# Performing scripture: Nicholas Lash on the tasks of theology

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*Nicholas Lash, professor at Cambridge University, has been one of the most influential theologians in the English-speaking world for the past generation. His work has helped spur the renewal of confidence among orthodox theologians working in mainline academic settings in the United Kingdom and the U.S. He has engaged philosophers as diverse as Marx and Wittgenstein and drawn on theologians across the spectrum, from Aquinas to liberationists. His own broad reach of interests is reflected in his remark that "to think as a Christian is to try to understand the stellar spaces, the arrangements of micro-organisms and DNA molecules, the history of Tibet, the operation of economic markets, toothache,* King Lear, *the CIA, and grandma's cooking—or, as Aquinas put it, 'all things'—in relation to that uttering, utterance and enactment of God which they express and represent. To act as a Christian is to work with, to alter or, if need be, to endure all things in conformity with that understanding." A Roman Catholic, he likes to point out that the last Roman Catholic who held his chair at Cambridge (back in the 16th century) was beheaded.*

**You've written that "care with language" is the "first casualty of original sin." Can you give some examples of poor word care?**

Examples are easy: all laziness, carelessness, cliché. I have often quoted a remark that I heard Gerald O'Collins, the Australian Jesuit, make 40 years ago: "A theologian is someone who watches their language in the presence of God." The church becomes an academy of word care to the extent that people learn that even the most academically demanding and technical theology has to be done, at least metaphorically, on one's knees, with one's shoes off.

**One of your books is titled *Believing Three Ways in One God.* Doesn't this approach to understanding the Trinity fall into what Theology 101 classes teach is the heresy of modalism?**

If such classes do teach that, then the teachers should be shot. I will, if I may, quote what I said about modalism in my little book on the Apostles' Creed, whose title you quote. The heresy of "modalism came in many shapes and sizes, but common to them all was the conviction that, in the Godhead, the only differentiations are transitory, episodic, a matter of successive ways (or 'modes') of acting or existing. Beneath the play of light and colour, before and after the episode of incarnation, the rock of God endures, unalterable and unmoved. For the modalist, in other words, the three ways we know God are of the nature of appearances, transitory forms, 'beneath' which the divine nature, unaffected, stands. God is not an individual with a nature, nor is God an agent acting in three episodes. According to what was, in due time, established as Christian orthodoxy, the distinctions that we draw in our attempts to speak of God go, as it were, to the very heart of the matter. The distinctions between Father, Son and Spirit are distinctions truly drawn of *God*, and not merely of the way that God appears to us to be, or of the way that—for some brief span of time—he was."

**By speaking of three "ways" you are trying to steer clear of the language of "persons" in the Godhead. What do you perceive as the danger there?**

Tritheism. Nor formally, of course, but, in view of the fact that, in modern English, to be one person is to be an individual; to speak of God as "three persons" seems to imply that God is three individuals. The problem has, I think, two roots. The first is the term *person* itself, which has profoundly shifted its sense over the centuries. The other we can indicate by asking: is the word *God* a noun or a verb? Most people, I think, would say: "Obviously, it is a noun." In creatures, identity and operation, being and acting, are distinct. In God, however, there is no such distinction. God is what God does: generating and being generated, breathing and being breathed (to use familiar metaphors). God is, without remainder, the giving that God is, and so on. The classical notion of "subsistent relations" was really an account of what we might call "subsistent operations."

**You've written, reflecting both on Karl Barth and on Hinduism, about the "end of religion." What are you referring to?**

In the Middle Ages, religion was the name of a virtue, a part of justice. Justice was the virtue of giving people and things their due. Religion was the virtue of giving God God's due. People fail in religion in one of two ways: they either treat some creature or creatures as God, or they treat God as a creature.

In the 15th century, as the Latin word *religio* moved into English, it did so to name communities of men and women whose lives were specifically dedicated to the virtue of religion. What were then called the "religious" of England we would refer to as religious orders. Then, during the 16th and 17th centuries, the word shifted from naming a virtue to naming a set of propositions or beliefs. Finally, and fatally, during the struggles misnamed the Wars of Religion—misnamed because these conflicts were not about religion but about the emergent state, the rules of which were determined to keep church leaders under their control—the word came to name a set of privately held beliefs and practices without direct public or political relevance.

That is the religion that is coming to an end. In a book titled *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* I wrote: "Not the beginning or the end of faith, or hope, or charity. Not the beginning or the end of prayer or proclamation, of the duty laid upon all humankind to work for peace, and justice, and the integrity of God's creation. But the view that 'religion' is the name of one particular district which we may inhabit if we feel so inclined, a region of diminishing plausibility and significance, a territory quite distinct from those we know as 'politics' and 'art,' as 'science' and 'law' and 'economics'; *this* view of things, peculiar to modern Western culture, had a beginning, in the 17th century, and (if '*post*-modern' means anything at all) is now coming to an end."

**You have observed the enormous increase in interest in Aquinas among theologians—including many Protestant ones. To what do you attribute this?**

I am not entirely sure. It is important to stress that it is a rediscovery of interest in Aquinas the theologian, as distinct from Aquinas the philosopher.

Here's my best rough guess: Bernard Lonergan famously characterized the sea change of cognitional strategy which occurred at the dawning of modernity as a shift from the pedagogy of the *quaestio* to the pedagogy of the thesis: from inquiry to assertion. I think that this needs to be read in the context of Stephen Toulmin's brilliant rereading of the narrative of the beginnings of modernity in his *Cosmopolis*. To my mind, he makes a most persuasive case for the view that modernity's characteristic preoccupation (Descartes is merely the conventional expression of this) with decontextualized certainty was the expression not of intellectual confidence but of something more like panic. Modern philosophy was a little like fundamentalism in that the characteristic obsession of the rationalist with clarity and

decontextualized truth expresses a fear that once you put things in context, once you let contingency back in, cherished verities may crumble.

During the past 50 years, both philosophy and theology have rediscovered more insistently historical and contextual styles and strategies, and this has helped theologians to discover that Aquinas was a permanently exploratory, genuinely interesting thinker.

Once, at an academic conference at which people began banging on, as they so often do, about what a magnificently *systematic* thinker Aquinas was, I lost my temper and said that whenever I heard people going on about this, I knew one thing: that they had never closely studied Aquinas's texts. Donald MacKinnon growled in agreement: "Yes, and the same is true of Aristotle."

**You've also written sympathetically about Marxism. After the collapse of communism, is Marxism still a philosophy that Christians need to engage? Why is it that some viable Christian version of socialism is so difficult to imagine in England and America?**

Those who doubt that Christians still need to engage with Marx are as foolish as those who doubt that we still need to engage with Aristotle, Kant or Hegel. At the heart of Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production was his insight that it led, with almost mechanical inevitability, to what he called "the universalization of the commodity form," the transmutation not only of all things, but also of all relations, into commodities. Dr. Marx, *si monumentum requiris*, *circumspice* ("If you seek a memorial, look around")—as Sir Christopher Wren's memorial in St Paul's Cathedral in London says.

May I risk being a little polemical here, out of friendly exasperation? I can understand why, in a culture as driven and absorbed by messianic capitalism as is the United States, versions of socialism of any kind are hard to comprehend with sympathy. But please do not drag us in with you. There were, as any historian can tell you, the very closest links between 20th-century socialism in Britain and Christianity, especially Nonconformity. In recent decades, the dire and dominant structures of British (and international) capitalism have deformed the Labour Party almost, but not quite, to the extent of losing its originally socialist vision, but we do not find Christian socialism in any way difficult to understand, because we remember it.

As millions of destitute Americans continue to be deprived of adequate access to good health care, people of all parties in the UK regard the retention of the National Health Service, “free at the point of delivery,” as essential to our *cultural* health. And a health service in which wealth or poverty make not the slightest difference is a socialist achievement.

**What hope do you see for the future of ecumenism? Is the ecumenical movement something you are invested in?**

One can hardly teach theology for 40 years in an interdenominational faculty in a secular university without being heavily involved in ecumenism. If, on the one hand, the goal of full communion between all mainstream Christian denominations seems as far away as ever, I would want to say, on the other, that there is a sense in which fundamental aims of the mid-20th-century ecumenical movement have already been achieved. We now take it for granted that we are not warring armies but—however deep the enduring disagreements—members of a common project of witness and discipleship.

Beyond such vast generalities, one would have to start being specific. For example, where the schism between East and West is concerned, in recent months there has been a discernible thawing of the permafrost around the patriarch of Moscow. But here the patriarch of the West (better known as Benedict XVI) has to be cautious. Move too close to Moscow, and Roman Catholics risk alienating the Patriarchate of Constantinople—whose suspicion of Moscow is hardly entirely unjustified given the extent to which it had become an aspect of the Russian government. And so on, and so on.

None of this, I fear, is very helpful. I’m only really trying to indicate that I do not find generalizations on ecumenical progress illuminating.

**You’ve said that interpreting the scriptures is more like performing the script of a play than constructing history from fragmentary evidence. Can you elaborate on this?**

If you look back where I first (I think) explored the analogy of performance, in a piece titled “Performing the Scriptures” (first published in 1982, reprinted in a collection called *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* in 1986), you will see that I contrast the notion of interpretation as performance not with the historian’s craft but with the supposition that a text (any text, although it is with scripture that I am most

concerned)—a set of black marks on white paper—tells you how to take it, without any interpretative labor on the reader's part, a labor for which the reader must take personal responsibility.

The emphasis on responsibility is emphatically not an encouragement to individualism—to myths of "my" meaning of scripture or of any other text. Hence the analogies I draw between the interpretation of scripture and the performance of musical scores and dramatic scripts.

Insisting that the whole of Christian living consists, in this sense, in the enactment, or interpretative performance, of scripture, I drew an analogy at one point between the Bible and the U.S. Constitution. "The fundamental form of the political interpretation of the American Constitution is the life, activity and organization of American society. . . . Similarly, we might say that the scriptures are the 'constitution' of the Church."

**You were famous at Cambridge for distributing "lashings," that is, for assigning papers to be read aloud in seminar and praised or criticized by you. Could you explain your pedagogical purposes? Is the Socratic method important in teaching theology?**

I suspect the hand of my good friend Paul Murray, who in January this year had a piece in *New Blackfriars* titled "Theology 'Under the Lash': Theology as Idolatry Critique in the Work of Nicholas Lash" with the perhaps distracting pun on my name. The impression of pedagogic ferocity would hardly arise if my name were Muggins!

In Cambridge, in a good old-fashioned, slightly Teutonic tradition, senior professors have "their" seminar. I inherited mine from Donald MacKinnon, and it had been established as a professorial seminar in philosophical theology several decades earlier. It would meet fortnightly, attended by doctoral students and colleagues from my own and cognate faculties.

I have no idea how I teach—I am as baffled as St. Augustine was as to how this thing works. Someone once defined a university as a library with people inside who help you to find your way around. Fair enough, but that is surely less than half the story. Where education is concerned, few things are more important than helping people to think, and to think responsibly, critically and creatively.

**What do you make of the theology of Benedict XVI and its relation to the subjects you've worked on**: **theological language, ecumenism, eschatology and so on?**

I am not sure that there is an easily identified entity that amounts to "the theology of Joseph Ratzinger" in quite the same sense that there are entities known as "the theology of" Karl Barth or Karl Rahner, and I say this knowing full well that on a shelf beside me is an excellent volume by Aidan Nichols titled *The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger*: *An Introductory* Study. If I am right about the distinction for which I am feeling here, then although the enduring influence of his mind-set is more or less ensured since he became pope, his writings might slip from view.

I say this not as criticism but as a way of locating him. He is an excellent theologian, but not quite up there in the top echelon alongside (to name roughly contemporary Catholics) Rahner or Yves Congar. (I do not mention Hans urs von Balthasar, for all that he is at present very fashionable, because, notwithstanding the power of an extraordinary mind, it seems to me that he lived and thought a little marginally to the life of the church, in marked contrast to Ratzinger, who did his work always at the service of the church.)

In talking of mind-set, I have something like this in mind: He is, never forget, Bavarian, a product of a deeply Catholic culture. He has a very strong sense of the distinctiveness of Christianity as well as a deeply pessimistic view of contemporary Western culture. I sometimes have the impression that, as a result, he would not be too unhappy if Christianity "pulled up its skirts" a little from the muddiness of the road, as it were, and contracted into a little flock. If he were still Professor Ratzinger, that is one view of where we are—one which would interact with others. But he is now pope—and this view, as a strategic vision, is somewhat disturbing.

**If you could preach this Sunday on any text and topic, what would you choose and what would you say?**

It would depend upon what the scripture readings for the Sunday were and what was on the news.

**How do you interpret John 14:6 to a secular, post-Christian culture?**

Leaving aside the fact that, like the Brazilian Dominican and friend of Castro, Frei Betto, I believe British culture to be more accurately described as pagan than as secular, I don't think that the way that I have learned to understand that verse is

dependent on particular circumstances. Rahner's notion of "anonymous Christians" is regularly misinterpreted by those who suppose him to be patronizing or colonizing people who, quite obviously, are not Christians at all. But Rahner was a theologian, not a sociologist. He knew that if every human being, past, present and future, receives in one form or another God's offer of salvation and eternal life; and if the enfleshed Word that Jesus is is, as the prologue to the fourth Gospel tells us, the Word that was in the beginning, through whom all things are made; and if the life inbreathed in us is the one breathing, one life-giving, one Spirit that God is; then it follows that no one comes to the Father except in the Spirit through the hearing of the one Word that God is.