



# Theology and Literature (1) – Franz Kafka

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**Rev. Henry R. Wardlaw, Emeritus Professor at the Uniting Church Theological Hall, Melbourne, Australia, discusses the relation of Franz Kafka and his writings to the Jewish tradition of faith.**

## **Symposium: THEOLOGY AND LITERATURE (1)**

### **Franz Kafka**

**Henry R. Wardlaw**

To write a piece about Franz Kafka for a journal which is concerned with establishing a bridge between Christians and Jews immediately invites questions about Kafka's relation to these two traditions of faith. It is clear that Kafka was not a Christian. His relation to the Jewish tradition of faith is rather more complicated. His childhood and adolescence were overshadowed by an over-bearing father and his relationship to his father remained an unresolved tension through most of his

short life. As a mature man in his mid-thirties he wrote a letter to his father in which he gives a quite detailed account of this struggle. The letter was never sent to the father, but it does attempt an analysis of the lack of understanding between them.

In his essay on *Moses and Monotheism* Sigmund Freud speaks of Judaism as a religion of the father. Of Christianity he says that having begun as a religion of the Father it finally becomes a religion of the Son. In all of this Freud sees the father-son relationship as somehow standing behind these two religious traditions and Franz Kafka's writing could be taken as a demonstration of this movement from the problem of patriarchal authority to problems of moral and religious authority. We might observe in passing here that the issues that have become central in more recent theological discussions of the limiting and distorting nature of this exclusively male perspective

are never raised by Kafka, perhaps because his own personal experience provides the dynamic of so much that he writes.

In many ways I think we might say that the tension which obviously existed between him and his father was a very powerful formative influence lying behind his most powerful writing. This might seem to suggest that his writing arose out of some kind of desire to justify himself in the eyes of his father or even in the eyes of his readers. but that would be to misrepresent the situation.

Kafka was not primarily concerned either with justifying himself or with condemning his father, he is simply attempting to set out his own understanding of the relationship and to indicate some of the effects that his father's behaviour may have had upon him.

He was certainly not seeking to make any final judgement about who was to blame for the tension between them. He was

simply trying to understand it. In fact Kafka was very hesitant to make judgements or to apportion blame in any human relationship. He once

remarked that human beings can not really make judgements about human affairs. To be in a position to judge one would have to be standing outside the situation, yet being outside the situation means one is in no position to make a judgement. In this I think he is very much at one with certain Jewish thinkers, among them Jesus of Nazareth, though, sadly, it is something that Christians and perhaps Jews too, have been unready to recognize.

Yet Judgement remains a pervasive theme through all that Kafka writes. In 1912 he wrote a story which he actually entitled *Das Urteil* (The Judgement). It was one of the few things he wrote with which he seemed really satisfied and he had no hesitation in having it published.

It is a strange story which centres on a quarrel between a young businessman, Georg Bendemann, and his father. The story begins with the younger Bendemann having just completed a letter to a friend from his past who has moved away and lives now in Russia. The friend has been quite unsuccessful in business affairs; nor has he found a partner in marriage. The friendship between the two has been close, yet in his letters Bendemann has never told the friend about the fact that he has become engaged to a girl of good family, whom he is soon expected to marry. This failure to tell such a seemingly close friend something that is obviously of great importance in his life seems strange to his fiancée and his father regards it as simply wrong-headed. Now, at last, he has written a letter in which the news is broken and he goes off to tell his father of the letter that has been written.

The encounter  
between father and

son then develops into an increasingly intense argument, in the course of which the father undergoes a change from being an impotent old man who submits to being tucked up in bed by his son into a gigantic figure, who finally rises up in his bed and pronounces judgement on his son, whom he condemns to death by drowning.

Hearing this sentence of death pronounced, the son hurries out of the house, through the crowded streets to a bridge over the river and jumps from the bridge, murmuring "Dear parents, I did always love you" as he falls to his death.

It is clear that the story is some kind of parable (Kafka himself once described it as "more of a poem than a story"), but how the parable or poem should be interpreted is far from clear. Kafka made several attempts to interpret it but he recognized that his comments by no means exhausted the implications of what he had written.

There were of course autobiographical links. He did live in tension with his father and it is likely that there was some sense of judgement involved in that relationship. Furthermore at the time of writing the story he had himself entered into a relationship that led on to his becoming engaged. Yet the story was not just a dramatic representation of his own situation. To say that it would be to treat it as a piece of realist story-telling which it certainly is not. It begins like a straight-forward narrative but later on it takes what might be called a surrealist turn beyond the sphere of realism altogether. In fact it takes on something of the quality of a myth, which is communicating something of Kafka's fundamental understanding of human existence and the central place that being brought to judgement occupies in our lives.

It is interesting to put Kafka's story alongside more directly

autobiographical reflection of the Scottish theologian John Baillie who was a contemporary of Kafka. Baillie tells us that he could not remember a time when his life seemed to be his own to do with as he pleased. "I was under orders and it was from my father or my mother or my nurse that the orders came." But Baillie never questioned the authority of those who gave the orders. "For I never supposed that it was merely a case of my father's will or my mother's will pitted against my will; still less their power pitted against my weakness."

For Baillie parental authority is perceived as belonging within an arena of moral constraint which gave order to life by prescribing appropriate structures of responsibility and lines of conformity which were themselves to be justified in terms of wider perceptions of justice. For its completion this moral order required the recognition of a divine sovereignty which vindicated the whole structure.

Kafka's perception of the human scene has a different character. Like Baillie he had grown up with a sense of constraint imposed upon him by his parents, which in his case really meant by his overbearing father. Unlike Baillie, he did not accept this as providing him with a moral arena in which he could live and move and have his being.

Why did these perceptions develop so differently? One obvious way of answering this question is to contrast the overbearing tyrannical character of Kafka's father with Baillie's childhood memories of a father who may have been a bit "straight-laced", but was at the same time gentle and loving. The fact that Baillie's father died while he was still a child may increase the force of this contrast.

This is not to say that the growth of these two different understandings of human life are shaped solely by the different experiences of parental authority. There is also the

difference of social setting, on the one hand Scottish Presbyterianism, on the other central European Judaism.

To call Kafka's perception "Jewish" or "central European" would be too simple however. One could certainly not say that Kafka believed in God in Christian terms nor even in the Mosaic terms of his own Jewish tradition. Whether I thought Kafka believed in God at all is a difficult question to answer.

But when it comes to the divine justice, the divine righteousness, which the religious believer sees as the ultimate measure by which all human lives are to be judged, this does have some place in Kafka's thinking or, perhaps I should say, in Kafka's imagination. The awful significance of that final judgement and the awful sense of responsibility that it creates is even present in the ending of Kafka's extraordinary story of Georg Bendemann.

What are we to make of that ending? It is hard to

find any unequivocal answer. Is it pointing to some kind of necessity - perhaps a moral necessity - laid upon the son to accept the father's judgement? Is it just demonstrating the power of the strong-willed in an essentially lawless world? Neither of these seem to be a satisfactory explanation. If Georg Bendemann is really guilty of something, what is it he is guilty of? To answer that we must consider the important, though absent, figure of the friend in Russia; Russia perhaps representing a wilder world outside the civilizing structures of Western Europe. What is the significance of this figure who stands at the centre of the argument between father and son?

We could read the story as suggesting that the movement into a "Russian exile" was the way which might lead to life, while remaining at home could lead only to death. And it is the futile posturing of the one who lacks the real enterprise of the exiled friend that

finally stands  
condemned.

There remains a  
question about the  
condemnation itself;  
whether the  
judgement leaves  
room for any kind of  
salvation or  
redemption.

Perhaps the only  
hint of this is hidden  
within the final  
affirmation of filial  
love as Bendemann  
falls to his death.

There have been  
those who can see  
in this some hint of  
redemption, even  
perhaps of  
resurrection, in the  
acceptance of the  
father"s verdict.

Of course this is not  
to say that Kafka  
embraced any kind  
of doctrine of  
resurrection. Kafka  
did not deal in  
doctrines. Like the  
great Jewish  
Rabbis, including  
Jesus, whom  
Christians name as  
the Christ, he told  
stories: parables  
which quicken the  
imagination and  
open possibilities  
and visions, and  
provide intimations  
of realities beyond  
all doctrinal  
formulation. When  
all the interpretive  
suggestions have  
been made and  
explored by critics  
reviewing this story I  
suspect Kafka  
would have said

that no one of them  
is finally right  
though no one of  
them is finally wrong  
either. All these  
things are present in  
the story, which is  
what makes the  
story so rich and so  
endlessly  
suggestive.

There are those  
who see Kafka as a  
nihilist who believed  
that none of our  
value judgements  
are more than  
perspectival  
impositions on  
reality. No one of  
them absolute,  
which might be  
taken to imply that  
in the end none is  
really to be taken  
seriously. But this  
does not do justice  
to the intense moral  
seriousness with  
which Kafka writes.  
Certainly the  
situations he  
creates are often  
laughable. The very  
idea of a man  
waking up to find  
that he has turned  
into a cockroach is  
surely laughable.  
But it may also be  
terrifying. It all  
depends how the  
story is told.

When we turn to  
Kafka's larger  
unfinished stories,  
*The Trial* and *The  
Castle*, we find the  
issues of judgement  
presented on a  
much wider canvas.  
The narrative

completeness of the shorter story (or "poem") is replaced by narratives which are not only unfinished but which are perhaps in the nature of the case unfinishable. The concrete figure of Georg Bendemann standing under judgement before his father is replaced by the half-anonymous Joseph K summoned to appear before a tribunal he cannot even find or, in *The Castle*, the even more anonymous K who is searching for the authority that has summoned him to carry out some surveying work. The motifs of authority and of judgement are clearly central in these two stories but where the authority is to be found and when the trial and judgement are to take place seem to be lost.

"Religions get lost as people do". This is a detached remark in one of Kafka's notebooks. He has a story of a count who was due to be holding court. When a group of petitioners come in to present their petition they find not the count but a little schoolboy. The old count is dead and the young one who

ought to be ruling is  
at his lessons and  
the petitioners  
wander off into the  
void, not knowing  
where to go.

There is a hint in  
this story that the  
sheer lostness of  
humanity may not  
be a permanent  
state but may in fact  
be a moment in  
human history:  
religions get lost,  
but perhaps they  
are not always lost.  
This might seem to  
give some ground  
for a more positive  
reading of Kafka.  
Yet here I hesitate.  
This is doubtless a  
moment in Kafka's  
thought but it cannot  
be taken as the only  
moment.

Kafka said of  
himself that he  
vigorously absorbed  
the negative  
elements of the age  
in which he lived.  
He had no  
hereditary share in  
the slight amount of  
the positive or of  
that extreme  
negative which  
capsizes into the  
positive. "I have not  
been guided into life  
by the hand of  
Christianity –  
admittedly now  
slack and failing –  
as Kierkegaard  
was," he writes,  
"and have not  
caught the hem of  
the Jewish prayer  
shawl – now flying

away from us – as the Zionists have. I am an end or a beginning."

Kafka did not resign himself to the idea that all human life is absurd, good and evil being no more than human conventions. For him the issues of good and evil were real issues, though this did not necessarily mean that he saw them as representing the last word on human existence. In his notebooks we find repeated reflections on the story of Eve and Adam in the primal garden of Eden. In the course of these reflections Kafka says "we are sinful not only because we have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, but also because we have not eaten of the Tree of Life. The state in which we are is sinful irrespective of guilt." Consequently "we are separated from God on two sides: the fall separates us from God and the Tree of Life separates God from us."

These reflections lead Kafka on to distinguish between two kinds of truth, represented by the Tree of Knowledge

and the Tree of Life.  
These he calls "the  
truth of the active  
principle and the  
truth of the static  
principle." In the  
first, Good  
separates itself off  
from Evil; the  
second is nothing  
but Good itself,  
knowing neither  
Good nor Evil. The  
first truth is given to  
us really, the  
second only  
intuitively. That is  
what is so sad to  
see. The cheerful  
thing is that the first  
truth pertains only to  
the fleeting moment,  
the second to  
eternity."

This takes us  
beyond the sphere  
of judgement,  
beyond that  
"endless cycle of  
idea and action,"  
which T.S. Eliot  
says

*gives knowledge of  
motion, but not of  
stillness;  
knowledge of  
speech, but not of  
silence;  
knowledge of words  
and ignorance of  
the Word.*

Perhaps it is in this  
the stillness, the  
silence, the Word  
that the "cheerful  
thing" resides which  
he suggests lies  
beyond the terrible  
uneasiness and the  
fear of judgement  
which seems to

pervade so much of his writing.

**Note:**

All the direct quotations are from Kafka's *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, edited by Max Brod and translated by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins. Originally published in *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, Schocken Books, 1954. Quoted here from *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, Exact Books, 1991 (see pp.37-59). The quotation from T.S. Eliot is from *Choruses from "The Rock"*.

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