

Editorial: Language and Faith

Like air, most of the time, language goes unnoticed until we encounter something – confusion, discomfort, surprise – and become aware of our linguistic embeddedness. English is my third language, one I learned as a teenager, and I did so primarily by reading the Bible. (It happened to be the King James Version, because that was the only Bible available to me at the time; little did I know then of the debates surrounding English Bible translations and their theological soundness!) Since then, for many years, English has been the language in which I most often think, read, and speak about faith. It has shaped the way I understand God, God’s people, and the world around me. Yet whenever I switch to another language when conversing about faith, I notice how particular linguistic structures emphasize certain theological ideas or images – or make it considerably harder to express certain nuances. Often, these differences are felt more in the body and emotions than in conscious perception.

It has therefore been particularly rewarding to curate this issue of *Theology in Scotland*, exploring how language shapes, challenges, and sometimes constrains faith, especially within the historical and contemporary Scottish context. What can be learned from the ways in which language evolves (or is suppressed) in the life of the church and its mission work? What could, or should, be learned from the experiences of minority language groups in Scotland? Moreover, while church practice often centres around propositional language, what about other modes of language – such as poetry, non-verbal expressions of art, and even silence itself?

As the contributions to this issue demonstrate, to discuss language in relation to faith is to inevitably enter the diversity of hermeneutical perspectives as well as questions around ethics and culture. Language plays a crucial role in how we perceive and relate to the ‘other’, and in how communities name and relate to those who are outside their accepted spheres of belonging. We begin with what was originally a conference talk delivered by Alastair McIntosh – a piece prepared for a very particular occasion and then re-crafted in conversation with the theme of this issue. Reflecting on the loss of Gaelic culture and language, and exploring how our cultural and linguistic situatedness colours our biblical exegesis, McIntosh draws theological and historical parallels between the Highland Clearances and the dispossession of Palestinians, advocating for a

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biblically-grounded ethic of land, justice, and ecological restoration. He highlights the prophetic Jewish vision of *tikkun olam* – the healing of a fractured world – as a shared calling across traditions, urging a re-imagining of land as sacred and inclusive.

Faith is coloured by the particularities of language; but language also gives colour to faith. Continuing with the Scottish Gaelic world, and juxtaposing it against the linguistic hegemony of English, Martin George Holmes argues that linguistic diversity is vital to the health and identity of the Church. Using Scottish Gaelic and confessional Calvinism as a case study, he explores how a *lingua franca* can undermine minority faith communities. Language is not merely a tool of communication, but a vessel of theology, culture, and communal identity, and since linguistic diversity is part of how the Gospel spreads and inhabits cultures, the marginalization of indigenous languages can erode the theological vibrancy of the affected communities.

Following from these two pieces, which both discuss the power of language with particular reference to the Gaelic linguistic world, we move to two other pieces which reflect on the connection between language and art. Kate Hennessy’s essay explores artmaking as both a form of language and a form of faith – a ‘theology of the hands’ – that engages mystery, embodies beauty, and bridges the gaps that aren’t accessible to doctrine. Considering the dangers and limitations of religious ‘verbiage,’ she suggests that the artistic impulse is a faith-full response to spiritual hunger, leading to a deeply nourishing encounter with God, especially when or where traditional religious forms falter.

We then move to a wide-ranging conversation between Pat Bennett and Pádraig Ó Tuama. They look at how imaginative, non-dogmatic approaches to the sacred text – similar to how we engage with poetry or art – can open up deeper, more embodied, and more surprising encounters with the divine. Ó Tuama advocates reading the Bible not as a singular message to decode, but as a multifaceted, ‘wild’, participatory narrative that invites questions and emotional response. The text here does not only speak to us, but also reads our lives in return. Some may find this openness to multiple meanings unsettling, seeking a more definitive interpretive framework, yet Ó Tuama and Bennett offer an invitation to rediscover a deep, creative, curious attentiveness to the text as a pathway for encountering God anew in both Scripture and daily life.

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Writing for the Arts and Culture Corner, Laura Gilmour considers the word ‘submission’ through the lens of the trauma of domestic abuse in the context of undergoing a ministerial recognition process. Using quilting art as embodied theological reflection, Gilmour’s piece contrasts surface self-presentation with deeper, hidden realities within the self, revealing how submission and survival are interwoven in the experience of the one who has lived through domestic violence. Her work highlights the power of deliberately slow, creative practices in the remaking of one’s self – especially for those whose voices have been silenced.

Silence and other non-verbal forms of communication are often neglected both in church life and theological thought to the detriment of both, and certainly deserve greater attention. At the same time, words remain inseparable from Christian faith: from Scripture to public worship, and from academic discourse to private devotion. My hope is that readers, wherever they may be and whatever languages they may speak, will find in these contributions both a challenge and an encouragement as they reflect on how language and its limits shape their encounter with God.

It so happens that this is the last issue of *Theology in Scotland* on which I have worked as the editor. It has been a bittersweet time for me to reflect on the various themes the journal has explored over the past few years. I am leaving it with fond memories, deep appreciation for the collegial fellowship, and full confidence in the good and capable hands of Dr Katie Cross, the new editor. I extend my thanks to all the contributors, the Board of *Theology in Scotland* and its Chair, Alison Jack, and especially to my dear colleagues, Colin Bovaird and Jonathan Birch, who have made each issue possible.

Lina Toth
Editor



Farewell and Welcome

Dr Lina Toth has been editor of *Theology in Scotland* for over five years. She recently announced her intention to ‘retire’ from the post in order to focus on her role as Director of the Langham Scholars Programme at the Langham Partnership. And so this marks the last issue she will edit.

Lina has brought her considerable theological and organisational experience to the task of editor. The journal’s direction and focus has been

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sharpened during this time, with themed issues on important topics such as Theological Education in Scotland today, Autism and Faith and Theology and the Environment. Our online presence and accessibility have greatly increased, and Lina's guidance and vision has driven this process. Her Editorials are always models of incisive commentary on the articles that follow. I think I speak for all of the editorial team when I say she has been a joy to work with.

We send Lina our sincere thanks and best wishes for the future.

We are also pleased to announce that Dr Katie Cross will be taking on the role of editor of the journal from the next issue. Katie is Christ's College Lecturer in Practical Theology at the University of Aberdeen and specialises in the study of theology which intersects with personal and collective experience, particularly in relation to trauma and suffering. Katie will introduce herself in the next issue, but in the meantime we thank her for her willingness to take on this role and very much look forward to her contribution to the journal.

Alison Jack
Chair of the Editorial Board