Scriptura 58 (1996), pp.233-250

THROUGH THE UNKNOWN, REMEMBERED GATE: ON THREE OPPOSITIONS IN THE MEETING OF CONTEXTS

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Abstract

With the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the conclusion of an era in the history of the Church in which the definitive challenge to respond to apartheid dominated theological discourse, space has emerged, gaps have arisen in public life into which leap a thousand new challenges. The context of apartheid has become, in socio-psychological terms at least,[1] a multiplicity of new contexts. How are we to theologise now, without relinquishing what we have learned before (for to do so would be to disrespect history, and to disrespect history would be to dishonour those whose sacrifices in the past enable important possibilities in the present). This article reflects on three paradoxes, or aporiai, which open up new possibilities for imagining the theological task in a post-apartheid era in South Africa. These are the oppositions between space and time, between body and spirit, and between truth as revealed and concealed. The first opposition helps us to answer the question: Has the liberation paradigm in theology become obsolete? The second opposition poses the problem of the Cartesian splits between mind-body, God-world, internal-external, personal-social which has so bedeviled our theological work in South Africa and so limited our capacity to account for reality as one (the problem is encapsulated in the well-worn adage that politics and religion do not mix). The third opposition undermines all attempts either to close down communication between ourselves and the Other on the grounds that we have the truth, or to impose upon the Other our understanding of reality in the name of truth. This last opposition poses the question of apophatic theology in its most acute form, namely: Can we live out of faith without requiring that we possess it for our own? If we can, then our encounter with the Other in the meeting of contexts may be fruitful in reshaping the theological task, and that is what I will argue. These three components of the discussion are not systematically linked (though they can be). Rather, arising from my own questions as a result of an interpretation of the religiously informed, practically located symbolic universe of a local base community in Natal, they will take the form of parallel approaches to the same issue: the nature of the theological task in a society in transition. Each component is introduced in relation to the work of a particular scholars whose thought seems to be especially helpful in dealing with my questions. The whole may be seen as an experiment, a work in progress, a setting out of certain problems in order to state them more clearly (hopefully), and to expose this particular formulation of these problems to others for comment and criticism.

1 In other terms, many things now emerging as significant concerns of public life were clearly not absent previously (e.g. the politics of gender; the place of African Initiated churches). But they were sublimated, and it was often extremely difficult, under the impact upon daily life and discourse of extensive apparatuses of state control and equally extensive sites of resistance and struggle, to pay sufficient attention to them or even to have them recognised.

Introduction

In *Little Gidding,* the last of his *Four Quartets,* TS Eliot reflects on the way in which endings are always linked to beginnings, leaving us to consider the paradox of simultaneously knowing and not knowing the journey of life we are on. Every stop on the way to look, touch, taste and record the journey -any action we take -

> *Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea s throat*
> *Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.*

We shall not cease from exploration, says Eliot, and our exploring takes us through the unknown, remembered gate.

These images of the poet provoke a sense of the real which embraces paradox, which finds in the gaps between two things which we juxtapose (ending/beginning, knowing/unknowing, arriving/moving on) a vacant place to be filled - and emptied again. These are like the *aporiai* of theology, the perplexities which we seek to systematize into a single view but which continually force us to open up that view again in the gap that remains.

The most fundamental *aporia* lies in our speech about God which, when probed more deeply, leaves us silent about God. Our language about God, just as we think we have grasped what we mean by it, eludes our grasp again. It is essentially parabolic language, speech or writing which points to a reality which cannot be apprehended directly. We speak of what we believe, and as we speak - if we are sensitive to the irony of the attempt - we are forced into doubt about what we say. And, says Eliot again, every phrase and sentence that is right ... is an end and a beginning, every poem an epitaph.

To think of theology in this way is to participate in the contemporary philosophical suspicion of any irresolvable ambiguity of language and language-like activity. It is to partake of what has become a rather widespread recognition, in theology as in many other disciplines and not least on the frontiers of correspondence theory of truth, a suspicion based in an analysis of the experimental science, that reality - our understanding of reality - is based not on some discernible essence (if we have the right tools), but on constructions of our mind. What is more, we have come to recognize that these mental constructions are not the isolated acts of an islanded subjectivity, but the result of a prior insertion into a world of discourse which members us in a community of discourse.[2] Of course, these constructions have to conform to a number of tests by which we eliminate ignorance and madness.[3] Even then, however, what we are

2 Theologies which privatise religious truth, locate it purely in the internal personality, or project it outside of the world we know into a speculative realm we do not, would clearly not fit this description. These forms of theology, however, I would characterise as reductionist and untenable, at least as theology, that is, as forms of reflection on faith. The faith out of which such reflections arise might well be more defensible, but that is another matter, and one which would have to be demonstrated.

3 Following Habermas (1984), we may say that these tests may be understood generally as tests of truth (propositional assertions which can be tested), of truthfulness (the comprehensibility, well-formedness and rule-correctness of normative rightness), and of sincerity (expressive authenticity). Within a different philosophical framework, Bernard Lonergan (1958) describes the required tests in terms of the demand to be attentive to experience (sensitivity), intelligent (understanding), reasonable (judgement or truth), and responsible (valuation).

left with is not reality itself, but a picture of reality. We may be able to map the picture with greater or lesser accuracy, and this is not unimportant. But, as Jonathan Smith (1993:309) puts it, the dictum of Alfred Korzybski is inescapable: Map is not territory but - maps are all we possess.

But to think of the theological task in terms of silence and parabolic language is to be part of a long history, albeit one somewhat forgotten among the positive theologies of modernity. This is the history of apophatic theology, in which the absence of God, the shadows of our language about God, the vacant places in our understanding of God are incorporated into our sense of God. Radical unknowing challenges all claims to know. Revelation is found to conceal as much of reality as is disclosed, and that recognition itself becomes part of the disclosure. Theology itself is destabilised for the sake of theology.

As abstract as this may sound, we may locate some of its implications quite directly in the plurality of theological discourses which arises in the meeting between contexts, a meeting which characterises and challenges our particularist perspectives. An encounter with the Other across the boundaries of what is known and remembered brings with it the end of what we know and the beginning of new knowledge. Part of this new knowledge is an endless encounter with what we do not know, a recognition that Otherness, however much acknowledged and respected, remains other and beyond our knowing. This is another way of stating the same kind of paradox.

The Mastering of Time

Jean and John Comaroff (1991) introduce their anthropological study of the encounter of missionaries and the Tshidi clan of the Batswana with the story of the gift of a mechanical clock to the local missionary, Robert Moffat, for the Church. This was an unusual clock, a gift from the London Missionary Society in England, in which little wooden soldiers marched round on a pedestal on the stroke of the hour. The regular rhythm of the clock was a symbol of the value placed by European Christian civilisation on time. It might be seen as a proclamation of the benefits of this civilisation.

But the Batswana reacted with alarm to the presence of the clock, even when an evangelist tried to reassure them by cutting off a piece from the painted bodies of the wooden soldiers. The Batswana knew that the clock was magic. It took time out of their hands, regulated it into fixed, discrete intervals, and thereby threatened to control the rhythm of their own lives. The colonizer would conquer time itself. The systematic, analytical mastering of time which the clock represented, reinforced by the implicit force of the marching wooden soldiers, projected into the lives of the Batswana the same kind of systematic, analytical command over their lives which European colonisation implied. However intuitively this insight may have arisen, however limited their comprehension of the technologies of modernity, the Batswana had grasped the reality of their situation very well indeed. In the face of the clock, write the Comaroffs (1991:xi), they had caught their first glimpse of a future time, a time when their colonized world would march to quite different rhythms.

The Comaroffs spend much of their book on showing how the Tshidi, through a range of activities which expressed one or other form of power, attempted to control their own world even as others attempted to control it differently. Hegemony, they point out, is never total. ... It is always threatened by the vitality that remains in the forms of life it thwarts (Comaroff 1991:25).

But what interests me here is less the important nuances drawn by the Comaroffs in our understanding of hegemony and consciousness, but the nature of resistance and control, the forms of power expressed in relation to the battle over space and time.[4] Freedom in space - the paradigmatic core of liberation theories of the last decades - may not be the same as freedom in time, the latter a theme more likely to be found in mystics than in systematic analysts. The former paradigm has tended to be sceptical, if not downright contemptuous, of the latter, with the result that both ontological and epistemological mistakes[5] are made in assessing the importance of spirit, of personhood, and of myth.[6]

A useful and important study of this problem within the framework of the notion of *kairos* has been done by Robin Petersen (1995). I would like to draw upon this study to make certain points about the link between space and time as it affects contexts of translation.

The particular kind of translation of concern to Petersen is that between the context of liberation theologies and the context of popular indige*nous* churches of the Spirit or African Initiated churches (particularly of the Pentecostal or Zionist type). I take this meeting of contexts to be instructive for other contexts as well, such as the one in which I have dialogued with a base ecclesial community (BEC) in Inanda near Durban, Kwazulu-Natal.[7]

Drawing on a study of the range of meanings of the word *kairos* in Greek philosophy and literature, and comparing this with theological readings of the same concept, Petersen shows that *kairos* and *chronos* are not as distinct as is often assumed by theologians adopting Paul Tillich s influential use of the term. *Kairos* is not simply a time of crisis, nor is it linked only to prophetic discernment and ethical action. While such a notion of *kairos* fits well with a politically conscious task of uncovering reality in order to transform it, it does not fit well with the kind of religious activity characteristic of the bulk of black Christians in AIC s in whose interests the liberatory task is formally undertaken.

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4 Compatible and equally informative claims are made by James Scott (1990) in his discussion of the importance of hidden transcripts and infrapolitics.

5 To claim that mistakes are made is to assert only that an unnecessarily truncated grasp of the complexity of reality results, and that there are resources available for correcting this without expecting that we will ever escape ambiguity and uncertainty.

6 Following contemporary canons in semiotics and hermeneutics, I mean by myth in this regard the rich, thick description of symbols and images by which our imagination apprehends reality before it becomes the subject of reflection. I also mean the results of that reflection once they are incorporated back into the communal context by which myth is sustained. It would be better, therefore, to use the term mythos (Jennings 1976) rather than myth, but as the term is not widely known I shall not do so.

7 See Cochrane (1996a; 1996b; 1996c; 1994; 1993b; 1993c), as well as Belief on the Boundaries: Dogma, Domination and the Recovery of Incipient Theologies (in progress, forthcoming).

Petersen wants to recover a different, more nuanced understanding of *kairos* without setting aside the important lessons about a politically committed theology which have shaped its use in the nineteen eighties in South Africa. I think his attempt is largely successful. It has the virtue that it opens up room for reconceptualising the link between freedom as the conquest or reconquest of space (land, jobs, housing, governing institutions - the realm of the physical and the material), and freedom as the unshackling of time (ritual, liturgy, celebration, creative imagination - the realm of the spiritual and the ideal). Just what this means is the import of the argument that follows. It draws on a reconstructed notion of time in order to relate it to a hypostatised notion of space.

The argument offered by Petersen traverses a wide terrain, touching on philosophical and theological analyses of time, epistemological analyses of representative South African theologians (Goba, Mosala, Nolan and Villa-Vicencio in particular), anthropological analyses of the forms of the dispersion of power among the weak or the oppressed, and historical analyses of the commodity-like construction of time in a capitalist political economy. Obviously, it is impossible to repeat the details of his extended argument here.

Allowing for the fact that important nuances are therefore left out, let us begin with Petersen s central concern, which is to find an understanding of resistance which is capable of taking into account both intentional, conscious emancipatory action and unintentional, semi-conscious ritual; or, in another formulation of the problem, to find a unity between prophetic and mystical theology.

Liberation theologies, which Petersen subsumes under the category prophetic, typify this problem in an overdetermination of the ethical imperative of liberation, leaving the cultural terrain inadequately theorised. Yet it is often on the cultural terrain that the struggles of everyday life are expressed in forms of creativity which speak to human social and spiritual needs; practices that make the inhuman human, that heal the diseased body (politic?), that exorcise the demonic possession of the principalities and powers of apartheid capitalism, that create new people from the discarded of society (Petersen 1995:41).

Drawing on an argument that *kairos* in Greek thought is connected to metis (cunning intelligence), one may say that *kairos* includes a way of knowing which combines flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over the years (quoting Detienne and Vernant; Petersen 1995:46). *Kairos* is then the terrain of time within which a struggle of resistance may also be carried out. Here we recognise the dynamic of resistance implicit in the story with which we began the effects of the clock brought to the mission station among the Tshidi. It is resistance in this key that Petersen wishes to identify and recover.

In order to arrive at the resolution of the relation between time understood mystically and time understood prophetically, Petersen has to show that religious practices such as those characteristic of AIC s are internally coherent with the religiously motivated praxis so important to liberation theologies. He does this by turning to the work of Moishe Postone in his neo-Marxist reconstruction of time as a sphere of domination under the conditions of modern capitalism. Postone, arguing that our modern understanding of time is a construction not found in pre-

capitalist societies, posits two forms of this modern construction: abstract time, and historical time (Petersen 1995:80, 205ff.). These two forms of time are opposed to time as concrete, that is, time to concrete events and cycles (concrete time could be linear or cyclical - this is not the key distinction) in which one may speak of good or bad time, profane or sacred time.[8]

Abstract time is tied to the social necessity of measuring and quantifying value in production. Handled as a commodity under the conditions of exchange characterised by a market economy (whether this is a state controlled market or not), abstract time becomes hegemonic, that is, it becomes an unseen, totalizing form in which power is organised and taken for granted. The clock, a mechanical device which counts out time into discrete, controllable entities, is the symbol of commodified time, and a form of control (as anyone who has to clock in and clock out of their job will know).

Historical time, understood as a directional dynamic, also functions under modern economic conditions as controlling in what Postone refers to as the treadmill of modern life which presses more and more into any unit of time, so that an experience of an hour a century ago has been radically intensified. For example, sound bites, an increasingly prevalent mode of communication on television (especially in news broadcasts) thrusts severely curtailed perceptions of reality at us which dramatically overpower our capacity to grasp what is going on, thus disempowering us.

What makes this distinction interesting for our purposes is that forms of domination, following the theory of hegemony and consciousness posed by the Comaroffs (1991) to which we referred at the beginning, must be accompanied by forms of resistance. The dispersal of power across the continuum of hegemony and ideology is always in flux, as is the related dispersal of consciousness and its representations. This flux is the stuff of contestation, sometimes overtly political, sometimes indirectly cultural. As the Comaroffs insist, in congruency with similar claims by Scott (1990) and de Certeau (Petersen 1995),[9] resistance must therefore be understood as more than a self-conscious activity against a consciously grasped form of domination. Resistance arises not only in attempts to conquer space by establishing a place of freedom. It also arises in the sphere of time as the repossession of concrete time against abstract time and against the alienated form of historical time characteristic of capitalism. This is what Petersen (1995:223) calls *kairotic* time:

> ... it takes the form of resistant time; resistant in the sense that it inserts a discourse which contests, subverts, undermines and challenges the totalization

8 A distinction made by McGaughey (1995) between cosmological time and phenomenological time as one of the key aporiai of theology is similar to the distinction made here, though cast in different language.

9 Like Petersen, I have depended in my own work on the significance of the religious experience and thought of AIC s and base ecclesial communities on the work of Scott and the Comaroffs (see footnote no. 7 above for references to published work in this regard). This would be one reason why I find his approach congenial and enlightening. I have not read Michel de Certeau, however, and depend entirely on Petersen at this point. De Certeau s key work is entitled The Practice of Everyday Life, and its relevance is pointed to in Petersen s suggestion that it could just as well be called The Resistance of Everyday Life.

> of time. This resistance is, however, also regenerative, for it points beyond the time of resistance to the time of liberation, when time will no longer dominate but be subordinated to the human good. It is thus a resistance that is salvific, redemptive, pointing to the new time of God s reign, to the time of the Sabbath rest which remains for all God s people (Heb. 4:9).

Petersen thus point to what he calls resistance in two keys, the former being in the familiar field of ethical activity and the struggle for a place, the latter breaking open a reduced, limited reading of resistance to incorporate religious experiences which are not ethically motivated. Construing the latter as *kairotic*, and not just the former, situates the two forms on a continuum, rather than seeing them as mutually excluding the other (Petersen 1995:224).

To make this concrete, Petersen (227) tells us of a personal experience of a symbolically coded ritual in an AIC worship service. Everyone removed their watches and place them on the altar. Explained by the worshippers themselves simply as a practical manoeuvre to avoid damaging the watches in the lively activity of worship (dancing, one presumes; perhaps immersion), Petersen nevertheless thinks that in this specific ritual (one does not need to put watches on an altar to keep them safe) there is a recognition that clock time has no place in the service and perhaps an attempt to put time in its place by placing it (along with all purses containing money [another form of steering power-JC]) on the ritual altar. Abstract time is thereby subordinated to sacred time, to ritual time, and an attempt is made to bring it back under human control. In a similar move, Petersen links the AIC stress on religious healing practices to resistance understood as the contestation of the body as a commodity (in labour and in non-holistic medicine). The remystification of reality in ritual cannot then be understood merely as a return to superstition, an incapacity to enter into modernity, but as a contestation of the terms of modernity itself.

Finally, a link is made between a prophetic use of *kairos* and resistance to time as the closure of history. Against the closure of history in systems of control which de-emphasise subjugated memories and naturalise commodified forms of time, *kairotic* time inserts a discourse of Messianic time, of eschatological time, which resists this closure (Petersen 1995:233). Here we are back with the prophetic stream of thought in theology. Here too we encounter freedom in space articulated as freedom in time.

The tension between the two dimensions (which may, following contemporary physics, be seen as different conceptions of the same reality rather than different realities), however, is not collapsed. And in the gap between them, the boundaries between prophetic theology and mystical theology may be both recognised and mutually related. This forces us, too, to recognise that theology is first and foremost a living out of, a listening to, and an adjudicating of *aporiai* in the human odyssey of faith (McGaughey 1995:96).[10] A contextual theology which works with this gap offers the hope of translation between two paradigmatic contexts in the service of a richer conception of life and thus of that redemption which offers life more abundantly.

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10 McGaughey relates this statement to Anselm s classical definition of theology as faith seeking understanding, though he points out that this formulation was originally Augustine s.

Theology s Split Personality

Space-time is not the only *aporia* fundamental to the world of theological discourse. Another is the link between body and spirit, a link severed by Montanism and the gnostic forms of Christianity which so challenged the early Church and led it to formulate its claims in terms of a unity of body and spirit. The split has also become characteristic of our modern world under the influence of Cartesian dualisms, primarily that between subject and object, but also that between the personal and the social, between the internal and the external, and in theology between God and the world. These splits are also the source of several problems in SA contextual theologies. Most of these problems may be traced to a particular epistemology determined by an emphasis on the second term in these polarities, and a typical inability by political or contextual theologies to account adequately for the first term.

The Cartesian epistemology is now under attack in many quarters. It is not necessary to summarise its weaknesses, or the arguments now ranged against it in the name of post-modernism, post-colonialism, or any similar position. But I have found one approach to the problem, drawing of all things on Plato, which seems to offer a point of attack (McGaughey 1995). It challenges the epistemology undergirding modernism while simultaneously opening up space for the more fluid, ambiguous understanding of truth demanded by a contextualised theology. Let me begin the discussion by referring to a point in Petersen s argument grounding a *kairotic* epistemology against a *logos* epistemology. Petersen contrasts a sophist understanding of *kairos* with the theories of Plato and Aristotle. The epistemology of the sophists, dependent upon the priority of *kairos* over *logos* (reason), is described as relativistic, elusive, contextual and shifting, in contrast to the world of Platonic forms and Aristotelian logic, and of the modernist quest for foundational certainty, rational and ethical clarity (Petersen 1995:50). Clearly, on a traditional interpretation of Plato which treats universals as rationally established absolutes, this contrast may be justified. But this interpretation of Plato is no longer uncontested. One source of such contestation becomes the basis of the argument that follows on the unity of body and spirit. This will be developed further in the final section in relation to an assertion of the uncertainty of all truth claims.

As will be seen, I explore an alternative interpretation of Plato not for its own sake, but in order to develop further some of the claims made by Petersen in respect of time and resistance. While Petersen helps illuminate the relationship between the prophetic and the mystical, we will turn to other approaches to uncover Cartesian dualisms at work in other areas which also have an impact upon the way in which we understand theology. This will radicalise the question of resistance by taking it into the fundamental anthropological and epistemological dilemmas posed by the intention of theology to speak the truth, or to speak of the truth. Once again we go through the remembered gate - that which we have learned in the past - into a condition of unknowing.

The relevant work is that of Douglas McGaughey (1995). Our concern is spirit. I take for granted a contemporary acceptance of the importance of body, of material reality, in contextual theologies. This is clearly evident in their emphasis

on the physical, economic and political realities of unfreedom. What has proven more intractable for contextual theologies is an ability to incorporate an adequate vision of spirit. It is to this task that I turn.

The essence of McGaughey's argument lies in an attack on materialist epistemologies and the resultant mathematization of reality. Primary reality is here seen as quantifiable, measurable, observable, predictable, manipulable; rationality is understood as causal, calculating (1995:196ff., 443ff.). The paradigmatic shift came with the rediscovery in Europe of the Aristotelian corpus. Modern thinking since Descartes has been dominated by Aristotelian nominalism, argues McGaughey. Epistemologically, this is most simply stated as the requirement that there be evidence for the truth. This evidence must be located somewhere, that is, it must be accessible in a particular place.[11] Place is material, actual. Nominalism therefore requires that our non-material experience be discounted as evidence.

Because nominalism thus denies that our names for things are anything more than pointers to reality which lies outside the naming process (our consciousness, mind, *nous*), truth must be constituted through a verification, or falsification, of that to which our names point an external reality. There must be a correspondence between what is thought and what is externally sense-able (that is, externally determinable). If one cannot show an externally sense-able correspondent to experiencing and what is thought, then the experiencing or thought are assumed to be false. Theology makes this move too. Truth, for modern theologies generally means verification, either in the text of scripture (a tangible object), in the dogmatic tradition (likewise a discernible object), in appropriate behaviour (the observable results of faith, a strong theme in both pietism and liberal theology), or in the positing of another realm of reality which reaches to us from beyond (thus even a concept of revelation which depends upon some other metaphysical place as the source of experience seeks a truth that can be verified in its effects on us). Ironically, despite all attempts to define theology as a spiritual discipline, its modern forms thus partake of a materialist epistemology. That which goes on in the consciousness, in mind, in *nous* - that which is spirit - is non-observable, non-sensible, non-tangible, non-verifiable. It cannot therefore offer proof of anything, at least within this paradigm.

As should be clear, the division between what is internal (consciousness, mind, *nous*, experiencing) and what is external (accessible to the senses or objectively available) parallels the fatal divisions between the seen and the unseen, body and mind, eternal realm and worldly realm, the divine and the human. These divisions, probably above all other difficulties in western traditions, are alien to Africa. The same epistemological fault is responsible, McGaughey (1995:444) argues, for the clash between science and theology on the one hand, and the apparent harmonisation of the two along the lines that they deal with different

11 Following John Nijenhuis, McGaughey distinguishes between a locative meaning of Being, to which I refer here, and a quantitive meaning of Being. The quantitive meaning speaks of Being as participation in reality, as opposed to the occupation of a particular place in the locative meaning. The emphasis of hermeneutic philosophy (Ricoeur, Gadamer) is also towards a quantitive meaning of Being, that is, on the way in which we participate in reality, which we normally call experiencing in ordinary language. This distinction points to our earlier discussion on space and time.

spheres of truth on the other. Either way, a dividing line is drawn between the two, analogous to the divide between internal and external reality.[12]

All of these approaches to truth which I have characterised as dependent upon the epistemological foundations of nominalism find their reference in actualities: texts, observable behaviour or action, language, the deposit of history, and the like all object-like manifestations of the real. But McGaughey argues with some force that the real includes not just actualities; it also includes possibilities. This clue, as yet expressed rather abstractly and still in need of clarification, provides me with the key to what I want to say about truth.

What McGaughey suggests is a recovery of the notion of truth found in Plato s simile of the line.[13] The technical details of the discussion are difficult and it is not necessary to repeat them here. It is not my purpose to argue for a new interpretation of Plato, which I believe McGaughey sufficiently substantiates. However, it is probably necessary to indicate briefly what the simile of the line says in broad outline for, though they cannot clear to the reader at this point, the implications of McGaughey's interpretation for an understanding of truth (and an analysis of the disease of modern theology) are radical.

Plato uses the line to distinguish between mind and body, spirit and world, ideas and material. The first term in each of these pairs refers to what is above the line, the second term below. Spirit, now, is equivalent to consciousness, mind, or *nous*. But *nous* or spirit is not simply ideation or reflection. Rather, it is that which serves the first principle of the whole - the Good - in grasping and illuminating reality itself. In the simile of the line, *nous* is neither restricted to ideas nor reducible to either calculating or contemplative reason, neither self-contained mind nor abstract reason separated from a world of engagement. It incorporates imagination, understanding and reflection, but is not reducible to them.

Spirituality, so McGaughey, must therefore also be defined in this relation. But spirituality is not, as many interpret Plato,[14] separate from body, world, materiality, nor is it superior in any formal or ontological sense. It is, first, different, because it is consciousness appropriating reality (indirectly). Second, it is also the basis of the possibility of any experience, because without consciousness we would have no experience, no ordering of the sense phenomena of the

12 As McGaughey puts it, the epistemological fault finds expression in theology in terms of two sources of knowledge about God: revealed and natural. Nature can teach one about the creation of God, but not about the purpose or meaning of life. Hence revelation complements nature by providing an empirical source of information, the scriptures, about salvation. Truth is learned either from nature of from the scriptures, i.e., there are and must be empirical warrants and backings for all truth claims (444/5).

13 The original simile may be found in Book VI of The Republic.

14 McGaughey suggests that the wrong interpretation of Plato, upon which follows a wrong understanding of the much later neo-Platonism and its interaction with Christian theology, arises precisely because the allegory of the cave, which follows in the next book immediately after the simile of the line, is not read in the context of the simile of the line. If it were, then it could not be interpreted as suggesting that ideas are real and materiality is the mere reflection of ideas or universals. The allegory of the cave has to do with how one is liberated from the realm of sense perception (so that the upper region of the simile of the line consciousness comes into play), while the simile of the line has to do with what knowledge is.

material world (they would overwhelm us). But it can never be separated from experience - from body and world - without being destroyed in the process. A free-floating consciousness is quite literally inconceivable.

McGaughey concedes that Plato privileges spirit or mind, the upper half of the line (which is not the same as ignoring the lower half), and notes that this is a mistake, now widely recognised, in part responsible for the much-maligned reputation of Plato. But he argues that Plato s preference is not necessary to his schema and that, once removed, the schema allows for some radical conclusions. His analysis produces the following insights about Plato s simile of the line, each of which I will subsequently employ in defining the relation between Christian tradition and truth.

(1) Reality consists in the whole of the line, that is, consciousness (or spirit, mind, *nous*) above the line, and the sensible world (materiality) below the line. The truth of reality, in other words, is reached only in grasping both the material and the spiritual simultaneously. Reality is a *Gestalt* of mind and body, spirit and world, not just that which can be empirically or materially ascertained, nor just that which can is experienced internally or subjectively at the level of consciousness alone.

(2) Spirit (*nous*), that which produces universals and paradigms, pertains to possibilities (what is not) in the world, opening up actualities (what is) which enables us to transcend them. However, this is not transcendence from world or body, society or person (above, outside) but transcendence within world or body, society or person. It is an elevation of what is into that which is not yet; it is the motor of what is new and the source of human being (as opposed to our participation in nature as particular kinds of animals). This is why a materialist epistemology or ideology cannot understand or meet the experience of human beings where it is not calculable, objectifiable.

(3) World or body, as actuality, constrains us. It is an equally inescapable part of reality (the insight of pragmatism).[15] This is why an idealist epistemology or ideology fails to grasp the material conditions of human being.

(4) Neither consciousness nor knowledge of the world provide guarantees of truth, for both are filled with ambiguity and unknowability. Consciousness operates with ultimately indefinable universals (an insight first stated by Socrates),[16] whereas knowledge of the world is inescapably framed within

15 McGaughey argues that pragmatism fails not because it offers an untenable test of material reality, but because it does not apply the same test to spiritual reality. As he puts it, analogously to the charge to try leave a sixteenth floor room by the window and see what happens, one may say try ignoring the paradigmatic universals by which one is able to understand anything and see what happens.

16 Universals are what our consciousness needs in order to make sense out of the phenomenological flow of events, which otherwise become nonsense in a plethora of independent, arbitrary and incoherent stimuli without differentiation. Thus universals establish the difference and identity of phenomena by providing us with the coherence we need to make sense of things. It is only in this way that they are universal, however. Universals are not in themselves absolutes, eternal constants or ontological entities. They remain tentative, ambiguous. Though they establish

limited interpretive paradigms (an insight Thomas Kuhn made clear for the natural sciences, those branches of knowledge which most strongly laid claim to an unmediated access to reality through experimentation and controlled observation).

(5) The universals with which consciousness operates are not metaphysically universal, that is, ontologically guaranteed absolutes. Rather they remain hypotheses (Plato). Thus all appeals to universals have the character of tentative approximations, still and always to be confirmed, not certainties.

(6) At the same time, universals do not float in the air unattached to any historical experience. *First*, the meaning of an idea/universal is not grasped without having grasped it as a possibility for understanding something particular (McGaughey 1995:463). *Second*, universals are deposited in human history in the form of language, which precedes us, and in the form of traditions, which give us our identity. Because both language and tradition define the self in relation to others, universals are inherently social, the work of communicative action. Spirituality, understood in relation to *nous*, should never be taken to be merely private, individual, isolated from body and world. This would be a contradiction in terms.

The loss of spirituality in modern times follows upon the Cartesian split of mind and body, spirit and world, and the triumph of an epistemology which values the latter (body, world). The corollary, of course, is that all that Plato would see as spiritual is regarded in the new epistemological framework as unreliable, as non-verifiable, as mere emotion or illusory experience incapable of guiding us to truth. The modern search for truth, then, must aim precisely at excluding, bracketing, or marginalising as far as possible such subjective factors in order to arrive objectively at a truth which can be shown to correspond to an external occurrence or object.

What is forgotten here (and what is also the point of attack in post-modern literature and philosophy, or of Kuhn in his theory of paradigms in science) is that any investigation of material reality already depends upon a prior imaginative framework which is both limited and partial. Knowledge, whether material or spiritual, is irredeemably mediated. Drawing on Ricoeur, McGaughey (450) defines this prior imaginative framework or paradigm as the sedimented syntheses of the past (quoting Ricoeur, my emphasis): the labor of imagination is not born from nothing. It is bound in one way or another to the tradition s paradigms ... deployed between the two poles of *servile application* [requiring a hermeneutics of suspicion] and *calculated deviation* [dependent upon a hermeneutics of restoration], passing through very degree of rule-governed deformation.

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coherence between things, they cannot themselves be clearly defined. So, for example, we learn to know what a tree is, and can recognise one even if we have never seen its particular type before. But we cannot show in what way all trees are definitively different from all other objects. Botanical categorisations attempt a definitive classification, for example, but the distinctions they make are themselves chosen selectively within a particular scientific paradigm. Universals, then, are ultimately indefinable, even though we cannot but use them as if they point to definite realities. This then becomes the point of Plato s allegory of the cave, which follows directly upon the simile of the line, rather than the usual interpretation of ideas as substantial, materiality as imprecise reflections of ideas.

Paraphrasing Ricoeur, the theological task I implicitly defend here may be described as a challenge to the servile application of the paradigms of the Christian tradition on the one hand, and a plea for a calculated deviation from those paradigms on the other. The challenge employs a hermeneutics of suspicion by analysing factors of power and knowledge, relations of power, representation of the Other, and uncritical conversation in an engagement with particular contexts and the encounter between people from different contexts. It also employs a hermeneutics of reconstruction by locating the evidences of spirit in the midst of the world by which what is may be transcended in the anticipation and construction of what is not yet.

Spirit, understood thus, is emancipatory, and it is so in the world, embodied in persons among other persons. Moreover, it is emancipatory in two senses: in time as the imaginative grasp of possibility - an insight of mystical thought; and in space as the drive of emancipatory action - the insight of prophetic theology.

The Actual and the Possible

This leads to a proposal for understanding theological truth in terms of possibility rather than actuality. Christian tradition, as truth, must be understood an approach to reality, a framework for commitment to the way reality must be (an imperative of faith, any faith), which joins the spiritual and the material, the possible and the actual. The disclosure (aletheia) of reality which ensues is the nature of truth. As McGaughey shows, truth as aletheia means to be noticed, in the sense of arising out of that which eludes notice and is unnoticed (1995:464). Truth reveals what is concealed, but in doing so, new concealments occur (other possibilities lurk there which have not been realised or which have been excluded).[17] Here there is no marriage with a correspondence theory of truth in which what is revealed (what is actual) is taken to be a direct correlate of what is true, and what is concealed only the result of ignorance or error.

These thoughts can now be relayed to our understanding of Christian tradition. The first thing we may state is that tradition, the deposit of past commitments, is actual and, in this sense, material (fixed in texts, creeds, etc.). It constrains us to the heritage which defines us because it provides the language by which we may identify what it means to put on the mind of Christ (Paul, speaking precisely of *nous*). We are constituted by this heritage. But if this is all, then it is a truncated reality, a dogmatic trap from which spirit strives to escape. This is tradition as law. By the spirit, by putting on the mind of Christ, by *nous*, we participate in the making of that tradition in the dialectic between what constitutes us and what we constitute. This is the epistemological foundation for a theology of unification

17 In the realisation that the actualisation of one possibility prevents the actualisation of other possibilities that might have been available one has the epistemological basis for what Habermas calls the systematic distortion of communication and action. But, unlike Habermas s project, which seeks to find a model of communicative competence capable of overcoming this limit, this distortion is also ontological. There is no way around it, for it is the nature of reality. A more limited version of Habermas s systematic distortion may nevertheless be granted as of particular importance, namely, the kinds of distortion which result from the imposition of a manipulative, calculating consciousness which presses its hegemony upon all. This is the point at which a hermeneutics of suspicion becomes vital.

between the actual and the possible. It requires that not all possibilities are congruent, and that the actualisation of one possibility conceals or prevents the actualisation of other available possibilities. This is why the tradition is not simply a harmonious record of the work of the spirit, but also the record of contestation for one possibility against others.

This is not a one way street, however. The universals or paradigms of the received tradition remain as a deposit which particular persons, groups or communities encounter and with which they must deal. Whatever possibilities may be actualised in the process of this encounter, other possibilities are prevented or concealed. The hermeneutic of restoration invoked by new possibilities does not leave behind the hermeneutic of suspicion which questions both what is actualised and what has been prevented or concealed.

The fourth point presses us to recognise that neither natural nor revealed knowledge gives us any guarantees. This paradox is the nature of our experiencing: we search for understanding, but we always encounter doubt or that which escapes our understanding, and not because of ignorance. The paradox lies in the fact that universals constitute the basis of our understanding: we inherit them in language which is the great institution that ... has preceded each and every one of us (Ricoeur, in McGaughey 1995:462). But simultaneously we constitute the universals out of the particulars of our experience.

Thus we cannot ultimately depend upon revealed or natural knowledge. As McGaughey notes, this forces us to live by faith. Reading the past, including scripture, in which Christian tradition comes into being, we may then recognise that it is that its truth lies in its profound record of the never-ending search of human beings for the wholeness which eludes them. The process is what counts. The content of that search the words, sentences, ideas and intentions deposited in the records of the tradition, provide us with no guarantees. They remain tentative, always pointing to our profound unknowing, to a non-epistemic faith in fact (McGaughey 1995:459). We have no access to any higher form of knowing. The route to certainty is blocked. Any attempt to smash down the walls which block us inevitably implies that we smash other human beings or nature itself. This is the insight of faith, of non-knowing.

Moreover, the paradox of being constituted by the universals we inherit even as we constitute them out of the particulars of our experience has a further twofold implication for our understanding of Christian tradition, reinforcing what has already been said. First, at the point where we lay claim to being Christian, we insert ourselves into the inherited language of the faith. As we learn more of this heritage, which we must to make any sense of the identity of being Christian (otherwise the claim is trivial), so we sink our roots into its universals. Second, we necessarily contribute to the establishment, confirmation or alienation of these universals by constituting them in relation to our own particulars of experience.

This process, of course, is the way in which the tradition got started and kept going in the first place. The dynamic of the development of tradition is its truth. Our participation in this dynamic is its requirement.

Another step may be added. If the Christian tradition is the linguistic (or language-like) deposit of the set of universals which define what it means to be

Christian, then it must be recognised that these universals themselves are ultimately indefinable. They elude our grasp, and they do so systematically (that is, it is not a matter of ignorance but of the limit of our knowing). The implication is that no statements of this tradition which claim to be the truth may taken as such in any final, certain, unambiguous manner. They guarantee nothing except our historical identity which, if open to possibility or to new creation, cannot remain static. This, as I have already indicated, is a position indeed held within the Christian tradition for a long time, especially among the mystics whose theological paradigm is one of search or quest as opposed to assertion or decree, but also in the implications of a fully grasped doctrine of the *sensus fidei*.[18]

Revelation is thus not an event in the past, but an unfolding of the future in the present. Moreover, this unfolding is not anti-worldly, but takes place within the real world, that is, within the constraints of actuality. Thus revelation simultaneously conceals the truth (other possibilities which might have been actualised but were not) even as it reveals it (the insertion of the new within the old, opening it up for further possibility). Theology, like the spirituality it accompanies, is thus an ongoing journey, a search for understanding, and not a repetition of the past, nor even simply a reinterpretation of the past. It takes the *creatio ex nihilo* quite literally as the bringing into existence (actualising) of that which does not yet exist (possibility).[19] We move now to the fifth point, that universals are hypotheses about reality, or tentative approximations. If this is so, we may conclude that the Christian tradition, to the extent that we take it as our own, offers us one set of tentative approximations of reality, including our part in it. There are no grounds, in this case, for any fundamentalism, any hegemonic religious domination of others, any exclusive claims to truth. McGaughey s (1995:473) formulation of this point in relation to spirituality is precise and rich in implications: The spiritual as well as the material dimensions of experience require us to speak of an odyssey of faith seeking understanding, because we do not have direct and immediate access to the material, and the spiritual, at the very least, is rooted in indefinables. But spirit is informed by a higher horizon of pragmatic faith.[20]

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18 Denis (1993:51), for example, points to the view of Vincent of Lerins, a fifth century writer, who argued that care must be taken that we hold the faith which has been believed everywhere, always and by all. Properly understood, this is not a call to find and hold onto some essential faith by which the people may be corrected, but rather a recognition that what is believed by the people must be taken seriously in the construction of doctrine and, as Denis notes in a development of this argument in later Catholic theory, in its reception. In respect of the latter notion of reception, Denis points out (52) that a doctrine not received by local believers having no impact on them and their understanding of the faith is a serious indication that something is wrong, for instance, with this definition.

19 McGaughey (460) thus points out that we need to speak of God as possibility, that is, as no-thing, out of which every-thing emerges. This is a creatio ex nihilo that is continuous and commences with possibility rather than Aristotelian actuality, that is, rather than Aristotle s Unmoved Mover which is actual ... or Process thought s primordial nature ... of God. He also notes (466) that the key to Descartes logical arguments for the existence of both the world and of God depend upon the assumption that something cannot come from nothing. This is the trap of materialist epistemologies from which one cannot escape if one stays with the notion of reality as encompassing only actualities and not possibilities.

20 In a footnote, McGaughey (473) points out that the Greek distinctions between *nous* (consciousness or Reason in Plato s simile of the line), *logos* (the structuring system of universals), and nomos (law) help us understand the theology of Paul and of John. In Greek

All such attempts are not only unworthy of the human spirit, particularly among those who claim that this spirit is made new in Christ and reaches out to all, but they are also inevitably damaging of the spirit and the humanity of others. This does not mean a restless pluralism is best, and a non-committal faith exemplary. It only means that we recognize our own limits, in spirit and in knowledge, taking on the humility which this requires as a systematic contribution to the world and to others of the love of which Jesus spoke and which the narratives of his life indicate he shared.[21]

Revelation, in this view, must be brought into relation with concealment. What unmasks one aspect of reality (the point of conscientisation or of social analysis in political/contextual theologies) must simultaneously be understood as hiding other aspects. Thus there is no path to truth as absolute, certain or guaranteed, no clear and unambiguous grasp of the reality of the world. To quote McGaughey (1995:38), The truth of human experience is that it consists of a dynamic of the actual concealing the possible where the possible is constantly being projected by the human spirit into the future in acts of understanding.

To conclude, if we understand the truth of tradition in terms of *aletheia* -the disclosure of that which eludes notice or is unnoticed - then it is possible to understand that translation across boundaries, between contexts of otherness, is not only interesting, but vital for the truth Christians proclaim. What is unnoticed or eludes notice, of course, is key. It does not take much, in the paradigm of a contextualised theology which I have taken for granted in my reflections, to see that the most significant indicator of what eludes notice may be found in suffering. Not suffering as an abstract principle, but suffering as embodied in the world, among those who elude notice because they are not heard.

Truth as disclosure then has implications of a profound sort. It drives us to apprehend reality in its actuality (no cheap grace here!), requiring a hermeneutic of suspicion. It calls us to imagine reality in its possibilities (no faint hope!), requiring a hermeneutic of reconstruction.

Through the Unknown, Remembered Gate

The theological journey proposed by the juxtaposition of terms adopted in the above arguments, as I have tried to suggest in each case, is never certain. To paraphrase McGaughey (1995:96) once more, the theologian is always and already in a groundless wagering in faith rooted in paradox. Yet one s grasp of the paradoxical character of life may be less or more adequate, which is not unimportant: ... it is not as if one could choose not to wager. Faith has as much to do with our acting as it does with our understanding, and one cannot not act!

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thinking *nous* is higher than either *logos* or nomos. I would add, applied to my discussion of Christian tradition, that consciousness as understood here is higher than either the paradigms of the tradition (in its texts, creeds, confessions, etc.) or the rules or laws it expounds in catechisms, canons, disciplinary codes, and the like. This underlines the general point I am making about the role of context, experience and suppressed knowledges in the shaping of theology.

21 What we have here is in fact a recovery of an ancient tradition which McGaughey (1995:488) locates in the theologies of Paul and John. This is the tradition that emphasises the elevation of the human into the spirit for the sake of the transformation of the world, a task that cannot be ours is we remain embedded in material reality alone.

We do not undertake this journey without carrying a particular history. That history is both personal and communal, both local and general. It is also the stuff of identity in as much as we take into ourselves, either voluntarily or involuntarily, a tradition by which we name ourselves. If the theological task is our focus, then a religious tradition is what we remember and re-member. As we walk through the gate of the present into the future, we take this memory - embodied, reinterpreted - with us.

But as we pass through the gate, we enter again into an unknown territory. The maps we bring with us are our guide, but they remain provisional, even if they are all we have. They can and must be redrawn. In this sense theology itself cannot be anything else than situated in a context to be shaped by that context. It is part of the task of reconstruction. How we translate that task from one context to another is crucial. I have argued that it must be a tentative translation, a translation which recognises boundaries but is capable of taking account of them. It is also a translation which works with the *aporiai* of theology as the epistemological basis of resistance to any totalizing form of discourse and any form of certainty in our religious discourse.[22]

I began with TS Eliot. It seems appropriate to end with his words again. The words are drawn from Choruses from The Rock and they drive us to the task of building anew, the task of theologising in and between new contexts knowing of our unknowing, remembering where we have been, still but still moving:

In the vacant places
We will build with new bricks
There are hands and machines
And clay for new brick
And lime for new mortar
Where the bricks are fallen
We will build with new stone
Where the beams are rotten
We will build with new timbers
Where the word is unspoken
We will build with new speech
There is work together

22 Translation, in the sense I have described it, is rather different from the meaning given to it by Robert Schreiter (1993) in his discussion of the three major models of local theology. Because Schreiter steps into similar territory with maps not unlike those I use, it is necessary to clarify this point. His use of the notion of translation depends upon the tradition in biblical scholarship usually referred to as dynamic equivalency. In this tradition, the translator tries to find in the target context, local terms and images which may be seen as equivalent to those adopted in the very different context out of which scripture arose. As Schreiter (7-8) points out, the major difficulties with such an approach are (1) a positivist understanding of culture in which it is assumed that there are in fact direct equivalencies between two very different contexts (a tendency towards a surface reading of culture and a lesser capacity to listen), and (2) an assumption of some essential, supracultural and unproblematic core to Christianity the kernel from which the husk simply has to be removed. On this last point, Schreiter might not go as far as I have in emphasising the radical unknowing of theology, but his point remains pertinent.

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