

## **Topic 16: Beyond Fundamentalism: Interpreting the Revelatory Text**

**I. The Necessity and Possibility of Interpretation:** We have talked about the world behind the text - the world of Ancient Israel, of Jesus and his disciples, of those who produced the biblical texts. We also made reference to the metaphor of "the world of the text" - the text of the Bible is like a world that we "enter" and, in so entering, we are changed. Now we turn to the world "before" the text, that is, the world we are living in and to which we seek to relate the text. We relate the text to our world through the process of interpretation.

Interpretation is a historical necessity. The community cannot not reinterpret even its most fundamental and self-identifying symbols, since the experience of the symbols at any given time after their generation necessarily differs from The originating experience that gave rise to the symbols and Later experiences of the symbols

New interpretations that preserve the intrinsic meaning of original symbols are possible. The dialectical structure of symbolic communication makes possible an account of both sameness and difference between the new interpretation and the original symbol. This account draws attention to the original symbol (an expression fashioned by human beings in past ages) that discloses realities that can be experienced today. These realities are transcendent but mediated symbolically.

**II. Contrasting Approaches to the Process of Interpretation:** Knowledge results from taking a good look (positivism): this approach (what Bernard Lonergan calls "naive realism") considers an "already elaborated datum" as the object of knowledge and knowledge as a recording or photograph of this object.

Revelational positivism: the revealed symbol or doctrine is "already given" as an "objective truth." To interpret it we only need to "take a good look at it" with eyes unencumbered by skepticism. This is the path taken by religious fundamentalism. Anthropological positivism: there is nothing beyond the "scientific" data of experience. To interpret this data we only need to "take a good look at it" with eyes unencumbered by metaphors and myths. This results in secular fundamentalism.

Hermeneutical theory sets out criteria and methods for interpreting texts in terms of human reality and human reality in terms of texts, Hermeneutics moves beyond the subject object dichotomy. It does so by making use both of distance and analogy. The hermeneutics of suspicion allows for a critical distance from the text

and from one's own ideological motivations. The principle of analogy postulates a certain consistency of human experience in history and allows for the possibility of critical inquiry and interpretation.

### **III. The Process of Interpretation and the Structure of the Process:**

Interpretation begins with pre-understanding, moves through the dialectic of explanation, and concludes in the experience of meaning known as transformative understanding.

Pre-understanding is an implicit "educated guess" about the meaning of a text. Explanation uses methods to clarify the sense-reference content of the text. Transformative understanding involves the holistic assimilation of that content into one's own reality.

Effective historical consciousness characterizes the distinctive mode of human reality. We know past events in the present and as shaped by their passage through history. Likewise, the past is constantly being reconstituted within its own effective history.

Interpretation seeks to be faithful to the symbols of scripture and the history of doctrine constitutive of the community. At the same time it needs to be intelligible within a contemporary horizon of consciousness. Finally, interpretation must be capable of transforming the community and empowering it to move forward into its future.

### **REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What is the goal of interpretation?
2. What does the process of interpretation seek to produce?