

Believer or Atheist? – The Priest/Poet R. S. Thomas*

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The title of this lecture, ‘Believer or Atheist? – The Priest/Poet R. S. Thomas’, sounds a shocking one for an Archbishop, in whose church R. S. Thomas served as a priest for his whole ministry. I have chosen it because R. S. Thomas has been accused by many of not believing in God because of some of the things he said and some of the poetry he wrote. John Barnie, the editor of *Planet*, calls him an atheist manqué.¹

John Barnie starts by admitting that Thomas produced a great body of meditative religious verse but thinks he was:

a man struggling to retain a faith in God in the face of the evidence available to him from the material world. In his probing of the nature of God and of God’s putative relation to humanity, he stumbled repeatedly against opposites he was unable to reconcile.²

He says that Thomas failed to accept the logical conclusion of his position which would have led him to cease believing in God and that it is this failure which is responsible for the tortuous and contradictory nature of his poetry. As Barnie says:

... it is possible to argue that, despite the torments of doubt, the poet always remained within a firmly Christian frame of reference. I concede that in some ways this is true, but I also believe that this was not an entirely frank position and that some poems ... point in another direction altogether.³

He thinks that it would have been more honest if Thomas had adopted the position of his contemporary, the Swedish poet Harry Martinson, who ‘was able to live without the baggage of theology’, without having the need for a God or any ultimate answer and who regarded the universe as an enigma.⁴ Thomas, according to Barnie, should have been more honest and given up ‘the consolation of religion’, which, in actual fact, failed to console him, in his view.⁵

R. S. Thomas, of course, did not always help his own cause. He said that he needed to draw a distinction between his calling as a priest and his work as a poet.

* This paper is based on a lecture given to the Society on 20 October 2010, in London, with Adrian Morgan in the chair.

1 John Barnie, ‘Was R. S. Thomas an Atheist Manqué?’, in *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R. S. Thomas*, ed. by Damian Walford Davies (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 60.

2 Ibid, p. 60.

3 Ibid, p. 73.

4 Ibid, p. 73.

5 Ibid, p. 74.

As a priest, he said he felt an obligation to present the biblical message in a more or less orthodox way. He did not feel he was employed to preach his own beliefs, doubts and questionings – these, to his mind, had no place in his public role as a priest. He said in an interview:

I am obviously not orthodox, I don't know how many real poets have ever been orthodox ... I find it very difficult to be a kind of orthodox believer in Jesus as my Saviour and that sort of thing... You know I just can't sing the hymns and all the silly twaddle that there is. I think I've been lucky in the period which I have lived through because obviously I would have been for the chop in earlier days. The Inquisition would have rooted me out; even in the nineteenth century I would probably have been had up by a Bishop and asked to change my views, or to keep them to myself etc... I think that so much of our Christian beliefs... are an attempt to convey through language something which is unsayable. And this is partly where the trouble arises... there are aspects of language which are more successfully conveyed by metaphor and the risen Christ, the resurrection to me, as I said, is metaphor, it's an attempt to convey an experience for a kind of new life, an eruption of the deity into ordinary life, a lifting of ordinary life into a higher level... So those are the things that I'm interested in... I can't rise to the great acts of faith of some of the saints and all that. I can't definitely say to you, oh definitely I believe I am going to live again, I am going to be raised: I am on a kind of neutral ground, I leave it to God. If I am worth saving, if He is disposed to save me, I mean, you see, I'm using linguistic terms now, I only half believe in. We use these words, like resurrection, what does that really mean, what is going to be resurrected. I can't really be dogmatic about that sort of thing.⁶

In this way he may have given the impression that his faith was not real – that as a poet he believed very little in reality but because he was a priest, he had to pretend to have a faith he did not really have. To Barnie, he is at best unorthodox, at worst an atheist. He comes to this conclusion for four main reasons.

First, says Barnie, there is an inconsistency in the way he writes about the natural world. On the one hand he treats it with reverence for he loved both the countryside and the sea, and in his book, *A Year in Llŷn*, his love of nature and particularly his love of birds shines through.

The natural world revealed to him something of the beauty and splendour of God. So, in his poem 'The Moor' it is likened to a church which he enters:

6 'R. S. Thomas in Conversation. Interview with Molly Price-Owen', *The David Jones Journal* (2001), 93-102.

... on soft foot,
 Breath held like a cap in the hand.
 ...
 What God was there made himself felt
 Not listened to ...⁷

So too, he can write,

Look at the nest of the long-tailed tit, with its 3000 feathers inside.
 Take out carefully one of the small eggs contained in it, and think
 of the fragile life that is developing under this miraculous shell.
 Nothing but? Lift your head at night and look at the heavens...
 Nothing but?⁸

In other words, when you look at the beauty of nature, you are forced to
 conclude there is a God. So too he writes that:

God is in the throat of a bird:
 ...
 God is in the sound of the white water
 Falling at Cynfal. God is in the flowers
 ...
 Felt His heart beating in the wild hare.⁹

Many creatures
 reflect you, the flowers
 your colour, the tides the precision
 of your calculations.¹⁰

And in his poem 'Blackbird' he writes:

There is a presence whose language is not our language but who
 has chosen with peculiar clarity the feathered creature to convey the
 austerity of his thought in song.¹¹

On the other hand, Thomas writes of the cruelty of nature and the way creatures
 prey on one another and of the great waste inherent in the evolutionary process.
 There is a dark side to the natural world. Evolution is by natural selection and
 this poses questions about the nature of God. He writes of '... the impersonal,

7 R. S. Thomas, 'The Moor', in R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems, 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix
 Giants, 1993), p. 166

8 R. S. Thomas, *Autobiographies*, trans. by Jason Walford Davies (London: Phoenix, 1977), p.
 131.

9 R. S. Thomas, 'The Minister', in *Collected Poems*, p. 43.

10 R. S. Thomas, 'Alive', in R. S. Thomas, *Laboratories of the Spirit* (London: Macmillan, 1975),
 p. 51.

11 'A Tribute to R. S. Thomas', *Agenda*, 36.2 (1988), p. 7.

pitiless, beauty of nature'.¹² He writes that either God has no part in the cruelty, and therefore there must be another power that is as great or greater than God or else God is in some way responsible for this cruelty. What kind of God is He that allows such cruelty and natural wastage?

He expresses it in verse like this:

God looked at the eagle that looked at
the wolf that watched the jack rabbit
cropping the grass, ...
He stepped back;
it was perfect, a self regulating machine
of blood and faeces.
... It was not long
before the creature had the eagle, the wolf and
the jack rabbit squealing for mercy.¹³

So this is indeed nature, red in tooth and claw, with man the highest and yet the cruellest of the species. In his autobiography, he writes the sea:

... is both a mirror and a window. In the mirror is to be seen all
the beauty and glory of the creation; the colours and images of the
clouds, with the birds going past on their eternal journey... Under
the deceptively innocent surface, there are thousands of horrors, as if
they were the creator's failed experiments.¹⁴

Darwin, in his *Origin of Species*, posed the same question, where the weakest seemed to go to the wall. Thomas then is seen as being unwilling to draw the inevitable conclusion that there is no purpose or design behind the world – it has just evolved over billions of years by the process of natural selection and where only the fittest survive. Yet isn't Thomas facing the dilemma we all face when we believe in a God who has created the world where there is so much beauty and order that it seems axiomatic that there is a purpose to it all, and yet is also full of so much disorder, disharmony, cruelty and waste? One can appreciate the beauty of a sunset and yet be thrown by the randomness and destruction of a tsunami. We too, like Thomas, can feel:

And in the book I read:
God is love. But lifting
my head, I do not find it
so.¹⁵

12 Thomas, *Autobiographies*, p. 118.

13 R. S. Thomas, 'Rough', in *Laboratories of the Spirit*, p. 36.

14 Thomas, *Autobiographies*, p. 78

15 R. S. Thomas, 'Which', in *Laboratories of the Spirit*, p. 54.

It is the heart of the dilemma of anyone who is a religious believer. How do you reconcile a world where beauty, violence and cruelty seem to exist side by side? As Bernie himself reluctantly admits, it is an unresolved theological problem for all Christians, not just for Thomas.

Elaine Shepherd, who wrote a book about Thomas' poetry, puts her finger on it when she says, 'Some readers, (who) see it as reflecting an instability in Thomas' faith, rather than, as I see it, his determination to explore all possible responses.'¹⁶

Thomas had been a parish priest in rural Wales and was aware of the harsh reality of nature and of the bleakness of mid Wales' moorland. God may be in the throat of a bird but in another poem he says that,

... love's text
Is riddled by the inhuman cry
Of buzzards ...¹⁷

That is life.

Secondly, Bernie criticises Thomas for his constant harping on God's absence. He writes, 'In a world where God is present only as an absence, it may be that he is absent in the more thoroughgoing sense of being non-existent.'¹⁸ Better for Thomas to stop believing in God than to talk in a paradoxical way of his presence in absence is what Bernie seems to be saying and he quotes the poem 'The Absence':

It is this great absence
that is like a presence, that compels
me to address it without hope
of a reply.¹⁹

Or again,

I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find.²⁰

Moreover,

16 Elaine Shepherd, *R. S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 49.

17 Thomas, 'The Minister', p. 42

18 Bernie, p. 68

19 R. S. Thomas, 'The Absence', in R. S. Thomas, *Frequencies* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 48.

20 R. S. Thomas, 'Via Negativa', in R. S. Thomas, *H'm* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 16.

Genes and molecules
 have no more power to call
 him up than the incense of the Hebrews.²¹

Neither ritual nor science can discover or invoke God and modern technological man has no more ability to reach Him than his less sophisticated predecessors.

But then Thomas writes:

Who is it that ever saw God? Whoever heard Him speak? We have to live virtually the whole of our lives in the presence of an invisible and mute God. But that was never a bar to anyone seeking to come into contact with Him. That is what prayer is.²²

In other words, Thomas is addressing the question most believers, if they are honest, face – does God exist or are we just talking to ourselves when we pray? Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian, whose writings influenced Thomas who wrote two poems about him, asked the same questions. He too was the ‘... articulator of uneasy faith, of the experience of living over dark fathoms’.²³ The answer of both Kierkegaard and Thomas is that, as we pay attention to and desire this God who seems absent, He may reveal Himself. And it is almost, as if in spite all the difficulties, Thomas is, as he says in his poem, compelled to address God knowing that he may not have any kind of response. It is like staring into a glass which seems obscure and then ‘... the longer we stare into it, the clearer becomes the reflection of a countenance in it other than our own’.²⁴ We do not know, of course, whether this will happen at all or if it does happen, how long it will take – but the poet has no choice – he must seek this elusive God if he is to be true to himself and his experience and God may reveal Himself.

By writing about the elusiveness and absence of God, Thomas reflects the experience of the modern age, because we live in a de-sacralised universe, as somebody put it, where God is not seen or felt as a presence. Yet the fact that God is felt to be absent is not just a feature of the modern age. There have always been complaints about the seeming absence of God. If you look at some of the Psalms, such as Psalm 88, ‘Lord, why do you hide your face from me?’, or Psalm 89, ‘How long, Lord, will you hide your face from sight?’, absence is a familiar theme. R. S. Thomas says that to define God is impossible. You cannot capture God in a definition and that is why the major themes of his poetry are about the hiddenness of God, the elusiveness of God, the mystery of God, the silence of God, the darkness of God, even the absence of God.

When he examines these themes, he shows, I think, how steeped he was in Holy Scripture, in the writings of the Fathers, in the Christian mystics, and indeed

21 Thomas, ‘The Absence’, p. 48.

22 Thomas, *Autobiographies*, p. 104.

23 Rowan Williams, ‘Suspending the Ethical: R. S. Thomas and Kierkegaard’, in *Echoes to the Amen*, p. 206.

24 R. S. Thomas, ‘S. K.’, in R. S. Thomas, *No Truce with the Furies* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995), p. 17.

in the classics. Christian tradition has always maintained that God is ultimately unknowable as He is in Himself, a mystery to which our human words can only point by analogy. Only something that can be fully defined can be proved, and so, since it is impossible to prove the existence of God in the abstract, God remains a concept, an idea about the way things are. Thomas reminds us that God isn't an object among many other objects to be explored, but a mystery in whose presence one can ultimately only rest in faith, hope and prayerful silence. We can only talk about God by using images, metaphors and analogies, and these descriptions are always provisional, inadequate and incomplete.

So Thomas writes:

But the silence in the mind
is when we live best, within
listening distance of the silence
we call God. This is the deep
calling to deep of the psalm-
writer, the bottomless ocean
we launch the armada of
our thoughts on, never arriving.²⁵

Or again, he writes:

... dwelt
in a soundless darkness
in the shadow
of your regard²⁶

And so I listen
instead and hear the language
of silence...²⁷

Silence, in a sense, is God's chosen medium of communication. The silent God evokes our silence in turn in His presence, but the paradox is that in and through that silence, an encounter may occur.

It is a presence, then,
whose margins are our margins;
that calls us out over our
own fathoms. What to do
but draw a little nearer to
such ubiquity by remaining still?²⁸

25 R. S. Thomas, 'A. D.', in R. S. Thomas, *Counterpoint* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990), p. 50.

26 R. S. Thomas, 'The Flower', in *Laboratories of the Spirit*, p. 25.

27 R. S. Thomas, 'Shadows', in *Frequencies*, p. 25.

28 Thomas, 'A.D.', p. 50.

A silent encounter is the best encounter that there can be between man and God because in and through the silence, a relationship is formed; a kind of mutual watching is taking place.

The relation between us was
silence; that and the feeling
of each one being watched
by the other...²⁹

That is the best that can be hoped for – this is faith – the presupposition that there is someone there, that God is real, not as an object among other objects but as the ground of one's being. It is not true that for Thomas, God had no reality beyond his language about him. He tries to engage with the transcendent mystery of God. If God does not exist, there would be no possibility of finding Him, but when God does occasionally reveal Himself, he apprehends the presence of a reality that surpasses his understanding for no one can ever comprehend God's inner nature and being.

Finding God requires time, effort and perseverance because he writes: 'My returns must be made | on my knees.'³⁰ 'The darkness,' he says,

implies your presence,
It is not your light that
can blind us; it is the splendour
of your darkness.³¹

There is no guarantee, of course, that in that silence, in that darkness, God will necessarily respond or indeed if He does, what form that response will take. But the desire of the poet for God is a desire of the heart, it is not a desire of the intellect. Knowing God is about having a relationship with Him and, again, that is in line with Christian mystical tradition. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a medieval mystical work, says that God cannot be reached by intellect and by reason but through love for there is always darkness between a believer and God.³² And so, R. S. Thomas speaks about the desire of the heart, the desire to enter into the darkness of God. It is quite obvious from his poetry that R. S. Thomas used to spend a great deal of time in church where he could find peace and quietness, waiting for God to reveal himself:

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church

29 R. S. Thomas, 'Silence', in *No Truce with the Furies*, p. 83.

30 R. S. Thomas, 'Tidal', in R. S. Thomas, *Mass for Hard Times* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992), p. 43.

31 Thomas, 'Shadows', p. 343.

32 J. Walsh, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (London: Classics of Western Spirituality, SPCK, 1981), Chapter 3, p. 120.

In summer, waiting for the God
 To speak; the air a staircase
 For silence;

...

Prompt me, God:
 But not yet. When I speak,
 Though it be you who speak
 Through me, something is lost.
 The meaning is in the waiting.³³

In other words, speech is not the language of prayer but waiting for and desiring God are. We cannot force God to reveal himself. Only as we give time and attention to Him may we encounter God – but there is no guarantee. But the poet persists because he feels compelled to pursue a relationship with God and sometimes he becomes aware of God's presence.

It is a room I enter
 from which someone has just
 gone.³⁴

... He is such a fast
 God, always before us and
 leaving us as we arrive.³⁵

His are the echoes
 We follow, the footprints he has just
 Left. We put our hands in
 His side hoping to find
 It warm.³⁶

There are interesting allusions there, to his habit of putting his own hand in the nest of birds, discovering that the birds have just gone, and also, too, of course the invitation of Thomas the disciple to put his hand in Jesus' side after the resurrection as proof of His having come through death to life. There are echoes too of the Book of Job where Job discerns the outskirts of God's ways.

33 R. S. Thomas, 'Kneeling', in R. S. Thomas, *Not That He Brought Flowers* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969), p. 32.

34 Thomas, 'The Absence', p. 48.

35 R. S. Thomas, 'Pilgrimages', in R. S. Thomas, *Between Here and Now: Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 364.

36 Thomas, 'Via Negativa', p. 16.

We never catch
him at work, but can only say,
coming suddenly upon an amendment,
that here he has been.³⁷

Or again in another poem:

... so in everyday life
it is the plain facts and natural happenings
that conceal God and reveal him to us
little by little under the mind's tooling.³⁸

God may speak very little, but he does speak sometimes but one has to listen hard to what He is saying. There is an economy, if you like, about God's self-revelation. 'It is when one is not looking | ... that it comes.'³⁹

God is not predictable, you cannot pin Him down, you cannot guarantee to find Him in and through the natural world, but there are moments, if you are alert enough, when that does happen. But what the poet is also saying is that the God who created this world continues to reveal Himself in and through it, and that it is often through the events of every day life that we discover God and His will for us. In other words, God is not abstracted from His world, but is revealed in and through it.

... I feel the power
that, invisible, catches me
by the sleeve...⁴⁰

Prayer is a relationship of love, and it is more of a listening than a talking. It is waiting for God and opening oneself to Him. Prayer is about submitting one's will to God, rather than attempting to enforce one's own will on God.

'And there is far more to it,' he says, 'than reciting of verbal formulae in God's presence.'⁴¹ He has no patience with the kind of person who would talk to God as if God were eavesdropping in the doorway, or using God as a kind of person to whom you give a shopping list of your wants.

... I would have knelt
long, wrestling with you, wearing
you down. Hear my prayer, Lord, hear
my prayer. As though you were deaf, myriads
of mortals have kept up their shrill

37 R. S. Thomas, 'Adjustments', in *Frequencies*, p 29.

38 R. S. Thomas, 'Emerging', in *Frequencies*, p. 41.

39 R. S. Thomas, 'Sea-Watching', in *Laboratories of the Spirit*, p. 64.

40 R. S. Thomas, 'The Presence', in *Between Here and Now*, p. 107.

41 Barry Morgan, *Strangely Orthodox: R. S. Thomas and his Poetry of Faith* (Llandysul: Gomer, 2006), p. 27.

cry, explaining your silence by
their unfitness.

It begins to appear
this is not what prayer is about.⁴²

He speaks about the change he himself had felt about praying to God:

It had begun
by my talking all of the time
repeating the worn formulae
of the churches in the belief
that was prayer. Why does silence
suggest disapproval? The prattling
ceased, ...

I contented
myself I was answering
his deafness with dumbness. My tongue
loll'd, clapper of a disused
bell that would never again
pound on him.⁴³

Or, again, he says:

Prayers like gravel
Flung at the sky's
window, hoping to attract
the loved one's
attention,⁴⁴

implying that the more you bombard God with your requests, then the more God will listen. He says that God does not answer prayer in a mechanical or arbitrary way. He, nevertheless, does reveal Himself in and through silence, and he's honest enough to say there are times when he almost gave up the practice or prayer.

I would
have refrained long since
but that peering once
through my locked fingers
I thought that I detected
the movement of a curtain.⁴⁵

42 Thomas, 'Emerging', p. 1.

43 Thomas, 'Silence', p. 83.

44 R. S. Thomas, 'Folk Tale', in R. S. Thomas, *Experimenting with an Amen: Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 517.

45 Ibid.

The occasional feeling that God is present to him, enables the poet to persevere, but it is about nurturing a relationship, not seeking answers to a list of demands. Most Christian saints too have argued that prayer is not about us bombarding God with our petitions but waiting in silence for him to reveal himself and they would have agreed with Thomas's sentiments expressed in the poem 'Ivan Karamzov'. The popular view of prayer rejected by them and Thomas is that prayers are like tickets you send to God which:

... after a while
are returned to you with the words
'Not granted' written upon them.
I repudiate such a god.⁴⁶

So the poet can say, 'Teach me to know what to pray for.'⁴⁷

The poet compares trying to understand God to the way that waves running up the shore always fall back.

I run
up the approaches of God
and fall back.⁴⁸

His assault on God is like that of the waves on the land and rocks of the shoreline. He metaphorically compares his relationship to God to this kind of tidal rhythm. However, all this has to be done kneeling in devotion.

Throughout his long life, Thomas persevered in seeking an encounter with God. He believed that nothing of any worth came easily and it was worth persisting with this quest for God. In his autobiography, he said that '... he turned increasingly to the question of the soul, the nature and existence of God and the problem of time in the universe' during the closing years of his ministry,⁴⁹ and 'through these poems there ran a religious vein that became more visible during his last years. After all, there is nothing more important than the relationship between man and God.'⁵⁰

Theologians such as Simone Weil believe that God can only be present in creation under the form of absence and that God cannot be identified with any aspect of the universe because He is the origin of it all. Darkness and absence do not imply nothingness, but rather the mysterious presence of the living God as humans try to reach out to Him.

God is greater than our thoughts about Him and:

... The great problems

46 R. S. Thomas, 'Ivan Karamazov', in *Collected Poems*, p. 289.

47 R. S. Thomas, 'The Prayer', in *Laboratories of the Spirit*, p. 10.

48 Thomas, 'Tidal', p. 43.

49 Thomas, *Autobiography*, p. 76.

50 Ibid, p. 104.

Remain, stubborn, unsolved.
 Man leaves his footprints
 Momentarily on a vast shore.

And the tide comes.⁵¹

... From one not to be penned
 In a concept, and differing in kind
 From the human; whose attributes are the negations
 Of thought; who holds us at bay with
 His symbols, the opposed emblems
 Of hawk and dove, what can my prayers win...⁵²

So God is beyond our reach, He is unknowable as He is in Himself and yet occasionally He reveals Himself when we pay attention to Him.

So too the Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, writing of God says: 'If God's incomprehensibility does not draw us into his superluminous darkness, if it does not call us out of the little house of our homely, close-hugged truths into the strangeness of the night that is our real home, we have misunderstood or failed to understand the words of Christianity.'⁵³

Thirdly, Thomas is also accused by Barnie of believing in '...a robust, peevish, vengeful deity in the manner of many religious folk tales and myths'.⁵⁴ He quotes his poem, 'The Island':

And God said, I will build a church here
 And cause this people to worship me,
 And afflict them with poverty and sickness
 In return for centuries of hard work
 And patience.
 ...
 ... and watch the bitterness in their eyes
 Grow, and their lips suppurate with
 Their prayers. And their women shall bring forth
 On my altars, and I will choose the best
 Of them to be thrown back into the sea
 And that was only on one island.⁵⁵

Or again in 'Soliloquy':

- 51 R. S. Thomas, 'Young and Old', in *Collected Poems*, p. 237.
- 52 R. S. Thomas, 'After the Lecture', in *Not That He Brought Flowers*, p. 22.
- 53 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, IV, p. 359.
- 54 Barnie, p. 64.
- 55 R. S. Thomas, 'The Island', in *H'm*, p. 20.

And God thought: Pray away,
Creatures; I'm going to destroy
It. The mistake's mine,
If you like. I have blundered
Before; the glaciers erased
My error.⁵⁶

Or in 'Rough': 'God took a handful of small germs, | sowing them in the smooth flesh'.⁵⁷ In the latter he seems to imply that God is responsible for germs and diseases.

Thomas has a volume of poetry entitled *Counterpoint*. The dictionary definition of counterpoint is 'the technique involving the simultaneous sounding of two or more parts or melodies or to set in contrast'.⁵⁸ Thomas' poetry is like this. There are no easy answers.

Thomas explores the gap between what Shepherd calls observation and revelation – the world as he sees and feels it and the world as the Christian faith claims it to be.⁵⁹ In this way he explores the absence and presence of God, the paradox of suffering and love and the God of the Old and New Testaments.

Elaine Shepherd calls some of Thomas's work 'mythic'. They are imaginative recreations of given stories. He starts from a familiar story and distorts it and produces an unorthodox version challenging readers to define God for themselves and provokes them to think.⁶⁰ 'Via Negativa' for example:

... His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm.⁶¹

The hand here is in the side of God, not Jesus as in the Resurrection story.
In another poem,

There was the sound
of thunder, the loud, uncontrollable laughter of
God, and in his side like an incurred stitch, Jesus.⁶²

Jesus here seems to cause pain to God but there could be a *double entendre* that Jesus' pain at the crucifixion (his side was pierced) is also God's pain. Elaine Shepherd said she worked from the premise that:

56 R. S. Thomas, 'Soliloquy', in *H'm*, p. 30.

57 Thomas, 'Rough', p. 36.

58 Morgan, p. 45.

59 Ibid.

60 Shepherd, p. 6.

61 Thomas, 'Via Negativa', p. 16.

62 Thomas, 'Rough', p. 36.

R. S. Thomas is a man of faith. Some people feel that there is a falling off of faith in the later work. These readers are expecting their own thing; they want faith to be expressed, if not in certainty and stasis, then in smooth, and interrupted growth. If we come to R. S. Thomas looking for reassurance and comfort, we shall certainly be disappointed. But if we come willing to explore with him what it means to be human, if we are willing to accept all the dis-order of life and not insist on imposing order, if we are prepared to sit 'loosely to orthodoxy' then the unorthodoxy of his work, arising as it does from a fearsome integrity, will at least force us to think for ourselves, and at best liberate us for that doubt which makes faith continuously creative.⁶³

Thomas once said in an interview, 'What I am tilting at is not God, but ideas of God. The attempt to define Him – that's when the trouble begins, perhaps we shouldn't attempt to define Him.'⁶⁴ Thomas uses irony and tries to provoke his readers into thinking about the Christian faith.

Fourthly, Bernie says that Jesus is far less prominent in Thomas's poetry than God and that is true. He then goes on to argue that his faith was *not* a Christ-centred faith and that he found the Old Testament more congenial than the New. He quotes the poem 'H'm' when the congregation ask about God:

... but the preacher
was silent reaching
his arms out but the little
children the ones with
big bellies and bow
legs that were like
a razor shell
were too weak to come.⁶⁵

and he contrasts this with the words of Jesus in Matthew 19: 'Suffer little children and forbid them not, to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' 'But the starving children of the world ...' says Bernie, 'can only suffer and die. The priest, the would-be mediator of divine love, is powerless. What does divine love mean under these conditions?'⁶⁶

So too as quoted already:

63 Shepherd, p. 9.

64 'R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge', *Anglo-Welsh Review*, 74 (1983), p. 40.

65 Thomas, 'H'm', in *H'm*, p. 33.

66 Bernie, p. 68.

And in the book I read:
 God is love. But lifting
 my head, I do not find it
 so.⁶⁷

Yet in both these poems Thomas is trying to be true to reality as he saw and experienced it. The fact is the hungry do die in our world and there is a great deal of cruelty and hatred in it and every Christian has to grapple with that reality.

R. S. Thomas is, to my mind, not only a religious poet but a Christian poet. A quarter of his poems in *Laboratories of the Spirit* are meditations on the Cross and both his volumes *Counterpoint* and *Mass for Hard Times* deal with Christian themes.

Thomas, however, is not a systematic theologian. He does not set out to explain how you can reconcile a God of love with the cruelty to be found in the world. He simply writes poems about God's love revealed supremely in Jesus. He does not explain how that works but regards God's love as revealed in Jesus as a response to the tragedies of our world. So, he takes for granted the person of Jesus and since the central message of Jesus was about loving God and loving others, and the heart of the Christian Gospel is about God's love for humanity and the world, the poet as a Christian struggles to convey how that love is manifested through the person of Jesus, when there is so much evidence in the world that points the other way:

... He kneeled long,
 And saw love in a dark crown
 Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree
 Golden with fruit of a man's body.⁶⁸

In and through the crucifixion of Jesus, the love of God shines through. Through the crucified body of Jesus, you see something of God's love. That is depicted here by golden fruit, gold being the traditional colour of divinity. So a tree, which might look very dead in winter, is in fact full both of golden fruit and blazing thorns. So the poet writes that, on the tree of the Cross, God's love blazes out in Jesus through His suffering. God communicates not through words but through *the Word*, the logos.

Another poem has the same theme of this new life coming through the Cross of Jesus:

Not the empty tomb
 but the uninhabited
 cross. Look long enough
 and you will see the arms
 put on leaves. Not a crown

67 Thomas, 'Which', p. 54.

68 R. S. Thomas, 'In a Country Church', in R. S. Thomas, *Selected Poems, 1946-1968*, (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1973), p. 42

of thorns, but a crown of flowers
haloing it, with a bird singing
as though perched on paradise's threshold.⁶⁹

All those are images of new life coming from death and so of resurrection – flowers, birds, paradise. God's love is made manifest supremely in and through the cross and suffering of Jesus.

Listening to the violinist Kreisler and watching him play, he writes:

This player who so beautifully suffered
For each of us upon his instrument.

So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns' halo:

...
Because it was himself that he played.⁷⁰

In other words, just as a musician gives of himself in his performance, Thomas sees on Calvary the total self-giving of God in Jesus and a total identification with humanity.

Jesus is 'love's risen body'.⁷¹ For Thomas, if people want to know what God is really like then they have to look at Jesus, because he believed that it was in and through Jesus that God's love was disclosed as fully as it could be disclosed in a human being. That, of course, is in line with Christian orthodoxy. So, it is interesting that, although it is impossible, as he says in other poems, to fully understand and comprehend God, yet this God is not some kind of remote, inaccessible, impassable God, unaffected by what happens to His world. In Jesus, God draws near to His world, suffers with His world, and his nature is that of out-flowing love towards that world. That is how God responds to the evil and tragedy of His world – by being involved in it. At one and the same time, God is absolutely different from and beyond his world, and yet in and through Jesus relates to that world in self-giving compassion and love. The action of Jesus is the action of God and the two things cannot be separated. The cross of Jesus, for R. S. Thomas, lies at the heart of all of that, because this God suffers in and with his world, and aches with it in its brokenness and its tragic happenings.

The poet's God is not some kind of passionless, feelingless, self-contained God, but a God who embraces His world with love. He is not the absolute monad of the Greek philosophers, unaffected by the tribulations of creation but a suffering, caring God who aches for his world.

69 R. S. Thomas, 'Crucifixion', in *Counterpoint*, p. 37.

70 R. S. Thomas, 'The Musician', in *Collected Poems*, p. 104.

71 R. S. Thomas, 'The Answer', in *Frequencies*, p. 46.

This Christmas before
 an altar of gold
 the holly will remind
 us how love bleeds...⁷²

It is very difficult for any of us to explain how this God of love answers the suffering of His world, and in the end, there is no explanation. R. S. Thomas is not a theologian in the sense that he works out some kind of systematic theory of atonement or resurrection. He, nevertheless, links the cross of Jesus to the love of God so that you can't understand God without that link. The same is true of the New Testament writers. They declare that God's love is shown on Jesus' cross but do not really explain how that is so.

The Cross is: '... the mystery | terrifying enough to be named Love'.⁷³ God is:

... Impassible
 yet darkening your countenance
 once for a long moment
 as you looked at yourself
 on a hill top in Judea.⁷⁴

Or again,

The lamb was torn
 From my own side. The limp head,
 The slow fall of red tears – they
 Were like a mirror to me in which I beheld
 My reflection.⁷⁵

'God ... looks,' in the words of Rowan Williams, 'into the crucified human face to see who he is, to see himself in the centre of the world's suffering'.⁷⁶ How that is so, is for us to work at and work out and there are plenty of Christian writers who stress God's love in Jesus without exactly explaining how that is so.

So, R. S. Thomas was a religious poet, but was no deist. He did not just believe in a God remote from his world. He was a Christian poet, even if a troubled and controversial one. His poetry is shot through with Christian themes, allusions and images; the cross and resurrection, bread and wine figure prominently in his work. There are, however, religious undertones and insights in a large number of his poems, which are not, on the face of it, about religious themes. In poems about modern paintings, Wales, the machine and the landscape, deep theological reflections are not far from the surface. For him, Christianity was the presentation of 'Imaginative truth' rather than historical or literal truth. He

72 R. S. Thomas, 'Festival', in *Residues* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2002), p. 47.

73 R. S. Thomas, 'Scenes', in *Laboratories of the Spirit*, p. 44.

74 R. S. Thomas, 'Neither', in *No Truce with the Furies*, p. 58.

75 R. S. Thomas, 'Cain', in *H'm*, p. 15.

76 Williams, p. 213.

recognised that there might be different paths to God, for only God Himself embodies the whole truth.

Some have been perturbed by the honesty and brutality of Thomas's explorations, and even what some have seen as his unorthodoxy. He saw his role as asking difficult questions, no matter how unorthodox they seemed, and at times he aims in his poetry to shock his readers so that they are forced to think through the implications of the Christian faith for themselves:

I believe in you, the almighty,
 who can do anything
 you wish.
 Rid, therefore
 (if there are not too many
 of them), my intestine
 of the viruses that against
 ...
 your will are in occupation
 of its defences.⁷⁷

That concept of prayer and of God's ability magically to rid the world of evil, he has dismissed many times in his poetry. He says that on the day of judgement he would have a great number of things to say to God:

... storming at him,
 as Job stormed, with the eloquence
 of the abused heart.⁷⁸

Here again, he is in line with both the Bible and Christian tradition, where there are numerous examples stretching from the Psalms through the Book of Job, to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, where the individuals concerned are honest enough in their prayer to look God in the eye and tell him how it is. What the poet is saying is, that if prayer is a real encounter with the living God, it has to be honest and that could include venting one's anger and distress against and to God. In the poem 'Welsh Testament' he writes:

... History showed us
 He was too big to be nailed to the wall
 Of a stone chapel, yet still we crammed him
 Between the boards of a black book.⁷⁹

So he comes back to this question again and again of being unable to pin down the living God. He suggests that all our ideas, all our doctrines of God are provisional. We try to make God in our own image and tend to restrict and confine

77 R. S. Thomas, 'Credo', in *Mass for Hard Times*, p. 12.

78 R. S. Thomas, 'At It', in *Frequencies*, p. 15.

79 R. S. Thomas, 'A Welsh Testament', in *Selected Poems*, p. 75.

Him. Yet God is infinitely bigger and more mysterious than we can ever think or even imagine as mere humans. There are no neat solutions – ‘what is ragged must be left ragged.’ Religion has a tendency to want to tidy things up. Religious belief for the poet was provisional and it was tentative in spite of the tendency of Christian doctrine to want to claim too much. But in fact, he says, Christian faith is more about asking questions than giving answers and the frustration of it all breaks through when he says he will ‘... bellow our defiance / at you over the grave’s maw...’.⁸⁰

I really believe R. S. Thomas was a deeply religious man, whose poetry arose out of his work as a priest, forcing him to face fundamental questions about God. His final published book before his death was *No Truce with the Furies*. ‘Geriatric’, the opening poem, begins with a question:

What god is proud
 of this garden
of dead flowers, this underwater
 grotto of humanity...⁸¹

It ends:

... I come away
comforting myself, as I can
 that there is another
garden, all dew and fragrance,
 and that these are the brambles
about it we are caught in,
 a sacrifice prepared
by a torn god to a love fiercer
 than we can understand.⁸²

And the last poem,

Few possessions: a chair,
a table, a bed
to say my prayers by,
and, gathered from the shore,
the bone-like, crossed sticks
proving that nature
acknowledges the Crucifixion.⁸³

In other words, the Cross is part of the warp and woof of God’s world, our creator and redeemer.

80 Thomas, ‘A.D.’, p. 51.

81 R. S. Thomas, ‘Geriatric’, in *No Truce with the Furies*, p. 9.

82 Ibid.

83 R. S. Thomas, ‘At the End’, in *No Truce with the Furies*, p. 42.

At the beginning of this lecture, I quoted R. S. Thomas making a distinction between his roles as priest and poet. In another place, he contradicts that and says Jesus was really a poet:

It is within the scope of poetry to express or convey religious truth... Religion has to do... with vision, revelation and these are best told of in poetry... Jesus was a poet... he is God's metaphor... how shall we attempt to describe or express ultimate reality except through metaphor or symbol?⁸⁴

He goes on to say that 'poetry is religion, and religion is poetry'.⁸⁵ The message of the New Testament is poetry. 'When I preach poetry, I am preaching Christianity and when one discusses Christianity, one is discussing poetry in its imaginative aspects. The core of both,' he says, 'are imagination. My work as a poet has to deal with the presentation of imaginative truths.'⁸⁶ So here he sees poetry as the essence of his expression of Christianity.

A. M. Allchin, in an essay in the journal *Theology* in 1970, says that there is a kind of '... tendency amongst us to want to make our faith into something kind and nice and inoffensive. We make our comfortable versions of Christianity...',⁸⁷ and Thomas refuses to do this, for '... life is not without tears, and a faith that has no place for pain in it will not answer to the realities of life. The world in which we live is a world... in which countless crucifixions still take place.'⁸⁸

R. S. Thomas's sense of himself as a religious poet did not rely on the production of obvious religious pieces or pieces which overtly explored God's nature or relationship with humanity. He saw no distinction between religious poetry and secular poetry. For him, the act of writing poetry *itself* was religious or spiritual and he saw both religion and poetry as being endeavours of depth and carriers of what he thought of as the unifying power of the imagination. He saw the creative act of any artist as an echo of the original creative impulse and actions of God and, as such, a creative act could not but be, at its heart, also a religious act.

In his introduction to the *Penguin Book of Religious Verse* from 1963, he has this to say: 'The poet, by echoing the primary imagination, recreates. Through his work he forces those who read him to do the same, thus bringing them nearer the primary imagination themselves, and so, in a way nearer to the actual being of God as displayed in action.'⁸⁹

Even when not writing religious poetry, Thomas was being creative, and therefore reflecting the mind of God as the creator and that, in itself, was a religious

84 R. S. Thomas, 'A Frame for Poetry', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 3 March 1966, p. 169. Quoted in William V. Davis, *R. S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), p. 7.

85 Ibid.

86 John Ormond, 'R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet'. A transcript of the BBC TV broadcast of 2 April 1972, reprinted in *Poetry Wales*, 7.4 (1972), pp. 52-53.

87 A. M. Allchin, 'The Poetry of R. S. Thomas', *Theology*, 73 (November, 1970), p. 491.

88 Ibid.

89 R. S. Thomas, ed., *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse* (London: Penguin, 1963), p. 8.

act. He goes on to say in that introduction that religion is the response of the whole person to reality, and poetry as the imaginative present of it:

... Poetry is that
which arrives at the intellect
by way of the heart.⁹⁰

I believe R. S. Thomas to be a man of great faith who honestly faces the questions that believing in God raises. People often think faith is the absence of doubt. Faith is, in fact, carrying on believing whilst not claiming to have definitive answers to every problem. I believe that the depth and commitment of his priestly vocation shows in a poem entitled 'The Priest' and R. S. Thomas, through this, should have the last word:

'Crippled Soul,' do you say? looking at him
From the mind's height; 'limping through life
On his prayers. There are other people
In the world, sitting at table,
Contented, though the broken body
And the shed blood are not on the menu.'

'Let it be so', I say. 'Amen and Amen'.⁹¹

90 R. S. Thomas, 'Don't Ask Me', in *Residues*, p. 69.

91 R. S. Thomas, 'The Priest', in *Not That He Brought Flowers*, p. 29.