Chapter 8

The Complexity of Hermeneutical Experience: Transcendence and Transformation

Werner G. Jeanrond

When I was a doctoral student at the University of Chicago Divinity School, every Wednesday in term time there was a lunch for students and staff with a speaker. However, once a year in May instead of a speaker a student band played traditional American revival music while beer and pretzels were served, sponsored by a major American publishing house. We very much loved this relaxed event towards the end of a compact academic year.

In May 1980 we were happily singing along to tunes such as Glory, Glory Hallelujah, How Great Thou Art, The Old Country Church, and The Little Old Church in the Valley when the world-famous history of religion professor Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) suddenly appeared in the doorway of the hall listening with great attention to the band playing and us singing. To those of us who spotted him it became instantly clear that, while we were having a merry time with these songs, consuming them, so to speak, at our beer-supported end-of-term gaudy, something rather different was going on in Eliade. He seemed transfixed by the same event, visibly encountering what I would label a religious experience. I shall never forget the complexity of what was going on at the same time: Eliade appeared to have a religious experience caused by the same musical event which provided us students with an experience of end-of-term pleasure. After listening for a while Eliade left the entrance of the hall again when the music stopped.

My fellow students of hermeneutics at Chicago and I were puzzled by this radically different reaction to the same event. Of course, we were well aware of Eliade's theory of religion which highlighted the distinction between the sacred and profane.1 He had argued that every aspect of our life could become an experience of the sacred. However, we were ill prepared to experience the very author of this famous theory interpreting now our own merry sing along in such obviously religious terms. He did not utter a word, but his transfigured face clearly manifested his religious interpretation of our event. We

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beer-drinking, pretzel-eating and singing students became the stuff out of which religious experience could be made. This was an experience of a higher kind for us.

We had heard and read of various stories of similar encounters between Eliade and aspects of reality, including how he could see religious dimensions in a circus performance where a lion sprang through a fire wheel, how he got lost in trance at a meeting with a shaman during a study tour of Japan, and how he was over-awed when encountering one of the many grey squirrels on campus. Hence, we knew that his perception of reality was generally more open to seeing religion at work where others might not see any trace of religion at all. But we students were genuinely taken aback by the realization that at an obviously secular festivity we ourselves could become the occasion of a religious experience for Eliade. This did surprise us and left us with a host of questions. Here I wish to take up three of them.

My first question concerns the nature of religious interpretation: What kind of horizon allows for religious interpretations of reality? My second question concerns differences within theological hermeneutics: Which kind of hermeneutics is appropriate to the interpretation of religious texts? And my third question concerns the importance of attending to shifting functions of interpretative acts: Who interprets what, in what circumstances, and for what purpose?

Horizons of Religious Interpretation

In academia, we are used to defining phenomena and perceptions. Part of the mistrust levelled at theological interpretations has to do with the seemingly endless horizon of theological reflection. And yet, in literary hermeneutics we have learned that it does make a difference whether we interpret a text solely in terms of its individual sub-units, i.e. its sentences, words, syllables, or letters, or in terms of the larger units of textuality and intertextuality. A text is more than the sum of its sentences. Perspectives and horizons clearly matter in interpretation not least in terms of establishing the very materiality for interpretation.² What then may count as a religious horizon?

Before entering into this debate I need to say a few words about my own theological approach to religion. I propose to understand religion in terms of a dynamic network of relationships: every human person seems called to

² See Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, trans. Thomas J. Wilson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005 [reprint]).