

CHAPTER 5 Conversation

Having established a set of requirements in Chapter 3, we are in a position to look at my proposed hermeneutic framework. The survey of metaphors and images in Chapter 4 is at least suggestive that an image or metaphor may be the way forwards. Tracy writes:

“We admittedly cannot offer a fully explicit account of the complex human skill of interpreting. . . . Nevertheless, studying a variety of models for understanding this central but puzzling phenomenon can aid us in developing practices necessary for good interpreters: those that enrich our experience, allow for understanding, aid deliberation and judgement and increase the possibilities of meaningful action.”¹

With Tracy, the model or metaphor I propose is that of a conversation.

“To understand is to interpret. To interpret is to converse. To converse with any classic text is to find oneself caught up in the questions and answers worthy of a free mind.”²

5.1 Why conversation ?

The first reason for using conversation as our model is that it is a fundamental human activity, related to the nature of God, and our nature in relation to Him and to each other. It is related to the nature

¹ Tracy : Pluralism and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 9

² Tracy : Pluralism and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 20

cf Tracy : Pluralism and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 19 “We converse with one another. We can also converse with texts. If we read well, then we are conversing with the text. No human being is simply a passive recipient of texts. We inquire. We question. We converse. Just as there is no purely autonomous text, so too there is no purely passive reader. There is only that interaction named conversation. Whenever we allow the text to have some claim upon our attention, we find that we are never pure creators of meaning. In conversation we find ourselves by losing ourselves in the questioning provoked by the text. We find ourselves by allowing claims upon our attention, by exploring possibilities suggested by others, including those others we call texts. If we want to converse with the author, that is another conversation. But we must realise that the text and the author are not interchangeable. As any author knows, once a text is written it is on its own. The author is one more reader.”

See also David Tracy: The Analogical Imagination (SCM 1981) p 101: “The individual thinker may also recognise that hermeneutical understanding can be understood on the model of authentic conversation. As the classical model for conversation in the Western tradition, the Platonic dialogue, makes clear, real conversation occurs only when the individual conversation partners move past self-consciousness and self-aggrandisement into joint reflection upon the subject matter of the conversation. [see Hans-Georg Gadamer, Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato (Yale University Press, 1980)] The back-and-forth movement of all genuine conversation (an ability to listen, to reflect, to correct, to speak to the point - the ability, in sum, to allow the question to take over) is a relatively rare experience, even for Socrates!” Tracy goes on to quote Gadamer: Truth and Method (Seabury 1965).

of God because of our understanding of God as Trinity, that is as three persons in social relation to each other. MacFadyen writes:

“God’s interaction with us is dialogical in form. In communication God intends and informs our human being as an autonomous structure of response: we are autonomous subjects of communication responsible before God. Our constitution as persons through our relation with God, which requires social refraction and mediation, generates a specific conception of the person.... The form which God’s communication takes is normative for practice in social relations....”³

Because conversation is so fundamental, using it as a model keeps the human subject and human society central. Watson (relying on MacFadyen) uses the model of dialogue and explores the theory of social relationships in order to “show the inadequacy of the post-structuralist elimination of the subject by outlining a theory in which subjectivity or personhood is not eliminated by the fact of its social construction, but on the contrary, constituted by that fact.”⁴ He continues: “from a political-theological perspective, the theory of intersubjectivity or communicative practice has the advantage of operating, like any recognisable Christian theology, in the world of persons and not in the aesthetic fantasy-world of an enclosed textuality.”⁵

The second reason is that it is fundamental to understanding. Gadamer writes:

“In [philosophy] is realised not only the conversation which each of us conducts with ourselves in thinking but also the conversation in which we are all caught up together and never cease to be caught up – whether one says philosophy is dead or not.”⁶

There are clear links here with Lindbeck’s view of religion:

“the process of becoming religious is similar to that of learning a language;”⁷ “religion as a cultural linguistic phenomenon ... makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, the experiencing of inner attitudes feelings and sentiments it comprises a vocabulary and grammar (/logic).”⁸

3 Alastair MacFadyen : The Call to Personhood (CUP 1990) p 206 see also p 7 and indeed the whole book.

4 Watson : Text, Church and World (T & T Clark 1992) p 113

5 Watson: Text, Church and World (T & T Clark 1992) p 114

6 Hans-Georg Gadamer : Reason in the Age of Science (tr Frederick G Lawrence MIT Press 1981) p 20 quoted in Jeanrond, Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking (Gill and Macmillan 1988) p 9

7 George Lindbeck : The Nature of Doctrine (SPCK 1984) p 22

8 George Lindbeck : The Nature of Doctrine (SPCK 1984) p 33

and indeed with many linguists' view of the world as mediated through language.⁹

It is a practical and realistic model. Watson is optimistic about the possibilities of conversation – it “need not serve either authoritarian or libertarian ends, but may be employed as a vehicle of dialogue.”¹⁰ He articulates this with specific reference to the Bible : if criteria, derived “both from the revelation and the determinate social context of its reception” are “deployed in the dialogic process for distinguishing undistorted from distorted communication” then, “insofar as these criteria [are] correctly applied, reception of the revelation or the word of God [will occur] in the dialogue.”¹¹

This optimism is based not on absolute claims for conversation, but rather on the possibility of relative adequacy: that is that language, used in conversation, will be good enough to convey meaning. There will be ragged edges, and elements of uncertainty, but these will not be so large as to destroy all possibility of understanding.

“We can achieve a good – that is relatively adequate – interpretation: relative to the power of disclosure and concealment of the text, relative to the skills and attentiveness of the interpreter, relative to the kind of conversation possible for the interpreter in a particular culture at a particular time. Somehow, conversation and relatively adequate interpretations suffice.”¹²

There is one further point: in a conversation, authority is located where it really lies – in the interplay between a person's own existential autonomy and the challenge of other autonomous selves; world views are tested against world views, and mere opinion can become interpretation.

⁹ Some linguists would even say that language speaks through people.

¹⁰ Watson : Text, Church and World (T & T Clark 1992) p 104

We may recall Vanhoozer's ideas about God guaranteeing the meaningfulness of language, and the capacity to understand of the structures of the human mind. Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 205-214 and p 456: Vanhoozer is using Plantinga's and Steiner's ideas. see Chapter 2

¹¹ Watson: Text, Church and World (T & T Clark 1992) p 116

¹² Tracy : Pluralism and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) pp 22 f

see also Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 139

see above: Chapter 2 section 2.1.6

5.2 A questioning conversation

“Conversation [] is a kind of game. It is a game where we learn to give in to the movement required by questions worth exploring. The movement in conversation is questioning itself. Neither my present opinions on the question nor the text’s original response to the question, but the question itself, must control the conversation. A conversation is a rare phenomenon, even for Socrates. It is not a confrontation. It is not a debate. It is not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go. It is dia-logue.”¹³

To interact with classic texts is to converse with difference and otherness. There are, as suggested above, some generic rules for good conversation. But there is only one way to understand what the rules are there for: we must insist on the act of questioning. We must allow that act to test, form, and transform itself by allowing ourselves to question.”¹⁴

In our practical comparative hermeneutics we shall proceed by asking questions, as it were, of the chosen writers. There has been some resistance to the right to ask questions - coming from branches of the church as far apart as the Black Theology of Cone, and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁵ Cone, a Black Theologian writing in America, takes the view that since theology comes from the context of those doing it, others, outside that context have no right to make any comment.

“In passing it may be worthwhile to point out that whites are in no position whatever to question the legitimacy of black theology. Questions like “Do you think theology is black?” or “What about others who suffer?” are the product of minds incapable of *black* thinking. It is not surprising that those who reject blackness in theology are usually whites who do not question the blue-eyed white Christ. It is hard to believe that whites are worried about black theology on account of its alleged alienation of other sufferers. Oppressors are not genuinely concerned about any oppressed group..... Because white theology has consistently preserved the integrity of the community of oppressors, I conclude that it is not Christian theology at all..... Black theology will not spend too much time trying to answer its critics, because it is accountable only to the black community. Refusing to be separated from that community, black theology seeks to articulate the theological self-determination of blacks, providing some ethical and religious categories for the black revolution in America. It maintains that all acts which participate in the destruction of white racism are Christian, the liberating deeds of God. All acts which impede the struggle of black self-determination - black power - are anti-Christian, the work of Satan.”¹⁶

13 Tracy : Pluralism and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 18

14 Tracy : Pluralism and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 20

15 This, in itself, may convince some that this is a method worth pursuing.

16 James Cone: A Black Theology of Liberation (2nd edition: Orbis, 1986) pp 8-10 see also note 4 (relating to page 7) printed p 143 NB I think there is a misprint in Cone’s text and notes 4 and 5 have been transposed.

Cone's argument would presumably be that we could not even claim the right to question his work as part of a (sister) Church; he might almost say that whites are Satanic because of their complicity in racism.¹⁷ Responses to this are first that this is the assertion of the exclusivity of a self-defined community: such assertions have seldom been either productive or edifying. Second, that questions asked in a spirit of enquiry are not imperialist, and need not be threatening; they may rather offer the opportunity for those in the wrong to be reconstructed. Third, that no theology lies beyond questioning – there is no such thing as a private language:¹⁸ Scripture and theology belong to the whole church, to which we belong and to which we have responsibility.

Interestingly, similar assertions of incompetence to question because of malicious and perverted attitudes are sometimes made at the opposite end of the political street. Much of the defence of views expressed in the right-wing The Kindness that Kills¹⁹ was couched in terms of attack on liberal theologians; the attack claimed that they had been subverted by a political agenda which meant that they would be incapable of seeing the truth of the arguments put forwards.

The second point is that, as we have already seen in the debates over the nature of text (and the privileging of speech or writing), in some senses a text is a weak conversation partner.²⁰ As Eagleton writes:

“A literary work is not actually a ‘living’ dialogue or monologue. It is a piece of language which has been detached from any specific ‘living’ relationship and is thus subject to the ‘reinscriptions’ and reinterpretations of many different readers. The work itself cannot ‘foresee’ its own future history of interpretations, cannot control and delimit these readings as we can do or try to do, in face-to-face conversation. Its ‘anonymity’ is part of its very structure, not just an unfortunate accident which befalls it; and in this sense

¹⁷ see below in Chapter 7 for more on Cone.

¹⁸ see Lindbeck : The Nature of Doctrine (SPCK 1984) p 38 Lindbeck is relying on Wittgenstein.

see also Fergus Kerr: Theology after Wittgenstein (SPCK 1997)

cf also Fish's idea of interpretative communities which 'share interpretative strategies for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions'. Fish : : Is There A Text In This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Harvard University Press, Massachusetts 1980)

¹⁹ ed Digby Anderson: The Kindness that Kills (SPCK, 1984). See Appendix 2.

²⁰ This concern is shared by Young: The Art of Performance (DLT 1990) p 48 – she suggests a role for an external rule of truth (referring to Irenaeus); and by Kelsey : Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology (Fortress 1975) p 14

to be an ‘author’ - the ‘origin’ of one’s own meanings with ‘authority’ over them - is a myth.”²¹

On the other hand, there are ways in which the text’s static, repetitive, nature is a strength: it may be passive, but it cannot be swayed or changed.²² A witness who repeats his/her story without alteration is a strong witness. Vanhoozer suggest that the text has sufficient internal resources to resist oppressive readings,²³ and the history of its interpretations has shown this to be true:²⁴ it preserves the ‘dangerous memory’.

5.3 An adequate conversation

“Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it. These are merely some generic rules for questioning. As good rules they are worth keeping in mind in case the questioning does begin to break down. In a sense they are merely variations of the transcendental imperatives elegantly articulated by Bernard Lonergan:²⁵ Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and if necessary, change.”

So writes Tracy;²⁶ MacFadyen, on the other hand, proposes a series of questions which have an element of self-examination, looking at respect, openness, authenticity, and rationality. First, to self :

“i) is our communication a genuine self-representation founded on a rational self-understanding, or is it guided by hidden interests? ii) are our expectations and intention of the other reasonable and therefore justified?”

21 Eagleton: Literary Theory: an Introduction (Blackwell, 1983) p 119

22 Barth makes this point too: because of the written nature of the Bible, it can continue to resist all efforts of domestication and distortion – its openness and potential for reformation of the Church are protected. Barth: Church Dogmatics (Eng trans ed Bromiley and Torrance T & T Clark 1956 – 1975) Vol I/2 p 583 ff

23 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 179

24 see eg Rowland: Radical Christianity (Polity Press 1988) for examples of the Bible’s liberating role being reclaimed; see also eg ed Devasahayam : Frontiers of Dalit Theology (ISPCK 1997) see also Chapter 2, section 2.1.5 and Chapter 3, section 3.5

25 Bernard Lonergan : Method in Theology (DLT 1972) p 231

26 Tracy: Plurality and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 19 This is part of a longer passage in which Tracy mentions “Aristotle’s dictum that in the pursuit of truth, friendship must yield.” Tracy, in a footnote, comments: “Perhaps it would be useful, therefore, for a re-opening of the famous Gadamer-Habermas debate – this time on the question of the truth claim of art, myth, and religion and thereby of the model of conversation as more helpful for understanding human communication than the model of explicit argument.”

Second, to the other :

“i) is the other’s understanding rational (not self-deceptive)? ii) is his or her communication genuine? Does the other really understand him or herself, oneself and the world in the way presented, or is there an attempt at deception? iii) are the structures of expectations and the proposed codification reasonable? The other’s claim that the answer to each of these is in the affirmative may only be redeemed through further dialogue in which there is explication of the understanding and claims of both.”²⁷

A third strategy for questioning could arise from the discussion in Chapters 2²⁸ and 3²⁹ on the (ethical) responsibilities of an interpreter towards the text and the world. It is this strategy I shall use to shape my questions, also incorporating Tracy’s and McFadyen’s thinking. We can therefore see a series of responsibilities, which a theologian claiming to have an adequate conversation with the Bible should fulfil:

- 1) A responsibility for the conversation - its grammar and its content
- 2) A responsibility about oneself – to be honest and open
- 3) A responsibility to the other participants: God; the Christian (and Jewish) communities; the Bible itself; the world.

Expanding these responsibilities, we arrive at the thesis that any person claiming to have an adequate conversation with the Bible should be able to answer these questions³⁰:

- 1) How has s/he fulfilled her/his responsibility for the conversation?
 - a) for its rationality and clarity
 - b) for its content – having appropriate knowledge of philosophy, literary critical theory, Biblical studies, theology, the world as it is (politics, economics...), the current intellectual climate etc – and a willingness to learn.
- 2) How has s/he fulfilled her/his responsibility about her/himself?

²⁷ MacFadyen : The Call to Personhood (CUP 1990) pp 163, 164

Other writers have suggested criteria for an adequate conversation : Vanhoozer : Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) mentions eg Grice and his principle of co-operation, and also Chomsky and Culler (Vanhoozer pp 337 f)

²⁸ Section 2.1.5

²⁹ Section 3.5

³⁰ It might be interesting to apply these questions to the Bible itself - by which I mean to the use by one part of the Bible of another part. One obvious candidate would be the Epistle to the Hebrews and its use of the Old Testament. We might suspect that in some areas of the questions Hebrews would, as it were, do rather badly. It comes to its texts with a definite ideology which does not really respect their original embedding. However, it is rather clear about that ideology, and is highly faithful to the urgency and breadth of that ideology, which is in some respects shared with the New Testament – or even the Bible as a whole (not surprisingly, since it is part of the Bible!). However, there is not scope for that investigation in this thesis.

- a) about being honest and authentic – recognising her/his own presuppositions and commitments
 - b) about being open to listening and to changing
- 3) How has s/he fulfilled her/his responsibility to the other participants?
- a) to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which raises matters of faith and life³¹
 - b) to the Christian (and Jewish) communities, which are creators and carers, and which are interpreters in their own right, with other conversations – some from the past, and some from the present
 - c) to the Bible itself
 - i) as needing to be known thoroughly and deeply
 - ii) as complex, and layered; as a (whole) canon; as offering more than one point of view – perhaps even contradictions;
 - iii) as being different and challenging
 - iv) as requiring considered use
 - d) to the world
- 4) What has been left unsaid? Are there relevant parts of the Bible which have been omitted? ³²

5.4 A conversation fulfilling the requirements?

We ought to examine these questions against the requirements set out in Chapter 3.

As an initial remark, I take it that an attitude of responsibility includes ethical responsibility, and a degree of commitment which, with regard to the others of question 3) – God, the Christian and Jewish communities, and God’s world – could be characterised as loving.

The first requirement was for a primarily Christian (or Jewish) location. The analysis of the debates in Chapters 2 and 3, distinguished between this requirement and a strong insistence on a faith commitment. The requirement is adequately fulfilled by question 3) b) – responsibility to the Christian (and Jewish) communities, and 3) a) responsibility to the Triune God.³³

³¹ orthodoxy and orthopraxis

³² This question belongs conceptually with the first responsibility, but logically needs to be the last question asked.

³³ cf Tracy : *Plurality and Ambiguity* (SCM 1987) p x “The places of conversation are also important, both as geographical places and as Aristotelian *topoi*: those places where insight, reflection and argument may be found.”

The second requirement was for the possibility of challenge and change, and for God speaking through the Bible. This is dealt with through questions 2) b), 3) a), and 3) c) iii).

The third requirement was for inclusion of both fixed elements of the text and changing elements of its reception, and for a consideration of the role of the self in interpretation. This is fulfilled by questions 3) c) – responsibility to the Bible itself, 3) b) – which refers to the other conversations / interpretations of the community, and 2) a).

The fourth requirement was for respect and attention to the text; this is dealt with in question 3) c) – especially parts i), ii) and iii).³⁴

The fifth requirement was to be analytic and descriptive rather than prescriptive. This is fulfilled by the concepts of conversation, and of asking questions, in themselves; indeed it is one fundamental reason for choosing the model of conversation.

The sixth requirement was for attitudes of both trust and suspicion. This is dealt with in the interplay of the different responsibilities of question 3) – towards God, the Christian Church, and the world. The responsibility is loving – but in paying attention to the different interests of these others, does not allow a distorted self-interest to dominate.

The seventh requirement is for ethical responsibility – again dealt with by question 3).

The eighth requirement is for accessibility – and for a possible interest in method. The idea of accessibility is the second fundamental reason for choosing the model of conversation: as we have seen, conversation – responsible conversation – is a basic human activity. At the same time, conversations are conducted with varying levels of competence, and question 1) b) looks at this, recognising that only an appropriate level is required, but looking for growth. Question 3) c) iv) as it were steps back from the Bible itself, to examine reflectively the way in which it is used by a theologian.

The ninth requirement is for a hermeneutic not to claim too much for itself,³⁵ which again is a fundamental reason for choosing the model of conversation which is always provisional, never completed. The ninth requirement also suggested the need to be able to offer some answers to current intellectual challenges; this is dealt with by questions 1) b) and 3) d), and also by question 2) a) which would implicitly restate for Christianity the claim that all world views are based on assumptions, and that Christianity's world view is not automatically suspect.

34 cf Tracy : *Plurality and Ambiguity* (SCM 1987) p ix “There is no intellectual, cultural, political, or religious tradition of interpretation that does not ultimately live by the quality of its conversation.”

35 see above at footnote Error: Reference source not foundError: Reference source not found 90

It should be noted that these questions also fulfil the requirements of Tracy, Lonergan and MacFadyen of being attentive, intelligent, responsible, loving, respectful, open, authentic, rational.

5.5 Images

We noted in the previous chapter that the most helpful metaphors were those with a personal dimension – for example the Bible as a witness – a criteria fulfilled by the metaphor of conversation. Indeed it includes, and as it were brings with it, the idea of witness, and also elements of some of the other metaphors considered in Chapter 4.

Certainly the Bible is a witness, but the idea of a conversation with a witness moves towards Irenaeus' point about it as friends to be trusted rather than sources to be tortured.

A conversation with a friend is an opportunity to see yourself as others see you – that is, it is a sort of mirror, which shows you yourself. Echo repeats to Narcissus his own words as he looks at his reflection; the Bible repeats its own – and in doing so offers its reflection of the reader.

Performance is about re-presenting the text of the Bible : “dramatic reading, then, assumes that the time of the text is recognisably continuous with my own time.”³⁶ A conversation with it also does this; indeed the interplay between score and performer is a conversation.

A key point about icon or mosaic is its complexity; in our conversations with the Bible, as with person, we encounter the complexity of the other.

In the metaphor of city, we looked at the responsibilities of a citizen, and the process of becoming one, and at the idea of location. These concepts are included within the description of a responsible conversation.

Thiselton describes a horizon as “the limits of thought dictated by a given viewpoint.”³⁷

Understanding the limitations of a particular viewpoint is integral to my conception of conversation, and the new understanding reached by sharing a conversation is exactly the process of horizons moving together.

³⁶ see Rowan Williams : “The Literal Sense of Scripture” in *Modern Theology* 1991 7/2 p 125 quoted in Chapter 4, section 4.4

³⁷ A Thiselton : *The Two Horizons* (Paternoster Press 1980) p xix

Having set up a list of questions which represent a practical comparative hermeneutic, (with which we would be able to consider and assess the use of the Bible by, for example, political theologians) the next step is to put them to some political theologians. In doing so, we shall be testing both the questions, and the chosen theologians. I need now, therefore, to make a choice of political theologians.