

What I have learned as a Theologian

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Delivered at a meeting of the Heythrop Association, June 2011, on my stepping down as Principal.

To begin, I offer you these photographs of a theologian climbing on the Forcan Ridge on a mountain called the Saddle in the Western Highlands, if only to make the point that if you want to do theology you should make sure you have careful footwork. Don't move your foot unless you know exactly where it is going; if you want to move, make you have three points of contact with the rock. It's not a good idea to be a theologian in space.





I thank you for your kindness in coming to this lecture and I share your wish to have a glass of wine before too long. I'm grateful to Simon Gillespie and the Heythrop Association for the opportunity they have given me to behave badly and to Annabel Clarkson who has organised this event. She's done so much over the years for me and the College that it's impossible to thank her enough. It's good to see my successor Michael Holman here, and Jim Sweeney who will look after the shop until Michael takes over in January. I'm delighted that Caron is here this evening – she was my first PA when I became Principal in 1999 – and it is good to welcome too her husband Francis who served on the Governing Body of the College.

Never give a podium to a theologian and expect things to go well. You may well judge that, given the title, this will be a short lecture. And with good reason: we perhaps learn not very much; we forget much more and the little that remains we call 'wisdom'. What we learn is usually a set of simple things that can be summarised very easily and probably will take you back to the simple teachings that gave you warmth and direction when we were young. But if you are an adult, that will seem far away. But as Margaret Miles points out, 'We never feel as grown-up as we expected to feel when we were children.'¹ Does our sense of self really change? Do you really feel very different from when you were young? And what has this to do with theology?

My good friend Eamon Duffy told me that he took Seamus Heaney to visit the grave of John Clare. On Clare's tomb are the words, 'poets are born not made'. When Heaney signed the Visitor's Book in the Church, he wrote his name, and then added the words, 'born and made'. What of theologians? Are they born or made or both? I think I have always been a natural theologian. As a very small child I was a Platonist before I knew about Plato. I remember, as a small boy, telling my parents that before I was born I had been in heaven and had chosen them, John and Agnes McDade, to be my parents. My father laughed heartily at this. I never forgave him. He was clearly an Aristotelian, having no truck with the idea of pre-existent souls. But one of my first bits of advice to you is 'If you want to be happy, choose your parents well: it pays off both when you're a child and all the way through your life.' I suggest you put this together with the advice Peter Gallagher commends to the parishioners of Wimbledon: 'You're never too old to have a happy childhood'.

I have no idea where my childish fantasy came from: it may be a common idea among devout children to think that they were somewhere *before* they come to be here, to project a previous life that had substance and heavenly reality because children cannot really imagine the world without their being part of it. How could there be reality without me in it? I suppose this is the driver for my childish idea. I've always loved the natural self-absorption of children, it's a quality which is insupportable only when it lasts into adulthood when it can become the besetting sin particularly of clerics. As we get older, we are to find goodness and God, not ourselves worthy of unlimited attention. For one thing, self-absorption is a serious error of judgment: no one is that interesting.

It may be the case, as I imagined as a small boy, that my first entry into heaven was before I was born, but I no longer hold that idea. But heaven, I think, is not simply future: perhaps I have been in heaven because whenever God has acted in my soul, that has been heaven; when in the Mass I have felt supported by saints around me, that has

¹ M.R.Miles, *Reading for Life: Beauty, Pluralism and Responsibility* (Continuum, 1997), 146

been heaven; when I have seen grace work in others, that too has been heaven; where love has been fruitful in the lives of others, when charity has flowed through me, that has been heaven and will be heaven because that is the life of God enfolding us. And it starts even now. The difficulty is not that we can't see what it will be like after death; it's that we now only haltingly know what is going on now.

In retrospect, there was an inevitability that when later I came to do a doctorate in theology at the University of Edinburgh, I did it on pre-existence language in Christology because Christ had been in heaven too when I was there and we had discussed my parentage, at some length, I remember. When I had my viva, my external examiner was Rowan Williams, as brilliant then as he is now. I do think he is a theological genius and an outstanding thinker and writer. When I was speaking one day to Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, Rowan's name came up, and I said that when he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, the newspapers said he had a brain as big as Basingstoke. Quick as a flash, Cormac said, 'And Basingstoke is a very difficult place to find your way round'. I've found thinking very hard, a discipline I have to work at. The French author Joseph Joubert wrote in 1805: 'Once we have tasted the juice of words, the mind can no longer pass them by. We drink thought from them.' Indeed so: perhaps like a good Bordeaux, the secret is to swill the words around in our minds before we drink thoughts from them.

I muse more and more on the significance that the word 'God' has for human beings, and find myself drawn towards what I hope is a proper and reverential agnosticism about the mystery of goodness that lies beyond the horizon of our thoughts. That theologians should claim to know so much about God astonishes me as much as does the speed with which some of our modern atheists reject the word, as though it has conceptual boundaries clear enough to merit either easy understanding or instant dismissal. I've always liked Herbert McCabe's remark that Aquinas thought that theologians don't know what they're talking about. Because they're talking about God. Theology, I tell my students, is about nothing, no thing. Nicholas Lash writes sharply that 'what is wrong with so much that passes for theology, ancient and modern, is its fundamental irreverence; its habit of using the term *God* as if it were a pawn, with a clearly defined conceptual content, in a game of intellectual chess' (*His Presence in the World*, 16). A lesson that also needs to be learned by the atheists who crowd the airwaves these days and by over-confident theologians.

People used to say that God let Karl Barth live so long so that God could find out more about himself. 'What do we know then so precisely about God?' an exasperated Karl Rahner said in an interview, referring to the confidence with which those German Trinitarian myth-makers, Moltmann and von Balthasar, treat the inner life of God; they devise complex dialectics of separation among the divine Persons, involving rupture, division, pain, pathos, dereliction; they transform the life of God into a Gnostic drama in which divine hypostases come to be separated from one another, before being reunited, and the oneness of the Godhead restored, in a transcendent Hegelian *aufhebung*. I spent many years at Heythrop teaching this kind of material, but I did not realise then how these post-Hegelian ideas about the 'suffering God' are reworkings of ancient mythical patterns of God wrestling with monsters in the waters of chaos, engaged in a divine *agonia*, a wrestling with nothingness in order to conquer death. The effect is to make God simply the biggest suffering thing around, and what good is that to us if God is locked into his own struggles and stands in need of completion?

Myth has its place in religion, of course, but it is not good to allow our doctrine of God to be determined by an ontology based upon mythical imaginings, nor to use the doctrine of God in order to teach a lesson about how human beings should live together. Sermons are regularly given on Trinity Sunday and at other times which present the triune life of God as a model of the perfect human community: the message is of three 'persons' living in harmony, establishing a transcendent unity as a product of their regard for one another, and this is the way we should be. Suddenly the model of the Holy Family as the model of human love is transposed to the inner life of God, and the consequence is, I'm afraid, tritheism. If you want to promote socialism as a goal for human society, you should not use the doctrine of God to do so because to construct a version of God in order to achieve certain human ends is idolatry. I have to tell you that I would never describe the Trinity as a 'community' because if I do so I think I have deviated from the foundational Jewish monotheism that holds that God is beyond composition, change and multiplicity. Internally, as part of my 'composition of place' as Ignatian spirituality labels it, or as the context of my theological *mise-en-scène*, I try to do Christian theology in the presence of Jews from whom, according to Christ, salvation comes to the world (Jn 4.22; but see 4.42). There are alternative Trinitarian theologies that avoid the tritheistic chasm and that respect more faithfully the Jewish roots of Christianity, but that is a lecture for another evening.



Much better to be a theologian on a bike and this is where I do my theological thinking which may explain my earlier confession that I find thinking difficult. My other bike is a racing bike; all I will tell you is that it is Italian, fast, and Ferrari-red. It is too cool to

useful for theology, too exhilarating, too edgy to be a 'thinking place'. But it is fun and it has its place in my life.

Every academic, even the mountain biking and climbing ones, must feel accused by the comments that George Eliot makes in her novel, *Middlemarch*, about Casaubon, the scholar who devotes his life to finding the key to all mythologies. A very arid character indeed, and when he finally dies halfway through the novel to everyone's great relief, the narrator says this about him:

For my part I am very sorry for him [Casaubon]. It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self -- never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardour of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted.
— George Eliot (*Middlemarch*) chapter 29

Indeed so. Too often theology has been conducted by 'highly taught' Casaubons in order to breed the next generation of Casaubons who don't enjoy their lives any more than their teachers. (There is a study to be done on self-replication among theologians.) But good theology has a bearing upon what is life-giving, religiously and humanly, and one of the things I have come to see is that you cannot separate what is religiously meaningful from what is humanly meaningful. A religion and a theology that keeps us at the level of 'a small hungry shivering self' will eventually be cast off by people in favour of an identity outside the Church. Human meaning is religious meaning, and religious meaning has to be very sure that it is at the same time human meaning. For Karl Rahner, there is only one mystery: that of the self-giving God, and this is at the same time, the mystery of the God-receiving human person. 'Man,' he says, 'is the event of God's self-communication.'

Theology is about how to think in ways that enable us to live the mystery of God. That's what I think it is and what it should be: how to think in ways that enable us to live the mystery of God. I've come to see, and this would be my next message to you, that 'the truth of God cannot be thought – it can only be lived.' Which is why it is the person and life of Jesus Christ that conveys the truth about God. Jesus does not conceptualise God – he would have made a useless modern German theologian – but he lives out a life so completely dedicated to God and those who need God that he actualises God with us and for us. He is the performative utterance by which the divine irrupts savingly within our time.

When Karl Rahner came to Heythrop in 1984, he listened to John MacQuarrie give a lecture about his wonderful, complex theology, and all during the lecture Rahner said his rosary and then through his interpreter, George Vass, asked the most devastating questions. MacQuarrie was given a painful tutorial by Rahner and enjoyed every minute of it. When a sceptical person once said to Karl Rahner, 'I've never had an experience of God,' Rahner simply replied, 'I don't believe you; I just don't accept that. You have had perhaps no experience of God under this precise code-word God but you have had or have now an experience of God – and I am convinced that this is true of every person.'

Every person? Indeed so, if you believe that God has an immediate presence in relation to his creatures. So can you have an experience of God without knowing it to be such,

without using the code word 'God'? Yes, it's called being a human being, and it's what you've been doing it all your life. A little story to make Rahner clear, and if I say that this story could be called 'Rahner for Dummies', I hope you won't be offended. It is meant to help the person next to you, not you:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys, how's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and says, 'What the hell is water?'

The water is God, the liquid atmosphere of goodness and gift in which we live and breathe. And becoming an old fish, a mature theologian, means getting to know the water *as water*, and God as God in whom we are. I like the story about the little girl who hears music for the first time and cries out 'It's God speaking to us'. (Quoted by Joseph Joubert) For some months, I have taken delight in the words of Vincent van Gogh who said, 'The best way to know God is to love many things'. Why don't commentators bring out the deeply religious nature of his artistic work? Is it possible that van Gogh in his paintings was learning to love God?



That God is not seen in the painting is important because God is not an object within the world, not a 'fact' alongside other facts. Many of our new atheists seem to be rejecting a view of God as a thing in the world alongside other things, one cause among other 'secondary causes', but the theological principle is surely the simple one that 'God does not wish to be everything'. 'To say that God created the world for his glory is to say that

he created it not for his sake but for ours.² That is why in the world there is people as different as Annabel Clarkson and Lady Gaga, one gifted with generosity of heart and the other, as they say now, 'differently gifted'; and there is the Rhone and the stars and the boats and the man and woman in the foreground of the painting with their back to the night time theophany, looking at us, perhaps on their way back home to bed, seemingly unaware of the divine glory that the painter sees, like the two young fish swimming along unaware that they are in water.

By moving towards what is true and good and valuable, through the powers or virtues that take shape in personhood, you 'latch on to' God, and when you latch on to God, you're in the only place where you can *be*. If God is reality, what Aquinas calls *ipsum esse*, being itself, simply 'the real', then being in God is the only place where we can *be*. Outside that reality we simply stop. I no longer believe in hell: if someone does not 'latch on to' goodness, truth, generous and sacrificial loving, a defining 'care for the world and its creatures, and refuses these things in an unimaginably definitive way, then in their death they simply stop. They don't 'go' anywhere because there is no 'self' that can go or be at all. If you empty the self of goodness, you empty the self of the capacity to be. Goodness is existence; if you step completely outside goodness, you cannot be. The other side of this is that in every aspect of your personhood, your ordinary, God is loving you into wholeness and when that process is complete, it is what theologians call 'resurrection'.

If you are wondering what Purgatory is all about, I refer you to my article, 'Judgment and Purgatory' on my webpage. But I should tell you about Therese of Lisieux the Little Flower on her death bed. I have a particular devotion to the Little Flower because I was healed of glandular trouble by Canon Taylor at Carfin. Every time I needed something done in the college and I didn't know how to do it, I lit a candle at the Carmelite church in Kensington Church St. When the Quality Assurance Agency inspectors came to Heythrop for the first time, they didn't realise that the room they were in had various pictures of the Little Flower concealed in cupboards, under carpets, stuck under tables in the room they were using. The prayers were always answered. Remember that I had been in heaven before I was born and things were negotiated and sorted out there a long time ago. That this College has recently done so well is not accidental.

You will probably be surprised by the words I used a few moments ago: I spoke about 'latching on to' God. What is my authority for this phrase? Well no less a person than Pope Benedict. I want to look at a passage from a speech he gave in the Czech Republic, and I find it extremely interesting, with consequences for what the Church might do, what this College is about and perhaps what theology ought to be about.

Here I think naturally of the words which Jesus quoted from the Prophet Isaiah, namely that the Temple must be a house of prayer for all the nations. Jesus was thinking of the so-called 'Court of the Gentiles' which he cleared of extraneous affairs so that it could be a free space for the Gentiles who wished to pray there to the one God, even if they could not take part in the mystery for whose service the inner part of the Temple was reserved. (*Comment: this acknowledges that there can be a differentiated closeness to God, with some having access to the heart of the Godhead in proximity and communion with God, but others having a different form of access proper to them. Notice that Benedict says that Jesus*

² B.Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 116

wanted there to create a free space for Gentiles to contact God in ways not identical with Israel's worship, but related to it.)

A place of prayer for all the peoples: by this he was thinking of people who know God, so to speak, only from afar; who are dissatisfied with their own gods, rites and myths; who desire the Pure and the Great, even if God remains for them the 'unknown God' (cf. Acts 17: 23). They had to pray to the unknown God, yet in this way they were somehow in touch with the true God, albeit amid all kinds of obscurity. *(Comment: notice how Benedict speaks respectfully of those who know God from afar, who are detached from the myths and assumptions of their own culture but experience a movement within them towards Goodness and unrestricted love. It is a movement towards God, although God is and remains unknown. There can be a significant movement towards the unknown God that takes a non-religious form. Why should we assume that only religious forms are how people connect to God and 'latch on to him'? Benedict's assumption is that there are important movements towards God from within agnosticism and this is caused and supported by the God who draws all men and women to himself in ways that they do not express in formally religious ways.)*

I think that today too the Church should open a sort of 'Court of the Gentiles' in which people might in some way latch on to God, without knowing him and before gaining access to his mystery at whose service the inner life of the Church stands. Today, in addition to interreligious dialogue, there should be a dialogue with those to whom religion is something foreign, to whom God is unknown and who nevertheless do not want to be left merely Godless, but rather to draw near to him, albeit as the Unknown."

I find this very interesting. What Benedict proposes is the creation of a place of serious conversation in which the Church talks and listens with unbelievers, Gentiles, those who are stand in the covenant that God made with all human beings and all living things through Noah. No one is outside the covenant: that is what is important in Benedict's statement, and agnostics and unbelievers have a connection with Christian faith. They are simply in a courtyard within walking distance from where we stand. You don't need me to remind you, do you, that Thomas Aquinas held that 'we are joined to God as to one who is, as it were, unknown' (*quasi ignotum*). And 'ignotum' is like the Latin equivalent of 'agnostic'.

There are circles of closeness and ignorance around the sacred presence which partly overlap with one another, and it is a deep mistake to treat nonbelievers as outside God's action – you do believe, don't you, in a doctrine of creation in which God is directly active in the lives of all? – and a mistake to think that they stand in a completely different place from us. There is a continuity among all human beings in relation to God. (The story about the Presbyterian church where there is a visiting preacher.) Well if Benedict told jokes as part of his theology, he would tell this one but I'm afraid he is German. 'Where would we be without a sense of humour?' Willie Rushton used to ask. 'Germany', he would say. Well a doctrine of creation means that everyone is in the parish: part of our trouble theologically is that we don't take this doctrine seriously and invest too much energy on issues of salvation. I'd like to see a form of Christianity that promoted the primacy of a doctrine of creation, rather than the salvation-centred style of religion and

theology that's been dominant since the Reformation. I suspect that creation is the doctrine that we need in order to commend the Gospel in this culture.

I come more and more to think that the mode in which Christians communicate with others best is through conversation, dialogue, witness and a sense of shared inquiry among adults. If there is one thing I want for the Church it is to foster a culture of study and shared inquiry as a condition of conducting our mission. The strength of Catholic tradition is the way in which religious truth is articulated philosophically. Augustine was quite clear that there wasn't one thing called 'religion' and another thing called 'philosophy': for him religion was philosophy. The Church has become preoccupied with a strangely monological form of teaching, but we do not have to be in the mode of instruction all the time because then you never hear the person you're speaking with and never learn the things you need to learn from those who are different. And if we are not mature in our self-criticism and self-evaluation, in reshaping our identity – the signs surely of responsible living – why should anyone take us seriously?

'Religions get lost, as people do,' Franz Kafka remarked. And I think that each religion has its own way of getting lost. Jews do it in their way. I don't think that Muslims have begun to ask that question seriously. It's important for Christians to ask 'What is the way in which Christianity might get lost?' I suspect we haven't really begun to explore that question. But we need to, I think, and Benedict's words seem to me to have radical consequences for how we construe the Church and its mission. Cardinal Martini, the Jesuit Cardinal in Milan some years ago, organised discussions in the Cathedral with unbelievers – a famous one with Umberto Eco was on the theme of 'hope' at the heart of human life. Rowan Williams a few years ago wrote a book introducing Christianity, and the whole opening section was on the theme of 'trust'. You cannot presume any more that the word 'God' means anything at all to people. It evokes probably no response, and sometimes if there is a response, it is based on a mistaken idea of God. Speak to people in humanly significant ways; genuinely respect them because everyone is in the family, in the parish; don't have anything to do with social power – theocracies, even modest ones, at the level of diocese and parish, are bad for everyone and a counter-witness to the Gospel; begin to understand why people don't trust us, think we need to be decontaminated and have real anxieties about whether human questions can be properly addressed religiously.

I want to suggest to you that the Church in the years ahead will be taken through an experience analogous to the experience of the Jewish community through nearly 2,000 years of Christian Europe: marginal to the main currents of cultural development; called to bear witness without power; needing to address the question of how to define and maintain an identity which will allow a distinct voice to be heard; in many ways an underground culture whose central energies, although marginalised, still come to enrich everyone. What Jews have been in the Europe of the past, we Christians will be in the future. What Jews and Christians might do together is keep the space for God open in a society which, because of the demands of capitalist pressures, makes people subject to manipulation, lies and degradation of the soul.

We have to keep the way open to nothing less than the good, to nothing less than ultimate meaning, to nothing less than the full dignity of persons, to nothing less than the divine mystery that can encompass and transform brutality and malice. This is what many Jews today call *tikkun 'olam*, 'healing the world', and it is a religious vision in which Christians can share, with the distinctive energies and spiritual experiences of

Christian faith. I've always loved Pope John Paul II's description of the Christian mission: 'we are to be a blessing to the world', and if Jews and Christians are to be a blessing to the world, we must first be a blessing to each other. A shared witness to God's transcendence and love; to religious values which alone can promote authentically human values; and to mutual enrichment of our common vocation to serve and bear witness to God and to look for the coming of the Messiah in glory and the life of the Age to come. My task as a Christian is to act always in ways that are good for Jews and strengthen them in their mission from God. Rabbi Jonathan Gorsky on the staff here seems to me to be doing this in a remarkable way, always acting in ways that bring blessings on the Christians and Moslems he teaches.

In my soul I've been deeply affected over the past few years by the writings of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, 'To know God', says Emmanuel Levinas, 'is to know what must be done'. 'Doing good is the act of belief itself', he also said. In Peperzak's summary of Levinas, 'The good cannot be contacted or approached directly, but only through dedication to good in the world'. If 'the good' is God, then we do not go directly towards God, but always love God through our accepting responsibility for goodness in the world. That seems to me to be the true religion that brings out the best in us: it is why a religious identity is the only satisfactory way of being human. A commitment to the unrestricted good of humanity is how we access and are shaped by the goodness that is God himself. This is, I suspect, the only proper response to the kind of atheism that dismisses religion as delusion. The Dominican Herbert McCabe used to say, 'If you don't love, you'll die, and if you do love, you'll be crucified. Make your choice.' A great man with a holy mind.

I share Rahner's concern that our present form of the Christian religion might not be adequate for our mission and might contribute to the marginalisation of Christianity, consigning God to the status of the ancient gods of Greece and Rome: mythological figures but irrelevant to our human project. What is needed in the Church is a culture of study and inquiry, open and respectful, a model of how human beings might work together towards the goal of a shared lasting human good. This seems to be a vital quality of the Church's mission, and I find it strange that as the culture increasingly is finding it difficult to relate to Jesus Christ and his Gospel, we're concerned with whether girls can serve at Tridentine masses. If you won't let them exercise a simple lay ministry, don't baptise them. In my final report to the Governors last week, I said:

The distinctive role of Heythrop, bridging philosophy and theology, holding together, on the one hand, the Jesuit educational tradition and, on the other, the identity of a College set up by Royal Charter within the University of London, refusing to set in opposition the demands of Catholic identity and ecumenical diversity, deliberately setting for itself an intellectual engagement with the issues in critical modernity, taking seriously a Catholic Christian philosophical/theological tradition and at the same time offering hospitality and dialogue with other religious traditions. If you wanted such a place, you could not simply whisk it out of the air. But it is the kind of College we already have, and are already building, and it is worth fostering. I know that Governors will not allow it to become something less worthy than what it is already.

In many ways, Heythrop is already a 'Court of the Gentiles' with pathways between Christians and non-religious people, between Christians and Jews and Moslems, between the monotheistic faiths and Asian religions, with a lively group of research

centres covering Philosophy of Religion, Religious Life, Eastern Christianity, Interreligious Dialogue, the Heythrop Institute. We conduct our lives with a graced sense of working together on something important, in many ways echoing the words of John Henry Newman: 'Truth is wrought out by many minds, working together freely...this has ever been the rule of the Church till now'.³ The Church is not a citadel but a school of truth in thought and action. You can only belong to it by being a learner, by adopting the yoke of truth-bearing with integrity.

'Truth is wrought out by many minds': the key words are 'many minds' and 'freely' because you cannot study and engage in inquiry without pluralism and liberty. Newman knew that point in the extremely repressive Church of Pius IX; we forget it still at our peril. Theology, *sacra doctrina*, like truth itself, is a self-correcting and self-implicating discipline, and it flourishes only in a Church that values truth above pragmatism. Religious truth is not established by decree, but is reached through dialogue, inquiry, shared study, a body of scholars working in a context of free inquiry into the truth that the Church needs for its mission. That is the ideal of theological study within a properly functioning Catholic Church that Newman presents and a passable version of this has been developing at Heythrop. All I have done, I think, as Principal is enable something valuable to take shape here that might be of service to Christ's Church and God's world.

Finally, I want to read a poem with you so that the last words you hear this evening will not be mine, but those of a great Polish poet, Czeslaw Milosz. I remember being on the Tube with Robert Murray who looked at a picture of, I think, a wonderful Amazonian Indian, probably a chief, with a great display of feathers on his head. Robert looked at him and said, 'I bet he's in touch'. Robert didn't tell me what he thought this Indian was in touch with, but I think he meant that he was in touch with the real, with God. Milosz in this poem is, I think, 'in touch' with God clearly, but also, I suspect, with Rahner. Milosz may have been an 'anonymous Rahnerian'. There are a lot of them around and they are not wrong. The poem fits me very well at this stage of my life, and you may well judge that it fits you too. I hope so.

Late Ripeness by Czeslaw Milosz

Not soon, as late as the approach of my ninetieth year,
I felt a door opening in me and I entered
the clarity of early morning.

One after another my former lives were departing,
like ships, together with their sorrow.

And the countries, cities, gardens, the bays of seas
assigned to my brush came closer,
ready now to be described better than they were before.

I was not separated from people,
grief and pity joined us.
We forget – I kept saying – that we are all children of the King.

For where we come from there is no division

³ J.H.Newman, to Robert Ornsby, an editor of *The Tablet*, in *Letters and Diaries* xx, 426

into Yes and No, into is, was, and will be.

We were miserable, we used not more than a hundredth part
of the gift we received for our long journey.

Moments from yesterday and from centuries ago –
a sword blow, the painting of eyelashes before a mirror
of polished metal, a lethal musket shot, a caravel
staving its hull against a reef – they dwell in us,
waiting for a fulfilment.

I knew, always, that I would be a worker in the vineyard,
as are all men and women living at the same time,
whether they are aware of it or not.

Translated by Robert Haas
From *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001* (Penguin, 2006)

