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Theological Hermeneutics (YDS 13-205)

This is the first lecture from a course on theological hermeneutics given in either 1976 or 1978. CPH 1976l. After some practical matters, Frei continues:

(2) Theological hermeneutics is not a unified field. One has to impose some sort of arbitrary order on many different things under one name.

(3) What are some of the component parts?
   (a) Theological hermeneutics, not general hermeneutics
   (b) Biblical hermeneutics, because that's what for a long time theological hermeneutics amounted to. Why?
   (c) General Hermeneutics; one could also say 'philosophical' hermeneutics. Even Karl Barth agreed that no special biblical hermeneutics.

(4) *Hermeneutics*:
   (a) How does one read a text? Are there any rules or principles for doing so? That's hermeneutics in an old-fashioned setting, especially in 18th-century Protestantism.
   (b) In particular, the abiding or normative meaning or sense of a text was what one was looking for. Hirsch: objectively valid interpretation.
   (c) This involved at least one kind of distinction in re Bible (presumably other texts also): (I) Information about the text and its cultural context and background (II) Reading of the text itself, as something that makes sense in its own right (but that very idea is disputed!). The latter again breaks down into two different things: (I) Meaning of words and sentences: What does it literally say there? (II) Question of 'meaning' – What is there there beyond grammatical sense? What shall I say when I want to say what it says there in other words? What is the common meaning or (sometimes) 'subject matter' between the two statements? (Remember even the formulations, the ways of conceiving issues and distinctions receive challenges constantly!)

(5) 'Saying it in other words' already introduces a very modern topic which would have been puzzling to earlier people going a long way back. Saying the same thing in different words, equivalence-talk you might say, involves an *activity* of your own. In other words, *repeating*, even if you know the grammatical and syntactical rules, is not the same as *understanding* (Barth *grants* this – others *celebrate* it.) So there is a second topic in hermeneutics, in theory of interpretation, that usually (for a variety of reasons) is thought to have a polar relation to the first.

If the first topic is that asking about *meaning* of texts, what or where is the meaning of a text, the second one is, how do we *understand*, by what process. What is it to *understand*, given the facts (1) that mere verbal reiterations aren't the same as understanding and (2) that there is some parallel between the meaning and our understanding of it, i.e., that there is a certain mystery to the text.

We have what it means in, with, and through the words, but the words aren't all that's there. And whatever else is there is cognate to, and therefore accessible to understanding. So we ask, What is it to understand?

(6) Both topics – interpretation as theory of meaning and interpretation as theory of understanding have evoked considerable skepticism on the part of some people. It is as though the two words erected into mental or intellectual constructs having their own reality certain words and related ones – ('consciousness') that make sense in many different ways, but not in that way. Have to take account of that protest. However, protesters and their opponents do have in common one thing.

(7) You may not be able to draw up general rules for interpreting texts but you are confronted with *literature*, i.e., with distinctively human works, concepts, content or 'the uniquely human,' the unique spiritual aspect of a text. This in contrast 'a science that studies the life of signs within society … showing what constitutes signs, what laws govern them.'[1] Linguistic study has its ordering principles not so much in the history of a language as 'in the logic of relation and oppositions among the signs of any given language-system at a particular time.' Robert Scholes: ' … the essence of poetry [is] in its verbal formulations as they emerge in poetic syntax.'[2]

(8) Theological hermeneutics – Bible
   (a) Perspicuity of Bible vs. need for interpretive community, tradition, teaching authority;
   (b) Unity of the Bible
   (c) Inspiration of the Bible – in three ways: Reliable information, true teachings, verbal inspiration.

(9) My own agenda:
   (a) Relative unity of canon
   (b) Narrative sense
   (c) Unity ?through Testaments

[1]   Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye; tr. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p.16.
[2]   *Elements of Poetry* (New York: OUP, 1969), pp.18, 32.