The [Scriptural] Text Alone: Certainty? Or inherent Instability?

Week 6 – Lecture 2
15 October 2004

If God is more remote, how can we connect to God?

• Conservative answer:
  – give more money to mediating institutions --- masses, indulgences, bequests
  – Italian Christian Humanism
  – Hybrid: both conservative and yet innovative: reworking of Great Chain of Being

If God is more remote, how can we connect to God?

New revolutionary answers:
  -- Bypass the visible church and turn to invisible “Church of the Elect”
  -- Mysticism: direct contact with God
  -- Private meditation on scripture

Medieval: Mediation
Modern: by-pass mediation – immediate access (reading)

Material preconditions for this cultural revolution: printed books / literacy / private reading / private spaces

1456
Gutenberg’s Bible
Individual access to printed word / private interpretation
Invention of “private space”
Peasant interior [Brueghel]

Beginning invention: “privacy”

Bourgeois interior [Flemish] (Mother picks lice out of daughter’s hair)
Important Symbolic Figure:
St. Jerome: he lived ca. 347-420

- St. Jerome: translated the original texts of the Bible [Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek] into the official Latin version [the Vulgate]
- Ask yourself: why is a man dead for 1000 years suddenly everywhere?

Albrecht Dürer:
St. Jerome [1512]
Dürer: early follower of Luther
Luther translates Bible into German
For Dürer, Jerome = symbol of Luther

Antonello da Messina
St. Jerome in his Study (c. 1460)

1515:
“Tower Room Experience”
1517:
95 Theses
By-passing mediation: turn to individual interpretation

- Sum: Private reading of Scripture --- now possible outside monasteries with the invention of the printing press and the availability of books --- provides direct access to God without the need for mediation through clerics [e.g., priests, mass, the “First Order”]

Blurring of boundaries: clergy / laity

- Note the side-effect of private reading:
- If you can now read the psalms outside of a monastery, and indeed have direct access to God via silent reading of your personal Bible --- what exactly separates you from the monks/nuns???
- Identity crisis! Blurred boundaries between clergy and laity.
- [Added problem: later marriages for sake of money. Everyone is celibate!!!]

A word of caution:

Who could read???

Literacy???

Luther:

Hic sto.
Hic maneo.
Hic glorior.
Hic triumpho.

Here I stand.
Here I remain.
Here I glory.
Here I triumph.

Blurring social boundaries: “Christian Liberty”:
Peasants destroying a German monastery during Peasants’ Revolt [1524-26]
On Christian Liberty?
Luther’s response: Against the Thievish and Murderous Hordes of Peasants: “knock down, strangle, and stab...and think nothing so venomous, pernicious, or Satanic as an insurgent.”
1525: princes and nobles crush revolt - 100,000 peasant lives.
Surviving peasants consider Luther a false prophet.
Many return to Catholicism or turn to more radical forms of the Reformation.

“Modernity” = “subjective individualism”
The individual “subject” with his/her rights is the fundamental reality and prior to other concerns.

Internal instability:

Anxiety over the reading:
The text of the world not as plain or trustworthy as it seems

- Note irony!!! A nominalist would already know the “instability of the text” --- doesn’t believe it really grasp “what a thing is in itself”
- HENCE:
  - Instability
  - Unreliability
  - Difficulty of reading meanings off plain surfaces of things
  - Does turn to “Scripture alone” better or worsen disruption of ordo
  - Rule of fortuna?
WHOSE READING/INTERPRETATION???

You want to by-pass mediation with private reading; Yet: instability at the center of the text

LUTHERANS
Calvinists
Anabaptists
Same scripture [alone];
Different interpretations

(Next week: Catholic Reform answer: Scripture not enough)

• KEY ANXIETY:
  – Can we trust God’s word that he will save us???
  – Note: a radical uncertainty; radical anxiety about the seeming arbitrariness on God’s part.

**From Luther, *On Christian Liberty***

Is not such a soul most obedient to God in all things by this faith? What commandment is there that such obedience has not completely fulfilled? What more complete fulfillment is there than obedience in all things? This obedience, however, is not rendered by works, but by faith alone. On the other hand, what greater rebellion against God, what greater wickedness, what greater contempt of God is there than not believing his promise? For what if this but to make God a liar or to doubt that he is truthful—that is, to ascribe truthfulness to one’s self but lying and vanity to God? Does not a man who does this deny God and set himself up as an idol in his heart? Then of what good are works done in such

Note anxiety and (implicit) doubt...

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**Luther: Heidelberg Disputation Theses [1518]**

#3. Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.
#4. Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.

**APPEARANCES DECEIVE**
The names we give to things aren’t what they “really are.”

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**OPED CONTRIBUTOR**

**What Derrida Really Meant**
By MARK C. TAYLOR

Along with Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, who died last week in Paris at the age of 74, will be remembered as one of the three most important philosophers of the 20th century. A thinker in the last 100 years had a greater impact than he did on people in more fields and different disciplines. Philosophers, theologians, literary and art critics, psychologists, historians, writers, artists, legal scholars and even architects have found in his writings resources for insights that have led to an extraordinary revival of the arts and humanities during the past four decades. And no thinker has been more deeply misunderstood.
To his critics, Mr. Derrida appeared to be a pessimistic nihilist who threatened the very foundation of Western society and culture. By insisting that truth and absolute value cannot be known with certainty, his detractors argue, he undercuts the very possibility of moral judgment. To follow Mr. Derrida, they maintain, is to start down the slippery slope of hedonism and relativism that inevitably leads us powerless to act responsibly.

This is an important criticism that requires a careful response. Like Kant, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Mr. Derrida does argue that transparent truth and absolute values elude our grasp. This does not mean, however, that we must think the cognitive categories and moral principles without which we cannot live, equals and friends; generously and friendship. Rather, it is necessary to recognize the unavoidable limitations and inherent contradictions in the ideas and norms that guide our actions, and do so in a way that keeps them open to constant questioning and continual revision. There can be no ethical action without critical reflection.

During the last decade of his life, Mr. Derrida became preoccupied with religion and it is in this area that his contribution might well be most significant for our time. He understood that religion is impossible without uncertainty. Whether conceived of as Yahweh, as the father of Jesus Christ, or as Allah, God can never be fully known or adequately represented by imperfect human beings.

And yet, we live in an age when major conflicts are shaped by people who claim to know, for certain, that God is on their side. Mr. Derrida reminded us that religion does not always give clear meaning, purpose and certainty by providing secure foundations. To the contrary, the great religious traditions are profoundly disturbing because they recall certainty and security into question. Belief not tempered by doubt poses a mortal danger.

As the process of globalization draws us ever closer in networks of communication and exchange, there is an understandable longing for simplicity, clarity and certainty. This desire is responsible, in large measure, for the rise of cultural conservativism and religious fundamentalism-in this country and around the world. True believers of every stripe: Muslim, Jewish and Christian-cling to beliefs that, Mr. Derrida warns, threaten to tear apart our world.

Fortunately, he also taught us that the alternative to blind belief is not simply unbelief but a different kind of belief-one that embraces uncertainty and enables us to respect others whom we do not fully understand. In a complex world, wisdom is knowing what we don’t know so that we can keep the future open.

A Mighty Fortress is our God
A Refuge never failing.

Luther: you can DOUBT certainty in the world BELIEVE FIRMLY in an unknowable God at the same time.