CIVIL SOCIETY AND THEOLOGY
INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to explore the ways and means in which religion does or does not influence civil society - if such a society exists at all - in South Africa. American theologian David Tracy’s distinction between the three different publics of theology (the academy, the church, and general culture) will be taken as point of departure, with attention being focused on the third public. The paper will attempt to demonstrate that not nearly enough attention has been given to this important area.

Certain factors inhibit or frustrate the interaction between religion and civil society. These factors include inadequate reflection and research on the side of religion and an inability to communicate with representatives of civil society in a constructive way. Conceptual stumbling blocks, as well as unfamiliarity with and uncertainty regarding the emerging new dispensation in the country, are additional factors contributing to the dilemma.

The basic hypothesis of the paper is that it is not sufficient to distinguish between different publics of theology. Other variables need to be taken into account. These include the subject or subjects responsible for what is called ‘theology’, as well as the different modes in which theology is done. The wrong choice of mode more often than not is the main reason for the ineffective operation of theology in this field. It is maintained that the interaction between theology and civil society will remain hamstrung as long as these matters do not receive the attention they merit.
Historically speaking, the relationship between religion and civil society has had a long and chequered history. As far as Christianity is concerned, the concept of a holy Roman empire was one of the earliest attempts to give expression to such a relationship. A prominent feature of this history is the amazing variety of patterns in which both religious traditions and local circumstances shaped this uneasy relationship, ranging from close co-operation to active opposition. Each society and tradition has a different story. This is the case not only between the major traditions of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, but also within these variations (as, for example, in Lutheran or Calvinistic approaches to public life). But also the kind of society and especially the prevailing conditions at a certain point in its history can be highly significant.

South Africa finds itself in a critical stage of transition. Existing value systems are disintegrating or are under serious threat. A new public ethos is emerging or is bound to emerge. But the contours of such an ethos is all but clear. In the market place, opposing philosophies are vying with each other to form the basis of an economic system, of a development strategy, of an education policy, of a democratic culture, and of all the critical elements which together make up a civil society.

Conspicuously lacking in this intense debate is a substantial contribution from the side of theology. There certainly is no dearth of pronouncements by synods or church bodies, but these are mostly done in isolation or in opposition. A sustained and constructive participation in the public arena and in terms of the public debate to develop a common value system and an ethos that will sustain a democratic dispensation is still sorely missing. There are various reasons for this deficiency. Perhaps the most important is an inability to understand the kairos brought about by the transition to, and the urgent need for, a new public ethos. For some churches, it is the result of an ‘once bitten, twice shy’ attitude. After being heavily involved in politics and having supported discriminatory policies and practices, there is now a tendency to withdraw from politics and to privatise religion. For others, who for so long had to resist these very policies, it still is a question whether the attitude of resistance should now be changed to one of engagement and of constructive participation.

But the problem might be even more fundamental than the change of ingrained attitudes and the inability to seize the opportunity. There is reason to suspect that we are dealing with a ‘structural deficiency’ - the apparent inability of theology to participate meaningfully and effectively in the public arena. Could it be that the very nature of doing theology up to this point has rendered it incapable of making such a contribution?
In order to answer this question, it is necessary to take a closer look at the different variables involved in the complex process of what we call ‘doing theology’. Reception theory has helped us to understand that audiences (or ‘publics’ in Tracy’s terms) are indeed important, but that many other factors influence the process of communication. After discussing the various audiences on the receiving end of theology, we also have to consider the subject or subjects involved, and the different modes or forms in which theological discourse takes place.

Publics

David Tracy’s distinction between the three major publics of theology (the academy, the church, and society at large), has not only clarified the issue, but is also marks a new phase in the discussion of a complex problem (cf Tracy 1981:1-46). Historically speaking, the position of theology at the university is a disputed one (cf Lategan 1993), with variations in different contexts (cf Harvey 1989, Kaufmann 1991, Heckel 1986, Baumgartner 1991, Wirsching 1991, Meuleman 1991, de Gruchy 1986). Theology is exposed, or ‘made public’, in the critical environment of the university in a specific way. Due to the demand for rationality in this context, the emphasis is on cognitive criteria of coherence, and the ideals of inter-subjective validity (cf Tracy 1990:3-4). In America, the constitutional separation between church and state, reinforced by a series of court cases (cf Clark 1990), made the teaching of theology at university, but especially in public schools, a bone of considerable contention. This contributed in a large measure to what is experienced as the marginalisation of theology (cf Farley 1983 and 1988, Kitagawa 1992, Long 1990, Harvey 1989). In other countries the situation may be different (cf Kaufmann 1991, Meuleman 1991), but there are also some marked similarities. This complex problem has lost none of its urgency. In the present South African transition, religion as a field of study at universities, but also in schools, once again has become an important issue. Because of the prominence of African religions in this context, the debate has taken on new and very interesting dimensions, which unfortunately cannot be discussed here in further detail.

The second public, that of the church or the believing community, demands different ways of speaking and different ways in doing theology (cf Kelsey 1990, Farley 1982:183-191). But, although this seems to have the nature of an in-house conversation, there is a very specific and distinct ‘public’ dimension to this discourse. According to Tracy, the basis for this communality is some aspect of
shared of human experience. This is specifically inherent in the foundational documents of the church, which lend to them ‘classical’ status. Although rooted in a very particular context, these texts have a disclosive power, ‘speaking to a potentially universal audience, because it expresses, through its very intensified particularity, some aspect of a shared human experience’ (Conradie 1993:34).

For the purposes of this paper, our attention will be focused on the third public which theology addresses (or should address) - society at large. In context of a society in transition, this public is of critical importance. It is the acid test for the contribution many are expecting theology to make and which theology itself is claiming to be able to make. However important other tasks and challenges for theology might be, this is the terrain which, to a large extent, will determine its future and the role it is likely to play in a new and fundamentally different society.

Taking the third public seriously, makes a critical analysis of this public, but also of its social location, essential. Reception theory has made us aware of the important role which audiences play in making successful communication possible. Audiences are not passive receptors, but active participants in a process of interactive exchange. The typology of readers also apply to the third public. What readers make up this public? Informed readers, like policy makers? ‘Ordinary readers’, who may be the marginalised and powerless part of the third public? Resistant readers, who are deeply suspicious of theology and especially of its intrusion in the public sphere?

The typology and social location of the third public are therefore important issues which require the tools and insights of social analysis to prepare the way for successful theological discourse in this context. In order to do this, we first have to take notice of the other variables in the equation.

Subjects

Tracy’s focus on the different audiences of theology, therefore, fits in very well with central concepts of reception theory, and has indeed opened the way to apply these insights in a much more extensive way. But in order to do this, the differentiation in terms of audiences must also be extended to subjects. In the discussion of a public theology, ‘theology’ is used in a much too monolithic and undifferentiated way. Who are the exponents and formulators of this theology? Who do we expect to be the subject(s) of a public theology? Are we talking about the organised church in its official capacity, which in concrete terms would mean that synodical decisions, policy statements, or official documents form the
substance of such a theology? Are we referring to the work of a prominent theologian or theologians, like Niebuhr, Tracy, Kelsey, or others, who are specifically engaged in this debate? Or is the recently discovered ‘ordinary believer’ the real subject of a public theology? Empirical research, again illustrated at this conference by the contribution of Van der Ven from Nijmegen, indicates that these ordinary believers do not believe the way they are supposed to believe. Church members hold views quite different from, and even contrary to, basic elements of the official position. And yet, it is this ‘ordinary believer’ who more than anybody else finds him- or herself in the public arena and at the cutting edge where issues demanding a theological input or a value judgment are decided. It is an exposed position where the protection of the cloth and the advantage of the home turf in the form of the moral high ground is not available. It is in the cut and thrust of this environment where representatives of the official position are not present that, out of necessity, a theology of sorts takes shape. The need is not only a reactive one, aimed at making sense and surviving in an often hostile environment, but also a challenge to pro-actively influence and shape life in the public sphere. To respond successfully to this challenge, the mode in which theology is done becomes a critical issue.

Modes of doing theology

The third variable is the mode or style in which theology is done by the various subjects in order to communicate with various publics. Variations in subject and public is accompanied with variations in mode. Burkhalter distinguishes between four modes of discourse. These modes formed part of a heuristic model developed to address the differentiation assumed in the praxis of religious studies. This was the result of an intense debate on the restructuring of religious education organised by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1986. Although focused on the needs of religious education, the distinction is also useful for our purpose (cf Burkhalter 1990:150-151):

(1) The discourse of the believer, expressed in worship and practice. The mode is affirmative, articulated in ritual, myth, and symbol. The style is spontaneous, emotive, uncritical (or rather, pre-critical).

(2) The discourse of second-order reflection within the tradition itself. Remaining within the broader outlines of the tradition, the mode is one of discovering, interpreting, clarifying, redefining, and identifying. The form might be that of theological or philosophical reflection, credal statements or codes of order or conduct. Essentially, it is an in-house activity.
The discourse of the academic and the university. Employing the critical tools of the Enlightenment sciences, the mode is one of detached analysis, critical evaluation, and the exploring of alternative possibilities.

The discursive practice of the student. This discourse cuts across the other modes and seeks to integrate them in a way that is personally meaningful and communally relevant.

The modes useful for religious education can be supplemented by yet further variations, for example:

Apologetics, where the mode is one of defending ‘truth claims’ in a wide variation of styles which could be persuasive, judgmental, confrontational, prescriptive or divisive.

Proclamation, in the style of propounding, positing, and claiming - not very suitable for the purposes of engagement and dialogue.

The prophetic mode, usually in the form of witnessing and speaking out without fear or favour. Precisely because the prejudices and sensitivities of the audience are not taken into account, this is also a mode not congenial to dialogue.

Of considerable importance for our theme is the further distinction which Gustafson (1988) adds to the prophetic, narrative, and ethical modes of moral discourse. He calls this ‘policy discourse’, aimed at formulating a particular course of action about quite specific issues. The subject of this discourse is not so much the moralist or the theologian, but ‘accountable agents with certain powers and limits of power’ (Gustafson 1988:50). This is exactly the focus of the present study. We shall return to this in the final section.

ADDRESSING THE THIRD PUBLIC IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Against the background of the variables discussed in the previous section, we can now look at how the third public can, and should, be addressed in the South African context. However, the situation is not without difficulties, because of theology’s past history in the public sphere.

Factors rendering public discourse ineffective

There are several factors impeding the development of an effective public theology in the South African context. First of all, we are dealing with a mixed
legacy. On the one hand, there is the extremely negative and deeply disturbing experience of a previous attempt to shape public life according to theological principles - the disastrous experiment in social engineering in the form of the apartheid state, stoutly defended on theological grounds by some, presented as based on ‘Christian-national’ principles. For many, this has discredited all further attempts at developing a public theology. Ironically, the reaction of some of the prominent exponents of an apartheid theology was to withdraw from public life (‘the church must never again meddle in politics’) and to retreat to the perceived safe haven of private religion (for similar tendencies elsewhere, cf Conradie 1993:27).

On the other hand, there is the tradition of resistance theology in various forms of liberation theology, which for a long time was an important stronghold in the struggle against apartheid. It participated very effectively in the public sphere in the mode of resistance, protest, and even confrontation. The genre of The Kairos Document is that of a prophetic witness against the (public) powers of the day. It exemplified a specific style in which the public debate was conducted - a style that has lost none of its importance or relevance. And yet, the question remains whether the time has not come to consider other modes of doing theology in the public sphere in order to remain effective in this debate. In his latest book, Villa-Vicencio (1992) makes a plea for the transformation of resistance theology onto a theology of reconstruction, in order to restore the humanity of the post-apartheid era and to assist the process of nation building. The question then becomes: What style or mode would suit this way of doing theology best?

It is not only the local situation and the legacy of South Africa’s past which frustrate the development of an effective public theology. The problem is more universal in nature, as illustrated by the so-called ‘Chicago-Yale debate’. It is not the intention to go into the substance of this debate. For that purpose, the reader is referred to the excellent article by Conradie (1993), of which I shall be making extensive and grateful use. I only want to illustrate how an inappropriate mode of doing theology can still inhibit serious and well-conceived attempts to develop an alternative approach. The Chicago-Yale debate deals, in essence, with two approaches to a public way of doing theology. Tracy, as the most prominent exponent of the Chicago school, is deeply concerned with the public nature of theology in all three publics he distinguishes. Dialogue and persuasion, and therefore some form of rationality, are important in all spheres. However, the nature of publicness may differ from public to public, requiring different strategies in each case. ‘The public defence of theological truth claims therefore requires, for Tracy, a particular form of rationality and a particular set of criteria for rationality in each of the three publics of theology’ (Conradie 1993:35). In the case of the third public, the transformative potential of any theological truth
claim is critically assessed, and the consequences of Christian action and beliefs are evaluated. In order to be convincing, truth claims cannot merely be redescribed, but need some basis of agreement and some measure of universality with those outside the faith community.

It is exactly this attempt to be universal and convincing on the basis of common rationality that led the so-called Yale school to opt for an ‘intra-textual’ approach to a public way of doing theology. Whereas Tracy gives preference to the modes of explaining and justifying, they concentrate on describing the way in which Christian truth claims function within a particular faith community (Conradie 1993:37). In terms of the Wittgensteinian concept of language games, the integrity of the language of the specific community is to be respected. The interests of such a community are best served by a sensitive and empathetic description of the rules of the language and how they function in that community.

Although there are clear differences between the more ‘extroverted’ approach of the Chicago school and the more ‘introverted’ attitude of their Yale counterparts, the preoccupation with the ‘truth claims’ of Christianity and their defence remains. The concern of the Yale school is that the attempt to render Christian beliefs universally, and therefore publicly, accessible by translating them into categories more familiar and congenial to the public sphere, can only lead to the loss of the specifically Christian or theological character of such discourse (Conradie 1993:38). The implication is that Christian truth claims should rather be described within their own frame of reference if one is to serve their persuasive power and if they are to have any value outside the community of faith (Conradie 1993:40).

Tracy appreciates the value of such an intra-textual approach, but does not believe that it will produce the desired result in the public sphere. He therefore insists ‘that we should not only describe the truths claims of the Christian tradition accurately, but should also proceed to assess how what we believe through our religious tradition coheres or does not cohere with what we otherwise know, practice, and believe’ (Conradie 1993:41).

What interests us here is not the respective merits of the two approaches, but to see how strongly the focus is still on preserving the integrity of the Christian faith, albeit by following different routes. This is directly linked to the mode chosen to preserve this integrity or vindicate the truth claims of theology. In essence, the third public is engaged in the mode of apologetics - be it apologetics proper or so-called ‘ad hoc apologetics’. The forms in which this apologetics is conducted may differ widely - from the purist position, which states bluntly that the best form of apologetics is good dogma (cf Conradie 1993:40), to much more
subtle and accommodating forms of discourse. Accordingly, different modes are also employed, ranging from description, explanation, and justification (cf Conradie 1993:37). Even when Tracy insists that although Christianity has its own terms, rules, and methods, these can be translated into the conceptual universe of any reasonable person who is genuinely open to the subject of conversation (cf Conradie 1993:41), the presupposition remains that the task consists of the translation of a given entity in some publicly accessible form. However desirable this translation may be, a fundamental condition is that the integrity of the belief system is not violated in the process. Furthermore, the aim is to demonstrate the reasonableness of the truth claims of theology. This is an end in itself, not the first step in a further process.

The supporting role of other modes of theological discourse

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, it must be clearly stated that the intention of this proposal is neither the replacement of existing modes of discourse by a 'superior' form, nor the devaluation of alternative modes. The argument is, rather, one of 'horses for courses'. The suitability and effectiveness of a particular discourse are in direct relation to the purpose for which it is employed. But more than that, the different modes of discourse play a supporting role in relation to each other. Intra-textual analysis, rediscovery of the tradition, reformulation and re-affirmation of dogma, describing the world of the text in its own terms, narrating the story of Biblical texts for their own sake, explaining and defending the truth claims of theology, prophetic resistance and confrontation, uncompromising witnessing, and apologetics of a more subtle or a more aggressive kind, all have their validity and function. The issue is to take into account which public one is dealing with, and to decide on which mode or modes would be suitable for that purpose. Furthermore, the more clarity that can be obtained in the context of the second public regarding the nature and content of faith propositions, the more effectively the discourse with the third public can be conducted. The different modes are complementary to each other and should be valued for their supportive contribution.

The need for a different type of discourse

Nonetheless, the need still exists for a different type of discourse to respond to the challenge and opportunity now presenting itself in the South African context. Alongside the modes of critical analysis and of prophetic witness and resistance, there is also the need to contribute to the establishment of a new public ethos in civil society - an ethos where theology and Christianity will not necessarily have a privileged position. This will require theology to move beyond its preoccupation with itself, beyond being concerned primarily with the validity of its own
truth claims, beyond its defensive attitude, beyond its experience of marginalisation and its resignation of not being able to influence civil society. But in order to be effective, this further step in the context of the third public will also require a change of style. It is important to spell out what the main characteristics of this style should be.

PROPOSAL FOR AN INTERACTIVE, CONSTRUCTIVE MODE OF THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE IN THE PUBLIC ARENA

What is being proposed arises from the attempt, in various forms, to develop a value system in the context of civil society that will support the transition to an inclusive, democratic dispensation in South Africa. As already pointed out, it is critical that changes in political structures and constitutional arrangements are accompanied and informed by a change in value system in order to establish a new public ethos in the country. Various projects of the Centre for Contextual Hermeneutics related to voter education and education for democracy have underlined the need for concentrated attention to the issue of values. Cooperation with participants from the public sector, and more specifically, the Stellenbosch Economic Project in collaboration with the Department of Economics, aimed at investigation of aspects of a post-apartheid economy, has stimulated the discussion of values in a non-theological environment. The invitation to develop common values on a Western Transvaal gold mine, a totally secular setting, provided a unique opportunity to participate in a discourse not from a privileged and protected theological position, but which nonetheless generated values compatible with basic theological concepts. The important point was that these values were not formulated in theological, but 'secular' language and illustrated the need for, and possibility of, a discourse of a completely different nature. The plea is, therefore, to move beyond what is conventionally understood as theological discourse and to explore the possibilities of a form of language that is not primarily interested in preserving the integrity of theology, but to serve a wider cause. The leading question for this purpose is not, How do we defend Christian truth claims? but, What contribution can theology make to the process of developing and establishing a new public ethos?

What is proposed here, comes close to what Gustafson (1988:45) calls 'policy discourse' - a discourse 'which seeks to recommend or prescribe quite particular courses of action about quite specific issues'. As we have already seen, it is a discourse conducted in the public arena with the focus on concrete issues, within the constraints of the possible. It has the added dimension of taking responsibility for what is proposed in this discourse, and therefore demands accountability. Gustafson points out that it is a discourse not conducted 'by external
observers, but by the persons who have the responsibility to make choices and
to carry out the actions that are required by the choices' (1988:46).

For such a discourse to succeed, very specific characteristics are required. Firstly,
it needs to be non-prescriptive. Theology and theologians tend to be judgmental
in their approach - listening to different positions and then declaring what is
good or bad - with clear instructions on what should be done. The attitude
should rather be one of joint discovery, allowing parties in the public debate to
participate on their own terms and articulate from their own experience and
perspective - letting issues and formulations emerge before directing and
confining the discourse.

This implies, secondly, that the style needs to be inclusive, that is, open to the
flow of ideas, to the new and unexpected, but also concerned that all possible
contributions are considered and included. In the South African context, it means
the ability to draw from the many and diverse traditions which form part of the
public scene and to enrich the discourse in the process. A Western, humanistic
tradition stands to gain from an African understanding of humanity, and vice
versa, but this presupposes an inclusive approach to public discourse.

Thirdly, an interactive, participatory style of discourse is required, not one
developed in the artificial and protected environment of the ‘own group’, where
stereotypes are neither exposed nor corrected. It implies the willingness, not to
claim a privileged position for theology, but to become vulnerable, and to be
challenged.

Fourthly, in order to be effective in a pluralistic public environment it requires
a discourse that gives evidence of hermeneutical competence. This not only
implies bi- or multilingual skills (Bellah - cf Conradie 1993:44), that is, familiarity
with different discourses, but also the ability to move between these discourses
and to mediate and interpret the issues as they are expressed and experienced
in different contexts (cf Bauman 1987 for an extensive analysis of the issue).

Theological discourse in the public sphere cannot succeed if it is conducted in
a dominating, or self-centred, way, pre-occupied with its own concerns. Hence,
fifthly, it needs to adopt a serving mode, losing and transcending itself to become
liberated in service to the other.

Without denying the importance of resistance and protest, public discourse,
sixthly, needs to be constructive in the sense of a willingness to reach out, to
build, to take responsibility, and to jointly map out a possible course of action.
Finally, theology needs to transcend itself in the sense that it becomes *anonymous*, or 'secular' - a discourse no longer formulated in recognisable theological language (cf Tracy 1989:198 on the issue of camouflaged language), but effectively translating theological concepts in a public discourse accessible to participants from other discourses, and in a form that is genuinely 'public'.

In this way, theology has much to learn from but also much to give to the development of a functional public ethos and a healthy civil society. It is an un- or underdeveloped area, crucial to what is now happening in the country, and worthy of serious attention.
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INTRODUCTION: WHY THE THEME?

We find ourselves in a time of negotiation about power, where terms such as power shifts, power sharing, loss of power and seizing of power have become part of our everyday conversation. With the transition from a power-based state to a constitutionally-based state there is also a change in our perception of power. With the proposed bill of human rights envisaged for the first time in this country people will be equal, at least juridically, and will claim the same rights and thus claim that they have the same power. This paper wants to rethink the importance of power as a positive entity, the intricacies involved with identifying, evaluating and distributing power, the possibility of effective empowerment of people, the negative evaluation and simultaneous misuse of power by the church and theology, the Bible and power and the possibility of a sound hermeneutics of power.

THE MULTI-DIMENSIONALITY OF POWER

Power is a positive precondition for life

Power is given with life, how limited that life form may be. Power is present and active everywhere in different guises. It does not simply reside in a single person,
dominant idea or model. Power is entrenched in all spheres of life. It is an integral part of us, like our language. We are determined by power and use power although we may not be aware of the power strategies which we adopt and the ways in which power plays a role in interactions and decision making.

One could give many definitions of power without really coming to grips with the term. Defining power may already be seen as a power strategy. Power is all-pervasive and multidimensional. It may be experienced positively as love, the good, security, enabling power, protecting authority and the like. Yet it may be experienced as negative, as oppression, manipulation, degradation, exploitation, as lack and so on. Power is seen as neutral and neither good nor bad. It depends on human action and interaction, on human relationships to define power. Power is such a broad term that it cannot be anything definite. The word ‘power’ actually functions as a multivalent metaphor which acquires a new meaning in every different context.

Power, in its positive and negative dimensions is part of the human condition, fundamental to our existence. The issue of being is identical to the issue of power (Mörchen 1980:28). The more powerful a life process is the more able it is to absorb or overcome non-being. Thus the ‘power to be’ or power of ‘being’ can be set against ‘non-being’ (see Balcomb 1993:171).

Power is everywhere and manifests in different ways

Power can be identified and indicated, but never limited to any specific appearance because it has so many forms. The identity of power is an open identity which changes continuously.

Power is vested in interest groups, in certain persons, institutions, the owners of the means of production, persons of a certain class, sex, or race. This has a determining effect on our culture. It affects language, literature, the interpretation of sacred texts, the substance of religious doctrines, national customs, regional superstitions, academic theologies, and political ideologies.

This multi-dimensionality makes it difficult to always recognise the more subtle manifestations and workings of power, especially where it is misused.

No one can escape the influence of power. The exercise of power determines the system of belief that undergirds the intelligibility and legitimacy of a social order at any given time in a society. This remains the case until this power is challenged by other powers. This makes the recognition of power misuse vitally important.
Misuse of power through the disguise of power

We are seldom confronted with blatant, naked power. Power is usually intentionally or unintentionally camouflaged. It can appear in different guises: in reversed form as manipulative inability; in overpowering ways as enforced truth and provable facts; sentimentally as tradition; intimidating as superstition. For the one in authority it is important that his power remains hidden as far as possible. What is hidden is not criticised or desired by opponents aspiring for or challenging the same power.

Most of the time hidden power is surplus power. Surplus power is the claim which is made on privileges and advantages to which you are not entitled, but which is claimed in the name of the common good or claimed as part of your mandate. So we find parents abusing their children in the name of strict education, the defence services violating human rights and keeping important information from us for the sake of ‘our safety’, educationists taking one-sided decisions on curricula according to biased and ideological viewpoints, medical doctors ruling out alternative types of medicine as they do not tie in with their world view, ministers deciding in the name of ultimate authority on the lifestyle and ethics fit for their members, and so on.

The power which is displayed openly is not necessarily the power which threatens. The deliberate display of power intends either to frighten off opponents or to give security to adherents (cf military parades). An open power display is frequently the visible symbol of the ideology which underlies it. However, it is the hidden and inarticulate power which subtly undermines. This hidden, surplus power is not taken into consideration by the persons subjected to it and it gives the one in authority an unforeseen advantage. In the case of unseen power, there is normally not a prepared counterforce for the unforeseen escalation of power.

A critique of the abuse of power

Depending on the social and cultural environment, you may be more or less inclined to criticise power. Christians are often taught to yield to the powers that have been set above them. The one in authority (government, parent, educationist, minister, priest, etc) is often identified with God. The Christian view of the state as instituted by God implies that we are being governed according to God’s will. The power of the state is experienced as at work and present everywhere, which enhances the perception of the divine nature of the state. The authority/state is experienced as a mystic entity which cannot be challenged. We thus find that a constant power critique is sadly lacking.
When power critique does occur it is often fashionable and harmless. We tend, for instance, to concentrate on only a few scapegoats who function as an exculpation for so many other persons or groups misusing power. If everyone is condemning the scapegoat then there is no risk in jumping the bandwagon. And eventually public power criticism becomes a fashionable and harmless topic in which everyone participates without any effect. In this way the manipulating effect of some power strategies in, for example, teaching, defence, and religion goes unnoticed as no one dares to scrutinise these areas for power misuse. Over against this fashionable societal critique stands the prophet who seemingly does not abide by the rules and who raises unpopular and uncomfortable questions. He or she is the person who unmasks ineffective symbols and misleading rhetoric. This person ostensibly speaks prematurely and acts out of turn but is indispensable to counter the ever-changing working of power.

POWER TO ALL: THE POSSIBILITY OF POWER SHARING

The best way to counter power misuse is to distribute power as evenly as possible. But it is not so easily distributed and shared. Power is not always measurable quantitatively, nor is it substantial like a cake which can be cut up and shared.

Attaining perfectly balanced power relations is not only impossible, it may also be counterproductive as power imbalances generate a dynamic society. A perfect balance of power implies a stalemate situation where no consensus is ever possible and nothing could be decided on. A perfect balance of power, ironically implies a state of anarchy. In the end, after much discussion on whatever issue, we must take a decision so that life (our work) can continue. On the other hand the rocking of the boat must be possible. It implies that power relations should never be totally out of balance.

Power itself is not evil. If it is so that too much power spoils the character, then too little power does so too. Promoting a well-balanced distribution of power pre-supposes people who want power and who are able to use power and integrate it in a well-balanced manner into their lives. They must also be prepared to share power, and to accept that another may earn more power by harder work and so on. The option to simply disregard the possibility of the attainment of power for all, or imagine people not interested in power strategies would be to take the vigour out of life. To simply allow the powerful to have their way, misleading people with rhetoric and ideology, would be to wilfully surrender the lamb to the wolf. People must be sensitised to criticise power and attain as much as possible power for themselves.
Because power is experienced in interpersonal relationships, individual's perceptions and strategies of power remain important. Balance in this respect means power is not a fixed entity which can be divided, but a state of mind where I grant you the power that I want for myself. I can only have power and be free if you have power and are free. Equality of power is a prerequisite for a credible relationship or interpersonal interaction. People should be custodians of each other's powerfulness to ensure the continuation of healthy relationships. As we all know, it is not easy to arrive at this situation of power equilibrium. Rather, people strive to force ahead in the race for power, to undermine each other's powerfulness, and to use their power advantage to their own benefit.

Eliminate power and you eliminate life. We cannot proclaim freedom to all without really trying to empower all. The establishment of the long outstanding charter for human rights must be followed by a programme enabling people to claim and experience these rights. The ideal is for each person to have the most power possible at his/her disposal in order to live his/her life to the full. With the overall promotion of power, power monopolies may be kept at bay and power disseminated over a broader spectrum.

A HERMENEUTICS OF POWER?

It is a question whether a trustworthy hermeneutics of power is possible. The function of a hermeneutics of power is to indicate the power strategies present in institutions, ideologies and lifestyles. To combat the misuse of power and to promote an awareness of the indirect influence of power, we must foster a societal hermeneutics of suspicion that unmasksthe rhetoric of normality and probes beneath the surface to expose the true forces at work in the world (see Abraham 1990:20). This of course is not so easy. We are often not aware of all the forces at work in society and in personal interaction. We have grown accustomed to power structures and institutions in society, their claims and manoeuvres, without questioning them. Accumulating power is often appraised positively. Power accumulation is also part of a capitalist mentality, which urges people to attain as much power as possible in a free-market atmosphere.

The aim of developing a hermeneutics of power is to enable all to critically read the societal text. Societal text criticism is an imperative to any free society. A hermeneutics of power could indicate imbalances in the power game and make suggestions for the positive and stimulating use of power. Therefore everyone must learn to enhance his or her power and use it without disadvantaging the other.
One of the best ways in which such a hermeneutics of power operates is the narrative. These stories display the familiar world of abuse of power, oppression, humiliation and degradation that so many people experience everyday. They may also parade as history, indicating that reality may be more hideous than fiction.

Part of developing a hermeneutics of power is to give attention to language and rhetoric. Power is expressed particularly in language. The words we choose to use in discourse can subtly favour a certain position. Language is seen as gender exclusive when there is not sufficient reference to the female sex. The terminology used in a theological writing can be condemned if it favours a specific theology, view or ideology (e.g. the process theology, liberation theology, evolutionism, Marxism). Language is perceived as green (ecology), black (liberation theology), red (neo-Marxism) and so on. Good rhetoric demands the careful selection of words to exert optimal influence. Apart from the language used, the context which co-determines the terminology used must be taken into account. Discourse can never be totally free and neutral. Those who dictate the terms of discourse dictate the lines the argument will follow. This goes for church talk as well as academic talk. A hermeneutics of power can show how our harmless rationalisations, our symbols and common-sense arguments, our theologies and eschatologies are invested with power strategies and abuse.

Church talk (rhetoric) works with essentialist ideas and thus uses essentialist words. But is all meaning not radically contingent? Talk about truth, justice, love, human nature and so on, is meaningless unless we embed those terms in a context and recognise that the context keeps shifting. As contexts shift, so do meanings (Satin 1989:227). Church rhetoric may create the impression that the church cares for the poor and powerless, while nothing is really done to alleviate the need. This rhetoric is thus a disguise for peoples' lack of empathy or will to really help and empower the other. So often people need the example of other persons' powerlessness, to comfort themselves in their own position of relative powerlessness. The powerlessness of blacks under apartheid rule gave many whites a feeling of self esteem and power.

THE BIBLE AND POWER: AN EXAMPLE FROM THE WISDOM LITERATURE

The Bible plays a very important part in people's perception of power. Striving for power is often seen as sin. Power imbalances are often not queried, social circumstances where people are misused are often considered normal (slavery) and so on. The attainment of power is spiritualised and transposed to the eschatological dimension. The Bible exerts a tremendous influence on our values,
mode of thinking, sense of power and social relations. It may occur in a very subtle form as in the case of proverbs which are used as an example. Like proverbs church dogmatics and Christian ethics must be deconstructed so as to answer the question whether it really sets us free to empower others or whether it is used to justify our style of living and self-concerned ethics.

Proverbs can be seen as a very subtle form of social control. Jacobson (1990:75ff) mentions the following: Proverbs have a cognitive function and are based on experience. Experience is seen by all as authoritative. It is queried by no one. That is why proverbs don’t invite argument, but conclude argument. ‘Truths’ based on experience are normally recognised by all, and cannot be dismissed or questioned. Part of the strategy of the proverb is to sound authoritative. The appeal to what everyone knows to be true is only the presupposition for the effectiveness of the proverb. The real key to how a proverb works is that it reframes the current situation. It is done in such a way that the hearer has no option but to heed it. The point of proverb usage is, through verbal skill, to manipulate the behaviour or attitude of people, maintains Jacobson (1990:81).

A proverb can be seen as a specific kind of admonition, preoccupied with behaviour. Proverbs consist of a topic and a comment upon it, typically in a binary construction. They leave no option open for any alternative viewing of the situation. It is always delightful to hear a proverb because of factors such as meter, rhyme, assonance, striking phraseology and so on. Thus we are entertained and manipulated simultaneously.

The place given to proverbs may differ from community to community, but all communities have their proverbs and most people are to some extent influenced by and manipulated by them.

This mild form of intimidation in proverbs is characteristic of many other genres, and often the intimidation factor is not so mild. But this poses no problem to the church. The church wants to intimidate and change people’s lives. Everyone must conform to the one and only truth and our interpretation thereof. Truth is power. We follow Christ to whom was given all power. The church is the mediator of this power to the world. But how does the church administer this power? Often not to empower people, but to empower the church itself. The church is the watchdog of society, but who is the watchdog of the church?

THE POWER OF RELIGION

The attraction of a religion depends on the power it promises. Christian religion deals pre-eminently with power. It promises power, criticises power, misuses
power. There is talk of the power of the blood, the power of prayer, the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. In the typical corpus christianum the influence of religion is omnipresent and we are covered by religion from the cradle to the grave. Religious rhetoric uses guilt, fear, the uncertainty of people, the wish to influence and manipulate God, and so on to tie members to the church, its policies, politics and programmes. The power strategies of Christianity are ostensibly innocent.

Christianity is imperialistically orientated. There is only one truth to which all must bow and this truth must be spread all over the world, no matter what the consequences may be for non-western, indigenous cultures. This is naturally not exclusive to Christianity and is innate to many other religions.

Church power does not only influence people and cultures outside the church; it subdues church members themselves. The power of the church frequently rests in the weakness (dependence) of its members. The church works with people in their moments of weakness. The grip which religion can have on people when they are terminally ill, when their business is in the balance, when people are simply weak, is well known. Our sympathy lies mainly with the weak and oppressed, the suffering and rejected - and possibly because their weakness gives us a form of power over them - even if it is only the power to be a saviour, or a father, for them.

Religion can indeed make people independent, but can also bind them to the church, to norms which are never queried, to social involvement with selfish interests in mind, to a stifling morality. Instill fear strongly enough and you have your followers in your hand; suggest that you hold the key to success, and they follow you; make the church the doorway to social acceptance and everyone comes to you. We all know the power of tradition to which all must adhere. No matter whether a dogma is totally outdated and appeals no more, it must be kept alive in our presence. The statues of the past watch over the points of view of the present and censor everything which does not duplicate the past. In this way we are governed from the theological grave.

If the ‘final’ truth to which the church appeals doesn’t make sense there is always the option open of Tertullian’s credo quia absurdum est - I believe because it is ridiculous - that is to say, in the eyes of the world. God’s wisdom is foolishness to the world, the cross is a scandal, the beatitudes nonsense. So often the church and theology tend to oversimplify matters for the sake of dogma, a unitary theory, or their ethical tradition. All societal cross currents, all ethical friction, everything unresolved and uncertain is interpreted in the light of some master narrative, to protect the tradition and lifestyle to which the church is accustomed.
Church talk is often characterised by the tendency to smooth down and harmonise all events, by a binary way of thinking, and static cliches. This is a power strategy. Everything is interpreted to make sense, especially if it doesn't. We do explain events by natural causes, if it is possible, understandable and suits us. As soon as events become more difficult to interpret, or when we encounter resistance to our interpretation, we add power to our assertions by transcendental explanations. God's guiding hand is seen in all events, everything works for our own good.

The mobility of religious power comes to the fore in the shift from the immanent to the transcendent (and vice versa), depending on where religion fits into the social power structure. The transcendent abilities of religion hold the secret of its survival. When religion is subjected to stronger earthly powers, the hope at the end is strongly emphasised as the metaphor of liberation. When socio-political developments fit the view of a specific theology these developments may be interpreted as the establishment of the kingdom of God.

A POWER THEOLOGY VERSUS A THEOLOGY OF WEAKNESS?

(Western) theology has undergone fundamental power shifts. Theology has to a degree lost the power which it had. This concerns not only the influence the theologians and church policy exerted on the state and individual life but also developments within theology itself. This process is linked up with the ending of modernism, the end of the metaphysical era, and the objections against fundamentalism and absolutes (cf Mörchen 1980:44-49). In theology today there is a greater modesty about truth-claims, absolutes are deconstructed, theologies and religion are seen as coordinated and a multiplicity of views, methods, and styles are emphasised. Theological thoughts have become inescapably hermeneutic while truth keeps calling for interpretation. Truth sacrifices its exclusivity to multiplicity and can no longer work with the old dualistic differentiation of truth-lie (Groot 1988:693).

For many, power theology has become the theology since the Second World War. Power forms the basis of liberation theology which struggles for the powerless. The power issue is inherent in feminist theology, ecology, ethics and so forth. But twentieth century theology is simultaneously a weakness theology, which proves how similar they are. Moltmann's suffering God and liberation theology (using both power and weakness) are good examples.

A power theology actually mirrors a weakness theology. Power and weakness are not really opposites. Power is as clearly present in Jesus as in Paul, and in Paul as in Nietzsche. The effectiveness of the different forms of power (or weakness)
can be evaluated anthropologically by observing how it really empowered people within their different contexts.

Weakness is not without its power. Jesus' sayings in the beatitudes were meant to empower the powerless and timid people of his day. The meek, poor, persecuted, dependent and so on were declared happy in so far as Jesus bestowed on them a different kind of power. He established an environment where people were accepted and the expulsion laws of society were overruled. He empowered them with the hope of the Kingdom of God when they were politically subdued. Jesus used the dynamic potential of weakness and thus of dependency (feelings of guilt, poverty, people ostracised from society, political dependence) to bind them to God and a new order where they could experience freedom through acceptance and power through love.

The power of the weak lies frequently in the will to impede the powerful. The weak are also strong and the strong weak. This appears particularly in the Pauline weakness theory 'when I am weak then I am strong'. The weakness theology of Paul is simply a power theology - a theology which only defines power and weakness differently. Paul uses the term weakness to support his theological argument. Paul changes a negative term (weakness, foolishness, servitude etc) into a positive one. In this way weakness is one of the greatest signs of apostleship because Paul brings it in line with the suffering and weakness of Christ. He sees the greatest revelation of divine power in the weakness of Jesus Christ, in particular on the cross. God wants to reveal his power through the weakness of people. He chooses the weak to shame the strong and to teach them that they too are weak. By his crucifixion Christ showed that God's weakness is stronger than the power and strength of people.

Church talk promises power to the weak. If you believe, and follow the rules of faith, you will be rewarded in future. If you are prepared to lose your life, you will win it, the last will be first, societal positions will be revolutionised. All these promises are connected with power. The problem is only that this empowerment is postponed and seldom fulfilled. In Psalm 37, for instance, it is the meek who are promised the land, although they seldom get it. However, these promises ensure the survival of the weak because it gives them hope. In spite of so many power theologies, the church has not always succeeded in empowering the weak. Churches are often very selective in their choices when siding with the weak. Many issues are ignored and only those fit for the church hierarchy are addressed. The power and weakness talk of the church and theology is symbolic and metaphoric. It must be deconstructed to show if it really empowers people, to indicate the selectiveness in empowering only some, to emphasise the negligence of important societal issues and so on.
A theology of power is hermeneutically bound to a continuous exposition of power. It has the task of empowering everyone so that it can be said that power is not everything, but everyone has power. The redistribution of power implies a redistribution of truth, accepting that the same human needs can be articulated and addressed in different ways. The redistribution of power implies a recognition of the culturally bound nature of our ethical systems. But how is this to be done, what are the norms and directives? Are new answers not simply new power strategies? Do consensus theology, reconciliation and empowerment imply a middle of the road position?

THE CHURCH AND POWER: CRITIQUE OF THE THIRD WAY THEOLOGY

Balcomb (1993:150ff) criticises a middle of the road option, where the church and individuals try to reconcile differing political or other interest groups. He fears that such initiatives will not really empower the powerless and that it must simply be seen as a mechanism by which the powerful retain their power. According to him promoters of the third way theology usually have political and economic interests in a stable society and their interests are best served in a situation where there must be as much reform as possible and as little disturbance to the socioeconomic infrastructure as possible. This involves discrediting the politics of both right and left, whose agendas tend to destabilise the economy (Balcomb 1993:165).

Protagonists of the third way view power negatively (Balcomb 1993:163). Power is seen as the antithesis of spirituality. The real power is not the power of people but that of Jesus. The third way paradigm sees conflict, violence, liberation, and suppression to be related and sees in it a contradiction to peace, reconciliation, forgiveness and repentance (Balcomb 1993:155,159,161). This ‘innocence’, displayed in the disavowal of power, is an unconscious psychological defence mechanism pushing aside the painful knowledge of one’s own complicity with violence (Balcomb 1993:165).

But is this third way approach unbiased? Balcomb doesn’t think so as these groups almost without exception end up by supporting the status quo organisation of power. The fact that people are part of the system implicate them in the power and privileges that the system offers or does not offer (Balcomb 1993:167).

Although Balcomb’s critique of third way theology must be welcomed, there are some difficulties. Atonement and consensus, love and an attitude of accommodation could be queried per se. His critique could be interpreted as fostering a
constant anti-establishment approach, whatever the establishment may look like. There exists no government on earth which can satisfy all opposing groups. Even democracy can be seen as a third way option as minority groups can once again take the place of the poor and oppressed. This approach gives an advantage to oppressed groups simply because they are oppressed. The question is who is to determine the norms according to which decisions can be made. Power struggles include difference in values, traditions, norms and the like, and these cannot always be negated or accommodated. The same process that toppled one power structure may be used to topple the next and so on.

What is true is that no one is totally neutral or unbiased. Preferences must be admitted and discussed. In the past especially the white churches refrained from getting involved in apartheid politics. As Balcomb suggested, this was without doubt, because the political status quo benefited them. One could rely upon these churches to gradually awake from this political ‘slumber’ and commence voicing their opinions on socio-political issues much stronger than in the past. However, we still do not live in an oppression-free society. Many people are still in dire need of the basic means to empower them to simply be. Churches and interest groups must be challenged to fight for the rights of the individual and to empower all. Empowerment must not simply be postponed to the eschatological end, but must be granted as far as possible to all so that a more human, tolerant and just society may be possible.
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Christian life is rooted in and takes its whole meaning from the person of Jesus called the Christ. Throughout the centuries, theologians and the faithful of the Christian community have endeavored both to answer the question put to Peter by Jesus ‘Who do people say I am?’ (Mark 8:28) and to phrase their response in ways that meet the needs of the people of their era and culture.

In our own day, the method and praxis of liberation theology, originating in Latin America, have become important tools with which to interpret the foundations and belief of Christian life. Our sisters and brothers in Latin America have aided the Christian community around the world to develop their own methods of theological reflection and analysis in relation to the situations of oppression and injustice which they experience. A very significant liberation theology is feminist theology, in which women are discovering their own voice in which to speak their understanding the Gospel and its meaning for humanity.

Feminist theologians are a diverse group but can be divided into two groups. The radical wing sees the Christian tradition as so sexist and patriarchal that it is irredeemable. The only morally respectable option is remove oneself from Christian belief and practice and to find in other traditions, such as the goddess tradition, a way of religious practice which is not intrinsically demeaning. This is the path chosen by Mary Daly in the United States, author of Beyond God the Father and other works.
Another approach is that of the reformists who recognise that the Christian tradition is indeed steeped in sexism and male-domination, but finds reason to hope that there are transforming and liberating elements within it. The women who are making major contributions to feminist theology today such as Anne Carr, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Johnson, Rosemary Ruether, and Sandra Schneiders stand on this reformist ground. This is also the perspective of womanist and African feminist theologians. Their pain is not less than that of the radical theologians, but their hope is rooted in the power of the Spirit of God to bring new things to birth out of the chaos and blood of the old.

Feminist theology arises out of the suffering of a particular group of people; that is, the women of the world, who comprise slightly more than one-half of humanity. Reflection on the situation of suffering of women reveals sexism as imbedded, not only in the structures of society, in for example, disparate wage scales for women and men doing the same kind of work, but within the Christian tradition itself. But the goal of feminist theology is not only to expose the raw wounds of sexism to the harsh light of understanding, but to use the resources of the Christian tradition in order to change the 'bad news', which women have always heard, to the full and true Good News of the Gospel. The vision which gives feminist theology its energy is that of a community of women and men who value, cherish, affirm, and support each other and each other's gifts while building a world and a church which reflects values of mutuality and reciprocity.

The critical principle of feminist theology is the value of the full humanity of women. Feminist analysis of the themes of Christian theology is based on this discernment principle as enunciated by Elizabeth Johnson: 'Whatever enables this to flourish is redemptive and is of God; whatever damages this is non-redemptive and contrary to God's intent' (1990:103).

THE CENTRAL QUESTION: CAN A MALE SAVIOR HELP WOMEN?

This is the key question of feminist Christology, as phrased by Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983:116). While we can talk about new ways to image Ultimate Mystery, such as God as mother, lover, friend (McFague 1987:78-87), the historical fact is that Jesus was incarnated as a male human being. This was part of his particularity, as was the fact that he was a Jew, spoke Aramaic, and learned the trade of a carpenter. The maleness of Jesus is problematic for several reasons. First, 'The gender of Jesus has been taken to be the mode or paradigm of what it means to be human' (Johnson 1990:107). In other words, the maleness of Jesus is assumed to reveal God as masculine, so that the only proper way to represent God is in images such as father, Lord, and shepherd. While
very few male theologians would today say that God is in fact male,² the pervasive sense that women absorb from their earliest days of catechesis is that men are closer to God because God is imaged as male.

Secondly, Jesus’ gender has been used together with the ‘fatherhood’ of God to justify patriarchy, the rule of the father over the family, and therefore the men over women and children. Patriarchy is pervasive throughout human cultures and has been the norm of relationships within the Christian Church. Thirdly, as Sandra Schneiders points out, ‘The masculinity of God and of Jesus has been used, in the practical sphere, to deny the likeness of women to God and to Christ and to exclude them from full participation in the life of the Church’ (1986:6). Here we meet the questions of women’s ministry, including that of ordination.

The stress on the maleness of Christ sends a clear message to women that to be male is to be closer to God than to be female. How then, ask feminist theologians, can a male savior offer the gift of salvation to women if women are not understood as equally imaging the divine mystery?

To argue that the Son of God became incarnate as a male human being because the Word is male is, strictly speaking, a heretical statement. This is so because the persons of the Trinity are distinguished in terms of relationship, not on the basis of gender. Schneiders cites Ambrose who stated that ‘Vir (male) is a name designating gender; gender however is attributed, not indeed to the divinity, but to the human nature’ (1986:51). The second person of the Trinity has been named in male terms because Jesus was male and not the other way around. The core of the tradition’s understanding of the Incarnation is the relationship between the humanity and divinity of Christ, not his gender.³

There is a tension in the tradition between the classical statement ‘What was not assumed was not saved’ and the misogynist statements of the Fathers of the Church and theologians down the ages. Women have been designated as the ‘devil’s gateway’ (Tertullian), as an incomplete image of God who only achieves completeness when joined with a male who is her head (Augustine), as a ‘misbegotten male’ by Aquinas (Johnson 1990:101).⁴ Although Genesis 2:27 clearly states that both women and men have been created in the image of God, the patriarchal view down the centuries has been that men are fully human while women have their ‘own proper nature’ which is assumed to be ‘different’ from man’s, implying and justifying subordination.⁵

However, women can only consider Jesus as Savior and respond to his invitation to the fullness of life if they recognise themselves (and are recognised by men)
as fully human. If we focus on the maleness of Jesus, as women we meet the 'other', the one who is different from us. Further, since men assume authority over women as literally their God-given right in society and the church, women meet a Christ who seems to embody that very dominating power which is so oppressive. Therefore, Ruether's question, 'Can a male savior help women?' is very problematic. However, reformist feminist theologians see that this is not the only answer, and that one is able to experience Christ as liberator for women.

A HERMENEUTICS OF LIBERATION

The role of hermeneutics in contemporary theological reflection is now well-established through the work of Gadamer, Habermas, and others.6 Fiorenza makes a very helpful distinction between a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and a 'hermeneutics of liberation'. She states that '... biblical texts and their interpretations are androcentric and serve patriarchal functions' (1984:15) because they were written by men and so reinforce patterns of male domination which form the basis of human relationships throughout history. Thus as we read the Gospels and ask the question, 'How did Jesus view women?' we are aware that men wrote these texts and interpreted the Gospel from their own perspective.

Yet it is in the Gospels and their description of Jesus' ministry, approach to people, and content of his preaching that we find a positive answer to our question. The Scriptures provide us with encouraging descriptions of Jesus' attitudes towards women and role of women in the life of the early Christian community which form the basis of a 'hermeneutic of liberation' for women Christians.7

First, the preaching of Jesus was directed to all people, women and men. The example of Mary of Bethany who 'sat down at the Lord's feet and listening to him speaking' (Luke 10:39-40) is the posture of a disciple who raptly listens to the word and teaching of the rabbi (Fiorenza 1983:165). The response to the call to welcome the Good News is repentance and belief (Mark 1:14-5) and this does not depend on one's position in society or one's gender. The parable of the Great Banquet (cf Matthew 22:1-14, Luke 14:16-24) 'jolts the hearer into recognising that the "basileia" includes everyone' (Fiorenza 1983:121). Here prostitutes enter the kingdom before self-righteous religious leaders (Matthew 21:31).

Women were most definitely part of the marginalised groups in Jesus' day, along with the poor, the sick, tax collectors, and public sinners. Jesus broke all the social taboos of his culture: he spoke with the Samaritan woman in public (John
allowed a woman with a haemorrhage to approach him for healing not in private but in the midst of a crowd (Mark 5:25-34), welcomed the company of women, and was at home in the house of Mary and Martha of Bethany (Luke 10:38-42). He exercised women (Luke 8:2) and healed their children, even if they were Gentiles (Mark 7:25-30). Wealthy women accompanied him and provided the financial basis of his ministry (Luke 8:1-3). In assessing the attitudes of Jesus towards women, Elizabeth Johnson comments that ‘the heart of the problem is not that Jesus was male, but that more males have not been like Jesus’ (1991:112).

Secondly, the preaching of Jesus used feminine images of God together with masculine images to show the depth of the mystery of God beyond all gender-identified symbols. The reign of God is like the yeast used in the making of bread (Matthew 13:33), surely an image of God which would have delighted women who baked the bread for their families. Jesus’ beautiful parables of forgiveness include both the male good shepherd (Luke 15:4-7) and the woman searching for the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), the finding of which is cause for great celebration. Jesus describes himself in the image of a hen gathering her chicks under her wing (Matthew 23:37-39), expressing maternal care for those he loves. Sandra Schneiders stresses that:

The female metaphors appear in spite of overwhelming cultural bias. They tell us something very important about God, something we may well not have discovered for ourselves in a male-dominated community, that God is neither male nor female, that God is both feminine and masculine (1986:41).

Thirdly, Jesus calls God his ‘Abba’, an intimate and affectionate form of address within the Jewish family. Jesus says clearly that God is not a dominating patriarch for him but a tender and loving parent. Jesus’ Abba thus subverts the traditional male imagery of God as Father, King, and warrior by presenting God in intimate and compassionate images. The use of ‘Abba’ by Jesus ‘undermines patriarchal patterns in its offer of a spiritual relation to God that transcends these forms’.8 Disciples are now sisters and brothers of the one ‘Abba’ through the power of the Spirit (Romans 8:14-16).

Fourthly, the androcentric bias of the Gospels could not eliminate the witness of women as faithful disciples, steadfast to the cross. Some names were remembered and written down: Mary Magdalene, Joanne, Susanna (Luke 8:1-3); others such as the Samaritan woman who became an evangelist to her own people (John 4:39-40) are nameless though their witness continues. At the Cross we find only John and a small group of women: his mother, Mary Magdalene...
and Mary the wife of Clopas. Peter had denied he had ever met Jesus; the other men had run away and were hiding.

Nor have the Gospels omitted the fact that it was to women that the Risen Christ first appeared. Women were entrusted with the astounding message that the Lord is truly risen, news the male disciples did not at first believe. Mary Magdalene's role as the 'apostle to the apostles' (John 20:18) is especially significant.

Fifthly, there is strong evidence within Acts and the rest of the New Testament of a vigorous ministry by women. Names such Junia, Phoebe, and Priscilla remind us that women evangelised, taught, and led the new Christian communities. They worked with Paul and were gifted by the Spirit in ways which helped build up community. Women preached the Gospel, served as 'diakonos' (cf Romans 16:1 where Paul calls Phoebe 'diakonos'), prophesied (a ministry second only to apostleship in importance to the community), possibly presided at the eucharistic assembly,10 evangelised, and in every way worked together with the male ministers to proclaim the Gospel and build the new community in which divisions based on sex had been abolished (Galatians 3:28).

This 'good news' did not last as the power of patriarchy, so antithetical to the egalitarian message of Jesus asserted itself. But the memory has lasted. And this is what has given women courage in this day to search the scriptures with a liberating hermeneutic which will provide 'seeds of hope' that the Christian community can be different and more faithful to the vision and praxis of Jesus.

REVISIONING THE CHRIST SYMBOL: JESUS SOPHIA

Focus on the Jesus of history, while it does provide hope as we observe his teaching and praxis of and to toward women, is insufficient for a feminist Christology. Paul tells us that by rising from the dead, Jesus became a life-giving Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45), the life of his body, the Church. Christ now embraces all the particularities of humanity: male and female, Asian, African, old, young. If this were not true - if women could not put on Christ and share his risen life - we could not be baptised. But there is no historical evidence whatsoever that there was a dispute over the baptism of women in the early Christian communities, in spite of the fact that in Judaism only men were full members of the covenant through circumcision.

The Risen Christ as a life-giving Spirit gives women and men hope that the historical maleness of Jesus is not the last word about him. A very significant
approach in revisioning the Christ symbol is the retrieval of the wisdom tradition. Christ as Sophia-Wisdom will help to provide 'a therapy of the religious imagination' (Schneiders 1986:19) which will assist in healing the distortions of faith and spirituality which have resulted from pervasive masculine images of God. Current feminist research into the meaning of Sophia-Wisdom reveals Her as a most appropriate name for Christ.

The Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures presents Sophia as 'co-creator with God at the beginning of time, as the breath of the power of God, as the sustainer of continuing life, the wisdom at the heart of all things, as teacher, lover, sister, and consort' (Murphy 1992:346).

The focus of traditional Christology has been on 'Logos' Christology, the Word becoming flesh (John 1:14). This is often thought of as a purely male symbol, derived from the 'logos' of Platonic and Stoic philosophy which emphasised the priority of mind and reason. In a deficient anthropology in which men were understood to be the 'rational ones' and women, slaves, and children the 'a-logoi', the mindless ones (Ruether 1983:125), stress on a logocentric Christology can run the risk of further alienating women.

John's Gospel speaks of Christ as the Logos who, like Wisdom, was with God from the beginning and through whom all things were made (John 1:2-3). The 'I am' sayings of Jesus in this Gospel are clearly linked with the Wisdom sayings of Proverbs 8:12-33 (Schneiders 1986:53). The Gospel demonstrates this Wisdom Christology very explicitly in chapters four and six when Jesus speaks of the 'water of life' and 'bread of life'. 'In the wisdom literature food (bread) and drink (water and wine) are symbols for the instruction given by Wisdom and for Wisdom itself' (Collins 1982:50-1).

Johnson states that the wisdom symbol 'evokes Sophia's characteristic gracious goodness, life-giving creativity, and passion for justice as key hermeneutical elements in speaking about the mission of Jesus' (Johnson 1992:157).

Jesus appears as the prophet and child of Sophia, announcing the good news that God loves all and desires the salvation of everyone, especially the poor and marginalised. The deeds of Jesus-Sophia are those of healing and wholeness in which the graciousness and love of God is revealed. This way of Sophia leads Jesus to the cross and he becomes Christ crucified, the Wisdom of God (Johnson 1992:158). Further, 'the crucified Jesus embodies the exact opposite of the patriarchal ideal of the powerful man, and shows the steep price to be paid in the struggle for liberation' (Johnson 1992:161).
In addition to breaking the seeming impasse of a male Christology, the wisdom tradition offers other advantages. Because it is linked with the whole cosmos, it orients Christology not only to the human but to the whole universe - for Sophia’s care embraces all creation. Secondly, since Sophia cares for all people, her friends are to be found everywhere people love and serve God. Thus Sophia-Christology has important implications for ecumenical and inter-religious understanding and dialogue. Thirdly, since Sophia shared the suffering which is so much a part of human experience, she stands with those whose lives are marked by oppression and injustice; thus we are called to be Sophia’s allies in the work of justice, peace, and reconciliation.

To identify Christ as Sophia-Wisdom provides a counter-balance to emphases on the maleness of Christ and Logos Christology. As we struggle with language for God which can speak to both women and men, the power of relation which is built into the wisdom metaphors gives us a glimpse of divine relatedness to people and all of creation.

**WOMANIST CHRISTOLOGY**

The Christological concerns we have explored from a feminist perspective have all been raised by white, Northern Hemisphere women theologians. We look now to our African-American and African sisters. How can a Jewish male Savior, whom we now know as the Risen Christ, help women in the Two Thirds World?

Jacquelyn Grant, an African-American theologian, describes her approach to the mystery of Christ as ‘womanist Christology’. She sees the feminist analysis of First World women as ‘inadequate for salvific efficacy with respect to Black women’ (1989:218), though not entirely irrelevant to their needs. She stresses that the feminist analysis should be taken seriously, but that Black women must go beyond white women’s theological agenda. Thus she titled her book *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*.

Grant maintains that white feminist Christology is inadequate for Black women for several reasons. First, it is theology done by white women whose experience is vastly different than that of black women. Because of racist oppression, in the United States as in South Africa, white women have functioned as the ‘superior’. Black women’s experience is of the convergence of racism, sexism, and classism; it is therefore enormously different from that of white women, especially white middle-class and upper-class women.

Secondly, Grant asserts that White theology, and therefore ‘feminist Christology’ is racist. Racism is based on domination, and she argues that white women
theologians in defining 'feminism', and therefore 'feminist Christology', have continued to exercise racist power and domination, since racism is based on defining the rules of the game and then ensuring that others play by those rules. She states that 'feminist theology' presumes 'a commonality with oppressed women that oppressed women themselves do not share' (1989:200). Black women, for instance, are dealing with survival, while White women are looking for fulfillment.

Thus, Grant parts ways with White feminist Christology and names her approach 'womanist Christology'. She cites the writer Alice Walker for her understanding of 'womanist', a word that connotes courage, audacity, responsibility, and seriousness. 'Womanist means being and acting (her emphasis) who you are' (1989:205). The task of womanist Christology is to expose the inter-connectedness of the triple oppression of racism, classism, and sexism.

Grant's 'womanist Christology' is not yet a developed, systematic approach, but it does include powerful images which show the direction of her analysis and reflection. Jesus is the 'divine co-sufferer' (1989:212) who empowers people in their oppression. Jesus is not passive in his suffering but through it 'empowers the weak', giving women such as Sojourner Courage 'a tough, active love that empowered her to fight more fiercely for the freedom of her people' (1989:214).

She also stresses that Jesus is black. Linking her analysis with that of James Cone, Grant states that 'as Jesus identified with the lowly of his day, he now identifies with the lowly of this day, who in the American context are black people' (1989:215). The 'kenosis' of Jesus takes shape in his self-emptying from the privileges of divinity in order to be in solidarity with the least, with the most oppressed. Grant's designation of Jesus as black thus also finds a welcome acceptance here in South Africa among those who have suffered the oppression of apartheid in its multiple dimensions of injustice.

The Risen Christ is also significant in womanist Christology as a symbol of hope. For black women, this signifies that their triple oppression is the context of the struggle for freedom, but it is not the last word about what life is about.

Grant charts an important continuing agenda for black women theologians. First is to investigate the relationship between the oppression of women and theological symbolism. The Christ who is the stranger, the outcast, the hungry, weak, and poor is more significant to black women than the impact of a male Christ is to white women (1989:219). The distinctiveness of Christ, for Grant, lies not in his maleness but in his humanity and as truly human, he thus shares the suffering of Black women. Second is to 'explore more deeply the question of
what Christ means in a society in which class distinctions are increasing' (1989:221). Christology is now linked to social analysis in order to understand the causes of the feminisation of poverty not only in North America but throughout the Third World. Thirdly, Grant calls for a ‘constructive Christology’ which does not destroy Black male humanity since this would be very harmful to the Black community as whole. She stresses the need to ‘take seriously only the usable aspects of the past’ (1989:221) in order to speak of Christ in language which both reflects and addresses Black experience.

AFRICAN FEMINIST CHRISTOLOGY

When we examine the writings of African women theologians in the area of Christology, we do not yet find a great deal of published material. This is evidence of the fact that few African women are serving the Christian community in the vocation of theologian, though their numbers are increasing. But as Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a Ghanaian teaching in Nigeria has pointed out, African women ‘do theology’ with their whole beings: rural women walking for water and firewood, cooking meals, caring for children; urban women working in shops and in the market - everywhere in Africa women proclaim through their lives a courageous hope in the goodness of life in spite of incredible poverty and oppression.

In an article titled ‘The Christ for African Women’ (1988:35-46), Elizabeth Amoah, who teaches at the University of Ghana, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye establish their Christological frame of reference by stating that African women share the same Christologies with men because they have learned these from men. However, women have different emphases in their Christological reflection. Three important images of Christ stand out in their analysis: Christ as liberator, as transformer of culture, and as reconciler.

Reflection on the Gospels makes it clear that Jesus liberated women from disease, social taboos, and the life-denying forces of their culture. The woman with the haemorrhage dares to approach Jesus for healing, though she is an outcast according to Jewish law; Jesus does not invoke the Law but heals her and restores her to the community (Mark 5:25-34). The woman crippled by disease for eighteen years is now able to stand upright because of the healing touch of Jesus (Luke 13:10-17). She becomes a symbol for African women to stand straight with pride and dignity in spite of the burden of oppression of their patriarchal cultures.

African women constantly meet death and the life-denying forces of poverty, sickness, and lack of education. To lose a child in death is the tragic experience
of too many African women. Here the Jesus who brought back to life the only son of the widow of Nain ‘is the African women’s Christ’ (1988:43), victorious over the worst that can happen to a mother.

The Christ of African women transforms the cultural assumptions of the roles of women. African cultures make ‘women become silent “beasts” of societies’ burdens, bent double under racism, poverty and lack of appreciation of what the fullness of womanhood should be’ (1988:43). African women warm to the stories of Jesus eating with women, speaking with them in public, and calling them to be his disciples. This Christ was able to act against the norms of his culture regarding women; he gives African women courage to work for their own liberation.

Christ is also a reconciler, a healer who touches the person in all dimensions of their suffering. African anthropology is holistic, without a dichotomy between body and spirit. But modern African society, influenced by Western values, often tears persons away from their roots and their dignity as persons. Amoah and Oduyoye emphasise that this African Christ is ‘calling us back to our true selves, to one another and to God, thereby saving us from isolation and alienation, which is the lack of community that is the real experience of death’ (1988:44).

Hospitality is one of the most beautiful gifts of African culture. African women share the hospitality of the whole continent with Christ, who is a refugee and guest in Africa. They ‘seek to make Christ at home and order life in such a way as to enable the whole household to feel at home with Christ. The woman sees the whole space of Africa as a realm to be ordered’ (1988:45), a place in which to welcome the Christ who liberates, transforms cultures, and heals the divisions of Africa.

A more systematic approach is taken by Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, lecturer in philosophy and religious studies at Kenyatta University, who develops five models of an African feminist Christology: eschatological, anthropological, liberating, cosmological, and healing.

In the first, the focus is on death and resurrection and the hope engendered by Christ’s victory over death. African women see in this Christ one who takes on their suffering and through his resurrection offers them the grace ‘to participate in the restoration of harmony, equality and inclusiveness in all human relationships in the family, society and the Church’ (1989:131).

In the anthropological focus, the African woman names Christ as Mother: the one who nurtures life and cares for the weak. In Africa, women are seen
primarily in this role of bringing forth life and lovingly caring for it. But women's roles in Africa cannot be limited any longer to physical motherhood. The Gospels show us that Christ recognised women as responsible persons in their own right and called them as disciples. She says:

Jesus today recognizes the African woman not just as a nurturer of life but as one who participates fully in the life of the Church - as theological teacher, catechist, biblical interpreter, counselor and as one called to restore the Church and humanity to the initial inclusiveness, holistic and mutual relationships between women and men (1989:131).

The model of liberation focuses on the unending sufferings of African women. This Christ who is liberator asks her not to accept these sufferings passively as her fate, but to work to eliminate every form of suffering and injustice from her society so that all may be free in Christ. The educated woman of Africa, is called to 'identify herself with her disadvantaged sisters' (1989:132): the petty traders, wives in polygamous unions, traditional rural women who are always poor and hungry.

The cosmological model offers hope for the liberation not only of persons but for all created reality. The Jesus of the Gospels was attentive to the beauty of nature around him, calling attention to the lilies of the field, sunrises and sunsets, using many agricultural images in his parables. The African environment is harsh and demanding, and drought, desertification, pollution, and lack of clean water have claimed millions of lives. The Jesus who could rebuke the winds and the waves is the model for believers who seek 'to restore peace and harmony to the African continent and the world' (1989:133).

Nasimiyu-Wasike describes the model of Christ the healer as coming closest to African reality. Christ's ministry of healing included not only physically healing but also exorcism from evil spirits. In Africa, the belief in the power of evil spirits and demons to cause illness continues to be pervasive. Christ the healer offers his healing power to African individuals and societies to bring them to wholeness and full health, freed from the fear of evil spirits.

This short discussion of themes of Christology in the writings of a few African women theologians reveals a unity of vision of the Christ of Africa for the women of Africa: he is victorious over all evil, liberator from injustice, reconciler of division, transformer of cultural oppression, source of hope, and healer of all divisions, illnesses, and oppression. This is a very concrete and practical
Christology, meeting African women at the point of their real needs. It gives a very positive, functional answer to the question: Can a Jewish male Savior help the women of Africa?

THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

The diversity of South Africa is reflected in the issues currently being addressed by women theologians in this part of the world. Denise Ackermann enunciates the differences in the theological community between white and black women approaching various issues, including Christology. Acknowledging that feminist liberation theology has been accused of being both middle class and racist, she calls for ‘a critical social theory which will enable us to tackle the persistent problems of both racist and sexist domination’ (1988:24). She stresses the vital importance of recognising the differences in experience between white and black women and how they affect the work of theology.

Black feminist theology, states Roxanne Jordaan, a minister in the Congregational church, ‘is preached in the Nyanga bush in Cape Town, in the streets of Soweto, in the shacks of Veeplaas, in the forced removal tents in Kabah’ (1991:127). Because this theology has emerged from the experience of political oppression, its Christological focus is on the Jesus who announced that he has come to proclaim liberty to captives and sight to the blind (Luke 4:18-19): a Jesus who is primarily a liberator and whose resurrection gives black women a reason to live and/or die for justice.

The approach of ‘womanist theology’ is used by Jacqueline William as she analyses songs sung by black female domestic workers in their churches. The Christological content of the songs was that of praise of Jesus, trust in him, and a plea that the Spirit of Jesus would be poured out on them. Trust was predominant in all the songs analysed. William links this with the distrust the women experience from their white female employers and the distrust they themselves feel because of the oppression and exploitation which have been pervasive throughout their lives. Any Christology which seeks to meet the needs of poor black women must, William asserts, ‘operate as a tool of empowerment to women in the struggle for liberation of Azania’ (1990:34).

South African feminist theology is very much in the process of development; and so it remains to be seen how Christological issues will continue to be addressed, how women here will be affected by the work of our sisters in other parts of Africa and the world, and how our South African voice will contribute to the feminist Christological discussion.
CONCLUSION

How then are ‘women considering Jesus’ today? In North America, Europe, and Africa, they are asking crucial questions: Can a male savior help women? What are the ‘seeds of hope’ in the Jesus of the Gospels which will counteract the ‘bad news’ women have heard down the centuries? How can the Risen Christ be liberator for women and men? Is the symbol of Sophia-Wisdom one of the answers to our quest for ways to speak of Jesus in feminist theological language? Who is Christ for African-American women who labour under three hundred years of racism? Who is Christ for the women of Africa whose daily lives are so full of poverty and suffering? How does Christ the Liberator speak to the lives of the women of South Africa?

These questions are vital, not only to women, but to the whole church community whose faith is centered on Jesus whom we name as Lord and whose call to discipleship engages us in the quest for truth, meaning, love, and justice.
NOTES

1. This is a revised and edited version of the article ‘Women consider Jesus’ published in *Grace and Truth* 11(1993), 159-184.


3. Sandra Schneiders points out that the attempt of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its 1976 ‘Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood’ to insist on the theological significance of the maleness of Jesus as the central point of the Incarnation is ‘at least theologically confused if not strictly heretical’ (1986:4).


5. The Documents of Vatican II also present the view that women have a different ‘nature’ than men. For example, in speaking of women’s employment ‘Gaudium et Spes’ states: ‘It is appropriate that they should be able to assume their full proper role in accordance with their own nature’ (GS 60).


7. Rosemary Ruether points out that when we go to the Gospels we find that ‘the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels can be recognised as a figure remarkably compatible with feminism’ (1983:15). We are not terming Jesus a ‘feminist’ in contemporary terms but are rather seeing a convergence of Jesus’ attitudes towards women with the foundational principle of feminism that women are fully human and equal in dignity to men.


Tetlow notes that since apostles and prophets presided over the Eucharist, and because there were women who exercised these ministries in the first years of the Christian community, ‘There is no evidence to exclude the possibility of women presiding at eucharistic worship until the close of the New Testament period’ (1980:125). ‘Ordination’ as priest was not a concept at this time of Church history. For discussions on the meaning of Sophia-Wisdom in relation to Christ see Schussler Fiorenza 1983:130-40; Johnson 1992:150-169; Ruether 1983:55-58.


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