

Theo-Poetics and Theology: An Exploration into the Politics of Interpretation

“. . .for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life.”¹

Religious experience, as a transforming experience of inner meaning, is initially expressed in and through re-presentations of the imagination (as to imagine, to image). Theo-poetics or images of “God” lie behind and are prior to theology. Images emerge in and from transforming experiences, surfacing out of the depths of the human imagination but always within and related to the given language and perceptual frames of those experiencing. Typically a variety of referential images cluster around the initial image(s) of the liberating experience. For example in the early Christian period, the primary image of “the Christ” was expressed in and through such referential images as Shepherd, Messiah, redeemer God, Son of Man, Rock, Door, Bridegroom, and so on. Because images are not consciously or rationally created, imaging is a form of interpretation organically related to the transforming experience by way of the imagination. Imaging emerges from and resonates with the intuitive and pre-cognitive dimensions of human experience. In more organized form, the imaged experience assumes the shape of myth, story, and ritual. Relating to and identifying with this form of interpretation is grounded in our abilities to imagine imaging images. The primary threat to this interpretive style is the tendency to substitute theology for theo-poetics, or an explanation for the imaged experience of transformation.

Images can be interpreted in rational, conceptual, and conscious terms. With this style of interpretation theo-poetics becomes theology, a systematic and conceptual exposition of the imaged experience of transformation. Because our experience is more various than we can grasp or comprehend, our awareness is selective. While images can reflect and re-

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¹ II Corinthians 3:6b. *R.S.V.*

present the liberating experience, our conceptual understanding is fragmentary at best. Theological interpretation can serve as a guide and mediator to the reality of the imaged experience. But theology can also move in the direction of making truth claims, definitions, and explanations which tend to become dogmatic and exclusive. For example in the Christian tradition such interpretation produced doctrines, orthodoxy, and belief systems. Because the conceptual style is more indirect and external than imaging the experience, it stands further away from the initial experience. Frequently theology becomes the organization of concepts inherited from others that are neither understood nor experienced. The primary threats to this interpretive style are literalism, the confusion of theological claims with the imaged experience or the experience itself, and the tendency to become objective, exclusive, and imperialistic.

Images, such as "the Christ," are alive and "functional" in a particular context precisely because they live there. They simply are - powerful, transforming, and the way the liberating experience is expressed. As such they do not need to be analyzed or interpreted. They are lived. Yet at the same time, there is something rather compelling for many of us about trying to understand and make sense of an image and the experience imaged. This process, for example, is already evident in much of the New Testament. But such interpretation tends to separate us from living in the immediate presence and context of the imaged experience by domesticating the transforming experience and images in concepts. It moves us to a level of conscious and narrowed attention from which we talk about the reality expressed by and contained within the imaged experience. In one sense, then, theological interpretation does violence to the vary nature and life of an image and the imaged experience. In addition, such interpretation is frequently confused with or substituted for the image and ultimately for the transforming experience itself. While alive images live in and from experience, theological interpretation talks about the imaged experience. Talking about is clearly not the same as experiencing or the imaging of the experience. But these lines cannot be drawn as neatly in actuality as in theory. The New Testament, for example, is a collection of various combinations of imaged experience (theo-poetics) and talk about experience (theology).

In the Christian tradition, the complex issues of imaging and the politics of interpretation were posed in differing forms almost from the beginning. For example in Matthew we read,

"Who do men say that the Son of man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that

he was the Christ.²

Here we find the beginnings of an interpretation which identifies the image of "the Christ" with the historical person Jesus. In its radical form through the tradition, this Synoptic tendency becomes interpretation of "the Christ" image exclusively in terms of Jesus. By giving absolute uniqueness to the historical person Jesus, this interpretation puts us in a position of almost slavish dependence upon a particular past event and upon the theological interpretation itself. Yet in John we read,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.³

While it is clear that in this gospel John makes an identity of the Word with "the Christ" and "the Christ" with Jesus, it is equally clear that "the Christ" is not exclusively identified as or with the historical person Jesus. The "cosmic Christ" in John is more than simply the historical Jesus. Because these emphases are more inclusive, experiential, and mystical, this line of interpretation has often remained subordinate or repressed in Christian orthodoxy. In its radical form, this style argues that "the Christ" image cannot be exclusively contained in any "thing," including Jesus or Christian doctrine, since it is the source of all things. This style includes a self-critical principle which prevents absolutizing the interpretation. As such it images the liberating experience in liberating forms that struggle against domestication and oppressive absolute interpretations.

Just as images have the power to restrict and fix, they have the power to open up and liberate. Interpretations of images possess the same double edged power. Which edge is stressed depends upon how the image and the interpretive process is perceived and understood. The style and intent of interpretation does make a difference. An exclusive and closed interpretation creates a context of dependency, submission, and oppression while an inclusive, open, self-critical interpretation creates a context for liberating possibilities. This can be illustrated by a comparison of two early church fathers. In the writings of Justin we find the position,

We are taught that Christ is the first-born of God. . . that He is the reason (Word) of whom the whole human race partake(s), and those who live according to reason are Christians, even though they are accounted atheists. Such were Socrates and Heraclitus among the Greeks, and those like them. . . .⁴

² Matthew 16:13b-16, 20. *R.S.V.*

³ John 1:1-5. *R.S.V.*

⁴ Justin, *Apology* (c. 150), I, xlvi, 1-4. Quoted in Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press), 2nd ed., p. 5.

More in line with the Johannine prologue, Justin refers to a universal and inclusive image of "the Christ." While embodied and manifest in the historical Jesus, "the Christ" is more than a particular person Jesus. In this form, the image of "the Christ" is liberated from domestication in an absolute historical past. Tertullian, on the other hand, argues for the more exclusive view in line with the Synoptic approach illustrated in Matthew.

What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem? What between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? . . . Away with all projects for a "Stoic," a "Platonic" or "dialectic" Christianity! After Christ Jesus we desire no subtle theories, no acute enquiries after the gospel. . . .⁵

Here the issue is broadened to include not only the relation between experience, image, and interpretation but also what kinds of interpretation are appropriate. With Justin and John the interpretation is in a larger context which ultimately qualifies and relativizes any interpretation. Within their vision no interpretation can be perceived in an absolute or exclusive sense because that which is imaged "stands under" any and all interpretations. With Tertullian and the Synoptics, the identification between the image of "the Christ" and a particular interpretation in terms of the person of Jesus is much more closely drawn, almost to the point of a singular identity and the exclusion of all else. Both styles of interpretation are political, the first tends toward liberation and transformation, the second toward domestication and domination.

Because alive images resonate with our experience at intuitive pre-reflective levels, they do not need to be interpreted in the context where they live. Such images simply surface within a particular situation as an expression of some transforming experience of inner meaning. It is not that images cannot be interpreted but that it is redundant to do so within their home ground. The need to interpret, describe, and explain may in fact indicate that the image is no longer alive. Typically explanation is needed when we have lost touch with the transforming experience imaged in the primary image(s). If we have to ask for an explanation of its meaning, the image and imaged experience are no longer immediately vital for us. In such cases, the significance of the image is shifted from the image to the interpretation, as in authoritative doctrinal formulations. Interpretation, then, can become part of the process of killing the image, or at least domesticating it. By necessity theological interpretation moves the image from its home in the imagination into a "foreign land" of the conceptual, rational, and literal. This move dramatically changes the nature of the image and the imaged experience. It also reflects, as well as creates, a shift from the politics of liberation and trans-

⁵ Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* (c. 200) vii. Quoted in Bettenson, p. 6.

formation to the politics of dependence upon external objective authority.

In the early church "the Christ" image was fluid and alive. There were many stories told about the significance and meaning of the experience of and with "the Christ." The plurality of stories indicates that neither "the story" nor the imaged experience had become normalized yet. The liberating experience was not yet contained in any exclusive form. But quite early on the issue shifted away from experience as reflected in the image of "the Christ." The gospel style of "Jesus said" may represent an early attempt to normalize and give authority to the "retold" stories. Within several centuries, proper definition and explanation of "the Christ" image becomes the issue at stake. The development of standardized formal creeds is one illustration of this. Orthodoxy (right belief) was separated from "heresies." The issue was more what one believed (acceptable and accepted interpretation) and less what one experienced. What happened was a fundamental change from theo-poetics to theology, from liberation to dependence upon authority, from transforming experience to conceptual content. This shift began with the distinction between correct and incorrect interpretation of the imaged experience. The image of "the Christ" radically changed form and power as soon as it was consciously theologized, a process already beginning in the New Testament but even more apparent in the struggles to separate orthodoxy from "heresy."

The interpretive process seems to follow a sequence: (1) there is some significantly transforming event-experience, (2) this event-experience is imaged in a variety of ways around a central image(s), (3) these images open up a number of possible interpretations, (4) a single interpretation eventually emerges which disallows the multiplicity of interpretations characteristic of earlier periods, and (5) a single interpretation becomes exclusive and authoritative doctrine which means that the interpretation rather than the imaged experience reigns supreme. The process moves from experience to concept, from openness and fluidity to closedness, fixity, and rigidity. With an exclusive and authoritative interpretation comes the claim that the interpretation is identical with the original event by way of belief, thus rejecting and denying its original ties to the imaged liberating experience.

While there are many event-experiences in our individual and corporate lives, some capture our attention and fire our imagination to such an extent that they alter our ways of looking at and living life. These are genuinely transforming in significance. The images that emerge to express and re-present such event-experiences are both in and yet other than the event-experience. Thus the image both participates in, with, and through the event-experience, but it has a life of its own. The early Christians used the image of "the Christ" in such a manner. In the event-experience of Jesus, the image of "the Christ" was in that event-

experience, to such an extent that the language used became "Jesus as the Christ." Yet the "resurrected Christ" was celebrated and experienced as always present. Even within the biblical materials there is little agreement on the meaning of the image of "the Christ." What we find in these materials are differing referential images, emphases, directions, and interpretations yet all grounded in the central liberating image of "the Christ." While it is evident that interpreting the image of "the Christ" with other images was present from the beginning, it is not clear that at this time there was an authoritative or normative interpretation that held dominant or exclusive control. The process had not yet moved to the rational, conceptual, and literal level necessary for an exclusive and authoritative interpretation.

But the process seldom remains at this point and it certainly did not in the Christian tradition. The imaged experience stimulates different kinds of thought and reflection as evidenced in the various writings from the first several centuries of Christian history. In the process of rationally and conceptually organizing these interpretations, a dominant interpretation begins to emerge. The doctrinal formulations of the early councils and the canonization of certain writings are illustrative of this. The shift is from imaged event-experience to rationalized interpretation, from subjectivity to increasing objectivity, from internal to external, from faith to belief, from resonance with experience to conceptual and literal truth claims. While such theological interpretation can serve as the handmaiden of the imaged experience if it remains open and self-critical, the tendency is for theological interpretation to become an imperialistic end in itself.

As the process develops, the dominant interpretation not only becomes normative but enforced by an external institutionalized power. As authorized doctrinal or creedal statement, the rationalized dogmatic interpretation becomes closed, exclusive, and coercive. The reality of the imaged experience of inner meaning becomes external and objective reality to be assented to in the form of "I believe. . . ." What was a vital image orienting life in a new way becomes an objectified truth and meaning system used to domesticate life and to separate "us" from "them." In such institutionalized form, theological interpretation becomes an ideology for power and control. Hierarchy, dominance, and dependence become its style. The once liberating power of the imaged event-experience becomes an oppressive ideology in the form of an exclusive theology. Such objectified external authority is used to legitimize institutional self-perpetuation and to "enslave" members to the system. The only experiential dimension tolerated is that reenacting the "acceptable" interpreted experience entombed in the ideology. The externalized interpretation must be internalized or believed but only in the accepted forms prescribed from the outside. No longer is it internal outward (the process of

imaging experience) but external inward (authoritative interpretation). The politics of liberation is domesticated and repressed in a politics of oppression and dependency. Exclusive belief, rather than faith and experience, becomes the decisive issue.

But as the history of the tradition illustrates, the image of "the Christ" also has a life of its own. There are moments in the context of the authoritative interpretation when the image surfaces again with liberating consequences in the very midst of and overagainst the tradition. In these moments, although the reasons are not altogether clear, the image becomes alive, powerful and transforming again. No longer entombed in the rock hard sepulcher of exclusive and authoritative interpretation, the image is reborn and through the image the liberating experience becomes possible. When the image grasps us, it liberates us from the authoritative interpretation by taking us beyond and beneath that interpretation. The primary metaphor in the imaged experience for this happening is the death of Jesus "the Christ" and the resurrection of "the Christ." The consequences of such an image rebirth can range from renewed repression and domestication by the tradition to reformation and even radical transformation of the tradition. When the image of "the Christ" has reemerged with life and power, the results have been liberating much to the dismay of officialdom.

In spite of all efforts to capture and define images, they remain enigmatic. Although known in and through experience, images defined are at best only fragmented and misshappen. While the source of the liberating experience can be imaged, it defies domestication in word or concept. Our persistent efforts to force images into the realm of explanation illustrates our almost inexhaustible desire to control and manipulate the source of such experience. Not controlled or manipulated by us, alive images live in and through us. While the imagination cannot be totally eradicated, it most certainly can be hidden, repressed, and domesticated. Those with a vested interest in the official interpretations have demonstrated how masterfully this can be done. Yet in the midst of the external, objective and normative interpretation, the image and the imagination can emerge to challenge, relativize, and qualify this interpretation. Even after institutionalization and formalization of the imaged in fixed doctrinal form, the liberating potential of the image exists to some extent within the doctrine but always overagainst, beneath, and outside of that doctrine. While the image of "the Christ" is in some sense within Christological doctrines, it always lives beneath and beyond these doctrines as the source. We assent and submit to the doctrine. Images grasp us. In grasping us, we encounter and participate in the imaged event-experience in our own existence, not as past but as always present. It is a matter of participatory reality rather than imitative external reality. Images invite us to new realities. Authoritative doctrines define us.

Imaging uses the familiar (mundane empirical reality) to open up and express the unknown and unfamiliar (the sacred reality beyond, beneath, and within empirical reality). In doing so, the liberating "ultimate" becomes known, not cognitively but intuitively and experientially. What is known in and through the image is the transforming reality of the sacred. While not exclusive or ordinary reality, it is a matter of experiencing reality in a radically different way. The "magic" is both in the image and in our openness to being grasped by the image. Vital images participate in our liberating experience with and of the sacred.

Images are not consciously invented. They simply happen. They surface and live when the time is right. It is clear, however, that such "in breakings" of the image are made more difficult if we consciously repress those dimensions of our experience and awareness that resonate with the image.

Our experience is informed by our inherited tradition(s), we cannot escape that. We are products of tradition(s). But our experience is also informed by common structures of our imagination. Vital images, while growing out of the human imagination, surface in a given context and tradition. being open to the liberating possibilities of images and the imagination can be the catalyst for the surfacing of a liberating image that may already be in the tradition. While in some sense tied to a tradition or context, the surfacing of an image radically qualifies or transforms that tradition and context. For example when the image of "the Christ" emerges as alive, it radically alters, even recreates, the assumed Christian tradition and mythos.

When an image surfaces at the juncture of tradition and experience it is both an expression of liberating experience (inward outward) and of inherited tradition (outward inward) and yet is has a life of its own. Through imaging or the surfacing of an image, an experience of meaning is opened which is beneath and beyond conscious reflection on experience and tradition.

Images are both detached from and attached to the particular context within and from which they emerge. Both need to be said at once. We ought not be surprised to find similar images (as symbols, myths, rituals) in many cultures, religions, and individuals. Common imagistic themes surface in various historical, mythological, and personal situations. But not all images are always alive in every situation. Differing situations give differing meanings to an image. As such images assume a different power in differing situations. An image reflects and is reflected by a particular situation. Thus images are in some sense attached to particular contexts. But images also tap into the common depth of human imagination and experience which means that they in some sense "transcend" the particular context or tradition. This is their liberating potential. For example the life and power of an image that lives in a context other than

our own and yet resonates with our own experience illustrates its "transcendent" possibilities. In touching the human imagination, the image orients, interprets, and gives life and meaning to a particular situation, and thereby transforms the situation.

The danger, of course, is to assume that the familiar and knowable (ordinary reality) is all there is. Since images emerge from within particular concrete situations and experiences, images can die, or we kill them, by absolutizing these images in literal and particular forms. Literalizing images cuts us off from their power to open up and reveal the liberating "ultimate." An image can be perceived as literal by those who have repressed their imagination, but it can be experienced as liberating by those participating in the creative power of imaging. To literalize the image or imaged experience is the real non-sense. It simply misses the point.

To literalize an image is to fall out of the realm of the imagination. Literalizing domesticates and controls the liberating potential and possibilities of an image. This is the very issue of our post-Enlightenment consciousness. Somehow we have bought into a dominating and exclusive frame characterized by linear time, literal rationality, and empirical verifiability. In this reality frame, the imaginative consciousness is not tolerated in any other than domesticated and functionalized forms. Authoritative theological interpretation serves to bind us to this reality frame by creating a context of domination and dependency. It is not that the image does not surface but that it is not often heard, or if heard, quickly domesticated and emasculated by the high priests of the accepted reality so that it fits into preestablished reality frames. A domesticated imagination is a repressed imagination, one cut off from the liberating possibilities of images. Alienated from its home in the imagination, the image goes underground. Remnants of its power live on in the depths of the individual's psyche and in the memory as recounted in social and religious mythologies.

When images surface with revelatory and liberating significance, the myopia or ordinary vision is exploded. As the image breaks in, "what is" breaks up. Such images are destructive of the accepted and acceptable reality frame because they free us from bondage to conventional ways of seeing things and orienting our lives. Accepted views of reality are taken up and transformed in the power and presence of the liberating image. Such images open up wider realities and new possibilities that resonate with our experiences of inner meaning. While disorienting and displacing in one sense, such images are orienting, creative, liberating, and life giving. The early church experienced both sides in their image of "the Christ." This image re-presents an experience of death to ordinary reality as well as the experience of rebirth and new life. Liberating images, then, have a "logic" or style of their own. Not contained in our accepted

views of reality, imaging lives in our envisioning other possibilities. It dismembers, then re-members in new ways. It delights in the surprise, the unusual, and unexpected which dramatically affects the predictable, usual, familiar, and expected. In the envisioning of new possibilities, the familiar is genuinely re-created. It is the style of the politics of liberation.

Part of what is at stake here is how we see. Our post-Enlightenment seeing is generally in terms of an assumed split between the "I" (eye) and all else. It begins in the separation of the "ego centered" seer (subject) and what is seen (object). It objectifies, separates, and analyzes these objects. In this reality frame, to see is to figure out, largely to control, manipulate, and dominate for the benefit of the "I." To know then becomes to know how to use ("knowledge is power"), particularly for the benefit of the "I." It is functional knowledge, frequently in the service of the status quo and vested interests. Imagistic seeing sees through the I (eye) to other possibilities. Because it is not bound to the status quo, it re-presents liberating alternatives. For those who have eyes to see, imagistic seeing carries the possibility of freeing us from bondage to ordinary reality and authoritative tradition.

Imaging re-presents the world of liberating possibilities. It is to experience those dimensions of meaning beyond the traditional canons of literal truth and ordinary reality. While we cannot make such experiences happen, we can do much to prevent them by repressing the imagination. Awareness of the liberating potential of images will not unlock the door to such experiences but it may help us find an appropriate way of being in the world to let it happen.