

Theology and “What Matters Most”: Distinctions, Connections and Confusions

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Abstract

This opening paper seeks to situate discussions about the academic status of “softer”, more practical disciplines within wider contexts. The most important and most distinctively theological of these is conditioned by the particular claims of Christian tradition about the saving revelation of a God who yet remains unseen and transcendent. Also relevant are ethical and political questions about the nature of education, and speculative questions about theoretical and practical reason.

Keywords

Grace, Spirituality, Revelation, Theology

Our conference has a rather complex and wordy title: “Formation in Holiness: Virtue, Growth and the Spiritual Life” – and perhaps in the background there lurks unspoken the spectre of the notoriously fluid “spirituality”. The awkwardness here itself conveys something of the reality we are trying to talk about. Few theologians would deny that the realities they study demand something more than facility in objective information. Properly understood, the truths of faith are connected with virtue, growth and the spiritual life. But it is hard to see how to go further. How can we “eff” the ineffable” without falsifying it? How and how far, if at all, should the connections between truth and practice be manifest in the classroom and in scholarly research? Even in this friendly gathering, our expressed opinions on such questions are probably quite divided; in our deliberations as individuals on such questions, we may well be uncertain or confused.

My aim in this opening paper is to open up a discussion about how Christian theology relates to “something more”. My most important task is simply to evoke the question in various ways. But I am also going to lay down some theoretical markers.

Self-evidently, the truths and propositions of Christian faith refer forward, to a promise. They are shot through with hope and eschatology, and they are systematically misunderstood when that perspective

is lost. The context of creedal truth is a process of transformation, in which our whole selves and indeed the cosmos, are being drawn into definitive communion with God.

It follows that the complex, often confused, turf-wars about the identity of “spirituality” as an academic discipline, and about its relationship to “harder” theological disciplines such as biblical studies or doctrine, need to be seen in two wider contexts.

Firstly, though theology is surely universal in its scope, it is neither the only sensible form of study, still less the only element in a worthwhile human life, even a worthwhile Christian life. Not only are there other fields of academic study (quite apart from what presses the borders of what is deemed “theology proper”); we also do many other things besides study.

Secondly, we also need to situate any contrast between theology and spiritual practice within a different, and more important distinction: that between our activity, and the transformative grace of God’s mystery – what I am going to refer to as “what matters most”. We only get the questions about theology, spirituality and virtue right if we situate them within a wider and more important question: one about divine and human action, about the sense in which, in any theological vision, created action is ultimately secondary, a “co-operation”, a response to an initiative that remains unseen and elusive.

The structure of what follows will be simple. I want to begin by evoking “what matters most”, the ways in which, so our faith tells us, we can become new creatures through the grace of God. I will then move on to “theological facts”: taking as witness a brief text of Karl Rahner’s, I will remind us that the language of reflective theology, even at its most technical and sophisticated, is used properly only when it points us towards “what matters most”. The variety of practices we call “spiritual formation” will then appear relatively easily as a range of complementary ways in which we can dispose ourselves for what God alone can do within us. I shall conclude with a few brief comments, thoughts on the distinctions and connections between theology, spirituality and “what matters most”, adding for good measure a cautionary remark about confusions.

“What Matters Most”

In the nature of the case, the reality I am designating as ‘what matters most’ can only be evoked. I offer two examples. The first is well known: the figure of the tall nun in Hopkins’s long poem, “The Wreck of the *Deutschland*”. The ship from Germany to the USA, carrying among others five sisters exiled as a result of Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf*, had run aground and foundered off the Essex coast, with 78 casualties. *The Times* had reported a tall nun in the wreckage

crying out, "O Christ, Christ, come quickly". Hopkins's rector had passed a remark to the effect that someone should write a poem on the subject, and Hopkins had taken this as licence to resume writing poetry, an activity he had abandoned in his early Jesuit years. The result was startlingly original, and in multiply complex ways. The second half of the poem is an extended reflection on what the nun's cry might have meant. But for my immediate purposes, I cut Hopkins's long story extremely short and simply evoke a phrase from his initial report of the cry. He himself, at St Beuno's, is "under a roof" on "a pastoral forehead in Wales"; by a contrast characteristically underlined by Hopkins's freedom with syntax, "they the prey of the gales". Hopkins continues:

She to the black-about air, to the breaker, the thickly
Falling flakes, to the throng that catches and quails
Was calling "O Christ, Christ, come quickly":
The cross to her she calls Christ to her, christens her wildworst Best.

"Christens her wildworst Best": the dense formula, however we analyse its syntax and logic, evokes the horror and tragedy of the passengers' plight, and seeks to avoid any sense of that reality being denied. But it also insists on the presence of Christ. Whatever the historical tall nun may have herself been experiencing, Hopkins as a believer draws on convictions about Christ's cross, and writes of a transformative power available precisely here, amid the storm, for one who is in Christ. Thus the storm can also be christened "best". We might speak of two realities united in the one event, without separation and without distinction. Christianity's distinctive message, its good news, is that this kind of mysterious doubleness is – in a phrase of Hopkins's referring to the mystery of grace – "no play but truth".¹ It represents a real possibility, indeed in some sense a promise of what God will be for all creation.

My second example is more recent and less conventional. Stephen Colbert is a US broadcaster and comedian, famous in particular for a show entitled *The Colbert Report*. Interviewing his guests, he takes on the persona of a crude right-winger. His wit and repartee often convey powerful criticism of his persona's attitudes, particularly the over-simple identification of certain cultural norms in US life with the gospel. He is known to be a committed Catholic. *The Colbert Report* has now finished, and Colbert is beginning a new role as host of *The Late Show*. He was interviewed recently for the glossy men's magazine, *GQ*.²

¹ *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Christopher Devlin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1959), p. 154.

² www.gq.com/story/stephen-colbert-gq-cover-story, accessed 3/9/2015. I am grateful to Juan Ruiz SJ, for drawing my attention to this text in his fine piece, "Colbert,

The interviewer notes that Colbert suffered a severe loss in childhood – the death of his father and two of his elder brothers in an air crash when he was 10. “It’s not just that he doesn’t exhibit any of the anger or open-woundedness of so many other comedians” – so the interviewer remarks – “it’s that he appears to be so genuinely grounded and joyful”. Colbert agrees that he is not angry: “I’m *mystified*, I’ll tell you that. But I’m not angry . . .”. Colbert acknowledges the difficulty of speaking about these things, and the need to avoid answers that are pat or pre-packaged. He evokes a sense of gratitude that he learned from his family and from his mother’s example. She had been broken by her grief, but not embittered. She had drawn “on her faith that the only way to not be swallowed by sorrow, to in fact recognize that our sorrow is inseparable from our joy, is to always understand our suffering, ourselves, in the light of eternity”.

Then Colbert’s rhetoric sharpens. “You gotta learn to love the bomb’ Boy, did I have a bomb when I was 10. That was quite an explosion. And I learned to love it. So that’s why. Maybe, I don’t know. That might be why you don’t see me as someone angry and working out my demons onstage. It’s that I love the thing that I most wish had not happened.” Asked to explain, he quotes – slightly inaccurately – from a letter of J.R.R. Tolkien’s, answering a priest who had complained that death in Tolkien’s work appeared not as a punishment for sin but as a gift.³ Colbert quotes Tolkien as having retorted, “What punishments of God are not gifts?” The interviewer notes the tears welling up in Colbert. “So it would be ungrateful not to take *everything* with gratitude. It doesn’t mean you want it. I can hold both of those ideas in my head.” Colbert had been thirty-five before he had felt this truth. He was walking down the street, and it “stopped me dead. I went, ‘Oh, I’m grateful. Oh, I feel terrible.’ I felt so guilty to be grateful. But I knew it was true.”

Paradoxes and Transformations

In one sense, “what matters most” is the gracious action of God, and it would be absurd to identify in any simple way a finite reality (even the humanity of Jesus) with that action. I offer Hopkins’s tall nun and Colbert’s interview as particularly powerful evocations of the unseen reality that is in play. How might we elaborate on that claim?

Suffering and Gratitude”–<https://thejesuitpost.org/2015/08/colbert-suffering-and-gratitude/>, accessed 7/9/2015.

³ *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 286.

We can start from the linguistic complexity: we are dealing with narratives and paradoxes, and in the Colbert narrative, the tone of voice conveys meanings beyond the tropes he uses. Colbert learns to love the things he wishes, and still wishes, had not happened; he feels grateful and terrible at once. Conventionally, we might speak of such experiences as “transformative” – but the familiarity of this usage should not dull our sense of the logical oddness in such talk. In Aristotelian philosophy, the form is the principle of identity; the idea of “transformation” is connected with the paradoxes of being born again, and becoming a new creature. Hopkins’s exploration of what the tall nun’s cry might mean is complex, exploring a number of alternatives that he rejects before arriving at his climax: “he was to cure the extremity where he had cast her”. This bland statement of faith in a saving Christ is surrounded by a wide range of literary tropes and rhetorical devices, by apophasis and paradox. Moreover, even the rejected theologies contribute to the overall monumental statement, self-evidently irreducible to plain theological prose, which is the poem.

Talk of paradox might nevertheless provoke from some an unfriendly question: what is the difference between a suggestive paradox and a senseless contradiction? The answer can only come from an invocation of Christian tradition, typically involving both those undergoing the experience in question and those who report and hear it. The invocation may vary in form, in intensity, and in the level of explicitness. But present it must be if a truth claim of any kind can be made. It follows – to anticipate my argument for a moment – that there is an important role for the Christian education that cherishes and transmits the memory of how God was in Christ. Such education holds us open to the ways in which that divine activity may be continuing within us.

Typically, such experiences of union are marked by struggle, perhaps a long one. Their paradoxical character indicates that those concerned are being pushed beyond conventional or standard responses to their situations. There is a sense of being drawn by God into something new. In retrospect, the congruence with traditions of death and resurrection may seem self-evident, just as the risen Jesus on the Emmaus road chides his disciples for not recognising earlier what was at stake in the crucifixion. But importantly, the fact that the convulsiveness should have been predictable to anyone who had read the prophets properly does not detract from the need actually to live through it.

There is a short piece in the third volume of Rahner’s *Theological Investigations*, entitled “On the Experience of Grace”.⁴ Brief,

⁴ (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1967), Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1967), pp.86-90—retranslated in my edition of Karl Rahner’s *Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll, NY:

relatively simple, and homiletic in style, the piece invites us to remember negative experiences, giving us a list of various possible examples. Playing on the ambiguity in the word *Geist* or spirit, Rahner suggests that it is in these negative places that we recognise the true nature of the human spirit. Whereas, average people just see experiences like these as “unpleasant”, as “interruptions of a proper, normal life”, believers come to relish them as moments when we recognise the true nature of the human spirit and in particular its mysterious union with the Holy Spirit. Believers’ growth in such awareness is slow, and cannot be forced. Moreover, Rahner is in no way claiming that one can live at this pitch all the time; it is not as though believers living by his vision “do not know that grace can also bless everyday reality, can bless commonsense actions, and can transform these too into a step toward God”. Nevertheless, we can open ourselves gradually, in union with Christ, to find fullness in emptiness, life in death, richness in renunciation. Deprivation, paradoxically, sharpens our sense of who we really are under God, and brings home to us our ultimate vocation – one that is not limited to this-worldly activity, but extends to participation in God’s own life. The negative experiences that Rahner highlights serve to remind us that the spirit within us “is not just a way of making life humane”, but is rather a presence of the Holy Spirit.

Near the end of Rahner’s essay, he quotes a monastic tag: *grandis nobis restat via* – there is a long way ahead of us. In important senses, “what matters most” is invisible to us; we apprehend it in the form of promise; we cannot observe the reality in question; it happens within us. When Karl Rahner describes the hypostatic union as the *Höhepunkt*, the climactic moment in salvation history, he immediately qualifies it. Of course, if you consider elements of creation as discrete individual realities, then obviously the Incarnate Word is the highest possible such reality. But the real climax comes only at the eschaton, when God is all in all.⁵ The same principle applies to the experiences of ‘what matters most’ that I have been evoking: moments when human beings appear to be undergoing a powerful kind of transformation. But, to use a phrase of T.S. Eliot, such moments are merely “hints and guesses/Hints followed by guesses”. The rest is less evident: “prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action”.

Oribs, 2005), pp.75-80. Interview evidence suggests that Rahner saw the presence of grace in experience as the point on which he centrally differed from the standard preconciliar manuals. For whatever reason, his published essays are reticent on the point. But when, in his Innsbruck grace codex, Rahner put forward his thesis in scholastic form, it was this slight essay that he gave as bibliography.

⁵ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, translated by William V. Dych (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), p. 194.

Revelatory moments are intrinsically anticipatory. The point enables us to address with an obvious question that the examples raise: there may surely be elements of error or self-deception in narrative testimonies of the kind that I have been invoking. What Hopkins writes about the tall nun surely owes far more to his own fertile spiritual imagination than to his very scanty and questionable knowledge of who she was and how she really behaved.⁶ Even Colbert's own autobiographical claims might be open to question; it would surely be an intrepid and quick-witted interlocutor or therapist who might challenge Colbert, but there is nevertheless no reason in principle why there might not be elements of deception in the *GQ* text. However, the truth in such sceptical, perhaps callous, objections does not invalidate the central theological significance of the testimonies. The power of Hopkins' poem does not depend on the questionable veracity of his report about a particular woman in a particular situation. The complexity of the theological and literary expression points us away from particular, declarative judgments towards something more mysterious and comprehensive. The primary witness of these texts is not about what happened to particular people at particular times, but rather their continuation and echoing of a conviction established in the creed. It makes sense to hope that our ongoing human reality can be reconfigured in keeping with the gospel promise. The authenticity of any particular claim is secondary.

Yet the testimonies of Colbert and Hopkins, nevertheless, have a rare religious credibility. The world of television comedy, let alone magazines like *GQ*, is not a forum in which religious issues are generally discussed. Nevertheless Colbert's publics can sense a quality in him that even a quite secular publication can trace to the kind of experience and conviction that he evokes. More conventionally, Hopkins's verse works to build up his believing readers' confidence in the tradition of faith that we share, and at least has raised religious questions for readers who do not believe throughout the century that has passed since its first publication. To adapt a phrase: though we may not see God's grace directly, we do sense its effects.

Revelatory moments of the kind I am identifying, still less the more hidden and wider process of which they are sacramental, are not to be identified with the learning of theological facts, or with facility in spiritual practices. Nevertheless, it is time to turn more explicitly to see how this can be the case.

⁶ See Norman H. MacKenzie, 'Is There a Flaw in "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*"?', in *Excursions in Hopkins* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2008), pp.281-332, for evidence supporting less edifying interpretations of the tall nun's behaviour.

Theological Systems

So far this essay has been an exercise in trying to give fresh expression to a standard pious theme: the primacy of grace. In this second stage of my argument, I want to turn to our standard practices of theological learning and spiritual formation. My suggestion will be a simple one. To use the conventional phrase: both reflective theology and spiritual practice in various ways dispose us for the reality that God's grace alone accomplishes.

It is time to turn to an explicitly theological text: an entry from the *Concise Theological Dictionary* of Rahner and his student and collaborator, Herbert Vorgrimler. The topic is what they call the *Gnaden-systeme*, the systems of grace: systematic attempts, particularly in the seventeenth century, to integrate convictions about the sovereignty of grace and human freedom.⁷ This text is about what I am calling theological facts: the teaching crystallized at the Council of Trent to the effect that God's grace is sovereign, and yet we remain free under the influence of grace. There was much scholastic debate about Bañez's theory of God's willing the creature's free choice and Molina's doctrine of God's "middle knowledge". Rahner and Vorgrimler reduce the historical variety of approaches to three, and state clearly that none of them deals with the problem in a satisfactory way. There was something methodologically awry in the whole debate.

The fault here lies chiefly with the inadequate biblical theology of earlier times and the temptation, by a kind of syllogistic gnosis, to try to comprehend the mystery of God that is past all grasp, and to make it something we can calculate.

The speculative error here lies in a failure to respect the transcendence of God, the ontological difference between creator and creature. We may truly say that God acts and creatures act, but the usage here is not univocal, and the relationship between the two is not something we can comprehend. The paradoxes of grace and freedom continue a pattern given in the very concept of creation:

we must realise that the ungraspability of how God's absolute disposal co-exists with genuine human freedom is simply the highest case of the ungraspability of how God's absolute reality co-exists with the genuine reality of the creature. If God is really God, then this inability to grasp must be permanent.

⁷ Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Concise Theological Dictionary*, second edition (London: Burns and Oates, 1983), p.200. Though the published translation is acceptable, I have made my own in the hope of bringing out some nuances more clearly. For the original, see *Kleines theologisches Wörterbuch*, sixteenth edition (Freiburg: Herder, 1985), pp. 141-2 – reprinting a reworking first made in 1976. This article goes back to the original first edition of 1961.

But, for Rahner and Vorgrimler, this speculative error, leading to the construction of theology on the model of explanations in the natural sciences, is rooted in "the inadequate biblical theology of earlier centuries". In the scholastic systems, the discourse of grace and freedom has become detached from its biblical basis of narrative and memory: the witness of the biblical texts to the possibility of communion with God, and the ongoing verification of this communion in an experience of praise.

This little dictionary article by Rahner and Vorgrimler of course affirms the standard propositions of Catholic teaching regarding grace

GRACE, SYSTEMS OF

The name for the speculative attempts to understand the working of the *grace of God while preserving human *freedom (any version thus involves the doctrine of *God, *sin, *original sin, the relations of *nature and grace, the character of the *supernatural, the *states of man, *predestination, *reprobation, etc.) The principal systems are *Augustinianism, *Banezianism, and *Molinism. The Church's teaching authority tolerates them all without preferring any particular one. None of them answers the underlying problem in a satisfactory way.

The fault here lies chiefly with the inadequate biblical theology of earlier times and the temptation, by a kind of syllogistic gnosis, to try to comprehend the mystery of God that is past all grasp, and to make it something we can calculate.

Thus the systems of grace now have little importance in modern theology. When God's statements about Himself and humanity (and likewise <human> experiences) seem to contradict each other, they are best left side by side as an expression of the plenitude of reality that is not at humanity's disposal. In our context here, we must realise that the ungraspability of how God's absolute disposal co-exists with genuine human freedom is simply the highest case of the ungraspability of how God's absolute reality co-exists with the genuine reality of the creature. If God is really God, then this inability to grasp must be permanent.

It is in the praise of God's grace that such propositions are maintained, as that grace in its sovereignty disposes, saves, and frees for proper freedom. (200)

Gnadensysteme heißen die spekulativen Versuche, das Wirken der Gnade Gottes unter Aufrechterhaltung der Freiheit des Menschen zu verstehen (hierzu gehören also in jedem Fall: die Lehre über Gott, die Sünde, die Erbsünde, das Verhältnis von Natur und Gnade, das Wesen des Übernatürlichen, die Stände des Menschen, die Prädestination, die Reprobation u. a.). Die wichtigsten G. sind der Augustinismus, Bañezianismus u. der Molinismus. Alle sind ohne Bevorzugung eines einzelnen vom kirchlichen Lehramt geduldet. Das Grundproblem wurde von keinem in befriedigender Weise beantwortet. Schuld daran ist vor allem die wenig sachgerechte biblische Theologie früherer Jahrhunderte u. die Versuchung, in einer Art von Gnosis (sylogistischer Art) das unbegreifliche Geheimnis Gottes zu durchschauen u. berechenbar zu machen. Darum spielen die G. in der Theologie der Gegenwart keine große Rolle mehr. Aussagen, die Gott über sich selbst u. über den Menschen macht (ebenso wie Erfahrungen), die einander zu widersprechen scheinen, bleiben besser nebeneinander als Ausdruck der für den Menschen unverfügbaren Fülle der Wirklichkeit stehen; in unserem Fall muß gesehen werden, daß die Unbegreiflichkeit der Koexistenz der absoluten Verfügung Gottes u. der echten Freiheit des Menschen nur der höchste Fall der Unbegreiflichkeit der Koexistenz von absolutem Sein Gottes u. echter Seiendheit der Kreatur ist, einer Unbegreiflichkeit, die bleibend sein muß, soll Gott Gott sein. Solche Sätze werden aufrechterhalten im Rühmen der souverän verfügenden u. rettenden u. zu eigentlicher Freiheit befreienden Gnade Gottes (141-2)

and freedom. God's grace is sovereign and cannot be thwarted; it is given to us without any merits on our own part. At the same time, the creature remains free under grace. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* can say at once that "the soul only enters freely into the communion of love", and yet, immediately afterwards, add that "God immediately touches and directly moves the human heart" (n. 2002). But Rahner and Vorgrimler suggest four important points about how these propositions, these theological facts, are to be understood.

Firstly, the paradoxical formulations are not to be taken as challenging us with a speculative puzzle that we could, were we only clever enough, resolve. Perhaps controversially, Rahner and Vorgrimler are ruling out some well-established kinds of speculative theology as methodologically absurd. When we predicate "action" of God and creatures, we are not using the term univocally. The paradoxes serve to remind us of the difference, one that in principle eludes precise specification, between divine and created agency, and of the futility of any attempt by creatures to develop a comprehensive theological system. To repeat: there is no question of denying the fundamental convictions of the faith. It is the attempt to articulate the connections between them systematically that is being repudiated.

Secondly, the bare, paradoxical statements of doctrinal principle can nevertheless be rendered intelligible in a different way, as patterns of figurative language emerging from a particular kind of event and experience, the kind on which we focused in the first part of this paper. An essential and major resource for this enterprise is the historical reconstruction of the events generating such convictions: the activities of biblical and historical theology as standardly practised in academic settings. Hence the criticism of older approaches to the Bible.

Thirdly, one cannot assent to the statements about grace and freedom unless one sees them as flowing from a committed relationship with God, involving one's own history. To the extent that this history is shaped by negative or sinful experiences, an element of struggle will be present. It is not simply the union of divine and human nature, or the interplay of creator and creature. It is also about the sinless one becoming sin, about what is our "wildworst" becoming best, about an interplay of gratitude and terror.

Fourthly, and finally: though the gracious action of God remains beyond our control, we can prepare and dispose ourselves for it, precisely by preserving and nurturing the memory of the events through which it was revealed to us. One important means by which we do this is through various intellectual activities aimed at preserving and exploring the heritage of narratives and ideas that we have received – in other words through the study of theology. Because this heritage is given to us corporately it makes sense that this study often abstracts from – though it should never programmatically exclude

– the particularities of how individuals and groups appropriate this heritage. Spontaneously, though informally, such reflection may well be couched in the language of objectivity, focusing on the givens of the tradition, independent of any particular way in which it might be received. Other styles of intellectual exploration may focus more explicitly on how the tradition lives on and is developed in particular cultures: we may speak of pastoral theology or the study of spirituality.

The relationship and distinction between these two sorts of intellectual activity, between theological sub-disciplines, are fluid, and a matter of ongoing discussion. It is not my concern to say much about them here, however. There is a more important task. The ways in which the Church nurtures the memory of what God has done, can do, and has promised to do, extend beyond anything we can sensibly call theology, even those forms of it more obviously connected to practical reason and ongoing reception that we might call pastoral, applied, or spiritual. With that remark, I turn to the idea of spiritual formation.

Spiritual Formation

Let me set alongside the dictionary article by Rahner and Vorgrimler a paragraph from very near the beginning of Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*. What we call the director of the retreat, or the one accompanying it, should be reticent, and let the energy come from the encounter between the person making the retreat and God. “The one who gives to another the way and order of meditating and contemplating” should be brief, and not elaborate more than necessary on the points for prayer.

... porque la persona que contempla, tomando el fundamento verdadero de la historia, discurrendo y racionando por sí mismo, y hallando alguna cosa que haga un poco más declarar o sentir la historia... es de más gusto y fructo espiritual, que si el que da los ejercicios hubiese mucho declarado y ampliado el sentido de la historia; porque no el mucho saber harta y satisface al ánima, mas el sentir y gustar de las cosas internamente.

... for the person who is contemplating, if they take the true foundation of the narrative, going over it and thinking for themselves, and finding something which might lead to clarifying or feeling for the story a little more... it is of more spiritual relish and fruit than if the one giving the Exercises had greatly clarified and filled out the story’s meaning. For it is not the knowing of much that contents and satisfies the soul, but feeling and tasting things from inside.

It is clear that Ignatius is pointing us beyond instruction and information. It is less clear just what he means by the phrase this translation renders as “feeling and tasting things from inside”. Exegetically, there is certainly a case for connecting it to the instructions that Ignatius gives for imaginative prayer based on the gospel – one is encouraged to pray “as if I found myself present” within the story (Exx 114), and to pass or apply the five senses of the imagination

over the scene, with a special stress on taste (Exx 121). The latter phrase, however, remains obscure, and the reception history, echoed in the consensus of contemporary practice, suggests a looser approach: to leave the person with the biblical material, to encourage reaction and personal engagement in a variety of ways, and to work with what emerges. One of Ignatius's few direct instructions to the one who gives the Exercises suggests that that provided the person is somehow being challenged or stretched in their prayer, they should be left to find their own way (Exx 7).

This is not the place to expound the methods of prayer and the overall dynamics of Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, or to offer a full theological interpretation of the process. For the purposes of my task in this introductory paper, I make just three observations.

Firstly, the spiritual formation offered here centres on promoting an interaction between a person's personal reflections on their own situation in history and the message of the gospel. A revealing phrase comes as Ignatius encourages us to think about Christ on the cross as the one through whom salvation comes.

Imagining Christ our Lord present and placed on the Cross, to make a Colloquy; how from the Creator he has come to make himself a human being, and from life eternal has come to temporal death, and thus to die for my sins. Likewise, looking at myself: what I have done for Christ, what I am doing for Christ, what I ought to do for Christ. And so, seeing Him in this state, and nailed thus on the Cross, to go over that which might present itself. (Exx 53)

"Colloquy" is a piece of Ignatian jargon denoting a spontaneous expression of one's own reaction; it is made 'speaking personally' (Exx 54), and "praying according to what one feels within one" (Exx 109). This focus on the individual's reaction takes us well beyond the systematic realms of pastoral or applied theology. Once the process starts, it is driven principally by the patterns of the individual's reaction, positive and negative, to the conventional prayer material, by what Ignatius calls consolations and desolations (Exx 62). Material is to be given them "according to how they wish to dispose themselves" (Exx 18).

Secondly, the exploration of the Christian heritage offered in the Ignatian Exercises addresses feelings and the emotions as well as, and perhaps more than those, our cognitive faculties. Notoriously, Ignatius's pedagogy regarding sin culminates in a meditation on Hell. He encourages us to pray for a sense of what the damned suffer, "in order that, if, through my faults, I should forget the love of the Eternal Lord, at least the fear of the pains may help me not to

come into sin” (Exx 65).⁸ Modern readers cannot but come to this text with preoccupations about the coherence of the doctrine of Hell with those of God’s power and love. Though Ignatius clearly does not share such preoccupations, his concern here seems more that the tradition be apprehended at different levels of emotion, and that the full range of energies within the subject, even quite primitive and unworthy ones, engage with the gospel of salvation.

Thirdly, the Spiritual Exercises were initially conceived not as a programme of spiritual formation in themselves, but as part of a wider process including experiences both in marginal situations and in one’s regular occupations.⁹ What happens in the setting of prayer and retreat needs to be complemented by experience in other settings – experience that may in its own way enhance our openness to the mystery of grace.

Though the discussion of spiritual formation here has focused exclusively on the Ignatian heritage, one suspects that the points could be made equally well on the basis of other traditions. The Ignatian texts certainly say much about whatever might come under the purview of spiritual theology, but they extend further, beyond the strictly academic. At the same time, the purpose of the spiritual formation being offered exhibits a continuity with more conceptual or academic theology as well practised: the disposing of the human subject for a transformation by God in ways that can never be fully predicted.

Conclusion

It is time to draw some threads together. In chapter 3 of John’s Gospel, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born anew – *ἄνωθεν*, whether that means “from above” or “again” – in order to enter the kingdom of God (John 3.3). What Jesus makes manifest to us involves us in a process of transformation that is mysterious, subversive, even scandalous. Familiarity should not dull us to the force of Nicodemus’s spontaneous response: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Underlying the Johannine *double entendre* is the paradox of

⁸ The thought-pattern recurs in the Jesuit *Constitutions*, when the text edifyingly suggest that superiors should try to be loved by those under them, only to add the qualification ‘but sometimes everything helps’ (VIII.1.G [667]).

⁹ See the document Ignatius called the *Examen*, a document setting out how prospective recruits to the Jesuits should be tested, especially chapter 4, 8-24. Conventionally, this document is printed as part of the *Constitutions*, with a standardized continuous numbering – the reference here is to paragraphs 64-79. For an initial overview, see Paul Nicholson, ‘Exercises, Experiments and Experiences: Tools for Ignatian Formation’, *The Way*, 47/4 (October 2008), pp. 77-92.

the tradition's witness that in Christ, while remaining who we are, *we* nevertheless become different. We do not know, any more than Nicodemus, what sense to make of this. We simply trust Christ's promise. In its fullness, this process designated being "born anew" encompasses just everything. We cannot observe or analyse it; we can only undergo it. It is this process that I have designated "what matters most".

This paper's title mentions connections and distinctions, with an obvious echo of the Chalcedonian definition. By human processes that recall the memory of Jesus of Nazareth and which are inseparable but distinct from the Logos of God, we dispose ourselves, and enhance our receptivity, for the transformation that comes from God alone. We strengthen our confidence and trust as we wait for what God alone can give. We do this in a variety of ways, some of which are more cognitive and intellectual, and find their place in the academy, some of which work with other faculties of the self and in other ways. It is the whole range of these practices that are at once connected to, yet also distinct from, what matters most.

The confusion against which I warn concerns how we understand the simple observation with which I started: that the theological enterprise involves "something more" than knowledge of objective facts. We should distinguish clearly, and avoid confusions, between two different senses in which this truism applies.

The first of these is ultimately a matter of academic administration and politics, one that can be looked at both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, we might invoke what the Germans call *Wissenschaftstheorie*: the relations between theoretical and practical reason, pure and applied academic disciplines, questions about the role of the subject in academic life, about how humane study enriches and forms the learner. Similar questions arise in other academic disciplines, and not only those that fall under the heading of the humanities. There are also questions about the relationship between the academic life and more emotional and practical forms of learning. More practically, we theologians share the vulnerability in the academy at large to market-driven ideologies of teaching and learning, obsessed with "measurable outcomes".¹⁰ What our colleagues in other disciplines say as they defend traditional claims

¹⁰ When theology departments in the UK were first required to demonstrate their mechanisms of Quality Assurance, I was asked to articulate my objectives for teaching a course on Ignatius Loyola, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. My first attempt included something like: "at the end of this course, competent and diligent students will have learnt to think more critically about the concept of 'contemplation'". Administrative authority sent this sentence back for revision, on the ground that the outcome was not measurable: what was required was something like "students will know what John of the Cross says about the Dark Night of the Soul". It is not theology as such that is under attack from such administrative barbarisms, but humane education as such.

about the ethical and civilizing function of the education they offer may also illuminate our own reflections on how theology connects with growth, virtue and the spiritual life.

At the same time, theology's focus on God relates the labour of academic learning in a more radical way. It sets all our activity, including the act of study, explicitly in the context of the mystery of God and the ontological difference. It is a mistake and a confusion to imagine that any academic supplement to theology that we might call 'spirituality' somehow overcomes that difference. We may indeed, in various ways and more or less coherently, develop traditions of spiritual practice that complement theological reflection in the classical, academic sense. But no such strategy can ever supply the sense in which any human expression of God's reality falls infinitely short of its object.

However we conceive the differences between reflective theology and spiritual practice, between learning the truths of the faith and being formed in the Christian life, all these activities, in their different ways, are engaging us in the memory of God's revealed deeds and promises. They hold us open and attentive to the mysterious touch of God. Human effort may plant and water the new life of the Spirit that God has promised. But it remains God alone who gives the growth.

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