

LITERATURE AND  
THEOLOGY

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# Editorial

It has to be recognised that talk of ‘theo-poetics’ in general, and particularly with regard to the interpretation of scripture and theological discussion, is still a fairly recent development. It springs from the intersection of theology and literary studies, similar in this to ‘biblical spirituality’, which springs from the intersection between biblical studies and spirituality, and ‘theological aesthetics’, which grows at the intersection of theology and all forms of aesthetics, arts, literature, music, etc.

The interactive meeting ground of literary biblical studies, theology, and spirituality is precisely theo-poetics or a theory of the spiritually transformative power of biblical texts as texts, actualised through a certain kind of reading or interpretation ... It would probably be accurate to say that theo-poetics is the literary or textual face of the wider concern with theological aesthetics as an approach to spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

The reason for the growing importance of the mediation of aesthetics in the practice of theology lies in the decadence of the grand narratives and the fragility of political discourse. The symbolic and the pre-rational come closer to and interact better with experience – including here religious experience – than with rational and speculative experience. And, according to the thinkers that are working in this area of studies today, human nature and human societies are more motivated and intrigued by images and fables than by ideas.

Although theology is principally an intellectual activity, the work of the great theologians was always influenced by imagination. The same happened at the beginning of all religions; they began with stories and rituals. As Amos Wilder neatly puts it, ‘Before the message there must be the vision, before the vision the hymn, before the prose the poem.’<sup>2</sup>

Faith must therefore be read and seen through aesthetic lenses. But we

should not think of this as an activity for rich people, middle-class people with time on their hands. The faith as lived by the poor and by indigenous peoples gives rise to a liberating theological aesthetics with great subversive potential that can reshape modern and post-modern concepts, symbols and meanings. Together with philosophy and the social sciences, then, literature and art are today a necessary and increasingly important hermeneutical mediation for theology.

For this reason this issue of *Concilium* presents this new hermeneutics to its readers through various eyes and perspectives. The first of the six articles that make up Part One comes from Scotland, where Professor Heather Watson analyses autobiography as a literary, spiritual and theological genre. From Argentina we have Professor Cecilia Avenatti de Palumbo, ex-president of the Latin American Association for Literature and Theology, writing about literature as a theological mediation for theology. Professor Luce López-Baralt, from the University of Puerto Rico, a great specialist in comparative mysticism and a noted Arabist, brings mysticism and literature together through the inspired verse of St John of the Cross. From Portugal Professor José Tolentino Mendonça, of the Portuguese Catholic University, writes about the bible and its interpretation as infinite writing. This survey could not omit Dante's theology, on which there are specialists all over the world, including Professor Vittorio Montemaggi, of Notre Dame. And finally Professor Luiz Gustavo Meléndez Guerrero, a young researcher in the religious studies department of the Ibero-American university in Mexico City, tackles classic themes that are always present when literature – and theology – are discussed: eros, poetry and the body.

Part Two of this issue presents voices from the five continents reflecting on the interaction between theology and literature in their region. Carmaña Navia Velasco from Colombia speaks for Latin America. Mayra Rivera, from the United States Latino community and author of the important book *Poetics of the Flesh*, offers an important and original reflection on the poetics of survival of Caribbeans in exile. Professor Jean-Baptiste Sèbe from France gives some of the best examples European theology's long and solid dialogue with literature. From Asia, Huang Po-Ho brings *Concilium* readers the fascinating experience of Mandarin literature and its theological potential. Finally, from Africa Stan Chu Ilo, stresses the importance for theology of the popular reading of the bible.

## Editorial

Part Three, the Forum, presents short theologico-literary texts that give specific examples of what theory and reflection have attempted to say in the earlier Parts. Some flesh and blood ‘theo-poets’ have been selected, and they offer us their inspiring and illuminating theo-poetics; in each case there is a short introduction. The writers are: the prophet and poet bishop Pedro Casaldáliga, from Brazil, the priest poet from Solentiname, Nicaragua, Ernesto Cardenal, and the pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote poems in the prison from which he went to the gallows. There is also writing from the US monk and writer Thomas Merton, who was fascinated by Asia, the French scientist and mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and the Brazilian poet Adélia Prado.

We hope that this issue of *Concilium* will encourage those who are currently engaged in theological research and teaching to venture into aesthetics and especially literature. There they will certainly find new inspiration that may enrich their thinking in times in which we still are still feeling the consequences of a long winter in the Church.

*Translated by Francis McDonagh*

## Notes

1. Sandra Schneiders, ‘Biblical Spirituality’, Andre T. Lincoln (ed.), *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually*, Eugene, OR, 2013, pp 128–50, quotation from p. 145. Also available online: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0020964316655108>.
2. Amos Niven Wilder, *Grace Confounding*, Philadelphia, PA, 1972, Introduction, p. ix.