David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of A Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) is rightly seen as a major landmark for modern literary approaches to the gospels. Since then, books have appeared at an alarming rate. On Matthew, see e.g. Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988 2nd edn). On Luke-Acts, see e.g. W. S. Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts: The Dynamics of Biblical Narrative* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

5. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 4, my emphasis.

6. The distinctions are now well documented: e.g. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 15–18; Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, 9–16; Longman, *Literary Approaches*, 83–87.

7. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 20–34; see also Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 33–37.

8. For discussions of plot applied to the gospels, see e.g. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 79–98; Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 2–9; Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, 17–36; Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 35–50; Rhoads and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 73–100.

9. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 101–48; Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 9–28; Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 51–67; Rhoads and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 101–36.

10. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 151–202; also Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, 135–55.

11. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 98–99.

12. This has been done helpfully by Longman, *Literary Approaches*, 47–62, and Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 85–101. Those with a background in literary theory or linguistics might like to try the following surveys and assessments: Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 471–514.

13. For a recent helpful treatment of these issues applied to Old Testament narrative, see V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Leicester: Apollos, 1994).

Issues in Modern Hermeneutics

DAVE TOMLINSON

The intention of this article[1], is to sketch out very briefly, some of the main features and influences in the field of modern hermeneutics. It is no exaggeration to say that hermeneutics is the epicentre of current theological conflict and debate; scarcely a single contentious issue, does not turn on the matter of hermeneutical presuppositions. This has certainly been the case in recent years over troublesome topics like liberation theology and feminist theology, and it is likely to be the case over the next decade or so, with such things as creation spirituality, or green theology, and the prospect of gay theology. Discussion of these and many other subjects can scarcely begin without reference to presupposed hermeneutical paradigms.

It is also worth noting that this preoccupation with hermeneutics is not limited to the theology department, it is a thoroughly multidisciplinary and inter-disciplinary field of interest, whose richness and significance is multiplied by the degree of cross-pollination being generated. Of course, it is this cross-pollination which lies at the heart of some people's growing concern about modern hermeneutics; the worry being, the degree of non-Christian influence which is permitted in such a crucial area of theological activity. This is an understandable anxiety, and the dangers are not imagined. Yet the anxiety serves only to pinpoint a tension experienced by Christians on many fronts: on the one hand, feeling concerned about spiritual and theological purity, yet on the other, recognizing the danger of isolationism and cultural irrelevance. Unfortunately we cannot pursue this question here, though it remains a pressing issue for us all.

So what is hermeneutics? Prior to the Enlightenment, it was understood as a matter of following certain rules or principles of exegesis, and in many people's minds this is still the case. Yet such a limited view of the subject, fails to take into consideration the developments of the past two hundred years, during which time, hermeneutics has taken on a thoroughly philosophical nature, and is concerned not only with the theory of interpretation (which it properly is), but also with the whole theory of understanding *per se*. Its most conscious preoccupation, however, remains that of the interpretation of texts, and the complexities of the relationship between text and reader. Current hermeneutical theory recognizes three focal points in this task: 1. The world behind the text—*author-centred*; 2. The

world within the text—*text-centred*, and 3. The world before the text, or the reader's world—*reader-centred*. In some cases, theorists are entirely committed to one or other of these foci, and in other instances, there is an attempt to integrate all three.

In the face of such a vast and diverse field, we must limit our discussion to just a few key strands of modern hermeneutic theory. We will begin by looking back to the roots of the subject, in the Enlightenment.

Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Philosophical Hermeneutics

The challenge of the Enlightenment was: Dare to ask! Dare to know! Dare to question! This evocation flew full in the face of feudalistic religion which had trapped people in fear, superstition and ignorance. The hermeneutics of feudal religion amounted to straightforward divinity, mediated through authoritarian ecclesiastical pronouncement. The big question which preoccupied Enlightenment thinkers, however, was: How can we know? How can we establish a reliable and independent basis for knowledge? Philosophers from Descartes to Kant devoted themselves to this epistemological dilemma. The rationalists sought knowledge through reason and the construction of systems of thought, based on a belief in the rationality of the universe. The empiricists, on the other hand, were sceptical of 'pure' reason, insisting that accurate knowledge could be obtained only through experience, mediated by the senses. But it was Immanuel Kant, the giant of the Enlightenment, who settled the dominant course of modern Western thought.

Whilst agreeing with the empiricists, that knowledge begins with experience, Kant held that it did not therefore follow, that all knowledge arises out of experience alone. 'Raw' knowledge coming to us from the outside world, is then unavoidably processed by the pre-existing frameworks and conceptual constructs of the mind. In effect, we create our own hermeneutics, and we have no access to unprocessed knowledge. The effect of Kant's thinking was to determine the sort of knowledge that would be acceptable. Knowledge arising out of observable cause and effect would be labelled 'fact', and would become the norm by which knowledge was measured in the public domain. Beliefs that were judged to require prior assumptions would be labelled 'fact', and would become the norm by which knowledge was measured in the public domain. Beliefs that were judged to require prior assumptions would be labelled 'values'; these would be limited to the private arena. The question was no longer whether God existed, but whether he could be known in any meaningful way, even if he did exist.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, the so-called father of modern hermeneutics, desired to reestablish theological thinking in the light of Immanuel Kant's crippling critique of religious belief. Defending such belief as a source of 'factual' knowledge, would now inevitably render it susceptible to all manner of discrediting from the natural sciences. Schleiermacher consequently opted to bypass the matter of objective truth, and instead, base religion on a foundation of religious experience, shared in the traditions of the church. The concept of 'religious experience' gripped Schleiermacher, and appeared to offer an answer to all his problems. The Bible would no longer be defended as a narrative of divine intervention, or as the word of God; it would now simply be considered a record of past religious experience. The price of Schleiermacher's religious epistemology was high: by detaching religion from history and by allowing epistemic dualism, he flung the door open to modernist theology, to pluralism and relativism.

Yet Schleiermacher's hermeneutics remain highly significant for all theologians, for it was he, more than anyone else, who understood the hermeneutical problem, and who transformed hermeneutics into a general philosophy of understanding. And it was the theory of general hermeneutics which were to occupy much of Schleiermacher's time. Theological hermeneutics were seen to have their specific peculiarities, but they could enjoy no special privileges: in order to affirm the sacredness of the Bible, he insisted that it must first be understood, and the only way it could be understood, was by examining it within the principles and framework of general hermeneutic theory.

This general theory of interpretation, Schleiermacher believed, consisted of two dimensions: one that was concerned with the language of the text (the objective dimension), and one that was concerned with attempts to re-live' or 're-think' the feelings and thoughts of the author (the subjective dimension). Critics charge Schleiermacher with so stressing the subjective, that he effectively promoted meaningfulness over truth. Yet Schleiermacher was at pains to emphasize the need of both dimensions. The process of this interaction between what Schleiermacher called the 'grammatical' and the 'psychological' aspects of the interpretative endeavour, were formulated as the 'hermeneutical circle'—a metaphorical device which has undergone constant restatement and re-use. Full understanding, he argued, can emerge only from a circular movement between the 'parts' and the 'whole'. The 'whole', with which we must always begin the process, consists in the inner unity of the text, or the overall sense of what the author or the text is saying. After an initial attempt at understanding this, the reader must then return to the 'parts' or the details of the text which will either confirm, or throw into question, the initial assessment. As this becomes a circular, or

spiralling process, it allows the reader to continue review and revise his or her understanding, in the light of the text.

Wilhelm Dilthey, who was a great admirer of Schleiermacher, was the first philosopher to develop and implement Schleiermacher's hermeneutical theory. Dilthey's interest lay not in theological matters, but in the prospect of using hermeneutics, as a possible foundational theory for the human sciences, which, at the time, were viewed as lacking the superior, objective methodology of the natural sciences. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics of understanding, offered Dilthey a promising way forward. The natural sciences, he reasoned, aim at *explaining* natural phenomena, whereas the human sciences aim at *understanding* human life and expression. Since he believed *understanding* to be the basis of the humanities, hermeneutics—the theory of understanding of human records and texts—appeared to offer a solution.

The vital ingredient in Dilthey's approach to hermeneutics is 'lived experience'. He believed that understanding of others, past or present, was indeed possible, on the basis that we share with them in the same 'human stuff'. And texts are deposits of 'lived experience', which can therefore, provide vital access to the authors and to their experience. Through empathetic identification, generated and fuelled by the text, the reader can re-live the writers' experience, and thus make understanding possible. Underlying Dilthey's theory, is the idea that we understand others, through a heightened understanding of self; interpretation is a 'rediscovery of the I in the Thou'.

Emilio Betti continues with this 'hermeneutics of understanding' by stressing the importance of 'openness' as an essential ingredient of understanding others. When we are interpreting a text, we must reach behind the words, and see what led to their expression; Betti speaks of the need of empathetic 'reconstruction'. After initial consideration of the language of the text, he advocates therefore, a critical self-awareness which can uncover factors in the reader which might otherwise hinder their openness, both to text and writer. The reader is then ready to enter imaginatively the writer's shoes and reconstruct an understanding of the situation of circumstances which led to the production of the text.

Gadamer and the Two Horizons

Hans-Georg Gadamer is known for his dislike of hermeneutical methodology; hermeneutics is a practical philosophy, he says, concerned with promoting human understanding and self-understanding. The introduction of interpretative method will reduce hermeneutics from a philosophy to a technology or to mere mechanics. This antipathy to method is important, since his critics think it prohibits him from developing adequate controlling criteria, in what is otherwise seen as a fruitful hermeneutical approach.

Gadamer expresses the process of understanding by the metaphor of two horizons which need to be fused together. When the horizon of the reader is merged with the horizon of the text, understanding takes place. A horizon can be thought of as a limitation to vision—it is 'as far as one can see'—but it can also be thought of as a field of vision, or as a vantage point. When readers enters the interpretative process, they always do so, with their own pre-understandings and questions which they bring to the text—their horizon. Whilst these pre-existing factors inevitably limit the readers' expectations of the text, they also provide the necessary material for the process of interpretation to commence. By a process of moving to and fro between his or her own world, and the world of the text, these questions and pre-understandings are adjusted and revised, and eventually the horizons will merge, and understanding will take place. Although there is temporal distance between reader and text, this can be overcome, on the basis that each shares in a common tradition of language.

Gadamer's approach has its critics. It tends to be thought of by some as over optimistic, and Romanticist; lacking in the critical reflection, which his disdain of methodological apparatus apparently encourages. Because it lacks a hermeneutic of suspicion such as that advocated by Ricoeur, it fails properly to take into critical account the inherent ideologies in the world of the text. In other words, it expects too much of the text. At the other end of the process, Gadamer's approach is charged with allowing too much imposition of the reader's ideologies upon the text. For example a fundamentalist, or a liberationist reader can happily claim that their particular 'fusing of the horizons' is an accurate representation of biblical truth. Some, who feel more sympathy for Gadamerian theory, suggest that it requires greater integration with other critical methodologies—the very thing Gadamer resists.

Gadamerian theory, has, however, taken deep root in modern theological thinking. By purging it of its more Romanticist elements, and by integrating it with other methodologies, scholars of many persuasions use it to great effect. Walter Wink, for example, draws on a Gadamerian approach, in his treatment of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk. 18.9–14), which we will pause to consider.

The reader who is familiar with the parable, does not need to read the story in order to know what it is about: God passes over the self-righteous Pharisee (the 'baddy') in favour of the humble tax collector (the

'goody') who is willing to call his life into question. Exegetical scholarship with its emphasis on historical criticism, tends to take us into the horizon of the text, informing us about the social roles of the two characters. It might explain that the hearers would, at first, have identified with the Pharisee, as the bearer of religious and social status, and may tell us of their consternation, at the unexpected justification of the tax collector. But as Wink makes clear, the text is actually being falsified, if exegesis ends with the horizon of the text, rather than going on to take into account the recoil of the story on the reader's horizon. The reader, conditioned by a long Christian tradition, knows who the 'goodies' and 'baddies' are, and why. They naturally identify with the tax collector, and condemn the Pharisee—full stop. The parable which aimed to unsettle its listeners, and overturn their values, is taken as a reassuring moral tale which actually confirms the reader's existing values. The paradox, of the justification of the ungodly is lost, along with the social implications for the reader, only to be replaced by a deformed teaching about cheap grace for rapacious toll collectors.[2]

I would suggest that, on the assumption that the reader is a modern-day evangelical, the following composition succeeds in combining a Gadamerian approach to the parable with a hermeneutic of suspicion, directed at the reader's horizon.

'The Spring Harvest Speaker and the Liberal Bishop'

Jesus told a parable to a gathering of evangelical leaders. 'A Spring Harvest speaker and a liberal bishop each sat down to read the Bible. The Spring Harvest speaker thanked God for the precious gift of the Holy Scriptures and pledged himself once again, to proclaim it faithfully. "Thank you God", he prayed, "that I am not like this poor bishop who doesn't believe your Word, and seems unable to make his mind up whether or not Christ rose from the dead." The bishop looked puzzled, as he flicked his fingers through the pages of the Bible and said, "Virgin birth, water into wine, physical resurrection. I honestly don't know if I can believe these things Lord. In fact, I'm not even sure that I believe you exist as a personal Being, but I am going to keep on searching." I tell you that this liberal bishop rather than the other man went home justified before God. For everyone who thinks he has arrived at his destination has actually hardly begun, and he who continues searching, is closer to his destination than he realises.'[3]

Such an exercise, suggests the possibility of many such alternative 'readings' of the parable, each depending on the readership.

Paul Ricoeur and the Nature of Religious Language

Unlike Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, another giant of modern hermeneutics has welcomed with open arms the influx of many different critical methodologies; indeed his immense capacity to integrate insights from the various disciplines, has meant that there is virtually no aspect of hermeneutics that he has not influenced profoundly. Naturally, we can touch on only one or two of them.

Ricoeur's special interest lies in the nature and effects of language. Although Schleiermacher did anticipate some of Ricoeur's interest in textuality, his dominant preoccupation lay in attempts to reach the mind of the original author, and much of pre-Ricoeurian hermeneutics has followed a similar course. Ricoeur, however, betrays complete indifference to the pursuit of the author's intention. His interest lies much more in the world in front of the text; in the possibilities which the text presents.

The first important feature of Ricoeur's view of language, is his observation that language is always ambiguous, and that any theory of interpretation must take this into account. The heirs of the empiricists, the logical positivists, tied to the meaning of language to empirical observation, and insisted that a statement is a genuine factual assertion, if and only if, it can be demonstrated to be the case. By this criteria, religious language is naturally relegated to the realm of personal opinions and values. Ricoeur stands in firm opposition to a positivist notion of language, by insisting that all language is inherently ambiguous, since it is rooted in metaphor, model and analogue. His extensive work in this area, concludes that just as 'poetic' language (which incorporates religious language) depends on metaphor for its expression, so 'scientific' language is dependent on models. There is no real dualism between the two. A 'model' in science, Ricoeur argues, is a device which seeks by way of fiction, to break down inadequate interpretation and facilitate fresh interpretation; it is an 'instrument of redescription'. And similarly, metaphoric language is a 'poetic' way of redescribing reality.

A key observation Ricoeur makes concerning metaphor, is that it is based on a tension of two apparently contradictory statements: it expresses an 'is/is not'. For example, 'time flies', could be rendered 'time does/does not fly'. It is not factually true to say that time flies, and a classic Aristotelian view of metaphor would treat the statement as a mere figure of speech. In Ricoeur's terms, such an analysis is reductionist: it effectively kills off the metaphor's disclosive potential. To use a more relevant example, we could ask what, in the light of a Ricoeurian view of language,

we mean by the affirmation 'God is a father'? In positivist terms, the statement is nonsense. Fatherhood has to do with male genitalia, and sexual relations; no-one would surely think of God in this way. Yet Ricoeurian theory warns against such reductionism, and points to the potential 'pay load', or disclosive power of the metaphor. Once the tension of a metaphor (its apparent none-sense) is dissolved into either an 'is' or an 'is not', (it becomes either literal or merely illustrative), the metaphor's disclosive power is forfeited. Needless to say, the above illustration has great significance in feminist arguments concerning 'inclusive' language.

Another feature of Ricoeur's understanding of language/language effect, which relates closely to what we have already discussed, is his assertion that meaning lies not in sense, but in reference. Understanding of texts, he tells us, involves following a movement from sense to reference, from what it says, to what it talks about. Once again, this approach takes us away from an over-preoccupation with original circumstances, and moves us in the direction of present and future possibilities in the text. It also shifts the emphasis in a quite different direction from that of Gadamer, who is at pains to close the distance between reader and ancient text. Indeed Gadamer's critics wince at the ease with which he seems to imagine that the distance can be resolved. Ricoeur, on the other hand, does not see distance as something to be overcome, but rather to be appreciated and positively exploited. And the distance which interests him is not the temporal distance between text and reader, but the distance between oral discourse and written discourse. What happens, he asks, when discourse moves from oral to written form? Far from hardening into a static entity which requires constant enlivening by Gadamerian 'dialogue' with the original horizon, Ricoeur insists that it becomes independent of the author, and is actually enriched with a surplus of meaning, which consequently opens up the possibility of diverse interpretations. Indeed, the text might now explode the very world out of which it emerged, along with its prejudices and limitations. By escaping from the finite horizons of the author, the text now *means what it means, and all that it can mean*, regardless of the intentions of the author, or of the supposed interpretation of the original audience.

Many readers will doubtless find Ricoeur's hermeneutics disturbing. He certainly throw into question the viability of linguistic absolutes and glib propositionalism. But his proposals are probably less relativistic than might be imagined. He is certainly not saying that texts can be taken to mean whatever everyone wants them to mean. A text is not just *any* text, it is *this* text, and its possibilities are controlled by its overall linguistic content and by its linguistic structure.[4]

Postmodernism: 'Let Me Tell You a Story'

We now come to our own immediate cultural situation; one in which the monolithic structures of the Enlightenment are fast crumbling. It is not yet clear exactly what will replace them, but in the midst of the cracks of this crumbling culture, new postmodern culture is beginning to take shape. One of the most helpful ways of thinking about the distinction between the worlds of the modern and the postmodern is to think of them as stories or narratives, versions of reality. The Enlightenment version of reality (the 'authorised version'), can be thought of as a 'big' story or an epic, which attempts to tell us everything. The nineteenth century was the period when big stories abounded: Darwin and the story of the evolution of species; Marx and the story of social conflict; Freud and the story of the inner world of the human psyche. Big stories are very reassuring with their, 'Once upon a time', and their, 'happily ever after'. But what happens, when the endings no longer seem plausible? Or when the story teller loses his thread? What happens, when the writer's hidden agenda begins to show? Or when we realize that they are *just* stories, versions of reality, rather than reality itself?

There is a consensus that this disillusionment with the great 'epics' of modernity, traces back as far as the First World War, whose unspeakable horrors, shattered the dream that scientific man could grasp his own destiny and create an earthly utopia. Add to this the Holocaust and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and all the terrors which have followed, and it is quite clear that the epic script writers have run out of credible story-line.

Postmodernism could be described as the second great attack on truth. The first would be loosely labelled relativism. The relativist tradition which arose predominantly from the social sciences, took a firm hold on public thinking during the decades following the Second World War. It could be summarized as saying that truth is paradigm-dependent, or linked to a particular framework of thinking. In practice, this means that whilst one can espouse something as true, one cannot declare it absolutely true. Postmodernism which could be described as a more intense form of relativism has arisen not so much from the social sciences, as from linguistic study, and the perceived relationship between language, text, meaning and reality. Since it views meaning as undecidable, it therefore proclaims truth to be unattainable. That said, Jacques Derrida, one of its chief theorists, denies that it constitutes an attack on truth as such.

Deconstructionism, Derrida's critical literary theory, does however, pose one of the greatest challenges ever delivered to traditional Christian belief. By recognizing the complete ubiquity of language, and its

prodigious self-referentiality, deconstructionism throws great doubt on the possibility of reference to external reality. The most prominent and controversial theologian to espouse a radical deconstructionist hermeneutic, is Don Cupitt. He has become quite convinced about the non-referential nature of language, and has therefore abandoned any idea of God as an external reality. As he sees it, God-talk is little more than a sophisticated fairy tale. In a reversal of one of Plato's stories, Cupitt asks us to imagine ourselves living in a cave from which there is no escape. All we can do is enlarge the cave, which is surrounded by impenetrable rock, as dark as night. We never go outside of the cave and nothing ever enters. We never see a dawn or feel a breeze. Within the cave, we tell each other stories, about the life beyond, to stave off the inevitable truth—that there is nothing outside. All the old religious certainties are being dispersed across the sea of language, Cupitt tells us, and language is all self-referential, it does not refer to anything outside of itself. If you look a word up in the dictionary, you will simply be referred to other words and when you look them up, you are referred to still other words and so on. Finally, there are only words, he tells us, vast proliferating systems of signs. It is useless to look for meaning outside of languages, it does not exist. When we speak of God, we are just attempting to bring meaning into a situation which is ultimately meaning-less.[5]

Of course, it can then be argued that Cupitt's chilling tale of nihilistic emptiness, is itself just a story; and it certainly is not the only possible outcome of deconstructionist theory. Derrida himself, whose thought is very influential on Cupitt, denies that the non-realist route is inevitable. 'I never cease to be surprised', he says, 'by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact saying the exact opposite.'[6] Derrida is however, mounting a rigorous attack on complacent assumptions about the referential nature of language. From a hermeneutical point of view, his ideas direct us to two rather uncomfortable matters: 1) The all-pervasiveness of language: we have no way of stepping outside of language and proving that something is objectively true, and 2) The immense difficulty of defining meaning in an unambiguous way.

The Viability of Realism

Thankfully, Cupitt's gloomy nihilistic hermeneutic is not the only option open to us. There are many scholars who wish passionately to retain realism in their faith, whilst at the same time engaging honestly and positively with the contemporary culture. A long-standing tradition which has found a whole new hermeneutical application in recent days, is that of critical realism. Critical realism stands in opposition not only to the non-realism of the likes of Cupitt, but also to the sort of naive realism, which Cupitt readily takes to the cleaners.

Naive Realism or literal realism, works from the assumption that there is little or no difficulty in describing God, or the spiritual dimension, in a literal or near-literal way, pretty much as we speak of everyday objects and experiences. If the Bible says that God gets angry, or rejoices, or if it tells us that he is a father or a king, then this is presumed to be a fairly literal account of the way things actually are. People like Cupitt denounce this as appalling anthropomorphism, suited only to the Sunday School class. But others who do not share Cupitt's radical unbelief, also dismiss naive realism, as a hopeless misunderstanding of the nature of religious language. Taking on board Ricoeur's insights concerning the essentially metaphoric nature of all language, and its consequent ambiguity, they would argue that naive realism looks for the wrong kind of truth in Christianity. Although it is sometimes charged with being a form of pre-modernism, literal realism actually owes its present-day existence to Enlightenment objectivism, whose requirements it is an attempt to meet.

Critical Realism is a concept used widely in the context of scientific theory, and it simply affirms the fact that there are many entries which, whilst they are non-observable, are nevertheless real; electric, magnetic and gravitational fields, for example. In a way they are transcendent, they are beyond our direct observation, hence the only access we have to them is via the use of models or metaphors. When we speak of a gravitational *field*, we know that there is no actual field, and yet the metaphor does refer to an actual reality, and what is more, it informs us as to the nature of that reality. We could say that whilst models are not literally true, they are truth depicting, truth conveying.

We will close with a somewhat controversial example of a critical realist interpretation of the atonement. Theologically, the atonement has always been understood with the help of models, and numerous models have been put forward. Most evangelicals tend to favour some variation on the legal model, which runs something like this: mankind is separated from God by sin, the only way that his righteousness could be satisfied, and our sins forgiven, was through a legal sacrifice, without blemish, offered on our behalf. Jesus was that sacrifice, and through the shedding of his blood, we can now be cleansed and reconciled to God. Naturally, there are variations on this theme, but these are the essential elements. Many people have questioned this interpretation of Christ's death, on all kinds of different levels, and as might be expected, Don Cupitt attacks it with vehemence, as a monstrous

portrayal of a God, who is apparently morally inferior to the creatures he made.

From a critical realist point of view, much of the problem comes from treating metaphoric language in a far too literal way. But there are alternative interpretations. Let us consider one which is put forward by Stephen Ross White.[7] The first question to ask, is what exactly was to be achieved through Christ's death, and what is supposed to have changed through it? The traditional reply is that sins were cancelled out, forgiveness was granted, and therefore God's attitude to us was altered, from wrath to mercy. The problems here are various and Cupitt is not alone in charging that it exposes God in a poor light. White's version agrees that reconciliation was the goal, but states that it was achieved through the demonstration of God's love, which *always* forgives, rather than through a once-for-all event of forgiveness. What is changed then, is not God's attitude towards us, but our attitude towards him. The eternal love of God was shown most fully and graphically through the acceptance and forgiveness of the worst that human beings could hurl at him, by the killing of his love, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. In this way, the cross did not *bring about* forgiveness; this existed already, but rather, Jesus *enacted* and *represented* the forgiveness which has always been there, in the heart of God. His attitude does not change towards us, rather ours does toward him, by our seeing forgiveness acted out before us. The evil we can do is also annihilated in the life of his resurrection, and we thereby gain confidence to draw near to God in the knowledge that he loves us and is able to transform our lives.

We cannot discuss this example further, other than to say that it gives a taster of how a critical realist hermeneutic might work. It certainly opens up many questions: Is there enough of an element of sacrifice to correspond to the sacrificial symbolism? Does it exalt love at the cost of righteousness? Will it ultimately matter whether we respond to it or not? But as we have already observed, the legal model begs many questions too: Does God have such changeable emotions? Can he really be placated by the spilling of blood? How does one person's blood being spilt, affect the status of billions of others?

Conclusion

Enough has been said to demonstrate why hermeneutics lies at the heart of contemporary theological conflict and debate. It might be argued that there are other, more conservative hermeneutical models, which have not been mentioned. This is true, but given the limited space, our intention has not been to survey all possible positions, but rather to open up the horizons of discussion. As we move into a postmodern era, with all its difficulties and opportunities for both church and theological academy, there is much more talk about hermeneutics of transformation. The shift away from objectivism (though not necessarily from objectivity) invites us to relax the dominance of both our pre-occupation with the past, and our preoccupation with the defence of dogmatic positions, and to look much more towards the transforming possibilities of the Christian text in a world which so badly needs it.

Footnotes

1. Two thorough accounts of the subject can be found in: Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, London: Harper Collins, 1992, and Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics*, London: SCM, 1991. I have drawn freely on ideas from these books throughout the article.

2. Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973, pp. 41–43.

3. Taken from, David Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, London: SPCK, 1995.

4. Some ideas here are drawn from, Sandra Schneiders, 'Feminist Ideology, Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics' in *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 19 (1989) pp. 3–10.

5. For a good account of modern and postmodern 'stories', see Gerard Loughlin, 'At the End of the World', in Andrew Walker, (ed), *Different Gospels*, London: SPCK, 1993, p. 208f.

6. Stephen Ross White, *Don Cupitt and the Future of Christian Doctrine*, London: SCM, 1994, p. 199.

7. Stephen Ross White, *Don Cupitt*, 209f.