

COMMUNAL “RESPONDABILITY”:
AN EVANGELICAL APPRECIATION OF INTERSUBJECTIVE HERMENEUTICS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the hermeneutics of three contemporary thinkers: James K.A. Smith, Carl Raschke and Alexander S. Jensen. After a critical evaluation of their main theses, based on the findings an elaboration is given on the subject of hermeneutics in a postmodern context. The required books are treated in diachronic order, and little reference to other books is made in these evaluations. This is mainly reserved for the last part: the personal engagement with the contents.

ONE

INTERPRETATION AS A CREATIONAL TASK

In his *Fall of Interpretation*¹ James K.A. Smith examines the nature of hermeneutics. The book starts with the provoking phrase “Interpretation has long been a sin” (17). From this statement Smith derives his goals; pointing out this is a misunderstanding of interpretation, after first thoroughly describing different views on hermeneutics (19-20). He introduces four of such views: *present immediacy*, *eschatological immediacy*, *violent mediation*, and *creational hermeneutic*. These views form the three parts of the book (both immediacy models are treated in the first part).

The Curse of Hermeneutics

The immediacy models say that hermeneutics are a result of the Fall (35-83). Only because of the separation between God and man, interpretation became a necessary evil. The present immediacy model—represented by Richard Lints and Rex Koivisto—claims that, while there was need for mediation because of the Fall, this has already been restored by the redemption through Christ and the “illumination” of the Spirit (37-8). There is “no interpretation needed” (39). This approach of resounds the common sense realism (see *infra*). The eschatological immediacy model—with Wolfhart Pannenberg, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jürgen Habermas as spokesmen—does not see this curse of interpretation removed entirely until the eschaton. Then immediacy will be reinstated. Contrary to the present immediacy model, eschatological immediacy recognizes the continuing distortion of human sinfulness and thus places the restoration of the hermeneutical paradise in the eschaton (62). At the same time of recognizing this “situatedness” of current interpretation it sees (human) knowledge exceeding these limitations. Knowledge per definition overcomes situated understanding. Both these immediacy models state that interpretation is merely temporal. At one time—this moment or the eschaton—the burden of interpretation will be lifted up.

¹ James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Downers Grove: IL: InterVarsity, 2000). Page references to this book are between parentheses in this chapter.

This is not the case for the violent mediation model—based on Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. These thinkers do not regard interpretation as a consequence of the Fall, since it is not a Fall *from*, but a Fall *within* humanness (88) and thus not a mere contrast with Eden. “Human be-ing is characterized by . . . spatiality and situationality, [thus] the interpreter can never step outside its locale” (91). Violence is not something accidental, but something “originary”; it is connected to the origin of human “be-ing” (121). This implies that there will be no moment in history where the burden of the interpretation shall be lifted (or restored).

The Blessing of Hermeneutics

Against the immediacy model Smith argues that being human necessarily means being located (40). Thus, having a tradition, a culture and a history are inevitably part of the created humanness, implying that interpretation is at the core a part of humanness. For this reason Smith proposes a creational hermeneutic (131-84). This means that Smith acknowledges the situatedness recognised by both Heidegger and Derrida.

He however does not agree on the equation of finiteness and violent interpretation (129). In defending this he uses a “fundamentally Augustinian theme: the goodness of creation” (136)—as opposed to a frequent misunderstanding of Augustine’s original sin (i.e., sin as being at the origin human, 135). The result of this understanding is “an understanding of the *status* of interpretation as a ‘creational task’—a task constitutive of finitude and thus not a ‘labour’ to be escaped or overcome” (148).

Smith achieves to convince the reader of this creational understanding of interpretation. If he calls attention to one point, it is that finiteness is not the same as sinfulness. Both immediacy theory and violent mediation go off track on this. Finiteness and interpretation are interconnected and not fallenness and interpretation. That Smith translates his proposal into a more practical use (149-83) is highly appreciated.²

² In this I disagree with Richard Briggs saying that Smith’s ecclesiastical goal is too elusive for such an audience. As if the entire church needs to read his book in order to have an ecclesiastical goal. See Richard Briggs, review of *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic*, by James K. A. Smith, *Heythrop Journal* 43, no. 3 (2002): 366.

Perhaps the biggest point of critique is his insufficient attention to the current distortion of hermeneutics. He does acknowledge this, but his main focus is on the goodness of creation. Herein lies the danger of neglecting the effects of the Fall and thus partly making the same mistake present immediacy makes—neglecting the tension between the present revelatory character of interpretation through Scripture and the Spirit, and the present distortion of interpretation.³ In his last chapter however, Smith points to the communal aspects of interpretation, thus avoiding giving too much credit to the possibility an individual ‘good’ interpretation. The “response to an ‘egoistic’ ontology . . . has to be an ontology of communion and a corresponding ethic of communication. This, after all, is what we are created for and it is in this hermeneutical situation we find grace to grapple with the effects of ‘the Fall’.”⁴

³ He gives this more attention in his *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? See for example: James K. A. Smith, Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (2006; 4th repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2008), 28.

⁴ Bruce Hamill, review of *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic*, by James K. A. Smith, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3, no. 2 (2001): 234.

TWO

INTERPRETATION AS A REPEATED PERFORMANCE

*The Next Reformation*⁵ of Carl Raschke is a peculiar book. On the one hand it is an eloquent philosophical analysis of “what postmodernism really is” and a historical examination of the “unholy alliance” evangelical Christianity has made with Cartesian rationalism and British evidentialism (9). On the other hand, Raschke in a quite challenging and often provoking way tries to explore the possibilities of postmodernism for the contemporary evangelical churches, with a focus on ministry (159-78) and worship (179-205).

The Performance

In the first chapters of the book Raschke offers a quite difficult analysis of postmodern thought. He does this in reaction on evangelical misunderstanding of postmodern thinkers. Evangelicals tend to think postmodernism to foster “nihilism”, “moral relativism”, “emotionalism”, “irrationalism” (11, 15), and to be “a host of disconnected truths” (16) and “nominalistic” (18).⁶ He mainly blames the influence of realism and the consequential foundationalism for this (17-9, 22-3, 27-31) and goes as far to say that the Christian realism “reeks of Gnosticism” (19). In following Bruce Ellis Benson’s *Graven Ideologies* he argues that the focus on the individual, the power of human reason and the objective character of reason are nothing less than a modernist form of idolatry (23).

The reaction to this idolatrous objectivism lies in Kantian critical philosophy sketching “the limits of human reason and [disclosing] the ways in which our knowledge of the world is construed in terms of prior ‘subjective’ structures of understanding” (37). This is to be differentiated from relativism.

⁵ Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004). Page references to this book are between parentheses in this chapter.

⁶ Based on his emphasis on the Kantian origin of the critique of objectivism, he differentiates Kant as well from perspectivalism, subjectivism and relativism (74).

Over Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel, Derrida and Deleuze Raschke comes to the notion that understanding that is not objective is still in need for a “sense of generality” in order to avoid a far stretched subjectivism and the consequent relativism. This can be “fostered by repeated performance” (64). This performance is distinguished from a formal logic of generality by the distinction of every performance (65). Based on the self-understanding of Jesus “I am the truth”, Raschke argues that

Christian truth is not, never was, and never will be propositional truth. Propositional, or purely philosophical, truth is conditional truth, even if it claims to be about what is unconditional. It can never be made into the touchstone of Christian truth, which is always *personal* and *relational*. (209)

This view goes beyond propositionalism and even the presuppositionalism, which recognizes the flaws of the supposed objectivity. “Faith is *presuppositionless*” (114). It will destroy the idols of the age. At the same time Raschke describes postmodernism as encapsulating “a sense of our times” (210). The way he does this almost seems to be idolatrous itself, despite his claims on postmodernism being at worst comparable with the plagues in Egypt (210). Nowhere in the book does Raschke offer a moderate critique on modernism. He views the Enlightenment as the real Dark Ages of history, and postmodernism as the light in those dark periods.

While modernism has had some flaws, presuppositions and propositions are not necessary contradictory to faith. It is more the way both are treated that has a potential danger for Christian faith to them. It is true that faith should be able to question our positions. But that should not imply a *presuppositionless* faith, but a *presupposition-questioning* faith—still acknowledging the role of presuppositions in faith matters. A very practical example is Paul addressing different presuppositions in the Roman church as far as food laws is concerned. While Romans 14 opens possibilities to discuss and question the food laws, Paul does emphasize to bring into account one’s presuppositions (vs. 14). What he also stresses is the importance of love in dealing with presuppositions (vs. 15-18).

Further, Raschke should give more attention to the failings of postmodern thinkers. Smith also would take the postmodern thought to church, but he still warns his readers not to not entirely go along Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault.⁷ This more

⁷ Smith, *Afraid of Postmodernism*, 24.

balanced approach is lacking in Raschke's *The Next Reformation*, despite his accurate insights on the defects of Modernity.

The Repetition?

Though the presentation of postmodernism in the first part is quite insightful, the second part disappoints. Raschke presents the Charismatic renewal as “emblematic” of postmodern evangelicalism (see chapter 8, esp. 203; 205). The examples he gives are definitely performances (cf. 185; 193; 201-2), but it misses the “repeatedness”. While Luther promoted a reformation of faith, rooted in the tradition of the Church, Raschke seems to get rid of this tradition in his practical elaboration. His ecclesial model is one where “there is no selection of hymns, no specific ‘order of worship’” (185); “either the preacher or a participant in the service chooses a selection [of the Bible], sometimes on the spur of the moment, according to the ‘movement’ of the Spirit” (193).

Raschke favours an intersubjectivity of understanding, but at the same time he depicts the liturgy of the (Charismatic) church as being very temporal, that is, the loose liturgy he explains shows little respect for what has been “performed” in previous centuries.⁸ More than Raschke, the Reformers stood in the history of the Church, acknowledging the “repeatedness”—the role of the great Tradition—and performing it—being critical toward that Tradition. For example, in his picture of the cell church (154-6), Raschke denies the importance of hierarchy throughout the ages, such as the affirmation of the Trinity. He wants to go back to the primitive church, but seems to forget that this is exactly what a lot of evangelicals claim to do. His approach is just one of many.

⁸ Cf. James K.A. Smith, review of *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, by Carl Raschke, *Pneuma* 27, no. 2 (2005): 405.

THREE

INTERPRETATION AS A PROBLEM

In his textbook *Theological Hermeneutics*⁹ Jensen does two things. First of all, he investigates the history of theological interpretation (6). Second, he offers his proper view on hermeneutics. *Theological Hermeneutics* being a textbook means that it offers a simplified representation of the subject.¹⁰ Jensen wants to give an overview of the *history* of theological hermeneutics (6), but it is actually an overview of its *modern history* (78-206) with a slight pre-modern introduction (9-77).¹¹ Almost ten centuries of medieval interpretation is reduced to about the same number of pages (51-63), thus leaving out the theological hermeneutics of Anselm, Peter Abelard, and Bernard of Clairvaux amongst others.¹²

It would have been a good addition to the book to give a more in-depth exposition of the medieval (and also the patristic) thinking, but probably because of the nature of the book (a textbook), its size (little over two hundred pages) and the personal preference of the author this was difficult to achieve.

The Problem of Understanding

Jensen defines *hermeneutics* as “the reflection on the problem of understanding” (2), and immediately adds a twofold meaning of this “problem”. First he gives a more positive approach: “the art of understanding”, followed by a negative one: “the removal of obstacles to understanding” (2). He already mentions the avoidance of misunderstanding in the first approach and this leads to think that Jensen opts in

⁹ Alexander S. Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, SCM Core Text (London: SCM, 2007). Page references to this book are between parentheses in this chapter.

¹⁰ Tarmo Toom, review of *Theological Hermeneutics*, SCM Core Text, by Alexander S. Jensen, *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 15, no. 2 (2008): 224.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*

¹² Remarkable is that Anselm is mentioned in his own proposal for a hermeneutical theology (215) and recommended in the literature of that chapter (222).

total for a more negative approach of hermeneutics. Human beings need interpretation help them to avoid or deal with difficulties in understanding:

Only in the beatific vision . . . will understanding be without impediment, and our thoughts will be fully transparent to one another. In this world, we live with imperfect communication and distorted discourse, and we will not be able to escape the hermeneutical question (228).

The *verbum interius* (inner word) “cannot be translated into external words without loss” (224), because we do not have access to the “pre-verbal” thoughts of others (227). The remaining question is whether the full future transparency is due to an opened access to pre-verbal thoughts or to a restored creational interpretation, as Smith proposes. Smith is the only one of the three that discusses this point in depth and consequently his argumentation convinces the most.

The Problem of Common Sense

Do Smith and Jensen contradict one another? When looking at the context of Jensen’s argumentation, this does not seem to be the case. A red line through the book is the warning for the influence of Scottish common sense realism (1, 82-6, 123-4, 207-8, 224-6).¹³ His constant call to take serious the problem of understanding seems due to his apparent aversion of this modernist philosophy. In this light, one understands his “problematic” approach better. Common sense realism does not do credit to the fallen state of understanding. It offered a simple epistemology: what we perceive is not a mental concept, but the object itself (83). For biblical hermeneutics this implies the text not needing interpretation. Even further, this implies tradition being worthless, because whatever has been said in history is irrelevant (85). The Bible “is intelligible by the people,” as Charles Hodge said (85), so there is no need for tradition.

Jensen’s understanding of interpretation as problematic actually does not necessarily imply him ignoring interpretation as fundamentally human. Jensen’s experience with a common sense realist reading of the Bible has shaped his approach. While his hesitation toward this modernist approach is actually quite

¹³ Though the index does not record 224-6 to deal with common-sense theory, Toom rightly sees Jensen’s conclusion as a critique on Reid. Cf. Toom, review of *Theological Hermeneutics*, 223.

accurate, it would have been more balanced if he gave some more attention to the creational reality of interpretation.¹⁴

This creational aspect of hermeneutics can be seen in some parts of Jensen's exposition though. In his description of theological language as the expression of religious self-understanding—this is “a particular understanding of human existence before God in rejection of another, competing self-understanding” (219)—Jensen shows his awareness of the creational order and the fact that humans cannot univocally describe God. This is not necessarily due to the Fall, but to the fact that God is “beyond the realm of creation” (218).

The Problem of Presuppositions

Not only Raschke, but also Jensen offers a view on presuppositions, and his is more balanced. Jensen states that it is “important for the theologian to be aware of his . . . presuppositions and, wherever possible, make them explicit, reflect on them and, where appropriate, criticize them” (208). This is a far more realistic call than Raschke's appeal to regard faith as presuppositionless. Jensen even further explains how this can be of use to theological hermeneutics. First, one needs to be aware of what is seen as “the ultimate reference of theological language.” Second, the theologian needs to be clear about “God's revelation in Jesus Christ”. In which way is it mediated? Finally, “the relationship between meaning and language” needs to be addressed (209). Only then the necessary dialogue between the positions is possible (226).

These practical guidelines seem to be more postmodern than Raschke's denial of presuppositions, even though Jensen distinguishes himself of postmodernism and actually calls it mysticism and nihilism (212). Smith uses a thorough example to illustrate this. He looks at Jesus' death and explains how two accounts of the same event can differ so much that—even though the event itself, or the truth behind the text, does not change—the account clearly depends deeply on the “reading” of each

¹⁴ On a meta-level this conclusion is quite interesting, because if one would merely look at Jensen's book in a common sense realist way, one might simply conclude that Jensen simply views interpretation as problematic, while a contextual reading of Jensen—and the consequential interpretation—suggests this different result.

narrator.¹⁵ Or within this context: the interpretation of each narrator depends on his presuppositions. If one presupposes that supernatural events do not occur, than the resurrection will be explained otherwise. If one is open to supernatural explanation, the resurrection can be experienced as reality. This presupposition “requires faith—and such faith requires the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶ Thus, Jensen is not as far from Derrida and his deconstruction of texts as he might assume. He might even be closer to postmodern deconstructionism than Raschke.

¹⁵ Smith, *Afraid of Postmodernism*, 44-8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

FOUR

INTERPRETATION AS A COMMUNAL “RESPONDABILITY”

Smith recently notes that one of the biggest fears Christians have of postmodernism is the loss of objectivity and the consequent threat of relativity.¹⁷ Even the possibility of subjectivity is—due to the modernist mindset of contemporary Christianity—already too fluctuant. Bringing this into account, one could opt for “intersubjectivity” as a response to the naïve objectivism inflicted on us by four centuries of Enlightenment. It is remarkable that all three discussed authors, though disagreeing on other topics, to a high level agree on the role of intersubjectivity.

Vertical Intersubjectivity

A first aspect of intersubjectivity is the relationship between God and man. The often liberal Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof (1914-95) shows some of his best work in his theological anthropology.¹⁸ His starting point for defining (theological) humanness is the vertical relationship: the one between God and man. He states that man is “a *respondable* person.”¹⁹ This wordplay in essence means that man has the liberty to answer God’s call. In that sense Berkhof speaks of neither man as *responding*—because it is not guaranteed that man responds to God’s voice—nor man as *responsible*—because that puts a too one-dimensional emphasis on the command of God and leaves too little room for human choice whether or not to respond.²⁰ Thus Berkhof coins a new word, *resondability*. Man is built to respond, but this does not imply him doing so.²¹ He is “respond-able”: able to respond.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20 n. 8; see also Raschke, *Next Reformation*, 11.

¹⁸ He is very clear that theological anthropology does not bring into account every aspect of a more general anthropology, see: Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An introduction to the Study of Faith*, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 178ff.

¹⁹ Ibid., 181; the Dutch “antwoordelijk” is well translated by Sierd Woudstra.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

While this shows a lot of human nature, it foremost shows the character of God. “God does not need the world to be God or even to come to self-realization. . . . [But still the] world is drawn by God into his own life just as a parent draws the child into his or her own life. God wills not to be a worldless God and wills the world not to be godless.”²² Even though God does not need to take this initiative, in his grace he did choose to do so. This immediately shows that God is *relational*, and not *logical* as the “god of the philosophers.”²³

There are numerous ways in which God calls man: the creature, the gift of his Scripture, his Son, his Spirit . . . The Bible for example contains words, but those words “are not just little squiggles of information on paper. Written words are personal exchanges, personal deposits of a person.”²⁴ God promises his concern with human beings and promise “is a performative form of language. Performative language . . . brings about what it refers to. . . . The understanding of the relation between humankind and God is expressed in making performative declarations.”²⁵

This is why words matter; “because they represent persons. *Because words represent persons, how we respond to words matters.*”²⁶ Thus, humans are not merely called by words, but are expected to respond to this calling. Not because of the objective character of the understanding of this word, but because of the person—the subject—that utters them. This is what Søren Kierkegaard means when he states that objective reflection “is not focussed upon the relationship, . . . but upon the question whether it is the truth to which the knower is related.”²⁷ This becomes a cold faith, a faith that is not Christian, because at the heart of Christianity lies the relational triune

²² Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 233-4.

²³ Raschke, *Next Reformation*, 81.

²⁴ Alan Jacobs in: Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 97.

²⁵ Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 221.

²⁶ McKnight, *Blue Parakeet*, 98.

²⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, “Truth Is Subjective,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, eds. Michael Peterson, et al., trans. David Swenson, 3rd ed. (1941; renewed 1969; repr. New York, NY: Oxford University, 2007): 119.

God. One simply cannot “attain heaven without an intimate, personal relationship between the believer and the God in whom he believes.”²⁸ This was also stressed in the *Sola Fide*-tenet of the Reformation.²⁹ Thus, understanding is at heart *intersubjective*: God is the initiative-taking subject who utters the word that needs interpretation; and man is the responsible subject, free to respond upon this uttering. A response God deeply desires, not out of need, but because of concern.

Even more, in Christian hermeneutics the word and the one who utters it become so closely related that Christians speak of “the Word made flesh.” This is the “incarnational hermeneutics” that can be found in Luther.³⁰ *Sola scriptura* is not a mere *sola* “text”, but it involves incarnation as well. The word becomes Word and demands a personal “re-acting”.

This “re-acting” on the call implies a thorough listening. It is not uncomplicated. “Listening to the Bible is . . . an art. . . . Sometimes we don’t listen. There is some attention, but no absorption or action.”³¹ Attentive

reading is an act of love and therefore an act of listening. But good listening, . . . listening, is more than gathering information. . . . God speaks to us for a reason—[it is] “missional” listening. In brief, God tells his story so we can enter into a relationship with him, listen to him, and live out his Word in our day and in our way.³²

The good listener acknowledges that God is the wholly-Other.³³ In the light of Smith’s creational hermeneutics, the creational order puts emphasis on human finiteness—not as fallenness, but as being other and subordinate to this infinite God.

²⁸ Raschke, *Next Reformation*, 25.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 25-6.

³⁰ Based on Ron T. Michener, Lectures Postmodernism and Theological Hermeneutics, Leuven, November 2009; and in-class discussions.

³¹ McKnight, *Blue Parakeet*, 99.

³² *Ibid.*, 103.

³³ Raschke, *Next Reformation*, 213.

The finite listener “re-acts” upon the calling. He seeks to *know* God. This is to be distinguished from an urge to *comprehend* God.³⁴ Man simply cannot put God in a comprehensive comprehending box. This should however not discourage him to seek to know God with his whole being.

To a correct knowledge of God certainly belongs the allusion to divine inscrutability. Yet this allusion must not be understood as the avoidance of an answer to the question of the meaning-context of reality as a whole. Instead, it represents a phase in such an answer, insofar as it emphasizes the superiority of the God-based meaning of the life-world as a whole over and above the limitations of human understanding.³⁵

While the latter part of the quote seems to imply that someday man will entirely “know” God—thus affirming Smith’s critique on his eschatological immediacy—the first part is a right call. The realization of the finiteness is not whatsoever an excuse for not seeking to know God. On the contrary, it stimulates man to be amazed by the wholly-Other. This knowing of God involves a love for God. This is the highest goal for humans. In light of Augustine, Smith adds that this wholly-Other is also to be loved *in* the Other—our neighbour.³⁶ This takes us to the second part of intersubjective interpretation: the need of a loving community.

Horizontal Intersubjectivity

The walls of a church don't make it holy.
It's what's authentic that completes the sum of its parts.
Don't excuse yourself from today on the pretence of your past.³⁷

³⁴ Based on Michener, Lectures PTH, 2009.

³⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Meaning, Religion, and the Question of God,” in *Knowing Religiously*, Boston University Studies in Philosophy and Religion, vol. 7 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1985), 164.

³⁶ Smith, *Fall of Interpretation*, 177.

³⁷ August Burns Red, “Existence,” on *Constellations*, Solid State Records, HOFF07CDA, CD, 2009.

In the song *Existence*, the band August Burns Red pictures the church as a community that is more than the sum of the parts. With authentic brokenness the individual can come to church and in community with others make it a holy (catholic) church. The brokenness is somehow dealt with in community. It is to a certain extent lifted up. This is also applicable for the distortion of interpretation in which the community should play an important role. The church ought to be the “*locale*” where interpretation takes place. Interpretation is not a thing between the individual and God. It is a response of a community to God. Smith calls this kind of intersubjectivity a necessary condition for interpretation—next to finitude.³⁸

While this vertical intersubjectivity cannot be denied as *the* starting point for interpretation, the horizontal level cannot be neglected either. For this the individual community member needs a vivid imagination. In his widely appreciated book on education—*De blik van de Yeti* (“The Viewpoint of the Yeti”)³⁹—Michel Vandebroek introduces a convincing example. The title of the book is based on a comic book by Hergé, *Tintin in Tibet*. The comic starts with Tintin setting out to rescue his friend Chang. Toward the end, the story does not seem to revolve around the saving of Chang, but around the encounter with the Yeti, a mythical creature that is the great unknown in the book. During the whole book, the viewpoint is that of Tintin, except on the last page. There the viewpoint changes. Tintin and his friends leave and go back, and this departure is portrayed from the perspective of the Yeti.⁴⁰

This illustrates the difficulties human beings have in opening up to the viewpoint of others—the Other is quest on its own. Raschke illustrates how difficult it is explaining something to another human who has not (yet) understood as follows: one of his friends having visited Mount Fiji, had enormous difficulties explaining the overwhelming experience that came with this visit to someone who had not been there.⁴¹ The same goes for biblical interpretation. It is difficult for a

³⁸ Smith, *Fall of Interpretation*, 151.

³⁹ Michel Vandebroek, *De blik van de Yeti: Over het opvoeden van jonge kinderen tot zelfbewustzijn en verbondenheid* (Utrecht: SWP, 1999). About every professor in Educational Sciences at Ghent University recommended this book during the lectures while I was studying there (2002-2007).

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 2, 10. Elaborated based on my personal notes during the lectures of Vandebroek at the Ghent University course *Gezinspedagogiek* in the academic year 2005-2006.

⁴¹ Raschke, *Next Reformation*, 80-1.

human being to explain an insight—an experience of God—to someone who has not got this insight. It is thus the task of the theologian to articulate his findings and “reflect back to the community what the community really is in Christ.”⁴² Thus, the struggle to understand God—in light of the need for a communal interpretation—involves a struggle to understand the neighbour.

Once this effort is made, one can try to “establish intersubjective understanding.”⁴³ This cannot be done without a setting of love. That is why “Christian understanding of words [is a] hermeneutics of love. The hermeneutics of love requires that books and authors . . . be understood and treated as neighbours. This means that when our neighbours speak, we listen. Love listens.”⁴⁴ It is not so much the otherness of the self and God that is the focus of Gods story, it is the “*otherness with others* that most concerns God.”⁴⁵ But it needs to be added that there is also another concern that often does not get sufficient attention: “oneness with others. . . . Oneness cannot be achieved just between God and self; rather, oneness involves God, self, and others, and the world around us.”⁴⁶ C.S. Lewis has emphasized this in talking about the “Three-personal God” and thus connecting the Trinity with interhuman relationships:

God can show Himself as He really is only to real men. And that means not simply to men who are individually good, but to men who are united together . . . For that is what God meant humanity to be like; like players in one band, or organs in one body. Consequently, the one really adequate instrument for learning about God is the whole Christian community.⁴⁷

⁴² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 105.

⁴³ Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 194.

⁴⁴ In: McKnight, *Blue Parakeet*, 98.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ C. S. Lewis, “Mere Christianity,” in *Mere Christianity and The Screwtape Letters: Complete in One Volume* (1952; New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), 165.

Departing from the *imago Dei* still being present in *all* humans, this supersedes the smaller denominational community.⁴⁸ Though the primary source of communal interpretation are the “stacks” of the denomination, there is need to look for progress and this often implies an interest in other communities’ hermeneutics. For example, an Evangelical can—and should—learn from a Roman Catholic. It even opens the door to interpreting the Word of God through the insights of atheists, agnostics, Muslims ... It leaves room for an “academic charity”: a genuine interest in those insights and how they can contribute to a more thorough and holistic approach to knowing God. That is why Smith can give his *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* the subtitle *Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church*.⁴⁹

The acknowledgement of the need for intersubjective understanding expresses itself in quite some ways. An example already mentioned before, is giving importance to church history and tradition. Tradition is the “place” where the Spirit has worked throughout the ages.⁵⁰ Neglecting this would involve neglecting the role of the Spirit in history. Reading the Bible for example is something that ought to be done “responsible to what the church has always believed.”⁵¹ That is why one should “read the Bible *with* tradition.”⁵² In Jensen’s most broad explanation of theology he states that theology is translation. Thus, “the theologian must interpret his or her own context in order to find an adequate theological language.”⁵³ This context does not merely mean the current church, but also the tradition of that church. But it goes further than this. Not only the religious conviction is based on tradition, also language, sociology, and culture are.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ This paragraph is based on Michener, Lectures PTH, 2009; and the scholarly “community” discussing it in class.

⁴⁹ Smith, *Afraid of Postmodernism*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁵¹ McKnight, *Blue Parakeet*, 31.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 33-5.

⁵³ Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 216-7.

⁵⁴ Smith, *Fall of Interpretation*, 152.

CONCLUSION

For a long time I have felt guilty for not reading my Bible in solitude every single day. “Read your Bible” was the *adagium* that often terrorized my thought. While I do see that advantage of a good habit, it is alarming if such a slogan pushes away what I have called a “communal responsibility” because of the influence of Reid’s common sense realism. I like the prayer Smith wrote after an encounter with Deleuze and I want to close with it in its “communal” and “responsible” character:

*Help us, then, Lord, to be your disciples above all –
To discern what these texts mean for our discipleship,
For our being-in-the-world,
Our being-for-others,
And our being-before-you.*

*Amen.*⁵⁵

⁵⁵ James K. A. Smith, “A Prayer,” in: *The Devil Reads Derrida: And Other Essays on the University, the Church, Politics, and the Arts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans: 2009), 159.

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