in nature (thus, "timely"), and do not claim to speak to all people everywhere in the same way. Like all historical documents, such texts originate in a particular culture, date from a particular period, are written in a particular language, and have been heard and responded to in a wide variety of ways. What makes them classic, therefore, is not a universally understood content, but a quality of imminent engagement which makes them compelling for successive generations of readers. In other words, the hold they exercise over the reader, the magnetism which they seem to possess, is rooted in their invitational (and thus, "indeterminate") character. They invite a response, and offer an ongoing, if uneasy, relationship, one which is paradoxically sustained by the very unfinished quality of the engagement.

There is no timeless content on offer here, such that the text itself can be left behind once its meaning has been grasped. Nor is there a willingness to allow the reader to impose her own meaning on a text which then functions simply as a mirror, reflecting back to the reader her own assumptions or insights. What there is, rather, is a text full of gaps and openings, one which is in some real sense unfinished, and which therefore draws the reader into its open spaces. The unity of such a text is therefore not a literary unity, but one which emerges from the interaction between text and reader. The text brings its irreducible historical nature, uneven transmission, and incompleteness to the encounter, while the reader brings her own historical

¹³ Tanner, pp. 124-28. See Stephen E. Fowl's quite different proposal for an "underdetermined" interpretation in *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

particularity and susceptibility to engagement. And although the outcome of their interaction is uncertain, the text functions to stimulate and perpetuate the encounter, unsettling each apparent resolution as it takes shape, and thus drawing the reader once again into renewed engagement.

Tanner goes on to point out that there are particular, and welcome, theological resonances to an understanding of the Bible as a text of this kind.¹⁴ Not only does this characterisation echo the richest insights of biblical studies in providing a way to link fragmented, ambiguous, and often discordant scriptural texts with one another, it also reflects a theological conviction that God's presence is not articulated in human history in a straightforward, predictable, and coherent narrative. Rather, God's participation and work is revealed through the irregularities, confusion, and reversals of ordinary life, in patterns that up-end what is taken for granted, futures that are ambiguous, and a present that is often mysterious and full of surprises. Felt coherence is suggestive only, woven out of familiar images, remembered voices, and ambiguous retellings. Meaning is implied, but never assured. God's presence is large and hopeful, yet indistinct.

And yet, Tanner's argument continues, attractive as this understanding of the Bible as a classic text of timely indeterminacy remains, given the lived ambiguities of human history, and thus also of the community of faith, it fails to account for the fact that in an important sense, and for good reason, the Bible has never been seen as a literary classic.¹⁵ Both in terms of language and in terms of rhetorical style, many of the biblical writings seem particularly inelegant,¹⁶ and they often embrace both a tone

¹⁴ Tanner, 127-128.

¹⁵ For this and for the argument which follows, see Tanner, pp. 128-134.

¹⁶ Compare John Calvin's conviction that the power found in the act of reading scripture cannot be located in the text itself, as major portions of scripture are unimpressive in terms of content and,

and a concern with the everyday which suggest that they were neither written by or intended primarily for those of elite cultural status. In this sense, then, the Bible was and remains a popular text.

The question, then, is how to reconcile these two understandings, and here Tanner turns to recent work in the area of cultural studies, in which the integrity of any text is dependent, at least in part, on reader response. Following the distinction made by John Fiske between writerly and producerly texts,¹⁷ Tanner argues that his understanding of the producerly texts of popular culture most closely resonates with the sort of text the Bible actually is. A popular text is above all, in this view, a text which is accessible, one that does not require special skills or training to be read or understood. It is attractive in the sense that, like a classic text of timely indeterminacy, it is incomplete and open-ended, characterised by gaps and spaces which the reader can choose to fill. And yet it gives no sense of being deliberately or unnecessarily difficult. Rather, it is concerned with the lives of ordinary people, who respond to a popular text in part because they see their own lives, concerns, and struggles reflected, perhaps even dignified, in its words and images.¹⁸

Again, there is an attractive theological resonance to such an understanding of the Bible as a popular text, as it suggests a God who speaks to ordinary human lives in a way which is available without necessary pre-condition, and which is often persuasive and significant, but never coercive. However, the very accessibility of the text, in this construal, raises the objection, in theory at least, that the text plays so unassuming a role in its encounter with the reader that the reader is left to make of

especially, rhetorical style. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T McNeill, translated and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1.8.1-2.

¹⁷ Tanner, p.30. The reference is to John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989). His definition of a producerly text is on pp. 103-104.

¹⁸ I am reminded of the gospel commentaries of the *campesinos* recorded by Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, Vol. 4, trans. by Donald D. Walsh. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982).

the text whatever she wishes. If the text exercises no hold upon her and is in no sense incomprehensible or difficult for her, then there is a high risk that it will simply affirm by default the terms with which she approaches the text in the first place.

This is a risk which Tanner acknowledges, yet she nevertheless argues that an understanding of the Bible as a popular text in this sense is an appropriate and fruitful one, not least because it functions to prompt a rethinking of what is meant by biblical authority, and in particular, the nature of respect and disrespect in this context.¹⁹ Too often, she maintains, the notion of respect for the biblical text has as its unspoken prerequisite an assumption of static and unchanging meaning, which the reader must "respect", and from which she may not deviate if a posture of respect is to be maintained. And yet, Tanner points out, such an attitude, though widespread, hardly accords with the practice of the repetitive reading of scriptural texts in a liturgical context, a practice which seems to assume that the possibility of a fresh hearing is never exhausted.

On the other hand, Tanner argues, if we understand the Bible as a popular text in the sense outlined above, then a number of assumptions follow from that understanding. To begin with, a reader is generally well-disposed toward such texts, and inclined to respect them, because it is assumed that they will be found helpful and useful in everyday life. Their accessibility invites the reader to return to them again and again, and while this characteristic may enable a kind of laziness on her part, it may also facilitate a kind of imaginative extrapolation in which she continues to experience the text as a resource for her day to day life. Indeed, precisely because she finds the text so accessible, a reader may come to value a popular text as a familiar, even safe, place in which to call her own conventional ways of thinking into question, not least

¹⁹ Tanner, p. 132.

when a straightforward reading of the text appears to be doing just that. In short, Tanner concludes, what appears to be an almost chaotic diversity in the possible readings of a popular text may in fact turn out to be the mark of the most important criterion for a "respectful" reading of the text, namely, that it does not rule out alternative readings or dismiss aspects of the text which might suggest them.

And if that is the case, then to the extent that the Bible is best understood as a popular text, the central task of the theologian or pastor with regard to the scriptural canon and its place among believers is to nurture a biblical imagination which reproduces itself and spreads organically, yet often unpredictably, like a hardy annual. The task is not to encourage diversity for its own sake, nor is it to reduce the possibilities of mature engagement with scripture to a single category of personal intuitive insight, though it is certainly true that from such imaginative reflections significant insight often comes. The task is rather to learn and teach scripture in such a way that the ongoing engagement of the theologian and her community with the canon works "to unsettle every Christian reading with reference to the possibilities that the Bible holds out for others, with reference to a biblical imagination wider than any extant church teaching."²⁰

Tanner's point is not that such an approach raises no further questions, and surely the most important one which follows from her proposal is that of what sort of discernment might be practiced in the midst of such imaginative richness, and how. For now, however, Tanner's claim is that a designation of the Bible as a popular text suggests, as a corollary, a sturdy, reliable, functional understanding of its authority as grounded in its imaginative capacity to prompt the interrogation of its own interpretive possibilities on an ongoing basis, whether those possibilities be seen as

²⁰ Tanner, p. 134.

straightforward or elite. And as Tanner sees it, such an understanding of biblical authority would be "primarily proved, not by the Christian hope of taking clear direction from it, but by the Bible's ability to disturb Christian self-satisfaction and complacency."²¹

Wesley A. Kort: Reading the Bible as Scripture

A second and equally compelling proposal for the particular functional authority of scripture is made by Wesley A. Kort, and although his starting point is quite different from that of Tanner, he too draws on recent work done in the area of cultural studies.²² Kort's argument is rich and complex, but at its core it is centred around two claims: that the category "scripture", and the concomitant practice of reading a text as scripture, are essential to any adequate cultural theory; and that the Bible, though in every sense an historical document, embodies and models a deeply rooted pattern which actually teaches us how to read a text "as though it were scripture".²³

To begin with, it is important to understand the sense in which Kort is using the word "scripture". It does not refer to the Bible or to any sacred text, as such, but rather names a category which Kort deems to be crucial to any adequate cultural theory. In this context, scripture refers to those beliefs held by an individual or group, "actually or potentially inscribed" in a text, which allow them to construct worlds and sustain life within them, but also to correct, reconfigure, or reconfirm those worlds.²⁴

As a category in cultural or textual theory, therefore, scripture locates a group in the

²¹ Tanner, p. 134.

²² Wesley A. Kort, *"Take, Read": Scripture, Textuality, and Cultural Practice* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

²³ Kort, p. 17. A summary of his argument is set out in the Introduction: "Scripture" as a Category in Textual Theory, pp. 1-17.

²⁴ Kort, p. 3.

wider cultural field, and serves as a source for the beliefs that constitute, sustain, and interrogate their world.²⁵ A "world", in the sense in which Kort uses the word, is simply a context in which people can carry on living because they are surrounded by a sufficient number of practices, customs, and beliefs which do not need to be questioned or defended, whose value or necessity is obvious to them, and which can thus in a sense be taken for granted.²⁶ And thus the significance of the category of scripture for cultural theory lies not only in the fact that scripture is a resource for the construction, confirmation, and location of worlds, but in the fact that it is also a potent resource for the self-critique and interrogation of those worlds.²⁷

Kort sets out the purpose of his project as that of recovering and reconstructing an understanding of what it once meant, and what it now might mean, to read a text as though it were scripture. The significance of the project is rooted in Kort's claim that the avoidance of anything that might contest, disconfirm, or question our worlds is a distinguishing characteristic of "our" culture (presumably that of North America and at least parts of Europe). Indeed, the only sense in which Kort finds it helpful to use the word "secular" is in naming a culture that has "lost its desire and capacity to read scripture,"²⁸ and therefore has a corresponding distaste or disinclination to engage in the discomforts of self-critique. Thus a loss of the ability to read a text as scripture, as Kort understands it, is a loss related both to identity and to the practice of healthy but often painful self-examination, and he further claims that this loss is a key feature of postmodernity. The retrieval and reconstruction of such an ability would, Kort assumes, prove relevant to particular confessional communities, but only insofar as this ability to read a text as if it were scripture also forms part of an

²⁵ Kort, p. 14.

²⁶ Kort, p. 9.

²⁷ Kort, p. 6.

²⁸ Kort, p. 13-14.

adequate cultural theory. For it would be a mistake, Kort writes, "to think that a community within the culture could be isolated from its major currents, could have a culture entirely its own, or could re-create a premodern culture in defiance of its context."²⁹

Kort's argument proceeds in four stages, which I will outline briefly before returning to highlight and explore in greater detail some of the judgements and claims he is making. The first stage of the argument³⁰ focuses on the theory of reading which Kort finds in the writings of John Calvin, embedded in the latter's doctrine of scripture.³¹ Kort begins here, he insists, not out of any sense that Calvin's theory of reading offers a model to be uncritically recovered, but rather because Kort judges Calvin's theory to be representative of a whole set of cultural assumptions and practices with regard to reading. In other words, Calvin is chosen not because he is original or inventive, but because he is representative and typical, a "site" where various late medieval and renaissance strands of thought converge.

In the second stage of his argument,³² Kort maintains that Calvin's theory of reading, or perhaps it would be better to say the theory of reading which Calvin most completely embodies as a representative of his time, gets successively transferred to the texts of nature, history, and literature as part of the construction of modernity. The important point being made here, however, is that modernity, for all its differences from the premodern period, remained grounded in the practice of reading texts as scripture, even though it was not necessarily the Bible itself which was anymore read in this way. The natural world, the narratives of history, and later works

²⁹ Kort, p. 20. The potentially more self-contained cultural-linguistic model of religious community, developed by George A. Lindbeck, will be considered in detail in chapter 4.

³⁰ Kort, pp. 19-36.

³¹ It is important here to point out the obvious, namely that for Calvin, "scripture" is the Bible, composed of the Old and New Testaments, and not a category in cultural theory as it is for Kort.

³² Kort, pp. 37-67.

of literature were all read, in turn and in Kort's sense, as scripture.³³ Where the practice of reading is concerned, therefore, premodernity and modernity form a continuum, for all the decisive differences which arguably exist between them.

Furthermore, Kort argues, if one wishes to characterise the differences between the modern and postmodern periods, one of the profound changes which must be highlighted is the loss, in postmodernity, of the practice of reading texts as scripture. For all the emphasis in postmodern thought on texts and reading, the concept of reading a text as scripture has been lost, and the consequences of this are at least twofold. First, authority shifts from text to reader, with the result that the power and significance of texts is determined by the reader's use, appropriation, or evaluation of them. And second, reading no longer has the power to radically challenge, correct, or reconstitute the personal, group, or institutional location and identity of the reader. In other words, there is no way to question the reader's assumptions, interests, practices, or use of the text, no grounds on which they can be evaluated, queried, or sanctioned.³⁴

The third stage of Kort's argument³⁵ then turns to a consideration of the various strands of postmodern thought, and finds within them clear signs of a progressive search for some basis on which a postmodern ethics might be constructed, given, on the one hand, postmodernity's rejection of universal norms and, on the other hand, the amoral consequences of the loss of the practice of reading texts as scripture. This search begins from the position of profound ethical instability

³³ At first, Kort argues, such readings are seen as supplementary to the reading of the Bible and warranted by it, but later they become independent cultural practices which in turn impose their own features on the reading of the Bible itself. See Kort, p. 37.

³⁴ Kort, pp. 69-70. For a quite different view of textual agency, see Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp. 1-16.

³⁵ Kort, pp. 69-95.

which characterises the early stages of postmodern thought. It then moves on to an attempt to develop models for the determining and maintaining of shared values in a given culture, and thus for that culture's stabilisation. And it finally attempts to give shape to the initial stages of a postmodern ethics, that is, a basis (other than objective norms) for the exercise of moral judgement and the practice of self-questioning.

Kort, however, finds the results of this search to be finally inadequate and disappointing, and suggests that this may be because the search for a usable ethics both in the absence of "modernist scaffolding"³⁶ and in the ignorance of the very cultural practices from which ethics might emerge is doomed to fail. Yet the beginning traces of a way forward which Kort claims to discern in this situation lie in his reading of two last postmodern thinkers, Maurice Blanchot and Julia Kristeva, in whose writing, in the final part of his argument,³⁷ he discerns signs of the reappearance of the cultural practice of reading a text as scripture.

The concluding chapter of Kort's rich study draws out some of the possible implications of what he is proposing, and I will explore some of his suggested insights in greater detail at the end of this section. For the moment, however, I want to look at some of the salient features both of his understanding of Calvin's theory of reading, and of his interpretation of the works of Blanchot and Kristeva, in which Kort finds suggestive traces of an emerging and reconstructed cultural practice of reading a text as scripture.

To reiterate, Calvin's understanding of the practice of reading, as Kort elaborates it, is embedded in his doctrine of scripture; indeed, his doctrine of scripture is largely about how to read the Bible, which of course includes how to hear it being

³⁶ Kort, p.95.

³⁷ Kort, pp. 97-117.

read aloud. And two of the principle sources for Calvin's doctrine of reading are entirely representative of his 16th century location, namely the practice of *lectio divina* and the various currents of humanist thought which helped form the intellectual backdrop to his theological work. The practice of *lectio divina* was rooted in the physical imagery of the language of contemplative prayer, whose metaphors were often those of eating: ingestion, rumination, and so on.³⁸ This form of reading practice was thus linked to an expectation of nourishment and transformation. At the same time, renaissance humanism had revived a scholarly interest in rhetoric, and in its corollary claim, namely that the power of a biblical text does not originate in the text itself, which is often rhetorically weak. Rather, the power of the text is encountered precisely and only in the act of reading, for it is in the act of reading that the power of God is able to be revealed, in spite of the stylistic irregularities of the text and the limited comprehension of the reader.³⁹

Having outlined these and other contemporary practices and currents of thought which helped to shape Calvin's doctrine of reading scripture, Kort then turns to his central interpretive claim regarding this doctrine, namely that its key feature is a distinction between two moments in reading, moments which Kort names "centripetal" and "centrifugal". He admits that the distinction he is making is "implied or assumed" in Calvin's own writings "more than it is articulated and defended," and admits also that the two moments, as he understands them, while distinct, are never completely separable.⁴⁰ It is upon this distinction, however, and the consequences which flow from it, that Kort's argument principally rests.

³⁸ Kort, p. 23.

³⁹ Kort, pp. 26-27. See also Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.8.1, to which Kort refers.

⁴⁰ Kort, p. 28. This distinction is elaborated on pp. 28-32.

Centripetal reading, Kort maintains, is grounded in a discipline of availability and concentration, in which the reader paradoxically embodies both a divestment of all assurance of prior understanding of the text and, at the same time, a readiness to receive such understanding. One reads scripture "as if there the living words of God were heard"⁴¹, open and attentive to what may be given in the reading, yet always experiencing that sense of expectation to be a kind of dislocation as well. This is because what is received in centripetal reading is nothing less than a true and saving knowledge of God, and as this knowledge penetrates the human heart with its power, the reader's entire life, everything she already knows, including her sense of herself, her understanding of the world, and her relationship to God, begin to be re-imagined and reconfigured. And as a result, the discipline of centripetal reading is experienced as both redemption and displacement.

It is followed, however, by the discipline of the centrifugal moment, in which the reader, whose whole life is undergoing transformation as a result of her having received saving knowledge of God in the centripetal moment of reading, now reads outward into the world. In this process, the saving knowledge of God is no longer confined in its implications to the life of the reader but is also brought to bear on the life of the world in all its political, social, and religious dimensions. In the centrifugal moment, therefore, "all of Scripture becomes profitable for a critique and restructuring of the church, the Christian life, and the civic order."⁴² The discipline of reading does not end with the centrifugal moment, however. For even as the whole of the world, along with the inner life of the reader, continues to undergo profound reconfiguration in light of the saving knowledge of God received in centripetal reading,

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.1.

⁴² Kort, p. 31.

so too do those reconfigurations themselves become vulnerable in turn. For even as they are embraced, they begin to become part of that assurance of prior understanding which must be yet again divested as the reader enters once more into the discipline of centripetal reading.

The discipline of reading scripture, then, in both its centripetal and centrifugal moments, is in some profound sense irreducibly solitary, but it is never only that, nor is it ever private.⁴³ Indeed, one might say that to read scripture is, at its best, to become engaged in the most relentless yet self-critical process of social transformation, and the most persistent and honest search for self-understanding. In this sense, then, when Kort describes the church as "a company of readers",⁴⁴ he does not refer to a loose collection of individuals exercising an unaccountable prerogative to "decide for myself" what the text says. Rather, he refers to a community whose mutual commitment to the discipline of reading scripture in this way, in both its centripetal and centrifugal moments, and whose willingness to undergo together both the disagreements in their common life and the reconfigurations of their worlds which the discipline of reading brings in its wake, together constitute their profoundest unity.

To read a text as scripture, or "as though it were scripture,"⁴⁵ is thus, in Kort's understanding, to learn to read in such a way that the practice of reading is shaped by both centripetal and centrifugal movement. And yet as we have seen, one of the identifying features of postmodernity, in Kort's view, is the cultural loss of precisely this capacity to read in this way, to read a text as scripture. It is significant, then, that when Kort turns to the writings of Maurice Blanchot and Julia Kristeva, he becomes convinced that part of what he finds there are analyses of culture and language

⁴³ Kort, p. 35-36.

⁴⁴ Kort, p.35.

⁴⁵ Kort, p. 17.

marked by clear signs that just such a reconstructed practice is here and there beginning to take shape.

Kort's analysis of Blanchot's writings centres on the close relationship between Blanchot's theory of reading and the understanding of culture on which it is dependent.⁴⁶ Blanchot argues that while hegemonic practices and notions of intrinsic value are commonly relativised and dismissed as modernist traits, they nevertheless reassert themselves in Western culture in phenomena such as the commodification of knowledge, an addiction to answers and solutions, and the imposition of coherence for the purposes of stabilisation and control.⁴⁷ These phenomena in turn severely limit the practice of reading, which arises by definition, according to Blanchot, from a condition of uncertainty, suffering, and loss, none of which can be either integrated into the culture or successfully expelled from it.⁴⁸ The culture can only understand reading as the acquisition of knowledge, and therefore as an achievement.⁴⁹

In the light of his analysis, Blanchot proposes an alternative to reading as commodity, and that is reading as exit, reading as a site leading to exit from the culture.⁵⁰ For the reader, this involves a kind of anonymity, an absorption into the particularities of the everyday. Particularity, in this sense, has nothing to do with what stands out as being unique or different, especially not in the positive sense often given to those words in contemporary parlance. Rather, it is to do with being part of what the culture does not even notice, and therefore neither welcomes nor spends any

⁴⁶ See Kort, pp. 97-113, for his analysis of Blanchot's theory of reading.

⁴⁷ For a similar claim in a different but arguably related context, see Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford and Maldon, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), p. xiv: "Whilst academics have been announcing the advent of 'post-modernity', and professedly sounding the death knell of all hegemonic 'grand narratives', global capitalism has insidiously established its power as perhaps the most rapacious grand narrative in the history of the West."

⁴⁸ Kort, p. 98; pp.104-105.

⁴⁹ Kort, p. 99.

⁵⁰ Kort, p. 100.

energy in trying to reject. Reading toward the exit, the reader encounters in a raw and disorienting way all that cannot be integrated into the culture, such as suffering, uncertainty, and loss, all of which are undeniably there, in the culture, but which are meaningless to it. To read in this way is thus to experience a profound sense of exile.

Or to put in another way, reading as commodity, reading as knowledge acquisition, represses everything which cannot be absorbed, included, stabilised, or controlled by the culture. Reading toward the exit is a response to this denial and concealment, for even a partial awareness of the violent deprivation imposed by culture is enough to draw the reader toward the exit. And yet to approach the exit is not to gain a truer picture of things, a perspective which is more whole. Reading toward the exit remains an experience of disorientation and uncertainty, and thus exile from a culture that tolerates neither. And it is significant, Kort argues, that when Blanchot seeks a way of illustrating what reading toward the exit might mean, he reaches for biblical narratives of leaving home, of becoming disoriented, and of wrestling with a stranger in the night. It is there he finds the very patterns of defamiliarisation that provide powerful narrative images of what it might mean to read.⁵¹

In the end, however, the practical consequences of reading, for Blanchot, are in one sense nil. Reading toward the exit provides no applicable content, no certainties to set against those of the culture, and no making good on what the culture lacks. The reader, however, is altered by the experience of reading in at least this sense: that having been exposed to the exit, she now experiences the culture as radically questionable, and finally mediated like everything else. To remain at the exit proves impossible, but the culture in which the reader must now carry on no longer exercises its hold on her in quite the same way. Within the culture, exit is unthinkable;

⁵¹ Kort, p. 110.

at the exit, it is not possible to negotiate with the culture. And yet the reader, torn between the two, "now knows what it is like, or at least might be like, to be somewhere else."⁵²

Having thus outlined Blanchot's theory of reading, Kort then turns briefly to the work of Julia Kristeva.⁵³ Drawing heavily on a psychoanalytic perspective, Kristeva understands reading not so much as exit from the culture but rather as "divestment or abjection of something internal to the reader". This divestment is related to the fact that, for her, language acquisition in the child is always related to loss, as the child's needs are no longer immediately recognised and met but begin to be negotiated through the use of language. Language then begins not only to represent loss to the child, but becomes in addition one of the ways in which the child learns to protect itself from further loss. And in such a situation, if the self is not to remain entirely self-enclosed and self-protected, "abjection of the self and its language must occur". While this may at first seem punishing, it is in fact a move against the self for the sake of the self, which is now a self transformed, related, and speaking more clearly with its own voice.⁵⁴

The importance of reading for Kristeva, then, is that it can be the space where this divestment and transformation, this destabilising and reconstituting of the self, is able to occur. It is at its heart a kind of reintegration, what Kristeva calls *jouissance*, a "reconciliation with that from which, by acquiring language, a person was once separated as the rejecting and rejected."⁵⁵ And when held in tandem with Blanchot's reading as exit, Kristeva's own theory, that reading offers a way of countering the self in order to allow a more fully inhabited self to emerge, suggests as does Blanchot's an

⁵² Kort, p. 113.

⁵³ Kort, p. 114-117.

⁵⁴ Kort, p. 114.

⁵⁵ Kort, p. 116.

account of reading marked with the traces of centripetal and centrifugal restlessness, and thus "identifiable as a site of reading scripture's faint return."⁵⁶

It makes a certain sense, therefore, for Kort to conclude his argument by returning to the concern with which he started, namely the recovery and reconstruction in a postmodern context of the cultural capacity to read a text as scripture, and in particular, to read the Bible as scripture. And as has become clear, the paradigm which Kort proposes for reading a text as scripture (and thus for reading the Bible as scripture) is grounded neither in the content of the text nor in the location of the reader. What Kort proposes is neither a paradigm of interpretation and application, with its primary focus on what the text means, nor a paradigm of use and appropriation, with its primary focus on the needs or desires of the reader. It is rather a paradigm of centripetal and centrifugal movement, in which the reader's radical attentiveness and sense of expectation before the text opens up in her an experience of transformation and prompts in her an outward realignment which ultimately leaves no aspect of her world and none of her commitments untouched. And yet at the very heart of this reconfiguration is a newly experienced fragility, in which both the transformed self and the reshaped world become vulnerable to the same radical attentiveness which made possible such transformation in the first place, and which will now finally put them both at risk once again as the work of reading continues.

Furthermore, Kort argues, this pattern of centripetal and centrifugal movement in reading is a deeply rooted biblical pattern, which is to say that biblical texts themselves instruct the reader in how to read a text as scripture. Kort finds evidence for this claim first of all in the biblical narratives themselves, in which men and women repeatedly leave their homes for lands and futures unknown to them, inhabit the

⁵⁶ Kort, p. 117.

uncertainties of the wilderness, and live within a prophetic tradition which relentlessly calls their social and economic arrangements into question.⁵⁷ Yet he also counts it as significant that both Blanchot and Kristeva, in whose work he finds reflected faint traces of a returning practice of centripetal reading in particular, draw upon biblical texts in order to illustrate their theories, with Blanchot returning again and again to the story of Abraham,⁵⁸ and Kristeva pointing to Paul "as one in whom the abject most fully has become coincident with oneself."⁵⁹

In Kort's understanding of them, then, Calvin, Blanchot, and Kristeva all ground their work in a common assumption that the Bible is "first of all about how it should be read, and such a practice does not mean prosecuting one's perspective, confirming one's institution or coherence, or validating one's identity; it means instead the readiness to be delivered from and bereft of them."⁶⁰ It means, in short, centripetal and centrifugal movement, and a practice of reading that embraces both. And it then follows, Kort would argue, that the purpose of theological reflection is not to establish and impose coherence but to make better readers of scripture, readers who are better not because the outcome of their reading is predetermined⁶¹ but because they are learning a new practice of reading, a centripetal and centrifugal heartbeat of divestment, risk, and transformation.

⁵⁷ Kort, pp. 128-130. Kort makes particular mention of the book of Job, which as he points out was also an important text for Calvin. "Job tenaciously persists in his refusal to accept the theological points of his culture's spokesmen, risking their judgement . . . Once outside the answers and categories theologies provide, Job finds himself called on to abject the very process of insistence and interrogation that carried him beyond the categories definitive of his culture and its understandings of self." Kort, p. 129.

⁵⁸ Kort, p. 128.

⁵⁹ Kort, p. 129.

⁶⁰ Kort, p. 123.

⁶¹ Kort's argument here reflects Tanner's concern that "respect" for a biblical text should not take the form of assuming that it has a predetermined meaning with which the responsible reader cannot take issue. See above, p. 99.

Reading as Resistance

For just a moment, let us return to Venice, and the Gallerie dell'Accademia, on whose walls hangs the 16th century painting, *Meal in the House of Levi*. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, the history of the painting, from its commissioning to its acquisition by the Gallerie dell'Accademia and its present siting, has been a rich and conflictual one. Viewed from the perspective of its present, stable location in Venice, the painting exhibits features both fixed and exclusionary. And yet even in its final form, hanging on the walls of Room 10, the painting continues to suggest interpretive possibilities that are expansive, unsettled, and self-questioning. Its imposing physical presence alone carries the weight of centuries, and yet each historically situated interpreter who views it nevertheless exercises her own continuing constructive power with regard to its precise iconography and narrative claims.

It has been the purpose of this chapter to suggest, in a somewhat analogous way, that it is both possible and fruitful to argue for the functional authority of the canon of scripture precisely on the grounds of those narrative qualities of the text which remain expansive, unsettled, and self-questioning. In other words, scripture functions authoritatively within the Christian community at least in part because it invites or makes possible or even instructs the reader and the reading community in a particular way of reading, and the fact that it does so is linked, again at least in part, to its own narrative characteristics. I have thus considered at length two recent proposals for the functional authority of scripture as it is grounded in the inner narrative dynamic of the canon itself. Kathryn Tanner argues that the designation of the Bible as a popular text suggests to the reader a sturdy, functional authority, a respect for the text, which is grounded in its own imaginative capacity to prompt the

interrogation of its own interpretive possibilities on an ongoing basis. Wesley A. Kort claims that the authority of the Bible is rooted in its capacity to teach the reader how to read a text as scripture, and to engage in the centripetal and centrifugal movement which such reading requires. Though they do so on different grounds, both Tanner and Kort are claiming that the Bible authorises a particular kind of reading, and in that sense exercises its authority not by stabilising meaning but by engaging the reader in a process of learning how to read in a way which is both risk-filled and transformative.

For any interpretive community seeking to take its global and local contexts seriously, and honestly acknowledging the internal and ecumenical diversities which shape its life, it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the claims being made by Tanner and Kort. Tanner's conviction, as we have seen, is that a properly authoritative canon of scripture will prove itself "not by the Christian hope of taking clear direction from it, but by the Bible's ability to disturb Christian self-satisfaction and complacency."⁶² Similarly, Kort makes the argument that the Bible directs the reader as to how to read, and that "such a practice does not mean prosecuting one's perspective, confirming one's institution or coherence, or validating one's identity; it means instead the readiness to be delivered from and bereft of them."⁶³ And in both arguments, a strong and underlying claim is being made, namely, that where the canon of scripture is concerned, a necessary condition for authoritative status is a narrative structure which engages the reader in an interrogation of its own meanings, as well as in an ongoing and critical reconfiguration of the reader's assumptions, values, and world.

⁶² Tanner, p.134.

⁶³ Kort, p. 123.

And it is precisely because such arguments carry such weight and significance that it is important to acknowledge one of the often implied but never, I think, explicitly stated assumptions that Kort has been making all along, one which he certainly shares with Blanchot, and one which is also implied, though less strongly, by Tanner's proposal. This assumption bears upon the whole tenor of the argument Kort is making for the Bible as a text which teaches the reader how to read a text as scripture, and which therefore teaches us how to read the Bible itself. The first part of the assumption is this: that in a postmodern culture which highlights and celebrates multiple identities and diversities, people and communities are routinely tempted to believe that their most important need is to be able to construct and defend coherent identities of their own. Religious communities are not of course immune to this cultural pressure and temptation, and are thus inclined as a result to embrace a paradigm of reading as knowledge acquisition.⁶⁴

In this, however, Kort would argue, they are mistaken. For the second part of Kort's working assumption, an assumption which probably both attracts him to Blanchot and Kristeva and then shapes how he reads them, is that people's greater need, in the (Western?) postmodern culture of possession Blanchot describes, is not the construction and defence of identity but the ability to give up positions and identities as appropriate. Kort thus appears to share with Blanchot the conviction that there is nothing innocent about the culture of postmodernity, and that its narratives of fragmentation and diversity simply serve to hide the reigning powers of accumulation, violence, and self-promotion. Indeed, when Kort asks why a postmodern culture lacking any acknowledged sense of the transcendent might ever wish to recover a

⁶⁴ See above, p. 109-110.

reconstructed capacity to read a text as scripture,⁶⁵ the answer lies in just this awareness of the hidden and coercive powers of the culture. In a culture with few agreed values providing restraint, the only functional certainties will be those which power takes to itself. And in such a context, to know how to read is to know how to relativise and disarm precisely such powers in a movement of divestment, risk, and coherent interrogation. "The initial, basic moral consequence of reading the Bible as scripture," Kort claims, "is to deprive power, and its use, of the cognitive certainty that it otherwise takes to itself."⁶⁶

In articulating this view, Kort is clearly distinguishing his own stance from a communitarian position which holds that it is possible for a religious group to leave the constraints of the surrounding culture behind, and to free itself from the culture's coercive powers while still effectively living in its midst. In underestimating the pervasive shaping powers of the culture, such a group only increases the likelihood that it will continue to come under the culture's powerful sway, though now in ways the group is less well-equipped, in its self-assurance, to recognise. And yet what Kort fails to ask clearly enough, I think, is whether learning to read a text as scripture is the same process for all groups or individuals within the culture, or to put it differently, what it might mean for the most vulnerable within the culture to learn to read a text as scripture. In short, he fails to acknowledge with sufficient clarity that there is what might be called a politics of reading. What would it mean, in other words, and how might it be possible for the oppressed, or the fragile, to practice divestment of positions and identities in a culture of commodification which has actively denied them both?

⁶⁵ Kort, p. 126.

⁶⁶ Kort, p. 127.

Almost half a century has passed since feminist theological voices began a renewed effort to point out that while the sins of the powerful often take the form of pride, self-aggrandisement, self-promotion, and structural complacency, those of the marginalised and the invisible are more likely to take shape in forms of self-loss, hiding, and the trivialisation of one's own experience or insight.⁶⁷ And while the condition of the former may be addressed by the moment of centripetal reading in particular, how might divestment of positions and identities possibly make sense to the latter? What does it mean to suggest that the vulnerable are to learn to divest what little voice and place they have in a culture intent on denying them both?

The partial contours of an answer to such a question can be found, I think, by drawing on insights gleaned over time, and not least by Calvin himself, from reflection on the traditions of Christian prayer. At the core of the discipline of prayer, in many of its forms but especially in silent prayer, there is a holding together of human vulnerability and divestment, on the one hand, and the empowerment of the gift and recognition of human dignity in God's presence on the other.⁶⁸ In prayer, Calvin maintains, both "keenness of mind" and "affection of heart" towards God "faint and fail, or are carried in the opposite direction", and even those most practised in prayer "are not unmindful that, perplexed by blind anxieties, they are so constrained as scarcely to find out what it is expedient for them to utter." God meets this vulnerability, according to Calvin, by offering the gift of the presence of the Spirit as a

⁶⁷ The landmark text was Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40 (April 1960), pp.100-112.

⁶⁸ For a beautifully argued reflection on vulnerability and contemplative prayer written from a feminist perspective, see Sarah Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing, in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*, pp. 3-39.

teacher of prayer, one who empowers the vulnerable by drawing them into the voice of prayer which undergirds their own.⁶⁹

In the discipline of prayer, in other words, in the willed practice of attending to that space in which human fluency is reconfigured as loss of words, and human vulnerability as voiced dignity, lies reflected a core insight into what it might mean to read the Bible as scripture. Kort's practice of reading a text as scripture, especially in its centripetal movement, is a clearing of that space which will allow for the reconfiguration of the self and the world. And in Tanner's model, the open-endedness of the narrative dynamic of scripture, understood as a popular text, along with the non-coercive tenor of its appeal, allows and creates that same spaciousness, and invites the reader's response. And so if we return to our question and ask again what it might mean for those whom the culture has rendered most vulnerable to learn to read a text as scripture, the answer is perhaps that, in Kort's terms, centripetal reading for the oppressed is a loosening or divestment of the coercive powers of the culture which have silenced them or led them to silence themselves. Or to put it differently, in learning to read a text as scripture, those whom the culture has denied positions and identities are freed from the terms of that denial. And at the same time, those who learn to read from a position of abusive power are offered the chance to learn an appropriate vulnerability through divestment, as all the structures on which their power depends are seen to be unjust, and liable to immanent reconfiguration.

This brings us, of course, back to Calvin's insight into the reading of scripture, and to his conviction that what one receives in reading is a saving knowledge of God. Such knowledge is of course, in his terms, rich and complex, but at its heart is the clarity which no longer confuses God with any other gods. We should learn from

⁶⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.5. The reference is to Romans 8.26.

scripture, Calvin writes, "that God, the Creator of the universe, can by sure marks be distinguished from all the throng of feigned gods."⁷⁰ Or in other words, the saving knowledge received in the centripetal moment of reading is in fact always knowledge which undermines idolatries of both power and impotence by revealing the defining and non-abusive power of the Creator of the universe, and thus equips the reader to read such knowledge out into the world.

As she does so, the reconfiguration of the self and of the world which emerges from this experience of divestment, and the subsequent reading out into the world of a fresh coherence, result in what Kort calls "normalization", a state which for all its acknowledged impermanence is nevertheless characterised by gratitude.⁷¹ In this state of normalization, identity is received again as a gift, and does not need to be reinforced and sharpened over against others or even over against the claims of the culture. By receiving her identity from another, the reader is unbound from the possessiveness of the culture such that she is no longer defined by it, seeking neither to embrace its values nor to find her only value in opposing them. And in the process of this normalization, the reader receives a certain clarity, even though her reconfigured world remains ambiguous and subject to change. And it is out of that clarity, grounded not in certainty but in the always unsettling imperative of departure and return, that the reader who was without positions and identities in the culture experiences the possibility of empowerment, the invitation to prophetic witness in the midst of a culture of accumulation, violence, and self-promotion, and the courage required for both.

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.1.

⁷¹ Kort, p. 132.

Here again, however, Calvin's instinct for the paradox involved in the movement of reading, the movement of departure and return, is unerring. For while, on the one hand, he holds that piety, that human orientation of reverence and love of God, is rooted in knowledge of God's character, yet that knowledge, when received, becomes also knowledge of the self, self-understanding of the most profound kind.⁷² It follows, therefore, that those moments of greatest clarity turn out to be not only unrepeatable moments of possibility with regard to dignified and courageous prophetic witness; they remain, at the same time, moments of confusion and loss, as the very knowledge of God which makes them possible issues in an intrusive self-knowledge which again threatens to reconfigure everything. And then the clarity itself becomes a mirror to the culture's own tendency, and ours, to confuse God with stability and self-protection, and to underwrite that very culture of accumulation, violence, and self-promotion even as we bear witness against it.

And so, in a sense, there is no closure in reading, only the experience of being caught up in the risk-filled yet life-giving rhythms of departure and return which bear down upon us as we read, and which compel our attention even as we become aware of their implications for both for self-knowledge, and for life in the world with all its insistent ethical demands.

An understanding of the functional authority of scripture as being rooted in the inner narrative dynamic of the canon itself, therefore, will privilege an expansive, unsettling, and self-questioning engagement with scripture on the part of the churches which reflects that narrative dynamic. It will both encourage and undergird those practices of lively interpretation which invite fracture for the sake of insight, disjuncture for the sake of possibility, self-loss for the sake of self-knowledge, and

⁷² Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1-3.

divestment for the sake of a radical availability. It will help to hold open the possibility of a fresh embodiment of visible Christian unity for our time, grounded in the vulnerable public rhythms of self-questioning, divestment, risk, and transformation. And it will invite consideration of the ways in which such rhythms might form part of a hermeneutics of intrusion which both disciplines and enlivens the churches' self-understanding and patterns of worship. And so it is to the question of ecclesiology that we now turn.

Chapter Four

Vivid Dangers: Towards an Interrupted Ecclesiology

“The Bible’s was an unlikely, movie-set world alongside our world. Light-shot and translucent in the pallid Sunday-school watercolors on the walls, stormy and opaque in the dense and staggering texts they read us placidly, sweet-mouthed and earnest, week after week, this world interleaved our waking world like a dream.

The adult members of society adverted to the Bible unreasonably often. What arcana! Why did they spread this scandalous document before our eyes? If they had read it, I thought, they would have hid it. They didn’t recognize the vivid danger that we would, through repeated exposure, catch a case of its wild opposition to their world.”¹

So writes Annie Dillard in her autobiography, *An American Childhood*, as she vividly recalls her Presbyterian Sunday school in Pittsburgh. Her adult memory of scriptural half verses and resonances as “stormy”, “opaque” and “wild” no doubt catches more of the truth of Scripture than many sermons. But much more importantly, perhaps, she evokes her childhood sense that a place in which the Bible was actually being read would be an unstable, restless place, a place of unexpected and perhaps even fearful transformations. Clearly, the dominant ecclesiology of her Presbyterian Sunday school, at least as practiced, was not up to the task. But what kind of ecclesiology would be? What kind of ecclesiology would provide room for such stormy and courageous reading, or emerge from its practice? That is the question to which in this chapter we now turn.

¹ Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (London: Picador, 1989), p. 134.

To begin, it may be helpful to return briefly to the shape of the argument of this thesis as it is emerging so far. A brief and initial overview of some of the key documents of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, documents which focused on the canon of Scripture held in common by the churches and on the hermeneutical challenges of the ecumenical movement, revealed a disappointingly limited use of Scripture itself as an imaginative or self-critical resource for the various tasks at hand. It was this initial survey which therefore prompted the formulation of the question which lies at the heart of this study, that is, whether and how a freshly conceived and embodied relationship of the churches to their canon of Scripture might now in the 21st century be able to furnish the ecumenical project with a new liveliness, integrity and depth.

In particular, and given that the promise of an embodied and *visible* unity has always been at the heart of the ecumenical movement, I suggested that one of the ongoing tasks for those who share a commitment to visible unity is that of imagining in ever-changing contexts how this unity might continue to take shape. More specifically, we need to ask how the ecumenical project might develop in a way which allows the churches to embrace an ongoing hermeneutics of intrusion, an interpretive paradigm which holds open at all times the possibility of the churches' being addressed from outside themselves even as their unity becomes more visible. What would be the visible outline or pattern of unity were the churches to allow for the possibility that such an address might interrupt or intrude upon even their hard-won ecumenical self-understanding, thus setting in motion a hermeneutical spiral of death, mourning, and vulnerable new life? Is it possible that the churches might construct for

themselves a hermeneutics of intrusion whose disruptive practice would nevertheless be at the service of their visible unity?

In attempting to answer this question, it has been my contention that the canon of Scripture provides a rich, and also significantly neglected, resource for beginning to construct such a hermeneutics of intrusion. In chapter 2 I argued on historical-critical grounds that the canonical texts themselves display, and thus invite, an intra-textual and open-ended process of interpretation and dissent as a primary mode of faithful reading. In this way, the texts themselves, precisely in their canonical form, embody the expectation of fresh insight, which is often granted only through the breaking apart of previous understandings. In the same way, the inner hermeneutical dynamic of the canon, and not just the individual texts it contains, becomes “canonical”, that is, functionally authoritative in the life of the churches.

In chapter 3, I continued to argue for the functional authority of the canonical texts on the grounds of their inherent narrative qualities as revealed by work in both literary and cultural studies. These narrative qualities of expansiveness, unsettling, and self-questioning suggest that the functional authority of these texts is not grounded in any inherent qualities of certainty or coherence but in their capacity both for the interrogation of the reader and for the ongoing reconfiguration of the community which engages with them in a systematic way. However, these same invitational qualities, which both solicit the reader’s engagement and insist that a serious, that is, respectful, reading should always keep other possible approaches in mind, can become in their own way seductive, offering endless possibilities for less demanding and effortful readings. And when they do, of course, they no longer engender

prophetic transformation in either readers or reading communities, but simply begin to exert a coercive and disengaged power of their own.

It is hard not to conclude, therefore, that the canon of Scripture, with its inner hermeneutical dynamic and its inherent narrative qualities, both invites and compels a hermeneutics of intrusion as a primary mode of right reading. And yet, if such a “stormy”, “wild” and transformative reading practice is to be engaged, what are the implications for the churches’ embodiment of visible unity? What kind of ecclesiology, what kind of community, can sustain such a practice? And what kind of church might be shaped into visible witness by the discipline of such reading? It is to these questions of ecclesiology that we now turn.

The Cultural-Linguistic Paradigm of George A. Lindbeck

My starting point for an exploration of what such an ecclesiology might look like will be the cultural-linguistic paradigm of George A. Lindbeck, as set out in his book, *The Nature of Doctrine*.² I am choosing to begin here not only because of the profound influence Lindbeck’s work has had on several generations of scholars and pastors,³ but also because of the specifically ecumenical context out of which Lindbeck’s proposals, by his own clear admission, took shape. Having been involved for many years in formal ecumenical dialogues of various kinds, he became puzzled by a phenomenon which seemed to recur with predictable frequency. Participants in a given ecumenical conversation, deeply engaged in attempting to plumb the depths of

² George A Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984).

³ See, for example, William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989); Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

their own convictions while opening themselves to a fresh understanding of others' doctrinal positions, would finally reach a long sought consensus, one which not only honoured the convictions of all but simultaneously drew on their respective insights to move the conversation forward.

And then, just as the celebrations began, a problem would arise. All participants would simultaneously embrace their newly discovered doctrinal consensus *and* at the same time insist on continuing to use their own traditional doctrinal formulations, almost as if nothing had changed. Clearly, this was not in the first instance a problem of reception, a question as to how believers of all traditions who had not themselves participated in such ecumenical dialogues might be best invited to consider their results. This was a question of the relationship between language and belief, and, perhaps, as Lindbeck would come to argue, of the way in which language makes belief possible in the first place.

Such, in any event, was Lindbeck's conclusion as he sought to construct a new conceptual framework for his thinking which would eventually become his cultural-linguistic model for the understanding of religious community. Rich in its implications, and much more deeply nuanced than some who have embraced Lindbeck's model seem to have understood,⁴ the cultural-linguistic paradigm understands religious traditions as comprehensive interpretive schemes which structure their adherents' experience of the world.

The key here is that, for Lindbeck, the interpretive framework is prior to the experience of the believer, and thus religion is "a communal phenomenon that shapes

⁴ See, for example, Robert P. Jones and Melissa C. Stewart, "The Unintended Consequences of Dixieland Postliberalism", *Cross Currents*, Vol 55, No 4 (Winter 2006); pp 506-521.

the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities.”⁵ In other words, “religious experience” is not a generic category, something common to the experience of human beings of all cultures and faiths but differently expressed according to the terms of their particular identities. People who reside in different religious traditions actually *have* different experiences, because “it is necessary to have the means for expressing an experience in order to have it, and the richer our expressive or linguistic system, the more subtle, varied, and differentiated can be our experience.”⁶

Within this framework, then, a doctrine becomes not so much a propositional statement of what is true, but something akin to a grammatical rule. And such rules, by virtue of their unquestioned status, enable both extended conversation and the emergence of a way of life which enables those who “speak the language” to engage constructively with what is most important and compelling in their lives, personally, corporately, and ethically.

According to this model, therefore, the integrity of a religious tradition does not lie in the correspondence of its principal doctrinal claims with some form of foundational, ontological truth. In an ecumenical context, such an understanding would inevitably lead to a situation in which some positions would necessarily be deemed to be right, or at least better, and others wrong. Nor does the integrity of a tradition lie in its ability to communicate with beauty, precision, or ethical weight a common human experience of the divine. In an ecumenical context, the danger of such an approach would be that the consideration of different formative experiences would lead to some being deemed less authentic than others.

⁵ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p 33.

⁶ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p 37.

Rather, according to the cultural-linguistic model, the integrity of a religious tradition is seen in the way of life it engenders among those who place themselves within it, and not in its conformity to any previously established truths or norms. This does not mean, of course, that such a tradition is necessarily irrational, or hopelessly subjective. On the contrary, it invites rigorous testing and evaluation on the basis of its own criteria, that is, on the basis of its “ability to provide an intelligible interpretation in its own terms of the varied situations and realities adherents encounter.”⁷ In this context, therefore, Christian theology turns out to be a kind of description of the world as it is perceived from within the tradition, and an exploration of the profound implications of such an angle of sight. In some of the most well-known words he ever wrote, Lindbeck characterized Christian theology as a process by which reality is re-described within a scriptural framework rather than translated into extra-scriptural categories. “It is the text, so to speak,” Lindbeck wrote, “which absorbs the world, rather than the world, the text.”⁸

Such a brief summary can hardly do justice to the thoughtfulness and, in many respects, the generosity of Lindbeck’s paradigm, which has opened up new prospects not only for inter-church relationships but also for a more mature and responsible Christian consideration of the Church’s ongoing relationship to Judaism, and for the development of much needed paradigms for inter-religious engagement.⁹ And the cultural-linguistic model has had other great strengths, perhaps chief among them the recognition that to a very significant extent, people’s identities are constructed by the communities to which they belong. We may be born, but we are certainly also made,

⁷ George A Lindbeck, “Towards a Postliberal Theology”, in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. By James J Buckley. (London: SCM Press, 2002); pp 190-191.

⁸ Lindbeck, “Towards a Postliberal Theology”, p 178.

⁹ See Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability”, in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp 223-252.

what we are. And so in a very real sense one does not become Christian simply by baptism or by the public assent to certain doctrinal statements, important or necessary as either or both of those acts may be. One becomes Christian by being nurtured within and learning the convictions, ways of speaking, and practices of a given Christian community, and by learning, too, that the embrace of these practices may set one at odds with the wider ethnic or national community to which one also belongs.¹⁰ For that world has been “absorbed by the text”, and can now only be described and engaged with from within the cultural-linguistic framework which makes that very description and engagement possible in the first place. For Lindbeck, then, it makes no sense to talk about Christian faith apart from its embodiment in a practicing community, for the practicing community is the core interpretive location for everything which follows.¹¹

Of course, to affirm that the integrity and viability of a religious tradition, as well as the meaningfulness of its linguistic practices, are linked to its social embodiment and publicly observable way of life is to return to one of the questions with which we began, that of the churches’ embodiment of visible unity. Within Lindbeck’s framework the churches, whatever else they may be, are visible and observable in an almost anthropological sense. And once the questions of visibility

¹⁰ It is easy to forget that this understanding can have some very real and costly consequences. The courage of the founders of ECONI, Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland, in 1985 will long be remembered, as its creation marked a kind of public declaration on the part of some self-described evangelical Protestants that faithful Christian discipleship within their own divided political context might demand of them a loyalty to Christ which would be greater than, and non-continuous with, their loyalty to the union with Great Britain, and to the political parties which promised to uphold it. (See Glenn Jordan, *Not of this World? Evangelical Protestants in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2001); pp 184-186.) And of course the tendency to confuse a kind of naïve and unquestioning patriotism with faithful Christian witness is a besetting sin of Protestantism in the United States, and was no less so at the time of Lindbeck’s writing.

¹¹ This is not, of course, the same thing as claiming that only those who are Christian themselves can have anything to say about Christian faith or witness. It is simply to acknowledge the impossibility of there being in the world something called Christian faith apart from the cultural-linguistic framework that makes Christian language and practice possible in the first place.

and integrity are raised in the same breath, the fault lines in Lindbeck's model begin to display their own visibility. For there is a darker, often more fractured, and certainly more painful experience of religious community than Lindbeck's model seems easily able to acknowledge. If the text absorbs the world, how can we be sure that it will not also absorb, and somehow render powerless, its own self-critical capacities in the world? Whose is the voice that will be able to interrupt the text?

It is precisely in response to these sorts of questions, themselves born of the lived and visible experience of Christian community, which have given rise to the most serious and important criticisms of Lindbeck's model. Many of these criticisms have come from feminist scholars and pastors, who have perhaps seen the cultural-linguistic model's fault lines most clearly precisely because they share with Lindbeck a vivid awareness of the shaping power of culture, and of religious cultures.¹² And so there is some irony in the fact that at the heart of what I deem to be the most significant critique of Lindbeck's model lies a question mark around the implied romanticizing of community life, and an apparent reluctance to acknowledge the negative aspects of life within a religious tradition, particularly for those who are not part of the community's mainstream.

For example, there is no acknowledgment in the cultural-linguistic model that communities are often defined by their most dominant voices, and that these voices, by virtue of their prominence, often tend to conservatism. There is a failure to account for the role that gendered relations of power can and do play in forming communities and practices, nor any acknowledgment of their powerful role in acts of isolation and exclusion. There is a silence regarding the realities of violence and secrecy which can

¹² For an overview of communitarian perspectives as they relate to theology, see Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), pp 144-151.

lie at the heart of a religious community. And in a sense the whole approach of the cultural-linguistic paradigm, even though it is understood to be life-shaping, is descriptive rather than prescriptive. It is not clear, therefore, how appropriate and healthy levels of corporate self-criticism are to be nurtured and maintained, or how, in the community's common life, the voicing of dissent or of creative alternatives to the status quo can be encouraged, or at least safe-guarded. It is not clear, in short, whether and how the model might be able to embrace within its self-description what I have called a hermeneutic of intrusion, an interpretive self-understanding which insists on holding open the possibility that the community might be addressed in unexpected ways from outside itself, and further insists that such disruption, for all that it is often unwelcome, can be life-transforming.

The Paradigm Revisited

(i)

We will return to the question of how a hermeneutic of intrusion might take shape in this context, and to an exploration of the sort of ecclesiology which might sustain it as a visible witness to Christian unity. In the meantime, however, and in spite of its shortcomings, the cultural-linguistic model itself prompts a number of useful insights which will be helpful in addressing both of these matters.

One of the criticisms which has been made against Lindbeck is that when he suggests doctrine should be understood to have a regulative function, akin to the regulative function exercised by the rules of grammar in a spoken language, he is both acknowledging the flexibility of this doctrinal "grammar" and, at the same time,

making its content unavailable for interrogation. He is, therefore, privileging a single discourse in the formation of Christian identity at the expense of the less prominent or occluded accounts which also make up part of the body of usable tradition within the Christian churches.¹³

The criticism is a fair one, but in some senses it does not go far enough. The question is not simply whether and how such doctrinal grammar can itself be the object of thoughtful and contextual critique. The question also has to do with the primary role of grammar within a language, and thus, in Lindbeck's model, also of doctrine within a cultural-linguistic framework.

Fluency in one's own first language, and in any additional languages one learns to speak well, involves a knowledge of grammatical rules or linguistic conventions, though much of the time this knowledge is hardly conscious. One simply "knows" that a particular sentence structure sounds right, or, if attempting to speak in a second, learned language, hears all too clearly the awkwardness of one's own grammatical constructions without yet knowing quite how to make them more fluent. The acquisition of fluency, therefore, involves an internalizing of the rules of grammar in which the learner of a language moves from a conscious and highly deliberate use of these learned rules to a more semi-conscious sense of what "sounds right", and then, as fluency increases, to a more nuanced and instinctive use of the language's own rich possibilities. One could say, therefore, that to become fluent in a language, a mastery of the rules of grammar is necessary, but hardly sufficient. For at the most profound

¹³ See, for example, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Is there a non-sexist Bible in this church? A feminist case for the priority of interpretive communities", in L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley, eds., *Theology and Scriptural Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998), pp 63-80; Linell Elizabeth Cady, "Identity, Feminist Theory, and Theology", in Rebecca S Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney, eds., *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), pp 17-32.

level of fluency, that needed, for example, to write poetry or to employ the more subtle literary devices of irony or humour, you need not only a grammatical proficiency but a more than rational grasp of when and how those grammatical conventions might be stretched even to breaking point, precisely so that the communicative possibilities of the language can be developed most fully.

Insofar as Christian doctrine has a regulative function akin to that of grammar, therefore, it only reaches its fullest potential by being transcended in a similar way. In a sense, this should come as no surprise, as the very vocabulary of Christian faith implies a kind of provisionality, speaking as it does of forgiveness and conversion, exile and pilgrimage, and hope that is unseen.¹⁴ Even more to the point, as we saw in an earlier chapter,¹⁵ one of the somewhat counter-intuitive insights of a canonical tradition is that the more fixed a significant text or a language is understood to be, the greater and more creative must be the possibilities for its ongoing interpretation, at least if the text is to retain its significance within the community. In any case, however, the fluency of speech which makes a text-based community “imaginatively and practically habitable”¹⁶ will certainly require an embrace and a competent use of its doctrinal grammar, but it will inevitably require more. It will require an understanding of fluency which instinctively accepts that while religious faith may be made possible in the first place by the interpretive framework which gives it expression, that same framework will itself become subject to fracture and redesign as a lived and habitable tradition moves into new contexts and cultures.

¹⁴ Rowan Williams has made this point with his usual eloquence. See Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p 49.

¹⁵ See Chapter 2.

¹⁶ The phrase is Lindbeck's. See Lindbeck, “Scripture, Consensus and Community”, in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, pp.201-222. The quote is on p. 218.

(ii)

Once we accept that even the most fixed and regulatory rules of grammar, while structuring a language and making discourse possible in the first place, also contain within themselves the seeds of their own re-working, another insight made available by the cultural-linguistic model begins to emerge. It is an insight which has profound implications for the ecumenical project for visible unity, as well as for Christian self-understanding in the various habitable contexts in which their communities take shape. And the insight is simply this, that no believer, and no community of faith, lives within the frame of a single cultural-linguistic paradigm, no matter how powerful its shaping structure on their lives. We live, always, at the crossroads, and even those who share a Christian identity, living as they do in different cultures and contexts, are subject in different ways to the structuring of the multiple linguistic worlds they inhabit.

One could even argue, in fact, that the New Testament owes its existence to the crossroads at which the multiple cultural-linguistic paradigms of Jew and Gentile believer met and, to some extent, deconstructed one another as different ways of speaking, different practices, and different memories were brought together in one community. And here, too, there is a certain untapped layer of insight in Lindbeck's model. For part of what grounds his approach, as we have seen, is his contention that in a very fundamental way the task of Christian hermeneutics "is to interpret all reality religiously by capturing the universe in the embrace of biblical language"¹⁷. The classic hermeneutical framework which makes this interpretive work possible, he argues, invites the faithful to read the Bible

¹⁷ George A Lindbeck. "The Gospel's Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability", in James J Buckley, ed., *The Church in a Postliberal Age* (London: SCM Press, 2002), p. 241.

“as a canonically and narrationally unified and internally glossed (that is, self-referential and self-interpreting) whole centered on Jesus Christ, and telling the story of the dealings of the Triune God with his people and his world in ways which are typologically . . . applicable to the present.”¹⁸

However, it is not Lindbeck’s precise definition of this classic hermeneutical framework which is most interesting, but his description of its origins, which draws on widely accepted accounts of the early church. As countless other scholars have also reminded us, the early church was not distinguished from the Jewish community by its scripture; on the contrary, the scripture they shared continued for some time to draw them into one another’s company. What came to distinguish the church from the synagogue was the former’s emerging interpretive framework for reading these same texts, a framework which struggled to recalibrate everything in light of the disruptive and, for the church, life-giving Christ event. At the same time, of course, oral traditions which had grown around the life and continuing presence of the risen Jesus began and continued to circulate, and some of these were soon written down. As they circulated, they began to form an extended canon of scripture. In the meantime, gatherings for prayer and worship at which meals were shared began also to produce their own hymns and liturgical affirmations. Out of all of this, Lindbeck argues, came a rule of faith, or way of reading, which continued to guide the Church for centuries and to shape its identity.

For Lindbeck, the elaboration of this classic hermeneutic and outline of its origins is a prelude to his argument concerning its gradual loss since the Reformation. For our purposes, however, what is most thought-provoking is the reminder that

¹⁸ Lindbeck, “Scripture, Consensus and Community”, in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, p. 203. See also his discussion of the classic hermeneutic on pp 204-208.

Christian scriptural interpretation had its origins in the disjuncture, the discontinuity, the interruption, of the Christ event. Because of what the followers of Jesus remembered of his life, knew of his death, and claimed with regard to his risen presence among them, the scriptures could no longer be read in precisely the same way. At the same time, however, they remained the primary language, and provided the most fruitful categories, for making sense of what they had experienced. Their scriptural framework for understanding what had happened to them had to be stretched to breaking point, and yet it still provided the bedrock on which alone such a risk could be taken. Somehow, the grammar of their faith had to retain its regulative function while at the same time taking on a profoundly new shape in the wake of an act of interruption or intrusion of the most radical and transformative kind.

Now if it is fair to claim that the classic hermeneutic, as Lindbeck describes it, had the historic role of performing a certain regulatory function and unifying the church in the West around a theological core, then it also seems only fair to acknowledge and credit the fact that this classic hermeneutic, this unifying framework, retained at its heart its origins in an event of disruptive and re-creative proportions. For the early church, this event was the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, an event which in theological as well as historical terms has since been marked by terms such as “unique” or “unrepeatable” or “once and for all”. At the same time, however, if the classic hermeneutic has its origins in the process by which a scripturally grounded faith was painfully deconstructed and then slowly re-worked into something which might be found to be useable and habitable in profoundly changed circumstances, then surely a willingness to engage with this inner dynamic is as much a part of the classic hermeneutic as any rule of faith. From a Christian perspective, this is

not in any way to challenge or attempt to diminish the world-changing import of the Christ event, or of the theological reflection to which it has given rise for 20 centuries. It is, however, to suggest that what continuity there is in the community's faith may be grounded not in historical or doctrinal certainties, but in the risking of continued expressions of trust in the God whose presence makes both the fracture of the world more likely, and the hope of an utterly new future beyond every breaking point more capable of being imagined.

We could perhaps also put this in a slightly different way. If the cultural-linguistic paradigm provides us with the possibility of the experience of Christian faith, then the character of the faith it makes possible will to some extent be determined by the capacity of this model to allow on an ongoing basis for the disjuncture at its heart. It must not only embrace the shaping power of the classic hermeneutic, but also honour the hermeneutic of intrusion which lies at its core and constantly renews its energy. Whether in the coming of the one whom his followers were to name as the Christ, or in the upheaval of 1st century community formation across cultural and linguistic boundaries, or in the continuing confusion of cultural-linguistic worlds which every single worshipper has brought to Christian practice in every tradition ever since, that moment of interruption, or resistance, or dissent must be recognized for what it is: that disjuncture which insists on holding open the possibility that the community might yet be addressed in unexpected ways from outside itself, and thereby be subjected to that unlooked for transformation which is in the deep structure of Christian faith.

For all the "canonically and narrationally unified" character of Lindbeck's classic hermeneutic, the Christian faith is not, after all, a meta-narrative in the now popular

sense of that word, a unifying and totalizing scheme of things which has a place for everything, generally determined by the most powerful, and maintains everything in its place. On the contrary, the Christian faith has always been eschatological, and expectant, looking for and anticipating what is to come next in the form of what has been promised but whose shape is not yet fully known. If the Christian narrative has a certain unity, as most would argue, it also has a certain provisionality, for it is a story which has not yet come to an end. Unproven in its reliability, and to the truth of which one can only as yet bear witness, it is a story whose “last word” will be spoken by God to the church as much as to the world.¹⁹

And yet one could argue that this very open-endedness is itself a kind of scripturally attuned coherence, a refusal to confine the possibilities of the future within an experienced present, and thus a readiness to hold out the hope that the future will be defined more by what is still to be given than by what has already occurred.²⁰ In another context, Richard Kearney has written about the way in which the imagination performs a similar function in the work of Gaston Bachelard.²¹ The act of imagination does not simply arise from within the self, or presumably, from within the memory of the community. On the contrary, it is “an acoustic act”²², an act of both alertness and listening which directs one to pay attention to what might be intruding upon the self from outside. As such, it is neither immobilized by the limited repertory

¹⁹ See Gerald Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); p 23. See also Brian Blount, “The Last Word On Biblical Authority”. Address to the 2000 Covenant Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, 3 November 2000. <http://www.covenantnetwork.org/blount.html>. Accessed 01/11/01.

²⁰ I am grateful to Cyprian Love, OSB, of Glenstal Abbey, Murroe, Co Limerick for sharing with me his then unpublished paper, “Christian Doctrine and Theories of Emergence”. His exploration of the relevance for theology of recent theories of emergent causality has stimulated and encouraged my thought in this section of the argument.

²¹ Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: From Husserl to Lyotard*. (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1991); pp 88-111.

²² Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, p 95.

of the way things are, nor dangerously led off course by fantasies which, because they cannot be embodied, are in the end only a form of escapism. In this understanding, Kearney argues, Bachelard's imagination "succeeds in preserving the claims of both iconoclasm (as a critical surpassing of the real) and incarnation (a commitment to the real)."²³ There is thus a profound yet tensile ethical content to imagination in this sense, "an intentionality of self-transcendence rather than of self-fascination".²⁴

In the context, therefore, of Lindbeck's practically habitable cultural-linguistic framework, an insistence on maintaining sufficient room for the disruptions of a hermeneutics of intrusion will have ethical as well as theological consequences. The integrity of the community will indeed be bound up with its way of life, but not, or not only, because stated doctrinal limits and ethical norms are being observed in practice. On the contrary, what public integrity the community has will be rooted in the lived knowledge that at the heart of its life lies the experience of having been intruded upon in all its certainties, and undone and remade as a result. Such a community, surely, will be learning, however imperfectly, to keep an ear attuned to the unexpected address from outside itself which, as it now knows, can be full of promise. And it will also be learning to inhabit its own moral and ethical certainties with a bit more humility, because it is often, after all, only the fractured practice of love which enables love's creation.

²³ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, p 93.

²⁴ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, p 102.

(iii)

Finally, it is also worth returning to Lindbeck's theological approach in order to take a closer look at what seems to me to have been an unhelpful and in certain ways inaccurate distinction, made perhaps more by others than by Lindbeck himself, between Lindbeck's own way of doing theology, to which he gave the name "postliberal", and the "revisionist" alternative.²⁵ The prevailing caricatures suggest two diametrically opposed alternatives, when in fact the reality is, as usual, much more complex.

In very broad and general terms, the postliberal theologian works from the assumption that Christian integrity in the world is grounded in a continuing exploration of the internal coherence of Christian faith, and of the practice to which that exploration gives rise. Those who engage in theological reflection seek to describe the world as it looks from within the tradition, that is, to interpret it from within the cultural-linguistic framework which is the Christian tradition, and then to explore the practical implications of such an angle of sight for life in the world. The mode of engagement of the postliberal theologian with the world is catechesis.

The revisionist theologian, on the other hand, understands Christian integrity in the world to be grounded in an ability to communicate across intellectual cultures, and to engage with the pressing issues of the day alongside those who do not necessarily know the language or share the assumptions of Christian faith. The theologian is

²⁵ The term "revisionist" was proposed by David Tracy to describe his own work. With regard to the term "postliberal", William C Placher has pointed out that in some ways it was an unfortunate choice. Placher argues that when Lindbeck began the work which would reach its final form in *The Nature of Doctrine*, the term "postliberal" would have had rather more radical overtones, but by the 1980s it was more likely to be associated with political conservatism. See William C Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralist Conversation*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989); p 22, note 23.

called to give a public account, in the language and philosophical categories of the day, of what Christians claim to be true, and to do so in a way that is comprehensible to reasonable intelligent people, whatever their background. The mode of engagement of the revisionist theologian with the world is translation.

Now it seems to me that the profoundly artificial distinction between these two approaches will be obvious to anyone who has spent time in a local Christian community, or indeed who has any interest in religious communities from a sociological perspective. To begin with, at least in the cultures of Western Europe and North America where Christian traditions have been historically dominant, the internal language of the Christian faith has long since leached out into the wider culture and, to a certain extent, taken on a life of its own. A young woman who regularly participates in worship in a local congregation, for example, probably brings with her an understanding of “mission” which owes more to the educational philosophy of the further education college where she teaches than to the New Testament. And to the extent that she engages in the kind of critical self-reflection on her life which Christian practice invites, she will become aware that she belongs to multiple language worlds, all of which exercise catechetical, or at least formative, influence over her thinking. To complicate matters further, if her annual training day at the college included a session on how constructively to address the tensions which arise in the context of teaching people of different cultural backgrounds, this same young woman may come to wonder at her own congregation’s failure to acknowledge its own issues of inter-cultural belonging.

It is likely, therefore, that every person seated, whether in a pew or on a floor cushion, in any gathered Christian community is profoundly multi-lingual, and is

constantly, if only unconsciously, negotiating her multiple belongings in several cultural-linguistic worlds. While all those present will be learning, as beginners or as more accomplished speakers, fluency in one dialect or another of the Christian language, differences in understanding between them will inevitably occur. And these will be as likely to arise from the uncomfortable meeting of the different cultural-linguistic configurations present in one community as from explicit differences in Christian dialect.

One important consequence of this multi-lingual reality is that the catechetical process of re-description of the world within a scriptural framework not only forms Christian identity, as Lindbeck has argued, but perhaps also sets a pattern for how the work of theology responds to the intrusion into its own worldview of what does not easily fit within its own framework. The work of catechesis surely transforms, or renders open to transformation, not only those to whom it is directed but also those who engage in it on their behalf, and in so doing, come up against the sharp end of the multi-lingual reality I have just described.

Lindbeck has called the message of the gospel “untranslatable”²⁶ from its own cultural-linguistic context into any other, but by this he means something quite specific. He is not suggesting that those who live as Christians within their own cultural-linguistic world are unable to communicate in any way with those who do not share their context. Rather, he seems to be drawing on the much more common sense in which we use the word “untranslatable”, by which we mean not “incapable of explanation”, but “not able to be rendered into another language without considerable loss”. In this more familiar sense of the word, a native English speaker,

²⁶ Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability”, in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, p 223-252.

now also fluent in French, can easily explain to other English speakers what a particular French expression means, while also enabling them to see that there is simply no corresponding phrase in English.

There will, however, be a number of possible translations of this particular expression, and of the sentence in which it is used. They will all, no matter how felicitous, represent a betrayal of the original, as any translation invariably does. And yet, while all will strive for accuracy, some will perhaps achieve something more: a loss which is also a gain, a rendering which simultaneously falls short of the original and yet in some way deepens or extends its meaning. In one sense, in Lindbeck's sense, the expression remains untranslatable. In another sense, however, the necessary act of translation, while never quite capturing the meaning of the original, accomplishes something else, something quite unexpected. It interrupts, fractures, and thus transforms, the hearing of the original.

And so it is fair to say, I think, that not only in its engagement with a multi-lingual world, but also in conversation with itself, the Christian tradition engages in both catechesis and translation, formation and transformation, and is potentially enriched and challenged by both sorts of engagement. From the revisionist perspective, a language must always be translatable, or ways must be found to make it so, for the purposes of necessary conversation and exchange, and even to enable the possibility of conversion. That is true. From a postliberal perspective, however, the translation is always approximate, falls short, and is never without loss, and in that sense there is a fundamental untranslatability at the core of language, analogous, one might say, to the incommunicable core of every human person. That is also true. However, while the tension between these two perspectives remains, there is no

inherent dichotomy between them. The nature of language, and the nature of life in a religious community in the world, make them inseparable.

Having given considerable attention to a critique of Lindbeck's position, however,²⁷ I would also like to note in passing that there are at least two questions which are fundamental to the revisionist position, and with which any serious ecclesiology will also need to engage. The first has to do with the revisionist's search for common ground, a shared language, and a degree of mutual intelligibility across religious and philosophical boundaries. And the question is this: is there a point at which the need to maintain this hard-won common ground, and to sustain the necessary conversations which a shared language makes possible, becomes its own imperative, and ends up by silencing the intrusive voice which both destabilises and renews the Christian tradition?

In a sense, this is one of the questions which, within the context of the documents of the 20th century ecumenical movement, remained unanswered, as we saw in Chapter 1. Both *Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions* (1963) and *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels* (1998) succeeded in raising, but did not answer, the question of how a hermeneutic of intrusion might be embodied within an ecumenical Christian self-understanding which holds unity and coherence to be two of its highest values. And if this tension is difficult, even painful, to resolve within the Christian tradition itself, it may shape even more powerfully those increasingly important and welcome conversations in which both Christians and those of other religious traditions and spiritual perspectives are engaged.

²⁷ See above, pp 130-132.

However, there is a second, and perhaps even more important, question which must be asked of the revisionist perspective. What place is given to the canon of Scripture within this framework? Given that Scripture has a functional authority within the Christian tradition which may be duly recognized but is not accepted or embraced by those outside it, can the language and narrative images of Scripture play any role in the public account of Christian truth claims which the revisionist theologian feels compelled to make? Or is the scriptural paradigm unhelpful, even dispensable, once some form of philosophical or political common ground has been established? Surely there is something too apologetic about a purely revisionist approach to theology which seems to place all responsibility for dialogue in the hands of Christians who are willing and able to express their most fundamental confessional identity in the preferred language of others, as if there could be nothing in the Christian community's own speaking and living in the world which might interested others in learning such a language or storied way of life. So what role can Scripture play in the nurture of public conversation about things that matter to all in a multi-lingual, inter-cultural world?²⁸

Towards an Interrupted Ecclesiology:

The Church as a Hermeneutical Community of Intrusion

I have argued that any sharp distinction between the postliberal and revisionist perspectives is a false one, and that any vital Christian community is engaged, in varying degrees, in both catechesis, the interpretation of the world from within a

²⁸ I am aware, of course, that this question is not new, and that David Tracy, in particular, has sought to address it by designating the Christian Bible a "classic text", that is, a text which addresses important human questions in such a way that it can be experienced as significant or compelling by non-Christians, even those who have no affiliation or familiarity with its religious and cultural context. See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986), p 132.

Christian cultural-linguistic framework, and translation, a public accounting for what Christians believe in a form which is accessible to the prevailing intellectual culture. If that is the case, however, we must ask whether the only workable alternative perspective is a kind of compromise between the two approaches, or whether there is another way of conceptualizing this whole debate.

I believe that there is, and it is rooted precisely in the character of the local church as it lives this bilingual reality in the world, and engages in translation and catechism simultaneously. The strength of each form of engagement is found in the necessity of its preferred mode: for translation, the articulation of pastoral and theological insight in a language that others can understand, and for catechism, a witness to the gospel on its own terms, a witness whose integrity is finally more important to the churches than its persuasive power.

It is the exact nature of this integrity, however, on which everything turns. From the perspective of the cultural-linguistic model, as we have noted, the integrity of a religious tradition is seen in the way of life it engenders among those who inhabit it. The question of how, and by whom, such visible integrity is to be recognized and named, however, particularly if it is contested, is left largely unanswered. At the same time, as we have also seen, the cultural-linguistic model displays its most significant weakness at precisely this point, when it does not make sufficient provision for appropriate practices of corporate self-questioning or nurture a common life which is sufficiently able to host voices of internal dissent.

All of which suggests that the concept of integrity in this context must have a quite specific meaning. It cannot be about internal consistency alone, particularly when we are talking about churches who claim to be rooted in a biblical tradition that

often privileges the experience of dislocation, the embrace of risk, and an awareness of provisionality in human arrangements. But neither, as the postliberal perspective rightly insists, is it necessarily about the reframing of a community's identity and convictions in ways which make them more accessible, or less unsettling, to those around you.

It is rather the case, I am arguing, that integrity in this context has to do with the church's willingness to become a living embodiment of the struggle to embrace its biblically grounded identity *in public view*, as a hermeneutical community of intrusion. Its work of both catechesis and translation will go on, as they must, in visible and audible ways. But what will also be visible and audible will be the hermeneutical intrusions to which the community remains open, whether from its own internal non-conformist and unsettled voices or from the questions, dismissals, and challenges of others. Such a community will not underestimate either the value or the shaping power of the cultural-linguistic framework in which it lives, and which arguably makes its own life possible in the first place. It will, however, acknowledge the continuing need and inevitability for its own internally referenced self-description to be addressed, put in question, and even undone, in unexpected ways. And in so doing, it will publicly bear witness to the learned insight that such disruption, for all that it is often unwelcome, can be life-transforming.

What will be visible and audible, therefore, will be an integrity which, however impressive at times, remains provisional, which is marked by struggle as well as celebration, betrayal as well as faithfulness, and failure as well as forgiveness. The unity of such a church will be a unity of engagement, a unity of suffering and interdependence, of the call to faithful witness in the face of the knowledge of one's

own betrayals. For only such a unity will finally be capable of testifying to what Christians claim to be true, that in the visible and joyful letting go of much that we had once counted on is found not only the promise but the gift of life, passionate, world-interrupting, graced, and transformative. Such a church will not buttress its identity either by denying that it is capable of sin, or by claiming that it is no longer the church when it does. It will instead embrace “that combination of unbreakable communal loyalty despite unflinching recognition of unbearable communal sins characteristic of Jesus and the prophets.”²⁹

Such an interrupted ecclesiology will only be sustained and nourished by an ecumenical church, a church which is as conscious of and committed to its catholic identity as it is to its grounded local existence.³⁰ While some of the transformative interruptions which mark and shape the life of the church will come from those who place themselves well outside the Christian tradition, others will have their origins closer to home. A Christian community which accepts its own recurring need to be startled and undone by a fresh preaching of the gospel will look to the wider ecumenical community for an articulation of the words it needs to hear. Those whom we name as our brothers and sisters in Christ may not be any more faithful at this than we are, but they are the only ones available to offer us this familiar yet surprising articulation of the good news.³¹

²⁹ George A. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, p. 246.

³⁰ Here the pattern of the New Testament churches comes to mind, with their frequent exchange of delegates and letters, a pattern mirrored in the Living Letters of the World Council of Churches, small ecumenical teams who visit other countries in order to listen, learn, and encourage one another. They are being organised in the context of the WCC’s Decade to Overcome Violence, and as a preparation for the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in 2011.

³¹ Katherine P Meyer, “Ambiguity, Failure and Ecumenical Practice”, in Joe Egan and Thomas R Whelan, eds., *City Limits: Mission Issues in Postmodern Times*, (Dublin: Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy, 2004), p 64.

This is entirely in keeping, I suggest, with some of the claims made for an ecumenical ecclesiology by Ulrich Duchrow as long ago as 1981.³² Even though the World Council of Churches established early on that membership in the WCC did not imply acceptance of a particular doctrine of the nature and unity of the church,³³ Duchrow argued that certain ecclesiological claims are implied by and undergird the very existence of the WCC. The most significant of these holds that since there is a creedal or confessional requirement for membership, member churches are necessarily engaged in the ongoing work of self-examination which such a creedal basis implies, as well as that of calling others to account, however provisionally, for their own fidelity to the biblical and apostolic witness. In this ongoing and often difficult exchange, there is at least some scaffolding for a more fully developed ecumenical ecclesiology.³⁴

In addition, there is some reason to think that such a model of interrupted ecclesiology will have a greater political integrity, as it will be capable both of valuing that embodiment of unity which takes the form of hard-won consensus and shared witness, and, at the same time, of moving beyond one of the great but flawed dreams of modernity, that those who respectfully sit around the same table seeking a common mind will eventually find what they seek. Once one accepts the fact that this will not always be the case,³⁵ the intentional formation and nurture of relationships among those whose perspectives differ is likely to assume more importance rather

³² Ulrich Duchrow, *Conflict Over the Ecumenical Movement: Confessing Christ Today in the Universal Church*. Translated from the German by David Lewis. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981).

³³ The Toronto Statement ("The Church, the Churches, and the World Council of Churches: The Ecclesiological Significance of the World Council of Churches") was received by the Central Committee of the WCC which met in Toronto in 1950. A brief overview of its significance can be found in Nicholas Lossky, José Míguez Bonino, John Pobee, Tom Stransky, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Pauline Webb, eds., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), pp 1008-1010.

³⁴ Duchrow, *Conflict Over the Ecumenical Movement*, p 326.

³⁵ See above Chapter 1, pp. 14-16, where I refer to the importance for the Louvain document of this recognition.

than less. There is a sense in which the greater the visible unity of the churches, the greater the need for vigilance with regard to the internal dynamics of their relationships.

It is, of course, precisely the recognition of this need which is part of what characterises the model of the church as a hermeneutical community of intrusion. In this model the local church in each place has its own distinctiveness and bounded sense of itself, while at the same time its deep catholicity is rooted in a necessary attentiveness to the disruptive voices which sooner or later call that sense of self into question. And that necessary attentiveness, in its turn, implies a local and visible embodiment which is spacious enough for those voices to get a hearing.

Margaret Canovan, in an essay on toleration, has drawn on the work of Hannah Arendt to make a somewhat similar point.³⁶ A political approach to the world, as opposed to a philosophical one, assumes a degree of lively, discursive instability, and mistrusts those forms of certainty, or truth, which undermine such political exchange by placing too high a value on agreement. Truth, in this sense, risks becoming coercive rather than freeing. And too much closeness, when rooted in fundamental convictions too uncritically shared, can become dangerous.

What binds people together, while at the same time enabling their political lives to flourish, Canovan argues, is not a common mind or universally shared perspective on the things that are important to them. Rather, it is their participation in a common, public discursive space, in which there is sufficient room for conversation partners to realign themselves as needed, or even to stand back for a time, in order to listen or

³⁶ Margaret Canovan, "Friendship, truth and politics: Hannah Arendt and toleration", in Susan Mendus, ed., *Justifying Toleration: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp 177 – 198.

gain perspective. In short, the only public space which will be able to hold people together in a common political task without coercion is a public space which gives due respect to the distance between them, which incorporates a degree of separation into its practice of community.³⁷

It might be argued, therefore, that a healthy ecclesiology is one which recognises that what binds its members to one another most deeply in Christ is not agreement, but common, respectful, and engaging space; in short, what binds them most effectively, and bears witness to their unity most effectively, is having enough room, enough room for the intrusive voice to gain a public hearing, and enough room for the transformations which may follow in its wake. Such a perspective becomes even more persuasive when one remembers the moving conviction of the Groupe des Dombes, that the only reliable path to unity is the conversion of the churches, “exactly at that point where they feel themselves strong and certain of their convictions”.³⁸

Insofar as the church exists as a hermeneutical community of intrusion, then, its ecclesiology will be an interrupted one. Its unity will not be shaped and made visible to the world only in the form of doctrinal agreement or political consensus, even though fruitful alignments of a doctrinal or political nature will frequently occur. Rather, the truest sign of its visible unity will be as concrete and provisional as a door jammed open. And what will be seen and heard will be Christian communities inhabiting and offering hospitality across different geographical worlds, different theological traditions, and different cultural-linguistic realities, engaged in the public struggle for that internal coherence and singleness of heart which show forth Christ,

³⁷ Margaret Canovan, “Friendship, truth and politics”, pp 182-183; p 194.

³⁸ Groupe des Dombes, *For the Conversion of the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), p. 5.

and yet living in public anticipation of the intrusive voice which will surely once more interrupt that coherence and reconfigure yet again that singleness of heart.³⁹

³⁹ I have explored some of these issues from a somewhat different perspective in “Ambiguity, Failure and Ecumenical Practice”, in Joe Egan and Thomas R Whelan, eds., *City Limits: Mission Issues in Postmodern Times* (Dublin: Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy, 2004), pp 57-67. My paper was prepared for a seminar marking the 10th anniversary of the Kimmage Mission Institute of Theology and Cultures, now the Department of Mission Theology and Cultures at the Milltown Institute. I am grateful to Tom Whelan for his kind invitation.

Rowan Williams has also argued that Christ is not “audible” only in consensus, but in “our readiness to decide, to take sides, as adult persons, and to live with the consequences and cost of that within the disciplines we share with other Christians of openness to the judgment of the Easter mystery.” Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 58-59.

Chapter Five

Places of Memory: An Interrupted Life of Praise

*“But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. [The Lord] said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”*¹

“How far is it possible,” Stephen Prickett writes, “in the words of the *Good News Bible’s* Preface, ‘to use language that is natural, clear, simple, and unambiguous,’ when the Bible is *not about* things that are natural, clear, simple, and unambiguous?”²

If the language of scripture is not always natural, clear, simple, and unambiguous, neither is the shape of Christian unity. And so it has been the aim of this thesis creatively to explore how ecumenical Christian self-understanding in the 21st century might be more imaginatively nourished by certain practices of lively engagement with texts which embody that same complexity. Such practices would be grounded in what I am calling a hermeneutic of intrusion, a flexible interpretive paradigm rooted in scripture’s own internal canonical dynamics. It is my argument that this paradigm can offer a way to uphold and practice the visible unity of the churches, while at the same time enabling them to embrace, as part of that very unity, those intrusions into their best understanding, and those interruptions of their richest forms of life, which herald an ongoing call to conversion. This interrupted ecclesiology allows for the possibility of a kind of truthful, fractured unity, whose visible expression

¹ Genesis 18.15 (NRSV).

² Stephen Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p 10 (emphasis in original). Quoted in Catherine Madsen, *The Bones Reassemble: Reconstituting Liturgical Speech*. (Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, Publishers, 2005), p 130.

is the public losing and finding of a Christian witness for our time, a destruction and reconstruction in plain sight of a life together into whose very fabric are woven both the failures and the hopes of the churches.

As I have tried to show, such a paradigm of visible unity, grounded in a hermeneutic of intrusion, will have a number of important features. It will be resistant to idolatry, understood as an uncritical assent to the present. In its patterns of faithfulness to the restless internal interpretive dynamic of scripture, it will make possible new ways to speak of God in the face of the destruction of the ways which were once life-giving but may no longer be so. In that sense, this paradigm of unity will be about becoming the church, not as some endlessly deferred ideal community but rather as those who receive the gift of a future in the midst of their own betrayals.

This paradigm of unity will embrace and affirm an understanding of what it is to be human in the world and before God which centres on our capacity to be reached, interrupted, or intruded upon by that which comes from outside ourselves. Over against the limited modern construct of progressively increasingly human understanding, this paradigm will be nourished by the narrative flow of departure and return, in which deeper knowledge issues in greater mystery, and the certainties which enable human life to go on are at the same time made vulnerable by the ordinary sorrows and inconsistencies of life in the world.

And finally, this paradigm of visible unity will embrace an ecclesiology subject to interruption, a church whose very life is both destabilized and enriched by a hermeneutic of intrusion. It will thus imply a bounded community, who gather for worship and construct a way of life as those who have some knowledge of, but are not ashamed by, the limitations imposed upon their understanding by time and social

location and theological perspective. At the same time, however, such a community will struggle to practice graciousness in the face of internal dissent and self-questioning, and hospitality in the face of interruption from outside, believing that the discomfort such intrusions may cause is also the sound of Sarah's laughter, and the herald of new life. And it will content itself with a form of integrity which is less about consistency of belief and practice than it is about ongoing conversion in full public view, with all the messiness and irony that such a turning will inevitably entail.

As I have also argued, a hermeneutic of intrusion will be rooted in scripture's own internal interpretive dynamic, and nourished by the narrative qualities of unsettled meaning, of departure and return, which prompt ongoing self-questioning with regard to what is known, and thought to be understood. At the same time, however, a paradigm of visible unity which is grounded in a hermeneutic of intrusion cannot be reliant for its life on scripture alone, nor can it ultimately be anchored in a rule of faith or in a particular expression of church order, both of which, as we have seen, must themselves be subject to fracture and reshaping. This paradigm of unity, therefore, will only acquire a usable shape within the framework of public worship and liturgy, during which the word of scripture is repeatedly proclaimed and in that sense intrudes upon or interrupts the believing community. It is not, of course, that those who worship are not subject to self-deception. It is simply that the act of Christian worship embodies a hermeneutic of intrusion at its heart, in the form of this insistent interruption by a scriptural word which is both familiar and utterly unknown. And so it is to the context of liturgy, and specifically that of proclamation and preaching, that we now turn. We will look at the practice of memory as the refusal of idolatry, the

construction of an oral environment for lively interpretation, and public proclamation of the gospel as a concrete and local memory of the future.

Unhealed Pain and the Liturgy

“I like a look of agony,” wrote Emily Dickinson, “because I know it’s true.”³

I have argued that an ecclesiology grounded in a biblical hermeneutic of intrusion will necessarily embrace an ecumenical understanding of Christian identity. As part of this understanding, however, it will also acknowledge both the existence and the shaping power of the diverse and intersecting cultural-linguistic frameworks which structure the churches in all their diversity. One of the crucial insights which follows from such an acknowledgment is the recognition that different cultural-linguistic frameworks imply different structures of memory; in other words, an ecumenical understanding of Christian identity suggests that different churches remember differently, and bear different memories of the same set of events into their daily lives.

And if it is a cultural-linguistic framework, or intersecting set of frameworks, which make experience possible in the first place, even when the meaning of the experience is contested, then it is also that framework which enables a construction of pain or suffering. And thus part of the way a community continues to see itself and others, and to interpret its own life, is in the terms of pain undergone, in the look of agony which is known to be true.

³ J241. Quoted in Catherine Madsen, *The Bones Reassemble*, p 34.

In November 2000, Walter Brueggemann gave an address to the Covenant Network of the Presbyterian Church (USA)⁴ in which he reminded his listeners that underneath the many familiar struggles over the interpretation of biblical texts and claims for biblical authority which are ongoing in the churches often lies a well of hurt, anger or anxiety, frequently unquestioned and sometimes completely unacknowledged.⁵ Furthermore, he argued, all interpretive passion carries within itself the potential for both creative engagement and fresh insight, on the one hand, and distortion or blocked vision on the other. And this is for precisely the same reason. The more passionate the perspective, the more vulnerable it is to threat; and the more open to fear and anxiety it turns out to be. Thus when our interpretive passion is seen to be operating to a greater and greater extent out of the very anxiety or fear which threatens our cherished perspective, we may conclude with considerable certainty that underneath the passion lies hurt, and unhealed pain. And the most powerful hermeneutical principle in operation, then, is no longer the one we claim, or are prepared to name. It is rather that deeply hidden and unhealed pain, from which we will not consent to be separated until it no longer defines us so strongly.⁶

Once we recognize that our own readings are being shaped by the memory of hurt, once we realize how powerful a hermeneutical principle unhealed pain can be, we will also, if we are lucky, come to understand that pastoral attentiveness to one another within the churches is likely to be as important as the articulation of our

⁴ "The Covenant Network of Presbyterians is a broad-based, national group of clergy and lay leaders working for a church that is simultaneously faithful, just, and whole. We seek to support the mission and unity of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in a time of potentially divisive controversy. We intend to articulate and act on the church's historic, progressive vision and to work for a fully inclusive church." <http://www.covnetpres.org>.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, "Biblical Authority: A Personal Reflection", p 3. Address given at the 2000 Covenant Network Conference, 3 November 2000, Pittsburgh, PA. <http://covenantnetwork.org/brueggemann.html>. Accessed 01/11/01.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, "Biblical Authority", pp 8-9.

interpretive arguments.⁷ Such an understanding, of course, implies and assumes that we all are part of one or more interpretive communities, and the importance of such communities will come to the fore precisely at those moments when our accustomed readings begin to fail us.

This is a point eloquently made by Peter Ochs, when he links the experience of suffering to the raising of questions which cannot be adequately addressed by accustomed answers, which in his words, “get over-stretched” and “break”.⁸ When this leaves the sufferer with a choice between despair and the embrace of a new way of seeing, it is the failed answer itself which prompts the search for new sight. The failed answer, in other words, invites us not to despair at its inadequacy but to ask ourselves what it has concealed from us. And in a community of postcritical interpreters, Ochs argues, the possibility is opened up that in the suffering, concealed behind the accustomed, and now failed, answer to that suffering, is the presence of God, who is powerfully known in those places where our interpretive passions run into the ground of our own wounded humanity.

And it is here, of course, that we are brought back to the place of liturgy, for it is in liturgy that the church calls upon its memory as a way of strengthening itself for an unknown future, a future, one might say, in which the accustomed answers sometimes fail, by embracing memory’s perspective. That perspective is not simply one of nostalgia, or even one which usefully constructs and confirms identity in the present. It is rather a perspective which affirms that believers may entrust themselves to the future, not because the future can be known, and certainly not because it can

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, “Biblical Authority”, p 3.

⁸ Peter Ochs, “Returning to Scripture: Trends in Postcritical Interpretation”, *Cross Currents*, Vol. 44, No 4 (Winter 1994/95), pp 437-453. Also <http://www.crosscurrents.org/ochsscripture.htm>. Accessed 23/06/03. Page 8 of 11.

be managed, but because God will be present in that future, concealed in our human unknowing.

It is one of the ironies of the ecumenical journey in the last century that the exploration of memory in the form of *anamnesis*⁹ was so enriching and transformative of the received understandings of the eucharist in so many of the churches, while the same insights which lent themselves to these transformed understandings were not experienced as being so generative where the churches' engagement with scripture was concerned.¹⁰ The term *anamnesis*, usually translated into English as "remembrance" or "memorial", draws much of its significance from the setting of Jesus' last supper with the disciples at or near the height of the Passover season. In the celebration of the Passover, God's liberation of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt is recalled in a way which proclaims the effectiveness of its power to enact freedom in the present. Thus the Passover liturgy, even today, instructs participants to remember: "It was not only our forebears that the Holy One, blessed be You, redeemed, but us as well did You redeem along with them."¹¹

This remembering, in other words, is a calling or recalling to mind of past events in such a way as to proclaim their continuing shaping power in the present, and thus to make them no less real as present realities. Or to put it another way, this remembering makes the shaping power of past events available to those who remember in the only

⁹ A key term in eucharistic theology, *anamnesis* is the Greek word placed in Jesus' mouth in the accounts of the last supper in both Luke (22.19) and I Corinthians (11.24), when he instructs the disciples to "Do this in *anamnesis* of me".

¹⁰ Fresh insight into this crucial term, *anamnesis*, is particularly associated with the work of Max Thurian. He was a key contributor to the process of study which culminated in the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, formally adopted by the World Council of Churches in 1982. He subsequently edited *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983). His own work, *The Mystery of the Eucharist*, was published in English in 1983 (London: Mowbray).

¹¹ This particular version of the claim is taken from *The Shalom Seders: Three Haggadahs*. Compiled by New Jewish Agenda, with an introduction by Arthur Waskow and a preface by Grace Paley. (New York: Adama Books, 1984), p 27.

context in which it is possible for them to undergo that shaping power, namely, in the time and place and context in which they now stand.

Thus for those Christian traditions whose dominant eucharistic model seemed to have been reduced to an occasional and sentimental exercise in nostalgia, as well as for those whose dominant eucharistic model appeared to have taken on too many of the characteristics of an anxious, repetitive ritual, the challenge presented by this much richer and more evocative understanding of what it might mean to remember had the potential to transform eucharistic theology, both within and among the churches. Some of that potential came to fruition, of course, with the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)* in 1982, which declared: “The biblical idea of memorial as applied to the eucharist refers to this present efficacy of God’s work when it is celebrated by God’s people in a liturgy,” and then went on to outline some of the implications of this understanding.¹² For our purposes, however, the most significant comment is found in Para. 12: “Since the *anamnesis* of Christ is the very content of the preached Word as it is of the eucharistic meal, each reinforces the other. The celebration of the eucharist properly includes the proclamation of the Word.”¹³

Here there is a clear acknowledgment that it is impossible to separate the *anamnesis* of Christ in the eucharist from the *anamnesis* of Christ in oral proclamation or preaching. In the context of *BEM*, of course, the point was to encourage traditions which had too much separated the eucharistic meal from the preached word, over-emphasizing the first to the exclusion of the second, or vice versa, to reconsider their practice in light of the impoverishment of their own traditions which they might

¹² *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), pp 11-12. (Eucharist II.B.5-13). The quote is from p 11, Par. 5.

¹³ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, p 12 (Eucharist II.B.12).

inadvertently be facilitating. In our context, however, that of the churches' engagement with scripture, the impact of such a claim lies elsewhere. What BEM is suggesting, but what, for obvious reasons, it does not go on to explore, is that an ecumenical recovery of the richness and depth of what is meant and implied by the biblical term *anamnesis* is as critical to the churches' engagement with the canon as it is for their eucharistic understanding and practice. And of course the primary location for that repeated engagement is the community gathered for worship.

However, if we are able to hold together the more evocative resonances of remembering as *anamnesis*, on the one hand, and Brueggemann's claims for the interpretive power of unhealed pain, on the other, then a deeper set of insights begins to emerge regarding the way in which the act of Christian worship embodies a hermeneutic of intrusion at its heart, rooted in the insistent interruption of the scriptural word in the liturgy. And in the context of exploring these insights, it is helpful to draw very briefly on some of the work which has been done recently in the area of history and memory.

In his exploration of these themes, Patrick H. Hutton makes a significant distinction between *repetition* and *recollection*.¹⁴ In Hutton's understanding, repetition refers to the enduring presence of the past in the present, often in forms which are unacknowledged or unreflective. Certain groups of collective memories would fall into this category, as would, presumably, various forms of personal trauma. Where repetition is concerned, the power of the past continues to make itself felt in the present, but largely without the conscious awareness of those who are being affected, and often in chaotic or erratic ways.

¹⁴ Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1993), pp xx-xxi.

Recollection, on the other hand, refers to a more conscious effort to evoke the past in a particular time and place, and for particular ends. Recollection thus involves a construction or reconstruction of the past for present purposes, and in light of our understanding of the present and its needs.

At first glance, one might associate repetition with a more oral culture of memory, in which the retelling of the past in the present can be more reactive, unreflective, and immediate. However, Hutton points out that in an oral culture, any given narrative will be subject to constant, if incremental, revision as it is told and retold. This is in part because there is little point in repeating a narrative which has no contemporary resonances, but it is also, in an oral culture, because the slow, almost imperceptible process of revision allows the narrative to accommodate itself to a changing context, while at the same time permitting those who tell it to do so under the rubric of stable and changeless tradition.¹⁵

In a similar way, one might assume that recollection would be better enabled by a manuscript or print culture, in which one's version of events is shaped more carefully, though not necessarily self-critically, over time. And yet this does not necessarily turn out to be the case either. Hutton argues that a manuscript culture, while it begins to exteriorize the past, does not signal a recognition that the past is over so much as a fear that it is. It reflects, in other words, an anxiety that past sources of wisdom and insight are being lost, or are losing the authority they once had in a rapidly changing present, and a manuscript culture is thus one which attempts, in the face of that anxiety, to preserve these ancient traditions in a more durable form.¹⁶

¹⁵ Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory*, pp 17-18.

¹⁶ Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory*, pp xxi-xxii, 18.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, therefore, it may be that it is oral tradition which embraces a greater sense of the shaping power of the past in the present, and which turns out to have a greater adaptability, a greater capacity for re-use, in the present. What Paul Ricoeur has said in another context about the complexity of human identity, namely that for a person to remain “the same” in character over time, she must develop an increased capacity for flexibility and change,¹⁷ can also therefore be said about certain kinds of tradition, and in particular, for our purposes, about oral tradition. And if we also recall, in this context, the often unacknowledged power of unhealed pain alluded to earlier, we may begin to sense some of the ways in which a hermeneutic of intrusion might resonate within the liturgy.

Part of the power of narrative is that it gives us a way, or at least enables us to imagine that there might be a way, for us to tell a particular story differently. And part of the power inherent in the public reading of scripture in the worship of the Christian community lies in the possibility it holds out to us that there are other ways of telling the stories which shape us, including the stories of our wounding. These other ways of telling can make room for previously excluded voices, and by shifting the narrative perspective they can call the reigning structures of authority into question. At the same time, however, they can enable us to begin to let go of certain events or encounters, simply by allowing us to choose to leave them out of the retelling. In that sense, as Paul Ricoeur has also pointed out, narrative can become somewhat paradoxically a place of forgetting, and thus a place in which memories can begin to heal.¹⁸

¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, “Memory and Forgetting”, in Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley, eds, *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary debates in philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p 8.

¹⁸ Paul Ricoeur, “Memory and Forgetting”, p 9.

To enable his readers to appreciate the full significance of this claim, Ricoeur draws upon the insights of two of Freud's short essays,¹⁹ each of which explores the different forms memory can take. The first essay highlights the danger to memory of what Freud calls repetition, a kind of obsessive recalling of the same event or feeling as if by doing so one could undo what has happened and become again the person to whom this event had never occurred. Repetition, in this sense, actually prevents remembering, which for Freud was a kind of reconstruction of the past in a form which was understandable and with which one could learn to live.²⁰

This reconstructive, or one might say, more healthy form of memory is linked in the second essay with the work of mourning, implicitly by Freud himself and more explicitly by Ricoeur. Freud contrasts mourning with melancholia, the latter being a repetitive, internal insistence that the losses one has undergone be undone, that the object of one's loss and the emotional fabric of its place in one's life be restored. As this is impossible, the person with melancholia persists in a kind of despair which, ironically, also makes remembering impossible. The work of mourning, then, like the work of remembering involves accepting that what is lost has been lost, that what is past is past, and then finding a way to understand and accept the loss undergone which enables you to live with the self-esteem of one who is prepared to live a life marked by the ongoing effects of its past, and shaped by its previous losses. Mourning is thus, like remembering, a form of reconciliation; what is lost is truly lost but what is gained is a strengthened sense of one's own identity.²¹

¹⁹ Both essays date from 1914, and are found in the collection, *Metapsychology*. The first is entitled "Remembering, Repetition, and Working Through", and the second "Mourning and Melancholia". No further reference is given. Paul Ricoeur, "Memory and Forgetting", pp 6-7.

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "Memory and Forgetting", p 6.

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, "Memory and Forgetting", p 7.

I have been attempting to argue for a paradigm of visible unity which is grounded in a hermeneutic of intrusion, and which thus implies an ecclesiology subject to interruption, a church whose very life is both destabilized and enriched by its “reachable” character. And one of the ways in which this reachable character is embodied is in the community gathered for worship, in which the prayers and praise of the people are interrupted, in a systematic and ritual and relentless form, by the public reading of scripture and proclamation of the gospel.

In this context, the written, fixed texts of the canon are re-engaged with as oral tradition, constantly made available for re-use. Their public proclamation suggests, week after week, that there are always other ways to tell the story of our lives, and in particular, that there are other ways to remember. Our guiding hermeneutical principle does not have to be unhealed pain, but neither are we to ignore the look of agony we see, on our own faces or on those of others, and which we know to be true.

A hermeneutic of intrusion, then, at its heart, engages the liturgy of the church as scripture is read and proclaimed, calling on the gathered community to refuse those forms of pain which Freud referred to as repetition and melancholia. For they are in fact both idolatrous, in the sense that they are forms of assent to the present,²² and embody a refusal of the offer of a different future. A hermeneutic of intrusion disturbs such a refusal, as it did in Sarah’s case,²³ and begins to teach the arts of memory and mourning, and through them, the greater art of openness to the possibility of a different future. It teaches the gathered community, in other words, to remember. And in the language of Paul Ricoeur, this time drawing on the work of Hannah

²² The phrase, again, is that of Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image: A Jewish View*. (Hampshire and London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1997), p 135.

²³ See chapter 1.

Arendt,²⁴ this remembering, this reconstruction of the past in a form which is understandable to us and with which we can learn to live, is simultaneously an unbinding, a release from the repetitive hold of the past, and a fresh binding, a commitment in the face of the unknown to a future which this right remembering makes possible. To remember well is to affirm that it is indeed possible, in the face of destruction, to continue to speak of God.

The Intrusive Art of the Oral Environment

I have been arguing that a paradigm of visible unity which is grounded in a hermeneutic of intrusion will depend, in part, for its visible, usable shape on the practices of the liturgy, on the community gathered for worship. Here the word of scripture intrudes upon the gathered community, teaching the arts of memory and mourning in order that the community might find it possible to refuse idolatry, and then structure its life not as a form of assent to the present but as a readiness to undergo the fracturing and reconstruction of its identity which is the hallmark of a reachable people. In order for this to happen, however, the liturgy of the churches must contribute to the creation and maintenance of a larger oral environment which allows for lively and ongoing interpretive work, and in so doing, constructs and affirms human identity as interruptible, as able to be reached by that which comes to us from beyond ourselves.²⁵

In Jewish tradition, as Lionel Kochan has reminded us, idolatry is associated with the eye, the visual. The eye holds the world as it is in its gaze, and the carved,

²⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "Memory and Forgetting", p 10.

²⁵ See the dream sequence of Marc-Alain Wolf in chapter 1, pp 1-2.

inanimate idols of the prophetic period, exotic and strange as they are to our 21st century eye, represent precisely that assent to settled arrangements which idolatry seeks to resist. What protects the faithful from the dominance of the visual, with all the implications such dominance entails, is what Kochan calls the empowerment of the ear.²⁶ “Idolatry is dependent on the work of the eye, from which the ear is fitted to offer release and redemption,” he writes.²⁷ The ear is fitted, in other words, to hear and be intruded upon by the word of God.

In a sense, though, such an affirmation only relocates the problem, because surely the temptations of idolatry extend to the compelling visual presence of the written text, once what has been heard is written down or physically fixed in some way. And it is here that the importance of the oral environment comes into view. The written text can only be prevented from becoming itself an idol by the recognition that oral elucidation and interpretation of the text will always be required, that such elucidation must be ongoing, and that a plurality of meanings is the inevitable result of taking the text seriously in this way.²⁸ The task of elucidation is never finished, and it is precisely this oral embrace of the biblical text as unfinished even in its written, canonical form which frustrates the idolater, whose assent to present understandings requires a text which functions as a “closed and self-sufficient totality.”²⁹

Or we could put it somewhat differently. What prevents the written text from becoming an object of idolatry is the community’s insistence that in a regular, disciplined way, such as in repeated acts of public worship, the written text is returned

²⁶ Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, p 159.

²⁷ Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, p 159.

²⁸ Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, p 166-68.

²⁹ Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, p 169.

to an oral environment, which unsettles it again, and in which, to return to Marc-Alain Wolf's story, the words slip off the page and dance around the room.³⁰

The importance of the creation of an oral environment within the churches for a lively engagement with scripture has also been highlighted from a feminist perspective by Melanie A. May and Lauree Hirsch Meyer.³¹ Their expressed concerns are twofold. On the one hand, they fear the possibility of a new "ecumenical confessionalism", in which voices of racial, class, sexual or cultural diversity are seen as a threat to a certain preconceived notion of unity, and thus to the ecumenical project. On the other hand, while recognising the way in which the Bible has functioned as a focus for Christian unity within the ecumenical movement, they are conscious of what have been experienced as the canon's severe limitations for women, including the time-bound nature of its writings and the very definition of its character as closed.³²

What they wish to propose, therefore, is that the very diversity of feminist hermeneutical methods already being practiced point to a way forward, in which diversity is not necessarily divisive but rather suggests another, more open-ended model of unity. In the present context, we might also point to the non-identical and intersecting cultural-linguistic frameworks within which Christians seek to interpret scripture and practice a way of life, as well as the divergent memories the churches bear within themselves, as further examples of that suggestive diversity. "Precisely the pronunciation of our particularity," they argue, "can renew the tensive vitality of the Montreal distinction of the living Tradition actualized in limited traditions, and can

³⁰ See chapter 1, p 1.

³¹ Melanie A. May and Lauree Hirsch Meyer, "Unity of the Bible, Unity of the Church: Confessionalism, Ecumenism, and Feminist Hermeneutics," in Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures, Vol. One: A Feminist Introduction* (London: SCM Press, 1994); pp 140-153.

³² The question of the canon has been extensively explored in chapters 2 and 3.

thereby give birth to ecclesial realities that bear witness to unity that is invitational rather than exclusive.”³³

In short, they argue, the way forward is to focus on the cultivation of a new orality within the community of faith.³⁴ This orality will presumably encompass, for example, the reading of texts in a liturgical context, the disciplined listening which allows us to hear the speech of another, the telling of stories in which the narratives of our lives and the narratives of scripture are interwoven, and the maintaining of a crucial distinction between the word of God and the words of canonical texts. It may also, of course, allow for the possibility that some texts can function authoritatively for Christian life and worship only insofar as believers are prepared to take issue with them, and in the end, wrest from them a greater practice of faithfulness that that to which the texts themselves bear witness. In the end, therefore, and to put it most starkly, it may be that the written canon of scripture cannot function in any sense authoritatively in the churches apart from the oral environment which makes it possible to hear and engage with the texts as they form, interpret, and contest the present. Language which functions authoritatively, as Catherine Madsen suggests with reference to the language of the liturgy, may in fact simply be language which must be worked on over time, and compelling language be language which resists compulsion.³⁵ And the sphere of that resistance is the oral environment.

A similar claim for the importance of the oral environment to the practice of reading is made by John Fiske, to whose work I have already referred above in chapter

³³ Melanie A. May and Lauree Hirsch Meyer, “Unity of the Bible, Unity of the Church”, p 142.

³⁴ Melanie A. May and Lauree Hirsch Meyer, “Unity of the Bible, Unity of the Church”, p 146-149.

³⁵ Catherine Madsen, *The Bones Reassemble: Reconstituting Liturgical Speech*. (Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, Publishers, 2005), pp 31-32.

3.³⁶ In the context not of liturgy but of the written texts of popular culture,³⁷ Fiske refers to Michel de Certeau's distinction between decipherment and reading.³⁸ Decipherment implies that a text is a container for meaning, and that some authoritative truth is hidden deep within it. It follows from this understanding that there is only one correct way to approach the text, one which will yield up its hidden content. A person must therefore be trained in decipherment in order to make any sense of the text, and even then the sense one makes of the text will be subject to the authority of those who provide the training necessary to understand it rightly.

Reading, on the other hand, emphasizes the context of the reader, who brings her own vernacular culture to bear upon the text. Her working assumption, with regard to the text, in this case, of course, a text of popular culture, is that it is accessible, unsubtle, or even obvious. Entry into the text is therefore not difficult, and what the reader finds when she gets there are gaps, contradictions, and various possible meanings which are available to her to consider or to make her own. And insofar as the Bible itself is a text of popular culture, as Kathryn Tanner has argued,³⁹ the Bible also requires the context of a surrounding oral culture in order to be read. This oral culture, according to Fiske, "precedes the written (the scriptural), [and] has developed beyond or against the 'official' language and is thus opposed to its discipline."⁴⁰

³⁶ See above, chapter 3, p 98.

³⁷ Popular culture, according to Fiske, is "the culture of the subordinated and disempowered and thus always bears within it signs of power relations, traces of the forces of domination and subordination that are central to our social system and therefore to our social experience. Equally, it shows signs of resisting or evading these forces: popular culture contradicts itself." John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp 4-5.

³⁸ See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). The reference in is John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, p 108.

³⁹ See above, chapter 3.

⁴⁰ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, p 108.

Certain parallels with the oral environment created by a gathered community at worship are obvious, I think. In the public reading and proclamation of scripture, as well as in the related, intentional contexts of group study and reflection in preparation for worship, an oral culture which makes room for reading, in de Certeau's sense of the word, is created and sustained. When scripture is read, initially at least, without comment, its gaps and contradictions open up, and its spaces are available to members of the congregation to fill. At the same time, however, the liturgy as a whole, and the contextual imperative of preaching in particular, provides a certain discipline for this ongoing and admittedly somewhat chaotic process.

It is thus possible to argue, I think, that the lively and imaginative engagement with Scripture which grounds a hermeneutic of intrusion is routinely and relentlessly modelled by the interruption into the life of the believing community of the weekly liturgy, with its insistent return to a reading of something we have heard before but whose power to reach us and unsettle us we do not, for that reason, discount. The community thus embraces, at worship, what Kochan described as the idolater's worst fear, the presence in our midst of what is unfinished.⁴¹

The poet Eavan Boland has argued in another context that the authority of a poem, whether it will be heard by the reader as an act of freedom or as an act of power, is dependent on the authority of the speaker, of the voice which animates the poem. "The mover of the poem's action – the voice, the speaker – must be at the same risk from that action as every other component of the poem," she writes.⁴² What is true in the context of poetry is also, I would suggest, true in the context of good liturgy. Those who move the action, that is, the congregation, must place

⁴¹ Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, p 169.

⁴² Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons*. (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995), p 186.

themselves at visible risk by doing what they do if their public work is to be seen as an act of freedom rather than an act of power. And the freedom of that risk is put on display precisely as the community shows itself to be reachable, to be vulnerable to that which comes, or to those who come, from outside its given boundaries.

The Liturgy of the Church: Memory Interrupted by Hope

Finally, the worship of the community comes into view in one final sense, as we continue to explore the implications of a model of visible unity grounded in a hermeneutics of intrusion. As we have seen, one of the benefits of an interrupted ecclesiology is that it offers a fresh way in which to draw on the occluded traditions of modernity, and in particular, on those of local intelligence and adaptability which are in evidence in the community gathered for worship.

It is important to be clear, however, that such a focus on the forms of local intelligence which may be shaped and expressed in the liturgy is to be strenuously distinguished from more insular expressions of a communitarian perspective. The latter may claim to be self-critical, and on their own terms they may be so. But they seem never to have entertained the possibility that there are circumstances in which mutual self-correction will not be enough, as the circumscribed interpretive environment itself will limit the sight, as well as the interpretive scope, of the community. As we have seen, one of the key claims of an interrupted ecclesiology is that the church, while in one sense definitively bound to the local context in which it orders its life and bears its witness, must in another sense remain open to and capable of being intruded upon by that which comes from outside itself, with all the

transformative implications for its identity which such an intrusion will entail. And as we have also seen, the primacy of local intelligence in the occluded traditions of modernity does not reflect an insular way of thinking, but rather something quite different: an intellectual excitement nourished both by a grasp of what can be known and understood, and by an exhilarating sense that greater knowledge leads in fact to a more profound sense of mystery's farthest reaches.

An example of an insufficiently self-critical focus on local intelligence, in this case with reference to the interpretation of scripture, is found in Stephen Fowl's work, *Engaging Scripture*.⁴³ Fowl outlines a series of communal self-understandings and practices which act, or so he argues, as the best protection against self-serving interpretation. These include, for example, the self-identification of the community as sinful and therefore open to correction, a working common life in which forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation are central, and a commitment to forming friendships within the community which enable members to testify to the work of the Spirit in one another's lives and to listen to others so testify.⁴⁴

The problem which remains, however, is that the very strength of Fowl's approach is also its weakness. In focusing on the internal practices of the interpretive community, Fowl's proposal does not take seriously enough the capacity of the churches not only to engage in self-deception but also to impose oppressive group norms which severely limit the kinds of self-understanding and practice which Fowl sees as critical. A community's understanding of what constitutes sinful practice, for example, is to some extent socio-politically constructed, so that in a community with

⁴³ Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

⁴⁴ Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, pp. 81-86; 115-119.

certain charismatic and gender-based conceptions of leadership, for example, simply to question those constructions could well be held by the majority to constitute sinful practice. Scriptural interpretation always takes place within the networks of power, experience, and knowledge that have helped to shape the interpreters, and therefore it is possible for a community to embrace all, or nearly all, of the internal practices which Fowl delineates and still be fundamentally self-deceived by its readings of scripture.

In contrast, therefore, I am arguing for a generative local intelligence which is linked precisely to the valuing of diversity, to the acknowledgement that human understandings are always incomplete, and to the resulting commitment to a lively interpretive life. This generative local intelligence will be open to the richness offered by other perspectives, will sometimes, in fact, be fundamentally interrupted and transformed by them. In the end, however, it will be committed neither to the endless possibilities of some expressions of postmodernism, nor to the closure offered by an overarching construct, but rather to the shaping and development of local wisdom, concentrating on what can be locally, thoughtfully, and persuasively argued in one's own context. The logic of such intelligence will be the logic of grace, in which every attempt at theological closure is finally seen to be a failure of trust in God, and in which the limitations of human understanding speak not only of finitude but much more of promise. It will not be, in Marilynne Robinson's wonderful phrase, for spiritual agoraphobes.⁴⁵

I want to turn, therefore, to the importance of the liturgy as a place of hearing, with the emphasis, for the moment, on place. Richard Lischer has noted, in

⁴⁵ Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*. (New York: Picador, 1998, 2005), p. 86.

characteristically direct language, that what connects contemporary Christian believers to Sarah and her laughter, or to the apostle Peter, or to the recipients of the letter to the Galatians is not some abstract understanding of “human nature” but in fact the church. In that sense, the connection which exists is both catholic and profoundly local in character. And even to acknowledge this much must also be to acknowledge the provisional, or perhaps a better word might be improvisational, character of apostolic faith.

What is handed down, in the church, is not the last word, but a living word.⁴⁶ One of the forms which this living word takes, of course, is proclamation. And while there is considerable biblical precedent for a call from God which summons the community to actual physical displacement, the intensely local nature of preaching and of the gathered community means that the summons from God frequently takes the form of the creation and nurture of an alternative community in a place which is already known. The new shape of this community stems not from its location, but from its often reluctant hearing of that insistent voice which articulates the possibility of a different way of life in the place where the community already finds itself. And once the voice has been heard, whether heeded or not, the very intrusion of a voiced alternative into the settled present throws the community back up against the improvisational nature of its apostolic faith once more.⁴⁷

In order to improvise, of course, one returns to the script, or to the score, not as definitive guidance but as a place of departure, a place from which what has been

⁴⁶ The turn of phrase is that of Brian Blount. Brian Blount, “The Last Word on Biblical Authority”. Address given at the 2000 Covenant Network Conference, 3 November 2000, Pittsburgh, PA. <http://covenantnetwork.org/blount.html>. Accessed 01/11/01.

⁴⁷ For a further discussion of these issues, see Walter Brueggemann, *Testimony to Otherwise: The Witness of Elijah and Elisha*. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 5-17.

laid down in the past can be re-worked and thus given fresh shape for the future. Further insight into this improvisational, and I will argue, liturgical, rhythm is offered, in a different but related context, by the French historian, Pierre Nora. Nora openly acknowledges that as a historian, he is less interested in “what actually happened” than in the way events are constructed or remembered over time, and their “influence on successive presents”. In short, Nora is concerned with “the overall structure of the past within the present”.⁴⁸

Nora has therefore coined the term, “*lieu de mémoire*”, or site of memory, which he defines as “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community . . .”⁴⁹ *Lieux de mémoire* can thus have a fixed, even an arrested quality, as when a monument is set in stone, as if time could be stopped, and remembering retain a compelling immediacy. At the same time, however, their power to affect the present diminishes rapidly if they lose their capacity to change, to adapt, to proffer old meanings while embracing new ones and, ironically, to generate new memories or meanings of their own.⁵⁰ In this sense, one might begin to imagine the reading of Scripture in public worship as a kind of *lieu de mémoire* to which the community returns on a ritual basis.

In his discussion of Nora, Patrick Hutton credits him with the reminder that collective memory is not homogenous, and that different sites contain both memories and counter-memories. They are often a guide to how the past was once experienced,

⁴⁸ Pierre Nora (under the direction of), *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*. Eng. language ed., edited and with a forward by Lawrence D. Kritzman. Trans. By Arthur Goldhammer. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Pierre Nora, “From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Realms of Memory*” (Preface to the English language edition), p xxiv.

⁴⁹ Pierre Nora, “From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Realms of Memory*”, p. xvii.

⁵⁰ Pierre Nora (under the direction of), *Realms of Memory*. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History” (General Introduction), p. 15.

but equally, they reveal the many ways in which the same sites and images can be used and re-used in multiple ways, even to commemorate unrelated traditions.⁵¹ Such an observation resonates, of course, with what we have come to understand of the challenges of ecumenical hermeneutics.⁵²

Lionel Kochan, however, contrasts the notion of the physical memorial (a contradiction in terms, in any case, as it too will eventually decay) with a “rabbinic psychology” which focuses on memory as the retention of words. Words, of course, have the advantage that they do not take up space,⁵³ and, in addition, they render the past “mobile, portable, [able to be] transmitted from mouth to mouth”.⁵⁴ The key point for Kochan is that the biblical call to remember is also an ethical demand, that the people of Israel are to remember that they were once slaves in Egypt, and that their experience of deliverance can only be rightly commemorated in a way of life which draws out the moral implications of what is remembered, and upholds the dignity of the vulnerable. And according to Kochan, no monument or symbol can bear the weight of that remembering; only the mouth can “transmit a remembrance that is also an imperative”.⁵⁵

Thus the designation of the hearing and proclamation of scripture in worship as a lieu de mémoire is a suggestive one. This is in part because, as Kochan points out to us, the notion of place is an ambiguous one. If place becomes too important, as in the construction of a monument in stone, memory itself is hardened and becomes unavailable to those who live in the present. If, however, memory is carried in the

⁵¹ Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory*, pp 8-10.

⁵² See Chapter 1, pp 17-21.

⁵³ Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, pp. 77-82

⁵⁴ Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, p. 87.

⁵⁵ Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, p. 92.

mouth, then it can be transmitted indefinitely, and it remains available to the present in renewable and fruitful ways.⁵⁶ Thus in a sense it is the place of hearing, the place of expectation, that becomes the *lieu de mémoire*. It is the place to which the community returns in the rituals of reading and proclamation, both to re-inscribe the narrative structures of the past in the present, and thus to reclaim its identity, but also to position itself for the hearing of an intrusive voice which will not be so much about identity formation as it is about putting the community at risk of transformation, and not least, in the case of the public reading of scripture, because of its ethical content.

And so the reading of the lectionary text can rightly be conceived, I think, as a *lieu de mémoire*, a place in which the memory of the community is lodged and which is in turn marked by the community's memories. At the same time, however, the liturgical acts of reading and proclamation protect the written text from becoming a monument, a memorial which retains some kind of symbolic place within the community, but whose resonances are increasingly inaccessible in the present. Instead, the liturgical acts of reading and proclamation return the written text to the oral environment which enables its transformative power. As a word spoken into the community in a particular place and at a particular time, it interrupts the life of those who hear it in the only humanly possible way, in the place where they are, and, perhaps, within the range of their hearing.

The act of Christian worship, in other words, embodies a hermeneutic of intrusion at its heart, in the form of this repeated and insistent interruption into its life by a scriptural word which is both familiar and utterly unknown. And although the varied contexts in which communities worship, and the multiple ways in which they

⁵⁶ Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image*, p. 85-86.

find themselves intruded upon by the scriptural word they hear, may at times seem so diverse as to testify only to fragmentation, it may nevertheless be that very truthful, fractured reality which proves to be the most powerful and visible sign of Christian unity in our time. It is a unity whose visible expression in every place will be the public losing and finding again of a locally grounded Christian witness, the inevitable destruction and reconstruction in plain sight of a memory of the future which is local, adaptable, concrete, provisional, concrete, at risk, and joyful.

Epilogue

“Know and forget, know and forget.”

“. . . Know and forget, know and forget.

. . .

it's the way
radiant epiphanies recur, recur,
consuming, pristine, unrecognised –
until remembrance dismays you. And then, look,
some inflection of light, some wing of shadow
is other, unvoiced. You can, you must
proceed.”¹

In retrospect, the beginning of the modern or 20th century ecumenical movement is generally understood to have been the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910, and its centenary has been widely celebrated this year. Writing in 1991, however, Wesley Ariarajah suggested that the ecumenical discussion of the theology of religions, in particular, should be “picked up where it was left in 1910”.² Ariarajah argued that the *Report of Commission IV* clearly pointed the way forward for the development of a more adequate Christian theology of religions by articulating, clearly and unambiguously, the link which it had been led by its own work to acknowledge: that which is formed between a living encounter of the Christian church with people of other religious identities, and the church’s continuing ability to

¹ From Denise Levertov, “For Those Whom the Gods Love Less”, in *Sands of the Well* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p. 96.

² Wesley Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians: A Century of Protestant Ecumenical Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 216.

summon from within itself a new theological imagination competent to deal with a growing awareness of the global religious landscape.³

In recognition of this centenary year and in light of my attempt in this thesis to construct a working paradigm of visible unity grounded in a hermeneutic of intrusion, I would like to extend Ariarajah's insight and make an even broader claim for the continuing importance of the legacy of 1910. The Edinburgh Conference was convened, in part, because Western missionaries had come to understand only too well how their different denominational and confessional identities often hindered their attempts to work among people who continued to embrace other religious identities, or to engage with them in conversation about the gospel. And it for this reason, among others, that the methodology chosen for the work of Commission IV involved the sending out of questionnaires, both to Western missionaries serving in other parts of the world, and to local believers who had converted to Christianity from another religious background. The former were asked about how their sense of what is central to the Christian gospel might have been altered through their work among people of other religions, and the latter were asked about the Western forms in which Christianity had been introduced to them, and were invited to elaborate on the ways in which these forms might have been alien or confusing to them.⁴

And when the *Report of Commission IV* concluded, as we have seen, that the living encounter of Christians with people of other religious identities was linked to the development of the church's theological imagination, and that this living encounter was perhaps one of the ways by which the living God seeks to ensure that the church

³ *World Missionary Conference 1910: Report of Commission IV* (Edinburgh/London: Oliphant, Anderson, and Ferrier, 1910), pp.264-65. Cited in Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians*, p. 30.

⁴ Ariarajah, pp. 18-19.

remains alive and growing, two truths whose importance extends well beyond the work of interreligious witness were being quietly affirmed.

On the one hand, it was the oral environment in which the missionaries worked which was clearly seen to have served as an important catalyst for the transformations in self-understanding to which they now knew themselves and their churches to be called. And it was the ongoing conversation in which they were engaged, both with people of other religions and with neighbours who, although Christian, nevertheless claimed quite distinct cultural identities, which created this fertile environment and opened up before the missionary delegates the possibility a fresh hearing of their own scripture and its proclamation of good news.

On the other hand, however, it was becoming clear that while the public struggle for Christian identity in new cultural contexts was certainly, at one level, about visible unity and denominational cooperation, at a much deeper level it had primarily to do with the readiness or ability of the Western churches to openly acknowledge the ways in which their treasured self-understandings were being interrupted and dislodged, and their identities undone and re-made, in plain sight. The Edinburgh Conference, in short, had already begun to recognise and embrace some of the features of what I am calling a hermeneutics of intrusion.

I have been attempting to argue that a freshly conceived and embodied relationship of the churches to their canon of Scripture might now, in this century, be able to give new life, new shape, and a more dynamic integrity to the ecumenical movement. I have also suggested that one of the ongoing tasks for those who share an ongoing commitment to visible unity is that of imagining in ever-changing contexts how this unity might continue to take shape. More specifically, the churches will need

to ask how the ecumenical project might develop in a way which allows them to embrace an ongoing hermeneutics of intrusion, and to live within an interpretive paradigm which holds open at all times the possibility that these same churches will be surprisingly and unexpectedly addressed from outside themselves, and put at risk of conversion even as their unity becomes more visible.

This alternative model of unity would mark a significant shift in self-understanding for the ecumenical movement, for, as we have seen, the commitment to visible unity has sometimes taken the form of a distorting focus on the most prominent areas of theological difference. However, I have tried to suggest that, precisely because of its own internal hermeneutical dynamic and its narrative qualities of expansiveness and self-questioning, the canon of scripture offers an imaginative and interpretive space of great promise to the churches, and grounds a hermeneutics of intrusion. These are the texts, after all, whose functional authority in the life of the church we continue to recognise, and which persist in jostling up against each other in our hearing in a vibrant, restless, and creative way.

The interrupted ecclesiology which emerges from this alternative model of unity will dignify and celebrate the local church, with its particular memories and its calling to bear witness in a given place and time. However, such an ecclesiology will only embrace the local and time-bound character of the church in tandem with its mystery-filled catholic identity, and will thereby draw for its life on the occluded traditions of modernity, insisting that epistemology and love are inseparable, and that the more something is known and understood, the larger and more compelling it becomes, and the more deeply and intelligently it can be loved.

A church which conceives itself in this way will also come to understand that its integrity is to be found in remaining open to, and reachable by, that which comes to it from outside its current self-understanding. It will thus embody a model of theological anthropology which privileges the conviction that there is a kind of human knowing which can only be made available to us by another, in interruption or intrusion, and in the interpretive re-alignments and transformations set in motion in the wake of such interruptions. Such a church will therefore also be more sturdily resistant to the practice of idolatry which takes its most seductive form in an assent to the arrangements of the present. And as a hermeneutical community of intrusion, the church will be nurtured by its practices of worship, but in particular by the weekly placing of the community within hearing of a word which is familiar to them, a word they know, and yet who expect that same word to interrupt and transform them. For they will have learned about such risk from scripture itself.

If they are asked about their “interpretive controls” in such a risk-filled world, they will point to the character and integrity of God, and then to their growing understanding of what it is to be human in God’s sight: reachable, willing to be undone and then given new life, in plain sight of the world. And they will know that this visible unity, seen in fracture for the sake of insight, divestment for the sake of a radical availability, and the releasing of one’s grip for the sake of new life, is in the end the only witness they have to offer.

And so, finally, we might re-visit for a moment that resounding hope of the ecumenical movement, Jesus’ prayer for the unity of his followers:

“As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”⁵

If, in the ecumenical movement, we have not sufficiently explored the assumption that it is the sight of the church’s unity, and the visible oneness of believers, which will enable the world’s faith, perhaps it is because we have forgotten that in the Gospel of John, the resonances of *sight* and *seeing* are often ambiguous and complex. This ambiguity culminates in the question of the risen Jesus to Thomas: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”⁶ “Seeing” Jesus, in John’s gospel, is finally a matter of faith, and not physical sight.⁷

However, perhaps the most important hallmark of the believing community in John’s gospel is the recognition that Jesus’ work is to reveal God to the world, or in other words, to make God’s presence *visible*. And if Jesus prays that they might become completely one, it is so that the world also might come to recognise the visible presence in its midst not of the church, but of the living God. The model for the unity of all believers, therefore, the way in which they are to be one, the unity which reveals God to the world, is that of the unity of Jesus with the One he calls Father, and this unity is both incarnational and intrusive. The presence of God is made visible in the world by the interruption of God into all that is human.

⁵ John 17.21b – 23.

⁶ John 20.29

⁷ John 14.19.

The oneness of the disciples, therefore, will also be incarnational, embodying a visible unity which is local, reachable, relentlessly called into question, and then, sometimes painfully, renewed. It is this unity which will prompt the world's faith, perhaps by surprise. And two of its marks will be the sound of Sarah's laughter, and the sight of the very words of scripture themselves slipping off the page and rising into the air with joy.

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