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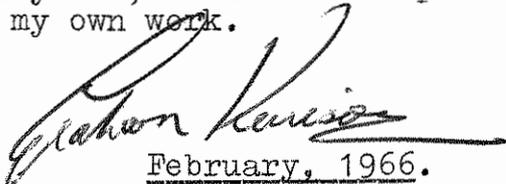
WHY DO RELIGIOUS TEXTS NEED
TO BE INTERPRETED?

by

Graham Kerrison

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School of General Studies within the Australian
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PREFACE

I must acknowledge at the outset my gratitude to the Australian National University for their generous assistance with a Master's Degree Scholarship. Without it, this work could never have been contemplated. My greatest debt, however, is to the members of the Department of Philosophy in the School of General Studies. From them I have gained much more than this thesis will reveal. In particular, my gratitude goes to my supervisor, Professor Herbst, for his willingness to embark on this venture and for his patience to endure.

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INTRODUCTION

There are few realms of discourse which could claim to rival the language of religion for the extent of its diversity from the sublime to the ridiculous. In the King James version, both the Old Testament and the New Testament can be justifiably viewed as classical works in English literature - though perhaps the individual books vary considerably in this respect. Few would question the sheer beauty of the language in the Latin Mass or The Book of Common Prayer. Yet in recent times the Church has yielded to the pressure of what might be called its survival instincts, with the result that paperback Bibles are appearing in journalistic prose, the Mass is now said in the vernacular and the Book of Common Prayer is the subject of much criticism. The honourable desire to find more intelligible forms of expression seems certain to relegate some of the most beautiful literature of Christendom to the top shelves of our libraries to collect dust forever.

What began as the religion of a motley collection of uneducated men became the intellectual pride of mediaeval scholasticism. Like sugar-cane in a mill, it seems that religion has been sapped of its sweetness by

centuries of intellectual labour and now the roughage is being returned to the masses to see if they have any use for it.

Caricatures are necessarily crude but through their distortion they often reveal otherwise neglected facts. Of course it is misleading to suggest that Christianity has been, in different periods, the exclusive possession of certain groups of intellectually similar people. But it is a fact that throughout the history of Christianity there has been an ever widening gulf between the God of the scholar's intellectual pursuit and the God to whom the peasant bends his knees.

Now, even this has changed. Not only has the theologian been attacked on his own ground but the peasant has learned to read and write. Where once, the pulpit could easily outwit the pews, now the preacher struggles to communicate with the people almost fearing lest they understand what he is saying. It is now a matter of convention never to assent to anything without a critical appraisal of it; so what is the man of faith to do? How can the preacher cope with his new congregations? Is some form of schizophrenia necessary to enable the man with a critical mind to participate genuinely in the

Christian religion?

This is the sort of context within which the philosopher of religion must deal with his subject. The religious cry out for a language which they can understand. The philosophical world almost defies the philosopher of religion to restore any life to the roughage of his inheritance with the modern tools of his trade. If it is the case that only fools rush in where angels fear to tread, perhaps I should have borrowed a title from the monk Guaniilo: On behalf of the Fool.

Like all language, religious texts need to be interpreted because each distinct use to which language is put has characteristics of its own which dictate the general approach that needs to be adopted if the language is to fulfil its function properly. Perhaps this can be illustrated by appealing to the difference that one would expect in an historical account of an incident such as the murder of Thomas A'Beckett, and a dramatic account of the same incident as it may be found in, say, T.S.Eliot's Murder in a Cathedral. Historical language and dramatic language are two different media, and therefore one has different expectations of each.

The major sections of this thesis are devoted to an elucidation of some of the peculiarities that belong to the concept of God. It should be obvious that I cannot hope to deal with all types of religious utterances here. Since the concept of God is so central to all religious discourse, I have chosen it for detailed analysis in the hope that it will throw some light on a special group of utterances, namely, those which are about God, those which are addressed to God, and those which are claimed to have been made by God.

Those who hope that this thesis will attempt to remove some of the many difficulties involved in expressing the message and doctrines of Christianity in a more intelligible language, will be very disappointed. That is a task which, in some respects needs to be done - but I think its importance has been overestimated. Moreover, this task is what I would call 'translation', not 'interpretation'. Translation from one idiom to another can only be achieved after a certain interpretational approach has been adopted. The most we can hope for here, is to indicate some of the factors that must be considered in developing such an approach.