

Joerg Rieger's New Paradigm for Theology: A Practical Tool for Analysing the Contents of Hymns from the 19th century onwards

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I am an inexperienced newcomer to hymnological analysis. My first, and so far, only venture into the field is prompted by reading Joerg Rieger's new paradigm for theology. Dr. Rieger is Associate Professor of Theology at Perkins School of Theology in the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, and his thesis is set forth in "God and the Excluded: Visions and Blind Spots in Contemporary Theology", published in 2001. Rieger's book isn't concerned with hymn analysis; in fact, he nowhere mentions the topic. But I hope to show that his argument can be substantially applied to the investigation of hymn contents. I shall begin with an outline of Rieger's argument; then, from my reading of his perspective, I will briefly refer to two well-known English hymns, one from the nineteenth, another from the early twentieth century. Finally, I shall introduce a text of my own, written following the events of 11th September; and will analyse that text in more detail.

Rieger's argument

According to Rieger, for the last two hundred years, the main context in which Christian theology has been done has been the advance of Western capitalism to global dominance. Arguably, this aim has now been achieved. Yet still 35,000 children die every day for want of help that the Western capitalist world could easily supply; and Christians find it as hard as anyone else to acknowledge that. For Rieger the difficulty results from "the collectively repressed truth about who benefits from the global economy". We (people of the West) have cut ourselves off from the rest of humanity. Yet "(w)ho we are is constituted not just by what is visible on the surface but also by what is excluded, repressed, or rejected." How can we get a handle on this possibly paralysing inner conflict?

Rieger says we need a kind of interactive synthesis between the liberal, neoorthodox, postliberal, and liberation modes of theological thinking that have dominated these last two hundred years. He characterises these modes as four 'turns': to the self, to the Wholly Other, to language and text, and to the other, others. Each turn represents something of a release from the limitations of earlier theological assumptions.

The turn to the self

Rieger contends that "The modern entrepreneurial self's gain in theological authority cannot be easily separated from its support by economic forces and the expansion of its power across the globe." He further suggests that, when middle-class Christians voice their determination to establish God's Kingdom on earth, it is an entrepreneurial self that drives them.

The problem with this self is its presumption of sovereignty, that it must lead and control. But the controlling self can only maintain its mastery by marginalizing and deprioritising whatever is beyond its control. What is the answer to this dehumanising pattern? Rieger quotes a dialogue partner, Jacques Lacan, that "the self can (therefore) come to itself only by leaving the position of leadership." There is an obvious parallel here to the doctrine of kenosis in which Jesus empties himself of all pretensions to superiority in order to be at one with the wretched of the earth.

The turn to the Other

Reacting to the crisis of the controlling self, many people turn to God as the Wholly Other, and they experience what feels like abundant life. Rieger quotes Karl Barth, who

insists that we need to be aware of the (absolute) difference of God and humanity: it's where theology begins. But the unreconstructed self looks to recruit the Wholly Other to support its values and its projects. For example, Barth noted at the time of the First World War that "What people call good does not necessarily provide a firm foundation..., including the traditional institutions of society, such as the state, international relations, art and science, the economic order, and - perhaps most surprisingly - even the family." Exposed in solitary transcendence, God thus conceived cannot alone counter the powers that degrade creation. As Barth pointed out, "There was in Germany during the 1930s plenty of profound living Christianity and confession"; but the confession "did not translate what was being excellently said in the language of the Church into the political attitude demanded at the time."

The turn to language and text

No one consciously wants to make the Wholly Other into an idol for supporting the prosperity-seeking self. But there is a way of using the language and the texts of the church, especially Holy Scripture, that can blind people to the dynamics of exclusion. As Rieger comments: "In a world where economic relations determine most of our lives, a certain vacuum is created in which new visions of community and proposals for preserving the church's doctrinal fabric have a strong attraction." Indeed, the declared goal of George Lindbeck, a leading postliberal theologian, is to assume the world into the structures of biblical text. Among those most strongly pulled to invest primarily in the language and texts of the church are liturgists and hymn writers; it is, after all, church constituencies that may be most interested in buying their work.

What is not yet fully appreciated is that "the worlds within which human beings live are increasingly thought of as socially, linguistically, and even textually constructed." But the self may not always discern the external factors influencing the ways texts are constructed. We may therefore fail to see the processes by which the church collectively represses knowledge of those whom the self excludes. The world as it is falls short of the commonwealth which the church believes God wills, so people may turn to the church's language and texts as relief from intolerable tension. In such a church God's coming in Christ is delayed until the word-bound church chooses to embrace the flesh of Lazarus , the poor man at the gate.

The turn to the other

Rieger's fourth turn is precisely to Lazarus, this marginalized, repressed other, the one and the many whom we want but also don't want to know. From his dialogue with Lacan, Rieger exposes the peculiar gift that this repressed other has for the agents of repression, whether they come from the controlling self, from the projected authority of the Wholly Other, or from the subtle embrace of religious tradition:

According to Lacan, the other is not simply and solely the victim of repression, but inhabits the space occupied by what people most deeply desire. The other may perhaps be likened to the beloved enemy; as, for instance, in Wilfred Owen's poem "Strange Meeting", where two soldiers meet underground, and one introduces himself: "I am the enemy you killed, my friend".

This "strange meeting" makes plain that the struggle all selves are involved in is not simply one-on-one: we struggle with powers and special interests who divide others from us, making them into either allies or enemies. To understand the nature of this struggle, we need to hear the testimony of excluded peoples.

Reconstructing the self in relationship with others

The repressed other is uniquely placed to reflect back the truth of the self's stance towards life and the influence of special interests upon the self. It's for this reason that the other is called "the analyst", the one "who is able listen from the position of the repressed." In Rieger's scheme, this is the crucial turning point, of liberating penitence, the kindling moment of a profound transformation. "If", he says, "the self is put in the position where it has to listen to its own truth in relation to the turn to others, theology

might finally be able to enter a new age, opening up the limits of contemporary theological reflection. Here everything starts coming together."

Even so, he warns: "A new authoritarianism could emerge where the theologian who identifies with the marginalized plays God, putting certain things such the poor or the woman into an absolute place of authority". Rieger's model is above all a tool for self-criticism, and that is how I propose to apply it to the reading of hymns.

Rieger's model applied
"Holy, Holy, Holy"

I consider first the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!" I learned it when I was nine years old, at my Church Junior School. It was written by Reginald Heber, a scholar who, in 1823, became Bishop of Calcutta, and died three years later, aged 43. It was the time when the power of the British East India Company was at its greatest; within a generation the Queen of Great Britain would be proclaimed Empress of India. Each year, at my school, we observed Empire Day, even though the Empire was obviously on its last legs. "Early in the morning", we sang to the Blessed Trinity, "our song shall rise to Thee." Looking back, I think there was an implied subtext: many people do not worship you, are not faithful to you; but even "though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see", we are still here, faithfully worshipping you. Although we are in every way unworthy of your favour (for "Only Thou art holy: there is none beside Thee, Perfect in power, in love, and purity"), yet we believe that you hear us, and are specially well disposed towards us. Applying Rieger's model: this hymn is neo-orthodox theology that heavily emphasises the transcendence of God. The All-Holy is set over against the corruption and corruptibility of humankind. Here the self is ambivalent: sinful, yet capable of being redeemed by perseverance in worship and true doctrine. The Blessed Trinity appears as inscrutable as an image of the Buddha, yet "...all the saints adore thee, casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea", and Cherubim and Seraphim fall(ing) down before Thee". The Book of Revelation, whose original purpose was to strengthen Christians facing persecution, is here used to foster submission to an absolutist ideology. The hymn shows no awareness that other people exist apart from those who worship as we do. If others do exist, it is only as potential additions to our number.

"Judge eternal, throned in splendour"

Almost a century later, Henry Scott-Holland wrote "Judge eternal, throned in splendour, Lord of lords and King of Kings". With its exalted description of the Wholly Other, this hymn resembles "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty". But it differs by showing a keen awareness of other people. Like Heber, Scott Holland was a scholar and a senior cleric of the Church of England. He was particularly interested in relating Christian principles to social and economic problems, being a member of the Christian Social Union and, from 1895 to 1912, editor the Commonwealth. "With thy living fire of judgement," the hymn prays, "Purge this realm of bitter things", and goes on: "Solace all its wide dominion With the healing of thy wings", and concludes with what many in the church and country may have felt was an offensive prayer: "Cleanse the body of this empire Through the glory of the Lord." The self of this hymn is fired up with a passion for justice; it cries out for the Wholly Other to be wholly involved in this world

Yet the images of other people are strangely generalised, almost insubstantial. "...the weary folk are pining For the hour that brings release.....(T)he city's crowded clangour Cries aloud for sin to cease...(T)he homesteads and the woodlands Plead in silence for their peace." The "heathen" are "faint and hungry" for the "richness" of God's Word. It's a post-liberal view that longs for the world to be gathered into Christendom. The hymn speaks for others, but others do not speak for themselves.

"When terror strikes"

On Sunday 23rd September last, I heard a preacher describe how, in 1338, in the very church where we were gathered, worshippers at Sunday Mass were attacked by French raiders; and many were left dead and wounded. I began to feel for myself something of

the terror of people who, for all sorts of reasons, are targeted for destruction. Shortly afterwards, I wrote a hymn:

1. When terror strikes, when gun or bomb
contests each claim to peace on earth: absorb the worst that death can bring;
be with the maimed, the grieved, the numb; let justice roll, and mercy ride
declare each creature's priceless worth. on waves of truth, till all may sing:

2. When terror strikes, when right or wrong
presumes to force its will to power: enables all to start again
be with the weak as with the strong; and flourish as all humans may,
inspire new hope, new love to flower. each girl, each boy, each woman, man.

3. When terror strikes, when greed or lust
pretends to wear the face of life: subsists within love's wounded frame.
be with the robbed, the raped, the lost; We bear our truth, our faith we dance:
restore their pride, and end their strife. the Crucified and Risen we name.

The self in this hymn

At the start of this hymn the self is both frightened and refusing to be cowed by terror. It is a self committed to be in solidarity with the targeted, including those who may be written off as "collateral damage". But it is not clear from the text whether that means with all who are maimed, grieved, numb, or only those with whom the self identifies. It could be that new love is being asked only for those who feel outraged by being attacked, and new hope only for success in hunting down their attackers.

The Other in this hymn

The self in verse 2 therefore prays the Compassionate One to be present with all who are victimised, whether by those who wage so-called "just" wars or by those who attack without moral or legal pretext. The hymn implies that the sufferings of victims outweighs the need of right and wrong to have their way by force. The concerns of the all-embracing Wholly Other have taken the place of partial selves, whether their partiality be individual or corporate.

In verse 3, the self in solidarity further identifies with the Wholly Compassionate in seeing terror even in the most intimate of personal relations. The evil served by the arms industry (that calls itself 'defence') and the propaganda industry (called 'public relations') is the same evil that is served by the pornography industry (called 'love'). These industries pay a lot of wages. Some at least of them employ Christian chaplains. In this hymn the divine Other not only nurtures victims towards their healing, but is implacably opposed to every force that victimises.

The language of this hymn

Some people may find the subject-matter and ideas of this hymn jarring. I aimed to contain and absorb every such resonance within the notion of Christ suffering and glorified, the Christian answer to terror. That image provides the central backbone of the hymn. I have been restrained in the way I've articulated it, but I have a friend who, whilst being grateful for the hymn as a whole, finds the image of Christ too strong. This friend simply cannot dissociate the "Crucified and Risen" from the one whose name was and is used to support murdering crusaders. It leads me to think that there may be times when Christians should not press the name and claims of Christ in the necessarily limited terms that we understand them. Sometimes we separate ourselves from humanity by insisting on the language of our belief. Unless we "absorb the worst that death can bring", we may cut ourselves off from others. In these circumstances it would be dishonest to sing "Now terror's done".

Another friend finds my verses 5 and 6 a bit woolly and piously-inclined. By implication, both friends suggest that by my language I fall into the trap of serving the idols I have

criticised in verses 1 to 3: that, by having a religious solution to hand, I have trivialised the sufferings of victims.

One of these friends proposed his own alternative last line of verse 4 leading to new verses 5 and 6. In verse 5 he continues the prayer set forth in my previous four verses; and his second replaces my image of the Crucified and Risen with a common cup shared by old foes.

4. (line 4)

on waves of truth that dance and sing.

5. Pierce every heart with penitence 6. The vision holds: pain, evil, death for violence done, or good withheld. by wounded love are swallowed up.

Remove the masks of cold pretence, New life takes wing on every breath; and vengeance once for all repel. old foes now share a common cup.

The other in this hymn

The other represents a universal and absolute prohibition against human violence. For violence excuses its perpetrators from needing to know those whom they violate. The other represents to the violating, depersonalising self that the self is itself paralysed by its woundedness compounded from external and internal factors, and that healing and mercy is at hand. In allowing the full selfhood of others, the self can be wholesomely reconstructed in relation to all other creatures.

It's why I am grateful to Rieger: he reminds us that it is interdependent selves who write and sing hymns; selves who are indwelt by the Wholly Other, formed by particular cultural artefacts, and reformed in relationship with all the others who refuse to be repressed. I commend his work as a model and tool for hymnological analysis.

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