

‘The Kingdom of God is between you’ – Bakhtin and the Christian Reader

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This paper is based on a talk given to the CLSG in November 2004, ‘Confessions of a Christian Bakhtinian’, and retains some of the personal tone and approach of that talk, while attempting to make it more detailed and better documented in some of the sections. It arose from two encounters after seminars at Keele, where I teach. The first was given by Ann Shukman on Bakhtin many years ago, where she was challenged to explain Bakhtin’s principle of dialogue as compatible with Christianity, which seemed to require an authoritative notion of language. The second came from Fred Botting, who asked me what I was, in theoretical terms, to which my immediate response was ‘A Christian Bakhtinian who hasn’t recovered from being taught by Raymond Williams.’ If the element of intellectual autobiography seems rather egotistical, one defence would be that the narrative of my understanding of Bakhtin reflects the way that the (still incomplete) process of translation of his work has determined the way he has been understood. There is, I know, a tradition of ‘confessions’ running from Rousseau to Confessions of a Window-Cleaner, which is not really saying sorry at all; what follows is, I hope, a little less self-justifying than that tradition.

IN THE WESTERN LITERARY WORLD, BAKHTIN’S LARGELY POSTHUMOUS TRIUMPH HAS been staggering. It is difficult to imagine what contemporary criticism would look like without his key ideas. They run parallel to certain tendencies within the postmodern and the deconstructive approaches to literature and culture, which is one reason why they have been so successful, and yet they have their roots in more traditional ways of reading and thinking. So they are less threatening, as well.

Bakhtin himself was a Christian, an unorthodox Orthodox, a neo-Kantian and a utopian Marxist; his ideas have been taken up in any number of critical pursuits well beyond those positions, and few of them bear any obvious Christian traces. I wonder why Bakhtin has been so attractive and fruitful for so many. I want to look at some of the big ideas in Bakhtin – dialogue, novelisation, carnival – and what they have to offer the Christian critic, or, at least, the critic trying to be Christian in their calling. Of course, being a Christian Bakhtinian isn’t that unusual. Apart from Mikhail Mikhailovitch himself (at least some of the time), a number of Bakhtin’s Russian admirers have seen him as an Orthodox philosopher as much as a literary critic. A number of studies have discussed his Christianity, or appropriated his ideas for the discussion of the Bible. When I wrote for advice in this to Graham Pechey, one of my old undergraduate supervisors and author of a number of important articles on Bakhtin, he replied: ‘Welcome to the company

of Christian Bakhtinians, of whom I am one'.¹ So the category is not my invention. The connections between Bakhtin's own faith and his writings will repay investigation.

Ruth Coates' *Christianity in Bakhtin* (1998) is an important attempt to take Bakhtin's Christianity seriously throughout his oeuvre. In doing so, she may have exaggerated the Christian content of some of them.² In so far as I can work it out from comments and translations, Bakhtin's Russian admirers are more likely to foreground his Christianity; earlier Western appropriations of his ideas were more likely to see the Marxist influences and possibilities. There is also an argument among American scholars of Bakhtin, about how central Christianity is to the books in the Bakhtin canon.

Certainly my first encounter with Bakhtin circle ideas was with *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, attributed to Volosinov, but now reckoned by many Russian scholars to have been heavily influenced by Bakhtin, if not written by him.³ It was exciting because it appeared to offer a way out of the prison house of language debate by insisting 'that the utterance is a social phenomenon'. This cut across the (then rampant) division between the Saussurean notion of language as an abstract, self-referential system, and its Romantic, or at least Crocean opposite, an insistence on the individual, expressive intention as the basis for understanding language. (In one of those odd twists of intellectual fashion, Saussure was as influential on Russian linguists of the 1920s as he was on structuralism in the 1960s and 70s.) This 'monologic utterance' (84) was rejected in favour of a more social model:

A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends upon my addressee. A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee...(86)

So, somewhere between the 'egotistical sublime', the death of the author and the intentional fallacy, here is a hypothesis that we can apply to historicist reading and modern appropriation alike. The book was published in Leningrad in 1929, and makes it clear that its notion of speech community is perfectly compatible with Marxist ideas of 'the concrete social milieu' and ideology. Not that the Stalinists thought so. Bakhtin was forced into internal exile, and Volosinov died in 1939. Although in retrospect one can trace numerous links between this book and Bakhtin's ideas of the importance of dialogue, they appeared to be addressing different issues. For Volosinov, the ridiculous polarity between Saussurean and idealistic notions of language is the target; for the Bakhtin of *The Dialogic Imagination*, the essential difference is between the novel and the fixed generic rules of pre-novelistic writing such as epic. To put it in literary critical terms (which Volosinov does not – he was a musicologist as well as a linguist), the contrast is between the analysis of writing as it is heard or received, and the already dialogic nature of some kinds of writing, even before they are received. Dialogue becomes more than a social activity; it is a marker of the social existence of a work of literature, if not a metaphysical principle. We could put it philosophically, as Michael Holquist has done, and say that, for Bakhtin, existence is dialogue, and

everything we can say about language and literature flows from that.⁴

The first book that Bakhtin published under his own name, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), carries this idea of dialogue onto another level. From being simply descriptive, it has become a desideratum. It is what makes Dostoevsky great. It is also a theory of personhood and society, one which the novelist is particularly concerned, and uniquely able, to work out.

...at the centre of Dostoevsky's artistic world must lie dialogue, and dialogue not as a means but as an end in itself. Dialogue is here not the threshold to action, it is the action itself. It is not a means for revealing, for bringing to the surface the already ready-made character of a person; no, in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is – and, we repeat, not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends. Thus dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end. At the level of his religious-utopian worldview Dostoevsky carries dialogue into eternity, conceiving of it as eternal co-rejoicing, co-admiration, con-cord... A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence. (*PDP*, 252)

Small wonder then, that Ken Hirschkop has argued that Bakhtin wants 'to endow language with some kind of inner political impetus' in his theory of language, while maintaining a kind of Kantian ethics of the individual; and that he sees Dostoevsky as creating within the space of the novel 'a Buberian religious community in which the presence of others in the guise of the purely human makes possible a radically new form of personal relation.'⁵

Carnival

My second encounter with Bakhtin was with his concept of carnival, popularised quite early on by Allon White & Peter Stallybrass, in *The politics and poetics of transgression* (1986). This addressed for example, the fair in Jonson and the Billingsgate form of abuse in the eighteenth century as English versions of the carnivalesque. The insistence of Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and his World*, that we need a history of laughter, was a challenge, when translated, to the remaining vestiges of the Arnoldian view of English literature. It was a time when playfulness began to replace the moral defence of the study of English. Instead of high seriousness, there would be *jouissance*. As an undergraduate, I studied a compulsory Tragedy paper in my final year at Cambridge; the notion that there should be a compulsory Comedy paper would have been thought absurd. Literature is serious; that was part of its defence as the centre of a liberal education. I couldn't imagine Raymond Williams writing a companion volume on comedy to his *Modern Tragedy*, either. Sure enough, nothing has changed there. Cambridge still has its Tragedy paper, and Comedy isn't there, even as an option. Look at the research and teaching interests of the faculty, and there are numerous tragedy specialists, but only one comedy specialist, and she's retired. It's not that Cambridge has been peculiarly resistant to theory, though it seemed to be once, long ago during the McCabe affair. Perhaps the lesson is that residual structures die hard in ancient universities. And Bakhtin's call for a history of

laughter has remained, if not unanswered, still drowned out by continued interest in the history and theory of tragedy. Perhaps Umberto Eco's book-destroying monk Jorge (in *The Name of the Rose*) was right: what moral consequences would have followed the rediscovery of Aristotle on comedy? 'That laughter is proper to man is a sign of our limitation, sinners that we are.'⁶

The focus of interest on Bakhtin's Rabelais book was, then, on his celebration of carnival, a religious festival in origin, but one that temporarily reversed the structures of authority and the prestige of asceticism. It is easy enough to see the Marxist origins of his admiration for the forms of carnival. It celebrates the people and popular art over high art; the 'lower bodily stratum' over the bourgeois mistrust of the embodied when it is not 'separated and completed', and it expresses the relative nature of human authority:

Carnival with all its images, indecencies and curses affirms the people's immortal, indestructible character. In the world of carnival the awareness of the people's immortality is combined with the realisation that established authority and truth are relative.⁷

There may have been a realisation, but does it change anything? Isn't carnival part of what Herbert Marcuse called 'repressive toleration', a moment of permissiveness which only serves to reinforce the need for a return to order? (Incidentally, reopening my cracking '60s copies of *One-Dimensional Man* and *Eros and Civilisation* to check the reference made me think it's time for a Marcuse revival. The moment for such concepts as 'the language of total administration' and the 'Catastrophe of Liberation' has surely come round again.) The idealisation of carnival, which by itself might present Bakhtin as a kind of antinomian or even anarchist, needs contextualising. Some of these contexts might be Christian. The emphasis on the body, which in some parts of Rabelais and his *World* seem to be anti-clerical as well as anti-bourgeois in a Marxist way, might also be a homage to the idea of incarnation, a debt paid by the ascetics of the monastery in a temporary breathing space before Lent. For many Orthodox Christians, Lent itself is a great Lent, and the rest of life a little Lent – except that Sunday always celebrates the Resurrection. That rhythm of self-denial and celebration could have a bearing on the Western Christian concept of carnival. Equally, for the Orthodox, the concept of incarnation has a strong link with art. In the iconoclastic controversy the argument for icons was that Christ, in his incarnation, justified the representation of the Son of God in pictorial terms.

The anti-authoritarian caste of *Rabelais*, written in the late 1930s, is often seen as a coded attack on Stalinism. Ruth Coates argues that carnival is, primarily, a 'strategy of negation', an attempt to assert the human spirit over the forces of centralisation; but that it goes beyond the immediate anti-Stalinist context:

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As to what indeed can be known of that ultimate utopia, and the possibilities of giving it serious, but not official expression in the world, I suggest that Bakhtin finds it modelled in the gospels, and particularly in the life and discourse of Jesus Christ, the universe's prime fool and its carnival king.⁸

This is not a view of Christianity that will appeal to everyone. Every so often *Songs of Praise* will feature an ordained clown, and I confess to planting a jester with cap and bladder in the congregation when I once preached on the foolishness of Christ. It was certainly memorable, but I hope the vicar's announcement of his resignation at the end of that service was going to happen anyway. Ralph Wood takes issue with her endorsement of Bakhtin here: 'The Gospel is upsidedown foolishness only to those who reject it, whether they be the peasants or the powerful', he argues. 'Believers are indeed fools, but only to the falsely wise who are too proud to wear the mask of the Author and Finisher of their salvation.'⁹ Wood is referring back to the key text of 1 Corinthians 1:18 here, though of course that is not the only reference to the foolishness of Christ. I also agree with Wood that folk wisdom is not as sacrosanct as Bakhtin seems to think. Bakhtin's championing of the people here seems both anti-Stalinist but also oddly compatible with Soviet aesthetics in that period. Remember Shostakovitch's struggles when he was accused of not giving the workers tunes they could sing. But of course there is a much subtler Renaissance version of Christ's folly in Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*: Erasmus wrote 'it is quite clear that the Christian religion has a kind of kinship with folly in some form, though it has none at all with wisdom.'¹⁰ Distinguishing the many layers of irony in Erasmus's masterpiece is not straightforward, so any quotation will need to be cautious, but it is a reminder that the praise of folly needs to be part of Christian understanding, particularly among its intellectuals as well as its more self-important leaders.

Late in his life Bakhtin, in conversation with V N Turbin, dropped another remark into this controversy. 'The Gospels are also carnival!'¹¹ What could he mean? Alexander Mihailovitch, probably the most theologically acute of Bakhtin's theological commentators, argues that dialogue is a supreme value for Bakhtin, but carnival is morally ambivalent. Certainly the world turned upside down is the *effect* of the Gospels (the phrase, of course, is from Acts 17:8). The language of the parables and of the Beatitudes would substantiate the claim, too. The last shall be first. So far Bakhtinian readings of the Gospels, at least those that I have found in English, have been more concerned to read the Gospels using the dialogic approach.¹² Malcolm Jones' work in particular has explored how texts with claims of authority actually work on us. It is one thing to assent to the authority, or inerrancy, or infallibility of the Bible. How that translates into the process of reading and living is not so much a matter of checking with the official statements of UCCF or the Westminster Assembly, or the Book of Common Prayer. It is a process of dialogue.

Other concepts in *Rabelais and his World* have been immensely productive in reframing some of the comic figures and narratives of the Early Modern period. The definition of 'grotesque realism' opens up another way of thinking, not just about Rabelais' monsters, but Falstaff and Sir Toby Belch,

too. On the one hand, the grotesque doesn't present an individual body so much as 'orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body...a point of transition in a life eternally renewed' (318). On the other hand, mockery and abuse is almost entirely bound up with the grotesque in their popular forms, at least: so Falstaff and Belch are given at least temporary licence as satirists even if (in true, temporary, carnival fashion) the favoured position, or the joke, has to come to an end. You can see it in Chaucer's fabliaux-based tales as well, like the arse jokes in *The Miller's Tale*. There are whole books applying *Rabelais and his World* to Shakespeare and his contemporaries – for example a collection of essays edited by Ronald Knowles, *Shakespeare and Carnival after Bakhtin*, and Michael Bristol's enormously influential *Carnival and Theatre*. Theatre can be a world turned upside down (temporarily and figuratively). The concept of carnival, then, is not just ideological, a reaction against the authorities. Like dialogue, it forges a link between social being and artistic expression.

The third major concept I want to consider is 'novelisation', the process described in some of the essays in *The Dialogic Imagination* which contrast the novel's generic eclecticism with those of older forms such as epic. So the novel is not just a site where dialogue between characters takes place (the same might be said of the drama), but where, uniquely, dialogue between genres is the norm. There is, perhaps, a misleading dichotomy here. The novel is not the only leaky genre – witness the neoclassic debate about the decorum of Shakespeare's tragedies during the Restoration. But Bakhtin is clearly right in showing how the novel will take over other forms – the diary, the legal confession, the spiritual autobiography, the found manuscript – and imitate them, cannibalise them, or pastiche them.

At this point, I would have to say, I was appropriating Bakhtin much as I did other theorists being published at the time, sometimes warily, sometimes a little too uncritically. I certainly hadn't identified him as a Christian critic. Then I had a visit from an old research student friend, over from in Finland and feeling a bit isolated intellectually. He had converted to Greek Orthodoxy. So we decided he needed to read some Bakhtin. About a month later came a triumphant postcard, proclaiming that we were dead right, but had we seen all the ideas from Orthodoxy in him?

This coincided with the translation of many of Bakhtin's early essays in *Art and Answerability*, notably 'Artist and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', which have a more transparently Christian cast than the works that made Bakhtin's name in the West. In this long and subtle essay there are really three figures: the author, the hero he constructs, and a third figure, the Other, who is the reader, but one who is contacted in spirit and love. That, argues David Patterson, reveals the essentially religious nature of true artistic activity: 'When art and life do not become one in the wholeness of my responsibility – when criticism is confined to explication and commentary – I lose the word and with it my self and soul.'¹³ The religious act and the aesthetic activity, then, should be images of each other.

There are contexts for this in Romanticism, in the Russian symbolists, and

even in Kandinsky's linking art and spirituality. But Bakhtin has another set of targets in view, the classical and neoplatonic conflict of soul and body. What is distinctive about Christ, and from him all Christian activity, is a unique synthesis 'of *ethical solipsism* (man's infinite severity towards himself, i.e., an immaculately pure relationship to oneself) with *ethical-aesthetic* kindness toward the other.'¹⁴ That running together of ethical and aesthetic is rich and suggestive.

Out of all the currents feeding into Bakhtin's thought here, one is obviously the doctrine of Incarnation, especially as expressed in the Orthodox theory of icons. Bakhtin also uses incarnation as a metaphor for form, which is the incarnation of the author; and also, explicitly, and parallel to, the reader's act of evaluation.

One can see parallels with Auerbach's contrast of Biblical and classical narratives in the first two chapters of *Mimesis*. For Auerbach, the key to understanding Christian realism, as opposed to the rigid classical distinctions of decorum, is that giving someone a cup of cold water could be the cause of eternal salvation. For Bakhtin, the self-emptying Christ of Philippians 2 can be the pattern for author and reader alike. 'To be artistically interested is to be interested, independently of meaning, in a life that is in principle consummated. I have to withdraw from myself, in order to free the hero for unconstrained plot movement in the world.'¹⁵

Reading allegory

How might all this apply to allegory, the subject of the conference in which this first appeared? How might a Christian Bakhtinian reading of allegory work? I offer four comments as prolegomena.

First, allegory is, most explicitly of the narrative modes, a practice of reading as much as a mode of writing. Allegorising is something you do as an interpreter as much as an author. Certainly allegorical reading predates allegorical writing in the history of Biblical interpretation. The Bible itself contains some allegorical reading, from Joseph's dream interpretations in Genesis to Paul's readings of the Old Testament. Bakhtin's model of reading as dialogue would seem to be particularly appropriate here, although, at least in the works so far translated, Bakhtin does not directly address allegory. Yet allegory places the dialogue of meaning between writer and reader explicitly at the centre of the work:

*Wouldst thou lose thy self, and catch no harm?
And find thy self again again without a charm?
Wouldst read thy self, and read thou knowest not what,
And yet know whether thou art blest or not,
By reading the same Lines? O then come hither,
And lay my book, thy Head, and Heart together.*¹⁶

Second, allegory has a strong Christian history after the Bible, from Augustine's readings of Genesis and the parables to *The Faerie Queene* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Why are the two mutually hospitable? Is it the desire to fix meanings, to move from religion to theology? If, as Susan Sontag once

argued, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect on art, allegory is very often the revenge of systematised religion on myth. Gordon Teskey, in a provocative study, proposes a principle: 'The more powerful the allegory, the more openly violent the moments in which the materials of narrative are shown being actively subdued for the purpose of raising a structure of meaning.'¹⁷ Does allegorical reading, then, tend to be coercive rather than dialogic? Obviously, if a character is named Despair, or Pliable, the reader will recognise that the author has closed down the options rather more than if they were called Smith or Jones. But allegories are rarely that straightforward, taken as a whole. Christian allegory tends to view events in this world as shadows, merely signs of what lies beyond – the spiritual reality being more real (certainly more permanent) than material reality. Yet, even in that 'merely' lies a difficulty. Leopold Damrosch comments that Bunyan's allegory 'shifts back and forth between two extremes: on the one hand, this world is the equivocal shadow of a truer world to which his signs point; on the other hand, this world is authoritatively allegorical and therefore the best embodiment of value and meaning.'¹⁸ One can add to that a Bakhtinian idea that both author and reader become self-conscious enough to be aware of what they are doing, effectively to be able to comment on their own writing or reading. His late piece 'The Problem of the Text', which is not so much an essay as a series of notes, offers several angles on this. Here is one: 'To express oneself means to make oneself an object for another and for oneself... But it is also possible to reflect our attitude toward ourselves as objects... In this case our own discourse becomes an object and acquires a second – its own – voice.'¹⁹ To enter into dialogue, as reader or writer, involves an element of self-reflection, not so much a suspension of disbelief but a suspension of unreflective selfhood. Reading or writing allegory is the laying open of such an internal movement of mind and feeling.

In his 1961 notes for reworking his Dostoevsky book, Bakhtin describes the function of faith in Dostoevsky's characters in these words:

Not faith (in the sense of a specific faith in orthodoxy, in progress, in man, in revolution, etc.) but a *sense of faith*, that is, an integral attitude (by means of the whole person) towards a higher and ultimate value... The type of people who cannot live without an ultimate value and yet at the same time cannot make a final choice among values. The type of people who construct their lives without any attitude toward ultimate value: plunderers, amoralists, philistines, conformists, careerists, the dead....²⁰

Is a feeling for faith enough? For a philosopher and theorist of literature in his last years, especially? It comes as the last of a triptych. The first is just one sentence: 'Not theory (transient content), but "a sense of theory"'. Then comes a longer paragraph about confession 'as an encounter of the *deepest I* with *another* and with *others*', a dialogue, in other words. A feeling for faith is, then, a dialogic faith. The kingdom of God is between us. In the beginning was the conversation.

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- 1 Pechey has published a number of essays on Bakhtin; see especially his 'Philosophy and Theology in "Aesthetic Activity"', in *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, ed. Susan M Flech and Paul J Contino (Evanston, 2001) and 'Not the Novel: Bakhtin, Poetry, Truth and God' in *Bakhtin & Cultural Theory*, ed. Ken Hirschkop & David Shepherd (second edition, Manchester, 2002).
- 2 See the long and perceptive review by Ralph C. Wood, 'Christianity and Bakhtin', *Modern Theology* 18:1 (2002), pp.119-124.
- 3 See Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton, 2000), p. 74n3; but contrast the earlier arguments of Titunik, Volosinov's translator, helpfully summarised and developed in Morson & Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin, Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, 1990), pp.101-110, which demonstrates what is at stake in collapsing the work of the Bakhtin circle into the work of Bakhtin himself.
- 4 Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (1990), especially ch.2.
- 5 Hirschkop in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*. See also his 'Is Dialogism for Real?' in *The Contexts of Bakhtin*, ed. David Shepherd (Amsterdam, 1998). Bakhtin admired Buber's I and Thou, and read him under the influence of his German tutor before he went to university in 1913. See Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), p.27.
- 6 Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, tr. William Weaver (1984 ed.), p. 474.
- 7 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, tr. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984), p.256.
- 8 Ruth Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin*, CUP, 1998, p.151.
- 9 Ralph Wood, 'Christianity and Bakhtin', pp.119-124.
- 10 Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*, tr. Betty Radice (Penguin, 1971), p.201. See M.A.Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (Duckworth, 1980) and, especially, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (Allen Lane, 1997).
- 11 Cited in Felch and Contino, *Bakhtin and Religion*, p.11.
- 12 See Walter L. Reed, *Dialogues of the Word: The Bible as Literature according to Bakhtin* (Oxford, 1993) and Malcolm Jones, 'A Bakhtinian Approach to the Gospels: the problem of Authority', *Scando-Slavica* 42 (1996), pp.58-76. For a dialogic reading of the Good Samaritan, see ch. 8 of David McCracken, *The Scandal of the Gospels* (New York, 1994).
- 13 David Patterson, 'The religious aspect of Bakhtin's aesthetics', *Renascence* 46 (Fall 1993), 55-71.
- 14 M M Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* (Austin, 1990), p.56.
- 15 *Art and Answerability*, p.112.
- 16 John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), 'The Authors Apology'.
- 17 Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca 1996), p.3.
- 18 Leopold Damrosch Jr., *God's Plot and Man's Stories* (Chicago, 1985), p.151.
- 19 M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and other late essays* (Austin, 1986), p.110.
- 20 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, tr. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, 1984), p.294.