

The Exegete and the Theologian: Is Collaboration Possible?

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Abstract: *This article ponders the possibility of collaboration between the exegete and the theologian. In reflecting on a particular instance of collaboration focused on the Gospel of John, it suggests a judicious application of Lonergan's "four dimensions of meaning" will be a useful tool in expressing the cognitive (objective reality), constitutive (identity-forming), communicative (community forming), and effective (world-forming) bearing of the Biblical text.*

*My specialisation, along with an interest in interdisciplinary studies, is what is unsatisfactorily termed "systematic theology". Some years ago, I collaborated with the distinguished Johannine scholar, Francis J. Moloney, SDB, in producing the book, *Experiencing of God in the Gospel of John*.¹ These methodological reflections owe much to the experience of collaboration.*

Key Words: exegete; Lonergan; Moloney; cognitive meaning; constitutive meaning; communicative meaning; effective meaning

THE METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology*² has addressed the question of how the ever-pullulating specialisations of this historical era might find common cause – but without each losing its own integrity, or pretending to a totalitarian self-sufficiency. Lonergan identified some eight "functional specialties"³ in his concern to present a "framework of collaborative creativity".⁴ His method was designed to serve particular specialisation, and yet to be sufficiently flexible to enable researchers, exegetes, historians dealing with the past to share in one collaborative enterprise with those who are more future-directed, that is, those facing the demands and possibilities of transforming culture in the interests of a larger appropriation of the Gospel. Lonergan's methodological framework does not intrude a philosophical, epistemological or doctrinal rigidity on the creativity of theology. It appeals to something much closer to home by inviting scholars, whatever their specific concerns, to take notice of the workings of their own minds in their coming to know anything at

¹ Anthony J. Kelly, CSsR and Francis J. Moloney, SDB, *Experiencing God in the Gospel of John* (New York: Paulist, 2003).

² Bernard J. F. Lonergan, SJ, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971).

³ Lonergan, *Method*, 125-148.

⁴ Lonergan, *Method*, xi.

all. While in its Christian specification theology finds its focus on Christian experience and tradition, it is firmly based on an anthropological datum, namely, the self-transcendence of the conscious subject.⁵ In this regard, human consciousness unfolds through the four inter-related levels of experience, understanding, judgment and decision, none of which is irrelevant to the work of exegetes or theologians, above all if they wish to collaborate in any project.⁶

THE PROXIMATE CONTEXT: MEANING

While such methodological matters are largely implicit in *Experiencing God*, the category of meaning figures quite explicitly throughout this book.⁷ The nature of meaning, though a pervasive category in the human sciences, may seem so obvious and general to the exegete as to scarcely merit attention. Yet, just as obviously, the Gospel of John is a textual field of meaning. It emerges from the past, witnessing to a once lived and still living field of meaning arising out of singular events and encounters. The biblical writer had once to ask not only what does all this mean, but also, how to mean and communicate it.

In some striking sense, Jesus Christ “meant the world” to the early community of believers. “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1) and that creative, enlivening and enlightening Word (John 1:3-4) “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). It enters into the world of human meaning. In course of the Gospel narrative, the meaning of the Word incarnate is expressed linguistically as, say, a question (John 1:38), a conversation (e.g., John 1:47-51), a command (e.g., John 13:34), a judgment (e.g., John 5:27) and a prayer (e.g., John 17). It is carried in symbols such as light (John 8:12), bread (John 6:35), the good shepherd (John 10:11), the true vine (John 15:1), to name but some. It is dramatically instanced in works of healing as with the man born blind (9:13-39) and in interpersonal gestures such as Jesus washing the disciples’ feet (John 13:1-11). It generates its own art as in the prologue to the Gospel and the discerning arrangement of Gospel narrative itself. This complex of meaning culminates in the subversive glory of the Cross as it incarnates the meanings of all the words, gestures, relationships and symbols that anticipated it.

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF MEANING

The Johannine writings richly evoke manifold character of the experience from which they arise. But when the phrase “experiencing God” appears in the title of a book, the critical reader must be immediately suspicious of the elusive term, “experience”. Can the interpreter express anything more than what the Johannine writings say *about* God – for example, about how Jesus is related to the Father, how the Spirit is related to them both, how the consequent doctrine was received by various groups. I would suggest, however, that such a reader should be cautioned about having too abstract a notion of experience, as

⁵ Lonergan, *Method*, 6-19.

⁶ For other possibilities, especially regarding history, see Ben F. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship. A Primer in Critical Realist Hermeneutics* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994) and Anthony J. Kelly, “The Historical Jesus and Human Subjectivity: A Response to a Recent Suggestion”, in *Australian Lonergan Workshop II*, Matthew C. Ogilvie and William J. Danaher, eds. (Drummoyne, NSW: Novum Organum Press, 2002) 151-179.

⁷ Kelly and Moloney, *Experiencing God...*, 55-60; 92-96; 136-140; 395-405.

though it were detachable from meaning in some elemental way. Experience is always potentially or actually meaningful. Experience provokes questions of meaning; the fact and content of experience is recognised by meaning and shaped by it into intelligible forms. Without meaning, the experience could not be registered, known or spoken of. On the other hand, to reduce the data of the Johannine experience merely to catalogue of objective truths or to the articulation of new doctrines about God would be rather jejune. There are elements of personal transformation, new imperatives toward community, and new forms of ethical conduct inherent in the experience.

Following Lonergan's sketch of these four dimensions of meaning,⁸ I suggest that such a manifold of inter-related dimensions of meaning is a useful tool in elaborating the compact experience of the truth of God as found, for instance, in the Johannine writings. These various dimensions point to the density of past experience of the Johannine community to suggest ways in which it can be personally appropriated in this far distant time, and so transposed into the present cultural situation in a productive fashion.

For the Word to become flesh is to enter into the world of human meaning, with its questions, answers, conflicts, fears, failures and hopes. The first words of the Word in the Gospel are a question, "What are you looking for?" (John 1:38). That question can be answered in four inter-related ways as the believer seeks out:

- (1) The ultimate truth that summons and judges us in the chiaroscuro of our experience of the world = the objectively cognitive meaning of the Gospel;
- (2) The truth of who we are as it informs our identity as conscious subjects = constitutive meaning of faith in Christ;
- (3) The truth of how we can and should belong together in mutual responsibility = communicative meaning of the Word;
- (4) Truth in action, in its world-transforming power = effective meaning of the Gospel.

Cognitive Meaning

While not implying any temporal ordering of these dimensions of meaning and the questions related to each, we can first treat the most obvious dimension of meaning, namely, the *cognitive*. The adult no longer lives in a child's world of immediacy. What is real is not reducible to what is already out there to be seen. Reality is known through the actuation of all our capacities to experience, imagine, understand, reflect and judge. Knowing is, therefore, a compound of activities, including, while at the same time transcending, what sense, imagination, feeling and their various projections can deliver. The cognitive dimension of meaning implies a definable content grasped in an objective judgment. It is inherent in faith's answer to the questions, Who is the one true God? How is this God revealed? How is the divine will to be discerned? In this cognitive dimension, the Word enters our experience as an objective *datum*, provoking questions, and demanding an assent to the reality of the God he reveals. In this regard, it can recognise

⁸ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 76-81. See also his "Dimensions of Meaning", *Collection: Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, Volume 4, Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (eds.) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 232-243.

things known that were previously unknown (e.g., John 16:29), and come to the realisation of the need for further illumination (John 16:12-14; 1 John 3:2).

As the Gospel leads its readers further into the depth and breadth of the Christian experience of God, it moves along lines shaped by the disconcerting otherness that Jesus brings into the situation. It looks back and upward – to his origin with the Father; and out – to the scope of what the Father is bringing about. The experience of God gives rise to an enriched *cognitive* sense of the God of Christian faith. Take one example drawn from John 5. Though the one God of Israel is working in all that happens, the singularity of Jesus' witness to this "one God" discloses a unique form of communication and communion between the Father and the Son. It presumes a reciprocity of consciousness between the Father who unceasingly works, and the Son who also works. Not unexpectedly, such an implication provoked theological outrage (John 5:17). Undifferentiated monotheism allows for no self-communication, either within the divine realm, or beyond it to the world. God is not only one, but ultimately alone. To the degree such a presupposition goes unquestioned, Jesus' filial experience of God is a scandal. As a result, "the Jews" see him not only as a breaker of the Sabbath law, but also as blasphemously making himself God's equal by "calling God his own Father" (John 5:18).

This charge occasions the expression of a cognitively rich and nuanced theology on the part of the Johannine author. His frame of reference always includes the utterly "Father-ward" relationality of Jesus' existence and action (John 5:19, 30, 43). And yet the Father's "Son-ward" communication is stated in various ways: "The Father loves the Son and shows him all he himself is doing" (John 5:20). This "showing" includes the "work" of raising the dead and giving life "to whom he will" (John 5:21, 26). Still, it is not only a matter of the Father's *showing*, but *giving* to the Son. This paternal giving to the Son includes the gifts of "all judgment" (John 5:22), of having "life in himself" (John 5:26), and the "authority to execute judgment" (John 5:27), along with "the works" that are his to accomplish (John 5:36). While Jesus bears witness to the Father from whom he comes, the Father both sends and bears witness to the Son (John 5:37). Even though he receives all from the Father and is unreservedly surrendered to the Father's will, Jesus remains a free agent; and his relationship to the Father is acted out in freedom (John 5:17). In one respect, the Father "rests" while the Son "works", for "the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22). In this regard, the Father not only gives, but yields, to the Son the properly divine activity of judging. In so yielding and giving over judgment to the Son, the divine purpose is "that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father" (John 5:23).

The intentional reciprocity and the mutuality of relationships here described will give rise, in the centuries to come, to a full blown trinitarianism of the post-Nicene doctrine. Here it is sufficient to observe the striking cognitive development in John's presentation. Jesus' personal action and authority cannot be considered apart from the Father who sends, loves, shows, gives and even yields to the Son. In this, the Gospel transforms former religious and philosophical notions of undifferentiated divine unity.

Constitutive Meaning

Secondly, meaning functions in a *constitutive* manner. The meaning of the Word affects the experience of human identity. In this dimension, the Word of God "informs" the sense

of self. It not only speaks about God, but forms a “Godly identity” in its light. This meaning “constitutes” believers in an awareness of being “the children of God”, and recipients of the gift of the truth. The believer enters into the divine meaning to find a new self in the light of what God is. The whole horizon of Christian existence is radically affected. Living this identity-shaping dimension of meaning, we can read the Gospel with the question, What new identity do we have as believers in the light of the God who is self-revealed in Jesus Christ?

Although the Spirit will come as gift, witness and guide to serve the Father’s communication to the world, the disciples still have to contend with their own confusions and sorrow. With the work of God still in progress, they have little sense of the unity and direction of the divine purpose and the phases of its timing (John 16:15-19). Their experience is determined by the opaque finality of death – the silence, darkness, defeat, and terminal separation from the Jesus who is leaving them by going to the Father. Still outside of the Father’s house and lacking the benefit of the Spirit’s guidance, they interpret any promised “little time” as the long time of death – when the dead stay dead, and human fate is wrapped in dread and obscurity. They have no eyes to look forward to that visibility of the glorified Jesus which will result from his going to the Father. They cannot comprehend his promised return as a source of life outside the limits of death. In the history of faith, they are not the last to express the limitations of both their vision and their patience: “we do not know what he means” (John 16:18b).

The dispirited sadness of the disciples is met with the assurance of Jesus as he moves toward his goal. At the depths of apparent defeat, and in the face of the world’s celebration of victory, a great transformation will take place. The glorification of Jesus will mean a transformation of the consciousness and very imagination of his disciples: “Amen, amen I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy” (John 16:20). A world-transforming birth is about to occur. For, in the hour determined by the Father, new life is being brought forth. Genuine believers, modeling their faith on the Mother of Jesus (John 2:4-5), will participate in a joyous birth. Their present sorrows are not symptoms of terminal distress but signs of the travail inherent in the experience of being born from above to abundant life (John 10:10). Despite the inevitable darkness of history, the light will bring its joyous evidence. The cross will reveal the glory of God; and the life that streams from the Crucified will lead to its consummation in perfect joy. The followers of Jesus will experience their lives unfolding in the sight of Jesus – “I will see you again” (John 16:22) – in a kind of eye-to-eye contact unclouded by the darkness of death and failure. The experience of joy is not moved indefinitely into the future. The journey of faith in time, whatever its conflicts, will unfold in the presence of the gracious Father. Believers will no longer experience themselves as outsiders to the communion existing between the Father and the Son, needing to address Jesus in order to contact the Father. Through Jesus they will be drawn into an immediate relationship with the Father, “for the Father himself loves you” (John 16:27). They will have peace in Jesus and in his victory over the world (John 16:33). Christian identity is based on intimacy with God and in the joy and peace of Jesus. In the joy of life as it has been revealed, believers will come to know themselves as involved in the conversation of heaven, as when Jesus prays to the Father, “They are yours and you gave them to me” (John 17:6).

Communicative Meaning

Thirdly, meaning of the Word is *communicative*. A community of common experience, conviction and identity is the outcome of communication concerning the ultimately meaningful. The followers of Christ are “meant” into a co-existence founded in their shared experience of God. The communicative dimension of meaning is clearly of prime importance in all the New Testament, as well as in the Johannine writings. The very choice of the name “the Word” in the first verse of the prologue of the Gospel underlines the communicative meaning which pervades the Gospel right to its end (John 20:31). At a moment of climactic intensity, Jesus asks the Father that the disciples and their successors be one as he and the Father are one (John 17:20-24).

The communicative dimension of meaning is elaborated even further in 1 John. It witnesses to a communion, the *koinonia*, which unites present believers with the witnesses of the past, “... from the beginning” (1 John 1:1; 3:11), with communities in other places (2 and 3 John), and, most of all, with the Father and the Son (1 John 2:23-24). The field of communication in question has historical,⁹ geographical,¹⁰ interpersonal,¹¹ inter-generational,¹² transcendent,¹³ and cosmic¹⁴ dimensions. The communicative meaning of God in 1 John includes past witnesses, present relationships with those both near and far, communion with the Father and the Son, and, more implicitly, a relationship with the world itself.

Effective Meaning

Lastly, the meaning of the Word is *effective*. Jesus Christ, and the God revealed through him, means Christians to transform the world in new and hopeful ways. The experience of God is effectively expressed in the supreme example of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-11), and in the new commandment to love as he loved (John 13:34). The effective meaning of God entails following him who is “the way” (John 14:6), as it affects every aspect of existence. So central to the Johannine experience of God is this effective dimension that the three other dimensions of divine meaning would collapse if the meaning of faith is not effective. To pretend to love God while hating a member of the community is to be in darkness (1 John 2:9, 11). We cannot love the invisible God without loving the all-too visible human other (1 John 4:20). Hence, the exhortation, “Let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). Believers must walk in the light (1 John 1:7), confess their sins (1 John 1:9), obey the commandments (1 John 2:3; 5:2-3) and do the Father’s will (1 John 2:17).

All this is to suggest that these classic texts of Christian faith “word” the experience of God in accord with these four dimensions. They are interwoven and interpenetrate in a holographic manner within the density of the faith’s experience of divine life, love and communication. To ignore this manifold meaning would result in being locked into a

⁹ Cf. 1 John 1:1-3; 2:1, 7, 8, 12, 21, 26; 4:6; 5:13.

¹⁰ Cf. 2 John: 1, 10-11; 3 John:1, 5-8.

¹¹ As in 1 John 1:7; 4:20.

¹² 1 John 2:12-14.

¹³ See 1 John 1:3; 2:23-24; 5:11-12.

¹⁴ Cf. John 3:16; 1 John 2:2; 4:9, 14; 5:4-5.

literalism of an extreme kind. On the other hand, a consideration of these four dimensions can prove to be a valuable tool in interpreting the experience of God in the Johannine writings and for structuring collaboration between the theologian and the exegete.

CONCLUSION

But there larger question remains. How can this rich and manifold fund of meaning be transposed into the present context of Church and world? The cognitive context has been immeasurably extended compared to the world of the past. Our knowledge of the world, for instance, has now to include data pointing to the fifteen billion years of cosmic emergence, and the three and half billion year evolution of life on this planet. Planet Earth circles the sun, a medium-sized star in a galaxy of some hundred billion such stars are said to shine, in a cosmos of perhaps a hundred billion galaxies. Moreover, our known world includes religions and spiritual paths beyond the imagination of the Johannine world. When Mt Gerizim in Samaria and the Temple of Jerusalem were significant markers in the religious topography of the Gospel, what now of Benares or Mecca or Nairobi or Kyoto or New York, or the forty-thousand year history of Aboriginal inhabitation of this country? How, in this far larger spiritual context, is the Johannine *Logos* the all-creative, enlightening and life-giving utterance of God? How does it dwell among us when “we” are an inexpressibly larger community?

Then, the constitutive meaning of Christian identity with characteristics of peace and joy, life and communion with God has moved into a new context. Once Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and evolutionary biology have had their say and communicated their respective “suspicions”, in what does our deepest identity reside? Given the phenomenon of the “unemployed self” within the technological world of our experience, where does “the Father” find those worshipers in “spirit and truth” (John 4:23) he is seeking out?

The evidence suggests that those early Johannine communities suffered a special grief, and felt beleaguered and isolated, at enmity with the world – which, however hostile, was still understood to be the object of God’s love. Those small, fragile communities have now died into the Great Church, which, in turn, is located in an unimaginably greater world – of both promise and threat. How does light and truth of the Gospel continue to communicate, inspiring – and risking – modes of communication and solidarity in ways that would have been too much to bear for those early Christian generations?

Finally, the inescapable imperatives of Christian love which are such a striking aspect of the way of life witnessed to in the Johannine writings, have now to develop into a much broader effectiveness. Loving one’s fellow believers must meet not only the (more Synoptic) challenge of loving one’s suffering neighbour, but also of loving the “neighbourhood” in this time of threatened ecology and pressing environmental concern.

In an expanding theology,¹⁵ each of the dimensions of meaning can be productively applied not only to the Johannine writings, but also to all our Biblical texts in ways that can supplement the splendid achievement of scripture scholars, and assist in a fruitful collaboration between them and theologians.

¹⁵ See Anthony J. (Tony) Kelly, *An Expanding Theology. Faith in a World of Connections* (Sydney: E. J.Dwyer, 1993), and revised (November 2003) Web version: <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/staffhome/ankelly/>

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