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Presidential Address

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Against the Tyranny of Tolerance - Some Thoughts about Personal and Intellectual Integrity within Hermeneutical Practice

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In my address this evening I intend to discuss a number of issues that I consider important for hermeneutics to attend to, in light of some current postmodernist attitudes. The substance of the address has grown in a general way from a certain sense of unease which I have experienced over a number of years in relation to postmodernist theories. The issues have been more sharply focussed for me by events in my teaching this last semester, and above all by my experience in co-writing the initial "methodology" chapters of a book on women and religion¹.

I shall begin my discussion with two brief stories, both related to my undergraduate class on Religious Literature. During last semester, this class read in part or full the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavadgita, Hebrew scriptures, Christian scriptures, and the Qur'an. There was much discussion during the semester on both an intellectual and personal level, much of the latter related to various aspects of the students' religious upbringing. Only one member of the class had had no religious upbringing, nor ever any experience that she would identify as being of a religious nature. To many, she seemed the ideal

type, an “innocent” reader, a *tabula rasa*, coming to texts for the first time.

Towards the end of the semester, this student unexpectedly challenged the view of her privileged status as reader, when she spoke of her frustration at listening to what others in the class had to say of their experience of reading, all the while feeling herself more and more disadvantaged, like an outsider. She felt she lacked a way of reading the texts as *religious* literature, being able to read only in a literary sense, not really appreciating the texts or getting as much out of the texts as the others were.

My second story relates to the same class. Towards the end of the semester, we came to the topic of the ethics of interpretation. As part of the process, I asked the class to read my recent article on Isaiah 47², at the end of which I offer a postscript in which I judge that the use of the metaphor of Yahweh as warrior in Isaiah is inappropriate or morally questionable when it leads to the possibility of presenting Yahweh as a warrior-rapist. I make this judgment for the Christian community who reads the text today, but also suggest that the metaphor was inappropriate even for the community from whom the text originated.

The class agreed that my judgment was appropriate for contemporaneous Christian communities, but most disagreed quite strongly with judging the originating community. It was invalid to judge the moral appropriateness of a metaphor for a different culture and time, to judge the ancient Hebrew community by my modern Western standards of morality. Yet these same students, in an earlier class on Women and Religion, when confronted by details of some women’s experience of female

circumcision in another religio-cultural setting, either made some statement about the immorality of the practice in any cultural setting - in other words, a universal moral claim - or were very uneasy about it, being philosophically opposed to making such claims yet wanting to.

The first story raises basic questions about the person who reads. How does one read really; how does one appreciate; how does one understand;...? The class, myself included, had made some presumptions about the innocent reader, the reader without baggage, or at least without religious baggage, the purity of her engagement without a heavy overlay of emotional attachment, either negative or positive, to some religious system. In this particular case, what does the reading demand of its reader? What more did my student need? Surely her reading was just as valid as anyone else’s? And if that is so, why was she dissatisfied? Can we discriminate about how valuable certain readings are?

I began my reflection on these questions from the simple idea of the subjectivity of the reading process. I doubt that anyone would disagree much with the idea that interpreting or reading a text is highly subjective³; that every reading is subjective, that each reading produces a new text unique to the perspective of the one who reads. No one else has my history, nor can they stand in my exact position to view the world. All this is self-evidently true, along with the statement that there is an infinity of possible interpretations when one engages texts.

Further, the process of interpretation itself is never completed. It is always open-ended, a process of apprehending, of being engaged with a text. For most of

us, the everyday experience results in more questions at the end of the process than at the beginning, so that we never really have any expectation of reaching a result which is a definitive or absolute answer as to the meaning of the text⁴.

However, this basic point about the subjectivity of the reading process is only one aspect of the reality of the situation; a description of what individual human beings do from one angle, only a description of what happens to a text as it is read. It says nothing of the history of reception of the text, nothing of the broader context of reading beyond the individual. To limit oneself to such a partial description of the reading process as if it were the full story and to assert that the text is solely the product or artefact of the one who reads/interprets is to occupy an absurdly and extremely solipsistic and anthropocentric position, as Paul Noble writes in relation to the work of Stanley Fish:

*...the paradoxical conclusion to which Fish's version of anti-foundationalism inexorably leads is that there is an infinite regress of interpretations of interpretations of interpretations without him being able to posit anything which this is ultimately an interpretation of. In other words, if his epistemology does not altogether abolish the world as something existing independently of the interpreter then it reduces it to a Kantian "thing-in-itself" about which absolutely nothing can be said...*⁵

Returning to my first story, if we were to ask my student if her reading was unique, was it equally as valid as all the other readings, and so on, she could answer "yes", but despite the theory, the practice for her was unsatisfactory. And she identified why it was unsatisfactory: she had no history of religious

experience, no community of believers of one kind or another, in which to contextualise her reading. She had a community of sorts (in this case, literary theorists), but not one that helped her read these particular texts as she wanted. In identifying the source of her difficulty, she identified the broader problem in holding too narrow a theory about the reader.

To view the process of reading only from the point of view of the individual reader is myopic. Such an excessively relativist position assumes that shared human existence is unimportant in the process of interpretation, that the idea of a context for the process within history and the *sensus communis* is *passé*⁶, that there are ultimately no universal norms about which we might agree that have a bearing on how we read and the kinds of judgments we make about what readings are good or appropriate.

The second story raises more strongly this issue about discriminating between various readings, and the possibility of making a judgment about material that may be more broadly applied by the individual who reads than just to his/her own experience. With regard to the latter point, it has become fashionable to move from the idea of the infinite possibilities of interpretation and the open-ended nature of interpretation, to the necessity of the suspension of judgment, as if that were the logical outcome of the subjective process of interpretation. Because I cannot say anything absolute about the meaning of a text, I cannot make a judgment about anything. Because there are infinite interpretations, every interpretation must be tolerated. One must be totally open. It seems to me that this creates a situation of some kind of amoral vacuum, where all absolutes

are gone and no truth remains to which one may commit oneself. There are only shifting sands - nowhere to stand - where nothing may be truly communicated or meaningfully said. What was simply a partial description of how human beings interpret and attempt to understand in an ever-changing world, has become a moral paradigm or rather an amoral paradigm.

Against the argument for the suspension of moral judgment, I want to assert that the logical outcome of the subjective process of interpretation is that one *must* make judgments, and that in fact it is not possible to suspend them. It is simply not possible to engage any text without making some judgment, without taking some position in relation to it, and this is so because such engagement is a subjective process. If we take seriously the complexity of what goes to make up a human person, then we must consider all the aspects of ourselves which are at work in understanding, including all those levels of feeling and reaction which guide the rational aspects of ourselves in powerful and subtle ways. The judgments about what we are trying to understand are never just rational academic judgments but they are also intimately applied to our life in general in all its aspects, either explicitly or implicitly. Our stance both throughout and at the conclusion of the process is non-neutral.

I cannot emphasise too strongly that this emotional or psychological reaction of the interpreter is integral to the entire process. Already from the very beginning there is a reaction to material which puts the interpreter in a certain position over against the text. In other words, we already position ourselves in relation to the object in the event of engaging it, not afterwards when we consciously attempt perhaps to make

some judgment about its meaning. And the interpreter who positions herself/himself in the beginning, continues to shift and adjust position in both positive and negative ways as the engagement continues.

The key aspect of the process for the academic interpreter is the attempt to integrate the personal and involuntary reaction to the material studied with the intellectual exercise of applying questions and paradigms consciously, and in the end to enter into dialogue with others from a position which is fully acknowledged as both personal and intellectual. Philosophers have debated for a long time the place of bias or prejudice, in the neutral sense of those words, in the hermeneutical process, but I have yet to find a study that takes seriously that this positioning of the self in relation to the material studied is an integral part of the entire hermeneutical process and not just something to be reflected upon and acknowledged as a kind of addendum to the beginning of the process, the acknowledgment of prejudice or preunderstanding before the real intellectual work begins⁷.

An extreme example related to my second story may clarify further what I mean by the complementary nature of the personal and intellectual aspects for the entire process of interpretation. When dealing with the issue of female circumcision, my immediate reaction to the material is a sense of horror; I have a sense of outrage from my body even before I begin to think about any of the issues. When I do begin to engage the relevant material from an academic point of view, trying to understand the practice within its cultural and/or religious setting, within women's experience, and so on (to avoid by such contextualisation the

“fallacy of detachable cultural descriptions”⁸, at the same time I am aware of my continuing personal reaction.

For those who espouse cultural or ethical relativism, no judgments can be made about this kind of practice. This is a case of another culture, another woman’s experience, and I cannot hope to represent this experience nor to make judgments on it from my limited perspective. If I dare to make a judgment, I can be so easily branded as a Western colonialist, so I am encouraged to play the intellectual “tolerance and openness game”. All the while I am experiencing feelings of revulsion and I have taken a personal position that is not reflected in my intellectual discussions. I have lost my sense of integrity; I have no committed position; I am a vacuum of non-judgment, an amoral and totally empty discussion partner.

Granted that this is an extreme example, it nevertheless raises the question of what kinds of judgments I can validly make about what I am interpreting. If judgments are made even involuntarily within the process of interpretation, how do I distinguish which ones are good and appropriate? Colonialist tendencies are indeed a very real danger that do not belong just to the past. On the other hand, one could also ask, are all judgments acceptable just because there are an infinity of them?⁹

I want to suggest a way of proceeding that takes a middle path which lies between the two options of total openness combined with suspension of judgment, and making a final judgment on material, irrespective of its appropriateness. Since judgment will inevitably occur, it seems to me that we must take our position on material but take it with an openness to dialogue about it, and to continue reading

in order to attempt constantly to discriminate what might be valuable and what not. We do not have some absolute truth about the material, but we have an opinion, a reaction. The kind of truth that we have is the acknowledgment that we have had a reaction, that we have taken a position.

The point about dialogue brings me back to the community (both one’s own community and other communities) as context of the activity both of reading and of judging. This is the context for making judgment and taking judgment, for judging with a community and against it, for judging between communities of differing cultures and historical settings. This assumes that there is some shared bond between human beings that makes this possible, whether one sees that as language as Gadamer¹⁰, or as ethical reasonableness or a divine element in the soul like Aristotle, or perhaps some basic ground of being like Caputo:

For whether or not one believes in God or mystics, one can still speak of something like a ground or fine point of the soul, a certain deep spot in the mind where the constructions of science grow dim and the cunning of common sense and the agility of phronesis go limp, where they wither away and lose their power... there is a fine point in the mind where one is brought up short, a moment of midnight reckoning where the ground gives way and one also has the distinct sense of falling into an abyss.¹¹

Even if we accept that there is some bond between human beings and communities, we are faced with the fact that not all communities will agree on or behave out of common ethical positions. However, this does not necessarily invalidate judgments made about basic values. Alan Buchanan argues that it is

highly implausible that there are no basic values shared with past communities and across quite culturally different communities.

*According to the very concept of human rights, the validity of statements about human rights does not depend upon the fact (if it is a fact) that all cultures happen to share certain values by reference to which such statements can be justified. Even if it should turn out that there exists a culture whose values cannot be appealed to to justify the statement that there is a human right not to be tortured, for example, it does not follow that there is no such human right. Whether there is a human right not to be tortured depends only on whether the statement "The right not to be tortured is a human right" can be justified by reference to the morally relevant features of human beings as such, not upon whether all cultures happen to include values that can be invoked in such a justification.*¹²

One must ask at this point specifically about judging communities in the past. This was the difficult point for my class with regard to making a judgment on the ancient Hebrew community. It often seems to me that arguments against judging communities in the past are based in a sort of arrogance that assumes that moral or ethical life is something that has been evolving, and that modern communities are thereby much more moral or responsible in this regard. This kind of thinking is similar to that which informs theories about the evolution of religious life from primitive animistic beliefs to the "higher" monotheistic systems. Of course, we have more knowledge about certain things in our world (and we have lost knowledge also) that can inform our ethical decision making, but that does not make us more ethical people than those in the past, and that we should be held as more

responsible and open to judgment about our ethical choices.

Who makes the decision about what are human rights? Surely this requires some kind of *sensus communis*, in the sense of the global community engaged in conversation both now across cultures and with communities of the past. The scholar takes part in this larger conversation by her context within the community, just as on the smaller scale there is a conversation with the text by the positioning and repositioning of herself in relation to it¹³.

As in the global community, so in the microcosmic world of the scholar, the process of making judgments must be informed by an ethics that is pragmatic and practical. Judgments from my reading must not be hidden away, but neither must they be aggressively presented. A considered, reasoned, and respectful response, even when negative, can set a sure groundwork for dialogue with those whose experience we have listened to. In this way we learn to distinguish between respect and permissiveness and avoid the vice of gutless tolerance. What matters is the quality of engagement with those with whom we disagree, that we have a willingness to be engaged, with the possibility that questions and opinions may change in that process. In the end it is in the behaviour and the exercise of power in the engagement which makes the difference to the outcome or even the possibility of dialogue.

Power is present and used in very subtle ways. By the very fact that I make a judgment, even if I don't represent it as a universal judgment, I am actually demanding in a way that the person with whom I want to be in dialogue has to consider it. The other person has to consider at least the possibility that there

is something more, another perspective, to be considered and argued for or against or accepted as possible and so on.

Thus, one of the key questions concerns the exercise of power in this whole process of making judgments and entering into conversation with others about these judgments. There are a multitude of paradigms for exercising power that we might choose from in our present cultural context: judgment made from a position of power of one race over others, of rich over poor, of male over female, of west over east, of true believer over pagan, of academic over non-academic, of academic over believer,... Starhawk's *Truth or Dare* provides a useful framework for addressing the issue of power¹⁴. Rather than the power-over model of patriarchal systems, the model of "power-within" (the authority of our own experience) and "power-with" (the authority of our own experience in dialogue with others' authority through personal experience) seems far more appropriate to the idea of a conversation.

Of course, conversations can be one-sided or dominated by one of the speakers. Scholars will need to practice self-reflection and self-suspicion within the process, trying to remain aware of Marx's *caveat* of the hidden relation that connects ideology to the phenomena of domination¹⁵. Particularly in cross-cultural dialogue, the dialogue partners must be careful from the very beginning to take into account where their cultures may have been related in the past in unequal positions of power through a colonial system of oppression¹⁶.

One-sided or dominating conversations emphasise difference at the expense of the openness of the partners. Sarah Hoagland argues that although a

dialogue is based in difference, it must not necessarily follow that the acknowledgment of difference must be set in conflict or antagonism as a way of coming to self-awareness (*contra* Hegel), in a paradigm of power caught in the metaphor of master-slave. She proposes rather a dialogue in which the partners are "autokoenoous" ("one among many")¹⁷. In such a dialogue the partners have a sense of their personal boundaries, not to limit interaction, but to provide the context for moral activity, where one has a part to play in relation to others and to certain situations¹⁸.

I have ranged very broadly in this address, but one point seems to circle again and again through the discussion; that is, the necessity of situating both the interpretive process and the dialogue about the judgments made during that process within the community context. The community is to be understood as broadly as the community of human beings, and as narrowly as the smaller communities within which we perform our everyday scholarly activity. The community is the context for the activity of reading and for the dialogical process of discriminating valuable judgment, and for that critique which leads to liberation or a clearer perception of the issues in a particular situation. It all sounds rather simple and obvious, but I think it needs to be said nonetheless to counter some of the distortion being advocated by the excessive subjective relativism or cultural relativism that has taken hold at present. In the end, the integrity of the scholar in the activity of interpretation is bound up with her/his actively critical life within global and local communities.

Notes:

1. Thanks to my co-author, Jane O'Shea, for discussion of many of the ideas in this address during our writing over the last twelve months, as well as for help in editing this address in its draft form.
2. Franzmann, M. 1995. "The City as Woman: the Case of Babylon in Isaiah 47." *Australian Biblical Review* 43: 1-19.
3. Throughout this address, I speak of texts and the process of reading. I suggest that the reader regard the term "text" as representing any phenomena to be interpreted; ie, the whole gamut of material which one might interpret in *Studies in Religion*: story, written text, dance, art, buildings, ritual, paraphernalia,....
4. When I say that there is no absolute meaning that can be stated or absolute interpretation that can be made by a reader about any text that is being engaged, I am not saying there is no absolute truth towards which a text may point, simply that a reader is not capable of interpreting absolutely.
5. Noble, P. 1995. "Hermeneutics and Post-modernism: Can We Have a Radical Reader-Response Theory? Part II." *Religious Studies* 31: 1-22, esp. 4.
6. See, for example, Gadamer, H G. 1975. *Truth and Method*. New York: Seabury, 22-29, or Apel, K O. 1986. "Perspectives for a General Hermeneutic Theory." *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*. Ed. K. Mueller-Vollmer. Oxford: Blackwell, 321-45, esp. 330-2. Of course, one could go as far back as Aristotle's description of a human person as *zōion politikon*.
7. Philosophers in general seem to regard rational reasoning as the core element in hermeneutics. Even Gadamer's concern for aesthetics in interpretation is tied to intellectual process - it is aesthetic "consciousness". When Ricoeur writes of "the properly human order is this in-between in which we constantly move, comparing our less rational and more rational motives, evaluating them relationally, submitting them to a scale of preferences..." he finds that the final step of this in-between mode is to use the scale of preferences as premises in *practical reasoning*." (Ricoeur, P. 1991. *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*. London: Athlone, 134; my emphasis]
8. Lane, S D. and Rubenstein, R A. 1996. "Judging the Other: Responding to Traditional Female Genital Surgeries." *Hastings Centre Report*, May-June, 31-9, esp. 37. Thanks to Liz Hepburn for drawing my attention to this article and the article by Buchanan cited below.
9. Of course, we could move further backwards to ask about the prejudices which give rise to the judgments. Gadamer, for example, writes of legitimate and illegitimate prejudices and the task of critical reasoning in overcoming all the illegitimate ones (Gadamer, H.-G. 1986. "The Historicity of Understanding." Mueller-Vollmer, *op. cit.*, 257-92, esp. 261); Bultmann distinguishes between a dogmatic prejudice which purports to be a definitive understanding and a preunderstanding that is open and set in the life-context of the interpreter; (Bultmann, R. 1986. "Hermeneutics and Theology." Mueller-Vollmer, *op. cit.*, 242-55, esp. 245).
10. Hoy, T. 1988. *Praxis, Truth, and Liberation: Essays on Gadamer, Taylor, Polanyi, Habermas, Gutierrez, and Ricoeur*. Lanham: University Press of America, 113-14.
11. Caputo, J D. 1987. *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*. Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 269. Perhaps here in the great Abyss, wherein is the ground of being, which is no ground, and at the same time the great life-giving darkness, we find the flip side of the amoral vacuum.
12. Buchanan, A. 1996. "Judging the Past: The Case of the Human Radiation Experiments." *Hastings Centre Report*, May-June, 25-30, esp. 26.
13. Detweiler and Robbins' description of Ricoeur's hermeneutical method is particularly

apt in this regard, outlining Ricoeur's "firm openness to the examination of many positions from the tentative adoption of one of them, in the expectation of receiving correction and offering correction as well. This is a stance more open-minded and open-ended than that of the poststructuralists who have already closed off the dialogue... by presupposing the singular validity of deconstructive tactics..."; Detweiler, R and Robbins, V K. 1991. "From New Criticism to Poststructuralism: Twentieth-Century Hermeneutics." *Reading the Text: Biblical Criticism and Literary*

Theory. Ed. S Prickett. Oxford: Blackwell, 225-80, esp. 270.

14. Starhawk. 1990. *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

15. Hoy, *op. cit.*, 104.

16. See Lane and Rubenstein, *op. cit.*, 37.

17. Hoagland seems to come close here to the idea of the *sensus communis*.

18. Hoagland, S. 1988. *Lesbian Ethics: Towards New Value*. Palo Alto, CA: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 235-41.

