

Critical Theology and Education

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Introduction

To many, linking the two words 'critical' and 'theology' will seem at best a tautology. After all, since Saint Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, theology has been regarded firmly and explicitly as second-order reflection, which is of necessity 'critical' if it is genuinely reflective. And yet there is a sense in which this understanding of theology—and this understanding of reflection—as in some sense one single identifiable discipline is very *uncritical*. Some of the more recent developments in narrative theology, for example, do not lend themselves to such a generalised analysis. A concern with hermeneutic theory, too, leads one at least to doubt the notion that 'theology' is 'always' the same sort of enterprise; one need only consider the diversity of 'local' theologies in Central America, or Black Africa, to recognise the *possibility* of there being many different interpretations of 'theology'. David Tracy's magisterial study, *The Analogical Imagination* (London 1981), in which the vexed question of the relationship between theology and cultural pluralism is addressed, is arguably the finest recent examination of these issues.

What I want to do in this short essay is to reflect upon our modern definition of 'theology', and to consider to what extent it is genuinely critical. To facilitate this, I will concentrate upon two texts: Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination*; and John E. McPeck's *Critical Thinking and Education* (Oxford 1981). In the light of their work, I will advance some ideas and suggestions concerning the way in which theologians might conceivably go about their tasks.

David Tracy

Tracy's basic position is well-known, and requires little commentary; indeed, he himself provides an excellent summary of *The Analogical Imagination*, when he writes:

My thesis is that what we mean in naming certain texts, events, images, rituals, symbols and persons 'classics' is that here we recognise nothing less than the disclosure of a reality we cannot but name true.¹

For Tracy, moreover, it is axiomatic that there can be no one, single, definitive interpretation of any 'classic''s meaning. On the contrary, and by definition, the 'classic' is capable of sustaining a number of different

interpretations; its meaning, so to speak, is precisely this ability to generate and sustain truth in plurality or multiplicity.

This plurality itself is indicative of the wide range of contexts in which interpreters find themselves working. The 'classic', therefore, stimulates and sustains a wide range of interpretation, because it reacts with a wide range of social contexts. Or, rather: in encountering the 'classic' in the act of interpretation, different people discover different aspects of the truth, because of their different social perspectives. So Tracy can write:

When we read any classic ... we find that our present horizon is always provoked, sometimes confronted, always transformed by the power exerted by the classic's claim.²

Our 'horizons'; i.e., our social and historical contexts, are themselves stimulated and interpreted by the meanings we discover in 'classics'. In other words, there is a hermeneutic 'circle' at work, in which both 'classic' and interpreter render meaning, one to the other. Such is the argument of hermeneutic theory, of which Tracy's study is such a fine example.

Theologically, and indeed religiously, it is not difficult to envisage the importance of Tracy's words. It remains, however, very much at the level of a general, hermeneutic theory. By that, I mean that Tracy offers guidelines for the way in which interpretation might work, but never actually sets out a specific position, a specific interpretation of a particular 'classic'. In one sense, this is understandable; *The Analogical Imagination*, after all, is intended to be a comprehensive study of hermeneutics in theology at the theoretical level. And yet its lack of practical application, its failure to ground its reflection in detailed analysis of at least one historical 'classic', is troubling. For it seems to me to perpetuate the myth that it is possible to make the kind of general, comprehensive claim that Tracy, and others such as Bultmann before him, does indeed make. This, I would contend, is uncritical. It has the potential to be critical, but not at the level at which the argument is left in *The Analogical Imagination*.

Despite its claims to take seriously the cultural pluralism of the modern world, therefore, Tracy's argument seems to run up against some very old problems. Indeed, one might almost say that Tracy succumbs to the very same problems that the Western tradition, at least since Kant, has found so disturbing. It is one thing to acknowledge the fragmented nature of experience and the way in which humanity encounters what it likes to think of as reality. It is quite another, however, to regard those fragments as somehow pearls-on-a-string, distinct but attached, and then to devote all of one's attention to defining the nature of the 'string', be it via hermeneutic theory or epistemology. In this respect, Tracy's quest for an 'answer', however subtle, seems in thrall to a broadly realist understanding of meaning and its discovery.

No doubt Tracy is correct to wrestle with these matters; certainly,

the discovery of meaning is one of the prime tasks of theological reflection, and *Christian* theology is—at least, in theory—committed to the idea that the discovery of meaning, in however wide a range of ‘classics’, ultimately originates in God’s action in Jesus Christ. But simply because one is speaking of ‘one’ action, and ‘one’ humanity’s discovery of meaning in the ‘classic’ references to that action, does not imply that there must be ‘one’ string upon which all ‘classics’ are hung.

The tendency to overlook this possibility; i.e. the tendency to bring all incidents of theological reflection under one single epistemological or hermeneutic umbrella, is perhaps an indication of theology’s overconfidence, the belief that it can—and should—say something of transcending significance. On this scenario, theology becomes almost invariably speculative; on the basis of analogy or dialectic, it seeks to say something of ‘lasting’ import. I want to suggest something very different. Given that theology is second-order reflection—presumably upon religious experience and practice—theology clearly has a dual role. First, theology must stop and consider the structure of the specific historical, religious experience or practice with which it is concerned. Then, second, it should attempt to be constructive.

The purpose of this distinction within theology is to bring in a moment of epistemological reflection, prior to hermeneutic interpretation; i.e., rather than regard epistemology and hermeneutics as antithetical approaches—as in, say, Hegel and Schleiermacher—see them as complementary stages within theology itself. Paul Ricoeur makes such a point when, in his essay *Preface to Bultmann*, in the collection *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (London 1981), he questions the speed with which Bultmann hurries on to the existential encounter with the kerygmatic Christ, paying too little attention to the semantic presentation of the historical Jesus. Ricoeur writes:

The entire route of comprehension goes from the ideality of meaning to existential signification. A theory of interpretation which at the outset runs straight to the moment of decision moves too fast. It leaps over the moment of meaning, which is the objective stage, in the non-worldly sense of ‘objective’.... It is the objectivity of the text, understood as content—bearer of meaning and demand for meaning—that begins the existential movement of appropriation. Without such a conception of meaning, of its objectivity and even of its ideality, no textual criticism is possible. Therefore, the semantic moment, the moment of objective meaning, must precede the existential moment, the moment of personal decision, in a hermeneutics concerned with doing justice to both the objectivity of meaning and the historicity of personal decision.³

‘The entire route of comprehension...’: it is this route, as the way of education within theology, that should be concerned first of all with

epistemological reflection, thereby being genuinely critical.

What one needs to see, therefore, is a primary, pedagogic purpose behind any consideration of the religious or theological 'classic', before the theologians moves on to the task of hermeneutic interpretation. Certainly, one would not wish to claim that such a pedagogic purpose were impartial; i.e., in some sense value-free. The failure of general theories of epistemology is precisely their inability to consider their own pedagogic role, instead of striking out in search of normative status. My suggestion, on the contrary, is that by recognising the essentially pedagogic role of epistemology in any given theology, one may begin to realise some of the hidden potential of Tracy's reflections upon cultural pluralism. Tracy himself points the way, when he quotes a passage from Nietzsche's *Schopenhauer as Educator*, in *The Analogical Imagination*. Nietzsche asks, rhetorically:

But how can we find ourselves again? How can man know himself? ... The youthful soul should look back on life with the question: what have you truly loved up to now, what has drawn your soul aloft, what has mastered it and at the same time blessed it? Set up these things ... before you and perhaps they will give you ... the fundamental law of your own true self ... for your real nature lies not buried deep within you but immeasurably high above you.... There are other means of finding oneself ... but I know of none better than to think of one's educators.⁴

Thinking of one's educators—religious and theological—implies the consideration of their pedagogic role, and of the pedagogic role of theologians as educators in today's schools and universities.

McPeck

In his *Critical Thinking and Education*, John E. McPeck sets out to consider precisely these questions. He is not concerned specifically with theology, nor any other one discipline. On the contrary, his intention is to look at the way in which reflection in any one of a number of different disciplines—be they arts or sciences—may be rendered more critical by a consideration of the way in which it fulfils its pedagogic role. For McPeck, therefore, 'critical' thinking does not mean rational enquiry, where 'reason' is regarded as the sole arbiter of knowledge. Rather, critical thinking is reflection which concerns itself with that stage outlined by Ricoeur in the passage quoted above; i.e., the semantic movement which precedes the existential (in terms of Bultmann's Christology), or the moment in which epistemology precedes hermeneutics.

Within this pedagogic model, McPeck offers the following definition of 'epistemology':

Epistemology is the analysis of good reasons for various beliefs.⁵

One can see, in this statement, how McPeck's understanding of epistemology combines with Ricoeur's insight, and my criticism of Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination*. McPeck is concerned to anchor his understanding of critical thinking—on behalf of which he formulates his particular interpretation of epistemology—in *specific* instances, that is, particular, concrete events. One does not find in McPeck's work, therefore, an appeal to generalised notions of how cognition operates. On the contrary, he is urging teachers to focus attention upon the given material of their own particular discipline. So, when McPeck writes:

When a person knows how to suspend judgement for the purpose of using his epistemic understanding of an issue and he does in fact so do, we say of that person that he is a critical thinker....⁶

we can be sure as to what he means. He means that the critical thinker is that individual who, prior to the different task of interpreting and evaluating an event or issue, (i.e. the hermeneutic task), can 'suspend judgement' by 'inserting' a stage of analysis of the good reasons for various beliefs. McPeck, in other words, is calling for nothing more or less than the introduction of certain standards of critical reflection within the ranks of those who seek to educate the young.

In theology and religious studies, it is not difficult to see how McPeck's plea might produce fruits fairly rapidly. In Britain, and in particular in Oxford, much of the study of the philosophy of religion seems to be taught on the basis of its complete dissociation from anything one might describe as constitutive of the material world. Questions of faith, knowledge, prayer, reason, the existence of God and the fate of souls, are considered almost without the slightest reference to historical practice or experience in specific religious contexts. On McPeck's terms, this is not simply illiterate, insofar as it fails to take into consideration that which is plainly given in the traditions and customs of society. It is also *uncritical*; it is dogma masquerading as logic, as rational enquiry. Working out McPeck's thesis, therefore, implies the criticism of any philosophy of religion which fails to consider religion in all of its social and historical complexity.

Tracy, of course, is working towards a similar goal. For Tracy, the interpretation of a religious 'classic' must involve reflection upon its social and historical context; in that sense, Tracy's study is critical. Where *The Analogical Imagination* breaks down, however, as was demonstrated above, is in its need to assert a single, dominant way in which knowledge and understanding, and indeed meaning, can be discovered. McPeck's answer to this question, as one might expect, is very different.

Certainly, McPeck can write that:

Critical thinking ... is solving problems in the context of discovery ...⁷

the implication being that logical and rational enquiry must at least

play their parts in critical thinking. But it is not his intention to identify any one single way in which critical thinking does indeed 'solve' problems. He writes:

... critical thinking requires the judicious use of scepticism, tempered by experience, such that it is productive of a more satisfactory solution to, or insight into, the problem at hand.⁸

One can begin to see, therefore, how McPeck's own model for critical thinking considers, like Tracy's, the question of cultural pluralism. Unlike Tracy, however, McPeck does not seek out one method, one theory, by which hermeneutics and interpretation might themselves be understood. Rather, McPeck seeks to urge upon teachers in all areas of study a model of critical thinking in which each attends to the specific materials of their discipline. So he can write that:

Critical thinking is parasitic upon detailed knowledge of and experience in parent fields and problem areas.⁹

The reader, at this point, will begin to recognise McPeck's ultimate assertion. That is: each and every discipline is not 'known' or 'understood' by way of an all-encompassing reason; rather, each and every discipline *must have its own epistemology*. Critical thinking, for McPeck, is to all intents and purposes the recognition of this fact.

In terms of the teaching of theology and religious studies—including the philosophy of religion—McPeck's views would seem to have great potential. For example, with the recognition of there being as many different 'epistemologies'—analyses of good reasons for various beliefs—as there are beliefs or practices (cf. here Tracy's 'classic'), the emphasis within the teaching of theology and religious studies upon 'mastering' a subject, with a view effectively to its domination and subjugation, would be redundant. There could be no such 'mastery'; solely ever-renewed reflection upon specific, historical texts and events. Theology would then cease to be something based upon the accumulation of information and particular formulae, and become the *testing* of religious beliefs and practices against the principles of the Gospel. Such testing, however, would not be absolute; on the contrary, and as McPeck points out, in critical thinking one must constantly construct alternatives and possible solutions for oneself. He writes:

Critical thinking requires the judicious use of scepticism, tempered by experience, such that it is productive of a more satisfactory solution to, or insight into, the problem at hand.¹⁰

There is a very real danger, of course, that such a statement becomes simply platitudinous. But I do not believe that this need be the case. McPeck, whilst reiterating the same thing *ad nauseum*, is at least saying something important. When translated into theology, in terms of its pedagogic purpose, his understanding of *critical* thinking could well serve as a way out of the self-created morass in which contemporary hermeneutic theology finds itself, despite its well-intentioned concern

with cultural pluralism. McPeck's emphasis upon specific experience and analysis of individual events and practices fires a cautionary shot across the bows of those who would reduce theology and religious studies to a form of painting-by-numbers, in which the 'mastery' of 'answers' and their marshalling is taught by means of dogma masquerading as universal principle.

Finally, and by a delicious irony, I would argue that it is precisely this understanding of critical theology which one finds in Saint Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, in the first question of the *Prima Pars*. Here Christian theology is exposed to precisely that searching analysis—the analysis of good reasons for various beliefs—which constitutes McPeck's definition of epistemology. Certainly, it might be argued that Saint Thomas is arriving at answers on the basis of a 'pearls-on-a-string' methodology, in which reason is the 'string'. But on closer inspection this proves not to be the case. In the last analysis, Saint Thomas understands and interprets Christian theology by means of *testing* its good reasons for various beliefs. In that, Saint Thomas is being critical, in a way that would prove valuable pedagogically for the contemporary tuition of theology and religious studies, and in a way that confirms the importance of McPeck's book. If theology as education is to be critical, it would do well to follow Saint Thomas Aquinas and John E. McPeck at this point.

- 1 D. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, London 1981, p. 108.
- 2 *ibid.* p. 134.
- 3 P. Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, London 1981, p. 68.
- 4 D. Tracy, *op. cit.* p. 130.
- 5 J.E. McPeck, *Critical Thinking and Education*, Oxford 1981, p. 23.
- 6 *ibid.* p. 156.
- 7 *ibid.* p. 17.
- 8 *ibid.* p. 7.
- 9 *ibid.* p. 10.
- 10 *ibid.* p. 7.

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