

OPEN LETTER

AN OPEN LETTER TO FRANCIS WATSON ON *TEXT, CHURCH AND WORLD*¹

from Professor Christopher Rowland

Dear Francis,

I was asked to write a review of your book but have decided to make this into an open letter. I have done so for two reasons. Firstly, there is something rather artificial in writing a review of a book by a person I feel is more than a mere acquaintance and whose work I have read and company I have enjoyed over the years. It is rather deceitful to give the readers of this piece the impression that it is an entirely dispassionate account from someone who is in no way involved with the writer of the book and is thereby unconstrained by the demands of friendship. That will not mean that I will draw back from reflecting on the things on which I find myself parting company with you but does make clear the context in which I do so. Secondly, in a way, which I hope is consistent with a theme of your book, I want to engage in dialogue rather than the monologue which is the typical genre of the review and hope that you will respond in that precise, systematic way in which you respond so carefully to questions and comments in discussion.

Your book is a substantial achievement in its attempt to wrestle with strands in our contemporary, intellectual world. Your setting of your study in three dimensions of text, church and world, is a necessary corrective to so much biblical study, where the task is understood too often as merely an attempt to engage in dialogue with dominant intellectual discourses, whether philosophical and historical, and a neglect of the rich tradition of interpretation and hermeneutic of the church. Your biblical interpretation, with which the book is adorned is sensitive to issues of church and world in the engagement with

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feminism, deconstructionist philosophy and the theological tradition of the Christian church. It is an interesting experiment in biblical hermeneutics to find the dialogue with aspects of contemporary culture taking place via the interpretation of the biblical text. You make the Bible the arena for the understanding, and the questioning, of aspects of our modern condition and in so doing treat us to illuminating and, at times brilliant, insights into the biblical texts. Throughout I had the sense that the reader is being treated to an attempt to establish a theologically credible biblical hermeneutic, no longer grounded in the obsolescent (?) verities of a hegemonic historicism, but in the richness of Trinitarian theology. That has meant a distancing from the dominant mode of academic biblical interpretation. Your espousal of a chastened form of interpretation based on the 'final form of the text' has a good deal of credibility, especially as you are sensitive to the criticisms made of such approaches in the past. So, you are wanting to part company with many of your British colleagues in academic biblical exegesis who still espouse the historical critical method. It is a position which is set out with clarity and cogency, and one with which I find myself in substantial agreement. (Incidentally, I wonder what you make of the recent document from the Pontifical Biblical Commission on biblical interpretation which stresses the historical method as the foundation of all scriptural interpretation? It seems to me to be an indication of how utterly pervaded with this approach all the Western churches have become, in contrast to other literary disciplines.) You hint at your perplexity at the theological propriety of this hegemony from time to time, and I entirely sympathise with that. Your initial discussions of the work of Frei and Childs enable us to see the theological possibilities which an alternative exegetical method opens up.

What was most striking about your exegesis is the refusal to ignore the hard points. The great merit of historical-criticism, like biblical scholarship down the ages which has been attentive to the details of the text, is that it has always made much of the 'aporias' in the text. While the exponents of modern criticism have 'solved' the problems by resort to source criticism or the expedient of the intellectually inferior author, like the patristic exegetes, you have stayed with the

textual cruces as sources of interpretative potential rather than knots to be cut. Your wrestling with the text is always illuminating and reflects that respect for Scripture, which is not born of obsequiousness or obscurantism, but of humility and lack of presumption about the infallibility of one's own reason. I warmly welcome that.

I share your reservations about the hegemony of the historical critical method and its effects but still remain to be convinced that as a heuristic tool it is so perverse that a theological exegesis would be better without it. Aspects of your hermeneutics are to be welcomed, in particular, your thesis (exemplified particularly well in your essay in the collection you edited a couple of years ago, *The Open Text*) of setting the text against the author. There is too often an implicit subservience to the absent author which may at times lead to neglect of the structure and pattern of the text itself. In historical criticism the literary remains form the rudiments of an imaginative reconstruction of another story which functions as a determining commentary on the literal sense of the text. Characters at the literal level then become mere ciphers for a historical reconstruction which becomes determinative for exegesis. This approach is a modern form of spiritualising, or allegorical, exegesis, though of course the referent to the hidden story is history rather than the truths of divinity. Despite the low opinion of allegory held by many modern interpreters, it seems to me that most historical criticism represents a good modern example of allegorical exegesis. While it can take its start from the text, it is often interested in another story: the struggles behind the text; the historical Jesus; the evangelist's community, the intention of the evangelist etc. In this quest the fabric of the text and its form can easily get left behind. They become merely a kind of 'window' through which (with varying degrees of distortion) the situation behind the text, that other story which allegory seeks to expose, can be glimpsed.

Narrative criticism can at least have the advantage of demanding a close analysis of the story as we have it. The preoccupation with the surface in much contemporary interpretation represents a necessary reaction to the reductionism of the quest for 'essences'. The allegorical method is an

important component of exegesis, however. Any one like myself who has imbibed the 'apocalyptic spirit' will never want to dispense with it. Your appeal, like the ancient Antiochene exegetes, is to attend to the literal as opposed to the allegorical. But the church has learnt to live with both, and there is no reason why that should not be true in the modern world also.

Indeed, the gospels offer indications that we cannot read them satisfactorily without attention to another level of meaning. We shall need to continue our endeavours in that area, albeit with a more chastened attitude to our ability to come up with the all-embracing 'hidden' story which neatly explains all that is there on the surface. There are textual pointers which demand attention to, what you call, extra-textual reality. That quest for it, speculative and vague as it may often be, demands an appropriate historical dimension, not as a bedrock, but as one of a number of factors to which attention is needed to explore the literal meaning of the text. Don't you agree that exploration of the situation of Jews and Christians at the end of the first century may be necessitated by verses like Matt 28:15 and Jn 9:22? Of course, it is possible that these tell us nothing but the perceptions of the situations of the writer, but they do demand of us some attempt to assess whether this may correspond with reality. The doubts which surround the promulgation of the *birkath ha-minim*, and the extent of its influence on the New Testament, indicate the difficulties of checking the nature of the exclusion referred to in Jn 9. The kind of neat confidence that I and others have expressed in the past about the context of New Testament writings now needs to be severely qualified.

The approach you have taken works well with narrative, of which the Bible is full. Where the historical method has been so successful is in providing contexts for the interpretation of those texts which make little appearance in your work: prophetic oracles; epistles etc. The exercise in historical imagination which has been employed over the last hundred years has enlivened large parts of the Old Testament and the Pauline epistles. Whatever reservations I may have about the particular solution you offered for the setting of Romans in your earlier book, I think that there is a theological propriety to that exercise of 'allegorical exegesis', because the experi-

ence of God incarnate means that every generation of the people of God are confronted with the struggle to answer the question where we meet and how we respond to God in society. We cannot allow that 'higher narrative' to determine our use of the text, but it is not inappropriate, as we seek to avoid self-centredness and idolatry, to look beyond our own self-preoccupations to the readings and the situations of others who have used texts before us. That is the heart of catholic Christianity. Also, given your concern to engage with secular reason in your theological exegesis throughout your book, I think that it remains necessary to continue to engage with that aspect of modernity which is represented by historical study. I can understand why you should not want to do so in your book (and your discussion of the important contribution of Hans Frei has an entirely appropriate position at the beginning of your study), but historical study remains an aspect of biblical interpretation which shows us well how Christian theology has effectively domesticated it (while at the same time being in some sense corrupted by its power). Such co-option of secular hermeneutical tools has always characterised exegesis from the very start of the interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Hellenistic period.

Nevertheless your challenge to the dominant assumption that, because these texts have their origin in history, they must first and foremost be studied historically is one I share. Inevitably, lexicography and textual criticism will demand of us a degree of historical study, but the meaning of these texts is much less dependent on the study of ancient history than most practitioners of historical criticism allow.

I wonder whether your interpretation reflects too much the pressing concerns of the academic context and our (your and my) need to engage with theology's truth claims before the jury of our peers ? I was sad that you didn't include more material explicitly on liberation theology as part of the main argument. This is not because it would have offered you any more interpretative insights than you already have (indeed, your biblical interpretations have clearly been enriched from time to time by the liberationist perspective), but because (if I may borrow a phrase from the armoury of secular reason) your treatment runs the risk of being too ideological. That is,

I thought that the hard questions posed by liberation theologians concerning the actual conditions of the majority of the world's population and the way in which the Christian gospel addresses them make only a brief appearance in your study. Of course, they are the ones who have fallen foul of the interpreters who 'police the limits of the text in order to prevent interpretations foreign to the context from gaining access and to expel those that have previously eluded their vigilance' (p. 171). But in several respects their work goes to the very heart of your subject: what context is deemed to be appropriate as the necessary dialogue-partner for theology; what can be said to mark the activity of the Spirit who convicts the world of sin, justice and judgement? I read your book as a concerted attempt to change the dialogue partner of biblical exegesis from history to theology. It is a timely reminder that the quest for an ancient context is itself a product of modernity and that proper access to it is barred when the 'modern' character of the search for that context is not recognised.

Political questions are at the heart of ecclesiology and hermeneutics and are always with us. Take the issue of what we read in church. For centuries the Church of England allowed only small parts of the book of Revelation to be read at morning and evening prayer (F.E. Brightman: *The English Rite*, London, 1915, volume one, p.51). In 1661 lessons from the Apocalypse were to be read only on certain feasts (the situation changed later when Revelation, except chapters 9, 13 and 17, was read in the month of December). In a church which asserts in its formularies that the Scriptures contain everything necessary for salvation this is a remarkable phenomenon and may be paralleled in the impoverished provision of readings from the Apocalypse in the eucharistic lectionary for the Alternative Service Book, the reasons for which may all too easily be imagined.

Within the theological tradition of the catholic church a biblical interpretation, which is centred in the prayer and sacramental life of the church and the practical commitment to the neighbour, is the essential framework in which theology is formed. Without it there ceases to be theology in any traditional sense of the word. I can tell from your book that you want to affirm that context. Yet I wonder whether the pull of

the academy can quench voices which raises questions about the neat formulations, whether they be the puzzling intuitions of visionary and mystic or the experiences of injustice and oppression. In short, your definition of the world is far too restricted and cerebral. That is not to deny that the sort of dialogue which you embark on with Derrida, feminist theologians and others is important but to affirm that this is hardly a representative sample of 'the world', nor, theologically, does it engage with its problematic character. Perhaps a more nuanced interaction with the Johannine understanding of the cosmos or the classic 'Christus Victor' doctrine of the atonement would have added another perspective to the theological problematic of your project?

What I am asking for is an engagement with, for example, Barth's struggle to find an epistemology so that the task of 'fides quaerens intellectum' can be conducted in a theologically appropriate way. If one wanted a dialogue with modernity in order to explore how this might come about, I wonder whether there is fertile ground to be cultivated in attending to the work of Adorno and Benjamin as well as the later members of the Frankfurt School whom you do include? Theodor Adorno's work exemplifies the reluctance to accept too readily the ideology of human language and demands that we seek to view everything in the 'messianic light'. Adorno, like both Derrida and feminist critics such as Irigaray, subvert the rationality of discourse. Some of that suspicion in Adorno's case may come from a continuing Jewish messianic inheritance, and his iconoclasm echoes many of the sentiments of Barth's theology. It parallels a subject close to my heart: the deconstructive potential of Apocalypse. From John of Patmos to William Blake there has been a continuous protest against a theology which allows a dominant rationality to determine understanding of God. It is a component of the text of the church which may help us to relate to that fundamental incoherence and injustice of the world in the ambiguity of its imagery as well as its refusal to grace the status quo with anything but the critique of eschatological renewal.

A characteristic feature of much theology over the last twenty years has been the explicit recognition of its contextual character: understanding God is rooted in the complexities of

particular cultures and the formative character of particular ways of life. So, while absolute truth may be our goal, we have to admit that it is at present unattainable within the confusion of the old order. God's freedom to act in unexpected ways and the consequent necessity to deny absolute validity to our human projects is a necessary corrective to a human proclivity to absolutise our wisdom. The problem is how one makes the move from acknowledgement of the unknowability of God to an understanding and explication of God without falling into all the traps of human fallibility. We are inevitably infected with conflicts of interest and the power of a dominant ideology to mask and betray the understanding of God's ways. The hermeneutics of suspicion, that important Enlightenment legacy (though the critique of ideology in one form or another has always been a component of Christian theology), have reminded us that the church, just as much as society, is an arena of power struggles, ideology and oppression, as you remind us in your book. To suppose that there is a privileged theological environment where the faithful can expound their theology free from ideological distortion this side of the Kingdom of God is to be guilty of a pernicious form of 'false consciousness'.

Theology in your hands has become a self-evidently coherent discipline, but I wonder if it is occasionally in danger of drifting into a stratospheric idealism away from the real world of conflict and contradiction. Whose theology and whose church are you speaking for? Shouldn't you come clean about your denominational allegiance and the discrepancies which your church manifests in its theological tradition? If you had been carrying out your project from within the Magisterium, I could have seen that your position would have had a little more consistency. But your understanding of theology is not as ecclesial as you make out. Indeed, I wonder at times whether you might be in danger of swapping the exegetes' guild for that of the systematic theologians' and ignoring the theological position of a particular church? It is that lack of particularity, which is such a feature of the post-modern condition which you point to, which I miss in your laudable attempt to ground your work in 'reality'.

Because I (think I) know you, I have some idea where you are coming from, and I guess that those who read the footnotes carefully enough will disentangle your theological pedigree. Perhaps it's important not to be too up front about that at the beginning and allow the value of your theological hermeneutic to be demonstrated by the series of interactions with aspects of contemporary culture as you go on. The problem with this is that the theological foundations of your hermeneutics within a concrete ecclesial tradition are never made clear. Indeed, your differences from the mainstream catholic position are never really articulated. While Barth (via the work of Hans Frei) is obviously an important dialogue-partner (though his distance from the canons of much mainstream exegesis is enormous), the evidence of engagement with Augustine or Aquinas is not great. I would have thought the former would have offered a foundation for your hermeneutic which could have allowed you a basis as well as space to disagree and explore.

One of the advantages which I presume to avail myself of in this genre is that I can address a personal agenda which I believe is integral to the discussion of the theological hermeneutics which you have expounded. I recall, in a review I wrote of your first book, drawing attention to the concluding paragraph in which you suggested that historical exegesis placed a huge question mark against the theological value of the Pauline letters. How you have come to a radically different position is an interesting hermeneutical question in itself, and attention to the diachronic perspective, as far as your intellectual pilgrimage is concerned, confronts a commentator on your work with a striking difference which intrigues and (at least as far as this one is concerned) cries out for an explanation!

I found your biblical interpretation throughout fresh and inventive. In particular, I thought that the account of the 'political' character of the Joseph stories represented so much of what I would like to see in narrative criticism possessing, as it does, an aware, socio-political concern. There were reservations, however. I thought that the exposition of deconstruction and post-modernism helpful and the application of 1 Cor 14 to the issue illuminating. Nevertheless the lack of an overall set

of theological hermeneutical principles left me wondering : why this tradition and, in the context of a dialogue with secular reason, why not engage with the discussion of private language in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (paragraphs 256ff and 528ff)? I thought that the concentration on this tradition left the applicability of 1 Corinthians to your discussion half-finished. While there is every reason to suppose that a major problem of contemporary pluralism is the tendency to solipsism in the wake of the demise of 'total' discourses, 1 Corinthians enters this debate only obliquely. Your theological solution is reminiscent of the Habermas' 'ideal speech situation' in which rational argument is the basis for truth. Words and intellectual debate are thus to the fore. Such resort to speech is disputed by Paul. Of course, in effect, he prioritises writing as a means of hegemony (2 Cor 10:10 could be read in this way). Yet his interaction with the Corinthians suggests that mere words, and even dialogue, could not be the mark of authentic discipleship. So, between the discussion of monologue and dialogue in 1 Cor 12 and 14, there is the assertion of the central importance of praxis, echoing sentiments of 1 Cor 2: 4 and 2 Cor 12:13. In the critique of the post-modernist agenda, wedded as it is in so many ways to the triumph of capitalism, the way of charity as a prerequisite, which is superior to both monologue and dialogue, needs to be asserted as the basic theological datum. I realise that is touched on later in your book, yet it is important that your admirable theological interpretation of the Bible is not wholly determined by a cerebral theology, unconnected with the critical manner fostered by worship and service which can contribute to the subversion of human wisdom.

In the juxtaposition of text, church and world, there is inevitably a degree of arbitrariness in which the knowledgeable interpreter is seeking to enable the reader to understand something of the vagaries of contemporary hermeneutical debate and how these might look when refracted through the lens of biblical interpretation. In your book there begins to emerge a critique of certain strands of modern thought from a biblically informed theological perspective. Yet we need to be on our guard lest the agenda be set by (post-)modernity. I had the sense that at times your biblical exposition functions

as a kind of peg on which dialogue is hung. In writing this I know that I cannot match your breadth of reading and so cannot pretend to be in a position to say with any clarity whether, if I had, I would have been approached the task differently. An issue for us all (and one which has always been at the heart of any Christian theology worth its salt) is the constant pressure on the space we allow for the text so that it does not lose its own distinctiveness in the face of the concerns of the world (and, to a lesser extent, the church). The struggle of theology has always been to find a space for what is distinctive in its experience of, and witness to, God. Theology has been construed all too often to be primarily a matter of ideas when it is lives of sanctity, negotiating what it means to reflect the way, just as much as the mind, of Christ, which identify Christianity best of all.

The fond hope of biblical exegetes that they had a space at the heart of the two other circles for work on the text is an illusion. There is no alternative for the Christian interpreter of the Bible but to recognise that there must be an engagement in a constant struggle with text and world in the context of the church. You have shown us that constructive dialogue is possible between church and world, so that the biblical text may properly be a means of mutually illuminating debate and insight for these two interlocking arenas of human activity, and I am extremely grateful for that.

Yours sincerely,

Chris

CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND
The Queen's College
Oxford OX1 4AW
England