

**The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture:
the critical functions of hermeneutics and spirituality in this dynamic discourse and
their effects on wellbeing**

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Abstract

Throughout the history of Christianity, a dialectic existed in the relation between theology and culture. This resulted in continuous conflicts among Christian scholars and among churches. This research tends to participate in this dialectic and debate to end up with some cognition for wellbeing. A distinction is made between “world culture” and “ethnic culture”. Under world culture this research focuses on post-modernism and post-secularism and, under ethnic culture, on the dangers of syncretism and fundamentalism. The dialectic increases where any one of these two components – culture and theology – takes the dominant stance. The objective of this research is to attend to these matters by proposing an *en route* forward to enhance wellbeing. This research consists of three main parts. The *first part* spells out the dialectic between theology and culture. The *second part* investigates some hermeneutical principles to be considered when dealing with text and theology through which spiritualities are roused and continuous controlled change is proposed. The *last part* proposes “two aspects of Christian spirituality to be considered as a matrix for a believer’s wellbeing”.

Each historical period has its particular questions, problems and consequences that address to theology its own claims. Theology has an address – the human being of a particular time in a particular culture. If theology does not speak to postmodern people in their idioms and in the intellectual discourse within their domestic cultures and worldviews, theology will no longer have a message for those people and will no longer address their wellbeing and answer their timely questions (cf. Heyns, 1974).

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture

Throughout church history, a dialectic existed between theology and cultures. Cultures influenced the interpretation of theology and the spiritualities roused from it, The noun spiritualities, as used in this paper, refers to the believer's "lived experiences" of the divine due to the divine-believer relationship. On the contrary, theology also influenced the way cultures were practiced and affected the wellbeing of the people of that particular period. In the end, a mutual influence takes place or should take place. Two questions to be asked at this point are: What is meant by theology and what is meant by culture?

Theology: According to Dunn (2003; Vos, 1992) many definitions have been offered to unpack the term "theology". Dunn defines theology as "talk (logos) about God (theos), and all that is involved in and follows directly from such talk, particularly the coherent articulation of the religious faith and practice thereby expressed". Vos (1992, p.3) writes, "Theology is the *science concerning God*". For Guthrie (1981, p.29) "'theology' is not necessarily restricted to doctrine, it tends to signify a system of beliefs". In early Christianity, religious "lived experiences" led to the formulation of theologies, and theologies in turn led to different spiritualities, or "lived experiences". Most important is the cognizance that the formulation of the Christian doctrine (theologies) is critically important for human wellbeing.

Culture: Browning (quoted by Prosper, 2014, p.301) defines culture as "a set of symbols, stories, (myths) and norms of conduct that orients a society or group cognitively, affectively and behaviourally to the world in which it lives." Gomis (also quoted by Prosper 2014, p.301) explains the term culture as "the way a given group of people behave habitually, and do things in life, depending on their geographical and climatic conditions and religious beliefs". These two definitions reiterate the basics used in the definition of culture – to be the way of life of a particular group of people. Culture thus encompasses many aspects of life, ranging from language and religious beliefs, to behaviour and mannerisms. These aspects are, to a great extent, determined by the time-spatial, geographical, climatic and environmental conditions (cf. Prosper, 2014). Culture thus comprises a way of life. For Christians, it should encompass all of the human features of existence, including how they resonate with the divine. It is important to realise that the domain of God should not be perceived

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture as existing apart from the world of humans. This means that the lives of people are interwoven with divine experiences (Prosper, 2014). It is for the wellbeing of the believer important to discover the varieties of divine involvement and the spiritualities embedded in it.

In order to conceptualise and to articulate such divine involvement and the consequential spiritualities that will emanate from it, biblical hermeneutics plays a decisive role in this dialectic, not only to release the tensions between these two entities (theology and culture) but also to contribute to a closer assimilation of the two so as to enhance human wellbeing. Good Biblical hermeneutics is fundamental for a relevant interpretation of Scripture, understanding of Scripture and consequently the formulation of a contemporary theology. Such a theology will consequently lead to certain spiritualities in a particular time and space.³

In this enquiry, the objective of this paper is to focus on ways in which *culture* and *theology* can blend together to give life its real meaning (cf. Mushy, 2014) and to enhance the *wellbeing* of people.⁴ The focus of wellbeing in this paper lies in the excitement of the awareness of the continuous presence, involvement and revelation of God in the life of the believer. This view has to be developed theologically and can have different “gestalts” within different cultures due to different values and different conducts in the different cultures.

In order to achieve this, the *modus operandi* in this research will be: First, to concentrate on the “dialectic between theology and culture” so as to point out the nature of the dialectic. Second, to consider some biblical hermeneutical principles as matrix for mutual influence and amendment between theology & culture to address the dialectic. Third, to propose the two most fundamental aspects of Christian

³ Environment can refer to cultural environment, church environment, household environment, etc.

⁴ Get also “consumer culture”, “digital culture”, “sports culture”, “company culture”, “print culture”, etc. It indicates how the people in that particular sphere of life live.

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture spirituality that should emanate from a contemporary theology (or Christian spirituality) and be relevantly developed and explained to contribute to the wellbeing of people.

The dialectic between theology and culture

This section distinguishes between “world cultures”⁵ and “domestic cultures”. The discussion of the *world cultures* will only concentrate on postmodernism and post-secularism. The discussion of *domestic cultures* will be approached from a point of view of ethnicity.

Postmodernism

Christianity, throughout its existence, has stood in a dichotomous relation to the various world cultures that took on different faces throughout history. Christianity was, however, not immune to the influence of the Western world. On the contrary, Christianity was over many centuries also influenced by divergent world cultures such as pre-modernism, modernism, secularism and is currently influenced by postmodernism and post-secularism. This paradigm or culture – referred to as postmodernism – obviously presented challenges to religion (Geaves & Chryssides, 2007). According to Vorster (2012, p. 194), postmodernism “describes a new condition in Western thought and culture”.

In reference to the character of modernism, Beyers (2014, p.2)⁶ observes that the “one way” of perceiving existence was replaced by “heterogeneity, fragmentation and pluralism”. King (2009, p.202) asserts that the consequence of postmodernism is that “it pursues a sceptical deconstruction of all systems of thought”; it questions all rigid and fixed explanations. It also questioned the necessity of *reason* as the primary *en route* to human knowledge. According to what has been said so far about

⁵Although the terminology “world cultures” has been used by this author to refer to postmodernism and post-secularism, he is aware that these “cultures” featured especially in the West – in the US and Western-Europe. The influence of these countries stretched worldwide.

⁶ Relativism and subjectivism can be added as characteristic of postmodern society (cf. King, 2009).

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postmodernism, four more specific characteristics can be formulated (see Kysar, 2007; Adams, 1997):

Firstly, for postmodernism *no universal truths* occur. Universal truths became obscure. “Cultures cannot be built on the absolute truths embedded in the universe” (Kysar 2007, p.155; also Beyers, 2014). Values are determined only from a social-contextual perspective. Consequently, metaphysics or ontology are abandoned. A plurality of truths emerges. King interprets this positively; he deems it not as a threat to Christianity (King, 2009). Secondly, *language can never be precise*; it is always ambiguous because it is uncontrollable. Readers can never know what a text meant to the author. Postmodernists deconstruct texts to point out their ambiguity and to emphasise the variability of a text. Readers even interpret and understand texts differently. Therefore, they will say there is no text, only varieties of images of the same document. The value of this assertion (deconstruction) is not to destroy the text, but rather to illustrate the polyvalence of the text. Thirdly, *history is fiction and not fact*. Postmodernism demolished the assertion of modernism “that we can reconstruct the past by careful and objective study” (Kysar, 2007, p.157). Fourthly, there is no such a thing as *objectivity* whether studying the past or even a text. For postmodernists, the involvement and entanglement of everyone in power structures and networks of prestige cause the inability of people to gather facts. Thus, the perspectives in postmodernism are relativity and subjectivity.

Initially postmodernism was regarded sceptically by the church to be a threat for the witness of the church and the confession of believers. Actually, postmodernism opens up multiple ways to knowledge (Geaves & Chryssides, 2007). It also opens up new possibilities for *religion* (King, 2009) (see post secularism). It strengthens the interest in spirituality and widens the possibilities for creating new perspectives, interpretations and meanings.

Unfortunately for religion, postmodernism does not provide “the hermeneutics of trust that is necessary for religion” (King, 2009, p.202). Two fundamental aspects in religion, truth and certainty, collapse.

Post-secularism

Post-secularism emanated from postmodernism. Where postmodernism rejects classical metaphysical thought (Adams, 1997) post-secularism - opened the investigation of sacred texts. This results in the emergence of a “post-secular philosophical tradition that refuses to reject spiritual texts, spiritual word views, and meaning-making as anti-philosophical” (Davis, 2010). Hovorun (2013) asserts that post-secularism was initially interpreted as a social phenomenon whereas at a later stage, Jürgen Habermas and others attempted to articulate it in philosophical terms (also Vorster, 2012). Moreover, even theologians became involved in the conversation.⁷ They tried to understand how religious people could benefit from this.

The labelling of post-secularism probably contributes to its popularity. Everything labelled with the prefix “post” seems to attract the attention. The same occurs currently in South Africa where the same slant is used in terms like “post-apartheid” and “post-colonialism”. They became buzzwords, especially among non-whites in South Africa. For Hovorun (2013) the word “post-secularism” seems indeed a successful label. A number of developments are currently recognised as happening in society that can effectively be connected to this word. In religious circles “Some people mean that religion is returning to public life [the revival of spirituality]⁸; some – the excessive clericalism and clericalisation of societies; some – religious renaissance; some – the phenomenal success of Christian Charismatic movements”. On the socio-political level: “some – the rediscovery of the nation’s identity and roots; some – Islamic fundamentalism; some – religious terrorism; neo-conservatism; some – simply conservatism; some – post-liberalism; some – post-

⁷ Taylor (2007, p.20) defines secularization to “consists of new conditions of belief; it consists in a new shape to the experience which prompts to and is defined by belief; in a new context in which all search and questioning about the moral and the spiritual must proceed” (also Taylor, 2010). Taylor (2010, p.21) also expresses that the understanding of secularism to “bring about a ‘death of God’” is unconvincing for him. He verifies this statement later in his book.

⁸ My inclusion.

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture postmodernism; etc.” (Hovorun, 2013, p.424).

The dichotomy of “sacred” versus “secular” is one of the main difficulties the church has been challenged with throughout the ages and today. The Christian theology found itself captured in the dialectic of these opposites. During the modern era, some authoritative theologies were formulated. These theologies (ideologies) function powerfully to equally unite or separate large groups of people. For the largest part of the 20th century, these theologies⁹ governed parts of the world. South Africa is one of many countries most affected by these approaches.¹⁰ The apartheid ideology in one way united the church and in another way separated the church in South Africa. As a result, the church suffers much today due to the “apartheid” as well as the “post” syndrome. The larger part of societies intuitively looks for alternatives for the amputated apartheid ideology. Some of them find an alternative in the Church, some in spiritualities. In this way, the Church becomes a kind of ideological prosthesis to replace the old “apartheid” ideology which was in the previous century the driving force of apartheid (cf. Hovorun, 2013).

In *conclusion*, old stereotyped answers (message), patterns of worship, formalisms and traditional boundaries no longer address the needs and wellbeing of many believers today. Postmodernism and post-secularism pose new challenges to Christian theology (cf. Vorster, 2012). In a different “religion-friendly” environment, Christian theology can become engaged in developing a conceivable meta-theory for today. This is expected from the church. Many people have not turned their backs on the church due to secularisation nor have many become religious (see Taylor, 2007). Many Christian believers expect new and different things from the church, and this boils down to one thing – a neo-interpretation and application of Scripture and a neo-theological composition.

⁹ Hovorun (2013) has used here “ideologies” and “faith creeds”. The use of “theologies” reflects my interpretation.

¹⁰ At this point I can refer to the “apartheids-epoch” when the Bible has been used to substantiate “apartheid”.

The gigantic interest in Christian spirituality over the past three decades should be exploited by equipping (Christian) believers to not only manage the change of the tide, but also to develop a theology, in relation to Scripture to cope with their intelligent newly asked questions for a better wellbeing.

Theology and inculturation

In this section I would like to focus on domestic cultures in general. According to Burrige (2007, p. 353) “we all have our presuppositions and ideologies and theological assumptions. Hence the hermeneutical circle can become a vicious circle, as we read our own prior concerns, beliefs and ideas into and then out of a text”. The following are some critical principles which should be borne in mind during the reading and analysis of texts and the articulation of theologies. In this context “texts” refer not only to “spoken” or “literary” texts, but to “life” overall.

The necessity for continuous change

Everything in the world is in flux, including domestic cultures. As part of everything that is in the world, Christianity, too, is dynamic. Over the years, some aspects – especially the role of women, sexuality and church leadership – were revisited and cast in new forms and new understandings (cf. De Gruchy, 1997). Changes in church doctrine and ministry have occurred from the foundation of the church.

De Gruchy (1997) correctly points out that effective indigenous cultural effects will influence and develop new discourses and fresh understandings of Christianity. Contemporary Christianity, in its various forms, is certainly not an all-inclusive imitation of the first-century primitive church. Throughout the history of the church, various indigenous cultures have influenced and modified the character of Christianity. Despite these influences and modifications, the identity of the church did not change because it cannot change. This is so because the identity of the church is embedded and apparent in the corporate devotion of Jesus Christ, despite the multiple distinctions of the interpretation of the Gospel: Western, Eastern, African, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal. In spite of the multiple

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture differences and divisions the ecumenical church and central theology continue to exist. This strengthens the protection of the foundational doctrine of the Bible (cf. De Gruchy, 1997).

The inculturation of Christianity: a new discourse

Culture is a requisite for being human. It expresses the various patterns of the thinking, feelings and conduct of people. Shorter (2015) defines inculturation as an effort to re-express the gospel content in configurations and expressions appropriate to a particular culture. This development should result in the reinterpretation and evolutionary change of both the gospel (theology) and culture. Any form of syncretism should be avoided while a synthesis should be established (Shorter, 2015).

Any Christian transformation of a particular culture is not a matter of the overpowering of that culture, but the reinterpretation of it. The culture then becomes transformed where applicable. This process results in the enrichment of that particular culture (Shorter, 2015). Important during such a transformation process is to remain faithful to both “the tradition concerning Jesus and to the authentic values of ... Christianity and culture” (Shorter, 2015, p.10).

According to De Gruchy (1997, p.38) the inculturation “results in new forms and understandings of Christianity”. It is the character but not the identity of Christianity that changes. The character of Christianity in Europe is not equivalent to that of the early church in the first-century Mediterranean world. The Christianity brought to South Africa or Australia by Europeans or early missionary activities during previous centuries equals not our present-day Christianity. Obviously, continuities and similarities of general characteristics of the Gospel message (theology) will occur, despite varying interpretations. The ecumenical church will continue to endure, notwithstanding diversities and divisions. Any form of change leads to the emergence of something new and vibrant. The Coptic Church and “some” African Independent Churches are examples of it. They grew to be churches with distinct cultural identities. Nevertheless, the church continues to confess its apostolic faith (De Gruchy, 1997).

Those who accepted the Gospel completely were transformed by it. They would consequently discover and experience that the Christian faith also changed the character of their culture over a period of time. This implies that any form of change is like two-way traffic in opposite directions. Such change is evident from how “Christianity changed Hellenism more than Hellenism changed Christianity” (De Gruchy, 1997, p.38–9).

Christianity has transformed the lives of many people from different cultural or ethnic groups over a time-interval of two millennia. Christianity has also undergone significant changes as different indigenous cultures interpreted it through their own cultural lenses (Oladipo, 2010; Onyinah, 2007). The Gospel can only become truly relevant to a specific situation when it has been interpreted within the confines of the particular culture and resonates with the entire life of the person. The Gospel inevitably will transform religious presuppositions. It will also change the ideas, attitudes and related activities of the person, who will remain an African or Australian. The rational (frame of reference) of a person will be changed to conform to the image and mind of Christ (see 1 Corinthians. 2:16, ἡμεῖς δὲ νοῦν Χριστοῦ ἔχομεν).

Can the bible then be interpreted in a manifold way?

To address this the following five different hermeneutical aspects¹¹ have to be considered: “metanarrative”, “contextuality”, “inauthentic manipulation”, “textuality” and “not any meanings but new meanings”.

¹¹ Continuous dialogue and application of biblical hermeneutics is fundamental for a healthy relationship between theology and culture. Many authoritative exponents on hermeneutics who made major contributions to the reading interpretation and understanding of texts occur throughout history. Unfortunately, most of them and their contributions cannot be discussed here. I refer to the excellent publications of Anthony Thiselton and Stanley Porter for referencing and the discussions of the works of Heidegger, Gadamer, Bultmann, Habermas, Foucault, Ricoeur, etc. See also my publications on Hermeneutics: Reading the Bible in the 21st century: Some hermeneutical principles: Part 1 and Part 2; Rethinking Biblical hermeneutics for mobilizing Christian believers to proclaim the Good News in a post-secular age.

(1) Metanarrative

Thiselton (2004, p.8) defines a metanarrative¹², or “grand narrative” as “an universalizing narrative or story that seeks to include or incorporate other stories and claims to truth or value within its own framework. The grand narratives of high modernity are typically those of Darwinism, Freudianism and Marxism. These seek to impose explanatory or validating criteria upon the world as a whole”.

Thiselton regards this approach intensely suspicious, because, according to him, it attempts to interpret the Bible as consisting of having absolute meanings of reality and universal norms for human conduct (Thiselton 2004). He refers to Bauckham’s (2003) useful involvement in this discourse of meta narratives. Bauckham (2003) points out that the Bible does, in some sense narrate an overall story that incorporates all contents,¹³ but does not reduce this content to a narrowly defined uniformity.¹⁴ The Bible is not a “totalising” system. This story reflects significant diversity and tensions, even contradictions (Bauckham 2003). The parts must be understood in the light of the whole. Surely the parts have a message in themselves: “the particular has its own integrity that should not be suppressed for the sake of a too readily comprehensible universal” (Bauckham, 2003, p.93).

Further, Bauckham (2003, pp.90-94) points out that the Bible includes many *little* narratives without “offering a single monolithic *grand narrative* of all history”. These narratives account about particular persons in particular places at particular times through whom God performs particular acts. He observes that “the Bible and biblical interpretation take place within a dialectic between unity and diversity, between coherence and particularity, between grand narrative and little narrative” (cf. Thiselton 2008, p.4). The Bible informs the reader about God’s *objectives* for the

¹²Universality: Jean François Lyotard has according to Thiselton (2004) the widest-used definition of postmodernity. Lyotard (1984, p.xx) writes, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it.”

¹³ To verify this point Bauckham (2003) refers to the inscrutability of God’s purpose with the world. Paul writes in Romans 11:33, “How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”

¹⁴ See the four Gospels, in the Old Testament the books of Kings and Chronicles. This provides a plurality of angles on the same subject matter (Bauckham, 2003).

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture world, creation and human destiny. This book also addresses believers in their particular and diverse situations in everyday life (Thiselton, 2008).

(2) Contextuality

During the interpretation process of any text the contexts of the text have to be respected. When context is neglected, erroneous interpretation and irrelevant application occurs (Mickelsen (1970). Therefore, the attentiveness to contexting discourse has been gaining popularity over the past decades. This happened not only in linguistics¹⁵ itself but also in many other interdisciplinary subjects such as social sciences and cultural studies. This subsection distinguishes between textual, situational, cultural and theological contexts that feature more strongly in biblical research.¹⁶

Linguistic Context. Linguistic context refers to the context within the discourse. It comprises the relationship between words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, pericopes and chapters. Relevant for this research are two of the three aspects to which Song refers, namely deictic and co-text¹⁷. The deictic context refers to the time and spatial expressions in the reading text. It can also refer to the persons in the biblical text or those addressed in the text. During the reading event, the readers must know where the events take place in time and space.

Recently, attention is also being paid to the previous discourse co-ordinate. This co-ordinate takes into account the pretention of the reading process (preceded text read). This implies that the reading text will have the whole of its interpretation effectively controlled by the preceding text. The interpretations of words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs are controlled by their co-text (Song, 2010).

¹⁵ Also in semantics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis (Song, 2010).

¹⁶ In his publication *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretations*, Robbins explains the necessity of these contexts in different words referring to textures. See also my publications on hermeneutics: Van der Merwe 2015a, 2015b.

¹⁷ Song (2010) distinguishes between deictic, co-text, and collocation in the studying of the linguistic context.

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Situational Context. The context of situation involves the environment, time and place, etc. where the discourse (the writing and original reading) occurs. Even the relationship between author and reader is implied here. This context traditionally includes: field, tenor, and mode. *Field* of discourse concerns any continuing activity. It reflects the rhetoric used by the author in the situation in which a text (dialogue) has occurred. *Tenor* “refers to the kind of social relationship enacted in or by the discourse” (Song, 2010, p.877). It emphasises both the emotional impact of linguistic choices as well as the kind of social and religious relationship within which communication is taking place. *Mode* is the author’s choice of linguistic medium through which the communication takes place (Song, 2010).

Cultural Context. these contexts refer to the culture, customs and socio-historical background of a particular period in language (text) in which the speakers (authors and readers) participate. Language, as a social medium of communication, is closely connected to the social structures and value systems of societies (cf. Song, 2010). Any social role is culture-specific, institutionalised in a particular society and recognisable by its members. Social status refers to the social position of the participants. Each participant in the discourse event must know their status and position in relation to the other and respect it. Sex and age often determined, or interacted with, social status (Song, 2010).

Theological context. Then there are also the micro and macro theological contexts. In the various Bible books, one or more theological themes occur. In the Gospel of John many theological themes occur which are pictorially interwoven with one another to influence and determine the meaning and profiles of particular vocabulary used in a specific theological theme.

(3) Textuality: Not any meaning but new meanings

Thiselton (2008:4) in his inaugural lecture made the following statement: “In those versions of literary postmodernity that follow Jacques Derrida on textuality, we face claims concerning the alleged instability of texts and meanings”. After this statement Thiselton (2008, p.4) refers to Ricoeur who discerns that the separation of any text

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture from its prophetic or apostolic authority infers destroying “a good part of what the text amounts to”. He also refers to Wittgenstein who perceives that communication, or the language-game, is consistently “the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven”.

The interpretation of biblical texts and writing of theology need no longer exclusively be connected to the cultural world to which and in which they were written; it seems to be inherent to the meaning of the text.¹⁸ Consequently the studying of a text consists of employing the meaning of the text. According to Schneiders (2003, p.184) the objective of interpretation should not only be the “dialectical illumination of the meaning of the text” but also “the self-understanding of the reader”. She also argues that in this dialectic event the interpreter moves, through intermediations,¹⁹ between the explanation of the text by means of exegesis, and by means of theological-spiritual sensitivity (cf. Schneiders, 1982). On the one hand, a text mediates meaning that lies embedded behind or in the text. On the other hand it assists the reader and mediates meaning that lies in front of the text. The text then generates various possibilities of reality from which the reader can select (cf. Schneiders, 2003; Ricoeur, 1976; Smith, 1971). In such a reading event, faith, culture, spirituality and wellbeing become hermeneutical tools in the meaning of texts.²⁰

The meaning of a text stretches beyond the originally intended meaning: Schneiders (2003, p.185; also Ricoeur 1976), influenced by Ricoeur, is of opinion that a text “is semantically independent of its author”. Therefore, the meaning of a text should be regarded to stretch beyond what the author intended.²¹ For her, the meaning of a

¹⁸ Cf. Vanhoozer (1998) concerning his discussion on the re-doing of interpretation in his book. See also Williams (2011).

¹⁹ Cf. Maddix & Thompson (2012) and Howard (2012) on the *Lectio divina* of texts.

²⁰ Issler (2012) refers to two modes of reading scripture: (1) the mode of “exploring” and “research” and (2) the mode of “listening” and “hearing”.

²¹ See also Weren (2014, p.96) who quotes Paul Claes who describes reception-oriented intertextuality, in which the reader plays an active part, as “...the complex of relationships between texts to which a function can be assigned by a subject that recognizes them”. The

text is open, as long as the text is validly interpreted. Her influence by Ricoeur is evident from what Ricoeur himself writes:

We may have to repay a debt owing to the authors we read. So we cannot say whatever we like... Perhaps we could say that a text is a finite space of interpretations: there is not just one interpretation, but, on the other hand, there is not an infinite number of them. A text is a space of variations that has its own constraints; and in order to choose a different interpretation, we must always have better reasons (Ricoeur, quoted by Vanhoozer, 1997, p.436).

*The polysemy of texts:*²²Ricoeur (1973) regards texts, by virtue of their linguisticity, to be polysemous²³. “The polyvalence²⁴ of words and semantic richness of larger linguistic units generate various valid interpretations in different readers under diverse circumstances” (Van der Merwe, 2015d, p.7). Tradition and personal research support contemporary interpreters’ richer meanings of the text than were available to the original readers (cf. Schneiders 2003, Gadamer 1975, Ricoeur 1976).

(4) Boundaries and freedom

The necessity for change and therefore also for “a new or amended Theology”, requires the reformulation of theological boundaries. These reformulations²⁵ relate with the character of Christianity, while the Bible itself sets certain limits and boundaries for the protection of the identity of Christianity. Thus, change is

response of Weren on this is that, “An essential element of this definition is that there is a reader who perceives relations and gives them a meaning and a function. Reception-oriented intertextuality involves implicit and free connections made by the reader, who can create relations which the author was not aware of” (Weren, 2014, p.96).

²² Weren refers to it as polyphonic (Weren, 2014).

²³ See Wittig (1977) for the pluri-signification in the parables in his essay *A theory of multiple meanings*.

²⁴ Vanhoozer (1997, pp.417–18) distinguishes four kinds of interpretive plurality: firstly, a plurality of authorial intentions occurs. An author might intend a number of interpretive possibilities in a particular text; secondly, there is a plurality of intra-textual relations and intertextual contexts; thirdly, a plurality of readers and the contexts of these readers may be discerned – multiculturalism influences biblical interpretation; “In order to serve the various needs and desires of various readers, texts *ought* to have plural meaning”; Fourthly, a plurality of reading methods occurs.

²⁵ See Shorter (2015) on the Christian transformation of African culture.

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture endorsed but certainly restricted.

According to Voelz all forms of discourse are context-bound and partial. This implies the subjectivity of discourse and that it “does not convey ... an easy comprehensive picture of reality” (Voelz, 2000, p.321). To solve this issue, Heyns (1974) proposes the following solution. For him, two kinds of truth occur in Scripture: central truth and peripheral truth. The Bible writers were distanced from our contemporary systematic, scientific and ordered knowledge of cosmology, physics and technical science. They had a different world view. Their formulation of reality was according to and related to their experiences of it in their idiom of transcendence versus immanence. One could thus take the view that God’s revelation was partly revealed, not in timeless or eternal truths (Heyns, 1974). This boils down towards both the respect for and the maintaining of central truths, as well as the reconsideration and reinterpretation of peripheral truths. “Peripheral truths are culturally bound and should be reinterpreted according to the principles embedded in these truths and how these truths relate to the present culture” (Van der Merwe, 2015d, pp.6-7).

(5) The search for biblical principles

Development: The development of doctrine (theology) is not something new. It occurs in Scripture and especially in the New Testament. Most of the New Testament authors made use of the Old Testament in their writings (see also Paul). Today we refer to it as intertextuality (see Weren, 2014). Marshall (2004, p.56) suggests that “texts that had a particular authoritative meaning in their original setting may have a different authoritative meaning in a different setting”.²⁶ The reading and interpretation of Scripture (theology) is dynamic and needs fresh practical applications (Marshall, 2004).

Different “umwelts”: The cultural-historical environments of the two biblical worlds (Old & New Testaments) differ in many ways from the postmodern and post-secular

²⁶ See for examples Marshall’s (2004) discussions on the “love commandment” in Leviticus 19:18 and the “call to live holy” from Leviticus 19:2.

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture environments and ethnic cultures. Therefore, culturally bounded expressions, laws and customs that we find in the Bible are no more applicable today. This does not imply that those references have to be annihilated today. They should rather to be reinterpreted. Important is to discover the principle embedded in the particular text. That principle should then be made applicable and relevant in a postmodern environment under the umbrella of the metanarrative and complete message of God in Scripture.

The centre point: amendments in theology should always be done in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the apostolic teaching. This is the essence of Christianity.

Particularity – *whole:* God’s revelation occurs not only in individual texts but corporative throughout Scripture. Individual texts must be interpreted and understood in the light of the whole. Some authoritative texts are no longer applicable in their original form, ‘but continue to be authoritative in a different way.

Continuity: During and in the process of change, continuity also occurs throughout Scripture. The God of Israel (Abraham, Izaac and Jacob) in the Old Testament is also the Father of Jesus and the early Christians in the New Testament and the God of Christianity throughout the ages. This God acts principally in the same way. Even the teaching of Jesus liaise with the Old Testament and the teaching of the early church (e.g. Paul)²⁷ (Marshall, 2004). However, who are we to say God cannot act differently in certain circumstances today? Nobody can ever restrict the sovereignty of God.

The mind of Christ: Development in doctrine (theology) and new understandings (intertextuality) are unavoidable. This should be based on the believer’s faith in God; it must be in accordance with “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16); it must be under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2) (Marshall, 2004).

²⁷ In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul writes, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” and in Colossians 2:6, “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him”.

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In conclusion, can the Bible mean whatever we want it to mean? According to Thiselton (2008, p.10) the reading of a text “requires patience, openness, listening, understanding, and indeed for a serious answer, the full repertoire of hermeneutics as well as these hermeneutical virtues”. These discussed hermeneutical principles have to be critically considered and applied in the construction of new theologies from which new spiritualities will evolve which will consequently make a new impact on the lives of believers. Part of wellbeing is to look at old things and experience old things in new ways – to constitute new excitements.

Christian spirituality to be considered as matrix for a person’s wellbeing

This section attends briefly to two most important aspects of Christian spirituality that play a critical role in conceptualising human wellbeing. The two aspects are God’s transcendence and immanence. In the amending of theologies these two aspects should receive much attention within respective cultures.

God’s transcendence - misteriumtremendum: Ancient as well as contemporary theologies admit the incomprehensible mystery of God. Theologies affirm this mystery by describing God kataphatically with a list of theoretical absolutes like all-good, all-knowing, omnipresent, eternal, unchanging, unseen, etc.²⁸ Such philosophical abstracts certainly emphasise the mystery of God (Burke, 1977).

When thinking about rewriting theology, or even redefining biblical cosmology (the ancient three story worldview)²⁹ one has to reconsider the *identity* and by implication the *character* of God. Who is this God? Maybe, who is this God for you? How real or true is this divine Being for you? To answer this question one has to

²⁸ This “mystery” is enhanced by some texts in the *corpus Johanneum*: John 1:18; 4:12; 5:37; 6:46; 14:8-11; 1 John 4:12, 20.

²⁹ Cosmology of the ancient world: Heaven, earth and underworld. <http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/gre13.htm>

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture distinguish clearly between God's transcendence and immanence and the relation and connection between these two aspects.

The Bible characterises God's immanence with words such as creating, commanding, loving, promising, comforting, righteous, light peace, truth, holy, (cf. Vanhoozer, 2010, p.3). Christianity understands the theistic nature of God "in analogy with the human nature of reason and personality". The Christian believer is aware of this as well as the restrictions and limitations tied up with this view. The attributes applied to God are complete; they are regarded as absolute and unqualified. All these attributes are regarded as comprehensible and specific: they are intellectually understandable, can be analysed, even be defined (Otto, 1936). They are essential attributes of God, but they are also synthetic essential attributes.

The transcendence of God reflects on his deeper essence. God cannot be comprehended by these attributes; the comprehension of God requires rather quite a different kind of reasoning and understanding (Otto, 1936). It seems though as if in Christianity a non-rational element is apparent in the nature of religious experiences (Otto, 1936).

Otto argues convincingly that in "Personal piety and ordered rites and liturgies, and again in the atmosphere that clings to old religious monuments and buildings, to temples and to churches" this non-rational side of God is experienced. In all this, devoted Christians will find they are dealing with "Someone" different for which only one appropriate expression occurs, "a *misteriumtremendum*" (Otto, 1936, p.12). "Conceptually, misterium denotes only that which is hidden and [is] esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar. What is enunciated in the word is negative, what is meant is something absolutely and intensely positive" (Otto, 1936, p.13).

Otto (1936) declares that the word "*tremendum*" adds something to "*misterium*", although that something is not necessarily inherent in *misterium*. The idea of mystery (misterium) is actually very closely connected with the qualifying attribute

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture *tremendum* which in this context connotes “awe”; the mystery almost becoming “awe mystery” to the believer. For believers it is distinct that divine nature or essence stretches far beyond any knowledge and “consequently all human linguistic expression is absolutely inadequate” (Strezova, 2012, p.176).

Otto (1936:26), in his explanation of the word “mysterium”, distinguishes between the normal and religious use of it. In a normal sense, the pronoun *mysterium* means a mystery or a secret in the sense of something alien to people, incomprehensible and unexplained. In a religious environment, mysterious (one), is “the wholly other, that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the canny, and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment” (Otto, 1936, p.26).

This mysterious God, which has no place in the human framework of reality, who belongs to an absolutely different form of reality and exists in totally other and different dimensions to which believers have no access, arouses an unmanageable curiosity in the human mind (cf. Otto, 1936). In the believer’s mystical consciousness, in feeling or experiencing the totally Other, higher modes of manifestation come into being. This contrasts the mysterious God with both every familiar thing and the world itself. This kind of manifestation exalts God to a metaphysical level, that which is above the whole world-order (cf. Otto, 1936).

If humans then cannot comprehend God, who are the critics to deny the salvation plan of God (cross & resurrection and *parousia*), its content and the *en route* to execute it? There must be an openness that Jesus and the Spirit relate divinely to the divine. We must also humbly acknowledge that we do not have all the answers of the questions we grapple with in life. The consciousness and experience of this *mysteriumtremendum* of God then becomes a mechanism or a catalyst for the believer’s spiritualities in everyday life. This in itself constitutes peace and excitement in the believer.

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This mysterious Being whom we refer to as “God” or even “Father” is so different and capable of doing so much more or even different, that it surpasses the believer’s mind (Philippians 4:7). Contemporary Christian theologies shall have to be formulated in the idioms of contemporary main cultures, such as the African cultures, Western cultures, Eastern cultures, etc. to make the Bible message more comprehensible today (cosmology, miracles, God’s revelation, presence, etc). This perception of the divine should create in the devoted Christian's daily life hope and trust, expectation and the experience of the peace and joy of God (Philippians 4:4-8). This Being is involved in creation in ways irrational to the believer. Paul says in Philippians 4:5–7 “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

God’s immanence - Supernatural existentia.³⁰ The bible refers to God also apophatically. In the Old Testament God is described and referred to as Deliverer, Rock, and the always-present Shepherd to his flock. Even Jesus teaches that God can be addressed as “Father” (Burke, 1977) and the Johannine believers are characterised as “children of God”. Thus metaphors have been used to say something about this mysterious being and which enable humans to talk about this God.

Related to the previous paragraph are the following two imperative questions posed by Burke: Is God intimate or foreign to human experience? Is God involved in daily human existence or is God an outside power who only intervenes rarely, in the biblical past and today, in marvellous, mighty deeds? (Burke, 1977). Burke (1977, p.39) refers to both Rahner and Dunne who made this critical statement that “the Mystery of the transcendent God is found not just beyond daily existence but also

³⁰ In this subsection I rely on the work of Burke (1977) in his understanding and discussion of Rahner. This phrase (supernatural existential) is used by Rahner to refer to divine life itself, God's self-communication.

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture within the human person". Both reason that a believers' understanding of themselves – their personal experiences of life—*can constitute an acceptance of God's ongoing revelation*. Rahner asserts that all people, with or without any knowledge of Jesus, have received implicitly, what he calls, "the gracious revelation of God" (Burke 1977, p.39). Due to God's supernatural grace has each person in that person's existence (Burke, 1977), according to Rahner, a "supernatural existential". For Rahner interprets this as the divine life itself, God's self-communication. The phrase "Supernatural existential" signifies in this paper those "experiences and capabilities for life which are not inherent to human nature" (Burke, 1977, p.40).

For Rahner this "supernatural existential" results in both warm experiences and also in extraordinary human capabilities. Such capabilities are e.g. the "human capability for self-giving love, for absolute honesty, for unconditional loyalty, respect for duty, and unselfish commitment for the good of others" (Burke, 1977, p.40). Paul's reference of the fruit of the Spirit can also be added here, "... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians. 5:22-23). These actions should be regarded to exceed the "natural" human abilities. It should actually be regarded as consequences of God giving himself to human existence (Burke, 1977). What Rahner, Burke and Dunne forgot to add and to express is that a specific mindset is needed to experience God in this everyday living. A person's mind has to be With the lack of such a mindset the believer will miss all the amazing spiritualities embedded in everyday life as well as the joy and peace of God embedded in it.

These things are a call to greater humanness to be experienced within oneself. It should be interpreted and experienced to be God's call to unite with Him. The experience of oneself in the experiences of life and in one's capabilities for life, "is comparable to experiencing God, his revelation, his self-communication" (Burke, 1977, p.41). Burke (1977) then relates a similar idea of Dunne with that of Rahner; the idea of God's presence within human existence. God's revelation becomes evident and is reflected within a person's own experience, a person's own narrative (Burke, 1977). I want to repeat it. When people do not seek it, they will not find and

The continuous dialectic between Theology and Culture experience God's continuous self revelation. It concerns a specific mindset.

Rahner argues that the most common experiences of life can be critical revelatory experiences of the mysterious divine. The changes people make to understand, to relate to others and to attach to now things that bring new meanings and excitement may be extremely important changes. Unfortunately can they be overlooked as some normal changes? For Dunne a person's insight into such experiences can be the illumining of their minds by God. At first glance insights into such experiences may seem to be common. Although Dunne is of opinion that such insights can be interpreted and be experienced as sacred (Burke, 1977).

All changes in life offer new perspectives, but only to the one who seeks them. The changes are brought by the creative and guiding power of God. Only the one who is open to insight allows a place for God to speak. Both Rahner and Dunne, then, experience God to be present in a person's experience of the self. God's revelation needs not to be the extraordinary or the miraculous what many people are curiously looking for, a kind of announcement from a foreign celestial sort of world. Indeed, it may be only the revelation of what is already present within the person (Burke, 1977, p.43).

Conclusion

How do all these aspects relate? Where post-secularism opens up a new interest in religion and spirituality, postmodernism widens the possibility for new meanings and experiences of the divine. Good hermeneutics has to utilise this new interest in religion and the widening of meaning possibilities to characterise Christianity in a new garment and to protect the identity of Christianity in the formulation of sound and relevant theologies with implications for human wellbeing. African Christian theologies and spiritualities will in certain ways differ from Australian Christian theologies and spiritualities. These theologies should guide believers to experience the divine not only in the extraordinary but also in the natural flow of everyday life. This demands a certain mind-set.

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