Reading Between Places: Participatory Interpretive Praxis*

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Abstract: The Bible is often read in ecclesial contexts without considering the wider social and political consequences of biblical interpretations. In this essay, I contend that committed reflective participation is essential for responsible reading. I begin by using an autobiographical narrative to identify obstacles which prevented me from reading responsibly, and, to demonstrate how a range of experiences in Australia and Afghanistan enabled me to read differently. I then engage Francis Moloney's "An Adventure with Nicodemus" to propose that confessional biblical scholars might enhance the reading-capacity of other readers and encourage congregations to embrace the interested and contextual nature of biblical interpretation by sharing explicitly confessional readings which avoid objectivist/subjectivist dichotomies and testify to the authority of Scripture. I conclude by drawing on Stephen Bevans' praxis model of contextual theology and contemporary community development praxis to propose an "Animated Reading Process" which might be used to facilitate responsible reading.

BIBLE READINGS MATTER, and not just within church walls: human lives, the fates of nations, and the health of the planet are at stake.[1] Despite this, many Christian congregations read or are taught the Bible as if its interpretation has few economic, social or political consequences. Within ecclesial contexts, the Bible is often used to discern messages about the nature of God and salvation, personal morality, and/or the interior "spiritual" lives of Christians. For entirely different reasons, some "self-aware" readers transfer their focus from the text onto themselves to make readers the objects as well as the subjects of reading.

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1. See especially Jim Wallis, "Dangerous Religion: George W. Bush's Theology of Empire", *Sojourners Magazine* (Sept/Oct 2003) and speeches by Tony Abbott and Alexander Downer in Francis Sullivan and Sue Leppert (eds.), *Church and Civil Society*(Adelaide: ATF Press, 2004) 1-5, 13-20.

In effect, both poles of reading behaviour – self-deceptive objectivism and self-centric subjectivism – reinforce dominant cultural assumptions, discourage respectful engagement with readers from other places, and preclude collective reflection on the socio-ethical implications of Scripture.[2]

How, then, might we negotiate our responses to the Bible in ways which balance respect for the "otherness" and transcendence of Scripture with the contextually and personally contingent nature of reading? Is it possible to develop a range of interpretive practices which congregations might use to read more responsibly?

I will not attempt to explore these questions primarily through theoretical or methodological means because an autobiographical narrative approach is more consistent with my thesis that committed reflective participation is essential to responsible reading.[3] I begin, therefore, by tracing my hermeneutical history to identify obstacles which prevented me from reading the Bible in transformative ways, and to show how a range of experiences enabled me to circumvent some of these barriers, however intermittently.[4] My reading practices changed independently of any exposure to hermeneutical theories or formal biblical studies. For this reason, I avoid referring to theological or hermeneutical notions of which I was not cognisant at the time, and use terms as I then understood them.

Despite this autobiographical overture, and some engagement with Francis Moloney's autobiographic experiments reading the Gospel of John, this paper is not intended as "autobiographical criticism" in the sense that a life story may be used to interpret texts or vice versa.[5] Rather, I am using my story heuristically in the hope that some readers

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2. This essay addresses a situation in which many Christians consider the Bible authoritative and normative for life and faith. Readers interested in how the biblical canon was formed and became authoritative for Christians are referred to overviews by Daniel J. Harrington, "Introduction to the Canon", and Phyllis Bird, "The Authority of the Bible", both in L. E. Keck (ed.), *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol 1* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 7-21 and 33-64.

3. Others have suggested how reformulating notions of Scriptural authority, truth and revelation might recover the transformative potential of biblical texts. Particularly helpful are Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991) and Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998).

4. Osvaldo D. Vena has used a similar approach in "My Hermeneutical Journey and Daily Journey into Hermeneutics: Meaning-Making and Biblical Interpretation in the North American Diaspora", in Fernando F. Segovia (ed.), *Reading Beyond Borders* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 84-106.

5. As exemplified by the diverse essays in Anderson J. Capel and J. L. Staley (eds.), *Taking It Personally: Autobiographical Biblical Criticism, Semeia* 72 (1995); Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (ed.), *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1999); and Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (ed.), *Autobiographical Biblical Criticism: Between Text and Self* (Leiden: Deo, 2002).

might empathetically retrace my formative experiences, reflect critically upon their own lives, and consider the implications for hermeneutics.

Having told my story, I propose that confessional biblical scholars might encourage congregations to embrace the interested and contextual nature of biblical interpretation by sharing explicitly confessional readings which avoid objectivist/subjectivist dichotomies and increase the reading-capacity of other readers. I conclude by drawing on community development praxis to propose an "Animated Reading Process" which might be used to facilitate responsible readings.

HOW I CAME TO READ BETWEEN PLACES – MY HERMENEUTICAL JOURNEY

Growing up in a middle class Baptist family in Melbourne, I read the Bible. I presumed that my ability to read qualified me to understand and I dismissed passages I didn't understand as either non-understandable (inherently mysterious and inaccessible) or irrelevant. What I understood confirmed what I knew. Numerous sermons, Bible studies, camps, and conferences provided me with standard expositions for almost any passage. I read and studied, not to discover anything new, but to refresh my memory and systematise my thoughts to explain more clearly to those less well-informed. Philosophical notions of "meaning" were largely irrelevant, but in the Epistles meaning was equated with the original intention of the writer, or of God through the writer, making it important to consider these passages in context. This was achieved by rehearsing the physical dimensions of "the Bible World".[6] Awareness of political contexts was limited to a pervasive consciousness of threat, of the danger of foreign nations, idolatry and natural disasters in the Old Testament, and of Roman or Jewish hostility in the New. A besieged mentality also framed our lived experience. We defended the faith, held onto the truth, and resisted the onslaught of secularism against "Christian values". The revelation we had received was sufficient and complete (2 Tim 3:15). Anything new or different was, by definition, dangerous and wrong. Guarding what had been entrusted to us (1 Tim 6:20), we protected the word of God so fiercely that we silenced, paralysed, and suffocated it.

Having paid scant attention to the possible socio-cultural backgrounds of biblical passages, biblical characters were presumed to operate as twentieth century Australians, draped in robes, clad in

6. Frequent appeals were made to references such as John A. Thompson's *Handbook of Life in Bible Times* (Leicester: IVP, 1986). The sophistication of Thompson's motives (outlined on pp. 7-11) were lost on us: we accepted as "proven fact" his reconstructions of physical environments without beginning to grasp the significance of their socio-cultural and political settings.

sandals, traversing a pre-modern Middle Eastern landscape. In practice, the contextualisation of passages was highly selective: promises and blessings were radically decontextualised and appropriated as our own; the relevance of difficult passages was restricted to people in other times, or to other people in our time, to anyone but us. My world was defined by clear boundaries and sharp distinctions. "Justified by faith", I was "assured of salvation" (Rom 5:1) and could "give a good account of my faith" (1 Pet 3:15).

Although my formal education was almost entirely scientific, I read fiction voraciously. Reading the Bible required discipline and dedication; reading fiction was entertaining and self-indulgent. Fine fiction, however, sometimes drew me beyond myself into territory I'd never intended to enter. Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, for instance, made uncomfortable reading. Potok's novel is permeated by the painful silence of a Hasidic rabbi who speaks with his son only when studying Talmud. Attempting to explain his silence, the rabbi describes his distress at realising that his son's reading of a tragic tale was devoid of compassion:

> He did not read the story, he swallowed it.... How that man [in the story] suffered! And my Daniel *enjoyed* the story…. I went away and cried to the Master of the Universe, "What have you done to me? A mind like this I need for a son? A *heart* I need for a son, a *soul* I need for a son, *compassion* I want from my son, righteousness, mercy, strength to suffer and carry pain, that I want from my son, not a mind without a soul!" I said to myself, How will I teach this mind what it is to have a soul? How will I teach this mind to understand pain? How will I teach it to want to take on another person's suffering?[7]

The parallels between myself and the rabbi's son were too obvious to ignore: I studied the same stories and extracted lessons, propositions and doctrines from them – I did not weep. Why did I grieve with both the father and the son in *The Chosen* but not with the fathers and sons of Genesis? Why did I read the Bible differently to other books? Should I read it differently? The rabbi was disturbed by his son's indifference to living as well as literary characters. Did my dispassionate appraisal of biblical characters reflect my attitude to those around me?

Alan Paton's anti-apartheid novel, *Cry the Beloved Country*,[8] drew me into a world I continued to inhabit long after reading and whose characters still occasionally appear uninvited in mine. In Paton's *Beloved Country* I felt what it was like to be close to opportunity but excluded

7. Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1966) 273-76.
8. Alan Paton, *Cry the Beloved Country* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948).

from it. I tasted the frustration and resentment of those left out of a world that served me well and them not at all. I began to feel fortunate, and therefore responsible. Having imaginatively experienced inequity "from the bottom side up", I could no longer accept inequity which benefited me as just or inevitable and began to question systems and institutions which protected my interests by excluding others. I suspected that what was legal was not necessarily right and that governments and government ordinances were not necessarily divinely ordained. I experienced friction, discomfort, bad conscience, guilt. By stretching my moral imagination, *Cry the Beloved Country* gave me a vocation beyond myself but left my Bible reading untouched – *that* discipline permitted no imagination! The rules and regulations which polarised my lived world had grown intolerable; the boundaries constraining my biblical world remained firmly in place.

Some years later, I shared a house in Townsville with two sisters, both new Christians. Watching these women read the Bible for the first time amazed and impressed me. Unburdened by received interpretations or historical awareness, they felt directly addressed by God and were engrossed, exhilarated and convicted. My reading felt increasingly drab in comparison with theirs: I ploughed my way through *Search the Scriptures*[9] with diminishing enthusiasm, they opened pages at random and were transported by grief or delight. Why was their reading experience so different from mine? I tried to read as they did but could not – their primary naïveté eluded me. I was excluded from wonder by my compulsion to explain, qualify and justify, to recite what a passage meant and how it should be applied, answering questions none of us had ever asked. I moved from a church with solidly expository sermons to a pentecostal church where the music was hauntingly gentle, sermons non-existent, and Bible readings apparently selected on aesthetic grounds.

During this respite from didactic assault, I participated in a workshop sponsored by World Vision. The facilitator invited participants to list characteristics which distinguished disciples from Pharisees before asking, "Which list best describes members of your church?" Our collective jaws dropped. We were Pharisees. I was a Pharisee. I began to read differently, no longer as an of-course-I'm-a-disciple but as a self-conscious disciple/Pharisee, aware that woes might apply to me as well as blessings, curses as well as promises. The Bible was suddenly unfamiliar and disorienting. It no longer taught me what I already knew but asked if I knew as much as I thought I did. The moral

9. Alan M. Stibbs (ed.), *Search the Scriptures: A Systematic Bible Study Course* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1967).

topography of my lived world became similarly difficult to navigate. If obeying the rules (in faith) didn't make me righteous, what *was* righteousness, and would I recognise it anyway?

In search of familiar ground, I returned to *The Cost of Discipleship* – only to discover that that ground had shifted beneath my feet too.[10] Following Bonhoeffer's reading of gospel call narratives, I read myself, the newly aware disciple/Pharisee, into the story and found my horizon fusing with that of the gospel world. I was not just one of the disciples, I was all of them and worse than any of them, a disciple who longed to be called, yet also a closet Pharisee. In Mark 2.14, I was the disciple "dragged out of his relative security into a life of absolute insecurity". In Luke 9, I was the first "volunteer" disciple who mistakenly thought he knew what he was doing and could choose his own life and design his own destiny; I was the second disciple who wanted to follow Jesus while remaining within the parameters of the world he knew, who wanted to follow without leaving home; and I was the third "hopelessly inconsistent" disciple who "reduced discipleship to the limits of human understanding,…plac[ing] himself at [Jesus'] disposal [yet] retain[ing] the right to dictate his own terms". These stories called me in ways which confused and unsettled me. I did not study and explain the Gospels, they interrogated me. The Gospels did not ask what I *thought about* Christ or whether I *believed in* him; they asked whether and how I would *follow* him. How could I follow when the call was clear but its execution uncertain?

In all this uncertainty, I remained sure of one thing: the vocation discovered years earlier in the *Beloved Country*. I was determined to do something practical about injustice, but knew no way to connect my concerns about global inequality with the questions of discipleship. I left Australia to join a rural community development project in Afghanistan. Was I following Christ or running away? I was certainly "leaving home", but on whose terms did I leave?

My approach to the Bible continued to change over the years I spent in Afghanistan. Perceived similarities between rural Afghanistan and biblical lands brought the worlds of the Bible and daily life closer together, making it difficult to separate Bible reading from other activities. When I sat down to read, biblical metaphors and narratives were spontaneously accompanied by vibrant images rather than laboriously constructed concepts. When not reading, biblical characters, symbols and parables slipped into my mind in ways they had not done before, an involuntary and unsolicited fusion of horizons. It was

10. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959 [1937]). The rest of this paragraph refers to pp. 48-67.

difficult not to meditate on Jesus' life and teaching as I walked through ploughed fields, joined the search for a lost lamb, or cleaned my household lamps. In years of poor rainfall I glimpsed what famine meant for those without money in a world with neither social security nor supermarkets. Travelling dangerous roads, the parable of the Good Samaritan plagued me with disturbing questions: Would *I* stop and help an injured person? What if I were ambushed? What if her assailants made me their second victim? What if the time I spent ministering to one person, who would probably die anyway, prevented me from assisting others in more sustainable ways? My own encounters with beggars were confronting, but I was appalled by how closely phrases my Afghan colleagues used to rebuff beggars – phrases I was tempted to mimic – echoed the words of refusal condemned in Jas 2:16.[11]

I was a guest in a world framed by beliefs and values I did not own and could never fully understand but would learn to respect: an honour-shame society in which communal survival depended on social cohesion and rendered questions of individual choice and fulfilment dangerous and irrelevant.[12] Having realised that mine was but one of many perspectives, I no longer presumed that biblical characters thought, felt or responded as I would in similar circumstances. I formulated my own responses while wondering how my village friends would respond differently. Increasingly, I read both worlds with double vision.

Paradoxically, it was easier for me, an outsider, to cross the boundaries of Afghan society than it was for those enmeshed within its hierarchies. I was an unmarried non-Muslim non-Afghan woman who adopted regional dress, respected cultural sensitivities, and learnt to speak a local language. This permitted me to cross gender and ethnic divides impenetrable to most: I could relate to men in the world of men, and, when invited, could enter the world of women and children, the world behind the veil. Over time, I identified shadows cast by less visible boundaries. In particular, the opportunity to live with a poor agrarian community while maintaining social and professional friendships with urban Afghans taught me how difficult it is for people to understand, communicate with, and respect those whose lives are bound by other parameters. I learnt how effectively charity (doing things *for* the poor or marginalised rather than *with* them) protected the standing of benevolent socio-economic elites while perpetuating the

11. I reflect upon my encounters with beggars in "Begging Your Pardon", *Zadok Perspectives* 73 (2002) 6f.

12. The social dynamics I observed were similar to those Bruce Malina describes in "Dealing with Biblical (Mediterranean) Characters: A Guide for U.S. Consumers", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19 (1989) 127-41.

exclusion of the poor. This sensitised me to possible political, social and economic motivations behind words and actions. I had only been peripherally interested in politics before. Now, observing dynamics of power and vested interest operating in the Afghan context, I noticed similar dynamics within the Bible, and, later, in my own country. The parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:1-13), for instance, reminded me immediately of people I knew caught in similar quandaries: men whose wealth and social standing were maintained by business practices they preferred to know little about; other men who knew that serving their employer faithfully would devour the lives of the poor; families desperate to escape debts they'd been unable to avoid and could never repay. The parable was no longer a story which gave an answer or taught a lesson but a story which raised questions: in the place of those characters what would I do and would I do rightly? The parable no longer addressed hypothetical moral or spiritual issues: it spoke of survival!

Our community development team used reflective and appreciative questioning techniques to encourage village people to identify the issues most important to them and to explore the implications and ramifications of addressing these issues in various ways.[13] Reading the gospels, I noticed that Jesus rarely closed questions in any definitive sense. Was he likewise avoiding giving answers in order to encourage people to wrestle with the issues themselves, to reconsider their presuppositions, and to understand the world from a disturbingly different perspective? If my interest in reading was to "hear what the passage teaches", how *should* I respond when the Bible reframed the questions I brought to it in ways which questioned my questions and challenged my perception of reality?

On my return to Australia, I found that my reading practices had diverged from those of my fellow parishioners. I did not doubt God or the authority of the Bible, but I did question the way the Bible was often read and interpreted without considering the influence of culturally-determined assumptions about the nature of God and the world in which we lived. I protested, with little grace and less diplomacy, that many commonly accepted interpretations were dangerous and deceitful, motivated by a subconscious desire to diminish the ethical implications of the Scripture and, hence, to minimise our obligations to others. I

13. Introductory texts which informed our work include Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (London: Longman Group, 1983); and Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, *Training for Transformation: A Handbook for Community Workers* (Gwero, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984). A more recently published and comprehensive text is Jim Ife's *Community Development: Community-based Alternatives in an Age of Globalisation* (Sydney: Longman, 2002).

protested that our reading practices sought to define and delimit God and God's world in ways which shrank our moral imaginations and left us unable to receive any revelation not received before. Church leaders were concerned and provided pastoral visits, counselling and tangible assistance to re-adapt and reintegrate. Friends reasoned with me gently: I was traumatised and misguided – nobody blamed me for that – but what I advocated wasn't practical and probably wasn't right. I ought to think less and trust more.

Thankfully, I discovered other confessional sceptics who shared my anxieties, Christians who wept *with* the poor and *for* the church which, by neglecting the poor, betrayed the poor, themselves, and their God. Within and associated with TEAR Australia in particular, I found groups of people who read the Bible into the world, the world into the Bible, and themselves into both. They read intelligently, imaginatively and responsibly from an unapologetically partisan and contingent position: committed to the poor yet knowing themselves non-poor, committed to the church yet grieving her failure.

Grieving for the church, grieving for the poor, I could abandon neither. How could I engage more constructively with my own and other evangelical congregations? I considered formal theological study with extreme scepticism. I was sufficiently familiar with historicist forms of biblical criticism to realise them incapable of addressing the questions which preoccupied me. Besides which, many of the Christians I hoped to persuade were frankly hostile to academic theology. Would entering that field only marginalise me further? And how could I possibly justify investing so much time, money and creative energy in something of no immediately obvious benefit to the poor? Despite these reservations, I began to study.

I began studying at an auspicious time. My enrolment at university coincided with the waning of scholarly infatuation with objectivity, and also with the general academic recognition of the limits of historical criticism. As I poured over detailed commentaries, I suspected that interpretive decisions often owed more to the translators' ideological or theological positions than to the Hebrew or Greek texts. Equally intriguing was the tendency of some commentators to dismiss difficult or anomalous texts by resorting to source or redaction criticism. Were these critics reading as I once had, presuming that what was not congruent with *their* sense made *no* sense?

The reticence of biblical critics frustrated me. My experience of community development had convinced me of the importance of perspective and the need to "contextualise" and "triangulate" information and ideas. I had trained myself to solicit and respect

divergent views, to investigate the bases for and consequences of variously constructed realities, and to explore the tension between competing and conflicting perspectives. Reading theology, I asked how I could possibly evaluate critical contributions in isolation from the critics' lives and motivations. Even those contemporary critics who performed their surface identity markers provided few interpretive clues. I needed more than biodata and curriculum vitae: I wanted to glimpse the people behind the ideas, to learn how critical incidents or formative events had shaped their lives and coloured their perceptions, to hear what grieved them and where they found joy, their "generative themes", "thick" narrative.[14] If critics refused to reveal themselves, or if the academy disallowed such frankness, they obliged me to imaginatively reconstruct them using whatever shreds of information I could find. I irritated my supervisors by reading between, under and over the lines and by resorting to "psycho-analytic guesswork" in my quest for critic-interpretive clues. Fortunately, as my studies progressed, I was able to glean "thick" information from a variety of sources: fragments of narrative embedded in otherwise discursive articles; seemingly tangential anecdotes hidden in footnotes; my teachers' verbal portraits of contemporary critics; and, best of all, published personal reflections.[15]

It was a relief to learn that no apology was necessary for reading imaginatively or for introducing insights gleaned from experience or from other disciplines into my reading.[16] It was reassuring to read biblical scholars whose readings of the parables were informed by an appreciation of Middle Eastern cultures and were sensitive to the political implications of the Gospels.[17] I was inspired by theologians whose readings called the "intolerable present", including themselves

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14. On "generative themes", see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1996) 77-105. On "thick" and "thin" descriptions, see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic, 1973) 6f.

15. See, for example, Jürgen Moltmann, "Jürgen Moltmann" in *How I Have Changed: Reflections on Thirty Years of Theology* (London: SCM, 1997) 13-21; and Walter Brueggemann, "Biblical Authority: A Personal Reflection" in *Struggling with Scripture* (Westminster: John Knox, 2002) 5-31.

16. See especially Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

17. See especially Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary and Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Kentucky: Westminster, 1994); Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994 [1972]).

and their theologies, into question.[18] Far from abdicating responsibility by deferring to the authority of the Bible, these "prophetic critics" responded to biblical authority by reading the present in its light, comparing what is with what could and should be, and embracing "sacred discontent" to live towards the kingdom of God, active participants in "the horizon of hope". It was liberating to realise that exploring the world behind a text need not imprison the text within its past but could liberate it to live again in the world in front of the text, my world.

Sadly, my fear that formal theological studies might distance me further from those Christians I am committed to engage seems to have been realised. I understand the reassurance provided by determinate biblical interpretations. How, then, might I encourage Christian communities to resist the ideologies of fear which have proliferated since September 11, 2001 and embrace Christ's command of love? How might I read with them in ways which invite us all to risk encountering the Bible as revelation – a revelation which may frame our worlds in front of the text within an altogether different reality?

TOWARDS RESPONSIBLE READING

In 1937, Henry Cadbury challenged members of the Society of Biblical Literature "to take responsibility for the social and spiritual functions of biblical scholarship".[19] This enduring challenge should extend to all reading communities whose interpretations, in one way or another, affect the world. It is, however, particularly acute for evangelical congregations who privilege the role of Scripture in shaping and informing Christian life. Yet, for some Christians, admitting the particularity and contingency of Scriptural interpretation seems tantamount to undermining the authority of Scripture itself. How, then, might confessional readers begin to recognise the influence of cultural contexts and socio-economic locations on biblical interpretation?

Responsible reading as reading which respects the contextual authority of Scripture

Rather than apologising for the *inability* of interpreters to transcend their own particularity, is it possible to *celebrate* the interested,

18. See, for instance, Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) and *Hope Within History* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987); Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Grounds and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993 [1964]).

19. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship", *JBL* 107/1 (1988) 3-17, 12.

perspectival and contextual nature of Scriptural interpretation?[20] If the Bible is in any sense a witness to the incarnational life of God, then only flesh-and-blood readers committed to responding to God's Word within concrete contemporary contexts can interpret it faithfully. It follows that exegetical attempts to establish an interpretation as normative or exclusively authoritative *reduce* the authority of Scripture by assuming that God will not speak through Scripture anything that God has not spoken before, and, by limiting interpretation to the elucidation of universal, timeless and absolute truths or doctrines which are often of limited practical significance. Once congregations concede that no-one else has or can ever read the Word of God *from their place*, it follows that no-one else can read *in their stead*. The authority of Scripture may then be seen to demand personal engagement and to prohibit "final" or "definitive" interpretations: "each new reality obliges [us] to interpret the Word of God afresh, to change accordingly, and then go back and re-interpret the Word of God again".[21] Not only *is* biblical interpretation influenced by the cultural and social locations and interests of interpreters, biblical interpretation *should be* located and interested – and *must* be to be responsible.

Responsible reading as confessional testimony

Francis Moloney's "An Adventure with Nicodemus"[22] is an explicitly confessional and consciously perspectival reading of the Nicodemus narratives in John's Gospel. Moloney's reading maintains a high view of the authority and alterity of Scripture while highlighting the contingent and provisional nature of reading. Rather than mounting a case for the necessity of personal readings, the insufficiency of inherited interpretations, or the impossibility of interpretive universality, "An Adventure" testifies to all three. As testimony, it is difficult to counter.

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20. The "interested" nature of interpretation relates to the existential concerns and purposes of interpreters. Advocacy theologians foreground their existential commitments: they are *interested* in reading for liberation. For this reason, they intentionally ground their readings within concrete contexts and attempt to read from the perspective of poor or marginalised people. In contrast, readers whose conscious interests are limited to "spiritual" or "academic" concerns tend to assume their interpretations politically *dis*interested and, by downplaying the influence of perspective and context, effectively read as if their own perspectives and locations were normative.

21. J. L Segundo, cited by Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) 69.

22. Francis Moloney, "An Adventure with Nicodemus" in *The Personal Voice*, 97-110. Previously published in "To Teach the Text: The NT in a New Age", *Pacifica* 11 (1998) 159-80.

Moloney begins by clarifying his reading identity, assumptions and location, all of which cause him to identify closely with Nicodemus.[23] He then invites his readers to accompany him on his adventure as he and Nicodemus move from positions of certainty in the sufficiency of their inherited religious traditions, through confusion and anxiety as previous convictions crumble, to hesitantly accept the risk and freedom entailed in responding to the challenges and questions of life and faith.[24] In effect, Moloney's readers witness a paradigm shift in progress. Within the *safe place* created by his explicitly confessional stance, Christian readers can permit the text to provoke them to venture beyond the bounds of inherited traditions. Moloney leaves his reading "open-ended", wondering where his adventure with Nicodemus might lead him next.[25] His reading is neither definitive nor final, not even for Moloney himself.

In "To Teach The Text", Moloney addresses other "expert teachers of the text", as is appropriate in an edition of *Pacifica* dedicated to theological education:

> The contemporary teacher of the biblical text must create a horizon where the worlds behind, within and in front of the text meet. The student must be given a reading of the text which acknowledges the past, but recognises the challenge of relating the givenness of the past to the exhilarating – even if at times confusing – experience of the present.[26]

Moloney presupposes that able teachers "take hold of the passage being taught [and] deliver it to students".[27] By distinguishing between teachers (presumably appointed by the Church to read and to teach readings) and students (who receive teachers' readings), Moloney manages to admit interpretive contingency while retaining interpretive authority within the Church, or, even more restrictively, within clerical academia. This tension remains unresolved throughout: Moloney advocates personal engagement with the text, yet at the same moment insists that teachers "create a horizon" rather than that they *encourage students to create horizons*, and that "the student…be given a reading…" rather than *the student be equipped with tools which increase their capacity to read*.[28] To read responsibly, people must embark upon their own reading adventures. To this end, "expert teachers of the text" will be

23. Moloney, "An Adventure", 98.
24. Moloney, "An Adventure", 99-104.
25. Moloney, "An Adventure", 105f.
26. Moloney, "To Teach the Text", 176.
27. Moloney, "To Teach the Text", 167f.
28. Moloney, "To Teach the Text", 167f.

those who read *with* other Christians in ways which respect and increase their ability to read responsibly themselves, rather than those who read *for* them or present readings *to* them.

Moloney has been criticised for "understating the subtlety of his hermeneutic" and for "constructing Nicodemus entirely on the basis of the text of John's gospel" without taking the world behind the text sufficiently into account.[29] On my reading, however, it is the subtlety of Moloney's hermeneutic which is problematic, not the hermeneutic itself. Moloney claims to "*overtly* use the many techniques of traditional and more contemporary exegetical practices",[30] but this is rarely evident to me. I suspect that Moloney's familiarity with the presumed socio-historical context behind the Gospel of John equips him to navigate the world within the text without making explicit, or maybe even conscious, reference to the gridlines of the world from which it arose. Had Moloney marked his movements between worlds more clearly, and had he made his interpretive decisions explicit, readers less well versed in biblical studies could choose whether to continue reading with him or to depart from him at any point – and would be responsible for their choices.

Responsible reading requires restrained self-disclosure

Just as some understanding of the historical world(s) behind biblical texts assists but is no substitute for responsible reading, so some insight into the worlds of contemporary readers assists others to interpret their readings but should not dominate the reading process. A fine balance is needed to avoid obscuring biblical texts behind autobiography.[31] Carefully selected fragments of "thick" narrative, which invite readers to empathetically enter into a formative incident or to "feel" a generative

29. Mark Brett, "Locating Readers: A Response to Frank Moloney", *Pacifica* 11 (1998) 303-15, 308-13.

30. Moloney, "To Teach the Text", 167.

31. Janice Anderson and Jeffrey Staley claim that autobiographical criticism "point[s] the way toward a more rigorously self-reflective and contextualised biblical criticism" ("Introduction" in *Taking It Personally*, 7-18, 16). Unfortunately, many examples of the genre, including their own, appear to reflect solely on the critical-self-in-context, using the Bible as an ancillary aid, and add little to our understanding of biblical texts. As Francis Landy complains, "It is as if somewhere along the way Jeff [Staley] has become bored with the work of reading texts, at least New Testament ones, and has decided to write about himself instead...", "Perversity, Truth and Readerly Experience" in *Between Text and Self*, 60-78, 73. At the other extreme, the "thin" biota Fernando Segovia recites in most of his work and the "personal anecdotes" inserted into his "autobiographical" article reveal little about how his human experience and his significant contributions to intercultural criticism relate. "My Personal Voice: The Making of a Postcolonial Critic" in *The Personal Voice*, 25-37.

theme, can reveal enough of the flesh-and-blood reader for other readers to understand *why* she writes as well as *what* she has written.

In his introduction to *Development as Freedom,* economist Amartyra Sen demonstrates how illuminating a pertinent fragment of personal narrative can be:

> I was playing one afternoon – I must have been around ten or so – in the garden in our family home in…Dhaka…when a man came through the gate screaming pitifully and bleeding profusely; he had been knifed in the back. Those were the days of communal riots (with Hindus and Muslims killing each other), which preceded the independence and partitioning of India and Pakistan. The knifed man, called Kader Mia, was a Muslim daily laborer who had come for work in a neighbouring house – for a tiny reward – and had been knifed in the street by some communal thugs in our largely Hindu area. As I gave him water while also crying for help from adults in the house, and later, as he was rushed to the hospital by my father, Kader Mia went on telling us that his wife had told him not to go into a hostile area in such troubled times. But Kader Mia had to go out in search of work because his family had nothing to eat. The penalty of his economic unfreedom turned out to be death, which occurred later on in the hospital. The experience was devastating for me…[32]

Whether or not they agree with Sen's interpretation of this incident, his childhood memory enables readers to understand in a "visceral" sense why economic freedom is so important to him. It testifies to a concrete subjective reality, establishes the *interested, committed* perspective from which Sen writes, and provides a powerful interpretive lens through which to read his work.

Responsible reading, then, requires a restrained discerning personal voice which is self-aware but not preoccupied by self, relates formative events which pertain to the reading but avoids inappropriate intimacy, and acknowledges perspective without reducing reading to perspective alone. The idea of "testimony" locates this restrained self-disclosure within a larger, communal context of evaluation, judgment and praxis.[33]

Testimony is not without risk. I began this essay by using an extended personal narrative for a specific purpose – I could legitimately tell my story quite differently with other ends in mind. I selected, arranged, articulated, and reflected upon experiences I deemed relevant as I remember them – which may not be how others remember them. I

32. Amartyra Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999) 8.

33. Walter Brueggemann represents this larger dynamic in his *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

interpreted events from my current perspective – it is possible, indeed probable, that I will later read these same events differently and ascribe different, perhaps conflicting, significance to them. I have shared only those parts of my experience which, so far as I am aware, were most instrumental in shaping my reading behaviour. Some readers may complain that I withheld crucial elements without which their reading falters, others that what I withheld reveals more than what I divulged. In one sense, such critique may be justified. All testimony is subjective, partial and interested. It cannot be anything else.

Responsible reading as committed interpretive praxis

The human consequences of Bible readings occur within real contexts, the world(s) in front of the text. For this reason, responsible readers will read their contexts as carefully as they do the Bible. Responsible readings of Scripture will thus be contextually informed, relevant, and committed.

One means of facilitating consciously contextualised readings might be to situate readings within the "praxis model" of theology described by Stephen Bevans:

> The praxis model takes the concrete situation seriously… it regards theology not as a generally applicable, finished product that is valid at all times and in all situations, but as an understanding of God's presence in very particular situations. There is a certain permanence and even generality needed in the theological enterprise, of course, but the praxis model offers a corrective to a theology that is *too* general and pretends to be universally relevant. …[R]eal theory emerges out of action and evokes more responsible more real activity.[34]

Contextual interpretive praxis involves ongoing processes of action and reflection: committed action is followed by periods of reflecting upon the community's actions and changing situation, re-reading the Bible in the light of experience, developing theory to inform future action, participating in further committed action, and so on.

Situating readings within such a praxis model demands rigorous analysis of local and global reading contexts. In particular, reading communities would consciously locate themselves within their world(s) before the text: How do we relate to clusters of power and privilege, domination and subordination, and inclusion and exclusion? (Here one cannot avoid the politics of publication, and the micro-politics of

34. Bevans, *Contextual Theology*, 63-80, 71ff.

sermons.[35]) How are community members enmeshed in the subtle dynamics of power, both inside and outside the church? What influence might readers exert where and how? How do our lives affect those who are less privileged, less powerful, and more vulnerable?

Committed interpretive praxis helps readers to learn the limits of their own particularity. It does not enable them to transcend these limits. I think of myself as reading between places, a location which colours my perspective without determining my commitments. I may read more responsibly if I am aware of where I stand and how I arrived there. I will read less responsibly if my personal history preoccupies me, or if I presume that between places is the only or the best place from which to read.

Living in rural Afghanistan I learnt that my culture was not normative and that the (culturally conditioned) way I read was not the only way to read. I did not become bicultural. I did not learn, and never will learn, to read from an Afghan perspective. Yet, I have allowed Afghan perspectives to (re)shape my reading practices.[36] Living with a poor community, I did not learn, and never will learn, to read with the eyes of the poor. Not only do I belong to a dominant culture, as an English-as-a-first-language-speaking, post-tertiary educated, second/third generation Anglo-Australian born of middle class professional parents, I am a dominant member of a dominant culture: any fantasies I may entertain of marginality or subordination are delusory. Yet, I have learnt how pervasively privilege has shaped my understanding. And, in so far as I allow my reality to be touched by the realities of the poor, in so far as I seek out and privilege readings from poor and marginal groups, I hope to read more responsibly.

Animated Reading – a contextually responsive participatory process[37]

The consonance between contextual praxis theology and community development suggests that the process of Community Animation might be adapted to provide a framework for responsible reading.[38] Com-

35. Might the publication of readings from diverse settings silence the readings of poor and subordinate groups even more effectively than the "universal" "objective" readings postcolonial critics consider oppressive?

36. Daniel Smith-Christopher discusses how sociological and anthropological material can inform exegesis. "Introduction" in Daniel Smith Christopher (ed.), *Text and Experience: Towards a Cultural Exegesis of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 11-22.

37. Cf. Gerald West's "Contextual Bible Study Process" in his *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993); and *The Academy of the Poor: Toward a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

38. Community development is as diverse a discipline as biblical studies. Allan Kaplan characterises the paradigm I am committed to as "alternative community development" in

munity Animators participate with community members in development processes which, ideally, are owned, initiated and implemented by the community. The Animator's role is to catalyse and/or assist development by listening, questioning, encouraging and facilitating access to resources, skills and information.[39] Analogously, "Reading Animators" would read *with* others and would resist reading or interpreting *for* them.[40] The purpose of Animated Reading Processes would be to engage with and respond to Scripture, not to analyse, master, or derive propositional truths or doctrines from it.[41]

Although the interactive nature of Animated Reading prohibits detailed choreography, I envisage five significant movements:

(i) a *cohesive movement* in which readers articulate their reading interests, consider the inherent risks of reading, and commit to read together;
(ii) a *confessional movement* in which readers clarify their reading location(s) and identify cultural myths and/or ideologies which might frame their reading in irresponsible ways;
(iii) a *cognitive movement* in which readers undertake the destructive and constructive groundwork necessary for full participation in the world within the text;
(iv) an *imaginative movement* in which readers enter the world within the text and, concurrently, read themselves, their worlds, and their beliefs about God more critically in its light; and
(v) a *responsive movement* in which readers bring their encounter with the text and, we trust, God back into their worlds in front of the text; reflect on their reading experience; and negotiate individual and communal responses.

Reading Animators would influence this process through the questions they ask, the information they offer, and the opinions they choose to share. Participatory processes may be used for controlling as

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The Developing of Capacity (Community Development Resource Association, 1999) http://www.cdra.org.za/Publications/V…/The%20Developing_of_Capacity%20UN%20NGLS_by_allan.ht

39. Jim Ife outlines the role of Community Animators in *Community Development*, 231-264.

40. Note parallels with Gerald West's discussion of the role of "socially engaged biblical scholars" in "Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated", *Semeia* 73 (1996) 21-41; and *Academy*, 63-78.

41. Cf. George Lindbeck's "cultural-linguistic" model of theology in *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). For an evangelical re-statement of this perspective, see Jonathan R. Wilson, "Theology and the Old Testament" in C. Broyles (ed.), *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 245-64.

well as empowering purposes.[42] Aware of this, diligent Reading Animators would make reading decisions overt, invite readers to challenge inferences drawn from the text, avoid any implicit claim to superior interpretive authority, and remind readers to consider possible consequences their interpretive praxis might have for other communities.

Reading Animators would initiate *cohesive and confessional movements* by constructing a *safe place* in which readers could explore their questions, air fears and doubts, and tease out the implications of possible responses to the text without fear of correction or confrontation. Even within a safe space, admitting perspectival contingency entails vulnerability. Readers who begin to question inherited beliefs about what a passage "means" or "teaches" might retreat in panic to hold received interpretations more rigidly. Alternatively, they may react against the uncertainty inherent in reading by discarding the Bible, and even their faith, along with their previous position.[43] Responsible Reading Animators would be sensitive to such risks and attempt to avoid or mitigate potentially disastrous consequences.

The *cognitive movement* preparatory to entering the world within the text would entail destructive and constructive phases. The *destructive phase* would be intended to remove obstacles which impede access to the world within the text. This would not require Reading Animators to disparage inherited traditions. They need only demonstrate that no interpretation is exhaustive or determinative; that not all interpretations are valid; that some valid interpretations may be irrelevant or irresponsible in certain contexts; or, that dominant interpretations may hinder reception of fresh revelation.[44] The *constructive phase* would be designed to fill understanding deficits which disable or distort particip-ation in the world within the text. When introducing extra-textual resources, Reading Animators should emphasise the inability of historical criticism to "prove" anything: scholars do not recover "what

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42. On domesticating and liberating uses of social participation, see Peter Oakely et al., *Projects with People: the practice of participation in community development* (London: ILO, 1991); Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (eds.), *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (London: Zed Books, 2001). Cf. Curtis Chang's critique of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's Inductive Bible Study strategy in *Narrative Weave: A model of group Bible study for postmoderns* http://regions.ivcf.org/content/217.

43. I was disturbed to discover how easily such crises can be precipitated. Discussing the separation of Lot and Abraham with a friend, I asked why she thought Abraham acted well and Lot badly when Genesis itself made no value judgement. My friend read Genesis 13 again and phoned upset: "If we can't know what Lot and Abraham means, what can we know? Can we know anything at all? What use is the Bible? Does God exist?"

44. See here Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Paul Ricoeur* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 73-154.

was" but propose "what might have been".[45] Too immediate an appropriation of a text may be prevented by noting our estrangement from the text. Assumptions that a text cannot mean anything now, that it did not mean in its original context, may be countered by affirming that Scripture is the Living Word of the Living God.[46]

The form of the *imaginative movement* would vary according to the genre of discourse read.[47] As mentioned previously, readers should be aware that entering the world within the text is an inherently unpredictable and potentially traumatic experience which may cause them to relinquish cherished certainties or disturb them in other ways.

During the *responsive movement*, readers would reflect upon their reading experiences in the light of their broader reading of the Bible and their reading context. Traditional or contemporary readings from other places may be introduced to offer valuable insights or to expose unidentified misconceptions within the reading community. Reading Animators may pose questions to broaden the interpretive horizon: What implications might our responses have for homeless people in our city/ bonded labourers in Nepal/people living with AIDS/mental illness?

It should be possible to approximate Animated Reading through sermons. Pulpit-bound Reading Animators might encourage people to "work" through the reading, to assess a variety of views critically, and to continue reading with other people in other places. One strategy I use is to embed an "Interruptive Key" (an observation which gently subverts determinative interpretations without directly challenging them) within sermon illustrations. For example, interpretations which understand Matthew 10:26-31 as an assurance of divine protection

45. Critical input would inform Animated Readings without constraining or directing them. This would reconfigure the responsibilities of confessional scholars and democratise the reading process without making biblical scholarship redundant. Cf. Stephen Fowl's case for an *ad hoc* use of professional biblical scholarship in *Engaging Scripture*, 178ff. On the contributions and limitations of historical and other forms of criticism see Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Towards a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); Fernando F. Segovia, "'And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues': Competing Modes of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Criticism", in *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 1-32.

46. Paul Ricoeur speaks of "distanciation" in a double sense: the distance of the text from its author, original context and primitive audience which renders the text "autonomous" and open to "an infinite range of interpretations"; and, the distance estranging the reader from the world behind the text which must be overcome before readers can participate imaginatively in the world within the text. See *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991) 83-88, and *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 37f, 218-221.

47. See Paul Ricoeur's case for methodological plurality and a "piecemeal approach" to hermeneutics in *Figuring the Sacred,* 35-47 and *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 73-118.

spontaneously unravel when I describe the precarious lives and violent deaths of Afghan sparrows and point out that Jesus talks about Middle Eastern sparrows, not canaries in cages.[48]

As an amateur Reading Animator, I experiment using a variety of reading strategies with confessional communities. When reading familiar texts, I encourage participants to lead themselves through the destructive and constructive phases of the cognitive movement. For instance, reading the Zaccheus narrative in Luke 19, I ask groups to tell each other the story "the way they remember it", and to explain what they've been taught about it in the past. Having articulated and discussed their received readings, a single question prompts most groups to reconstruct Zaccheus' socio-political context and to re-discover the story's narrative context. Most groups I read with require little or no assistance to reconstruct the broad socio-political context of the gospel. Given sufficient time, groups re-locate Zaccheus within Luke's larger narrative themselves. If not, I briefly outline the narrative context before inviting readers to listen to an extended reading of Luke 18 and 19 from the perspective of one or other biblical protagonist. During this imaginative movement, the *re*-membered narrative participants "experience" usually bears little resemblance to the simplistic moral tale "remembered" earlier on.

Animated Reading Processes which encourage readers to enter the world within the text from both directions, from our worlds in front of the text and from the hypothesised world(s) behind the text, may disorient some readers. The complexity of the process is compounded because comparisons drawn between hypothesised historical contexts and worlds in front of the text are provisional and so constantly open to revision and emendation. In my experience, readers find moving between worlds characterised by uncertainty intellectually challenging and emotionally exhausting. Is encouraging readers to invest in readings with such unstable foundations expecting too much? Reading this way is demanding. It is potentially traumatic. It is sometimes tremendously rewarding. Can responsible reading – or responsible living – be anything else?

48. Eugene Peterson's mis-contextualisation in *The Message: The New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1993) 32.