



What is the significance of poetry for theology today?

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There are four important words in this title: ‘theology’, ‘poetry’, ‘significance’ and ‘today’. We need to examine the meaning and use of each of these terms before we can begin to discuss the question as a whole. So we shall begin by considering what we mean by ‘theology’ and by ‘poetry’. We shall then discuss how these two relate to each other, and thus hope to discover what significance poetic expression may have in the work of theology, particularly in the context of human life in the early twenty-first century.

However, as thinking, recording and remembering beings we can never live wholly in the present moment. For all of us, but particularly for those with an academic education, our lives and thinking are built on those of our predecessors, and their writings, both theological and poetic, will influence us today and must be considered. As Laurie Green says in *Let's Do Theology*, ‘An appreciation of all the reflection of past ages upon God’s activity must be part of our endeavour as theologians’.¹ All of us, too, have snippets or chunks of poetry, hymns and so on rattling around in our heads, many of them from early childhood or schooldays, and even if we reject them they will affect our thinking. And as Green also points out, ‘We might want to reflect forward too, because part of our experience of God surely points us into the future’.² So when discussing the significance of poetry for theology today, this must be in the light of the past and with a view to the future.

What, then, do we mean by the word ‘theology’? Ian Fraser has defined it as ‘the disciplined attempts of human beings to understand how the world has been and is being affected by God’s presence and activity within it; to make out what kind of God he is, and what is his agenda’.³ These disciplined attempts are not restricted to those

who study academic theology, for as Samuel Amirtham writes in the foreword to Fraser's book *Reinventing Theology as the People's Work*, 'doing theology goes hand in hand with Christian living and reflecting on faith accompanies Christian discipleship. New forms of discipleship create new forms of theology, as new forms of theology inspire new ways of living'.⁴ Green, too, asserts that a theology inclusive of all kinds of people should address ordinary people's questions and 'allow for a whole new variety of religious and spiritual experience to be taken properly into consideration'.⁵ Moreover, Fraser points out the dangers of trapping theological insights within the academic community: 'The desiccated language theology employs at the professional level is a handicap to theology as an illumination of life'.⁶ Theology, he says, 'is for those who fly'.⁷ Green reminds us that for many centuries theology was firmly rooted in the life of worshipping communities, and that only with the growth of the universities did it become possible to study theology in a purely academic way. He asserts that 'theology must be rooted in experience – experience of the Spirit of God'⁸ – and he also says 'I judge the purpose of the theological enterprise to be contemplative, instructive and transformative'.⁹

The main purpose of Green's book is as a resource for working with the 'pastoral cycle' or, as he prefers to explain it, a 'spiral', of experience, exploration, reflection and action leading on to new experience. This is a way of doing theology which makes it a part of a group's whole life together. It can maybe illuminate the meaning of the current buzz-word, 'spirituality'. In fact Green entitles a chapter of his book "Spirituality: The Risks of Conversion".¹⁰ He believes that spirituality is 'not so much a thing as a way of being and doing', and that 'doing theology also helps us to meet God by offering us a new appreciation of the spiritual and sacramental nature of the whole of our lives'.¹¹ Stephen Wright, in his book about the spiritual life, *Coming Home: Notes for the Journey*, also discusses the relationship between 'religion' and 'spirituality'. He defines spirituality as a quest for meaning, purpose, direction and connection in life, and sees 'religion' as one possible conduit through which we channel and express what we have discovered.¹²

'Religion' is often defined as a group activity, and the 'pastoral cycle' is designed to be used by groups of people. But many people

who claim to be ‘spiritual, but not religious’ would assert that they need no community, that they can find meaning and connection alone. Kathy Galloway, in the introduction to her book *Talking to the Bones* concludes that this is not so:

Clothing the bones of faith with present flesh happens in relationship [...] the initiation of a most ancient form of learning and discovery: a dialogue of question and answer, of talking and listening and talking back, a dialectic based on the bones of experience, not on the rhetoric of theory [...] It is fatally easy to exalt one’s own subjective experience to the status of a theology, or to confuse one’s own needs or self-interest with revealed truth. As well as our own subjectivity, we need the objectivity of others.¹³

Many of the pieces in her book bear the signs of having been tested in the crucible of liturgies in Iona Abbey, where people definitely do not suspend their critical faculties when they come to worship.



How are meeting with God, new insights and experiences to be expressed?

Academic theology has often seemed to be concerned with exact meanings of words, with trying to achieve certainty by proving facts and defeating opponents in argument. Therein lie the roots of current denominational barriers and the fierce animosity that often exists between ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘liberal’. Poetic expression in this kind of context is often denigrated as woolly, unfocussed, a way of thinking for those who cannot cope with more rigorous objectivity. But Mark Oakley, in his book on the relationship between faith and poetry, claims that theological truth cannot be expressed in literal language: ‘The curse of literalism is that it often misses meaning and turns resonant truth to stone.’¹⁴ Moreover, we claim that the God we believe in is the Creator of the Universe. Yet our scientific endeavour has not yet shown us the full extent of the universe, and in the parts we have investigated there is much that we do not yet understand. How, then, can we speak objectively and ‘scientifically’ of a God who must be far

beyond our comprehension or powers of expression? ‘It is a challenge to keep the rumour of God alive in a way that is magnetic to mystery rather than dismissive’.¹⁵ We can only admit with Fraser that ‘A coherent declaration of the truth [...] will not be a set of constructs but a breathtaking shimmer of light’.¹⁶ Oakley also points out that ‘Truth for the person of faith is inseparable from the way it is spoken.’¹⁷ We have all sat fidgeting through a sermon or lecture where we did not actually disagree with anything said, but intensely disliked the way in which the ideas were expressed. More seriously, skewed expressions of religious faith can be dangerous. Rowan Williams, writing after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, contrasts the fanatical last messages of the perpetrators with the loving last messages of the victims. He writes:

We’d better acknowledge the sheer danger of religiousness. Yes, it *can* be a tool to reinforce diseased perceptions of reality [...]. Our religious talking, seeing, knowing, needs a kind of cleansing. [...] God always has to be rediscovered. Which means God always has to be heard or seen where there aren’t yet words for him.¹⁸

If we need to stretch language to accommodate insights, where better to turn than to poetic expression?

But if poetic expression is indeed woolly and unfocussed, how can it help us in the work of theology? We need to look more closely at what we mean by ‘poetry’. A book by Julia McGuinness, *Writing Our Faith*, is a manual in creative writing, particularly as a useful practice for expressing faith. Attempting to define what poetry is, she turns to well-known poets: Samuel Taylor Coleridge – ‘the best words in the best order’ – and Thomas Hardy – ‘emotion put into measure’. She then lists what she considers to be some of the essential qualities of poetry:

- attentiveness to an object, experience, event or feeling that engages us;
- selectivity and focus in our choice of words;
- shaping of words into a form or structure;

- sensitivity to the music of words – their sound or rhythm pattern;
- inclusion of images or figurative language.¹⁹

In this view, poetry, far from detracting from clear thinking, can sharpen it by its disciplined search for perfect expression. This search takes us beyond first impressions into deeper insights. McGuinness also points out that writing can clarify thinking and make new connections in our minds. This is especially useful when taking new directions, as it may make us aware of resources which we already had but had not recognised.²⁰ Oakley turns to T. S. Eliot for a summary of what poetry can achieve: ‘When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience: the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary [...] in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.’²¹ So poetic expression helps us to move beyond the literal, the prosaic, the everyday, and attempt to express the inexpressible. Here we are back at Ian Fraser’s ‘breathhtaking shimmer of light’. Oakley gives us some words from Thomas Merton: ‘Let us be proud of the words that are given to us for nothing, not to teach anyone, not to confute anyone, not to prove anyone absurd, but to point beyond all objects into the silence where nothing can be said’.²² Merton is a good example of how a brilliant theological mind can also speak poetically.

Of course, theology (in its widest sense, as words about God) and poetry have always worked together. Scripture, liturgy, psalms and hymns all have both poetical and theological elements.

A great part of the writings of the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures takes the form of poetry, giving form and force to the messages the prophets proclaim from the Lord. But there is poetry elsewhere, too, for example in the creation narrative in Genesis 1, where the theological affirmation of God as creator is made memorable by the attention-holding folktale device of a refrain: ‘and God saw that it was good. And the evening and the morning were the first day’. In the New Testament, the Book of Revelation is written as the ultimate ‘fantasy fiction’ narrative, but it is also poetic: for example, the opening verses of Chapter 21, describing the new heaven and the new earth, are rhythmic and vivid in their attempt to describe how God’s kingdom

will overcome death and chaos. We might not look for poetry in the gospels, but it is there, notably in some of the sayings of Jesus which are so vivid and memorable: the Beatitudes, ‘the lilies of the field’, and many others where the poetic language has been lost in the transition from Aramaic through Greek to modern languages.

The Psalms, the worship songs of the Temple, are of many styles, but as well as being poetic some of them are explicitly theological, notably Psalm 78, which begins with a teacher promising to explain mysteries, and then goes on to recount the story of God’s dealings with rebellious Israel.

The hymns and worship songs of our culture are also of very varied forms and styles. Some are prayers, some are praise, some are expressions of personal circumstances and emotions, but there are also many with didactic intentions. Story-telling hymns, whether for children or adults, aim to reinforce the stories of the faith. Credal hymns recite the basic tenets of the faith. Some hymns reflect a particular theological stance. This is especially true of those reflecting on the Passion of Jesus, since differing theories of the Atonement are held with passion by the various branches of the Church. Sometimes the resulting disagreements can even reach the newspapers. For example, in 2013 the compilers of an American Presbyterian hymnbook wanted to change a line in the popular modern hymn “In Christ Alone” to remove ‘on the cross as Jesus died / The wrath of God was satisfied’. The writers of the hymn refused to allow this change and the hymn was excluded from the book. A commentator on this dispute concluded: ‘The *In Christ Alone* debate is a great reminder that we should have our brains switched on while we sing.’²³

Also, there are modern writers who are consciously producing hymns teaching a particular aspect of the life of faith. Notable among these are John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community, who have produced many songs on the themes of peace and justice, God’s bias to the poor, and the imperative to care for creation. These didactic hymns are definitely theology at work in poetry.

The dance of theology and poetry within the confines of liturgy is particularly interesting. The ancient liturgical texts which have survived in use today, such as the Creeds, the Gloria and parts of Eucharistic prayers, are great poetry, but their principal purpose is to

re-state dogma. The poetry makes them memorable. In churches today there is much debate about the function of liturgy: is it to instruct the congregation, to enable them to express religious emotion, to produce an uplifting performance, to enable corporate prayer, or is it aimed directly towards God and the congregation is unimportant? Probably most liturgists would answer that all of the above have a part to play and that liturgy should try to fulfil all these aims. This is a tall order, and liturgies being written today, whether set liturgies or services being devised by a minister for a particular occasion, tend to overbalance either towards wordy theology or over-poetic expression – sometimes both within the same service. The best solution is probably clarity and poetic simplicity; this may need a talented poet to achieve it. As a lifelong Anglican, I still consider that some of Cranmer's work in the Book of Common Prayer is possibly the best liturgy written in English; but the English of four hundred years ago will not do for today. Poets are needed for the writing of modern worship.

Another way in which theological ideas have been presented to a wider audience is through plays and stories, beginning with the mystery and miracle plays of the Middle Ages and continuing to performances of new works today. Many of these are poetic in form, and in the last century plays by T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry were acclaimed as masterpieces of poetic literature.

Prose style can be more or less poetic. Some writers of expository or academic theology have a sense of rhythm and a way with words which gives their work a poetic quality. At its worst this results in 'purple prose' which can become annoying, but a talented writer can carry readers along into an almost effortless assimilation of what she or he is trying to say, which greatly increases the effectiveness of their argument. This is a great advantage in all writing of course, but since theology is attempting to express the inexpressible it is particularly helpful here. One great example was the seventeenth-century poet John Donne, whose sermons were collected and printed. They were so fresh, strong and direct and so well expressed that they are still read, and sometimes even still used as sermons, today. Writers on spirituality often use poetry as well as prose in their writing, as in Stephen Wright's *Coming Home: Notes for the Journey*, and this enables their work to be read by a wider audience.

Conversely, much poetry either innately or deliberately expresses theological truths and is prized by many as help in their journey of faith. Many poets come to mind: George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, R. S. Thomas, and many lesser lights. The publishing house of the Iona Community, Wild Goose Publications, produces many poetic works, by members of the Community and others, which are widely used both for private reading and in liturgy and groupwork settings. Such work is very enriching to theological thought. It also, however, draws attention once more to the difficulties of expressing theology in mere words. Kathy Galloway's poem "Apostles' Creed" includes a discussion of this very problem:

As symbols (which is what words are)
power, energy, creativity, life, etc., etc.,
are beyond words inadequate.
As explanation (which is what words are)
procreation, reproduction, etc., etc.,
are as inadequate to describe a process
of which only a part
(and which is never begun or ended)
was when my children broke through my flesh.²⁴

In both poetry and theology we are attempting to engage with something bigger, stronger, yet more intangible, than our minds can grasp.

It seems that since the earliest days of human thought, poetry has served theology and theology has informed poetry. But is poetry more significant for theology today than in past ages?

It is a truism that as adherence to organised religions has declined ever faster over the last century, interest in spirituality has increased. It is certainly true that despite the best efforts of the 'new atheists' it is becoming more acceptable to admit to an interest in spiritual things. Why is this? Stephen Wright summarises a process which was accelerated by the cataclysm of the 1939–45 war.²⁵ The certainties of class, of social order, of religious thought and of culture which seemed so secure at the time of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment had been gradually chipped away during the nineteenth century as slavery

was abolished, the rights of the poor and of women were debated, and ever-advancing technology began to change the environment of people's lives. The First World War seemed in retrospect to have been a catastrophe caused by adherence to rigid principles and a new society seemed struggling to be born. Then came the Great Depression and the rise of totalitarian systems devoted to 'the modern; perceived as rational, systematic, logical, and progressive'.²⁶ These systems 'clashed and crashed in appalling destruction'²⁷ during the 1939–45 war, and cultures, ideologies and nationalities have been at open war around the globe ever since. The 'modern' world view became discredited, and a 'post-modern' mind-set began to arise, with an 'unwillingness to define moral absolutes', a 'wariness of logical thinking and progress'.²⁸ The old certainties of the social order have disappeared, and with them the expectation that people will remain unthinkingly in the religion, class or culture into which they were born. People have moved from 'defining themselves objectively, by what society told us we were, to subjectively, by using our own feelings to define who we were'.²⁹ The same process of subjectivisation has to a certain extent extended even into science, particularly the realms of ecology and medicine, where there are so many conflicting theories and methods that it seems one can almost choose whatever way of life one chooses and find an expert to endorse it. In the realm of spirituality, the term 'New Age' embraces a great variety of worldviews and practices, all seen as being equally valid.

How should theology react to this radical shift in culture? The Evangelicals react by ever more stridently proclaiming ancient certainties, as for example in their determination to ensure that creationism is taught in schools. Yet at the same time theirs is the music of praise songs, love songs, of poetic expression of devotion. The liberal churches spend their time in passionate discussion and disagreement on church order, rules for sexuality, and how best to prop up failing churches. The conflicts are tearing them apart.

But there is another way. Almost unnoticed, a great outpouring of new liturgies, songs and poetry is reviving faith and showing the possibility of its reality and relevance to large numbers of people who would not owe allegiance to any church. This creative expression is also helping to break down barriers between denominations and between

conservative and liberal: not by smoothing over real differences in the hope that they will not be noticed, but by teasing out the fundamental agreements among people of faith and expressing them in ways to which all can assent. In these kinds of ways, poetry can become more significant to theology in the twenty-first century than ever before.

Notes

- ¹ Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology: A Pastoral Cycle Resource Book* (London: Mowbray, 1990), 12.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ian M. Fraser, *Reinventing Theology as the People's Work* (4th ed.; Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2005), 8.
- ⁴ Ibid., 6.
- ⁵ Green, *Let's Do Theology*, 6.
- ⁶ Fraser, *Reinventing Theology*, 34.
- ⁷ Ibid., 10.
- ⁸ Green, *Let's Do Theology*, 129.
- ⁹ Ibid., 105.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 129–47.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 129.
- ¹² Stephen G. Wright, *Coming Home: Notes for the Journey* (Sparket, Cumbria: Sacred Space Publications, 2008), 27f.
- ¹³ Kathy Galloway, *Talking to the Bones: Poems, Prayers and Meditations* (London: SPCK, 1996), 2f.
- ¹⁴ Mark Oakley, *The Splash of Words: Believing in Poetry* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2016), xxi.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 74.
- ¹⁶ Fraser, *Reinventing Theology*, 34.
- ¹⁷ Oakley, *Splash of Words*, xxi.
- ¹⁸ Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust: Reflections on 11 September and Its Aftermath* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), 4f.
- ¹⁹ Julia McGuinness, *Writing Our Faith* (London: SPCK, 2013), 85.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 130–33.

- ²¹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), 287 [quoted in Oakley, *Splash of Words*, 154].
- ²² Thomas Merton, “Message to Poets”, in *Selected Essays* (ed. Patrick F. O’Connell; New York: Orbis, 2013), 175 [quoted in Oakley, *Splash of Words*, xxviii].
- ²³ John Sandeman, “The Wrath Against Wrath: ‘Till On That Cross as Jesus Died, the Wrath of God Was Satisfied’”, Bible Society Australia, 14 May 2013. www.biblesociety.org.au/news/the-wrath-against-wrath
- ²⁴ Galloway, *Talking to the Bones*, 53.
- ²⁵ Wright, *Coming Home*, 3, 18.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 18.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 3.