

A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR ROWLAND

by Dr Francis Watson

Dear Christopher,

I'm grateful for your open letter, your generous comments and the critical questions you raise. Two general concerns seem to emerge, and it is to these that I shall respond here. The first is that I am too dismissive of the real value of the historical-critical method. Rightly objecting to its 'hegemony' in modern biblical studies, I'm in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The second is that the theological orientation that I bring to biblical interpretation is too 'cerebral': this makes me insufficiently attentive to the provisionality of our knowledge of God and to the particularities of a place called 'the real world'.

1. So far as I remember, my book contains no disparagement at all of 'the historical-critical method', largely because I do not believe that such an entity exists in the singular form that is normally envisaged. What does exist is a shifting set of conventions, never clearly defined and constantly under negotiation, about the questions that it is proper to address to the biblical texts and the answers that it is proper to expect from them. Beyond the fact that these conventions still privilege modes of interpretation that are, broadly speaking, 'historical' in their orientation towards the circumstances of the texts' origin, it is very hard to generalise about them. If, for example, one claimed that 'the historical-critical method' is characterised by its concern with 'authorial intention', the example of form-criticism would immediately refute that claim. As developed by such scholars as Gunkel and Bultmann, form-criticism sought to replace the hermeneutic of the individual creative genius (J, perhaps, or the historical Jesus) with a hermeneutic that found the origins of biblical material in anonymous communal processes. In the light of the irreducible diversity of broadly historical approaches to the biblical texts, it would be pointless to attempt a criticism of 'the historical-critical method'

as though it were a coherent entity. There are many historical-critical methods, sharing a certain family likeness but diverging and dissenting at least as much as they converge.

There are, however, at least three points at which criticism is needed. First, it is commonly assumed that the historical orientation of modern biblical interpretation is somehow normative, and, in particular, that the discipline will be subverted if theological issues are allowed to obtrude. This assumption stems from hermeneutically naive assumptions about 'objectivity' and from anti-theological prejudice, and it should now be abandoned. Second, there is a pervasive tendency to construct elaborate historical hypotheses upon flimsy foundations — an excessive optimism about what modern historical approaches can actually achieve, granted the limitations of the 'evidence' to which they must appeal. (How, for example, can one take seriously attempts to reconstruct the life-story of the so-called 'Johannine community'?) Third, and corresponding to the previous point, the obsession with reconstructing the world behind the text has led to a neglect of the text itself in its final form. Literary and canonical approaches have been salutary in this respect. In choosing to work with the final form of the text, I am motivated both by the conviction that theological interpretation must take seriously the fact of the canon, and by scepticism about the value of much of the reconstructive scholarship that remains resolutely oblivious to that fact. But I do not for a moment suppose that one can or should dispense with all forms of historical knowledge. The concept of the 'final form' itself presupposes the historical knowledge which, within its limitations, textual criticism has made available. And a hermeneutic like mine which criticises the tendency of literary approaches to minimise the biblical texts' referential functions, and to construe them instead as a self-contained world, is in no position to dispense with history. An anti-historical Christian theology would be a contradiction in terms. But that does not compel one to bestow a theological imprimatur on everything that currently passes muster as 'historical-critical scholarship'.

2. Your letter expresses a number of anxieties about the particular 'theological perspective' I attempt to state in my book, and I have some difficulty getting these anxieties into

focus. My biblical hermeneutic is grounded 'in the richness of Trinitarian theology'; yet it is too 'cerebral', too detached from suffering and contradiction; and it neglects explicit engagement with Augustine, Aquinas, Adorno and Wittgenstein. (Would such an engagement really make it any less 'cerebral'?) I fail to divulge necessary biographical information ('Shouldn't you come clean about your denominational allegiance...?') Why? My book isn't autobiography!). I am deficient in 'the critical manner fostered by worship and service which can contribute to the subversion of human wisdom'. I am 'in danger of swapping the exegetes' guild for that of the systematic theologians'. And so on. These criticisms are hedged about by many qualifications, but the cumulative effect of their constant references to 'dangers' is to express a fairly high level of unease. Although you don't mention this, my book could hardly have emphasised more strongly the inseparability of theology and ethics, and the ethics in question does not lack a political and a critical dimension: but it seems that the book retains for you its excessively 'cerebral' character despite all this.

You appeal to 1 Cor:13 in asserting the primacy of charity or praxis over 'mere words'. I could argue that at this point you simply misunderstand my argument, which follows Habermas and A. E. McFadyen in seeing speech as an instance of the broader category of communicative action: monologue and dialogue therefore represent not 'mere words' but modes of human interaction. But I think there's more at stake here than a misunderstanding. When you speak of 'charity' and 'praxis', you use words to pick out a certain class of actions from the broader category of action-in-general. But it isn't self-evident what is required for an action to count as an instance of 'charity'. This particular word must therefore be understood not as a mere label but as the centre of an entire discourse which constitutes the negative and positive criteria needed in order to distinguish these actions from others, and which offers a rationale for the uniquely high valuation ascribed to this class of action. 'Charity' comes into being only within discourse. That is not to reduce it to speech; it is to point out that the field in which we act is already saturated by language, which makes it impossible to play off 'mere word' against action.

The question is simply which discourse one inhabits as one speaks of 'charity' and defends the value-judgement that accompanies the use of this term. My assumption is very simple: that the proper discursive context for this term is that of Christian faith, which sees in the figure of the incarnate Word the norm by which all other instances of charity are to be identified and assessed. God loved the world like this (*houtōs*): that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life. This view of the practice of charity implies a trinitarian theology, and only makes sense in that context. Since you appear to find my development of this point too 'cerebral', I would ask you what the discursive context is within which you speak of 'charity' and 'praxis', and why you seem to find the trinitarian and incarnational one so problematic. Is it because all this theology is hopelessly and necessarily out of touch with 'the real world of conflict and contradiction'? Of course I can't prove that the world loved by the trinitarian God of Christian faith is 'the real world', but if it isn't then it seems to me that to talk of 'the real world' is just an empty rhetorical gesture. Which world? Whose reality? And why theirs rather than anyone else's? Could we know that 'the real world' is a place of 'conflict and contradiction' apart from Christian faith?

I suspect that you find my theological language too confident for your tastes: hence all your warnings against the practice of theology as 'a coherent discipline', in a 'privileged theological environment', oblivious to theology's own 'contextual nature', to the need for a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', and to 'the unknowability of God'. These are, if I may say so, the stock responses of contemporary liberal Anglican theology whenever the programme of *fides quaerens intellectum* is taken seriously; whenever, that is, an attempt is made to think coherently and responsibly, within particular traditions, about what it might mean to live by faith in the triune God, within the Christian community but also within a world that is in many respects antagonistic to and uncomprehending of this project. There is, frankly, no need for any reminder of the frailty and provisionality of a theological programme along these lines. It would be very much easier and more comfortable simply to acknowledge the limitations of all particular contexts, the

need for unwearying ideological vigilance, the divine unknowability, and the primacy of praxis. But, if one settled for this, would there still be any need of faith, in the Christian sense of the word? If, on the other hand, we tried to practise theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, then our current slogans about contextuality, praxis, ideology-critique and so on would have to be redefined in the light of a radically new context. In that way they might become theologically relevant.

With best wishes,

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