Ian Fraser:
Theology and ecumenism[1]

Tim Duffy

We are a verbose species. According to one theory, speech developed out of the soothing noises primates make to assuage the proximity of mutual grooming. As such it is a second order activity. This has been well expressed in the axiom that the Word had no sooner become flesh than men turned him back into words again.

Another maxim, which I first heard from Gustavo Gutierrez: Spirituality precedes theology. It is one reason, von Balthasar suggests, why perhaps so few theologians since the Middle Ages have made it to sainthood. Theology can only operate in a life that is spiritually alive.

Catholic and Reformed Ian undoubtedly is, and I love him (this side of idolatry), but I think we might want to hold off on sainthood just yet. We are nevertheless meant to learn something from the form of the Lives of the Saints – *vita, acta et passio* – life, things done by them and things done to them modelled on the life of Christ. By learning to become like them we in turn learn to follow Christ.

'Saints live not by immaculate attainment, but by dependence on God's forgiveness'.[2] We are all saints with L plates – the meaning of disciple (*mathetes*) is after all 'a learner'. Part of Ian's work has been to bring us the stories and testimonies of saints with L plates, the cloud of witnesses who are learning God's paradox:

> "My grace is all you need. My power is made perfect [*teleitai* – the Greek word means something like coming to its full purpose, reaching its proper end (= *telos*)] in weakness [*astheneiais* = non-strength]." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. (2 Cor 12:9)

What we are being drawn toward is the *exousia* – the true being that comes out of us (Mark 1:22). One of the risks of reading Ian's

work is that his gift of making theology immediate, accessible and personally relevant may lead us to overlook things – *ars celare artem* – or to forget that these things are often hidden from those who think themselves wise and clever, and are revealed only to the childlike (cf. Luke 21:10).

Contexts

There is probably a PhD or two in the links between Ian and his teacher John Baillie, whose Gifford Lectures *The Sense of the Presence of God* summed up his life's work and were delivered posthumously fifty years ago (and can be readily and valuably accessed online[3]). I'm not going to pursue any detailed analysis, beyond pointing to two major themes in that work. One is the importance of finding our own way with faith and the other is the elements of revelation to be found in all confessions at a time when this was far from a given, themes that find resonance with Ian. It's a good reminder of a Presbyterian culture of the national church in the middle years of the last century, which in its turn was a central part and vivifying element in the wider Scottish culture of the day, as well as having European and American contacts and international links through the WCC. Many of you will be a part of that culture. Ian exemplifies it.

One interesting aspect of this Presbyterian culture is an interlinked network of ministers, with a background in overseas mission, academic and committee responsibilities, as well as a spiritual dimension linked to the Iona community. A quick look at some of those who addressed Iona study weeks make an interesting consolidation of this informal network, including Ronald Gregor Smith, John Vincent, and R. D. Laing.[4]

A major part of these networks was the often formidable spouses and womenfolk, acting not as adjuncts, but in their own right. Ian, after all, is unthinkable without Margaret. John Baillie seems to endorse this view when he quotes from John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* in *The Sense of the Presence of God*, referring to his wife:

> [...] *it is not the least of my intellectual obligations to her that I have derived from her a wise scepticism, which, while it has*

not hindered me from following out the honest exercise of my own thinking faculties to whatever conclusions might result from it, has put me on my guard against holding or announcing these conclusions with a degree of confidence which the nature of such speculations does not warrant.[5]

A similar process emerged out of Scottish Churches House, where members of various committees and interchurch networks extended this existing process and found friendships and common purpose in their faith. Again, women, some of them here today, played a crucial if not a leading role. And during the time I have found myself involved, since the late 1970s, the process became more fully ecumenical, as well as more de-institutionalised.

This engagement, for me, aligned with a number of key themes I got from Ian's work (as well as Vatican II and seminal theologians like Yves Congar). These insights included the church as pilgrim people rather than merely institution; of a real involvement of the laity at all levels; a concern for justice and a social mission as a constitutive dimension of the gospel rather than a minor option; and the meeting with a variety of traditions, in person and through study which both enriched and broadened faith development. This in turn led to the acceptance of church as *semper reformanda* – constantly redressing the balance between the experience of authority and the authority of experience.

At one level it can be seen as an exemplar of that wonderful idea of the 'Caledonian Antisyzygy', which refers to the 'idea of duelling polarities within one entity', at the centre of Hugh MacDiarmid's work and engraved on his gravestone at Langholm:

> I'll ha'e nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur
> Extremes meet – it's the only way I ken
> To dodge the curst conceit o' bein' richt
> That damns the vast majority o' men.[6]

This could be read as a gloss on Revelation 3:16: 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.' There is more than a hint of MacDiarmid about Ian (and vice versa)

and no one would ever accuse either of being lukewarm; indeed Ian could probably happily take on MacDiarmid's self-aware description of himself as 'A disgrace to the community'.

Theology: taking the Church to the world, *exitus* – centrifugal

When we spoke briefly about how we would work this session together, Elizabeth Templeton commented that Ian's theology is impeccably orthodox. Yet Western theology has too often been unbalanced by a lack of corresponding orthopraxis. Or, as the American Jesuit William O'Malley has God say, 'Do you think I created you just to be unbad?'

> 'All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action is for the sake of friendship.' (Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*[7]).

> 'I have called you friends' (John 15:15)

> 'The correct analogy for the mind is not a vessel that needs filling, but fuel that requires to be kindled.' (Plutarch, *On Listening*)

Paulo Freire criticises the 'banking theory of learning' and so does Ian. Rather, the spark of faith ignites the kindling of hope, from which blaze the fires of love. Learning is less to do with accumulation and more to do with spending; less to do with building up merit, and more to do with sacrifice; abiding in – and of course these three abide …

The gift of the Spirit precedes our attempts to process it – *fides quaerens ....* Aquinas, speaking to the Doctors of Paris a year before he died said: 'A little old lady (*vetula*) of today knows more about things concerning the faith than all the philosophers of antiquity'.[8] And as Aquinas realised after his visionary stroke, the gift of the Spirit supersedes our attempts to process it.

Reinventing Theology[9] seeks to redeem theology from the arcane intellectualism and masonic dialects of what Nietzsche described as 'academic ruminants'. Ian's work may lack the obvious systematisation

of Barth or Aquinas, but it is the result of going out into the world, of making church in society. It has an organic social logic. It also points the way, like Ian's interim audits, to an ancient theme, found in Amos and Hosea, but perhaps most powerfully at the very beginning of Isaiah, where social justice trumps the holy huddles of the elect:

> "The multitude of your sacrifices – what are they to me?" says the Lord. […] "Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations – I cannot bear your evil assemblies. […] Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow." (Is 1:11a, 13, 16b–17).

There is an interesting parallel in the careers of Ian and his exact contemporary John Macquarrie. Macquarrie is unsurpassed as a philosophical theologian, and comprehends the **objects** of God talk in an intellectually rigorous yet accessible way. (His first professorship, at Union Theological Seminary, he tells us, was on the recommendation of John Baillie.) Ian, well aware of the intellectual dimension, by contrast chooses to read as well the texts of human communities and articulate the **subjects** of God talk in community.

Another aspect of this is in his grasp of the place of hymns in the life of faith. He understands what is expressed in the old adage that whoever sings prays twice over (often attributed to Augustine, who actually said *cantare amantis est* – singing belongs to one who loves). And the Judeo-Christian tradition, while it has its laws and its prophecies and its histories, has been held in continuity by the singing of the psalms:

> For the one who sings praise, does not only praise, but also praises joyfully; the one who sings praise, not only sings, but also loves Him whom he is singing for. There is a praise-filled public proclamation [*praedicatio*] in the praise of someone who is confessing [God], and in the song of the lover [there is] love.[10]

But someone better qualified than me could find rich material for consideration and reflection in Ian's hymns, which are an integral part of his work.

Ecumenical: bringing the Christian *oikumene* together, *reditus* – centripetal

Ian can be seen as a contrary missionary. On the face of it he reverses the gospel command to go and teach all nations. He goes to however many countries and brings back insights. For me, one of the strengths of *Wind and Fire*[11] was that basic Christian communities were a valid part of my European spiritual heritage and didn't require me to become an imitation Third World peasant. Of course I was also empowered to correlate this thinking with the inspiring insights of the developing world, an activity which is a kind of translation.

> '[...] my function in Scotland during the past […] years has been that of the cat-fish that vitalises the other torpid denizens of the aquarium.' (MacDiarmid, "On Being a Hippopotamus"[12])

Ian's ecumenism is ultimately relational rather than institutional, the organic unity of *gemeinschaft* rather than the departmental completeness of *gesellschaft*, if that is a useful comparison. These perspectives are important because each designates a different dynamic as well as different power brokers. They go back to the earliest days of Christianity and the balance of charism (the gifts of the community) and office (the duties necessary to sustain the community). Fr Jim O'Halloran designates these two elements as 'vision' and 'practicalities'. There is of course always the danger of polarising here – particularly where the power of love is supplanted by the love of power – and as Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us: 'the community is the frustration as well as the realization of individual life'.[13] The sheer serendipity of Ian's stories of discovered unity (as in my life and no doubt in yours) suggests that unity does not arrive only when we have ticked all the boxes, but rather as a result of what Ian has called 'the spontaneous combustion of the Holy Spirit'.[14]

So we have a process that is interpersonal and dynamic, which in Christian terms means Trinitarian. Its *telos*, that is its completion or perfection, is not as some would have it. In the introverted world of the Vatican,

> [...] the ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are not Churches in the proper sense; however, those who are baptised in these communities are, by Baptism, incorporated in Christ and thus are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with the Church.[15]

Nice to know that you're only comparatively defective!

But no, that model will not do. The *telos* is not ecclesiastical but eschatalogical. That is part of what I have learned from Ian, in person and in his collected testimonies. The unity is not an institution. It is the Kingdom of God's Pilgrim People, the Reign of God. 'Every teacher of religious law who becomes a disciple [*mathēteutheis*] in the kingdom of heaven is like a homeowner who brings from his storeroom treasures new as well as old' (Matt 13:52).

Michael Crosby, an American Capuchin friar, biblical scholar and social activist (literally one of the boys in the hood) makes an interesting point, that with the resurrection Jesus breaks all boundaries. The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20 uses the term making disciples (*mathēteutheis*) of all nations. 'Ultimately then, all persons who embrace the words and works of the Gospel of *Matthaios* are to be its *mathēteutheis*. As such they are to be its final redaction in the world entrusted to them.'[16] We are brought back to the Word made flesh.

So let us celebrate the man, Ian Fraser. Not so much for even his own significant personal achievements, but for being the gadfly, catfish or even antisyzygy, who has motivated and invigorated, enkindled and empowered, as well as encouraging and inspiriting us all. In the words of Burns about his publisher William Creech,

> *May never wicked Fortune touzle him!*
> *May never wicked men bamboozle him!*

Until a pow as auld's Methusalem
He canty claw!
Then to the blessed New Jerusalem,
Fleet wing awa!

Notes

1   This paper was given at the day conference "Ian Masson Fraser: Work, Prayer, Thought", held in Stirling on 24 March 2012.

2   Ian Fraser, *A Storehouse of Kingdom Things: Resources for the Faith Journey* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2010), 89.

3   http://www.giffordlectures.org/Browse.asp?PubID=TPSPOG

4   Ronald Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1998), 87.

5   John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God* (Gifford Lectures, 1961–62; London; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1962), 257 [and see n. 3 above, ch. XIII]; quoting John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London: Longman, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1873), 189 f.

6   Hugh MacDiarmid, "A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle" (1926), in *Complete Poems*, vol. 1 (eds. Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken; Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 88.

7   John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* (Gifford Lectures, 1952–53; London: Faber, 1953), 15.

8   Quoted in Fergus Kerr, *Thomas Aquinas: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 35.

9   Ian Fraser, *Reinventing Theology as the People's Work* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1988).

10 Augustine of Hippo, "Enarratio in Psalmum LXXII", 1. Translation of text in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 39 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956), 986.

11 Margaret and Ian Fraser, *Wind and Fire: The Spirit Reshapes the Church in Basic Christian Communities* (Dunblane: Basic Communities Resource Centre, 1986).

12 Hugh MacDiarmid, "Author's Note: On Being a Hippopotamus", in *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas* (London: Methuen, 1943), xv.

13 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 2, *Human Destiny* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 310.

14 Ian Fraser, *Many Cells, One Body: Stories from Small Christian Communities* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2003), 26.

15 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* [Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church], sec. 17.

16 Michael H. Crosby, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes: Matthew's Vision for the Church in an Unjust World* (2nd ed.; New York: Maryknoll, 2005), 8.