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The Weakening of Theology by Literature Is Not a Bad Thing

An interview with David Jasper by Tomasz Garbol and Łukasz Tischner[1]

Łukasz Tischner: Our research project, "Literature and Religion – Challenges of a Secular Age", refers to Charles Taylor's investigations. The main concept we borrow from Taylor is that of the "secular age" understood not as an age in which religion is in decline, but as one in which the conditions of belief have been transformed, so that theistic claims are no longer self-evident, and must be confronted with non-theistic views. Do we really live in a secular age? What does this term mean to you?

David Jasper: The distinction between the religious and the secular is relatively recent in Western culture, and now increasingly unhelpful or even meaningless as institutional religion continues to decline. As Charles Taylor indicates in *A Secular Age* (2007) – a book that grew from his Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh University on "natural religion" – in 1500 it was impossible *not* to believe in God, while we live in a world in which the opposite is closer to the truth. And yet, still, "religion" is extraordinarily difficult to eradicate, as, for example, contemporary "secular" China is discovering.

My lifelong obsession with the relationship between literature and religion (I will leave the term "theology" until a little later) started when I was studying theology and training to be ordained in the Anglican Church in Oxford in the early 1970s. Having already studied English literature at Cambridge, I found it hard to understand how biblical scholarship could manage to make extraordinary literature such as we find in some of the prophetic writings, the narratives and poetry of the Hebrew Bible, so dull. Then I discovered, quite by accident, Nathan A. Scott Jr.'s book *The Wild Prayer of Longing: Poetry and the Sacred* (1971), its title taken from a poem by W.H. Auden, and

[1] This interview comes out of research completed as part of the project "Literature and Religion – Challenges of a Secular Age" (NPRH 2ah 15005283). The full version (in Polish translation) will appear in 2019 in the first volume of the publication funded by the grant. Wywiad powstał w ramach prac badawczych nad projektem MNiSW „Literatura a religia – wyzwania epoki świeckiej" (NPRH 2ah 15005283). Jego pełna wersja (w polskim tłumaczeniu) ukaże się w roku 2019 w pierwszym tomie publikacji grantowej.

this linked me afresh in my biblical studies with my earlier studies in English and French literature in Cambridge.[2] I was happy again.

Having now been an Anglican priest for more than forty years, I have always found my deepest religious stimulation in poetry and literature rather than theology. Of course, that may include the glorious poetry of Archbishop Cranmer's 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, but it is generally much more "secular" poetry and literature that stirs my religious imagination. I began reading poetry at school, like many people in England, with Thomas Hardy – an inveterate doubter and hater of the established Church in the nineteenth century, but still a deeply religious soul, always "hoping it might be so." Hardy reminds that a secular age is not one that has lost interest in religion, but rather, perhaps, one that is obsessed with it. Maurice Blanchot once wrote of Franz Kafka that, like Friedrich Hölderlin, his passion is "purely literary, but it is not always only literary. Salvation is an enormous preoccupation with him, all the stronger because it is hopeless, and all the more hopeless because it is totally uncompromising."[3]

A "secular" age, then, is one that remains obsessed with religion. The reason for this may partly be the decline of the religious institutions – churches and the like – that have been the guardians of religion and the gathering places of the faithful believers. Once these begin to fade with the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach", and the death of God becomes an event in people's lives of faith, then they begin to search for religion elsewhere, often in strange, idiosyncratic and uncontrolled corners. It is here that the voice of the poet and literature often continues to speak – to provide, in what Blanchot called "the space of literature" (*l'espace littéraire*), a place for the religious sensibility to find itself again, with a degree of articulation, in a secular age.

Ł.T.: In 1992, in a discussion with Giles Gunn and other American scholars, you favoured the study of the relationship between literature and theology rather than literature and religion. In your recent book *Literature and Theology as a Grammar of Assent* you mention that the former perspective has been abandoned and you try to reintroduce it. Why do you prefer the study of literature and theology over literature and religion?

D.J.: The distinction between the study of literature and *theology*, and literature and *religion* is initially rooted, I suggest, in a difference between British and North American cultures. In the UK *theology* is still a major subject

[2] I wrote an essay on this chance literary encounter in R.S. Sugirtharajah's book *Caught Reading Again: Scholars and Their Books*, London: SCM, 2009, pp. 41–53. Many years later Nathan Scott and I became good friends.

[3] M. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. A. Smock, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982, p. 57.

in university curricula (though declining), while in North America it is generally confined to seminaries and church colleges. *Religion* is a very broad term that is difficult to define, and becoming more so. In his now old book *The Interpretation of Otherness* (1979), the American scholar Giles Gunn suggested that:

> discussion of the relations between literature and religion, between culture and belief, has taken a fresh turn in recent years, and that it is now necessary to widen the terms in which it is conducted: to reconstitute the discussion on the plane of the hermeneutical rather than the apologetic, the anthropological rather than the theological, the broadly humanistic rather than the narrowly doctrinal.[4]

This liberal view reflects a cultural relationship in the United States between Christianity (and it is with Christianity that we have been largely concerned in our study, at least until recent years) and civil society that is quite different from conditions in the United Kingdom and most of Europe. Although in many ways now vestigial, the national Church of England (and the Church of Scotland, where I now work) remain part of the fabric of society, its theology and liturgical practice still embedded in the practice of national culture. My own understanding of the study of literature and theology, as the title of my recent book suggests,[5] is founded upon the theological discussions of late Romanticism in the late eighteenth century, and further back in English literature to John Milton, the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century and the English Prayer Books of the sixteenth century. The relationship between literature and theology is quite different from that between literature and religion. For literature does not so much illustrate but interrogate the language of theology. It is an edgy conversation that is both necessary and insecure. Andrew Marvell had, after all, feared the ruin of sacred truths following Milton's "bold" attempt to re-write the Bible in his poem *Paradise Lost*, while Samuel Johnson, in the next century asserted that the truths of Christianity were simply too high and perfect for mere poetry to challenge.[6]

I am quite prepared to acknowledge that the study of literature and theology is a much less "secular" enterprise than the study of literature and religion, less culturally based and more grounded in the history and ecclesial traditions of Christianity, at least in the first instance. It is concerned with theological matters of salvation, redemption, forgiveness and the nature of God. The study of literature and religion is closer to cultural, sociological and

[4] G. Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness: Literature, Religion, and the American Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 5.

[5] D. Jasper, *Literature and Theology as a Grammar of Assent*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2016.

[6] A. Marvell, "On Mr. Milton's Paradise Lost" [in:] idem, *The Poems*, ed. H. MacDonald, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956, p. 64; S. Johnson, "Lives of the Poets (1779–1781)" [in:] idem, *The Life of Waller*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, Vol. 1, p. 203.

perhaps anthropological matters. Having said that, the Christian theological traditions of Western society in Europe *in its very secularity*, is still to be located within biblical and Christian theological principles. The Italian Roman Catholic philosopher Gianni Vattimo, who has been deeply involved in establishing the political foundations of contemporary Europe, when challenged by the claims of pluralism in European societies, argued that indeed it would be:

> a mistake to add the specific words "Christian values" to the [EU] constitution because it is precisely in order to uphold these same Christian values that Europe is secular: *the force of the Gospels and of Jesus' teaching provides the foundation of the secularity of any democratic state today*.[7]

This sums up very well my sense of the study of literature and theology and its paradoxes. It is, in a way, the weakening of theology by literature, but only because theology's concerns are also at the very heart of the literary enterprise: and "weak" theology may not be such a bad thing.

Ł.T.: Commenting on transformations in Anglo-American study of literature and theology/religion in recent decades, you mentioned that:

> the primary shifts (…) lie in the change from an emphasis on theology to religion, from a historical to a more cultural perspective, from a primary focus on traditional English literature to a wider (sometimes, it has to be admitted, more questionable) canon, and a more North-American concern, and to a greater, though still subservient, recognition of religious traditions outside that of the Christian West.

You seem to accept these changes as unavoidable, but at the same time you perceive them as, in a certain way, unfortunate: "there has been an expansion in the field, but at the same time loss of depths." Is returning to a theological perspective a promising remedy for this loss?

D.J.: This, of course, is essentially an extension of the previous question. At the heart of the matter is the much-debated term "secularization" and in what sense, in Charles Taylor's phrase, we are living in a secular age robbed of its enchantment. The key essay in my writings as a response to this question is the chapter entitled "Interdisciplinarity in Impossible Times" published in my colleague Professor Heather Walton's volume *Literature and*

[7] S. Zabala, "Introduction: Gianni Vattimo and Weak Philosophy" [in:] *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. S. Zabala, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, p. 28 (emphases added). A bishop recently said to me that he found this simply nonsense. I do not find it to be so.

Theology: New Interdisciplinary Spaces (2011).[8] Once again, the context is primarily Christian. We live in a time, at least in Britain, in which the great traditional departments of theology in our universities are clearly in decline and being replaced, in many institutions, by the newer discipline of religious studies. This is a broad field, established many years ago at Lancaster University by Ninian Smart, which examines, in a number of different ways, the phenomenon of religion in our society. What religious studies very often lacks is a sense of the historical depth of religious faith and practice, and it also perhaps reflects, to some extent, dare I suggest, the underlying anti-intellectualism in our declining churches in Europe. Within the intellectual and liturgical context of theology is lodged that faith and wisdom that is foundational to the greatest of Western art, philosophy and literature over nearly two millennia. Without such theological depth it is impossible to understand Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Joyce (the names are almost taken at random) who constitute the great tradition of Western literature. Nor is it possible properly to embrace the Western canon of literature without a clear understanding of the Bible and the traditions of hermeneutics to which it gives rise. As the Canadian scholar Northrop Frye once expressed it:

> In European literature (…) the myths of the Bible have formed a special category, as a body of stories with a distinctive authority. Poets who attach themselves to this central mythical area, like Dante or Milton, have been thought of as possessing a special kind of seriousness conferred on them by their subject matter. Such poems were recognized, in their own day, to be what we should now call imaginative productions.[9]

I have long regarded Thomas J.J. Altizer, as the pre-eminent "death of God" theologian, to be one of the most important intellectual and prophetic voices in contemporary American theology, and much of my work over the past two decades since I wrote my book *The Sacred Desert* (2003) reflects this. Altizer's profoundly biblical theology is rooted in the imaginative theological tradition of Dante, Milton, Blake and Joyce.

Ł.T.: Romantic tradition is vital for your intellectual journey, which originated in your interest in Coleridge, and more recently has led you to rediscover the Oxford Movement, and particularly John Henry Newman, the group of intellectuals so immensely influenced by Romanticism. The Romantic tradition has also inspired other eminent figures in the field of literature and

[8] D. Jasper, "Interdisciplinarity in Impossible Times" [in:] *Literature and Theology: New Interdisciplinary Spaces*, ed. H. Walton, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, pp. 5–18.

[9] N. Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 7.

theology/religion – Meyer H. Abrams, Harold Bloom, Northrop Frye, Geoffrey Hartman, Frank Kermode, Charles Taylor. Why is the Romantic tradition so crucial for studying literature and theology/religion?

D.J.: European Romanticism at the turn of the nineteenth century stands at a crossroads in Western intellectual and spiritual history. It is, to begin with, a reaction to the classical formalism of Enlightenment rationalist thinking, and it is so at a number of different levels. My doctoral study almost forty years ago and then my first book were dedicated to the English poet and thinker Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who, like many young intellectuals such as his fellow Lakeland poet William Wordsworth, embraced early the radicalism of the French Revolution as it marked the end of the *ancien régime* in Europe, before later becoming disillusioned with its violence and corruptions. Coleridge was also one of the first thinkers in England seriously to engage, if in a rather odd way, with the thought of Immanuel Kant and his philosophical shift from the ontological to the epistemological. Kant represents, in a sense, the intellectual culmination of the Lutheran Protestant revolution, the inevitable "secular" result of Lutheran theology and thought.

The Romantics, in their recovery of the affective, sought to bring together that which Descartes had once set asunder, and were at once deeply religious and profoundly skeptical, their soul-searching found not only in literature but also in the music of Beethoven (above all the *Eroica Symphony*) and the art of Caspar David Friedrich. In a book that has remained important for me, *"Kubla Khan" and the Fall of Jerusalem* (1975), E.S. Shaffer once wrote:

> Coleridge's two major interests, Christian theology under the penetrating probes of Enlightenment criticism, and a new poetry of the supernatural, met in the need for a modern mythology. For Herder, Eichhorn, and Coleridge, the two interests were inseparable.[10]

Coleridge's shadow spreads across the whole of nineteenth century English literature and theology. The same might also have been true of William Blake but he, in his deep eccentricities, had to wait until his rediscovery in the twentieth century, his art and poetry at once deeply Christocentric and eccentrically unorthodox.

But it was Coleridge who stood toweringly behind the developing theology of the leader of the Oxford Movement, John Henry Newman, though in a paradoxical manner. In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864) Newman wrote of Coleridge:

[10] E.S. Shaffer, *"Kubla Khan" and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature. 1770–1880*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 32.

> While history in prose and verse was (…) made the instrument of Church feelings and opinions, a philosophical basis for the same was laid in England by a very original thinker, who, while he indulged a liberty of speculation, which no Christian can tolerate, and advocated conclusions which were often heathen rather than Christian, yet after all installed a higher philosophy into enquiring minds, than they had hitherto been accustomed to accept. In this way he made trial of his age, and succeeded in interesting its genius in the cause of Catholic truth.[11]

This observation is crucial. At the roots of the great revival in the intellectual and liturgical life of the English Church known as the Oxford Movement lies a philosophical and Romantic seriousness that prompts a shift in both literature and theology that remains with us in many forms. Newman began life as an Evangelical, and his sensibility as such finds echoes in literature from the Brontë sisters (in their different ways) to the sceptical George Eliot. Romanticism's imaginative energy is found also in Sir Walter Scott's "invention" of Scotland and Augustus Pugin's building of Romantic Britain on principles that establish a deep continuity with the medieval English Church and its art.

Such Romanticism was at the very heart of our own scholarly beginnings in the study of literature and theology in the University of Durham in the 1980s, as I have tried to indicate in my book *Literature and Theology as a Grammar of Assent*, which draws upon Newman's greatest work, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870). I will not rehearse my argument again here, except to draw attention to what one of our earliest colleagues in the study of literature and theology, John Coulson (a gentle scholar who, he told us, survived life as a soldier in the Second World War by reading the poetry of Wordsworth), once called "the common tradition" that flowed from Newman in both literature and theology as far as the Second Vatican Council, a tradition that has its foundations in the thought and poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.[12]

Tomasz Garbol: Which currents in literature and theology/religion studies are still fruitful today? Can you name any movements, people, books in the field of literature and theology/ religion which make a significant contribution to such studies? Do you have preferred tools for literary analysis or favourite trends in criticism?

[11] J.H. Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. I. Ker, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994, pp. 97–98.

[12] See, J. Coulson, *Newman and the Common Tradition: A Study in the Language of Church and Society*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.

D.J.: This is a very difficult question to answer, as it must be clear from my recent writings that I am indeed pessimistic about the contemporary study of literature and theology/religion. Within the British context I feel that current work, though often solid and scholarly, is essentially simply repeating what was being done some thirty or forty years ago. The same source texts re-appear time and time again and little genuinely contemporary literature, it seems, is being read and assessed. In studies and "readers" in the Bible and literature, as well as literature and theology more broadly, there seems to be little development in theoretical or methodological explorations, and much remains very rooted in a Eurocentric and still fundamentally Christian context.

Thus I still would return for inspiration to such works as Robert Detweiler's edited book of 1983, *Art/Literature/Religion: Life on the Borders*. Such a book, which was radical in its day, reflects the importance of the then new and energetic world of postmodernism and poststructuralism (now long gone) that provoked so much thinking through philosophers like Jacques Derrida and others. It was also much more ethically responsible than is apparent in much of our contemporary works.

There are a number of issues that now require attention in a way that was not so apparent when I began my work.

There is the global and inter-faith context. A good example of this would be Eric Ziolkowski's edited book of essays in honour of the Chinese/American scholar, the late Anthony C. Yu, *Literature, Religion, and East/West Comparison* (2005).

In addition to this, in particular there is the development of Chinese scholarship and its challenge to translation studies. See, for example, *A Poetics of Translation: Between Chinese and English Literature*, eds. David Jasper, Geng Youzhuang and Wang Hai (2016).

This has enriched the field of hermeneutics – a theoretical and methodological concern which cannot be neglected. Much can be learnt from Chinese scholar Zhang Longxi and his early work *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (1992).

"Interdisciplinarity" has moved into "multi-disciplinarity". Much of my time is now spent with art historians, art theorists and artists in the field of visual art and religion. In addition, contributions are being made by musicians, film makers, and so on. For example: Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (2000), and Mike King, *Luminous: The Spiritual Life on Film* (2014). These are just two examples taken more or less at random from many possibilities.

T.G.: Which movements and approaches in contemporary human sciences introduce vital corrections to the study of literature and theology/religion? What are these corrections?

D.J.: Again, this continues from the previous question. I begin with wise advice given to me by Professor Ann Loades of Durham University in the very early days of our religion and literature conferences. She suggested that

we needed a philosopher at our conversations to correct and discipline us. Accordingly we drew on the presence of the Welsh post-Wittgensteinian philosopher D.Z. Phillips. In an early essay published in our first conference proceedings, Phillips wrote that we must maintain a close critical and philosophical eye on all language that we use:

> This is no optional strategy, a philosophical method which we can choose to adopt or not. On the contrary, what we have to do with here are fundamental issues concerning concept formation in religious belief; the way in which central notions in religious belief get a hold on human life.[13]

He continues, focusing more specifically on the grammatical demands that make language meaningful: "If we infringe these grammatical requirements we shall soon find ourselves engaged in trivialities or nonsense".[14]

If scholars in literature and theology need to listen attentively to the hard, critical demands of philosophy, they must also learn the necessity of a genuine interdisciplinarity from the field of hermeneutics[15] in such key thinkers as Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose major writings I regard as indispensable in our field. Ricoeur's hermeneutical enterprise is fundamental because, as a philosopher, he "has written with originality and authority on an astonishing variety of topics."[16] Beginning with Kant and Schleiermacher, Ricoeur's task draws upon almost the full range of contemporary human sciences, his idea of "text" being driven by two fundamental questions. First: "To what extent may we consider the notion of text as a good paradigm for the so-called object of the social sciences? (2) To what extent may we use the methodology of text-interpretation as a paradigm for interpretation in the field of the human sciences."[17] It is clear to me that the study of literature and theology cannot, nor should it, in any sense be exempt from this involvement. Indeed, we might say that it was a principle that was implied long ago in Cardinal Newman's seminal work *The Idea of a University* (1852).

At the same time we need to acknowledge, after Stanley Fish, that "Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do.[18] Indeed, Fish would maintain,

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[13] D.Z. Phillips, "Mystery and Mediation: Reflections on Flannery O'Connor and Joan Didion" [in:] *Images of Belief in Literature*, ed. D. Jasper, London: Macmillan, 1984, p. 25

[14] Ibidem.

[15] See D. Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*, Louisville: WJK Press, 2004.

[16] J.B. Thompson, "Editor's Introduction" [in:] P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 1.

[17] P. Ricoeur, "The model of the text: meaningful action considered as a text" [in:] idem, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*…, op. cit., p. 197.

[18] S. Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing Too*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 231–242.

true interdisciplinarity is ultimately impossible. But that should never deter us from our task of making the attempt. If, as Ricoeur would suggest, understanding is the primary mode of being in the world, then scholars of literature and theology must play a crucial role in the pursuit of such understanding, hinged upon the edge between theology and literature and open to the impossible demands of the full range of the human sciences. Being in literature and theology has always meant, for me, undertaking critical tasks for which I am in no way professionally qualified. It will not gain you many friends among the "experts" in the professional world of the academy and in the university, but it cannot be avoided.

Ł.T.: It was Jürgen Habermas who coined the term "post-secular", after the World Trade Center terrorist attack in 2001. Do you favour so-called post-secular studies? Do they significantly enrich study in the field of literature and theology/religion?

D.J.: Although I have long admired the work of Jürgen Habermas, not least since his development of a theory of communicative action, I feel uneasy about the term "post-secular", and, perhaps, its over-political implications. Indeed, and referring back to my starting point in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, I would in the end prefer to avoid this term altogether and its relatively modern distinction from the "sacred".

So my plain answer to this question would be "no". As must be clear, the roots of my concern with literature and theology are deeper and culturally, I think, more complex, though by no means unrelated to current circumstances and questions in the world in our century. I prefer terms coined by William Schweiker and David Klemm in their excellent discussion of "theological humanism" in their book *Religion and the Human Future* (2008). Klemm and Schweiker address what they call "the increasing denial of human freedom among many of the world's religions and so reversion to kinds of authoritarianism."[19] They make a distinction between "hypertheism" and "overhumanization" in our contemporary world, and I find these nuanced terms much more helpful. Ultimately they describe their essay in theological humanism as arising out of "the *quest for truth* rather than the novelty of the position or policy of action."[20] This describes very nicely my sense of the project of literature and theology. Truth, however we understand it, is a fundamental commodity to be pursued.

[19] D.E. Klemm, W. Schweiker, *Religion and the Human Future: An Essay on Theological Humanism*, Oxford: Blackwell-Wiley, 2008, p. 3.

[20] Ibidem, p. 4 (their emphases).

Ł.T.: Should literature and religion studies consider the perspective of the moral-existential orientation of protagonists or lyrical speakers – e.g. their recognition of a constitutive good/ good life, a Taylorian "fullness" of life? Or can religious issues be studied separately from ethical problems? Does ethical criticism significantly overlap with the study of literature and theology/religion?

D.J.: Ethical issues can never be set apart from the study of literature and theology or the matter of religion. Nevertheless, as Terry Eagleton has clearly shown in his recent book *Culture and the Death of God* (2014), religion must be set free from the burden of being the authoritative custodian of our moral and ethical codes. Eagleton writes:

> If religious faith were to be released from the burden of furnishing social orders with a set of rationales for their existence, it might be free to rediscover its true purpose as a critique of all such politics. In this sense its superfluity might prove its salvation (…) [Religion ought to be the bearer of] the grossly inconvenient news that our forms of life must undergo radical dissolution if they are to be reborn as just and compassionate communities. The sign of that dissolution is a solidarity with the poor and powerless.[21]

Perhaps one of the most articulate (and playful) expositions of such a separation of religion and ethics can be found in a book by an Anglican bishop, Richard Holloway, former bishop of Edinburgh, entitled, *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion out of Ethics* (1999) which begins with a meditation on the improvisatory soul of jazz music and a poem by Charles Tennyson Turner. Improvising upon a ground theme is a key skill in our work – as in ethics.

But allow me to return to Terry Eagleton, for I do not wish to be misunderstood. I think that there is a profound and necessary relationship between religion and ethics, but it is a radical, critical and reflective one, and not one bound by rules or dogma. Many years ago in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduc*tion (1983, Second Edition, 1996) Eagleton reflected upon the heady days of the early 1980s when we were all being seduced by Jacques Derrida, by postmodernism and deconstruction. His point was that there was a real tendency in the turn to deconstructionism to try and ride a coach and horses through everyone else's beliefs without appearing to assume the inconvenience of maintaining any of our own. Beliefs, after all, even critical ones, require responsibility. Thus it was that as the last century drew towards its close many people, and not least those of us involved in the study of literature and theology, began to make an "ethical turn." In 1992 Simon Critchley published his book *The Ethics of Deconstruction* in which he argues for the "ethical demand" within

[21] T. Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014, pp. 207–208.

Derridean deconstruction derived from the "messianic eschatology" of Emmanuel Levinas as, in Derrida's own words, it "seeks to be understood from within a recourse to experience itself." This being strictly speaking neither theological nor philosophical, directs us, among other things, towards a literary milieu.[22] And then, in his important book *Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities* (2000), Robert Gibbs argued that ethics is, in the first place, concerned with responsibility, and not simply a thinking about the right thing to do at any particular moment according to somewhat abstract demands of reason or the will.

Now, actually, this kind of thinking had been going on for some time in the field of literary studies. I think especially of two books, J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (1987), and Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988). Neither of these books is strictly religious, let alone theological, in their concerns, but they were important for me. It has often been the case that the study of literature and theology has its beginnings outside the strictly theological or religious domains. Literature, it may be argued, maintained its ethical concerns when religion, in its institutional forms, was declining and losing its place in the general social and public consciousness. J. Hillis Miller makes his initial point quite simply and clearly: "I shall argue… that there is a peculiar and unexpected relation between the affirmation of universal moral law and storytelling."[23] He makes claims for the odd eclecticism of his choice of authors – Kant, de Man, George Eliot, Trollope, James and Benjamin – who, taken in this strange order, "magically generate a narrative and seem to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end."[24] The ethical challenges of what Hillis Miller calls "good reading" begin to reconstruct a shape that religion and theology might then begin to recognize and finally associate with. They are concerned with that which Charles Taylor may call "fullness" of life, or, more simply, a concern for human flourishing that, unavoidably at some point, calls into play a sense of transcendence – and therefore religion.

Ł.T.: To what extent does the interpreter's worldview affect the results of her/his literature and theology/religion studies? Is it possible to free ourselves from presuppositions, to be simply critics, without any denominational label?

D.J.: My answer to this is a resounding "no!" I have always argued that reading cannot be innocent or free from presuppositions built, for good and ill, into the reader and interpreter's "worldview". I cannot free myself from

[22] See, J. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" [in:] idem, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 83.

[23] J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, p. 2.

[24] Ibidem, p. 11.

the essentially Christian perspective that is mine, though I have a responsibility to hold it critically and with a responsible self-awareness. But critical awareness does not release me from its shaping vision. The same is true also of the bias of gender, education, ethnicity and so on.

It may be, of course, that texts themselves, which are equally and inevitably cast within religious and cultural dimensions, may finally oblige us to shift our own position, and that is the risk of reading. The theologian Daphne Hampson, in her book *After Christianity* (2002), came to the conclusion that, although she was herself a Christian and had once considered ordination, the texts of the Bible were so inherently patriarchal that, as a woman and a feminist, she could no longer hold to what she calls the "Christian myth" as taken from the biblical texts. The integrity of her worldview was challenged beyond redemption by the offence of the worldview of the text. (This did not eliminate the distinction that, for Hampson, must be made between the Christian myth and the broader human awareness of a dimension of reality that can only be called God.)

One of the reasons that I persist in the study of literature and theology is precisely the endless *risk and challenge* that literature presents. The poet S.T. Coleridge wrote in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) of that "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith."[25] It is a delicate and important phrase. Any fictional text (novel, play, poem) invites us into its world demanding that willing suspension of disbelief so that the world of a novel – by Dickens, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, and so on – becomes "real" to us and challenges our assumptions – our pride and our prejudices. Wolfgang Iser's notion of the implied reader reminds us that none of us are ever "ideal" or perfect readers – and within any reading process, our presuppositions, our imperfections, and perhaps our worldviews are challenged and tested. Reading, like faith itself, is always a risky business.

The space of literature thus becomes a testing ground for our worldview and its assumptions precisely inasmuch as we bring that worldview, consciously and unconsciously, to bear upon our interpretive practice. Reading is always a kind of conversational process – as we address the text and the text addresses us. In another work, Coleridge remarked that: "(…) in the Bible there is more that *finds* me than I have experienced in all other books put together; (…) the words of the Bible find me at greater depths of my being (…). "[26] But the opposite is also true. We enter into a text with all our baggage of worldview – even as the text enters into us and interrogates that baggage.

[25] S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), eds. J. Engell, W. Jackson Bate, The Collected Works, Vol. 7, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, Vol. 2, p. 6.

[26] S.T. Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, London: William Pickering, 1840, p. 13.

Ł.T.: In your recent book you recall the first British Conferences on Literature and Religion, and emphasize that the origins of studies in this field were immensely influenced by the post-Holocaust generation (people like Ulrich Simon), and their trauma. It is probably this impact that accounts for the genuine seriousness and existential commitment of scholars in the 1980s. The problem of forgiveness and radical evil debated by a Jewish remnant is not an exercise in formal ethics. Do literature and theology/religion studies need to rediscover this kind of seriousness? Is it available for new generations?

D.J.: My intention in writing *Literature and Theology as a Grammar of Assent* (2016) was to explore the origins of our conferences, which began in the University of Durham in the early 1980s. As with so much writing, I was exploring as I went along, rather than beginning with a clear, initial understanding of our underlying motivations and purposes. Clearly the leading senior people involved in those days, now almost forty years ago, were formed by the events of the Second World War, and they set the tone of our progra me. Theology was apparently stagnant, and only the voice of literature could, it seemed, bring any release, any forgiveness. For people of my generation, then, it was rather like being cast as Edgar at the end of *King Lear*, left to carry on in a world in which "we that are young/ Shall never see so much, nor live so long."[27] Ulrich Simon's remarkable lecture, "Job and Sophocles" set the tone of the first conference in 1982, and its dark shadow still lies across every page of my book in 2016. At the end of his lecture, Simon suggests: "Perhaps the time has come when tragic irony will liberate the stale religious positions of our time." Then he concludes: "*Sunt lacrimae rerum*… The world is like that, but heroism and compassion make it bearable."[28]

After Simon – a German Jew who escaped as a young man from Germany in the 1930s and became a Christian priest, having lost all his family in Auschwitz or Russia – we have not felt so deeply the problem of forgiveness and radical evil, a problem plumbed nowhere more deeply than in Dostoevsky, Dante, Shakespeare or Blake. Yet I would like to think that such seriousness can still be rediscovered in contemporary literary studies (for the Churches have forgotten it) but, as yet, I cannot find it to be so. For one thing, the present state of our universities precludes such serious moral reflection, they being obsessed with a facile success ethic and bureaucracy that belittles all such things. And perhaps the spirit of the times is against us.

In 1994 I co-edited with Mark Ledbetter a volume of essays in honour of our old teacher in literature and religion/theology, and our friend, Robert Detweiler of Emory University. Bob died in 2008 after a terrible stroke, and has largely been forgotten by the present generation of literature and

[27] W. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 5, Scene 3, lines 324–325.

[28] U. Simon, "Job and Sophocles" [in:] *Images of Belief in Literature*, op. cit., pp. 50–51.

theology scholars. He was also a man whose life was marked deeply by the Second World War and its aftermath. For four years between 1951 and 1955, Bob worked for the rehabilitation of refugees in various parts of Germany – Neuweid, Stuttgart, Lübeck and Hamburg. We closed that festschrift volume, which was entitled *In Good Company*, with an interview with Bob in which he lamented the decline of moral education in universities. It was a decline that had to do with vision and commitment. He said:

> It has to do with the fact that too many of us in higher education have not found the vision of an educational community. We may be collegial, but we tend not to commit ourselves to each other and to the institution. Is it too much to expect that we do that? Or shouldn't we ask, at least, why we don't value and practice such commitments?[29]

Bob was finally asked what he was least and most happy about in his career as an academic. He replied, with characteristic dryness: "I'm least happy about the fact that after my three decades in higher education our society appears to be in worse shape than ever. I take this personally. I am most happy about the connections and friendships that have evolved over the years."[30] Robert Detweiler knew the secret of being profoundly serious through the medium of the pun and quick humour. He knew that at the heart of everything was the need for forgiveness – to forgive and to be forgiven, for without these things there is no possible progress in this world or the next. He would have hated, and perhaps been hated, in the contemporary world of the over-serious, self-serving university, which has forgotten his form of deeper theological seriousness. Detweiler had degrees in both literature and theology, and that was important. He knew both worlds from the bottom up. His interviewer in *In Good Company*, Sharon Greene, concludes with these words:

> The puns and quick humour in which Robert Detweiler delights should not blind us, however, to the deep seriousness with which he addresses his diverse subjects. To illustrate only one of his concerns, that of the increasing voyeurism that pervades/invades our society: through Robert's work, one confronts head-on the uncomfortable shift from a (more or less) sacred to a secular, yes, even profane, society – from a society in which "His eye is on the sparrow" to that in which the stranger's/strangler's eye may be on you.[31]

T.G.: Did the Holocaust and gulags cause an irreversible change in post-war theories of art, in the sense referred to by Adorno or Steiner? In your

[29] S.E. Greene, "A Conversation with Robert Detweiler" [in:] *In Good Company: Essays in Honor of Robert Detweiler*, eds. D. Jasper, M. Ledbetter, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994, p. 448.

[30] Ibidem.

[31] Ibidem, p. 449.

text "Retrieving a Theological Sense of Being Human" you suggest that this change results in a proliferation of *via negativa* strategies. How does this affect literature and theology/religion studies?

D.J.: I think now that the essay "Retrieving a Theological Sense of Being Human", which was my final lecture given to the conferences on literature and religion in Leuven in 2014, is perhaps my central statement, beyond which I have little more to say. I do not intend to continue academically for much longer, for since then I feel that I have merely been repeating myself. But still, I will go on for a while. I think that the Holocaust and the gulags (and now I would add the Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong in China) changed everything in the middle and later years of the twentieth century. In one sense Adorno was correct (and I will return to Adorno and Rowan Williams in the next section), and since the *Dialektik der Aufklarung* (1944), Christian theology has indeed struggled to say anything very serious or effect its purpose of reconciliation in Western cultures. Most of what I read theologically after Auschwitz and that makes any sense to me is not to be found in Christian theology, but more often in the work of Jewish thinkers like Richard L. Rubenstein and others.[32] Literature alone has continued to speak, often merely in negative or warning tones, but at least it speaks and may be heard. And there are those poetic moments of what the novelist Vladimir Nabokov dramatically called "the marvel of consciousness – that sudden window swinging open to a sunlit landscape amid the night of non-being."[33]

This may be no more than keeping, in Kierkegaard's phrase in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, "the wound of the negative open." For me, the only possible and honest theology must follow the logic (if that is what it is) of the ancient *via negativa*. I have spent much time in pursuing this tradition in the Christian tradition from the Pseudo-Dionysius to Meister Eckhart and beyond, knowing that, in one sense, I am missing the positive in what they say and think. I am still struggling with the poets – and I am thinking more now of Kafka, Dostoevsky, perhaps even Samuel Beckett. And all one might say is what Blanchot said of Kafka as he wrote: "At such moments writing is not a compelling call; it is not waiting upon grace, or an obscure prophetic achievement, but something simpler, more immediately pressing: the hope of not going under."[34] It is, perhaps, not much, but it is something. And then I think too of the rabbis in Auschwitz who, it is said, met together to rail against the God who had brought his people to this hell – and then went away and said their prayers to the same God.

[32] See, R.L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*, Second Edition, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

[33] Quoted [in:] D. Jasper, *The Sacred Body: Asceticism in Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture*, Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009, p. 1.

[34] M. Blanchot, op. cit., p. 63.

Ł.T.: In your own critical-theological practice you seem to welcome negative strategies of interpretation. Rowan Williams once accused you of indulging "the idea of a cancelling of word and image rather than their relocation or radical opening up". Of course, your attitude, very personal and existentially momentous ("For me the study of literature and theology is the most serious thing I have ever been engaged in. It has been a task of retrieving a theological sense of being human") seems to be shaped by the testimony of the generations which survived twentieth century totalitarianisms. On the other hand, however, their "searches for meaning" were never satisfied with the negative recognitions, and continuously aspired for positive certainties, for words and images. A striking and deeply moving example of such an aspiration was the teaching of Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro, a rabbi of Piaseczno, who – having witnessed and finally experienced genocide and starvation in the Warsaw ghetto – developed the theology of the weeping God who hides in an inner chamber. What are the limits of a *via negativa* in your own study of literature and theology?

D.J.: I understand this question very clearly, and I hope I can offer something like a meaningful answer. First allow me to deal with the exchange with Dr. Williams. His reference to me is made in the text of his Gifford Lectures, delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 2013, and entitled *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (2014), in which he rightly points out that when Adorno wrote of the silence after Auschwitz, he was more precisely talking of the *barbarity* of writing poetry after the Holocaust.[35]

In his lectures and book Rowan refers to my book *The Sacred Body…* (2009), which is concerned with asceticism and is the second of my three "sacred" books.[36] He remarks that "David Jasper… notes how the religious icon realizes a kind of silence because it acts as threshold rather than a depiction."[37] He continues that there is a "significant insight" in my suggestion that (in my own earlier words):

> [The early Christian monks] sought absolute participation in the body of the Godhead at its deepest depths of humanity, at a point so far beyond the bearable, in the absolute desert, that its own deepest being met God as truly total absence wherein alone is Total Presence. In this utterly profane moment there can be no severance of spirit from body, for the body, in all its physicality now is nothing but spirit.[38]

[35] R. Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 159.

[36] *The Sacred Desert* (2004), *The Sacred Body…* (2009), and *The Sacred Community* (2012).

[37] R. Williams, *The Edge of Words…*, op. cit., p. 169.

[38] D. Jasper, *The Sacred Body…*, op. cit., p. 30.

What Rowan objects to here is the "rhetoric" that "indulges the idea of a *cancelling* of word and image rather than their relocation or radical opening up (…)."[39]

But this fails to acknowledge that this "rhetoric" is quite deliberate – though I would prefer to call it a poetics of language, being rather suspicious of the business of rhetoric in general. Far from being a cancelling, it looks back to something like Nicholas of Cusa's idea of the *coincidentia oppositorum* – and as that is recovered again in the writings of T.J.J. Altizer, who is perhaps the most significant (and misunderstood) contemporary American theologian. Altizer himself writes with deep poetic passion of the death of God as the moment of pure negation that is, at the same time, the moment of salvation – a descent into hell that is simultaneously and absolutely a resurrection. You can only know this from such poets as William Blake or writers such as James Joyce in the darkest passages of *Finnegans Wake* – which I regard as the closest in modern writings to scripture. In one of his most profound books, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (1977), Altizer ends in a crescendo of words that end in pure silence:

> The real ending of speech is the dawning of a totally present actuality. That actuality is immediately at hand when it is heard, and it is heard when it is enacted. And it is enacted in the dawning of the actuality of silence, an actuality ending all disembodied and unspoken presence. Then speech is truly impossible, and as we hear and enact that impossibility, then even we can say: "It is finished."[40]

That's it: the total emptiness that is God in the genesis of speech moving into pure silence.

Ł.T.: Do studies of literature and theology/religion have a future?

D.J.: Of course they do, and they must. But the study of literature and religion/theology has never sat easily within academic structures within universities. This is true in both the UK and the USA. In the latter there have been centres of activity in Chicago, Emory, Virginia – yet none of them have lasted very long. But this is not only a weakness, it is also, paradoxically, a strength.

Some years ago, the Centre for the Study of Literature, Theology and the Arts at the University of Glasgow was flourishing as a home of many scholars and research students. Now it does not exist, because it never fitted into the departmental and financial structures of the University. But this liminal position also gave it great freedom to speak and voice radical views while it lasted. It is more difficult for younger scholars than it was for me when I began

[39] R. Williams, *The Edge of Words*…, op. cit., p. 169.
[40] T.J.J. Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God*, New York: Harper & Row, 1977, p. 96.

in the early 1980s in Durham University. I was much more independent and able to do what I wanted to do. Universities were then far less bureaucratic and less controlled by tight and specific funding streams and government-led policies and strategies for higher education. I had freedoms in the system that younger scholars today do not have in a more tightly managed academic environment. As a result, as I have already suggested, the current publications on literature and theology/religion (many in the form of "readers" that serve student and course needs and sell well for publishers) now tend to be dull and unadventurous. There are exceptions. I recently reviewed a wonderful book by the Jewish philosopher and storyteller Sandor Goodhart entitled *Möbian Nights: Reading Literature and Darkness* (2017), which is a complex, creative, challenging contribution to post-Holocaust literature based on the image of the Möbian structure. But such books are rare. But by its very nature, the study of literature and theology must be edgy and dare to be creative. It won't guarantee many young scholars a career. Some of the best work in the field has always been on the edge, or even beyond it, of the academic circle, in the realm of creative writers and poets.

T.G.: What literary work is crucial to understanding the religious anxieties of our time?

D.J.: That is a very difficult question to answer. I read literature all the time – not all of it by any means contemporary – and it is like swimming in a wide sea. It all works together and it is rare that one element or even author stands out. How you encounter literature is also, to a certain degree, accidental. Because I have been teaching in China each year for the past ten years, I have recently been reading a great deal of contemporary Chinese fiction, especially in the so-called "scar literature" that emerged as a result of and after the Cultural Revolution. This has been profoundly important for me precisely because its cultural strangeness challenges my own deepest held religious views and understandings. I would direct you once again to the critical writings of Zhang Longxi, a Chinese scholar teaching in Hong Kong, and in particular his recent book *From Comparison to World Literature* (2015). Although it is not a specifically "religious" book, its conversations between East and West have deep underlying theological currents. Western culture is still very Eurocentric, and it must grow out of that. It is partly a language problem – Chinese or Japanese are languages that are still relatively rarely taught in the West. But the study of literature and theology thrives not so much in the context of precisely "religious" literature, but when it attends to widely different voices that demand attention at the level that matters most to us – and that is, finally, a religious level in some sense. I actually do not read very much "religious" literature as such.

We need to break out of our narrow boundaries. Theology and even religion are often not very good at that because of their obsession with orthodoxy. Literature is less constrained.

At the same time, and finally, literature is something that we need to return to continually. I am spending a great deal of time now re-reading nineteenth texts that I have not actually read for decades – including novels by Dostoevksy, Dickens, Balzac and so on. Given my argument for the importance of the nineteenth century in literature and theology, it is important to me endlessly to return to the "classic" texts of literature, not assuming that I know them but allowing them to work upon me again and again as I grow older. I suppose, then, if there were to be specific texts that I would propose in answer to this question they would be something like *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Finnegans Wake*. Of course these are not precisely "of our time" in the early twenty-first century. But my defense for proposing them is twofold. First – truly great literature transcends time utterly. In the Western tradition we can still read Homer, Aeschylus and Virgil with acute attention. Second, there is always a time lag in assessing the literature that will abide and remain profoundly with us. It is very difficult to know what of the literature of today and even the most recent time will continue to speak powerfully and uniquely. Perhaps only now can we truly "read" Dostoevsky and Joyce.

But then, you should ask a Chinese literary scholar what he or she is reading. It might be very different.