THEOLOGY AND IGNATIUS'S SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

By ROGER HAIGHT

THE QUESTION I SHALL ADDRESS in this essay is disarmingly simple: what is the bearing of the discipline of theology on the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. This straightforwardness, however, conceals a nasty ambiguity concerning the meaning of theology. For theology is a pluralistic discipline, both in its content and more radically in its method, in its contemporary performance and its very conception. The response to the question will thus very much depend on which or whose theology is brought into the equation. Two questions, therefore, are placed before us, the one regarding the conception of theology and the other regarding its bearing on the Exercises.

Having complexified the issue, what is needed is a strategy to handle both questions at once. This is not the place to write a defence of a method for theology. Yet one can display the fruitfulness of a particular concept of theology by its ability to meet a problem. In what follows I shall outline in broad strokes a conception of theology and use it to respond to the initial question. It is hoped that the way in which this notion of theology is able to be brought to bear on the Exercises will at the same time recommend it.

I shall begin by describing theology very generally as an hermeneutical discipline, that is, a critical investigation that follows certain fundamental principles in interpreting reality, particularly as it is mediated to us through a tradition that is embodied principally but not exclusively in texts.[1] Such an understanding of theology makes it particularly applicable to being brought to bear on the Exercises.[2] The discussion will then be carried forward by examining how the three fundamental criteria for relatively adequate theological interpretation come to bear on the Exercises.

I. Theology as an hermeneutical discipline

Hermeneutics may be understood very generally as a discipline which considers the principles or dynamics of interpretation. As

such it has always been applicable to the Christian study of the bible. But the term is used here with reference to a philosophical movement reaching back to Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century and reacting against certain themes in the philosophy of the previous century. If Enlightenment meant a trust in critical and scientific reason, a breaking out of the hold of tradition, and an emancipation from authority, the emerging historical consciousness showed that human beings cannot escape time and circumstance, that all human thinking is particular and shaped by a past tradition, that to understand the human demands an appropriation of its history. Now to understand the past is to interpret the past; understanding itself is interpretation. Thus the philosophical discipline of hermeneutics is really a study of understanding itself, especially of understanding human existence as that is communicated to us in the persons, events and texts which are the monuments of that existence.

Although hermeneutics may be generalized to include understanding of anything, it is particularly applicable to the study of the meaning of texts. For example, interpretation of written law is hermeneutical. Laws are the codification of the ideals and values of a society. Legal interpretation follows rules for understanding what is to be done by bringing to bear on a present situation the norm of a law established in the past. Hermeneutics is particularly relevant to Christian theology insofar as a classic writing of the past, scripture, is considered the constitution of the Church and the norm of faith. Since scripture is both a principal source and the final norm for theology, theology may be considered a hermeneutical discipline that interprets the meaning of scripture, as well as tradition, at any given time.

In this context of a very broad meaning of hermeneutics we can give a descriptive definition of theology as follows: theology is a hermeneutical discipline which interprets reality, that is, the world, nature, the human person, society, history, and the ultimate reality that is God, in terms of Christian symbols. Some brief comments on this formula will be enough to communicate its intent.

This description of theology includes the classical definition that theology is faith seeking understanding. It also takes into account that scripture is the principal norm for theology, the *norma normans non normata*. For the absolutely central symbol for Christian faith, and thus for Christian self-understanding and theology, is the concrete person of Jesus of Nazareth. But Jesus is preserved for

us almost exclusively in the scriptures, so that the main source of Christian symbols is scripture. But what can be said of scripture can also be said in an analogous way of the whole history of Christian symbols which make up Christian tradition. The Councils, the major movements in Christian history, the theologians, the various institutional developments that make up Christian history, all comprise the symbols and data for Christian theology. Surely the Spiritual Exercises, having motivated Christian life over centuries, are a significant monument in the history of Christian thought and action. The Exercises are thus an important piece of theological data in the Christian tradition and a source for theology.

But the most significant element in the proposed description of theology is that the object of theology should not be thought of as the symbols themselves. It would not be quite accurate to say that theology is exclusively or even most importantly the interpretation of the symbols of the Christian tradition themselves, unless such an assertion were understood dialectically. A symbol is something in which something other than itself is mediated and disclosed. Symbols point beyond themselves to a reality other than themselves which they make present to consciousness. Therefore the object of theology is the reality to which Christian symbols point, the transcendent reality of God and all reality as seen in the light of this revelation of God. The object of theology, its subject matter, then, is tensive: it includes two dimensions that interact with each other. Theology, in considering the symbols of Christian tradition, is geared to interpreting reality as mediated by the symbol. And in the understanding of reality mediated by the symbol one also understands the symbol itself as mediating a reality that transcends it.

It may be postulated here that there are two sources for theology. The first consists in the symbols of the tradition with scripture holding the principal place. The second consists in common human experience. That common human experience, potentially all human experience, is a genuine source for theology is almost self-evident. As will be shown, theology like faith itself is a form of human consciousness, and one cannot escape human experience in forming one's conception of the object of faith. Thus both the symbols of tradition and general human experience comprise the data for theology.

Let me conclude this brief definition of theology by noting three general criteria for a relatively adequate theology. These criteria

will be developed more fully in the application of this notion of theology to the Exercises.

A first criterion for theology is fidelity to the first source, the data of scripture and the other symbols from the tradition. Theology does not merely consist in a description of the experience of the faith experience of the community. In fact, at any given time the faith experience of the community may not be faithful to its foundational norms. One way in which fidelity to the scriptures is preserved is by historical research, by critically investigating the symbols of the past in their historical past.

A second criterion for theology is intelligibility. Theology must make sense; it must be critically coherent with whatever else one knows to be true. Theology does not merely consist in a historical exegesis of the meaning of the symbols of the past. This principle accounts for the development of theology and doctrine in history. On the basis of new knowledge and new interpretations of reality new questions arise about how to construe reality theologically, and this gives rise to the history of reinterpretation.

A third criterion for theology is empowerment. Just as all knowledge and understanding are in the service of living, so too theology is *for* life in history. Theology must bear reference to the possibility of human existence in an actual situation in history, and another measure of its adequacy is its ability to empower that life.

These three criteria overlap. Although they have been isolated here, each one should be thought of in conjunction with the other two. They qualify each other. Therefore statements under one heading cannot be understood without reference to the other two principles. In what follows, I shall apply each of these three criteria to a theological interpretation of the Exercises.

II. Fidelity to the Exercises

The Exercises may be considered a source for theology in a manner analogous to scripture. They provide a set of symbols for theological interpretation. Since in this case they are the source and data to be interpreted, the first criterion of an adequate interpretation is conformity with the data to be interpreted. Theology based on the Exercises must be faithful to the Exercises. Ordinarily, in the first instance, this fidelity is guaranteed by a variety of historical critical methods of research which can determine the historical context, the intention of the author, and various

other indications of the genesis of the text. Critical theological interpretation of the Exercises cannot be based exclusively on a description of the meaning they mediate to people today.

But at the same time, and in tension with this first historical interpretation, a cardinal principle of hermeneutical theory states that the meaning of a text from the past cannot be limited to what historical analysis can reveal about it. In a process that Paul Ricoeur calls distantiation, the passage from oral to written communication creates a break and hence a distance between the text and its author, its historical context, and its original audience. The author is no longer there to clarify or underline the meaning; the text is freed from its original situation to be read potentially by anyone in unlimited different historical contexts. The text, then, in some degree becomes autonomous; it is freed in some measure from an historical determination; its meaning transcends or goes beyond what historical method can determine about it, so that it becomes open to have a bearing on ever new situations. Ricoeur expresses this dramatically when he says that Paul's letter to the Romans is not only addressed to the Romans but also 'to me'.[3]

This principle is paradoxical. It is marked by a tension between the historical individuality or preciseness of Ignatius's conceptions and programme of spirituality, for example, and universality, their ability to be appreciated and appropriated universally. This paradox can be explored through the notion of a classic writing that has universal relevance because it has captured universality in a translucently particular and concrete way. The principle of distantiation is crucial for theological interpretation because it is based on historical consciousness which imposes conditions for the possibility of meaningful interpretation. Negatively, unless the potential meaning of the text is in some measure released from its particular historical moorings, it cannot bear meaning into the future. Thus, positively, the distance and transcendence of potential meaning from past historical conditions is what makes present-day appropriation of the text possible.

Applied to Ignatius, distantiation implies that one cannot limit the meaning of Ignatius's Exercises to what he thought, to his intentions or his specific worldview, to a sixteenth-century situation or horizon of consciousness, to how his associates and companions understood him. The principle, therefore, negates Ignatian fundamentalism. The historical work on the Exercises is extremely important to ensure fidelity to the Exercises; but any reduction of

the meaning of the Exercises to what historians can say about them effectively negates their relevance to our world today.

III. Intelligibility in terms of current experience

A second principle of hermeneutical theory, when it is incorporated in a method of theology, stands in tension with the principle of fidelity. Theology is a constructive discipline: it is meant to interpret the symbols of the tradition in such a way that they are intelligible for a present-day audience in a contemporary historical situation. Over and above a first and historical interpretation of what was meant in the past, theology seeks a constructive understanding of reality in the present moment. How then does the past come to bear on the present?

One can understand the process of interpretation that goes on at this point analogously in terms of a dialogue between two people. Imagine two people from very different historical backgrounds trying to communicate and share their experiences. Two different 'worlds', two different standpoints and horizons of experience, two different sets of presuppositions and premises, encounter each other. Yet there can be real communication here on the basis of a common humanity and the commonalities of a shared world to which each can refer. And one can transcend the self, go beyond the confines of one's own limited experience, in order to appreciate in some measure what is other than one's own experience. But in the end one cannot escape or leave behind one's own history and the experience that constitutes one's identity. Rather, what one learns is drawn into one's own experience, and by analogy with elements of one's own experience one makes sense of the other's. The bottom line here is expressed well by an axiom of Aquinas: what is received or understood is received according to the manner of the receiver or knower.[4]

Applying this dialogical principle to theology, one can say that there can be no appropriation of the symbols of the past that escapes present-day consciousness. Indeed, appropriation is interpretation, and it means drawing the meaning of the past into a current consciousness of the world. What historical consciousness entails is that every understanding of the past is automatically reinterpreted within the framework of a present-day understanding of the world. By a principle of analogy one's self-transcending appreciation of the experience of the other and different is spontaneously translated into terms of one's own experience.

This principle is intensified when it is expressed in terms of truth. Theology seeks not only meaning but also truth; it is therefore a critical discipline that has its eye on reality: the one enshrined in the past texts being interpreted and the other an internalized witness of one's experience as that has been shaped by one's own world. In the dialogue between these two witnesses one must assume that one can understand in some degree the witness with whom one is in dialogue in its own terms, as other. But theology cannot affirm on the basis of a witness from another world and time what one knows not to be the case on the basis of one's own experience. Surely, too, a genuinely open stance to the voice of the past can confront and change one's own experience. Authentic interpretation requires being changed by the meaning of the text. But at the same time theology can only interpret reality as disclosed from the past in a way that is analogous and coherent with truth as it is manifested in any given historical context.

When applied to the Exercises of Ignatius this criterion of theology complements and completes the critique of Ignatian fundamentalism. Negatively it means that present-day Christians cannot, or at least should not, transport themselves back into the sixteenth century. One cannot be expected to find meaningful conceptions about reality that at the same time express strictly indigenous characteristics of a past time and culture. And this refers to the whole of the Exercices and every part of them insofar as they are a product of past history. But this principle also opens up positively and constructively the task of a theological interpretation of the Exercises. This is creatively to break open the past symbols, find their analogies in current experience and conceptualization, and render them intelligible and coherent with contemporary understanding of ourselves and our world in this point of time in history.

IV. Empowerment for life in the world

The tension between the first two theological criteria of fidelity and present-day intelligibility raises the question of how one is to discern the sameness or identity of a genuinely new interpretation that is also faithful to a past text. This problem finds its resolution in the third criterion of theology, empowerment.

'Empowerment for life in the world' finds its grounding in an anthropology that views knowledge itself as ultimately pragmatic. The most theoretical kinds of knowledge, even mystical contemplation of ultimate reality and communion with it, are themselves

forms of human action that bend back upon human life to enhance it. Theorizing, resting in truth, and meditative communication with God are themselves human behaviours which do not draw us out of the world and human history but are the catalysts of a more fully human mode of existence.

Hermeneutical theory provides a principle that is coherent with this fundamental theory of knowledge which may be called the principle of applicability. It is most clearly exemplified in the interpretation of law. According to this principle the applicability of a law of the past *is* its meaning here and now, so that to determine its applicability is to determine the meaning of the law itself. In other words, one does not first decide the meaning of the past law, and then figure out its relevance. Rather the universal meaning of the law is constituted by its diverse applications; finding the right application is interpreting the internally consistent meaning of the law in history.

This principle, when it is integrated into an hermeneutical conception of theology, responds to the question of what theology is for. Theology, like all knowledge, is for life, and life is to be led in this world and this concrete history that is ours right now. All theology, even in all its specialized branches, insofar as they are parts of an integral discipline, is practical theology. The very purpose of theological interpretation is to open up possibilities for life in the world today, that is, in our concrete history.

On this basis, the consistency, or the element of identity and sameness between current interpretation and past text, lies in empowerment. What is the point of God's revelation except empowerment of human life? And what is salvation other than the empowerment of human life by God's revealing self-presence or grace through past symbols? Therefore the point of all theology, and the locus for pinpointing the identity of current interpretation with the past, lie within the dynamics of the possibility of empowering Christian life. But not of course in isolation from the other two criteria.

This principle, when it is applied to the Exercises, means that the dynamism of the theology that interprets reality on the basis of the data of the Exercises coincides with that of the retreat director and the retreatant. This dynamism is not escape from the actual world; there should be no 'retreat' from the world except in situations that are temporary and therapeutic. Rather theological interpretation must open up real possibilities for life in our actual

world. Real possibilities are not the possibilities of the past but of the present, not abstract and mystifying but intelligibly coherent with the actuality of our world, not purely individual but in keeping with the real solidarity of each person's life with partners, colleagues, fellow citizens, fellow suffering human beings, and especially the wretchedly poor. Real possibilities are concrete and tied to options that can only be made in a concrete world.

To conclude this bare outline of the role of hermeneutical theology in relation to the Exercises it may be said that theological interpretation of them, and of reality through them, is as open as history itself. There is a profound paradox here that, because of its subtlety, will undoubtedly continue to generate an equally profound irony. The more interpreters seek to be faithful to Ignatius historically, to uncover the original meaning of the Exercises, and then reduce their meaning to what they meant in the past, the more they cut the Exercises off from our life today and distort the meaning they bear for present-day Christians. But in overcoming this Ignatian fundamentalism, a theological interpretation must also keep in a constant tension all three theological criteria. A theological interpretation of the Exercises that is intelligible and empowering but not faithful to the inner logic of the text of Ignatius, that is, its salvific point of Christian living, is in that measure a false interpretation. One that is faithful and empowering but not intelligible will of course in that measure also be rejected. And one that is both faithful and intelligible but not empowering for life in our world and history today is at best simply irrelevant and at worst counter-productive. But when these three critical norms are held in careful balance, they can produce a wide variety of interpretations that engender an authentic Christian life in a host of different historical situations. In other words, Ignatius's Exercises will continue to live.

NOTES

[1] The reflections which follow are drawn from the following sources: Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and mythology, and other basic writings*, ed and trans by Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Dorothee Soelle, *Political theology*, trans by John Shelly (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and method* (New York: Seabury, 1975); Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the human sciences*, ed and trans by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); *idem*, *Interpretation theory: discourse and the surplus of meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976); *idem*, *Conflict of interpretations*, ed by Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974); David

Tracy, *Blessed rage for order: the new pluralism in theology* (New York: Seabury, 1978); *idem*, *The analogical imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and interpretation as categories of theological thinking*, trans by Thomas J. Wilson (New York: Crossroad, 1988). For a fuller account of the conception of theology that is proposed here, see Roger Haight, *Dynamics of theology* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist, 1990), especially chapters 9–10. And for a brief programmatic essay that applies the principles outlined here to the Spiritual Exercises, see *idem*, 'Foundational issues in Jesuit spirituality', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits* 19/4 (September, 1987).

[2] It would be a mistake to regard the *Spiritual Exercises* as simply a text to be read and analysed. Because it is a programme of exercises, the understanding of this text finally requires undergoing these exercises. But the same thing might be said of scripture as well, as will be seen in the course of this essay.

[3] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the human sciences*, p 192.

[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II—II, q 1, a 2.