

1. Introduction

This little book has its origins in the St Aidan's Lectures, given at the invitation of Dr Nicholas Taylor in May 2018 in St Aidan's Episcopal Church, Clarkston near Glasgow, of which he is the Rector. These lectures are an established annual event in the city, an opportunity for members of the congregation, local people, visitors from the universities, schools and other churches in Glasgow to listen to talks on a variety of subjects within the life of the church that demand a kind of leisurely but acute form of attention to matters of cultural importance. Such attention is all too rare in the life of today's harassed, numerically declining and often self-absorbed church in our society. I thank Nicholas for his kind invitation and for granting me an opportunity that has, on my part, an undeniable degree of self-indulgence, but offers me an opportunity to reflect upon almost a lifetime – I can set it precisely at a period of fifty two years since I was fourteen years old when I fell in love with poetry (a story to be told shortly) – during which time the relationship between poetry and religion has been with me as an ever-abiding concern, stimulus and puzzle to the heart, mind and spirit.

Any writing, and perhaps the more so as one grows older, has an ineradicable autobiographical element in it, sometimes more obvious, sometimes less, and this book is no exception. The predominantly

Anglican nature of my taste in poetry will be quickly evident, not surprisingly since my father was an Anglican priest. I have been ordained and served in the Church of England and the Scottish Episcopal Church for more than forty years, and, incidentally, have a retired Anglican bishop as a brother-in-law. Anglicanism is, one might say, in my blood, heart and mind, and however critical I might be of the Anglican Communion, however perilously close I have been at times to jumping ship, I am still on board and will probably remain so until the end. One cannot but be aware of the failings of those institutions which one loves most dearly. But if I am also grateful to the University of Oxford for initiating me into whatever understanding of Christian theology I now possess, I am far more indebted to my earlier experience of reading English literature at Jesus College, Cambridge where I was taught by, among others, Raymond Williams, a man of great humanity and wisdom and no Christian belief. Behind him, I am indebted to a remarkable teacher of English at school, the late Laurie Jagger, who first opened my eyes to the poetry of Thomas Hardy, and after that Shakespeare, Milton and a miscellaneous group of twentieth century poets from W.B. Yeats to Stephen Spender, Philip Larkin and, rather unwillingly on my part, I have to admit, T.S. Eliot. Laurie, I know, influenced the lives of many people, some far more distinguished in the field of literature and the arts than I, in profound and often hidden ways. He could not go unmentioned in this book, over which his benign spirit rests in so many ways.

Thomas Hardy's poetry was my first love in English literature, and Hardy will have a whole chapter to himself very early in this book. My selection of five poets, not in any particular chronological order, will seem odd and arbitrary to most people, but they make perfectly good sense to me: Thomas Hardy, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Traherne, Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Geoffrey Hill. Finally, I will give some attention to the poets of the English pastoral tradition from Chaucer to R.S. Thomas and beyond. I make no apology for the a-historical order of the chapters. They reflect the history of my own poetic encounters with English poetry and religion, and the order makes sense to me.

Together, these poets reflect a variety of attitudes towards Anglicanism, both for and against, that sum up, to a degree, my own complex relationship with that tradition within the Christian

church. Not accidentally these chapters conclude with poets, most of them priests, within the enduring pastoral tradition that is, and must be, at the very heart of Anglicanism in its different forms. But it is Thomas Hardy who comes first, a writer described recently as ‘the churchiest skeptic’¹ – an individual who can never quite get away from the practice of a religious tradition, whose theological roots he had lost somewhere in the darkness of his gloomy soul, perhaps not surprisingly given the institutional rigidity of so much Victorian Anglicanism. But Hardy goes on, hoping it might be so and never entirely losing sight of the vision glorious. And it was Hardy who took me back a step in time to S.T. Coleridge, to whose thought and poetry I devoted my doctoral studies in Durham under the careful eye of Ann Loades. Coleridge was, perhaps with John Henry Newman, the greatest English Christian thinker of the nineteenth century, a troubled soul with moments of extraordinary poetic vision. Coleridge can be infuriating, but he was, finally, an honest man, and that is worth a great deal in our world.

In the seventeenth century, Thomas Traherne stands in complete contrast to these troubled nineteenth century souls. Much of his writings in both prose and verse have only recently been discovered and edited, and are still in the process of publication in a magnificent projected nine volume *Complete Works* edited by Jan Ross,² though you do not need to read very much of his poetry or prose to sense the essence of Traherne. He was one of those rare people who carry profound learning lightly, and he had an extraordinary capacity to see the unity of all created things under God. If Hardy’s late Victorian world is beginning to fall apart, Traherne, two centuries earlier, sees everything together as a whole, as Coleridge had also struggled to do in his aesthetic sense of ‘unity in multiteity’ that is nothing less than ‘the language of God himself, as uttered by Nature.’³ At the beginning of his unfinished *Commentaries of Heaven*, identified as his writing as late as 1981, Traherne proposes that:

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1. John Fawell, Hardy: ‘The Churchiest Skeptic’, ed. by Ineke Bocktin, Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec and Cathy Parc, *Poetry and Religion: Figures of the Sacred* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 169-180.
 2. *The Works of Thomas Traherne*. ed. by Jan Ross. 9 Volumes (Cambridge: Brewer 2005-). The work is projected to be completed by 2020.
 3. S.T. Coleridge, *Hints Towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life* (London: John Churchill, 1848] Facsimile (Farnborough: Gregg International, 1970), pp. 42, 17.

The Mysteries of Felicitie
 are opened
 and
 ALL THINGS
 Discovered
 to be
 Objects of Happiness.⁴

After Traherne we go back in time even further to the English Renaissance and to Sir Philip Sidney. In the very best sense of the term Sidney was a Christian gentleman. That latter title is perhaps not very fashionable these days, but it remains important that a poet and a Renaissance man, a translator of the Psalms and writer of love sonnets in the Petrarchan tradition should represent for us that necessary figure of the 'gentle – man'. The same quality of gentleness, perhaps, cannot be so easily said of my last individual poet and the most recent, Sir Geoffrey Hill. I never met Hill, but I somehow feel that I know him through the saintly medium of Peter Walker, Bishop of Ely, to whom I owe so much, and it was Peter who introduced me to the difficult treasures of Hill's profoundly religious verse. Hill's poems written between 1952 and 2012 are also now available in one large, splendid volume edited by Kenneth Haynes.⁵

Finally, I cannot omit the chapter on the tradition of English pastoral poetry that has its beginnings in Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Poor Parson of the Town', and remains flourishing in a quiet way today. For this we should be thankful. It is attractive to me for its quality of hiddenness, even its uselessness in worldly terms, an ecclesial virtue that we are sometimes in danger of losing in the Anglican tradition as it now suffers the seductions of missionary ambition and the zeal of bureaucratic efficiency. The way of love is quieter, less anxious, perhaps.

But I do not want this to be just another book on Christianity and English poetry. In one of my earliest books on the relationship between literature and theology, I wrote a chapter on the complex critical tradition in English that relates poetry to religion, from Sidney, through Dr Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century, up to Lord David Cecil, the editor of the first *Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, T.S. Eliot and more recent critics like my former colleague in Durham, the late Ruth

⁴ *The Works of Thomas Traherne*, Volume 2 (Cambridge: Brewer, 2007), p. 1.

⁵ Geoffrey Hill, *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*, ed. by Kenneth Haynes, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Etchells.⁶ I will come back to that reflection in my 'Conclusion' to this book. The relationship between poetry and religion is never easy, ranging from Samuel Johnson's complete separation of poetry from the matter of religion – a view descended from such anxieties as Andrew Marvell's fear that Milton's biblical *Paradise Lost* would bring about the 'ruin of sacred truths'⁷ – to, on the other hand, the complete merger of poetry with the stuff of religion, prayer and perhaps even theology. The reflections on five English poets in the present book are not in any way supposed to be 'prayerful' or even particularly religious. My position is very different from that of Ruth Etchells who once wrote in a little book entitled *Praying with the English Poets* (1990):

the mystery of prayer has this in common with the mystery of poetry, that their language ranges from the commonplace and the (literally) mundane, to fervency, exaltation, and rapt stillness. Noisy as gongs, quiet as breath, musical, abrasive, an undertone, a declamation.⁸

It is not that there is no truth in this, of the kind to be found when we are reading the poetry of George Herbert, and certainly Thomas Traherne or Henry Vaughan. (It is something oddly more difficult to find outside the seventeenth century.) But underlying the present book is a very much more difficult and indeed challenging sense of this complex relationship between poetry and religion.

The reason that I have worried about these connections between theology (and religion) and literature for most of my life is because I think that their relationship is absolutely necessary, but at the same time highly problematic and even obscure. First of all, there is great danger in simply confusing the two, as many people tend to do. Poets may or may not be particularly 'religious', but often the most 'religious' of them might be writing in deep rebellion against, or in an understandable rejection of, such things as churches or other institutions of religion, their beliefs and demands. Hardy was like that. Others, like Traherne, are the complete opposite of this in their sense of poetry and divinity. As regards theology, poetry is certainly more

6 David Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion: An Introduction*, 2nd edn, (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 10-14.

7 Andrew Marvell, 'On Mr. Milton's *Paradise Lost*', *The Poems*, ed. by Hugh MacDonald (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 64.

8 Ruth Etchells, *Praying with the English Poets* (London: SPCK, 1990), pp. vii-viii.

fundamental and anterior to all possible theological articulation. One way of describing it is to construe poetry as a prolegomenon to religion and theology. It is a field or space into which religion might be called as appropriate, though often in strange and, to itself, unaccustomed ways. What I am talking about is something like the French thinker Maurice Blanchot's idea of *l'espace littéraire*, and there are few thinkers more important for the beginning of the study of literature and theology than Blanchot. It was he, after all, who recognised that the tragedy of Kafka was that he was an inveterate man of literature who had a finally hopeless preoccupation with the religious demand of salvation. Kafka's passion is literary, wrote Blanchot, but salvation is an enormous preoccupation with him, all the stronger because it is hopeless, and all the more hopeless because it is totally uncompromising.⁹ I think that I can understand that and it explains to me at least why reading Kafka is both so painful and so necessary. Of this *espace littéraire*, Blanchot wrote:

A book . . . has a centre which attracts it. This centre is not fixed, but it is displaced by the pressure of the book and circumstances of its composition. Yet it is also a fixed centre which, if it is genuine, displaces itself, while remaining the same and becoming always more central, more hidden, more uncertain and more imperious.¹⁰

It is this tension between the unfixed and hidden centre, shifted by the pressure of writing, and that centre which is necessarily fixed with its imperious demands, that is so important. In this tension, literature, and above all poetry, far from being a 'handmaid of piety' (as John Wesley once called it in his 1780 Preface to *Hymns for the People Called Methodists*) is the very opposite, but yet the site within which religion and theology are endlessly questioned and reformed.

I mentioned at the beginning that I was fortunate enough to be a student at Cambridge when Raymond Williams, at the height of his fame as an intellectual figure in the New Left, was teaching there in the late '60s and early '70s. One of his most prominent students at Jesus College, a little ahead of me in time, was Terry Eagleton, and Terry's recent work *Culture and the Death of God* (2014) was very much a formative influence

9 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 57.

10 Frontispiece to *The Space of Literature*.

upon this present book and the Glasgow lectures that lie behind as they were being brought to birth. Eagleton reminds us that since the European Enlightenment, and in our own European age of drastically shrinking churches and widespread public neglect of traditional faith, religion is actually extremely difficult to eradicate or even ignore. Thomas Hardy, of course, knew that long ago, and that is another reason why I begin with him. On the first page of his book Eagleton writes:

I start by showing how God survived the rationalism of the eighteenth century, and conclude with his dramatic reappearance in our own supposedly faithless age.¹¹

Furthermore, it is as well to keep reminding ourselves that religion is by no means necessarily a good thing. If genuine atheists are more often than not rather reluctant atheists, fundamentalists of any kind – Christian, Islamic or whatever – are the inevitable products of a cultural situation that has suffered for some time from a toxic disingenuousness. Western liberalism since the eighteenth century, both in religious and political terms, has actually only got itself largely to blame for the rigid, dogmatic and unlovely violence of the fundamentalist and the equally unlovely amorality of our present so-called political ‘populism’. Truth is never an easy concept, and religion in its many guises in western societies in these last few hundred years has had an uphill task. Its demise as a liberal enterprise cannot be a matter for much surprise. To start with, it has been overburdened (or overburdened itself) with its task as our moral gatekeeper, a responsibility that should begin much closer to home simply in our sense of being human. Eagleton puts it this way:

If religious faith were to be released from the burden of furnishing social orders with a set of rationales for their existence, it might be free to rediscover its true purpose as a critique of all such politics.¹²

11 Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), p. viii.

12 Ibid. p. 207. It was a point made in a rather different tone by Richard Holloway, the former Bishop of Edinburgh, in his very readable book *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion out of Ethics* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999). I applaud heartily the paradox that drives Richard’s argument, that ‘our attempt to love morally as though there were no God might be the final test of faith.’ It might, indeed, ‘Be God’s greatest triumph’. (p. 5.) Here we must delve our deepest humanity – and poetry is often very good at that.

That is very true, and as a clergyman, I am sick to death of being asked to state a *position* – on firm theological grounds – in matters of gender, the ending of life, and so on. We somehow feel sure that theology (and behind it, in some mysterious, unintelligible way, the Bible) will come up with the final answer, embalmed in history and tradition. More often than not it won't and it shouldn't. Such theological entrancements are generally simply ways of maintaining the *status quo* and they have a nasty tendency to distance us from our proper humanity. As Eagleton puts it in another, earlier book, *After Theory*, the Yahweh of the opening chapters of the Book of Isaiah thunders his exasperation at his 'pathologically cultic people' retorting that instead 'he will be known for what he is . . . when they see the stranger being made welcome, the hungry being filled with good things, and the rich being sent empty away.'¹³ When we learn to become properly human then we shall begin to know something of God.

I end my brief encounter with Eagleton's work with his own closing words in *Culture and the Death of God* on the impropriety of calling in 'supernatural support' for 'common-or-garden morality', and regarding:

The grossly inconvenient news that our forms of life must undergo radical dissolution if they are to be reborn as just and compassionate communities. The sign of that dissolution is a solidarity with the poor and the powerless. It is here that a new configuration of faith, culture and politics might be born.¹⁴

It is not just that religion won't go away – and if we think it has then it usually reappears all too often in very nasty forms. Religion is something that needs to be continually altered and reflected upon in endlessly changing and profoundly human cultural circumstances. It begins in our humanity in all its frailty and not in any bold statements about God. Look at the beginning of Psalm 22 (which Jesus speaks from on the cross¹⁵) or Psalm 130 – *De Profundis*, a cry from the abyss. The point is that in these deeply 'religious' moments God is *not* there, and so I am not here saying anything much about God, at least to start with. I happen to think (and have always thought) that

13 Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. 175.

14 *Culture and the Death of God*, p. 208.

15 Mark 15: 34, Matthew 27: 46.

Nietzsche, in his wildly and often extravagantly 'poetic' way, got it just about right in *The Gay Science* (1863) in his parable about the death of one particular god – though it depends, of course, very much upon what you think you mean by the idea of God. There's the rub, and I will leave it there for the moment. In due course the poetry can speak for itself.¹⁶

In my experience, theologians and others who subscribe in some sense to the idea of the death of God are almost always the most deeply God-haunted people. It is very often in the words and writings of poets, whether believers or not, that such hauntings are most profoundly and disturbingly expressed. Here, I suppose, we are at the very heart of this book. The poet is a person of ambivalence. In 1798, Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 'Kubla Khan' famously warns us to fear the poet with his flashing eyes and floating hair:

Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.¹⁷

The poet is to be feared, but it is because the poet alone has returned to the Paradise Garden from which we have been banished, and that is, after all, just a dream. The poet is also to be loved. Here we are at the meeting point of the sacred and the profane in the mystery of words. Anyone – and it is most of us at some point or other – who has felt both the seductive pull and the dislike of 'religion' at some time or another, will find in the poet the splendours and the miseries of the religious life with or without God, and its endless, necessary and glorious fascinations.

As I have said, the choice of these five poets in this book is entirely personal. There could have been easier and perhaps more straightforward choices, made from, perhaps, George Herbert to W.B. Yeats. The poetry that you like and resonate with, rather after the manner of people, is to some extent accidental and personal. I can

16 I have long felt myself drawn close to Tom Altizer's sense of the radical Christian, the Christian 'who believe[s] that the Church and Christendom have sealed Jesus in his tomb.' Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 182.

17 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. by Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 298.

well imagine that Philip Sidney is not to everyone's taste these days – he does seem to us rather formal, remote, and a bit stand-offish. But he speaks to me and I have known him for a very long time. And you do not choose whom you fall in love with. You just know it when it happens. The demands of Christian theology and the canon of Scripture are quite strict and in some ways limited. The canon of poetry (as indeed of all literature) is far more expansive and much more broadly hospitable. It doesn't actually matter if you find you do not really like Sidney's poetry and his Psalms that take you back in a particular manner, as we shall see, to the poetry of the Bible. There are plenty of other poets ready to invite you to taste and see. But at least pause a while and let me introduce him to you, perhaps for the first time or perhaps as someone forgotten since school days. Listen to why he is important for me, and try to understand why, for me, reading the *Sidney Psalter* of Sir Philip and Mary Sidney is a way into something like 'religion' because here the Psalms are embraced by a certain English poetics. And, as with people (or music), you can grow to like some poetry that you find difficult at first.

Many years ago I read, more from a sense of duty than anything else, Harold Bloom's large book on *The Western Canon* (1994). It is certainly worth a read, like most of Bloom's writings, but there is a tone about it that is, I believe, profoundly wrong. It suffers from too much nostalgia, which is always very enervating, and tends towards a kind of intellectual and cultural élitism that is off-putting and ultimately deadly when you are trying to encourage people to read poetry and they begin by being rather afraid of it. I have tried to avoid both of these sins that particularly afflict academics and often also people of a 'religious persuasion', not least the clergy. I have always felt that the religious life is not something that is achieved, but something towards which, at best, we can say we are moving. If you want to use a religious term, then my encounters with poetry are, at best, most appropriately described as moments of salvation,¹⁸ experiences of healing that bind up the wounds and keep us on the road. Poetry is the best thing for such healing, its salt cleansing even while it irritates, its balm also as smooth as olive oil when needed. Only through the poetic process does the stuff of religion begin to make real sense to me.

18 I am thinking here of Primo Levi's collection of stories from within Auschwitz, *Moments of Reprieve* (1981, English translation, 1986)

Very recently I reviewed a book of essays published posthumously. They were the writings of a former student of mine who achieved her doctorate in Glasgow University when she was a sprightly seventy-five years old. Kay Carmichael's *It Takes a Lifetime to Become Yourself* (2017) was edited from her papers and poems by her husband, David Donnison. Kay was damaged terribly in her childhood by the church and never got over that trauma. But she was a deeply religious person for all that – I mean a deeply committed person in every sense of the word, and at her most heart-felt moments she expressed herself in poetry. She was not a great poet, but that does not matter. We should all write poetry from time to time. One of the tributes for Kay's funeral described her as 'a naughty, dignified, compassionate rebel with a cause'.¹⁹ It struck me at the time as a perfect description of the Jesus Christ whom I try to follow, though it might be better just to think of Kay as herself and not confuse her with impossible precedents that she certainly would not have liked very much. The book that emerged from her doctoral study was entitled *Sin and Forgiveness: New Responses in a Changing World* (2003). It was an enquiry into how sin (which is different from immorality) and forgiveness should be understood in a post-Christian society, grounded in Kay's assertion that the Christian paradigm of sin and forgiveness was generally too simplistic, too 'doctrinal' and too determined.

Like many teachers I have learnt far more from my students than I suspect they ever learnt from me. I go back continually to the poets from theology, because they know very well that life and all of its issues are far more complex, far more nuanced and often far less simplistic than anything theology can finally deal with. Of course we need rules, but all rules are there to be broken in the end, even if it means taking the punishment as a result.

There are plenty of excellent books on poetry and religion, dealing with the power of the imagination, the matter of spirituality, the question of symbol, and so on. Most of them, I admit, I find a bit dull and predictable, so I won't mention any names here, but you will find a few listed in the bibliography at the end of this book. These brief chapters are, I hope, a little different. They reflect a love affair with poetry where meaning and problems have their beginnings. Here 'religion' is paused

¹⁹ Kay Carmichael, *It Takes a Lifetime to Become Yourself*, ed. by David Donnison (Edinburgh: Scotland Street Press, 2017), p. 231. The words are of Anthony (Lord) Lester.

for a moment, though it is really what the whole thing is about. We start in the poet's world and in what W.B. Yeats called, in 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', that rag and bone shop of the heart where truth begins to appear in the beauty and the confusion - and then we go forward again, hoping it might be so.

SAMPLE