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Robert A. Traina: Teacher, Scholar, Saint

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My wife and I landed in Wilmore, Kentucky, in early September 1973. The first challenge was dealing with the intense heat and humidity. Then, there were no teapots, so we had to make do with saucepans for making tea. Muriel was pregnant, so we had to deal with morning sickness accompanied by a desire to consume fried bacon; the bacon was not up to Irish standards; it was all grease and no meat. Then, because we arrived after the semester started in order to save money on our flights, I missed the first week of classes and quickly got behind, especially in Greek. And then there was the initial encounter with Robert Traina.

A lot of students raved about his courses. I picked up a copy of *Methodical Bible Study* in order to find out what generated the fuss. I was not impressed. The book was self-published and lacked the normal aesthetic qualities I had long associated with academic texts. Worse still, I could not make head nor tail of what it was about and thus failed to see why folk were so keen to talk about its significance. I recall looking at the list of laws of relationships and the block diagrams and thinking that all of this looked out of place in a book on hermeneutics. Surely, this was an effort to make the proverbial silk purse out of sow's ear; this kind of analysis had no real place in understanding literary phenomena. I assure the reader that this reaction was not made from

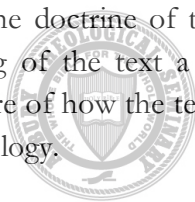
intellectual arrogance; it was an honest effort to make sense of the testimonies that abounded in the student body. It was precisely because of those testimonies, however, that I decided to shelve my initial impressions and wait and see. The positive testimonies came from every direction and were especially strong when delivered by students whom I very quickly came to respect because of their academic background and lively intelligence.

I signed up for the course on the Pentateuch in my second semester (this is what I recall) and once Traina stepped up to the podium I knew we were dealing with a teacher and scholar who was deadly serious about his work. In time I also took his course on Mark and on Romans. The logical outline I wrote covering the first eight chapters of Romans was one of the most difficult assignments I have ever completed. As with all his courses, the course on the Pentateuch was packed out; every chair was filled; apart from one student who later signaled unease with the theological moves Traina was expounding, students were riveted by his presentation. Initially, as was typical in a course of lectures in North America, students would raise their hands and ask a question. This was new to me, for I was used to lectures where there were no questions; professors were there to argue a case; discussion took place in tutorials in small groups where we read papers on assigned texts. By the second week, we were so keen to hear what Traina had to say that there was intense peer pressure to suppress questions. So questions simply dried up. We dealt with the problem by setting up what we called rap-sessions outside of class, where Traina systematically noted, and then worked through the issues that were identified at the beginning of each session.

One reason why we wanted to hear what Traina had to say stemmed from the assignments that were carried out in advance. These were especially difficult for me as the course assumed an earlier course where questions of method were pursued and where one learned the ropes of interpretation. However, that was a secondary consideration.

I found that the assigned exercises involved such intense immersion in the text of scripture that one came to the lectures absolutely desperate for light on what they might mean. Even after I got the hang of his proposals, I was hungry for illumination.

Traina supplied that illumination to a degree that was absolutely astonishing. This, in fact, was the real reason why we wanted to hear from Traina rather than be distracted by the intellectual worries and musings of our fellow students. At one level, what was at issue was the implementation of strategies of interpretation that he had worked through from the bottom up. He had thought through the issue of what constituted the reliable interpretation of texts for himself, inventing his own language to capture what was at stake, and then put that to work in his interpretation of the material under review. The experience was intellectually liberating in at least two ways. First, one gained confidence in one's efforts because there was a standard of excellence exhibited day by day with amazing clarity and consistency. Over time, one was set free from slavish dependence on the relevant commentaries; one was no longer intimidated by those who made much of their knowledge of the original languages; one gradually found one's own voice in the debates about the meaning of the texts. Second, one quickly came to see that Traina brought to his interpretation of the text a first-rate theological mind. These texts were not simply ancient texts; they were living texts that still spoke to us today. They took up many of the issues that bothered me from the beginning of my Christian pilgrimage and that were honed in a prior degree that combined the precision of analytic philosophy with the rigors of experimental psychology. It was, therefore, no surprise when I found out later that Traina had done his doctoral work in systematic theology, writing a brilliant thesis on the doctrine of the atonement. He was bringing to his understanding of the text a fine-tuned, theological sensibility that made him aware of how the text bore on some of the central issues in Christian theology.



Looking back, I recall the following as especially significant. As already noted, his views on atonement were conspicuous. In this case, Traina insisted that any account of what God had done in the death of Christ had to square with a prior analysis of the actual causes of Christ's death. Given that Christ's death involved an innocent victim and was brought about in an act of judicial murder, it was morally otiose to think of his death in terms of divine punishment. The detailed events in and around the crucifixion of Christ acted as a moral constraint on any account of divine action in atonement.

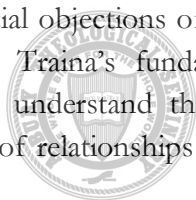
Consider another example. In his interpretation of the dramatic material in Exodus 32-34 where Moses argues with God and God changes his mind on the threat to wipe out the Israelites, he insisted on construing God as an Agent open to human encounter rather than some kind of impassible Being who stood above the vicissitudes of human rebellion and suffering. This was an element in a wider vision of God as a genuine Agent who entered into real relationships with his creatures.

And now for a third case. In his treatment of Christian ethics, Traina expounded a vision of ethics as centered in a form of relative absolutism that left room for the adaption of divine love to the complexities of human existence. This was not some kind of version of Situation Ethics that had been a fad in the nineteen-sixties; it was a serious effort to wrestle with the actual texts that dealt with ethical material. In all these examples, Traina was content to take his stand on scripture and leave us to follow through in our own deliberations. He presented each of them quietly and graciously, willing to note our worries, and aware that there was only so much he could do in the time available. For my part, when I return to his notes today, it is rare that I do not find a host of insights that cry out for further investigation. I have been haunted at times for years by the questions he set loose in my mind.



What I am seeking to capture here is the extent to which Traina was working in philosophical and systematic theology. This in no way is meant to downplay his work in hermeneutics. When I was a graduate student at Oxford, I attended a lecture course on Redaction Criticism by Leslie Holden, and I noted early on that Holden was finding more or less by accident what Traina had taught us to observe systematically. While I have not always deployed the schema Traina taught us, I have used it informally throughout my academic life in the interpretation of philosophical and theological texts. In my work in what I call Blue-collar exegesis across a lifetime of teaching in local churches, Traina's proposals have been the backbone of my preparation week in and week out. Traina was, to be sure, very clear in his insistence that a full-scale reading of any text required attention to extra-textual considerations, but he rightly saw his own contribution as focused on the final form of the biblical text. In a sense, he simply taught us to take apart a text and then put it back together again in a way that captured its central claims and content.

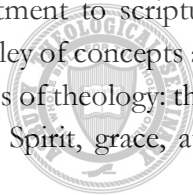
This work was nourished by Traina's thoughtful immersion in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey and R. G. Collingwood. Collingwood was already one of my favorite philosophers. In an undergraduate seminar we had worked through his book on metaphysics and I had read virtually all his writings on my own. Traina was very clear that the task of the interpreter was to understand the minds of the ancient authors and editors of scripture. In conventional terms, this has meant the search for the meaning and intentions of the original author. Much ink has been spilt on this topic. I think it is better framed as a set of questions of the speech acts of the original author; talk of intention is simply one way of referring to the actions of an author. Once it is reframed in this way, the crucial objections of the recent past fall by the wayside. So I stand by Traina's fundamental orientation in hermeneutics: the task is to understand the mind of the writer. Moreover, while talk of laws of relationships can be misleading, the



crucial point is that authors use a network of strategies to express what they want to say; our task is to reverse the causal process and work back up through the strategies deployed in order to understand as best we can the mind of the author.

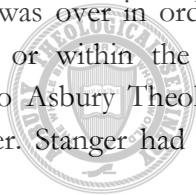
Traina took this notion from Dilthey. He took from Collingwood the claim that historical investigation involved the reenactment of the mental acts or thought-world of human agents. Strictly speaking this is an overstatement. As Saul Kripke pointed out, who can or would want to reenact the mental acts or thought-world of Hitler or Stalin? However, philosophically Traina is right to insist on the radical distinction between history and natural science. In history we seek to understand not just the actions of human agents but the motivations, desires, beliefs, passions, and circumstances that lead folk to do what they do. We do not do this in the case of electrons, atoms, or black holes. So in broad terms Traina was correct, even though we can drop the particular mistake that Collingwood made. Thus, in Traina we can detect a mind furnished with relevant philosophical considerations as he thought through the contours of the interpretations of texts.

As already noted, we also encounter a mind that was engaged in thinking through a whole range of perennial theological issues. Traina is correctly understood as a conservative thinker. At its deepest level, this means that he was a robust Protestant who sought above all else to ground his thinking in holy scripture. I recall vividly a comment he made to me that growing up he was always amazed at the gap between what he heard in Christian preaching and teaching and what he was finding in scripture. He gave his life to closing that gap. It was this passion that I think fed his efforts to develop appropriate methods for unlocking the treasures of scripture. However, there was more at stake than a formal commitment to scripture. Materially the treasures of scripture give us a medley of concepts and teaching that inevitably take us into the great themes of theology: the doctrine of God, Christology, the work of the Holy Spirit, grace, atonement, entire sanctification,



faith and works, and the like. I trust that someday soon we will have access to his private papers, so that this aspect of his work can be explored in depth. This will not be an easy task; it will require careful attention to the background work that never made its way into the public domain. I am morally certain that such work would yield a fine harvest of theological insights that go beyond our natural tendency to think of Traina simply as an exegete of scripture. I hope that before long all his private papers will be made available.

I came to know Traina outside the time I spent in his courses. As president of the student body, we served on committees together. For a semester I acted as his assistant, grading papers. In addition, I travelled with him by car to the Gethsemane Monastery in Kentucky where he taught the monks on a weekly basis. In committee work, what stood out was his mastery of the issues and his integrity; there was no dodging difficult issues. As a grader, I was struck by his combination of perfection and humility; he cared about his students but there were to be no short-cuts in their work. In the trips to Gethsemane, it was fascinating to watch him deal with the questions of the monks. I recall that one session was devoted to John 6, a pivotal text in Roman Catholic treatments of the meaning of the Mass. Traina was fully aware of the issues that swirled around the crucial periscope. He dealt with the queries of the monks by walking them through his understanding of the chapter as a whole. There was not a note of defensiveness or polemics in the discussion. In the car, he shared with me with great candor the challenges he had faced across the years. I was astonished to hear of the shenanigans that went on at The Biblical Seminary in New York when he taught there. I marveled at his patience and his resilience; he was not for sale at any price. When he felt he had to leave, he waited until the semester was over in order to avoid any public turmoil among the students or within the institution; he quietly resigned and made his way to Asbury Theological Seminary at the invitation of President Stanger. Stanger had astutely recognized his



worth and was patiently waiting in the wings to bring him to Wilmore. The other information I picked up was the dire state of his health. I had had no idea that he had been teaching our classes accompanied by severe pain in his shoulder. He also suffered from diverticulitis, if I remember correctly. Yet he kept on at his work; few if any suspected what he had to endure on the medical front.

As I looked back on his work earlier in my career, I often wondered why Traina did not publish more. One thing is certain. His thesis on the atonement is a model of first-rate academic work; so, there is no doubt about his scholarly abilities. I only have speculations to offer on why he has remained such a hidden treasure. For one thing, he got drawn into administration and this clearly drastically cut back on the time at his disposal. For another, I think that he saw himself first and foremost as a teacher; and this required detailed attention to this craft. He gave me a copy of his manual on teaching and I have found his suggestions extremely helpful in my own work as a teacher. In addition, I think he was a perfectionist when it came to his work. And this, of course, is often the enemy of developing material for academic consumption. I suspect that he would never have been happy with anything he would have written for the standard academic world. Yet, there is one more consideration. Unlike many academics, Traina had no interest in inventing an academic persona, no desire to be famous, no concern to establish an academic reputation. He was the personification of intellectual humility and grace. In the end what mattered was a life of steadfast obedience to his Lord and Savior. He was fortunate in inspiring generations of students who have taken his legacy and are integrating it into the guild of biblical studies and making it available to a wider public. He did what he was called to do in his own life and was happy to leave the aftermath to providence.

During my time at Asbury there were rumblings that Traina was one of the heretics that had recently come to positions of significant influence on the student body. Frankly, I was having such a stimulating

time across the whole range of faculty that I found such talk somewhat silly. I enjoyed the contrasting styles of teaching and I found the differences provocative. In any case, the school as a whole was so clearly conservative that rumors of heresy were laughable. I had already encountered deeply revisionist accounts of Christianity; there was nothing like them at Asbury. When I mentioned the rumors to Traina, he was not surprised. Yet he would not move an inch in offering criticism of his colleagues. He was gracious in the extreme. When I integrated this response with my personal experience of him across three years, there is only one word that comes close to describing Robert Traina. That word is holiness. He was for me a paradigm of conspicuous sanctity.

Earlier this year, I had occasion to revisit Wilmore. I took time to visit old haunts on campus. I drove through the beautiful countryside that reminded me of the landscape of my native Ireland: the rolling hills, the luscious green grass, the cattle in the fields, and the horses in the magnificent farms. I spent time in church, giving thanks for all that was given to me as a student at Asbury Seminary. Then, on the day I left to fly back home, I asked a helpful receptionist to locate the graveyard where Traina is buried. She furnished me with the name of the cemetery outside Lexington. When I got there, I was given a map of the grave sites. It was not difficult to find the relevant section, nor was it difficult to locate the grave itself. I stood at his grave in silence. I left haunted by the legacy of teaching, scholarship, and holiness that was embodied so brilliantly in the life and work of Robert A. Traina. I began my education when I was sent to regular school at the age of three and a half. My father had been killed in a truck accident and (as my mother told it) I was a handful at home. Across the years I have had truly great teachers; Robert Traina was easily one of the greatest. May his memory be eternal.

