

Finding Time

A Reply to Bill Harkins and Kathleen O'Connor

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In the right context, it is both invigorating and humbling to place one's work before the wisdom of colleagues. This is one of those contexts, and I am deeply appreciative of Bill Harkins and Kathleen O'Connor for their charitable and challenging insights into my work. This reply gives me the opportunity to clean up misunderstandings, to correct errors, to clarify substantive disagreements between us, and to create further space for conversation beyond this reply.

First to misunderstandings. Following Phillip Rieff, Bill quite properly notes the dangers of equating theology with the any number of post-Freudian forms of psychotherapy. Narrowly, Rieff's concern with the "triumph of the therapeutic," is that many forms of psychotherapy are premised on the conviction that if we work hard enough at getting our heads right, we can be okay (as in "I'm okay; you're okay"). More broadly, it is that these forms of psychotherapy have become a form of religious faith in western culture that is too shallow and too individualistic to address the problems that persons in that culture face. Or, translated into theological terms, Rieff's concern is that these types of psychotherapy are just another way of claiming that we don't really need God to make us right—that we can do it on our own, thank you very much—and therein we cut ourselves off from the very source of hope, vision, and comfort we actually need to live in the world.

I share Rieff's concern—albeit in a context 40 years removed from when he wrote. Along with Rieff—and, I imagine, with Bill—I think that Freud was right: psychoanalysis may help the pathologically unhappy and dysfunctional to become mundanely unhappy and dysfunctional; it won't, however, cure them into fulfillment. But what I meant by "therapy" when I said that theology is therapy certainly wasn't the kind of psychotherapy Rieff was concerned about. There are many kinds of therapy in the world: physical, medicinal, aroma, dietary, etc. Among them, theology is probably more like occupational therapy: it helps us learn to deal with losses from which we (at least by our own doing) are unlikely to recover. Good theology helps us cope with a universe that is simultaneously too grand and too horrid for us to control; it doesn't relieve us from dealing with that universe's grandeur and horror—and certainly not when we experience that grandeur or horror firsthand. I should have been clearer in defining my terms.

Lack of definitional clarity may also account for what I think may be a misunderstanding between Kathleen and me. Following her work in trauma studies, Kathleen suggests that we cannot really prepare for disasters—that by definition, disasters exceed our ability to cope with them and therefore our ability to prepare for them. Perhaps for traumatic events this is so. It seems to me, however, that I'm doing something if I buy health insurance in Virginia, dig a tornado cellar in Kansas, maintain my first aid training in Georgia, or carry an avalanche cord in the Colorado high country. Given that disease and tornadoes and injuries and avalanches can all be disastrous, I don't know what to call what I'm doing other than "preparation." I'm open to other language, however. Again, though, my point isn't that theology can prevent trauma: any of us can be faced with events beyond our ability to cope. Perhaps, however, it can make those occurrences less likely or less severe. Perhaps Kathleen disagrees, but if so, I'm certainly going to ask her about her health insurance, her pension, and her reasons for writing so eloquently on why lament in the Old Testament still matters for us today.

Turning to my errors and the disagreements between the three of us, it occurs to me that these are all bound up in our respective and troubled understandings of time. For my part, I conflated a biblical narrative that describes *why* we feel the way we do with a chronology of events that attempts to give reasons for that feeling. The feeling is that while there is meaning, order, truth, and beauty in the universe they always evade our understanding or control. As a result, we also feel a throbbing ache of absence that is overwhelmingly insistent when we experience disaster. The chronology is the first several chapters of Genesis. While I certainly wouldn't treat those opening chapters as a (pre)historical description of events, I did slip into treating them as giving an order to time rather than an interpretation of the experience of human existence. And while the language of "before" and "after" may be perfectly adequate in describing our various *experiences* of disasters, the language probably works less well in describing the *experiential* qualities that such disasters remind us of. Thus, Bill's comment on my naïve reference to Edenic origins is chastening and deserved.

That said, I don't think that Bill and I actually do share agreeing interpretations of the cross of Christ in the midst of vulnerability and contingency. For Bill, the

theological question is who suffers with us. For me, it is what God does about our suffering. So where Bill looks to the crucifix to see the one crucified—the one willing to become flesh so that we might not suffer alone—I look to the cross and empty tomb to see the one whose crucifixion makes possible something beyond (or “after,” if I can still use that word) suffering.

This is not to say that I have any illusions about therapy “resolving” aspects of the human condition this side of eternity. I won’t speak to Bill’s experience, but in mine the very notion of such resolution isn’t so much theologically wrong as existentially nonsense: Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection certainly hasn’t made me, anyone I know, or anyone I know of invulnerable or independent. The crucifixion and resurrection have, however, opened up the promise that in the New Creation, we will be raised inviolable and transformed. Shorn of the hope that comes with that promise, sitting and lamenting with the grieving (while it may be cathartic) feels to me more like an expression of brave agnosticism or mute despondence than it does like faithful co-grieving. To be clear: my argument isn’t against sitting and lamenting with the grieving (nor with grieving ourselves), but with thinking that when we are doing so, we are imitating Christ. That’s the triumph of the therapeutic that Rieff warned us against.

What has this to do with time? Only this: where Bill argues that we need to recover Holy Saturday, I argue that our problem is that we haven’t yet begun to live after Easter. For Easter isn’t just about alleluias and lilies; it is about a world that has begun to be transformed—a transformation which will not be completed until Christ comes again. Between the first resurrection and the coming one, there will still be pain and suffering and grieving, but that isn’t all that there has been or all that there will be.

Perhaps, though, I am reading Bill less charitably than I ought. Perhaps he means something like this: “the only way that those who grieve may eventually live after Easter is if we don’t push Easter on them, but let them spend time—and spend time with them—in Holy Saturday.” Perhaps our disagreement isn’t about time but about timing. But if so, I find it peculiar that someone who so emphasizes the dialectic quality of theology—the “both/and” quality of it—should order the process by which we do theology in such a linear fashion. Easter admits to grief—as all those New Testament authors writing out of grief and after the resurrection attest—so we can grieve without refusing Easter. Or, to say that differently, there is nothing that can happen on Holy Saturday that cannot happen after Easter—but much that can happen after Easter that Holy Saturday can’t recognize. So if this is what Bill is recommending, then I can only say, “Welcome to my error,” since his recommendation, too, confuses a meaning-making narrative with a chronology.

Or, perhaps, I should say, “welcome to our error,” for Kathleen, though she evades it better than Bill or me, also mixes her understandings of time. On the one hand, her response suggests linearity: first we live one way, then disaster happens and (if we live at all) we can’t live the way we used to, then we learn to live in a new way. First this world, then no world, then a new world. This linearity underlies her insistence that we cannot prepare for disaster.

On the other hand, though, she notes that we construct the new world out of pieces of the old: “Healing requires new speech but not made from completely new ingredients. To rebuild communal identity, victims of disaster need continuity with their past traditions to reframe the violence and make it part of their story.” What was then and what is now are not quite so distinct as her first telling of the story suggests—and perhaps, though she doesn’t really say much about it, what is now and what will be aren’t so entirely different either, for there is covenant in both.

But if that’s the case, then we are preparing for disaster when we do theology because doing Christian theology isn’t so much about developing “rigid orthodoxy” as about developing the type of generous orthodoxy that stimulates creativity, insight, compassion, and wisdom. Those, it seems to me, are the very types of tools we’ll need in order to do theology after disaster and doing theology now gives us the opportunity to practice using them. Practicing theology won’t prevent disaster (who among us could think that??); it may, though, help us cope with what disaster does to us.

Which leads me to a final point. Those who have found the time to read through lead essay, responses, and reply have been observing theologians practicing with each other. You have seen our misunderstandings, errors and disagreements (or at least some of them). You have seen that neither Bill, Kathleen, nor I are done with theology because none of us have gotten it right yet. Nor are we done with thinking about what theology does when it intersects with the various points in time and space that constitute our lives. In other words, you have seen a conversation that is far from finished. Now I hope you will find the time to continue this conversation, practicing theology with us and with others. Practice takes time. Moreover, practice takes trusting time enough to think that what we do now can be useful later—even if later is after yet another disaster. So we find time to practice. We practice finding time. And we practice finding out about the time in which we live. In a world full of people searching for stars, maybe finding time may be the best theology we can do.