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# Stories, Hermeneutics, and Maturation in Christian Life

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***Abstract***

Everybody loves a good story. Whether it is told on the big theater screen, performed as an opera, or read from the tattered pages of a favorite childhood storybook, we all enjoy participating in story-telling and story-receiving in differing ways throughout our lives. Stories have that effect on us: they take us to the action, transform us into one of the participants, and draw us into the intrigue that seeks to be resolved.

In Christian life, many texts that have come down to us in the traditions act upon us in the same ways: they take us to the heart of the action. They transport us into their world so we can take part in what the text is all about. This is not to suggest that the Christian texts are fiction, as I described story-telling above. But, fiction or not, texts in general – and the dynamics that play out in the life of the individual and community when reading them – hold many things in common. Texts play a central role in the development of Christian life, conversion, and character formation since these texts bring us to absorb a world of values and actions that reflect the long-standing wisdom of the Christian traditions and our relationship with God. This article explains, from a textual hermeneutical perspective, why and how "reading" texts and stories of

all kinds contribute to the personal spiritual-human development and, in turn, character formation in Christian life.

> O You who are beyond everything! How can words sing your praise, when no word can speak of you? Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390), *Selected Poems*.

> A text, in effect, 'fixes' discourse [speaking], preserving its meaning when the event of speaking passes away. So consideration of the 'textuality' of the text is first of all important because it reveals how meaning can be expressed, preserved, and conveyed over temporal and cultural distance. David Pellauer, "The Significance of the Text in Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Theory"

## Introduction[1]

A central role in Christian life is the biblical witness of men and woman and their stories of life with God; with each other; and within the cosmos at large. The biblical text is a primary text for the development of Christian life, moral development, and character.[2]In fact, we could describe the scriptural witness to the saving activity of God in our lives as *the* classical text.It holds special prominence in the life of the Christian communities and individuals within them. However, many kinds of other texts are also of great significance in Christian life and used for insight, growth, and maturation. These include the many biographies and autobiographies of the lives of Christians who inspire to go beyond one's current state to achieve something more. Christian prayer books, hymn books, sermons, letters, and poetry also, reflect and nourish Christian character and life today. But what about Christian musical scores, religious icons, statues, paintings, architecture, and other works of art that have come down to us as expressions of Christian life and are used to nourish one's soul? Could these also be read as "texts"? Indeed, all these cultural expressions could be "read" as texts as we will see below.[3]

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[1] Extracted and edited from David B. Perrin (2007), *Studying Christian Spirituality*, Routledge, 185-218. Used with permission.

[2] For a helpful understanding of how this is true, see "Infallibility and Inerrancy" and "Authority and Normativity," in Sandra Schneiders (1991) *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 53-59.

[3] For an example of how art and architecture lend themselves to the interpretive process, see Margaret Visser (2001) *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery, and Meaning in an Ordinary Church*, Toronto: HarperPerennial Canada. As Visser states on page 4: "Churches

For the moment the central issue is the appropriation of texts by readers today. As we reflect on it, the following questions surface: How do texts function in developing Christian life today and contribute toward character formation? What issues must we pay attention to in selecting and reading texts from the Christian historical, past as well as those being developed in the present? Which texts should we pay attention to, and why? Communities today are experiencing a plurality of spiritualities; each one is named by specific boundaries, such as feminist, political, black, or liberationist. What role does the life experience of the reader bring to the current meaning and appropriation of the text from within these boundaries?

All of the above-mentioned questions require serious reflection since texts play a major role in affirming Christian belief and practice in so many important ways and we use them to enhance our self-understanding and personal maturation. Most likely we all find ourselves from time to time turning to texts from the past and present – for academic study, personal edification and spiritual nourishment, or out of casual interest. We read and interpret these texts for various reasons: we look to the writings of important historical figures to guide us; we selectively adorn our places of worship with art to inspire us; we use poetry to gain insight into the deeper poetic dimension of life; and so on. Because texts in many forms continue to function as an integral part of Christian belief, practice, and character formation, we must reflect critically on the way we use and interpret them.

**What Is A Text?**

We normally use the word "text" to refer to the written language. Texts are produced by taking up pen and paper, or in today's more high-tech world, by typing on a computer keyboard. But, in our understanding of "text", a much broader definition of the word is to be needed. Not only have men and women left behind *written* texts as witnesses to their sublime experience of God, but we also have other expressions of these experiences. For example, could we not consider as texts the primitive drawings of men and women left on the walls of the catacombs of Rome in the first century? And what about the musical scores and paintings of the German mystic Hildegard of Bingen (1098 –1179), who gave

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are laid out with a certain trajectory of the soul in mind." Likewise, texts are laid out with a particular trajectory, a place in which we are invited to dwell and to be transformed.

witness to her visions from God through these mediums? Or, could the complex forms of religious paintings and statuary of the baroque period (seventeenth century), which convey drama, movement, and tension between the material and spiritual worlds, not be considered as texts?

The issue at stake here is whether the object for the study and interpretation of Christian life ought to be reduced to *written* texts. Christians have left witness in numerous forms to the way God's Spirit has been active in their lives. All of these forms could be considered as meaningful traces that witness to God's Spirit in the world, and thus be open to interpretation, each in their own way. We, therefore, affirm that texts are more than written records.

We do not make this affirmation naively, simply because it suits our strategy to include a range of forms of witness to God's active Spirit in our lives. Language theorists agree.[4] Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher of language, for one, affirms that the concept of "text" covers a broad spectrum of realities. It includes any work of culture – that is, any inscribed expression of human existence – whether that be in written text, musical score, painting, statuary, symbol, image, architecture, or other art forms. All of these mediums give expression to human life and have the potential to make truth claims about reality.[5] Whether such an expression is found in a statue, painting, or book, it sets up a world of relationships beyond its own immediate boundaries and invites us into the task of interpretation. For example, the expression on the face of a statue (sad, longing, joyful, hopeful), gestures of the hands (outstretched, arms folded, pointing, wringing, clasped), even the colors (dark, light, monochromatic, mixed), all "speak" to realities other than the concrete existence of the statue in itself. Through these "gestures" we are drawn into levels of reflection beyond the immediate

[4] On Ricoeur's notion of "text" see: Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991. In particular see: "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding," 105-24 and "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," 144-67. David Pellauer describes Ricoeur's notion of "text" in the following way: "Taking it to its limit, the entirety of human existence becomes a text to be interpreted." "The Significance of the Text in Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Theory," in *Studies in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Charles E. Reagon, Athens: Ohio University Press, 1979, 109.

[5] Edith Wyschogrod goes so far as to apply the concept of "text" to "persons and their relations." See *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (1990) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 19-25, 30.

statue that is before us. We are led into the task of interpretation through these variables of the statue: What does the statue "say"?

Let's reflect on the above with a particular statue in mind: "The Thinker." Sculpted by the French artist Auguste Rodin (1840 – 1917) in 1881 "The Thinker" sits unclothed on a rock, torso leaning forward, head held up by a solitary hand, eyes gazing pensively toward the earth. The intense emotion in his face forces us to conclude that he has something important on his mind. The statue quickly directs the viewer to ask this question: "What is so important that the thinker sits undistracted while the rest of the world drifts by?" If we look a little further into the origins of "The Thinker," we discover that it is part of a collection of sculptures which depict various scenes from *The Divine Comedy*, written by the Italian poet Dante (1265–1321). "The Thinker," who sits at the gates of hell as depicted in Dante's work, appears to be reflecting on the meaning of life and his potential banishment to the fires of hell. Our attention subtly shifts at this point: instead of wondering what is so important for the person depicted in the statue, we are invited to reflect on the meaning of our own lives and its future prospects. In a way similar to that of interpreting written texts, we have traveled the route of interpreting the statue. The statue has "spoken" to us.

Our interest here is the truth claim that these media make concerning life with God, and the human expression of it. Meaning can be expressed and preserved over temporal and cultural distance through these art forms. They take up and voice the truthfulness of the way God has been in relationship to God's people. Let us briefly look at a second example from the world of artistic expression: that of Hildegard of Bingen mentioned above.

In the paintings of Hildegard of Bingen, we can see a struggle to break free from accepted patterns of oppression (feudal master over common laborer; a man over a woman; cleric over layperson). Her cosmic vision of inclusivity and equality of all people, as expressed in her art, gives witness to this dimension of God's saving plan for the world. Hildegard's expression of the sanctity of all life is another powerful dimension displayed in her artistic work.[6] She recognized that there is a deep relationship between the love of God, the love of the world, and

[6] An excellent article that connects mystical experience directly with the artist is the following: Evelyn Underhill, "The Mystic as Creative Artist," (1980) in Richard Woods, ed., *Understanding Mysticism*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 400-414.

artistic expression. The expression of life's beauty through art brings us into a relationship with God, and with one another, in ways that cannot be anticipated. Art that moves us to rejoice and be happy, or to cry and be mournful, directs our emotions toward the transcendent nature of life just as written texts do. Art produces worlds in which our imaginations can wander and thus open up new possibilities for our lives and aid us in growing the values and virtues that we desire in our character, in our personality.

The example of Hildegard of Bingen, which is not unique by any means, challenges us to be open to all kinds of textual witness to the ways God's love is lived and celebrated and moves us to grow and mature. Perhaps a more obvious example is the expression of Christian life found in the icons in the Eastern Christian traditions.[7] All of these expressions could be considered as legitimate texts, and as ways that the Christian tradition has been appropriated and made available to be passed on to future generations.

In summary, texts by which we imply all the media described above, and not only written texts, fix the meaning of human experience in some objective form that is then open to interpretation and re-interpretation in various settings and time periods. Because of these characteristics of texts, we are able to bridge the gap between historical time and the lived time of the world as we know it. But we cannot construct this bridge without taking into account the interpretation process. Let us examine that process now.

**Hermeneutical Interpretation of Texts**

From the very outset of our reflection, we want to affirm the objective nature of the content of texts. Texts can often be identified as being about something that can be described in concrete terms, even if only very generally. For example, the Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), in her book *The Interior Castle* (1577), tells us about a large castle with many rooms. She guides us through the rooms using colorful images and detailed descriptions. But is the text *really* about a castle and its many rooms? As we read on and begin to put the interpretive clues together, we realize what Teresa is describing

[7] For an example of how an eighth-century Roman icon of Mary may be interpreted in a similar way as a written text, see Margaret Visser (2001) *The Geometry of Love*, 30-32. On her assessment of the relationship between the interpretation of images and texts in general, see "Images and Texts," in *The Geometry of Love*, 29-35.

for us: the journey of transformation in and through the mystical love of God. *The Interior Castle* has become well known for its insightful description of transformation in the contemplative life. However, even though Teresa describes this journey in detail, there is something unique about the journey for each and every individual. She invites the reader to bring his or her own experience of journeying with God as one of the elements in the interpretation of the text. This includes one's personal experience which emphasizes the subjective element of the interpretation process. Thus we can say that the text challenges the individual to reflect upon his or her own journey as it relates to the journey narrated in *The Interior Castle*.

Teresa reminds us that the reader brings a valuable perspective to the interpretation of the text according to his or her current state of character. This helps shape the current meaning of the text in situations that are not specifically described or anticipated there. How could Teresa possibly have described everybody's journey from her own time, let alone those countless readers in the future?

A helpful approach to interpreting texts that respect the objective content of the text and gives a place to the subjective experience of the reader in the meaningful interpretation of texts is called a *hermeneutical* method of interpretation.[8]The word "hermeneutics" comes from "Hermes" in Greek mythology, the name of the messenger of the gods to human beings. Hermes, the son of the god Zeus and Maia, was responsible for bearing messages between the gods and the human world. Thus, hermeneutical theory refers to techniques used to tease out the message given to us in texts. But the hermeneutical method of interpreting texts proposed here does not merely answer the question 'What does the text mean?' but rather, 'What does the text mean for us today?' In order to answer this latter question, we need to hold together in productive tension two things: the objective content of the text, and the subjective experience that the reader brings to the reading and interpreting of the text. Let us now examine both of these poles in more detail.

[8] Heremeutical theory, as developed in this article, takes its inspiration from the work done by the French philosopher of language Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005). Ricoeur, in fact, was influenced by other philosophers of language, such as Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger, along with a host of others who have been working on methods to critically interpret texts. A recommended single introductory volume to Ricoeur's work is: Klemm, David E. (1983) *The Hermeneutical Theory of Paul Ricoeur: A Constructive Analysis*, Toronto: Associated University Presses.

## The Objective Content of Texts

The first pole, the objective content of the text, is what the text is about: what the text says about life, about spirituality, about something. But acknowledging that the text has something to say does not necessarily admit that there is some absolute meaning in the text in and of itself, let alone meaning that is settled once and for all time periods and circumstances. Texts come from particular historical settings and are always read and interpreted within subsequent historical settings that may shape their meaning in new and different ways. Texts in Christian life ought not to be considered instruction manuals. They are texts that use a metaphor, figures of speech, parables, poetry, and other imaginative literary devices to convey meanings and truths about life, about ourselves (about our character), and about God, but these truths are not immediately available to us.

It is because these texts are so highly charged and open to multiple meanings that the interpretive task is needed in the first place. Think, for example, of the fourteenth-century writings of the Englishwoman Julian of Norwich (1342–1414). In her *Revelations of Love,* Julian recounts her painful love affair with Christ. Her religious experience would have been shaped by the enormous loss of human life due to the bubonic plague (Black Death) spreading across Europe at that time. From the first pole, we ask the question 'What does the text mean?' There may be an intended meaning in the text as planned by the author, but this is not the final goal of hermeneutical interpretation. We could stop at saying that Julian's visions represent an imaginative attempt to give meaningful expression to the absurdity of death that surrounded her in the small English town of Norwich and throughout Europe in general. But how does this acknowledgment help us understand our experience of death and pain today? We need to go further than merely acknowledging the origins and truths of the text related to its time of production. The second pole in the interpretive process is needed to bring the text meaningfully forward into our own time.

## The Subjective Meaning of Texts

The second pole, tied intimately to the first, is the importance of the perspective that the reader brings to the reading and interpretation of the text. The reader, with his or her own life experience, will always read texts from this embodied perspective. Just as we need to acknowledge

that texts have a history of interpretations that are brought to bear on current interpretations, we recognize that our personal past shapes the perspective from which we read and interpret them. This approach acknowledges the importance of the experience of the reader which gives the text new life. The reader is involved in a life-world – a world of family life, work, prayer, self-giving, the faith community, and so on. From this second pole, we ask this question: What does the text mean for us today, given this life-world that is most likely quite different from the life-world during which the text was written? Answering this question is the true hermeneutical task. With this question, the text has the potential to be brought forward from the past and taken back up into living speech in the life of Christian communities and individuals today.

A dynamic relationship exists between the two above-mentioned poles. We are informed by the objective content of texts but we are also able to gain new meanings from texts because of the subjective elements we bring to the text. The cumulative experience of our lives, our history of relationships, and the current existential situation within which we find ourselves – in short, our life-world – are all brought to bear on the current reading of the text. The task before us in interpreting texts is to make the transition from the life-world of the text to our own life-world. The two poles of objectivity and subjectivity, although each individually recognized, are inextricably linked in the development of the understanding and appropriation of texts.

When we approach them in this way the texts are kept supple and fluid, and we leave room for the dynamic nature of life, and the active presence of God through the Holy Spirit, to enter our lives through the interpreting of texts. Thus, these texts can contribute significantly to our personal spiritual-human maturation and character formation. When we keep in productive tension the objective and the subjective nature of the text, then we remain open to new ways that God speaks to us in order to renew our lives within a changing and developing world. It is this kind of reading and interpretation of texts that gives great hope to bringing classical texts,[9] as well as those lesser known texts in the

[9] Paulist Press launched in 1978 a book series by well-known as well as less-known authors who have contributed to Christian literature down through the ages. The *Classics of Western Spirituality* collection presents readers with a comprehensive library of historical textson Christian spirituality, and a representative collection of works on Jewish, Islamic, Sufi, and Native American spirituality. This library contains multiple genres of spiritual writing, including

Christian traditions, forward into our lifeworld so we may gain from them meaningful insights for our own lives.

Thus far we have acknowledged the two poles that need to be kept in tension in order to interpret texts in a helpful way. The first pole – respecting the text itself and giving it an active voice – has another name: it is the moment of explanation. Through techniques of analysis, we are able to explain the content or life-world of the text. The second pole – respecting the experience and the life-world that the reader brings to the text – is the moment of understanding; here the text is brought into active dialogue with the actual circumstances of a life. Let us now consider these two moments further to see how they are developed and how they interact with each other.

**The Explanatory Moment of Interpreting Texts**

To read a text and interpret it according to various methods of study is to explain the text. For example, we can read a text and determine its theological concepts or themes. The result would be a *theological* interpretation of the text according to known theological categories from the perspective of our own tradition. We could approach the text from a *psychological* perspective, describing the psychological states of characters in the text, their interaction with each other, and how their states of mind may have shifted from the beginning to the end. A psychological reading of the text might describe the meaning of the text as a reflection of the significant events in the life of the author (traumatic childhood experiences, for example). We could study the historical and cultural setting of the text to determine how it reflects significant events during the time it was written. This is known as *historical criticism*. The meanings of particular words or phrases, and how they have evolved through time, could also be part of the study of a text. This is literary criticism. Studying a text's genre (e.g., poem, hymn, narrative, parable, sermon, letters, monologue), overall structure (structural analysis), metaphors, figures of speech, and so on, would help us at the objective explanation of the text – that is, what kind of meaning the text intends to bring forward.

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poetry, songs, essays, theological treatises, meditations, mystical biographies, and philosophical explorations. There are currently about 150 titles in *Classics of Western Spirituality*. See "Review Symposium: The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Classics of Western Spirituality Series, in *Spiritus* 5/1, Spring 2005, 88-110.

All of these critical analytical tools can be used to gain insight into the sense of the text. Limiting ourselves to one method may not reveal the full depth of the content of the text. Using two or more methodological approaches – such as theological interpretation and psychological interpretation – will take the project further. Reading the text from a number of perspectives is thus very helpful in this initial phase of interpretation. They help describe what the text is about in order to describe the life-world of the text but do not yet access the meaning of the text as it intersects with our world.

For example, when we first read the poem by the Spanish mystic John of the Cross entitled the *Spiritual Canticle* (1584), we discover a story about two lovers roaming the countryside, seeking each other.[10]Along with their journey, they encounter animals and beautiful country vistas. Eventually, they find each other and consummate their love. That is the story that the *Spiritual Canticle* tells, but this is only a surface reading. To get to the deeper meaning, we first need to do a careful study of the text. This study and analysis is the explanatory moment of interpreting the text.

In analyzing the *Spiritual Canticle*, we can do historical-contextual studies to see how the language of the text reflects the culture of sixteenth-century Spain, during which time the poem was written; literary-textual studies would explore the sources of the rich images and metaphors; thematic-symbolic studies would develop the recurring themes; theological studies would describe and connect the poem to common theological beliefs of John's time. On this latter point, we could interpret the *Spiritual Canticle* as descriptive of the threefold classical spiritual itinerary.[11]

However, interpreting a text is not an end in itself. The goal is not to understand the text better from one of the perspectives described above. Interpreting a text from within the parameters of its production is quite different from interpreting a text in a contemporary context.

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[10] For a detailed example of how the explanatory moment in interpretation functions, see the following: David B. Perrin, "Foundations for a Hermeneutical Interpretation of the *Cántico espiritual* of Juan de la Cruz," in *Science et Esprit*, XLVIII/1 (1996), 61-84 and David B. Perrin, "Implications of Hermeneutical Methodology for the Interpretation of the *Cántico espiritual* of Juan de la Cruz," in *Science et Esprit*, XLVIII/2 (1996), 153-174.

[11] For an analysis of the three-fold classical spiritual itinerary that considers the role of mysticism, asceticism, and human-spiritual growth in its dynamics see: David B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 248-57.

In explaining the text we may have explained various components of it: explained the historical and political setting that gave production to it, explained it in relationship to the life of the author, explained its theological points, and so on. But we have not yet moved to the task of understanding the text in the context of the world of the current reader. Texts are not only about describing realities that may result in the transmission of knowledge – literary, cultural, political, theological, and so on – but they are also about the task of helping us make sense of our own lives. The move to understand the text shifts us to the second phase of the interpretation project: that is, to ask the question of how the text is relevant in the here and now. The task of interpretation is ultimately to take the text back up into discourse as event in the life of flesh-and-blood. The text thus becomes living speech once again.

To summarize, then, the explanatory moment of interpreting a text has its own dynamics even though it has links to the moment of understanding the text. When we first read a text we understand it at a certain level, however superficially. The text cannot fail to be about something. This initial encounter can then be modified, authenticated, and deepened by applying various critical analytical techniques as we have seen. This work helps us develop our critical perspective on the text, but is not yet the moment of understanding the text which is at the foundation of spiritual development and character formation.

**The Moment of Understanding in Interpreting Texts**

As indicated above, the properly hermeneutical task is to understand the text from the perspective of the life of the current reader, who asks certain questions: How does the text enlarge the world in which we now live? How does it give us a better understanding of who we are in that world? Our search opens us up to unseen possibilities for living with a new vision for the world. The information gathered from the explanatory phase of interpreting the text we carry with us as we move toward asking the questions of the text's current meanings.

In order to understand the text, we need to be mindful of the life-world that *we*, the readers, bring before the text. Texts are always read by flesh-and-blood people who believe, suffer, hope, forgive, find joy in life, love, and so on. How does the text speak to my/our current world – the situation now, in which all of my believing, loving, and forgiving take place? What new possibilities for life does the text open up for

us as it shapes anew our ideas about God, ourselves, and the world in which we live?

Our life-world includes the life-world of the text (the understanding of the text we have available to us at this point). After all, texts are read within interpretive traditions that cannot be ignored. The text and the life-world of the reader both have their own sociological, political, ecclesial, and spiritual sensitivities, but the two life-worlds are linked. The encounter is informed and guided by the explanatory phase, whose insights gave us a preliminary understanding of what the text is about.

New questions and new data may expose new meanings as we read the text at a deeper level. These are all brought to our current project of interpretation – not to clarify meaning in the text at a conceptual level (we have already done that in the explanatory phase), but to gain meaning at the level of human life. Gain in the meaning of a text is not merely a conceptual gain: it plays itself out in the realities of life. The life-world of the text is thus brought into dialogue with the life-world of the reader, which opens us up to new ways of seeing our world and our life with God.

This is where the perspective of the reader can be brought to bear on the text in order to gain new meaning from it. To explore this idea, let's reflect on the unique experience women have in childbirth. Women who have experienced the wonder of pregnancy and child birth may have insight into the creative, birthing nature of God that men don't have, and thus may spontaneously name God using feminine terms. Having become mothers themselves, they may find it natural to speak of Divine Motherhood. This, in turn, may lead them to read scripture in an entirely new way.

For example, the biblical figure of *Hokmah*/*Sophia* (spoken of in Proverbs 1:20-33; Proverbs 8; and Proverbs 9) may take on new meaning following the act of childbirth. *Hokmah* in Hebrew, *Sophia* in Greek, was a street preacher in the market.[12]Recognized as a prophet, she identified herself with life itself, and is related to the act of creation (Proverbs 3:19). A close analysis will reveal that Sophia's self-description in these texts is remarkably similar to Israel's description of the unnamable God. The birthing mother would find it a short step

[12] This brief description of *Hokmah*/*Sophia* is taken from Elizabeth Johnson (1993), *She Who Is: The Mystery of the God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, New York: Crossroad, 86-90.

to identify Sophia with a feminine naming of God, for Sophia helps us name the feminine, creative attributes of God. Since we mostly name God in masculine terms, a feminist analysis, combined with the shared experience of birthing, opens up the possibility of new language to describe God and thus new understandings of how God is present and active in our world.

This example shows that the life-world of the reader has a critical role to play in the current meaning of texts. But neither the text, in itself, nor the experience of the reader, in itself, is taken as absolute; a balance of the two needs to be achieved. The text may give fresh insight into my experience, and my experience may open me up to explore new meaning in the text. As mentioned above, the meaning of the text can be developed methodically, through the explanations of various studies done on the text. This, in turn, affects our understanding. And so the cycle continues as the finding of new explanatory methods, such as a feminist critique, are incorporated into the text's encounter with the life of the reader. An ongoing and deepening understanding of the text takes place through the movement back and forth between explanation and understanding. In this way, the text may introduce correctives in the way we view things so that we expand our current understandings.

With this hermeneutical method we avoid a dogmatic approach to interpretation, which tends to exclude the life-experience of the reader in a current reading. We are therefore led toward a reading that takes the life experience of the current interpreter into consideration of the actual meaning of the text. This approach is important since merely trying to tease out the concepts or meaning in the text – that is, explain the text – may not allow for the experience that the reader brings to the current reading and interpretation of the text. This fundamental problem is often overlooked in the reading and appropriation of texts within the Christian traditions. The result has been the tendency to make texts too hard and too dogmatic, thus weakening their capacity to speak within new historical settings far removed from their time of origin in order to provide fresh insights into our lives.

**Summary: Explanation and Understanding**

Even though explanation and understanding form a unique interpretive method, they also can be identified separately by the kind of knowledge and relationships that they each engender, as this table shows.

| Explanation | Understanding |
|---|---|
| * produces knowledge that does not need to be gained by personal experience; | * produces knowledge based on human experience; knowledge is personally acquired; |
| * aims at clarifying abstract knowledge according to known categories; logical consistency, based on reason, is fundamental to its method; | * aims at clarifying knowledge in relationship to what is known on the personal, intuitive level; logical consistency is not fundamental to its method; |
| * questions are brought to the text as an object to be studied; questions are not necessarily linked to the personal life of the reader; one-way relationship to text; | * involves personal life of the reader; individuals find themselves being personally questioned and interpreted by the text; two-way relationship to text; |
| * analysis of text appears to be non-evaluative but does contain the bias of human interest: that is, one's own worldview; | * bias (worldview) is appreciated as being the place of meaningful encounter between the text and the reader; bias is a positive factor in the text's interpretation; |
| * knowledge gained by explanation is accessible to all through rational thought; | * knowledge gained by understanding is a personal knowledge; it shows itself through the performance of the text in action; |
| * knowledge remains at the level of concepts based on empirical investigation; closed within itself. | *knowledge is open to transcendent dimension of life and is productive of meaning; opens to personal transformation. |

## Why The Hermeneutical Method Of Interpretation Is Helpful

If we use a method to interpret a text that will always disproportionally favor our own predetermined perspective on the text we are less likely to discover something new about the text and about ourselves. That approach after all, would defeat the purpose of going through the work of carefully interpreting texts: we read and interpret texts in order to find new meaning in them for our Christian lives today. Therefore, we want to be as open as possible before the text, and we want to employ a method that will allow the text to speak without absolutely imposing upon it our predetermined meanings. This is what a hermeneutical approach to texts allows us to do. Texts only make sense in the context of a life; they are meaningful only inasmuch as they assist the reader, and the reading community, to encounter the text as a dynamic,

transformative event. But a hermeneutical approach to texts insists that just as it is essential to bring our own life experience to bear upon the text when we are reading and appropriating it, we must give the text an active voice in the reflection.

Seeking to understand a text from within textual hermeneutical theory is therefore not merely to ask the question "What does the text mean objectively?" (that is, what the main ideas and concepts are in the text), but to ask and respond to the question "What does the text mean for us today?" Exploring this second question may call us to make choices in order to transform our lives or to take a particular stand on an issue in our faith community or in society because of the truth claims brought forward in the text.

Truth claims in a text show themselves in action, in the ethical sphere in movements such as human justice, love, self-giving, and reconciliation. Hermeneutical interpretation of a text shows itself in action in the world, rather than in intellectual confirmation of the author's intentions or in conceptual knowledge that fits nicely into a systematic framework. A hermeneutical approach to texts shows us that texts do not point us toward the historical past or to systems of knowledge as much as they point us toward the prophetic future and help us find new ways of being in an ever-changing world. What is being suggested here is that texts, with their figures of speech, poetic metaphors, multiple layers of meaning, plays on words, and so on, never allow themselves to be reduced to one final and absolute meaning. There is always something more to be sifted out from them.

The hermeneutical approach to textual interpretation marks a shift from previous ways of reading and interpreting texts. Oftentimes in the past, people sought absolute and objective meaning in a text. The task of interpretation may have been to describe the meaning as determined by what the author said about the text; or to determine the meaning of the text by reducing its meaning to the meaning of particular words, symbols, and images as they related to pre-existent bodies of knowledge; or to unearth the cultural use of these during the historical and political period in which the text was written. Ultimately, however, even though the explanatory moment places the text in a life-world, it falls short of getting at the meaning of the text for us today. All of this work is necessary to assist in getting at the meaning of the text, but, ultimately we understand texts when they become mediums for *self-understanding* in our world today. As a result of hermeneutical

interpretation we are given an enlarged self and new ways-of-being in the world.

The hermeneutical approach to reading texts brings into dynamic tension what we know and what we do not know about life. These two dimensions of knowledge continually play back and forth with each other. We read the text with what we know already yet we allow the text to open us up to new perspectives about our world, self, and God. As we are opened up we can go back to the text to read again, and potentially gain even further new meanings. This dynamic of reading and appropriation, appropriation and rereading, is repeated endlessly as the text is received in different historical and cultural settings down through the years as well as in different phases of life. The tradition from within which the text was read previously is preserved, for we cannot discount the wisdom of the original community that found meaning and thus life in the text. In a hermeneutical reception of a text the current reading community always finds itself linked to previous readings and interpretations that form part of the context of the current reading and interpretation.

**Classic Christian Texts**

As we have seen, the term "classic text" is used to describe foundational texts that have been used repeatedly over the centuries to gain valuable insights into beliefs and practices in the development of Christian life. Classic texts come to us through their long history of effects: they continually effect or bring about the self-understanding of the Christian communities. For example, classic texts display a certain amount of normativity – with respect to the standard perspective with which we view things, or with respect to a particular issue. We may recognize, or see mirrored, in classic texts, moments in our experience that are nothing less than the truth of life as we have come to know it in our hearts. But we also recognize in classic texts their capacity to open us up to new ways of viewing ourselves and our world, for such texts can upset conventional opinions. In brief classic texts "are those texts that bear an excess and permanence of meaning, yet always resist definitive interpretation."[13]Given these characteristics of classical Christian texts, we may think of Origen's (c.185-c.254) *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Augustine of Hippo's (354-430) *City of God*, Walter Hilton's (1340-1396) *The Ladder of Perfection*, Marguerite Porete's (d. 1310)

[13] David Tracey (1987), *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 12.

*The Mirror of Simple Souls*, or Teresa of Avila's (1515-1582) *The Interior Castle*. But can there be a clearly identified collection of texts that may be referred to as "classic"?

This is a fundamental question in Christian life. Many of those texts that have been identified as classic texts were written by a very small segment of the population (often culturally privileged, highly educated males who were celibate, from Western Europe, and clerics). Are there texts written by others (such as women, married persons or persons partnered in other ways, non-clerics, or those belonging to minority and other ethnic groups) that can contribute in a significant way to the development of Christian life if only their voices are given a chance? The issue of which texts are classic texts and which ones are not thus involves more than merely identifying those texts that have been identified as such in the past.

Opening up Christian life to those voices that have been muted in the past is useful for a multitude of reasons, including historical ones (manuscripts that were lost or incomplete), ideological biases (the reflections or conclusions in the texts didn't fit into beliefs or practices of the time), or church governance structures (writings reflecting women in positions of power were largely ignored). Thus, concept of classic texts can be questioned in at least two ways, both closely related. The first has to do with the list of texts currently identified as classics – or, perhaps better, those texts that are excluded from receiving this description. The second has to do with the limited and limiting content of currently accepted classical texts. Let us look at both these issues.

**Texts Identified as Classical Texts**

The problem here is that the choice of classical texts has revolved around a self-selecting circular process:

i. texts were written from within a particular world view that reflected the limited knowledge and experience of the people of the times; naturally practice and beliefs are written up in texts from the perspective of the historical and political world of the day;

ii. texts found to reflect the dominant values of those in control, and in positions of privilege, whether church or state, became more easily accessible and affirmed as normative by those persons in positions of power and privilege; good reasons were found to ignore texts, or particular interpretations of texts, that did not affirm the dominant

perspective of those of position and privilege; there was a controlled reading of texts;

iii. subsequently, in future generations, the texts first chosen as normative because they sustained the status quo were anointed as classic texts; these texts became *the* resources to authenticate or correct current trends, beliefs, or practices with respect to dominant positions of power and privilege; current practice and beliefs are made to conform to the positions reflected in texts that may have been written with radically different world views; new experiences or insights that do not conform are considered unacceptable or even heretical;

iv. as a result, classic texts, rather than opening us up to new perspectives and new meanings can bethe source of the exact opposite: an affirmation of the status quo that resists change because they tend to silence competing voices and perspectives; new experiences of life with God in an ever-changing world not reflected in classic texts may be ignored; new readings, based on new methods of interpretation, are excluded because they threaten the status quo; new or developing ways of experiencing God are thereby sacrificed to the ideology of the classic text. In short, classic texts can undo the hermeneutical dynamics, as presented in this article, through a process of self-selection.

This process of self-selection would naturally exclude texts that are not in line with normative understandings, whatever these might be in current times. For example, questions about the way we view our relationship with God (God as authority figure or God as friend?); the way we grow and mature in our character or spiritual life (a linear development or circular development?); or the way power is shared equally between men and women (women may be admitted to ordained ministry or only men can authentically hold this role?) have received various responses at different points of history. All perspectives that are identified as normative in texts of any given time period are considered very fine when the texts are being read by those who stand to gain the most (position of privilege) or by those who can use the texts to sustain their current ways of doing things. It is a well-established fact that the power holders in any culture (political, social, or ecclesial) favor particular texts that recommend a way of life that maintains the status quo for the power holders. Contradictory voices (and thus certain texts themselves) can be excluded today because the original text excluded those voices when it was written.

Although we favor certain texts that continually speak truthfully to our current historical situation, we welcome voices – from the past or from new, emergent texts – that may offer fresh and invigorating ways of living Christian life. When our list of texts becomes so authoritative that other voices are excluded, we do well to critically examine our rationale for these choices. As times change and we develop new knowledge in all areas of life, we can expect God's Spirit to blow in unfamiliar ways that might lead us to new textual voices from the past or present for spiritual nourishment. The goal is not to establish once and for all a closed list of classical texts, but to bring into critical dialogue a range of voices. In this way we continually reflect critically on our lives with each other and with God. The term "classic text," therefore, needs to be used with some flexibility and fluidity. Even texts that have been received down through the ages in a consistent fashion and have taken on the stature of classical texts can be opened up to new readings.

**Conclusion**

Texts from the past have proven to be powerful resources for the shaping of our lives in many forms. As we read these same texts today, we must recall that they were written from a different perspective on the world, with different cosmologies, with different models of God, and different models of the self. Thus, when we read texts today, the task is not primarily to link ourselves to some distant past through the text, but rather to allow the text to speak to our situation today. This is why interpretation, or hermeneutics, as we have described it here, is necessary. Through the process of hermeneutical interpretation of texts we can grow in personal maturity and closeness to God.

The hermeneutical reading and interpretation of texts follows a few simple steps that can be summarized in this way:

1. We read a text with a question in mind, as vague and imprecise as this question may be. This is true even if we are reading for personal growth and maturation. We chose the text keeping in mind that the content of the text may shed some light on our question and on our life. At this level, we have encountered the text in a naive reading and interpretation of it, but we have an intuition or a hunch that the text has something to offer us. So we keep going.

2. To deepen our critical awareness of the text, we may choose to reread it through a particular critical lens, such as, literary criticism,

historical criticism, feminist perspective, or theological framework. Through these readings of the text, we can critically explain, from the perspectives of each method, or even from the perspective of the author, the inspiration behind the first production of the text. With this reading we have passed beyond a naive reading and interpretation of the text. But the origins of a text ought not to exert absolute normative control over its meaning today. There is no meaning or truth in a text *per se*. And thus we continue.

3. With the above information in mind, we allow the text to confront our reality today. We allow the life that is being lived, with its own world view and its own critical awareness of the social, political, and church milieu to encounter the depth of the text. The experience of the reading subject is brought forth: the joys and accomplishments, pains and anguish of a life are brought to bear upon the text, and the text upon this life. To understand the text is to allow ourselves to follow the path of thought that the text opens up. At this level, we discover what the text is about, how it may be taken back up into living speech, to be performed again in the hopeful life of the believer.

What we come to understand with such an approach to texts is that traditions (sedimented interpretations) can be broken open or shaken up. Traditions are linked to culture and normative interpretations of texts. Once the culture shifts, the normative interpretation of texts will often shift as well. This, in turn, will break open the tradition to new expressions (innovations). This does not mean that the previous expressions of the tradition were false, but, with God's graceful Spirit alive in the world, we discover anew, or ever more truthfully, how that Spirit is alive and calling us forth in new ways. As a result of great advances in a number of disciplines, our world view, our conception of the self, and our favored ways of modeling God have shifted significantly. All of this newness needs to confront our actual and current reading and interpretation of texts.

With time, the innovative interpretations born from new readings may once again fall prey to sedimented interpretations. As individuals, communities, or cultures settle comfortably into what were once new paradigms, and the world around them shifts once more, the process will undoubtedly be repeated again as all of us are called – both on the individual level as well as the communitarian – to an ever deepening life in God.

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