

The library and theological studies : an indivisible marriage

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On Tuesday February 10 in the year 1767 Samuel Johnson went as was his custom to the Queen's House (on the site of the present Buckingham Palace) to read in the King's library. George III, learning that the famous writer was present, expressed a desire to meet him, and went to the Great Library to do so. He then courteously enquired of Johnson if he 'was then writing anything.' Johnson replied that 'he was not, for he had pretty well told the world what he knows'.

The rest of the conversation is instructive but perhaps not relevant to our present purpose. I begin here, however, for two very good reasons, or perhaps three. The first is that it introduces us afresh to one of the great readers of our culture, Samuel Johnson. To readers we must return again and again. For Johnson reading was a joy, an end in itself. The second is that the eighteenth century introduces us to one of the significant changes in the ways in which writing, and therefore books, came to operate in our culture. Alvin Kernan in his book *Printing technology, letters and Samuel Johnson* shows how print took over from orality. Alexander Pope in the eighteenth century, at once made much money from publishing his poems and translations, and in the *Dunciad* satirizes the new world books made possible by the printing press. Dullness is the dominating goddess of this popular culture:

Prologues into Prefaces decay,
And then to Notes are fritter'd away.

The third reason for beginning with the eighteenth century is simply to suggest that there is nothing new: the relation between libraries and the study of theology has always been very close. This could be illustrated from a number of significant periods in the history of Judaism or the Church. The main point of these introductory remarks is, however, to suggest that the relation should not be seen as simply utilitarian. Of course theologians need books. When I came here forty-five years ago a thing that was important to those of us who would teach and learn in biblical studies was that the contents of the libraries of Qumran and Nag Hammadi should yield their secrets, and that those with technical and linguistic ability should tell the rest of us about the significance of these discoveries. But, like Dr Johnson in the library of George III, there would come a time when all had been told. There are nevertheless certain big questions which recur, which come again and again; and it is on one of these that I want to reflect briefly this morning.

It is, I suggest, a little more than a coincidence that some of us have lived through similar crises in ways of speaking about God (the subject matter of theology) and in the fate of the book (in literature and libraries). The death of God, and 'The Death of Literature', to borrow the title of another book by Alvin Kernan : one thing that the death of God, and the death of literature have in common is a tendency for the attack on the disciplines involved to be led from within. We had become accustomed to attacks on the great traditions of theological thought to come from without. Modern science, it was suggested, was antagonistic to religious thought and practice, just as the enemy of good writing was the ill-informed philistine.

Kernan, with literature in mind, wrote some words that might with a few alterations be made to apply to the study and teaching of theology.

Ours is a strange time, but it has in it, as the words quoted above suggest, few things stranger than the violence and even hatred with which the old literature was deconstructed by those who earn their living teaching and writing about it. They stood in line, fought for a place at the front of it, to demonstrate the meanness and emptiness of books and poems that had long been read and taught as the highest achievements of the human spirit. Humanism became a term of contempt, and the work of literature an illusion. The attack has abated, the old literature being stone dead, but at the moment in 1990, the most popular subjects of criticism at undergraduate and graduate courses are still those that demonstrate how meaningless, or paradoxically, how wicked and anti-progressive, the old literature has been, how meaningless is its language, how badly it has treated those who are not white, how regularly it has voiced an aristocratic, jack-booted ethos or propagandized for a brutally materialistic capitalism. As David Brooks says, describing the way in which the literary curriculum at Duke was recast in the 1980s to embody the new politics and the hatred of the old literature: "Marx is stood on his head. Literature does not reflect material conditions; it creates them. Domination, imperialism, racism and sexism are caused by their depiction in the books championed by the white male elite".

Where does this leave us as theological librarians?

- * With your libraries? The library reflects two interests: the interests of the teachers of this and past generations, and the wider interests of the subject. Literature is always bigger, a wider thing than individual taste:
 - * Marxist criticism need not be accepted at full face to recognize the correctness of its underlying argument, that despite the revolutionary mythology of romanticism, there is and always has been, a close working connection between literature and its parent society.
- * Secondly, you stand or sit with the reader or readers in all the variety of their interests and talents. You play about not only with books (which might be fun), but also with readers of books. More and more attention is being given in hermeneutical discussion to the reader.
- * Thirdly, your place in that process and on that line that connects books and readers, is not merely that of a conveyor of a commodity, from producer to user, it is your privilege to link people together in a quest for the truth on a variety of matters, making author available to reader, authors to readers.
- * You stand as theological librarians not apart from librarians of other subjects but in the mainstream of a great tradition of human learning. It is part of your responsibility to convey the disciplines of human learning in all their critical rigour (and vigour) to theological texts. In a sense no theological text is sacred, just as in another sense every serious non-theological text is sacred. Illich's book provides examples on almost every page of how fundamental to the careful reader were disciplines and considerations which were brought into being to serve monastic mumbling.

Above all the theologian needs to read

to read imaginative literature,
not just literature on which great theologians depend.

For too long students of the Bible have only been interested in cases where biblical and theological writing show dependence one on another. The careful reader of scripture or in the central theological tradition can never be allowed to forget that he or she works in a great literary tradition. The library resources available to theologians must contain examples of those traditions, so that the imagination of the reader may be kept alive, in ever fresh ways. Ivan Illich, in his fascinating study of (or commentary to) Hugh's *Didascalion*, describes that important moment when the text that was written for pious "mumblers" was reorganized into an optical text available for logical (individual) thinkers.

Epilogue

As we become more technically competent (perhaps to deal with means) the threat to our coherence is in the definition of ends and how to get there. Librarians must constantly remind the rest of us that not all communication is of the same kind. What is appropriate for the commercial world may be utterly confusing for the humanities, to which the skill of librarianship fundamentally belongs. But as the two poems below remind us, what is at stake is humanity, or if you like, members of the human race, thinking, talking, writing in the presence of God, and on the way doing so in the presence of their fellow members of the human race. To be aware of this they need libraries.

I

The Eagle soars in the summit of Heaven,
The Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit.
O perpetual revolution of configured stars,
O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,
O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to GOD.
Where is the life we have lost in living?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from GOD and nearer to dust.

I journeyed to London, to the timekept City,
Where the River flows, with foreign flotations.
There I was told: we have too many churches,
And too few chop-houses. Then I was told:
Let the vicars retire. Men do not need the Church
In the place where they work, but where they spend their Sundays.
In the City, we need no bells:
Let them waken the suburbs.

Choruses from 'The Rock' I. T. S. Eliot. *Collected poems 1909-1935*. London, 1936.

AND YET THE BOOKS

And yet the books will be there on the shelves, separate beings,
That appeared once, still wet
As shining chestnuts under a tree in autumn,
And touched, cuddled, began to live
In spite of fires on the horizon, castles blown up,
Tribes on the march, planets in motion.
“We are,” they said, even as their pages
were being torn out, or a buzzing flame
licked away their letters. So much more durable
than we are, whose frail warmth
cools down with memory, disperses, perishes.
I imagine the earth when I am no more:
Nothing happens, no loss, it’s still a strange pageant,
Women’s dresses, dewy lilacs, a song in the valley.
Yet the books will be there on the shelves, well born,
Derived from people, but also from radiance, heights.

Czeslaw Milosz. *The collected poems 1931-1987*. Penguin, 1988. p. 485.

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A few contributions only this issue. Any offerings gladly accepted.

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