What Does Theological Ethics Do? Toward an Account of Theological Ethics as Tropology

Esther D. Reed, University of Exeter

The question: 'What does theological ethics do?' invites answers that range from the descriptive and comparative (e.g., what happens in Universities where theological ethics is taught) to the doctrinal and hermeneutical (e.g., why theological ethics is dependent utterly upon the self-revealing grace of the triune God revealed in the bible), and the contextual and constructive (why and how the places and politics, etc., of where theological ethics is done, is related intrinsically to decision-making that bears upon action). Mindful of Karl Barth's reported words in a *Time* magazine piece that, 40 years previously, he had advised young theologians 'to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible' (Friday, May 31, 1963), this essay offers a doctrinally-informed, constructive answer: theological ethics does tropology.[1]

Tropology is rarely discussed in Christian ethics today but has a lineage in Christian tradition of interconnecting aesthetic, political and moral practice. Tropology is everyday striving after the moral sense of the bible that allows the diverse witness to the self-revealing grace of the triune God revealed in its pages to bear upon the praxis of life. In a short study entitled *The Book that Reads Me: A Handbook for Bible Study Enablers* (1995), Hans-Ruedi Weber invites bible-study enablers to re-experience the bible as an oral rather than literary tradition through story-telling and singing, drama and symbolic actions. His point is that generations of Western Christians have flattened the bible to merely a literary document to be read and/or listened to. A striking front cover shows a wood carving of a beautiful and strong African woman whose arms are raised in prayer and dramatic representation of the scriptures. The message conveyed by the image is that bible is more like the script for many dramas than simple prose text and comes with an expectation of dramatization; this book must be lived. This is the essence of tropology. Theological ethics that does tropology moves between newspapers and the bible, as Barth summons young scholars, in ways that expect deep hermeneutic relation between the logos of the text and lifestyle, judgment and action.

[1] *Time*, 'Barth in Retirement', Friday, May 31, 1963 https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,896838,00.html (accessed 19 July, 2019).

What is Tropology?

Tropology (from Gr. trépō + -os, meaning turn, way, manner or style) is one of the classic models for the interpretation of scripture employed variously throughout the history of the churches, and is associated especially with 5th century CE John Cassian's (c.360-435) multiple senses of scripture. A Latin ascetic monk whose *Institutes* and *Conferences* became normative accounts of 5th century monastic life and the history of the Desert Fathers, Cassian taught his readers to interpret scripture with scripture, to stay focused hermeneutically on the person of Christ Jesus, and to expect that spiritual knowledge has several dimensions including the tropological: '[O]f spiritual knowledge there are three kinds, tropological, allegorical, anagogical .... The tropological sense is the moral explanation which has to do with improvement of life and practical teaching'.[2] Tropological readings of bible texts are found throughout the *Institutes* which describe and prescribe the lives of monks in minute detail — the cords and capes of their robes, the canonical system of the nocturnal prayers and psalms, the election of those in authority, how to struggle against faults including gluttony, covetousness, anger, dejection, accidie, vain glory and pride. The *Conferences* similarly recount the teachings of various abbots especially for those individuals who renounce the world and aim at perfection in love through ascetic practices.

Gaining insight and wisdom with respect to moral explanations of the bible demands much of the monastic institution and of individuals: '[H]oly lessons should be read in the Cœnobia',[3] that is, within the community of the monastery such that all hear the words of scripture. The institution is variously expected to set the conditions within which constant meditation upon the bible's teaching yields practical knowledge with respect to the improvement of morals and purification from faults.[4] The monk or anchorite living alone is expected to pursue this practical knowledge in close association with their striving also after theoretical knowledge, that is, the most sacred truths with respect to the nature of the triune God and things divine: 'Whoever then

---

[2] John Cassian, *Conferences*, translated C.S. Gibson. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 11. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350814.htm> *Conference* 14, ch.8. Note also that A.M.C. Casiday's *Tradition and Theology in St John Cassian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006 is an excellent guide to how Cassian's Chalcedonian Christology. A strong emphasis on the humanity of the incarnate Christ informs Casiday's account of spiritual knowledge holds together *praktikê* and *theorêtikê* knowledge, ascetic struggle and thoughts of God.

[3] John Cassian, *Institutes* Translated by C.S. Gibson. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 11. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350704.htm>. http://newadvent.org/fathers/350704.htm Book IV, ch. 17.

[4] Cassian, *Conference* 14, ch.1.

would arrive at this theoretical knowledge must first pursue practical knowledge with all his might and main. For this practical knowledge can be acquired without theoretical, but theoretical cannot possibly be gained without practical.'[5] In the *Institutes*, examples are given of Abbots who sought understanding the scriptures with prayer 'until he discovered by a revelation from the Lord the solution of the question propounded'.[6] The challenge for the monks both communally and individually is to adapt their own life or understanding to the meaning of the Scripture rather than making its meaning correspond to their own views. Thus the bible is read for inspiration to banish the incentive to anger, and to reserve no occasion whatever for indignation.[7] Where biblical texts yield answers that could be understood to vary, the challenge is to 'understand the drift of Scripture' mindful that the end of the monk's way of life is the kingdom of God.[8]

Tropology for Cassian entails constant meditation on the scriptures for the treasures of wisdom in order better to grasp knowledge of spiritual things.[9] It also requires a certain attitudes of heart and mind. Anyone seeking a vision of God must shun the stain of sin, have peace of mind, a steadfast purpose of heart that they should constantly aspire after this vision and ever cleave to God and to heavenly things.[10] In so doing, all should be careful to see that no wrong interpretation is fixed on to the pure gold of Scripture thereby deceiving them as to the value of the metal. When the devil tempted Jesus, he twisted the precious sayings of Scripture into a dangerous sense. Likewise, he will try 'to cheat us with counterfeits'.[11] The monk must return again and again to the scripture for guidance in matters of mindset and behaviour, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit mindful that there might be multiple senses of scripture:

> Wherefore on those passages which are brought forward with a clear explanation we also can constantly lay down the meaning and boldly state our own opinions. But those which the Holy Spirit, reserving for our meditation and exercise, has inserted in holy Scripture with veiled meaning, wishing some of them to be gathered from various proofs and conjectures, ought to be step by step and carefully brought together, so that their assertions and proofs may be arranged by the discretion of the

[5] Cassian, *Conference* 14, ch.2.
[6] Cassian, *Institutes* Bk V, ch.33.
[7] Cassian, *Institutes*, Bk VIII, ch. 21.
[8] Cassian, *Institutes*, Bk VIII, ch. 21.
[9] Cassian, *Institutes*, Bk VIII, ch.2.
[10] Cassian, *Conference* 1, chs. 7 and 8.
[11] Cassian, *Conference* 1, ch. 20.

> man who is arguing or supporting them. For sometimes when a difference of opinion is expressed on one and the same subject, either view may be considered reasonable and be held without injury to the faith either firmly, or doubtfully, i.e., in such a way that neither is full belief nor absolute rejection accorded to it, and the second view need not interfere with the former, if neither of them is found to be opposed to the faith ...[12]

Continual prayer and the guidance of those wise persons acknowledged by the Cœnobia is required, although no guarantee of protection against how heretics pervert scripture or how the devil might lead astray.[13] As A.M.C. Casiday summarises: 'Cassian is calling for a reading of Scripture that is holistic rather than fragmentary .... Cassian has already committed himself to the proposition that a right and life-giving explication of Scripture is possible only for those who are leading a holy life; and that the holiness in question, while it may be found in diverse callings, is authenticated by the Church'.[14] Adoration, love and worship of Christ as God properly results in a life of service learned from the bible, which is a testament to God's actions in history.[15]

Augustine's four senses of scripture did not include the tropological but had a built-in moral test. He outlined the four senses of scripture as follows:

> Four ways of expounding the law have been laid down by some scripture commentators, which can be named in words derived from the Greek, while they need further definition and explanation in plain Latin; they are the way of history, the way of allegory, the way of analogy, the way of aetiology. History is when things done by God or man are recounted; allegory when they are understood as being said figuratively; analogy, when the harmony of the old and new covenants is being demonstrated; aetiology, when the causes of the things that have been said and done are presented.[16]

Individual believers and the church should test readings of the bible against the criterion of whether the resulting practice tends to build up love: ‘The fulfillment and end of the law and all the divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing… Anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures

[12] Cassian, Conference VIII, ch..4.
[13] Cassian, *Institutes*, Bk VII, ch. 14.
[14] Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 247.
[15] Casiday, *Tradition and Theology*, 242.
[16] Augustine, *On Genesis* (New York: New City Press, 1990), 5.

or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.'[17] For example, in a Letter to Jerome about his work of translation, Augustine foresees division between the Latin and Greek churches if the languages of the biblical texts available to each were different.[18] He knew of discrepancies between the text supported by the Hebrew codices and the Greek Septuagint version, as well as Latin versions, such that 'one has no confidence in either quoting it or proving anything by its help'.[19] The dangers of mistaken interpretations were multiple but like many of his predecessors Augustine taught readers to expect multiple meanings of any text of scripture.[20] Alongside seeking the harmonization of the meaning of any given text with predominant meanings elsewhere in the bible, the test of whether the reading produces the fruit of love was, in effect, a tropological guide.

That Augustine's four senses of scripture should be understood to include a moral sense is affirmed by Aquinas in answer to whether, in holy scripture, a word may have several senses.[21] The objection countered is that Augustine's fourfold division as to history, etiology, analogy and allegory does not include tropology, and so perhaps excludes a moral sense. Aquinas' reply refutes such nonsense: 'Therefore, so far as the things of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law, there is the allegorical sense; so far as the things done in Christ, or so far as the things which signify Christ, are types of what we ought to do, there is the moral sense.'[22] One kind of truth in scripture does not contract other kinds of truth. To ask about the moral meaning(s) of scripture is to inquire into the humanity of Christ. As Robert J. Dobie is clear: 'Implicit in Aquinas ... is the insight that to uncover the true meaning of Scripture is to uncover

---

[17] Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* Translated by James Shaw. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 2. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/12021.htm>, 1.36.41.

[18] Augustine, *Letter* 71. Translated by J.G. Cunningham. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102071.htm>. Manuscripts would have been in Old Latin and Greek, and Augustine was aware of problems issues of interpretation arising from uncertain translation. Augustine, *Retractions*, 2,12,39.

[19] Augustine, Letter 71, ch. 4.

[20] The idea that the bible yields many and diverse readings, including moral readings, was familiar to Justin Martyr (c.114-165), Irenaeus (c.130-200), Tertullian (c. 160-225), the exegetical schools of Alexandria (including Clement of Alexandria, c.180-215 and Origen, c.185-253) and Antioch (including Theodore of Mopsuestia c.350-428 and John Chrysostom). See Elizabeth A. Clark, 'Scripture and Asceticism' in Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens, Ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: OUP, 2019), ch. 31; Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (ADA, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), Karlfried Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Nashville, TN: Augsburg Fortress, 1959.

[21] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, 1.1. art. 10.

[22] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, 1.1. art. 10, *sed contra*.

the self-subsistent Word, Christ, in and through whom all things were created.'[23] Tropological readings allow the soul to discover what is true of Christ and required of the believer such that truth becomes a lived reality. While Aquinas says relatively little about the practice of hermeneutics, his bible commentaries constitute a significant corpus and his two most cited works, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*, are, in many respects, both commentaries on the bible. Reasoned argument is required to make sense of the scriptures and this includes attention to the literal sense of the texts. Beyond this, the spiritual sense — divided into the allegorical, moral, and anagogical — is found in relation to Christ. Consider how Aquinas unfolds an allegorical reading of Jesus' plucking ears of corn on the sabbath (Mk 2.23), to yield moral meaning:

> But in a mystical sense these disciples pass through the corn fields, when the holy doctors look with the care of a pious solicitude upon those whom they have initiated in the faith, and who, it is implied, are hungering for the best of all things, the salvation of men. But to pluck the ears of corn means to snatch men away from the eager desire of earthly things. And to rub with the hands is by examples of virtue to put from the purity of their minds the concupiscence of the flesh, as men do husks. To eat the grains is when a man, cleansed from the filth of vice by the mouths of preachers, is incorporated amongst the members of the Church. Again fitly are the disciples related to have done this, walking before the face of the Lord, for it is necessary that the discourse of the doctor should come first, although the grace of visitation from on high, following it, must enlighten the heart of the hearer.[24]

The line between the literal meaning of the text and spiritual truth seems relatively insignificant as Aquinas seems almost to riff, that is, to improvise a call-and-response routine intended to awaken the hearers' own responses.

Nor is tropology a reading practice confined in Christian tradition to the great scholars of the church. Tropology, says Ryan McDermott in *Tropologies: Ethics and Invention in England, c. 1350–1600*, 'might be thought of as the church's circulatory system', that is, the process by which belief that 'All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, reproof, for

[23] Robert J. Dobie (2015) Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart on Exodus 3:14: Exegesis or Eisegesis?, *Medieval Mystical Theology*, 24:2, 124-136, at 124.

[24] I am indebted to John F. Boyle for this example. See 'St. Thomas Aquinas and Sacred Scripture' https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/papers/Taqandss.htm (accessed 26 April 2019). From *Catena aurea in quatuor Evangelia*, in Mk 2:23-28, ed. A. Guarienti (Turin: Marietti, 1953), vol. 1, p. 450. The translation is taken from *Catena aurea. Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers* (Oxford: Parker, 1870), vol. 3, p. 52. Boyle observes that Thomas himself has taken this interpretation from the Venerable Bede.

correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good service' (2 Tim. 3:16-17) becomes the flesh and blood of everyday practice, 'channeling the meanings of scripture into readers' lives'[25] Tropology is an everyday striving after the moral sense of scriptural interpretation which allows biblical meaning to bear upon the believers own 'actions on the way to the kingdom of heaven'.[26] McDermott studies how literal and tropological readings of the bible interweave to contribute to literary invention in the period. Of interest especially is how crowds of people become ethical agents participating in the world of scripture without being absorbed by it:

> In the Pentecost episode in Piers Plowman, Will and Conscience find themselves on the scene in first-century Jerusalem, inventing with the gathered crowd one of the most famous hymns of the liturgy, the sequence *Veni*, *Creator Spiritus*. Like the apostles who are speaking in tongues, the crown invents a completely new song — indeed, invents the Christian liturgy — but it is already a copy of the Holy Spirit's gift. Such a "copy" defies classical rhetorical models, according to which an invention must vie with and displace its model.[27]

Tropological participation in the daily (re-)invention of the church's liturgy links reading of the bible to the history recounted within its pages and performance of the church's liturgical year, it links to poetry and biblical dramas, especially the Passion Plays, and to the pastoral work of inspiring hearers to the good. By attending to medieval practices of tropology, McDermott accesses a rich history of interconnecting exegesis, artistic creativity, spirituality, poetic invention, moral philosophy, and more. McDermott central point is that the bible presents its readers with the tropological imperative to turn its words into works.[28] Tropology is ordered toward participation in salvation history, and, says McDermott, much more intimately in touch with *sacra scriptura* (sacred scripture) and therefore more fundamental than the *scientia divina* (theology as a science) and *pastoralia* (pastoral and spiritual care) than developed later.[29]

McDermott's claim is that tropology as a practice of moral invention survived 'as the most important principle of continuity between "medieval" and Reformation cultures', e.g., inspiring exegesis, poetry, and drama even in the court of the radical reformist King Edward VI.[30]

---

[25] Ryan McDermott, *Tropologies: Ethics and Invention in England, c. 1350–1600* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 12.
[26] McDermott, *Tropologies*, 2.
[27] McDermott, *Tropologies*, 7.
[28] McDermott, *Tropologies*, 12.
[29] McDermott, *Tropologies*, 13. 17-18.
[30] McDermott, *Tropologies*, 4.

Tropology helped bridge the spiritual and ecclesial gap opened by the Reformation between in the practice, for instance, of poetic paraphrases of biblical passages — with the continuing use of the *Patience* poem, an alliterative paraphrase of the biblical Book of Jonah where the prophet's psychological struggles with Yahweh are played out powerfully. Tropology, says McDermott, is moral in the Thomistic sense of uniting theological and philosophical aspects, empirical concepts, reason and will, but also, at least sometimes, in the spiritually powerful invoking anagogically the judicial gaze of God from the end of history through dramatic media. McDermott's focus on the Doomsday pageant of the York Passion Play serves theologically to remind readers that the moral work of tropology in Christian tradition is not about individual agents do not stepping into salvation history and playing a role but, rather, being swept up into the work of God: 'This anagogical approach to ethical participation in salvation history exerts a salutary counter-pressure on tropological invention, keeping it from devolving into what Protestants would call works-righteousness'.[31] In this tradition, tropology is a reading practice that invites the activity of making or doing something not planned beforehand whether as narrative creation, homily, sacramental practices of penance, imaginatively dramatic renderings of bible passages or moral argument.

Tropology Today

Even this brief survey of the history of tropology in Christian tradition yields preliminary findings. First, tropology is inseparable from doctrine, the church's confession of the gospel of Christ, the pastoral nurture of believers, personal formation in his service and for the sake of his coming reign, and more. As for John Cassian spiritual knowledge holds together *theorêtikê* and *praktikê* knowledge, doctrinal exposition and judgment oriented toward action, so tropology today derives its lifeblood from Christian doctrine and is the practical outworking of the beliefs of the church. The pattern is found repeatedly in the New Testament: 'Let the same mind be in you that was[a] in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God .... Therefore (Gr. ὥστε) my beloved' (Phil 2, 5-6, 12). The practical dimensions of Christian living re secondary to, and derive from, what is believed. The substance of a Christian ethics is given by God's love for the world: '[S]ince (Gr. εἰ) God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another' (1 Jn 4:11 NRSV). The ground of theological ethics is the nature of God, beyond human conception, unconfined to human ideals, rules, or concepts, and revealed as love: 'So if you have been raised with Christ ...' (Col 3:1). This is the

[31] McDermott, *Tropologies*, 291.

premise from which flows the conclusion that his disciples are to 'seek the things that are above', that is, grow in their knowledge of matters spiritual and thereafter '[p]ut to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry (Col 3:1). Tropology is doctrinally-rooted description of the human condition and destiny informed by reading of the bible; tropological readings of bible texts link the lives of communities of believers and individuals to God's purposes for all creation.

Second, tropology is inseparable from spiritual formation. At least as understood by Cassian, tropological readings of bible texts require a fixing of the spiritual eye upon God in the hope that divine assistance on the path toward perfection will be given through the written words. In many respects, tropology is not primarily an academic but spiritual endeavour undertaken by the believer who seeks only to follow the example of Christ's life and be formed in his image. His rhetoric is harsh on the ear today but can be reappropriated if the basic point is taken that tropological readings of bible texts are expected to have formative effects upon the believer and are undertaken by communities and believers in the expectation of change. While Cassian's wrote for monks and anchorites, there is no reason to suppose that striving to discern the moral sense of scripture, which has to do with improvement of life and practical teaching, is delimited to the monastic life. Nor is it necessary to suppose that discernment of the moral sense of scripture is somehow dependent upon human efforts with respect to spiritual discipline and achievements in prayer. While Cassian taught that the most appropriate posture or attitude of the heart before divine the word of God revealed in scripture is untiring perseverance and humility, there was no assumption that such attitudes and behaviour would guarantee some kind of result. He walked the narrow path between urging those in his care to be diligent with respect to their own spiritual formation whilst not turning such efforts into a merit system. With this proviso, the believer is expected to renounce love of self that leads astray and fear only the Lord who is love incarnate, mindful that the devil always lies wait for every human being's downfall. Those reading the bible for its moral sense are expected to pray that their minds might be purged from all carnal desires and daily lifted towards spiritual things, until the whole life and all the thoughts of the heart become one continuous prayer.[32]

Third, tropology is inseparable from the work of the moral imagination. Imagination is variously involved in our knowledge of the self, world and other people, and in constructions of possibility and hope. The allegorical poems and passion plays of medieval and Reformation

[32] Cassian, *Conference* 10, ch.7.

England exemplified this expectation in dramatic ways, and are a powerful example of how tropology is inherently creative as the ethicist envisions the world, or their tiny part therein, in the light of the coming reign of God. Discussion could easily widen at this point into reflection on the arts play a vital role in Christian discipleship or why aesthetic philosophy has a role in the social sciences, law and psychology.[33] A more expansive consideration would include the work of imagination in enabling a person to comprehend something of the experiences, motives, joys and pains of others, the work of imagination in opening vistas of possibility, and mediating between the universal and the particular.[34] For the moment, it must be enough to observe that seeking the moral sense of the bible or, indeed, anything which has to do with improvement of life and practical teaching, invites the imaginative capacity to revision the world such that once again God might declare it good (Gen. 1:31). The seeming aesthetic dimension to which the creation narratives bear witness is integral to the capacity to reflect, form judgments and act in ways that embody the love of God for the world. Approaching theological ethics as tropology entails the claim that theological ethics is helpful conceived, at least in part, as aesthetic creativity, perception and appreciation.

Fourth, theological ethics as tropology demands interdisciplinary engagement across the academy. It is allowable — indeed, unavoidable and desirable — for moral theologians and Christian ethicists to engage across academic disciplines if their own discipline is to be adequately attention to the world in which we live. Enacting the movement described by Barth as moving between newspapers and the bible requires theological ethicists to be intelligently aware of, and responsive to, the complexity of contemporary life and of the interplay of cultural, economic and psychological influences that shape human experience.[35] Interdisciplinarity is necessary if theologians and ethicists are to contribute to public debate, ‘to recover the contribution of faith’ or to ‘deepen its contribution’ in the public arena: 'theological inquiry through interdisciplinary study would attempt to rediscover the distinctness and relation of the spheres of understanding and life, religious and “non-religious”, theological and interdisciplinary for the good of humankind, and in that to recover their intrinsic

[33] For a sustained consideration of how the arts are essential to citizenship, see Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), esp. 85. For consideration of beauty in international law, see Mary Ellen O'Connell, *The Art of Law in the International Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), esp. 33-4.

[34] Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007 originally published 1968). For an excellent review that sets the book within the context of Ricoeur's philosophical career, see Robert P. Scharlemann, *Language and Society* Volume 22, Issue 1 March 1993, 157-160.

[35] I acknowledge indebtedness to Daniel W. Hardy's unpublished piece 'The Logic of Interdisciplinary Studies and the Coherence of Theology' (November 1995) Report to the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton.

connection to the truth of God and God's purposes'.[36] Such interdisciplinarity will avoid unwarranted suspicion of the value of other disciplines for understanding or benefitting theology but seek instead to develop fruitful and appropriate interaction.

Tropology Evaluated

Evaluation of some kind is required if theological ethics as tropology is to reckon with the 'good fruit' criterion (Matt. 7.15-20; Matt. 11:2015; Matt. 21:18–22; Mark 11:12–14). Jesus is reported in various New Testament texts as evaluating words and actions in terms of what fruit is produced. Matthew's report of Jesus' warning against false prophets seems to suggest that the community operate a rule of thumb whereby they expect the difference between true and false prophets to be recognizable in the character of what results from their words and other actions. 'Fruit' was commonplace as a metaphor for the consequences of deeds.[37] Hence the signs by which false prophets will be recognized are their works. While the meaning of the metaphor becomes eschatological when referring to the fire that will burn in final judgment, the ideas running across the pericope are that judgment will come, that hearers are called to consider the relationship between words and what results from them, inner and outer lives, and whether "evil" (πονηρός) or "good" (ἀγαθός) issues from how people speak and behave. While the immediate application in Matt. 7.15-20 is false prophets — identified by Ulrich Luz as Christian, not Jewish, miracle workers and exorcists — whose words and deeds will produce fruit recognizable as good or evil, and questions may be asked about what constitutes 'good' or 'evil' fruit, whether the metaphor may pressed with questions about different kinds of tree, the limits of the metaphor, and more, the expectation that the falsity of prophets will be recognizable in their works has wider application as a pragmatic principle of expectation with respect to the evaluation of personal behaviours, ecclesial polity, public witness, etc.[38]

Failure to make a strong theological case for evaluation as something inherent in the renewal of tropology would leave us in a precarious position. Church history is too filled with atrocities committed in Jesus' name for an account of theological ethics as tropology to proceed much further without attention to evaluation, that is, to how judgments are made with respect

[36] Hardy, 'The Logic of Interdisciplinary Studies and the Coherence of Theology', 9 [unpublished]. For Hardy, the predominant image in this essay was the refraction of light into bands of color as it passes through a glass prism; the colors in this refraction represent how 'God's truth is to be found present in and through the dynamics of human understanding and life in the world' (p. 15. Emphasis original). This is no 'pretense' of theology in interdisciplinarity, nor a half-way house in which the mutual benefits of each discipline are never fully engaged, but a mode of approach that 'should have as its goal the uncovering of the dynamic of the work of the Triune God in the refraction of modern life and understanding as that occurs in other disciplines' (p. 15. Emphasis original).
[37] Ulrich Luz*, Matthew 1-7* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 378.
[38] Luz*, Matthew 1-7*, 376. See further 380-3 for notes on the history of interpretation of this passage.

to what counts as 'good'. How, then, is theological ethics undertaken as tropology to understand and map the kind of evaluation(s) that will satisfy the 'good fruit' criterion without turning Jesus' words into a full-blown Christian pragmatism that clarifies and corrects the validity of textual readings with reference only to what results? How is Christian ethics as tropology to be evaluated without the endeavour morphing into an unrestricted pragmatism in which theological ethics is reduced to some kind of unworthy strategy wherein the end justifies the means.[39] At issue is the scope and kind of evaluation required as reading the bible produces judgment and decision-making with respect to action. While not advocating an anti-foundationalist, Dewey-like pragmatism which resists appeal to an eschatological end or transcendent good, the 'good fruit' criterion suggests that a built-in expectation of evaluation is something required and not an optional, nice-to-have extra. How, then, are we to conceive of and map the various dimensions of the evaluative task?

Four dimensions of the task require consideration. First is the doctrinal dimension of the evaluative task whereby tropology itself is understood as possessing an internal, evaluative dimension when read the bible is read canonically as ordering all judgments to the cross of Christ. Striving after the moral sense of the bible for the improvement of life and specifics of decision-making presupposes that the meaning of 'good' in theological ethics is given by the goodness of God revealed in Christ Jesus (2 Chron. 7.3; Ps. 34.8; Mk 10.18; Lk 18.19). Tropology is only ever about seeking to live according to the ‘mind of Christ’ (Phil. 2:5) and as ‘the body of Christ’ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:12; Col. 1:18), and so evaluating tropology requires a working relationship between the two concepts of revelation and evaluation. The scope of the question of what this working relationship entails is potentially vast. Questions come into play about hierarchically construed ecclesial authority versus more discursive accounts of how divine revelation is discerned, how God's word addresses sinful creatures, how dogmatic prejudices bear upon perceptions of the moral sense of the bible, when to distrust tropological claims that tend toward the subjective or intuitive, how to discern the true prophetic voice when contested by the community, and so on. or the moment, we note merely that tropology today must entail something like a living dialectic whereby enquiry into the goodness of God revealed in Christ Jesus is understood as inherently polyphonous and

[39] For a nuanced account of why Reinhold Niebuhr's pragmatism should not be characterized in this problematic way, see Mark L. Haas, 'Reinhold Niebuhr's "Christian Pragmatism": A Principled Alternative to Consequentialism', *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 4, Christianity and Politics: Millennial Issue I (Autumn, 1999), 605-636.

polysemic because given through communities of faith in which every believer is, at once, both justified and a sinner, *simul justus et peccator*.

Second, meeting the 'good fruit' criterion in tropology today invites creative reengagement with the existential dimension pertaining to spiritual formation. John Cassian and those for whom he wrote expected individuals to grow in their spiritual lives, including in moral discernment and discipline. Today, it is more common for debates about maturation, how adults — and not only children — grow in self-understanding and moral awareness, capacity for meaning-making, ethical judgment and effective leadership, etc., to happen within developmental psychology than theological ethics.[40] Hence our question is whether theological ethics should find better ways of conceiving and talking of the ethical dimensions of spiritual formation as entailing personal growth and increasing capacity for moral rigour. More specifically, should revisiting the ancient tropological interest in spiritual development manifesting itself in progress in the moral life urge theological ethics toward cognitive and developmental psychology with a view to understanding better how developmental research has bearing upon spiritual formation and accompanying moral decision-making and behaviour? Words of caution are necessary. Developmental psychology takes many forms but may be broadly conceived as empirically-based scientific investigation intended to explain growth, change and consistency across the human lifespan, and to analyse how moral development is experienced. The psychologist's questions are different from the questions of theological ethics or moral philosophy;[41] our interest is in the points at which respective interests overlap. At issue is the extent to which spiritual formation is deemed to entail developmental change with regard to the morally appropriate direction of that change, and whether there is scope for theological ethics to expect somehow that discipleship is developmental.

[40] E.g., Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) was significant in advancing a constructive-developmental theory of meaning-making influenced especially by the child developmental psychologist Jean Piaget but with application to adults. Judith Stevens-Long, *Adult Life* (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1988) included ethical / committed behaviour in her typology of development across the adult lifespan whereby a person matures from behaviour driven by a desire to confirm to behaviour driven by principles, includes assisting others, and ability to meet one's own needs without using others instrumentally. See esp. 66. More recently *The Oxford Handbook of Reciprocal Adult Development and Learning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011 2nd Ed).

[41] Note, for instance, moral philosopher Gertrud Nunner-Winkler's critique of the moral universalism held by Lawrence Kohlberg. 'Moral Relativism and Strict Universalism' in Thomas E. Wren, Ed., *The Moral Domain: Essays in the Ongoing Discussion between Philosophy and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 109-126.

Third, evaluating tropology today needs better understanding of the philosophico-aesthetic dimension of tropology pertaining to moral imagination. Having noted the wealth of witness in Christian tradition to benefits entailed in dramatizing and otherwise giving artistic expression to readings of the bible, and how the products of their labours — plays, music, paintings, stories, sculptures, etc. — variously give imaginative form to the moral sense of biblical texts in given situations, questions arise with respect to what happens in theological ethics as the moral imagination creates space for judgement and various kinds of critique. The same conceptual space was in view when, in his report of Abbot Moses's reply to a question regarding the goal and end of the monk, John Cassian urged monks and hermits to fix their spiritual eye on the coming reign of God:

> The end of our profession indeed, as I said, is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven: but the immediate aim or goal, is purity of heart, without which no one can gain that end: fixing our gaze then steadily on this goal, as if on a definite mark, let us direct our course as straight towards it as possible, and if our thoughts wander somewhat from this, let us revert to our gaze upon it, and check them accurately as by a sure standard, which will always bring back all our efforts to this one mark, and will show at once if our mind has wandered ever so little from the direction marked out for it.[42]

Note how Cassian both affirms the imaginative work of fixing one's gaze upon the goal of the coming reign of God whilst alluding also to 'a sure standard' and bringing efforts back 'to this one mark'. He holds in tension both the creative work of imagination and its discipline. Reflection at this point could burst into contemplation of how beauty awakens and enlarges human capacity to act for the sake of God/the good, psycho-cognitive considerations of how empathy is experienced and whether and/or why visualization renders the experience more intense, why moral imagination is required to conceive of something different from the status quo, and more; we note merely that tropology entails moral reasoning as a study of the creative and beautiful.

Fourth, the 'good fruit' criterion in tropology requires extended conversation across academic disciplines, language, cultures, etc. This might seem self-evident but warrants mention because of the (often justified) complaint against the tradition of theologico-ethical engagement with the bible marked by Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen's attempt in the

[42] Cassian, *Conference* 1, ch.2.

period 1916-1921 to learn their 'theological ABC all over again, beginning by reading and interpreting the writing of the Old and New Testament, more thoughtfully than before'.[43] The complaint is that this kind of doctrinal commitment squeezes out serious socio-political and other academic engagement. Robin Lovin makes the point:

> For all its theological integrity, Barth's position is impossible for a public ethics. If we are to choose our actions by reason and defend them publicly by argument, we must either limit the freedom of God or abandon the metaethics that bases all moral meanings on God's will.[44]

Lovin's concern is that appeals to the Word of God are too often made at such a level of abstraction that they mean very little practically.

> Obedience to the requirements of the moment is all that marks a faithful ethics. Moral argument, moral uncertainty, and moral justifications belong to that closed-off realm of human speech untouched by the Word.[45]

While not sharing Lovin's view that 'Barth's position is impossible for a public ethics', I recognize difficulties entailed in, on the one hand, not reducing God's word to a divine object that may be discussed at will and somehow manipulated by human reason such that obedience to divine command becomes a method for making moral judgments and, on the other, speaking about the moral sense of the bible meaningful degrees of specificity and certainty. There is no single response to this challenge only repeated demonstration that holding tropological readings of the bible to the full range of academic standards is consistent with affirming that bible remains a purposive means of divine self-communication that is understood only with holding that the bible is still 'sufficient to declare the truth' in matters of both doctrine and morals.[46]

In a *Time* magazine piece published April 20, 1962, Barth is reported as saying: 'There can be ... no question of "disproving" the authority of the Scriptures, for the church today must take

---

[43] Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 97.
[44] Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices: Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner and Bonhoeffer* (Fortress, 1985), p. 42.
[45] Lovin, *Christian Faith*, p. 42.
[46] Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* Translated by Archibald Robertson. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 4. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2801.htm>, Part I, §2.

the "risk" of accepting the witness of the early Christian who established the canon of the Scripture, and the Reformation fathers who revised it. God still speaks within the Bible: in the light of faith, the church and her theologians must listen and undertake the ever-unfinished task of finding out what He is saying'.[47] My answer today to the question: 'What, then, does theological ethics do?' is to reaffirm Barth's urging of the risk to keep listening for how God speaks within the bible and, as per long-standing witness in Christian tradition, to do so for its moral sense. To this end, this paper has considered various dimensions of the tropological task: the doctrinal (concerning the substance of 'the good'), the existential (concerning personal growth in relation to 'the good'), the philosophico-aesthetic (how 'the good' is seen as beautiful and otherwise perceived) and the discursive (how perceptions of 'the good' must be subjected to the rigour of cross-disciplinary investigation).

[47] *Time: The Weekly News Magazine* http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19620420,00.html (accessed 7 August, 2019).

Aquinas, Thomas - *The Summa Theologiæ of St. Thomas Aquinas* Second and Revised Edition, 1920 Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province Online Edition Copyright © 2017 by Kevin Knight <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>

Augustine - *On Genesis* (New York: New City Press, 1990)

Augustine - *On Christian Teaching* Translated by James Shaw. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 2. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/12021.htm>

Boyle, John F. - 'St. Thomas Aquinas and Sacred Scripture', *Catena aurea in quatuor Evangelia*, in Mk 2:23-28, ed. A. Guarienti (Turin: Marietti, 1953), vol. 1

Busch, Eberhard - *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976)

Cassian, John - *Conferences*, translated C.S. Gibson. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 11. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350814.htm>

Cassian, John - *Institutes* Translated by C.S. Gibson. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 11. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350704.htm>

Dobie, Robert J. - (2015) Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart on Exodus 3:14: Exegesis or Eisegesis?, *Medieval Mystical Theology*, 24:2

Haas, Mark L. - 'Reinhold Niebuhr's "Christian Pragmatism": A Principled Alternative to Consequentialism', *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 4, Christianity and Politics: Millennial Issue I (Autumn, 1999)

Luz, Ulrich - *Matthew 1-7* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 378

McDermott, Ryan - *Tropologies: Ethics and Invention in England, c. 1350–1600* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016)

Nunner-Winkler, Gertrud - 'Moral Relativism and Strict Universalism' in Thomas E. Wren, Ed., *The Moral Domain: Essays in the Ongoing Discussion between Philosophy and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990)

Ricoeur, Paul 0 *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007 originally published 1968)