

THE POPE'S RHINOCEROS

or

Are Theologians Idiots?

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INTRODUCTION

William Blake's anger at Sir Joshua Reynolds's pontifications cannot be contained when Reynolds intones the praise, 'He was a great generaliser...'. Blake's (marginal) retort is:

To Generalise is to be an Idiot. To Particularise is the Alone Distinction of Merit.
General Knowledges are those Knowledges that Idiots possess.¹

This sounds sweetly in our postmodern ears. We have become suspicious of the grand narratives of generalisation. We have learned to detect the hidden agenda behind such narratives. Literature can glory in its pursuit of the particular and it can, with clear conscience, join itself to religion as long as religion deals with particular religious experiences. So we have courses and conferences which exist under the headings, Literature and Religion or Religion and Literature.

But what of theology? Are theologians generalisers, and, hence, idiots? Are they to be kept isolated from discussions of literature lest they infect it with the old drive to generalise? Theorists of literature, such as Anne Freadman,² can call for permeability of discourse: the social sciences have much to say to literature and vice-versa. But is theology to be kept out of this dialogue? After all, theologians are reasonably honest in confessing what they are about. The most famous definition of theology is Anselm's 'faith seeking understanding' (*fides quaerens intellectum*). So theologians presume faith and try to explain it. Are historians as honest as this in confessing the faith they live by? (Witness the Manning Clark affair!) Are politicians? (John Howard's 1996 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture looked like a reply to what Manning Clark was supposed to have said!) Are anthropologists? (Remember Derek Freeman's hatchet job on Margaret Mead!) The question stands: is a healthy relation between theology and literature possible? Is the faith presumed by theologians so general that it is, in Blake's terms, idiotic?

A WORK OF THEOLOGY

To answer these questions I shall use David Tracy's *Blessed Rage for Order*³ as a representative work of theology. There are obvious dangers in this. Tracy's book begins with an examination of ways of doing theology, of which his is one. There is, then, no 'representative work of theology'. But Tracy will do for this paper. He is aware of the 'secular' world and can see no sense in excluding it from theology. He is aware of the social sciences and literature. He is not some dinosaur whose theology is an easy target for postmodern theorists. Further, *Blessed Rage for Order* has recently been re-released. It has been chewed over by the theological establishment for twenty years and has not been spat out.

Tracy styles his way of doing theology as 'revisionist'. In the revisionist mode,

Christian theology ordinarily bears some such formulation as the following: contemporary Christian theology is best understood as philosophical reflection upon the meanings present in common human experience and the meanings present in the Christian tradition.⁴

In this statement 'and' is a key word. Tracy uses a two source approach treating both the current human situation and the Christian tradition as sources for theology. He rejects the temptation to follow Tillich and look for questions in the current situation and answers in the Christian tradition. Both sources are explored for both questions and answers. We have, then, a correlational method. An authentic secularity and an authentic Christianity are checked one against the other to find what is true, that is, what is adequate to experience.

This does not appear to be the methodology which idiots would use, but does it result in vague generalisations? Does it, for all its sophistication, lead to nothing more than 'General Knowledges'? At first glance the answer to these questions is a 'yes'.

Tracy appeals to the notion of limit which he sees as central to a religious dimension to life. The current situation in science and in morality points to limits to ordinary experience. We sense that the quest for knowledge will continue to drive us toward cognitive self-transcendence, that the categorical imperative will continue to point us towards a universal 'ought'. From such examinations of authentic secularity Tracy derives a basic faith, a basic optimism. The Christian tradition yields a mode of being-

in-the-world which accords with this optimism. It reveals a gracious God; it points to self-sacrificing, agapic love as a way of life.

All this may suit Blake's view of the heavens and the earth but its very generality seems designed to bring him to apoplexy. A more detailed reading of Tracy may calm him. Particularly enlightening is Tracy's analysis of authentic Christianity. Tracy focuses almost exclusively on the great christological texts. He sees the task of history to reconstruct the texts ('of Jesus and about Jesus'), of semantics to establish the linguistic structure of the texts, and of literary criticism to determine the genres used in the texts. The task of the theologian is to examine the mode-of-being-in-the-world referred to by the text.⁵ Theologians are not concerned with going behind the text to find the real Jesus. Rather, they must explore what is in front of the text, which is for Tracy that mode-of-being-in-the-world which the text opens up for the intelligent reader.

Tracy is very clear that modes of being which are 'religious' depend on limit experiences. They cannot be formulated in concepts (generalisations?) but can only be expressed in symbol, myth, narrative. The New Testament presents 'facts' in the sense that it contains symbol/myth/narrative which is an actualisation of possible ways of being in the world. It expresses agapic love (for example) in actual terms. It does not deal in generalisations but presents (or re-presents) a story which it invites the intelligent reader to judge.⁶

WHAT IS GOING ON IN THEOLOGY?

This brief excursus into *Blessed Rage for Order* seems to promise some hope for theologians. The more canny of them may not be idiots after all! But Tracy is useful for his pointing to wider issues in theology. I wish to take up two of these issues: the use of the New Testament and the possibility of a secular theology.

Tracy turns to the New Testament, as every Christian theologian must. (?) But how is an intelligent reader to regard the New Testament? Tracy suggests that the New Testament contains narratives which invite interpretation for living in the world now and in the future. I would like to expand this view. The New Testament contains a body of narrative, some parts of which seem to contradict other parts. And it is open to seemingly endless interpretation.

It reminds me of the Pope's rhinoceros in Lawrence Norfolk's novel of the same name.⁷ In the novel Spain and Portugal are trying to further

their respective political ends by being the first to present a rhinoceros to Pope Leo X. To Europeans the beast is an endless set of possibilities. It can be anything and nothing as this exchange between the intelligent Silvestro and the dull Bernardo shows:

'When we have this Beast though,' he began.

'Beast?' Silvestro cut him off. 'You mean the animal with armour in place of a hide, the Beast which is lured out only by virgins, which has a great horn that it uses like a sword to cut the guts out of its enemies?' He stared disbelievingly at his companion. 'It doesn't exist, Bernardo. It never did, any more than dragons do.'⁸

Even people who have seen the beast spin out an endless web of interpretation with the rhinoceros at the centre. An old African shaman tells a story in which Ezodu, the rhinoceros, is an Esau-like character in the creation myth, a hunter in opposition to the farming elite. He tells his apprentice never to repeat the story:

'Want to know why?' asked the old man. He took the boy's silence for assent and continued, 'Because they will not believe it then any more than you believe it now.'⁹

Is the New Testament such a 'beast', a basis for endless interpretations which have little to do with fact, or, to split another hair, have everything to do with fact in Tracy's sense of fact, that is, a possibility of interpretation?

To some, the word 'endless' may be too strong. Can't we dismiss interpretations which seem quite outside the parameters of the text? So to claim that I Corinthians 13 is about my Aunt Aggie does seem to do violence to the text. But, in my experience, Christian interpreters do this sort of thing with great regularity. Biblical scholars may deal with the historical Jesus and the New Testament, systematic theologians may add another layer, the churches and their interpretations, but practical theologians, preachers and the pious add two more layers, 'us' and 'me'. When all these layers of interpretation are taken into consideration the possibilities are, apparently, endless. The New Testament can be about making the dishonourable burial of Jesus look good,¹⁰ it can be about UFO's, it can be about my indigestion, or about my Aunt Aggie. What is theology to make of all this?

One of Tracy's moves is to excise the historical Jesus layer from theology. The theologian's task is to examine the christological texts and the world in front of the texts, not the world behind the texts. I don't think theologians will be allowed to get away with this. Writers such as John Dominic Crossan are asking too many awkward questions. The way of

dealing with him seems to be to lump him in with the Jesus Seminar and give the whole group the label, 'idiots'. But in Germany Gerd Lüdemann is asking the same questions. The puzzle of who Jesus really was will not go away!

Crossan brings it squarely into the theological arena. He argues that each age constructs its historical Jesus using the best available evidence, and uses this construct as foundation for its theology:

I presume that there will always be divergent historical Jesuses, that there will always be divergent Christs built upon them, but I argue, above all, that the structure of a Christianity will always be: this is how we see Jesus-then as Christ-now. Christianity must repeatedly, generation after generation, make its best historical judgment about who Jesus was then and, on that basis, decide what that reconstruction means as Christ now.¹¹

One could argue that the context of each generation, its needs and its aspirations, will help determine how that generation sees both Jesus-then and Christ-now. Crossan's neat formulation - history is the foundation for theology - is naive! But the point still stands: Christian theology deals with the particular, the particular 'then' and the particular 'now'.

How can it do this? Every detail of the life of Jesus ('then') seems relevant to what theology is about. As Lüdemann notes, statements such as 'For my faith in Jesus, it is completely unimportant how Peter arrived at his faith in Jesus after Good Friday' make honest questioners suspicious.¹² But what of every detail of life now? What of UFO's and my Aunt Aggie as the personification of Christian love?

In the quotation above Crossan appealed to judgment. Tracy uses this notion even more carefully. We have already noted his reliance on the intelligent reader. The process of correlating authentic secularity with authentic Christianity requires, for Tracy, judgment, the Aristotelian phronesis. It requires intelligent reading of texts and of life. The task of theology is not to escape into generalities, but, for both Tracy and Crossan, to deal with the particular with all its quiriness and insanity.

A SECULAR THEOLOGY?

Tracy's using 'secularity', serious engagement in this world and this life, as a source for theology raises another question for Christian theology: is this world one of two sources for theology, or is it the principal source? As Tracy admits, Christian theology has been guilty of regarding Jesus the Christ as

the only source for theology. But is Jesus significant simply because he is such a good example of what this life is about? That is, is Christian theology a sub-set of a wider enterprise, secular theology?

I wish to suggest that David Malouf's *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* is symbol/myth/narrative in this wider enterprise of secular theology. In the novel, Fergus, the carrier of his family's hopes, the one aware of nature and of the sufferings of people, the fine horseman, the dead bushranger, could be a Jesus figure, but he isn't. When Adair, once so close to Fergus, officiates at the hanging of Carney, one of Fergus' gang, he hopes to learn something of his friend from the lumpish 'paddy'. But Carney is the surprise of the novel. When Adair realises his own quality of durability he also realises that Carney has this quality. When Adair feels his durability threatened by 'extinction' it is because he is close to Carney, soon to be extinguished by hanging:

I feel very close to the cold edge of it [extinction], because I am close to him. No, not Fergus after all, whom I had hoped in one form or another to find here, but this stranger whose animal presence comes near to stifling me...¹³

Carney asks a last favour before his death, to be allowed to wash in the cold water of Curlow Creek. For the men who witness this washing, the experience is 'limit' in Tracy's sense. The three troopers have their own concerns: Kersey has caught fish and wants to eat them, Garrety is randy, and Langhurst is preoccupied with his usual introspective musings. But witnessing the simple act of washing makes them want, too, to be clean. The sight of Carney's bruised body moves them out of their own limited worlds. The washing is relaxed, quietened, subdued time for Adair. Its end signals the return to the real, the 'limited':

The man looked up then. Their eyes met. The moment was broken. The man moved, lifted his foot from the water, set it down in the clinging grains of sand. Returned, Adair thought, to this other condition we are bound to. Both of us. All of us. The insufficient law.¹⁴

Carney will, I suspect, be claimed for Christianity. He could be a bruised Suffering Servant who moves others to cleanse themselves. There are rumours that he has not died. The Government has arranged things so that his grave is not public. It exists in the trackless bush, so, perhaps, it does not exist at all. Is Carney alive, the heart of a future Irish rebellion? The parallels with Jesus are obvious.

Malouf, I feel, is far more subversive. Carney is ordinary. He is not as cloddish as the troopers want him to be, but he is an ordinary man whose corporeality is stressed in the novel. If such a one can be the source for limit experiences, the world and ordinary human life must be taken very seriously. Carney is not an ordinary man who gains dignity by his parallel to Jesus. Rather, Malouf is suggesting that Jesus has dignity because his life partakes of the humanity which Carney displays in the novel. Theology is not to be occupied with Jesus alone. It searches the lives of all men and women for symbol/myth/narrative. The Jesus story is one among many.

CONCLUSION

A healthy relation between literature and theology does seem possible: but there are conditions. First, literature has the right to spring from a faith seeking understanding which is not a Christian faith (or a Jewish or Muslim or Hindu faith). The faith it springs from may be secular in Tracy's conceptual sense and in Malouf's narrative sense. Second, literature has the right to expect a hearing from Christian theology. If authentic secularity is a source for Christian theology, this theology must listen to the world in all its particularity. And particularity is where literature (and art) shine, if Blake is right.

This second point needs stressing. Christian theologians, it seems to me, are not good at listening. They accept the postmodern move to alterity in their rhetoric, but when it comes to the things of the spirit they expect others to listen to their wisdom. Christian theology rarely listens. Tracy is right to point to the tendency for Christian theologians to have answers for other people's questions.

Theologians must deal with the particular. They may conclude their dealings with generalisations, with immutable formulae, and be idiots. Or they may formulate tentatively, knowing that a return to the particular will force a re-thinking of their position. They may even avoid formulation and use narrative, again knowing that they have not yet told the definitive story. These last two seem ways out of idiocy.

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- ² Freadman, A. 1996. *Scattering the Rhapsodic Fog* (The Australian, November 20), p. 32.
- ³ Tracy, D. 1975 [1995]. *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: The Seabury Press).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 207-15.

⁷ Norfolk, L. 1996. *The Pope's Rhinoceros*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson.

⁸ Ibid., p. 453.

⁹ Ibid., p. 516.

¹⁰ Crossan, J. D. 1995, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper), & Lüdemann, G. 1995, *What Really Happened to Jesus* (Trans. John Bowden. London: SCM).

¹¹ Crossan, p. 200.

¹² Lüdemann, p. 1.

¹³ Malouf, D. 1996, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (London: Chatto & Windus), p. 184.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 201.