SEASONS IN THEOLOGY

Inroads of postmodernism, reference and representation

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FOREWORD

The worldview that evolved over the past five centuries, culminating in modernism, is a scientific one based on representation. The art of accurate representation became the magic wand. Representing reality means knowing it, and knowledge means control – and who can deny the efficacy of technoscience grounded in representation? But the study object of theology is not empirically observable, nor can it be broken down into its smallest elements. Theology can do no more than study the medium in which its study object (God) appears indirectly, namely the world of texts. Cornerstones in that world of objectified texts are their validity; history; language, translation and commentaries; inter- and intra-text; textual reference; and representation. But, like the world of empirical research, the textual world is never free from human subjects and the power strategies they import to legitimise themselves, their schools of thought and the like. Truth, unity, methodology, laws, propositions, dogmas, you name it – these were hallmarks of the enterprise.

In the heyday of modernism there were critical voices. Representation had to be legitimised, whereupon the prefix 'post-' spread like wildfire: postmodernism, post-empiricism, post-positivism, post-structuralism, post-metaphysics, post-epistemology, post-representation. Unity, truth and method – the foundations of science and modernism – came under fire. They were not demolished but were combined with concepts like multiplicity, complexity, realitivity, relationalism, interdisciplinary study, contingence and contextuality.

Historically the human sciences antedate the physical sciences. Philosophy with its subdisciplines – logic, anthropology, theology, cosmology, ethics and the rest – dates back to ancient

Greece, and for centuries it ruled scientific thought as a kind of (speculative, non-empirical) human science. After the advent of Christianity, and especially its adoption by the state, theology was assigned a privileged position and philosophy took second place, featuring via trends like neo-Platonism and, later, Aristotelian thought. The scientific revolution in the 15th century was a watershed, triggering a process that culminated in science as we know it today. From the outset it was clear that empirical observation, especially with mathematics as the lingua franca of physical science, had a huge advantage over the human sciences because of the relative incontrovertibility of its findings.

The key word was representation. The physical sciences could depict reality more reliably, accurately and directly than the human sciences. They could lay claim to objectivity and neutrality and could control, replicate and prove their findings. The human sciences, it was said, were prone to subjectivity, cultural bias, value judgments, metaphysics and religion. Since the human sciences were pre-eminently textual, marked by sub-jective elements like imagination, language, stories, interpreta-tion and understanding, issues like representation and reference were singled out, especially in hermeneutics. Philosophy devoted a lot of attention to justification: how can statements and judgments be justified? But justification in philosophy came up against the three bugbears of logical circularity, infinite regress and recourse to absolute certitude (Habermas 1987:302).

For many centuries the human sciences remained subject to the domination of theology and the church, until the three grand masters of suspicion – Freud, Nietzsche and Marx – upset the applecart. They exposed the centres of power and control and questioned the notion of truth, the nature of the human psyche and the tyranny of the state. But can the human sciences be

assigned greater scientific status after the deconstruction of their 'truths'? Is their contribution not aesthetic rather than scientific?

The emergence of hermeneutics with its emphasis on explanation and understanding has certainly brought us closer to correct reading and interpretation of texts, but who's to say that those texts (revelation) contain ultimate truth?

Some human sciences try to emulate the physical sciences to give their findings greater plausibility. The pretension underlying quantitative methods (e.g. empirical theology) with their accent on statistics and case studies was pinpointed, implying that these efforts are not free from highly subjective elements. Even the speculative aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis have been discovered, so his contribution is considered to be mainly at a para-psychological level, hence closer to philosophy than to the exact sciences. And in philosophy epistemology – long regarded as the bedrock of the discipline – was likewise deconstructed to a post-epistemology with greater emphasis on subjectivity and human virtue (virtue epistemology).

But science, including physical science, also has subjective and culturally contextual elements. The human mind with its imagination and innovativeness is not confined to any science. Indeed, the contribution – albeit indirect – of Christianity to the development of Western science is commonly acknowledged.

The evolution of the sciences proceeded apace. Physics has largely reached maturity, its further growth pending the development of new measuring instruments. In the 21st century the accent is on the biological and medical sciences. Human scientists have been speaking about the 'end' of philosophy for some time, and postmodernism has called the claims of most sciences into question. Even theology as a pre-eminently textual science is past its prime. Academically the emphasis is shifting

more and more to disciplines targeting the labour market and the dictates of the corporate world. Among the major challenges is research relating to the future of our planet and its dwindling resources, deteriorating natural environment and growing number of endangered species. Does that mean that after the supernova of modernism the burnt-out human spirit is merely a white dwarf of pessimism, fighting grimly for the last dregs of energy before they run out? The answer will be determined, not by technoscience, but by the human spirit.

The term 'human spirit' is inescapably linked with spirituality, religion, values. Hence the theme of spirituality is of cardinal importance on the secular level as well. When it comes to the human sciences concepts like linear and cumulative growth do not apply. Humans remain their own worst enemies, including threatening the future of life on the planet. In that context the question of control keeps cropping up: in how far can growth, technoscience, economies, expansion be controlled? (See chapters 10 and 11.)

The contribution of religion generally and Christian theology in particular would be to play on values that induce human beings to live harmoniously with their physical, social and other environments. This does not preclude the notion of personal salvation, but religion cannot – as it tended to do in the past – confine itself to that. If it disregards contextual responsibility for the sake of individual experience and future salvation, it offers no more than any form of entertainment. Religion is literally re-creation with a view to the fulfilment of human destiny: meeting our responsibility to ourselves, God, our fellow humans and our environment.

Theology must orient itself to physical reality, in the sense of honestly studying the real world and acting pragmatically to meet its demands. A prophetic theology is by definition societal.

But a societal theology should focus on more than just social problems. Above all it must be critical of the phenomenon of power in all its protean forms, from monopolistic truth claims to economic and technoscientific tyranny. It includes a reappraisal of, and interaction with, what one could call secular spirituality, which encompasses every form of spirituality that influences the human mind. It includes an ecological theology that, as a present-day natural theology, puts our responsibility for the physical environment and the survival of life on earth on its agenda.

This book touches on aspects of these seasonal changes in theology.

Chapter 1 takes a tongue-in-cheek look at theology as a science. It is primarily a textual science, working on the biblical text and all the texts that have been written in response to that revelatory source through the ages. Hence science in theology is based on intertextual dialogue and the truths that such dialogue brings to light. The multiplicity of texts, especially as they emerge in references, is often so contingent that the references should be seen as purely metaphoric.

Chapter 2 explores what theology is from different vantage points on truth and in terms of its contextual nature. It looks at aspects of theology as a scientific and, more specifically, a textual discipline. Other issues are the extent to which theology is governed by the church and, in the South African context, liberation theology.

Chapter 3 elaborates further on the theme of truth and how it directs research. Postmodernism proclaimed an end to ultimate truth. Does that mean the end of theology, which traditionally laid claim to such truth? In its new context theology may be qualified as post-canonical, post-confessional, post-secular,

postmodern and interreligious. Its relatedness to reality is highlighted by examining aspects of a societally oriented theology.

Chapter 4 focuses more specifically on the postmodern idiom in theology. Postmodernism remains linked to modernism and may be seen as a critical counterpoint rather than a movement in its own right. Certain postmodern features of theology are identified, which characterise it as anti-fundamentalist, radically pluralistic, textual and metaphoric, applying a hermeneutics of suspicion in light of present-day notions about history, language and culture. The influence of postmodern theology on subjectivity and the doctrine of God is discussed, as well as some theological implications of the interpretation of power and technology.

Chapter 5 deals with theology as a textual science and the nature of textual truth as representation. The modernist conception of science has representation as its root metaphor and sees its task as representing the natural world accurately in scientific terms. In theology this translates into how supernatural reality is represented in texts. The intra-textual and extra-textual worlds interrelate in complex ways. Roland Barthes's (1983: 31-61) zero reference is dealt with, together with Derrida's never-ending reference of *différence* and Heidegger's exposition of the text as a world (the world – *Welt* – created by the text). Theological truth depends on the interpretation of reference. Mention is made of the implications of reference for theology as a dogmatic discipline.

Chapter 6 looks at the aftermath of an era that has brought us to the 'end' of truth. It examines the end of religious truth, scientific truth and metaphysical truth. Different theories of truth are outlined, along with the implications of the narrative nature of theological truth. The chapter concludes with a sketch of the

functioning of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Chapter 7 concerns the description of our world order as diverse or pluralistic, and how this affects our perception of truth. 'Open truths' turn us into tourists who, after prolonged isolation, are given new visas that offer opportunities for exciting new journeys. That is what life amid cultural diversity means. The context no longer permits essentialism. As eternal travellers we are bedouins pursuing a truth that is told anew in the diverse stories of each milieu. One fascinating context is the recognition of the biological roots of the mind and its truths. The chapter concludes with a consideration of African truth and its communal nature, as epitomised by the concept of ubuntu.

Chapter 8 discusses the continuance, characteristics and influence of religion in a post-secular society. The religious world is not a-secular, any more than the secular world is a-religious. The reasons why the secularisation thesis has not been realised and the role of modernism and pluralism in this development are explored. The notion of a people's religion and the role of post-secularism in theology and postmodernism are dealt with. The new South Africa, in which a secular state does not promote any specific religion, has replaced the 'Christian' apartheid state. African Traditional Religions must find their place in this new context. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is cited as an example of the interaction of religious and secular realities.

Chapter 9 elaborates on the same theme as chapter 8, focusing on aspects of secular spirituality. The term 'secular spirituality' is meant to convey the contemporary phenomenon of spirituality experienced at all sorts of levels not associated with structured, institutionalised religion. We outline the relation between secular reality (the natural realm) and religious/spiritual reality

(the supernatural realm) as it developed from pre-secular animism (pre-modern unity with nature), to secular dualism (modernism), to post-secular holism (influence of post-modernism). This is followed by a thumbnail sketch of secular spirituality in Africa, specifically during the liberation struggle. Secular spirituality in its techno-spiritual mode, which is becoming increasingly important, is dealt with cursorily before using it as a model for a postmodern natural theology. In this context 'natural theology' does not involve a search for proofs of God's existence, but seeks to integrate the natural and supernatural dimensions of human life meaningfully.

Chapter 10 concerns the way ideologies forcibly represent reality and how this tyranny can be overcome by the dream of utopia. There are different approaches to the problem of ideologies. On the one hand we must recognise that we all have ideologies, on the other we should try to interpret, analyse and, if necessary, transcend them. Some interpretive models are outlined. Attention is given to ideology as both a distortion and a legitimation of reality. Ideology is compared structurally with utopia, pointing out the similarities and emphasising the importance of utopia for any society. Utopia is a source of creative power, capable of representing an alternative vision. As such it criticises ideologies and inspires us to consider alternative societal models. Different kinds of utopia are discussed. Recourse to symbols is proposed as a fruitful approach to ideological reality. The functioning and changing nature of social symbols is noted, as are the possibilities of an epistemologically oriented critique of, and a semiotic approach to, ideologies. A semiotic approach entails interpretation of signs and symbols. The church's task, especially in emphasising atonement as the complement of freedom and love, is emphasised.

Chapter 11 deals with the public and hidden faces of power, how we use it and suffer under it. Religion is undeniably one of the oldest means of exercising power and control. A religious hermeneutics of power ought to be an ongoing project. Religious power is manifested inter alia in the subversive form of wisdom and truth. Its claims to 'weakness' and altruism, too, can be used to exert power.

Chapter 12 examines a facet of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, which sees understanding of texts as analogous to understanding human beings. To Ricoeur religion is post-critical, post-rational and interpretive. In an age marked by a spirit of suspicion we can no longer take religion for granted, neither can a second religious naivety be created artificially. Religious language and thought are analogous to poetry. Religious experience functions in the domain of narrative and symbol. We live by way of stories that articulate our values, fears and hopes. The notion of reference is highlighted, including the way it features in the practice of church proclamation.

The final chapter deals with postmodern sexuality in our present-day ethos. In the prevailing framework many are critical of unquestioning faith, pedantic prescriptiveness and absolute ethoses. The church often preaches the ethics it believes its members to hold. Examples are cited of how sexual ethics are dealt with in church documents. There are deconstructive comments on chastity, followed by features of a postmodern ethos based on a reappraisal of corporeality. Matthew 5:27-30 is examined to see how a biblical text on sexuality could be read in our time.

The book is a product of inter- and transdisciplinary research. Gone are the days when disciplines were studied in isolation from each other. Thus theology is complemented by fields like

philosophy, theory of literature, sociology, biology and anthropology.

Most of the chapters are modified versions of articles published previously. I acknowledge the following publications:

Chapter 1

FOOTNOTE REFERENCES AS METAPHOR

Science as reference

Science bases itself on reference. Physical science describes the physical world, classifies species, works out formulae to render the laws underlying nature. Its primary method is inductive. Speculation is ruled out, although conjecture is permitted. But not all physical phenomena are visible. At molecular and especially at atomic level models and metaphors are used to describe the nature of, for instance, atoms. Nobody has ever seen an atom, an electron or a quark. Nonetheless scientific facts can be checked, experiments are repeatable, and paradoxes and contradictions are permitted only as rare exceptions. Physical science rests on experimentation and method, on testing and measurement, on verification and falsification.

The human sciences deal with realities that cannot always be qualified empirically, so references function differently. God is not visible. History is based on interpretations of facts, so histories differ. Sociology observes human behaviour, but people behave differently from each other, so the descriptions are at best approximations. For the most part the human sciences proceed deductively. Certain theses are postulated, whereupon an entire doctrine or model is built. The sole condition is that deductions must tally with these premises. Metaphysics deals with a world existing *meta* (alongside) physical reality. Philosophy has produced admirable metaphysics that governed human thought over the ages. But late 19th and 20th century philosophy became increasingly critical of metaphysical systems, to the extent of claiming that they have reached their end. Kant in particular pointed out how the human mind devises truths that cannot be physically demonstrated. Obviously mathematics, a symbol system, operates this way, the difference being that mathematical formulas fit reality in fascinating ways. The world is amenable to mathematical language.

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The human sciences are pre-eminently textual and texts contain references. They may be to the world beyond the text, but also to the intratextual world created by the text itself. That is what we call zero reference (see chapter 6) and is found mainly in novels. In textual human sciences references are predominantly intertextual. Texts build on other texts in an infinite series of layers Theology developed the archaeological tracing of texts underlying other texts in subdisciplines like textual, redaction and historical criticism.

We refer to other texts in footnotes; texts without footnotes are usually not considered to be scientific. But how reliable is this mode of 'doing science'? That is the theme we deal with briefly.

Footnotes as reference

Life is a network of references. In fact, they determine us from the cradle to the grave.

Scientific texts are self-conscious. They have a certain dignity, based on method, structure, reference and truth. They are texts that profess to know. The references in a scientific text – via footnotes – are no less self-conscious. They must be unambiguous: no vagueness or ambiguity can be tolerated, hence they must also be correct. Naturally footnote references are secondary, for the text primarily refers immanently to its own world, hence to itself and its own relation to its sections and subdivisions. Footnotes refer to a world beyond the text, which cannot be checked at that moment simply because it is not immediately available. The texts to which they refer are present only to the extent that the author cites them.

We rarely realise that the world referred to in footnotes is far bigger, older and wiser than the one reflected in the text. The fact that I browse in the library (cemetery) with its books (gravestones) as objects all around me doesn't make my life greater than theirs simply because I have their titles and headings at my disposal. Both graves and books remain closed until awareness of the life and worth they have, or once had, resurrects them in my mind. That affects my horizon.

Strategy of footnotes

Footnotes say everything and nothing. Nothing, because they are footnotes and the text can be read without them. Everything, because they vouch for the authority, reliability, et cetera of the text and thus carry it.

Footnotes give a text a scientific character *because* they are references. They refer to some norm, control, witness, tradition, allies and opponents. Hence via its footnotes the text both identifies and dissociates itself. In its footnotes it plays with others texts, grapples with them, interacts with them.

But there is also a certain power strategy in the use of footnotes. Invoking an authoritative author or text makes your own text more authoritative. The omission, for instance, of an obvious reference could indicate the author's estimation of that text. It is not always clear whether the text 'carries' the footnotes or whether the notes have to 'carry' the text. Through their footnotes authors can display their academic muscle, can quote in all the languages they know – even ones they don't know – and can moreover do so from the original text. Quoting from the original suggests intimate knowledge of that text, hence the primary nature of the author's information. Nobody knows whether she has read just the page from which she is quoting, or whether she has read the entire text and, more especially, read it in context. In that case the footnote is carrying the text, not the other way round. Through his footnotes an author can make himself extremely vulnerable, so sound strategy is a sine qua non. Citing an outdated work or one that is taboo in a particular academic environment can jeopardise the author's text, regardless of its content.

Relativising nature of footnotes

By self-consciously referring in footnotes authors acknowledge their dependence on other texts and ideas. They acknowledge that there has been interaction – interaction with other authors. Of course, there are many ways of interacting with other texts. One can proceed eclectically, maybe simply present a poor replica of the other text or

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violate it outright. One can handle it honestly or dishonestly. One can abuse it to suit the ends of one's own work. Authors use another text with only one aim in mind: to pin it down in a footnote. Most authors are promiscuous in their dealings with texts. There is a danger that greater frequency of interaction all too easily results in superficial interaction. Thus one could surmise that an apparently virile text, attested by frequent references to other texts in footnotes, may easily become impotent. Such a text says nothing and is nothing but a history of its way of dealing with other texts via footnotes.

With reference to the pleasure of texts, Roland Barthes points out the 'slit' operating in a text, thus creating a subtext. That tension created by the split is what makes the text 'desirable'. Barthes (1983:411), referring to the 'desirability' of texts, feels that clinical semiotic representation leaves them lifeless: "That is what representation is: when nothing emerges, when nothing leaps out of the frame: of the picture, the book, or screen."

Footnotes reveal the relativity of a text. It is one in a whole line of texts, an incarnation of other texts bearing their fingerprints and footmarks on its body. This cannot but relativise the topic discussed in the text as well. Truth, too, is a trace, an expression, a bit of pleasure. Footnotes not only indicate the relativity of the text but are themselves relative. Why is a particular text cited in a footnote at that particular point? Could the note equally well have referred to some other text, or could the same reference have occurred at a different point? If an expert in the field were to read a text without looking at the footnotes and consider what footnotes she would have inserted, would they be the same ones? If an author were to reread his own work after a lapse of time and consider what texts he would cite at a particular point, would it be the same texts he had used before? Probably not. That suggests that a reference to another text at a particular point may be fortuitous.

Possibly footnote references to other texts indicate the author's train of thought. Whereas authors may observe a fixed structure in their work, use specific scientific methods, et cetera, footnotes are not subject to such a rigid regime. Reference usually occurs by way of

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association and connotation, which in their turn are contingent and not necessarily repeatable. If references to other texts, interaction with other authors, influence the author after all, then a work in which other texts feature would look different if it is rewritten. That would be indicative of the fragmented nature, not only of human existence but also of science and its truth. But it also has positive implications for science.

Footnotes as metaphor

Normally human scientists use references in a fundamentalistic way. In fact, fundamentalism is a hazard in all references. It happens when the reference is used to pronounce unequivocally on an equivocal issue: when A in your text is equated with, or related to, the A of some other author's text, which another person may see as B, C or D, and which may actually not be one of the alternatives at all. Most texts are cited out of context. After all, one could hardly sketch the exact background to the cited source every time one refers to a text, which is inevitably done within one's own framework. If the two frameworks were identical, the author would not have written anything new.

The fact is, however, that sources are never cited humbly but categorically, with ostensible scientific exactitude. Fundamentalism is at its most dangerous when it is unrecognised, as when an author tries to freeze textual relations while they are and remain fluid. Renouncing fundamentalism is to renounce the security offered by bias. But renouncing fundamentalism also permits the possibility that the interaction could be different, that a new interpretation and truth can be born. That means surrendering to the movement of metaphor.

Paradoxically, metaphors represent meaning by presenting what they are not. They not only help us to talk about God (because we can name him without claiming to know his essence), but are more true to the way we refer to the empirical world. After all, we are working with verbal concepts. But the stone or the cat we refer to can never be known exactly *an sich*. Metaphorically we realise that our perception is built on subjective representation of the outside world. The image of a rugby match that I watch on the television screen is electronically

mediated, just as stories, paintings, poems, texts, religion or footnotes mediate slices of reality – a reality that always surpasses what they mediate.

Footnotes often refer like metaphors. In metaphors there is one point of similarity or analogy for every thousand points of dissimilarity. Because footnotes deal with other texts eclectically, there is often just one point of similarity between the subject of that text and the subject indicated by the footnote as it features in a different text. As in the case of metaphors, one person may spot a point of similarity that someone else would never notice. That makes reference – indeed, truth and science – extremely relative but also creative. It is such playful interaction with other texts that laughingly relativises one's own truth, yet also occasionally gives birth to something new. The metaphoric way in which footnotes refer could vary. It could take the form of analogy, simile, epiphor or diaphor. (The former term refers to the element of correspondence in a metaphor, the latter to the element of dissimilarity.)

When an author refers fundamentalistically, unequivocally, with the assurance that this is how it is and not otherwise, little good can come of his footnotes/references. It is the author who allows the not-so of her reference to influence her who will be most open to creative reinterpretation of the material she is dealing with. It is authors who constantly allow the different horizon of the paradigm they are citing to influence their thinking who are able to produce something new from that tension.

Footnotes as traces

Anyone who writes and quotes, that is to say, writes and refers in footnotes, does so in the hope that his own text may one day feature in a footnote somewhere. Anyone who refers runs a risk of fundamentalism. There is flagrant fundamentalism and sophisticated, covert fundamentalism. Sophisticated fundamentalists may be as unaware of their own fundamentalism as flagrant fundamentalists. Of course, there is a big difference between a bad reference and a good one. A wrong reference may hit everyone in the eye, or the error may

only be discovered after careful investigation. Good references are those that take the framework that they refer to seriously. In ancient texts, where one finds a layering of tradition, research in fact shows that it is difficult to tell what the original author actually said.

Thus no reference ever corresponds exactly with the cited text. Each new textual horizon differs from the previous one. The closer the new horizon to the cited one, the less likely it is to come up with something new. The value of new texts lies in the new truths they reveal or the old truths they present in new ways. The problem with flagrant fundamentalism is that it refers to a text and insists that it says what it manifestly does not say. The 'advantage' is that it permits the fundamentalist to say something very different, even something new.

Chapter 2

IDENTITIES OF TRADITIONAL REFORMED THEOLOGY

Introduction

In view of the new style, paradigm and climate for theologising in post-1994 South Africa, we have an obligation to reflect anew on what we mean by theology. Changes in the political, social and economic spheres present fresh problems and challenges, which also affect theology. These changes call for renewed reflection on, for example, anthropology, ecclesiology and liberation theology with its demands for theological praxis. The question of the exclusiveness of Christian truth must be reconsidered within the framework of a fully secular state under the new constitution. The question of an indigenous African theology and a pattern of inculturalisation that deviates from the traditional Christian approach to Scripture also needs attention. At an ethical level thorny issues like human rights, economic models, freedom and responsibility should be discussed. In addition it is high time that the debate between theologians of different colours and denominations gets under way in earnest at a real-life, contextual – and not only an academic – level.

There is a lot of dissatisfaction with theology in its present form. The question of the meaning of theology normally arises when boredom and sterility set in. The concrete issues mentioned above clearly militate against purely theoretical or metaphysical speculation and preclude simply repeating old answers to the question. There have been many answers but it must be answered again, not necessarily because of uncertainty about what theology was or should be, but because it is a living science which continually inquires into the reality of God and human responsibility and how that is represented in each new situation. Theology is permanently subject to God's criticism, says Ter Schegget. God withdraws from a rigid theology (Ter Schegget 1988:41). Theology must be open to criticism. To be sure, it is a moot point whether that criticism is human or divine. God

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is inaudible; all we have is critical voices speaking in our time. Theologies and religions differ because they derive from different situations. Theologians live in different parts of the world, and come from different social classes. When reading theology one gets a glimpse of these various points of view and ways in which they relate to God. From this interchange of perspectives one forms one's own view (cf Borgman 1990:134).

Theology, and specifically Christian theology, is the umbrella term for the sciences dealing with facets and implications of the belief that God exists, has revealed himself to humankind, and is represented through his revelation, the witness of the church, faith experiences and the like. In fact, only a small subsection of theology concerns itself with questions about God's existence. The theological subdisciplines, each with its own historical tradition and agenda, have become so wide-reaching that a comprehensive overview is no longer possible, with the result that in a fragmented context the meaning of theology is not easily determinable. Hence the God-question will never again have a uniform answer. God is one, but theology is multiform. The theologian (a person) thinks (theologises) and God laughs (freely adapted from an old Jewish saying). Theologians must always be aware of the distinction between their words and God's Word, which they can only interpret inasmuch as they know it from ancient scriptures written by people with very different worldviews. Theology is always a human enterprise.

Many find the lack of conformity and unity in theology problematic (Kasper 1989:13). Theology is always more than the specific theology being propounded. Besides, genitive theologies such as the theology of hope (Moltmann), of love (Jüngel), of the word event (Ebeling), and others with different emphases such as metaphorical, liberation and ecological theology, merely highlight a particular facet. They ask the same question but there are many answers. A multiplicity of churches must give rise to a multiplicity of theologies (although there is more ecumenical interaction between theologians of different denominations than between churches). Theology has become so all-embracing and theologians so numerous that macro answers to the

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question of the meaning of theology are no longer feasible. Theology cannot be other than multi-tiered and multidimensional.

Theology has always been concerned with *truth*. Truth, especially in Greek thinking, is overarching, universal and *ultimate*. In the New Testament this metaphysically oriented concept of truth is historicised in the conviction that Jesus is the truth. In him the general and the particular, the movement from 'above' and the movement from 'below', are said to converge. The truth which is Jesus manifests itself in the fullness of his relationships with the Father and human beings. In these relationships Jesus is a metaphor for the way faith, hope and love come true. The moment truth is seen as located in relationships, it is both singular and plural (i.e. one and many). This accords with the dynamic concept of truth that we are considering here in its provisional and challenging form. The provisional nature of theology keeps it modest and acknowledgment of its contingent nature testifies to its seriousness.

The credibility of theology is called into question whenever it fails to understand or is unable to serve the world in which it functions. Divorced from its contemporary context, it pales into mere history of theology. It may cease to be theology even if theologising flourishes. It has to satisfy numerous demands and conditions to be theology at all. These include scientific standards, accountability to the church and relevance to socio-political realities. The demands may broaden or change. Some forms of theology appear to be ivory tower hobbyhorses, for example a theology which is so critical of its sources that it subverts the grounds of its own existence. No doubt even these forms of theology can be fruitful. For a while they may even serve as sound theology.

The existence of pure theologies which must be 'discovered' and practised is a myth. The history of theology shows that answers which seemed to offer the best explanation in a particular era later turn out to be partially true, even false. That same history also sounds a warning against one-sided, purely transcendental or metaphysical theology, existential theology, liberation theology, et cetera. Aspects peculiar to these theologies remain part of the tradition of thought, without which

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theology would not be possible. But the question about the meaning of theology must be answered *contextually*.

The field of enquiry determines the nature of both the enquiry and the science. Theology's 'object of study' is only indirectly recognisable in the textual witness of Scripture and tradition. In addition its ultimate concern, God himself, is only indirectly identifiable through texts. Theology is inescapably a textual science. The theologian can do no more than measure the faith and tradition of the church against the textual evidence that gives access to it. The danger is that such an exclusive emphasis on texts can result in a theology about the god of texts rather than about Scripture as 'God's text'. Yet God eludes the grasp of theologians: without them he instils faith and without their texts he encounters people. All that theology can be certain about is the text it examines, and even that eludes final interpretation.

There is a growing tendency to move beyond the various branches of theology, with the result that they not only overlap but also make extensive use of para-theological disciplines. A theological text is indeed an *intertext*, in which many different texts function simul-taneously.

Theology in context

Theology is a contextual appropriation of God's word to meet the needs and wants of the people of its time. Each theology is already situated in a particular context (a theological *Vorverständnis*). This context (horizon) determines the problem area in which it operates, its addressees, the ethical questions it considers and the appeals it makes. Unfortunately theology often speaks out only in reaction to the protests of non-theologians or the media. Experience shows that all too often it arrives at the accident scene too late to be an eye-witness. Hierarchical structures obstruct a quick response from the church. Although theology traditionally spoke to the church, it is increasingly focusing on society, especially when the church is not sufficiently receptive to its voice.

On the one hand theology must be directed to the world and its needs, on the other it must be prophetic and not merely world-directed. Whenever theology simply parrots the voices of others and works according to their agendas, its prophetic nature is called into question. The theological context can become a prison, warns Geense. In addition theology can be decisively influenced by the philosophical climate of a particular period, its own psychological structure, the social forces determining it and the ecclesiastic and universal framework in which it functions (Geense 1988:9). It must maintain a critical distance from these factors. Theology must be directed to the world, but in such a way that its orientation reflects its avant-garde character. Then the theological word is experienced as prophetic.

How does theology determine its agenda, and how does it come to fruition? Which influences are permissible and which should be filtered out? Should it proceed from the allegedly pure Word of God (approach from above) or from the human situation (approach from below)? The problem is that it is not always possible to distinguish between the two approaches, that is between theology and anthropology, because we read, interpret and consider the truth from 'above' (revelation) against the background of our own language, culture, and experience. Theology can become so ensnared in an approach from above that it provides answers from above without understanding the questions from below. It can also be so preoccupied with voices from below that it closes itself to any talk from 'above'.

If the approach from 'below' is unacceptable because it over accentuates the human element, and the approach from 'above' is rejected because it appears too absolute, how do we find a middle way? An existential answer lies in the text as a word event, centring on individuals' relationship with God, themselves, their world and their fellow human beings. It is with the text as story that we identify. The text as a life world has the potential to address people more strongly than the world outside the text. This means that as scientific critics theologians must consider the various possibilities of what is perceived as reality rather than settle for some reductive, historically 'true' theory of reality. In a sense the intra-textual and extra-textual worlds are not separate but merely different ways of experiencing,

thinking about and describing the same world. Without the world there is no text and without the text no world. In the story we recognise ourselves as we are in our human dilemmas and we identify with its answers to these. In fact, it is not just people who possess texts: the gods do, too. In the three monotheistic religions God is predominantly experienced through textual mediation in whatever interpreted version the text is presented. The text's reference is not limited to the physical world. Through metaphor, oxymoron and comparison it expresses the ineffable and sheds light on the ineffable One.

Biblical narratives are not in the first place abstract reasoning; they are stories in which we 'live'. We identify with the events they recount to such an extent that we 'lose' ourselves in the story. In this way God is immediately present as one who speaks and acts. In the story there is no longer any distance between subject and object; it is no longer a matter of from 'above' or 'below' but of experience and encounter.
It does not simply mimic Scripture, but also mirrors life.

Theological reform and the transformation of the modern university

Theological reform is influenced by the broader environment in which it will be performed. University policy, societal interests, the role of education and ecclesiastic policies co-determine the direction, speed and intensity of reform.

Identity of the modern university

Universities originated in the 12th century, during the Middle Ages. In Bologna (Italy) students formed guilds and employed lecturers. These guilds were open to everyone and were fully democratic. Initially at most universities there was regular contact between lecturers and students concerning curricula and other matters of importance. It is thus not so strange that students today demand a greater say in all matters affecting them. Universities in the Middle Ages were initially relatively free from the influence of the church and the state – a freedom to be envied today!

Reforms in Napoleon's time expected education to be directed to the needs of bourgeois society. The idea of occupational training started here and impinged on academic freedom. The university as we know it today is structured according to the 19th century German model, when Von Humboldt tried to restore the ideals of the medieval university. Education, character formation and scientific training were considered equally important. Students were encouraged to do independent, creative work (Klapwijk 1991:20-28).

Universities today seem to have lost many of the initial ideals. The emphasis is increasingly on technical or professional training, which often lacks creativity, ethics and aesthetics and fails to form a critical, independent worldview and contribute to modes of thinking. These factors may not be directly measurable in terms of utility, applicability and money. They are, however, indispensable for balanced academic training.

There is no prescribed ideal of what universities must be. The university is a cultural artefact and as such should reflect cultural changes as they occur. This does not mean that it should simply succumb to cultural pressures to be and to do what is regarded as fashionable. Universities should protest against any manipulation by the state, interest groups, donors and so on. The real danger is that they will neglect their critical function so as to please the government of the day. They have to maintain their own unique identity to be of benefit to society. A university should not necessarily reflect the morals of the society it serves but must interact critically with that morality. Neither should it simply mirror and represent that society on all levels. It should rather challenge unreflected cultural ideas of the day. If universities conform to prescribed modes of thinking, succumbing to academic puppetry, they merely repeat what is already known and make no worthwhile contribution. Academic integrity presupposes academic freedom, commitment to the common good in a spirit of critical solidarity. Of course this calls for self-criticism so as to be able to adapt to new insights into their own nature, place and function. The different historical and societal contexts in which universities operate influence their identity. Thus they must prepare themselves for rapid urbanisation and increasing student numbers.

Self-understanding in the theological profession

The self-understanding of the entire theological profession has become a predicament. To evaluate, reconstruct and reform the profession one will have to ask preliminary questions once again. Scholars and experts often continue to offer courses without any self-criticism or re-evaluation, as if they know exactly what they are doing and why they are doing it and as if their colleagues all know exactly what they are doing and why they are doing it, while in fact no-one knows (Smith 1993:149). Theological self-understanding has different aspects, some of which are mentioned here.

Have we reached the end of theology?

In some Protestant seminaries and faculties theology is still practised as if nothing has happened to our world of understanding since the Reformation. Such inability to come to terms with cultural, hermeneutic and other developments heralds the end of theology. A new understanding of truth and knowledge, a changed worldview, radical plurality, relativism and paradox all contribute to the dilemma theology must face. Ingrained ambiguities in science, technology and industrialisation – the basic forces shaping our civilisation – contribute to this dilemma. The loss of religious symbols, of the category of the sacred has had a tremendous impact on Christianity. According to McGinn (1989:445-447) the book, academic theology and the churches are all endangered by opposing pressures: by hyper-modern differentiation and specialisation, by individualism and pluralism, as well as by anti-modern, reactionary de-differentiation and a drive to achieve uniformity, both out of 'hunger for totality' and because of totalitarian tendencies of secular and religious provenance. The end of Christianity's dominance on the ethical level as well as its claim to having the 'only truth', outside which there is no salvation, also influences the future of theology. Whatever items one adds to this list, the fact is that theology is fundamentally affected by all these factors and should deal with their implications.

Some feel that theology has reached its end. A closed, tradition-bound, foundationalist mode of theologising has come under heavy

fire. This has nothing to do with impiety or disloyalty, but must be seen as the outcome of a hermeneutic process started by the Reformation. Developments in textual understanding opened up a broader spectrum of meaning, accommodating more perspectives than tradition allowed.

We have been deprived of our absolutes, but this does not mean that we are drowning in a sea of relativism. A broader spectrum permits a multiplicity of relationships, in which truth is contextualised, argued, experienced and celebrated. This enables us to reinterpret tradition. According to Knitter (1991:158ff) we must move from a foundationalist to a conversational model of interpreting tradition. We need dialogue with others, not only to affirm our own truth but also to be saved from it.

What makes theological training theological?

What is theology? It is both embarrassing and liberating to repeat this elementary question. Embarrassing, because after so many centuries we still do not seem to know what theology is about, and liberating since many of us were wondering for many years why exactly we were doing what we did. Everyone appears to be doing the 'done' thing. The question 'what is theology?' does not imply that there is a final answer somewhere. It should rather stimulate self-critical assessment of the sense, needs and goals of our curricula and research programmes.

Thus one recognises that there is not one theology but many. Farley (quoted by Thiemann 1991:150) maintains that religion never exists in general – any more than any other form of culture does – but always as a religion that owes its origin and principle to some particular occasion or insight. This indicates the impossibility of general rules for practising theology. There is also no ultimate religion beyond the religions, implying that there is neither an actuality nor an archetype to serve as the referent of the term 'religion'. Human religiousness must be discovered through painstaking analysis of particular traditions. Faith itself, according to Thiemann (1991:151), remains beyond the reach of scholarly investigation, and even its active,

reflective life is not an appropriate object of academic study. Although this may be true, personal faith should be critically influenced by theological study.

Why are theological training and research structured the way they are? Because of tradition, confession, personal religious commitment, the inclinations of study leaders, sociopolitical circumstances? Although all these factors influence theological design, it is difficult to say exactly how they do so, as there are no fixed rules. Convention and social concerns, however, seem too decisive.

Burden (1994:124-129) cites five models operating in the theological world: the approach from the theoretical to the practical; a faith-within-its-own-context approach (confessional training); a concrete experience approach; a ministry approach (professional training); and a vision and sensibility approach. Without denying the legitimacy of these approaches, they entail a danger of theologising in an insular and self-contained bubble. Interdisciplinary exposure, contact with other models, traditions and faiths, self-criticism and planning, constant re-evaluation and the like are imperative.

From superiority to openness and plurality

Our theological self-interpretation has changed dramatically from a sense of control and superiority to one of openness and acceptance of plurality. Our changed self-understanding is in line with the change in the relative status of Western culture vis-à-vis other cultures. The reasons for the Western sense of superiority no longer exist or are regarded as highly questionable. They include individual and social emphasis on the value of the person and individual rights; equality of the sexes; promoting personal and social morality, notably democracy and humanitarianism; and an emphasis on history and progress (Gilkey 1989:380-381).

Christianity has also come in for criticism. In our society, according to Wegman (1990:87), the Christian religion has become dependent on the prevailing principle of supply and demand and can no longer impose itself on people's conscience. Postmodern society regards the

universal pretensions of Western Christianity as convictions and behavioural patterns peculiar to its own particular sphere, which neither the public nor other religions pay the least attention to, let alone accept.

Postmodernism can be seen as the self-critical continuation of modernism. It opened up fixed epistemologies and closed views on truth and knowledge. It is aware of pluralism against a multiplicity of contexts of understanding and interpretation. It influences religion on many levels. Postmodernism is widely seen as characteristic of certain forms of belief. Poewe (1991:331-334) argues that charismatic Christianity is postmodern in the sense that it is post-ethnic, imaginative, trans-cultural, holistic, paradoxical and semiotic (dependent on signs). Similar traits can be identified in many other religious groupings – Poewe claims to recognise them in African Independent Churches (AICs).

The feeling of superiority has been replaced by one of openness towards others and willingness to acknowledge and learn from non-Western religions. One tends to identify theology with Christianity, but Judaism, Confucianism and Buddhism have far older critical traditions (Deist 1994:60). The study of these religions should not depend on the number of their adherents in a specific country, but should be undertaken for the common benefit of all religions. Unbiased encounter between religions is bound to be enriching and must lead to greater understanding of human religiosity. Such encounter is complicated by a tendency to take Western theological and religious conceptions as our unacknowledged criterion of religion and religious studies.

Theological integrity and intellectual honesty

Theological integrity concerns interaction between different subdisci-plinary fields of interest, different theological disciplines and also between theological/religious faculties and the churches. Dialogue between colleagues in the same department, in different departments, in different disciplines must be conducted on a regular basis. Theological integrity does not mean that easy answers or com-

promises are always possible. Integrity does not necessarily imply unity in theology, between the sciences, between different types of hermeneutics, research methods and the like. It does, however, give researchers the task of coming to terms with the various dilemmas facing their subject.

There is a need for a theological geography, that is placing theology on the map of the religious situation. Theological understanding is not one thing but many. The notion of theological integrity must be broadened to include – apart from issues of curriculum, method and hermeneutics – societal issues and questions on an ecumenical and interfaith level.

If the call for a new faith commitment, a second religious innocence and renewed interest in theological experience and spirituality implies disregard of the paradoxes and dilemmas of theological education and research, it is intellectual dishonesty. Research that operates in a textual inner world without any reference to existential, ethical and practical problems is intellectually dishonest.

Confessions and traditions have largely lost their appeal and ask for radical and critical reinterpretation. Religious experience itself has become an issue. What are the preconditions for experiencing the transcendent, the holy in our time? These and other similar questions explain the interest in other religions. The study of other religions (at theological faculties) contributes to this discourse, which accounts for the shift from faculties of theology to faculties of religion at many universities.

Theology as science

Whereas theology once 'made' the sciences (in the Middle Ages it was considered the queen of them all), today it looks very much like the sciences are 'making' theology. Originally theology created the underlying structure of meaning, in terms of which science studied the structure of existence. Now existence itself provides meaning and theology is no longer required as a point of reference or foundational science. This led to the rejection of everything that is not scientific.

Theology's scientific nature and quality are important for its self-image: what is at stake is its status as a universal discipline. According to Barth one of the supreme norms of theoretical science is that justice should prevail in each individual case. Theology, like every science, concerns people's search for knowledge about a particular object of enquiry. To that end it follows a particular route to knowledge (style and method) dictated by its 'object'. Theologians are also expected to be open-minded and critical of their own premises and presuppositions (Stavenga 1989:270), yet they tend to deny their dependence on the methods and epistemologies of other sciences.

Changing notions of the nature of science in non-theological disciplines certainly influence theology's own thinking in this regard. Previously scientific knowledge was portrayed as fixed, verifiable, even unchanging. Thus theology claimed that Scripture is eternally valid, clear, adequate and unchanging (see *notae scriptura*). This in itself created a sense of scientific security and certainty. Since then science has changed its mind, distancing itself from the notion of final pronouncements, accepting that there are other ways of defining, describing and interpreting phenomena. Science is no longer one but many, in the sense that there are numerous methods, models and styles of scientific practice. It has become independent of changes in scientific method. These influences have also hit theology. Thus one finds theologians propounding Karl Popper's critical rationalism, Kuhn's paradigm concept, Lakatos's views, et cetera (cf Stavenga 1989:269). Within its own context and according to its own approach, theology should go about its business in a scientifically responsible manner, and interact with other sciences on a transdisciplinary level.

An obvious danger is that the conditions for scientific work can cause theology to get bogged down in preliminary issues such as method, terminology, definition, theory and paradigm. Theology is not a science in the full sense of the word. It is sometimes called a 'spiritual' science, which, from a strictly natural-scientific point of view, is an oxymoron. Theology is a 'limited science' or, put differently, a science working according to its own rules. At what point precisely should faith supersede reason? Faith is articulated in a specific corpus of texts, whose rationality, coherence and meaning can

be examined and tested. Where does one find a 'pure' account, in which the tacit supposition of faith does not play a role?

Science itself is no longer as closed, as methodologically or systemically bound as it used to be. When we present theology as a science, the assumption is that it should be a pure theology. But whose and what norms determine purity? God is the object of theological reflection, but because God cannot be objectified, he is called the subject of theology. Whatever is thought or said about God is determined by the researcher's own subjective relationship with her research 'subject'. When theology proceeds neutrally, it becomes philosophy of religion. It continually runs a risk of succumbing to either subjectivism or objectivism, which weakens its case. There is a danger, for example, of objectifying God in metaphysical theories and questions about existence, or by attributing traits and qualities to God. Theology deals in revelation. The faith dimension keeps it 'open', dynamic, even esoteric. Nevertheless the revelation in question is scientifically researchable and identifiable. It can be fashioned into epistemological structures, systematised, described and comprehended – literarily, historically and culturally – in terms of the value systems underlying all religions, worldviews and sciences.

There have been many attempts to resolve the theological dilemma of how to speak about what cannot be seen. Thus in the time of the Reformation a distinction was made between a *theologia archetypa* (final theology, as in the *Ding an sich*) and a *theologia ectypa* (as experienced by people via general and special revelation). We cannot speak about what we cannot see, since we have to express ourselves in language that is, by definition, comprehensible. However metaphoric and analogical our God-talk may be, it is still language and can be understood.

Theology as theory and praxis

Distinctions like those between theory and practice, orthodoxy and orthopraxis, theology (dogmatics) and ethics, a theology from 'below' and a theology from 'above' are commonly made. Aristotle distinguished between theology as *theologia* and *theologike*. The

former refers to God's own words, the latter to human attempts to understand the deity. It is a distinction between pure, original God-talk and reflection on that talk (Ratzinger 1982:337). For Thomists theology is *scientia speculativa* and for Franciscans it is *scientia practica*. The two are distinguishable but not separable. The *orthos* in orthopraxis assumes prior theoretical reflection.

Theology cannot be academically neutral, as if one is studying some sort of exotic object (Ratzinger 1982:338). God-talk influences God-walk (Borgman 1990:140). Thus Herzog (1988:ch 1-3) distinguishes between Theo-praxis, Christo-praxis and Spirito-praxis. Unfortunately theological praxis is often the world in which theologians live rather than the real world in its need. A theology which does seek to address the world in its need is liberation theology. The purpose here is not to discuss liberation theology at length, but merely to raise a few questions and make a few comments.

At all events, in the apartheid era there were more white theologians who were critical of liberation theology and dissociated themselves from it than there were supporters. Understandably many experienced it as threatening and refuted it. The report on liberation theology accepted by the general synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in October 1990 is a good example: it identifies liberation theology solidly with Marxist societal models. Liberation theology was accused of misusing biblical material, especially the exodus motif in the Old Testament; of subservience to Marxist models of social criticism; of being ideological and utopian, extremist and one-sided; of reducing biblical salvation to mere political or social liberation, and so on.

Liberation theology has decided advantages. It has forced 'white' theology to pay attention to the practical implications of the gospel. So, for example, it stimulated thinking about human rights, affirmative action and equitable labour laws. It enabled black theologians to free themselves from the Western mould and to some extent created a distinctive theological identity and tradition to build on.

Theology subservient to the church (faith)?

It seems that there will always be conflict between faith and reason. Anselm's search for proof of God's existence demonstrates the priority of reason over faith. When Gaunilo told him that his proof was convincing only to those who already believed in God, Anselm was unperturbed, because he saw his attempt as an exercise in faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Hence faith takes priority over reason (cf Appleby 1988:153).

The question is to what degree theologising is genuinely independent of faith. Many students claim that they started their studies as firm believers, but by the time they graduated they had no faith left – only theology. Doing theology often distances students from uncritical fellow church membership. The only way to resolve this dilemma is to bring faith into line with our present-day worldview. We need to infuse the values reflected in the biblical texts with relevant, contemporary meanings so as to make them plausible and compelling for modern people.

Theology is usually seen as a function of the church (at least in the Calvinist tradition). Consequently the church determines what is taught, and who is selected for teaching and ordination. In many respects theology has become the church's prodigal son, who now lives in a distant land with foreign theologies and notions. Many believe that theology has left the nest of the church. Church members find it hard to understand that theology, once thought to be in line with Scripture, is now, according to theologians, no longer so (e.g. as regards the ordination of women, acceptance of gays as fellow members, etc.).

There is a real danger that the church will once again straitjacket theology to such an extent that it is unable to exert a renewing influence on the church. Theology must certainly serve the church but must not 'believe' in it. In this connection Kasper (1989:8) advocates a theological theology: one which does not primarily believe in the church but in the God of the church, and which is directed to him.

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Influence of culture, pluralism, modernism and postmodernism

Theology is always located in a particular culture, but its role is that of a cultural critic. It cannot avoid reflecting contemporary cultural movements. Indeed, it articulates the spirit of that culture, albeit in a theologically selective way. At all events, its cultural dependence must be acknowledged (Maimela 1990:178; Moltmann 1988:41-58). This means that the religion communicated to other peoples and cultures is couched in terms of the communicator's culture.

A foreign culture can be experienced as suffocating or imperialistic. Black theologians insist on a religion that reflects African cultural values. As a result essential elements of the Christian tradition will be reinterpreted (as Western Christianity did with its own source texts over the centuries). Maimela (1990:179) says of white Western theologians: "Their theology reflected the concerns of white middle-class suburbanites, and had no claim to objectivity or universality." Theologically there should be openness to culturally bound expressions, including understanding and tolerance of the culturally unfamiliar.

Part of the influence of culture, especially in the West, was the modernist thought on renewal and the ensuing reaction. Broadly, modernism can be traced back to the Enlightenment. The emphasis is on individuals who, by virtue of their reason, are in charge of their own lives, their world and even God. The hallmark of modernism is this accent on the individual (subject) who is in charge. Human beings and their future are viewed optimistically. Through science and technology they will make the world a better place. Modernism refers to a mindset that emphasises reason, the subject, the infallibility of science and absolute truth. Its promises to free people through science and technology and make the world a better place have not been universally fulfilled. Many people feel they are worse off than before they enjoyed the blessings of modernity, in spite of its 'achievements'.

In theology modernism is associated with liberalism and developments such as the rise of historical criticism. By and large the Protestant churches were not open to this thinking. Thus a theologian

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like Barth, with his stress on God as the total absolute and the total relativism of human beings, curbed the growth of modernist theology. Theologically modernism is linked to secularism (see CD II/1:136ff).

Postmodernism is the reaction to modernism. It is difficult to date its onset, but usually it is traced back to the disillusionment after World War II, although features of postmodernism were discernible before that. It sees our existence as threatened by modernism – a product of Christianity. It is ecologically sensitive and, through deconstruction of literal, fundamental 'truths, it makes rapprochement between different cultures and belief systems possible. If this does not happen, religious and ideological warfare will continue. It alerts us to the dangers of technocracy, especially the way it threatens human personhood and the environment. Postmodernism does not profess to be a school but seeks to articulate our postmodern awareness. On the one hand it poses a threat to theology, on the other its influence cannot be denied and must be answered. Some theologians are enthusiastic about it. Ford says: "One is to welcome postmodernism's undermining of types of rationality and the historical authority that have often attempted to dominate and dictate to theology" (Ford 1989:294). In general contemporary theology displays many postmodern features, although one cannot identify an actual movement or school. Theologians like TJJ Altizer, MC Taylor, C Raschke, C Winquist, H Smith and D Griffin make use of deliberate deconstructive strategies.

Postmodernism emphasises the indefinite, changeable, pluralistic and open character of existence. Our existence is historical and thus changeable and contingent. We cannot use measuring instruments and definitions to find adequate existential answers. It is characterised by multiplicity, uncertainty and relativity. Even the 'eternal' truths theologians work with do not obviate the need to think about God and salvation in ever new and different ways. Postmodernism is anti-metaphysical and thinks about God from the standpoint of real-life experience.

A typical feature of postmodernism is a switch from Christo-centrism to theo-centrism, as is evident in Snook's work (1986:133-144). Here not Christ but God is the focal point of religion, which leaves room for

other religions to worship God on a par with Christianity. It makes it possible for diverse cultures and forms of worship to be viewed collectively as expressions of a religion centred on the same God. These tendencies are also found in Black theology (cf Mosala; Muzorewa).

The postmodernistic notion of rationality and knowledge highlights their historical and cultural variability and fallibility. It shows that knowledge is corrupted by power and dominion. Ford (1989:292) puts is thus: "There is hostility to theory in favor of more literary or pragmatic forms of discourse, and underlying that is a radical attack on the very notion of truth ..." This particular notion of truth establishes a category of the absolute, an appearance of truth, independent of people, which exists somewhere out there and just needs to be found. In a Kantian way 'truth' suggests that the scientifically objective person possesses faculties of judgment – which must simply be applied while ignoring the world in which the person lives – and is aware of a host of possible interpretations.

Developing an indigenous African theology

Theology's demands of a situation are determined by people's receptiveness to those demands. It cannot expect its every word to be heard and accepted as prophetic. A prophetic word always has its time: it is meant for a particular time and is accepted as the answer to the problems of that time.

In South Africa criticism of Eurocentric theology rings loud and clear. The emergence of a contextualised African theology will present great challenges to traditional Western theology. The question is in how far such an African theology will be free from the dilemma peculiar to Western theologies. For many black theologians Western theology still smells of imperialism and Western supremacy. Even Western white liberation theology is not acceptable. Muzorewa (1989:54) writes: "European and American theologians are rendered inadequate to do Liberation Theology on behalf of Third World Christians in Black Africa because in most cases black people have been oppressed

by the whites – thus the two groups lived on different sides of the railroad track, so to speak."

The criticism is levelled that after the arrival of Christian religion in Africa one paradigm was explained in terms of another. The ideal is proclaimed that Christianity should not dominate Africa culturally, that each should influence the other and that an inculturation of Christianity should be investigated (Prozesky 1990:21).

With the emergence of an African theological identity comes the realisation that the Christian value system offers an alternative to, but not necessarily an improvement on, the African one. Value systems are self-validating and exist in their own right. Besides, the two value systems display more communalities than differences and Christian theology, by focusing on the latter, has simply complicated dialogue. Basic African values are still very strong and are not easily destroyed by Christianity (Prozesky 1990:19; 215). In particular black theologians insist that their theology can stand on its own, that it can significantly influence (black) society and can foster greater unity among the indigenous churches (Prozesky 1990:28). For a theologian like Molofo, African theology is a theology from 'below', whose starting point is found in the social, economic and political problems of the day. During the struggle against apartheid the Christian Bible was important to the extent that it assisted the fight against injustice. Hence, like Mosala, Molofo questions the overall authority of the Bible, especially insofar as uncritical readings frustrated the liberation struggle (Prozesky 1990:45). On the same lines Mosala (1989:28) writes: "In the area of Bible reading many of us have already decided that there is no such thing as a politically and ideologically neutral reading of the Bible. And so we have started the struggle to liberate the Bible so that the Bible can liberate us."

Worthlessness of theology

Theology must always retain an element of 'uselessness'. That moment of uselessness, when theology cannot be co-opted for some purpose or other, is also a moment of celebration. One could call it a doxological, an aesthetic element – theology as poetics. It is theology

as foolishness, as silence, as awe. That is the moment when theology subverts itself, qualifies all positive statements with a 'not quite so, not quite so'.

Chapter 3

RESEARCH AND TRUTH

Introduction

Research, including theological research, is questioned in the new South Africa. It is seen as elitist, Western-oriented and inappropriate in a Third World country, where the emphasis is increasingly put on primary education. A plausible refutation of this argument is not easy. Are research outputs really measurable, and what are they worth? Is most research not simply a collation of other research? How original, inventive and creative is it, in fact? Can one defend it by falling back on the argument that its true worth cannot be measured? The taxpayer expects society to benefit, both directly and indirectly, from the money spent on research. Should that money not rather be spent on buying tried and tested research findings abroad? Or should research not be confined to projects that benefit society?

These questions and others with the same tenor call for reappraisal and review of the policies of all research institutes and agencies. Their strategies and policies will have to be persuasive to justify a future for research.

Education may be expected to feature prominently on the national agenda for decades to come. For that reason it has to be as effective and purposive as possible. There is a real danger of fundamentalism in a new democracy: of naively grabbing for modernistic ideals to ensure a better life for all, or, by way of reaction, repudiating modernism[1] and

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1   In a new democracy like ours there may be groups that seek their salvation in previously oppressed but now reviving traditions. These traditions are ideologised and anything that is alien to them is rejected. This is a minority stance, usually dominated by a more progressive approach, which wants to preserve tradition but adapt it to a 'technological age' in the hope that it will result in a better life for all (cf. Scannone 1992:83). In a situation of insecurity fundamentalist viewpoints tend to flourish (Lechner 1993:22-24). According to Lechner the disappearance of fundamentalism is prerequisite for the revival of religiosity. He regards fundamentalism as largely a modernist problem: "It actively strives to reorder society; it reasserts the validity of a tradition and uses it in new ways ..." (Lechner 1993:30).

agencies associated with it, because so far it has failed to improve the lot of the majority of citizens.

The public must have an opportunity to make inputs on an open research forum. The best research is not always confined to academia. Neither should good research be restricted to pragmatically important or natural-scientific projects. Criticism of technologically biased development is essential to protect the human race and its environment. Without that the sole task of future research may be to try and correct the consequences of past errors.

There is 'useless' research that no society can do without. It concerns mainly the aesthetic and religious dimensions of human life, and without it all other research would be sterile. The value of research does not lie only in pragmatically applicable results. Human society cannot survive without paying deference to people's poetic, aesthetic and religious needs.[2] In that sense ostensibly 'useless' research has a place.

Theology, churches and religious groups are key instruments to influence people, change values and establish a new worldview and anthropology that will co-determine future expectations. A socio-political revolution on the scale we are experiencing at present cannot but change the agenda of every vital religious group or relevant theology. It would be tragic if theology were not to seize the opportunities and challenges presented by such a transition. Thus one task for theological research would be critically reflecting on and anticipating the change process, and contributing to it. We should avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, not in order to ensure a

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Fundamentalism, like modernism, is counteracted by processes of pluralism and universalism.

2 It stands to reason that the apparently 'useless' has irreplaceable value in any discipline and in society at large. It needs to be stressed in an era where technology as a means to economic survival is overemphasised. The aesthetic and poetic dimensions of theology are expressed mainly in its doxological character. Doxology is a counterweight to rationalism. Since it includes religious experience, it can encourage an ecumenical, community-oriented spirit. "The emphasis on experience in theology opens the possibility to reclaim the nature of systematic theology as doxology" (Naude 1994:426ff. Also see Du Toit 1992:70).

perfect future, but because it provides the best alibi to justify today's decisions to the next generation.

Research, modernism and truth

Research can be a myth. People's faith in research is based mainly on by now untenable modernist assumptions, such as the existence of truth *an sich*. To modernism truth poses no problems, because its attainability is taken for granted. It applies a correspondence theory of truth, with modernity itself as the truth (Malpas 1992:287). Research brings us incrementally closer to truth, it is argued. Better methods, eliminating error, more exact and consistent terminology and the like ensure growth and progress towards truth. And the closer we get to that truth, the better our lives will be. Science enhances our quality of life.

Truth presupposes unanimity. After all, it rules out falsehood. But in practice research leads to diversity rather than unity. Many people are disconcerted that the one divine truth has to make way for a multitude of human truths, whose equivocal nature and contradictions reflect an ambiguous world. Those who want to fit reality binary-fashion into white-black categories find this stressful. Kundera (1988:6-7) writes: "Man desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before he understands. Religions and ideologies are founded on this desire." Nietzsche pointed out that we cannot but view things from a particular perspective. Yet many people feel impelled to see everything in terms of true-false and good-bad relations (Allen 1992:230). That certainly applies to the South African context.[3]

In a pluralistic context theological research can at most try to do justice to the manifold perspectives in society.

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3   Fundamentalism is firmly entrenched in Southern African communities. Ironically, the cultural pluralism of our context should curb fundamentalist traits, since the multiplicity of viewpoints ought to be conducive to openness. But that presupposes that the groups are exposed to each other – which was not the case under the former dispensation. Religious apartheid still flourishes and there is little real exposure of one group to another. Religious apartheid can no longer remain above criticism.

Postmodernism and truth

The postmodernist has emerged from Plato's cave and no longer accepts a perfect world of ideas, of which this world is but an imperfect reflection. Truth does not lie above or beyond our reality but manifests itself in countless forms within it. It is governed by time, cultural history, tradition, the rules dictated by the language and interests of the community in which it functions. Our image of truth has become Escher-like: details make sense in their context, but the overall picture is always fraught with paradox and contradiction.

In the Nietzschean sense research has become decadent. To Nietzsche decadence means loss of unity, wholeness (Jay 1988:2). The misleading nature of truth has often been pointed out in the history of Western philosophy. That history is full of attempts to pin down truth in a system, a dogma, a book; to regulate meaning, determine rationality, standardise method as a gateway to truth. But what we call truth is actually a process, a piece of intellectual history, a game – even though it is usually viewed in deadly earnest (cf Thiselton 1992:11). Truth remains a working hypothesis that we cannot do without. Often it functions metaphorically in the language we speak. We must perforce construct necessary truths, but they are not absolute (Runzo 1986:44).

No religion can dispense totally with its own frame of reference, which includes certain criteria of truth for evaluating other religions (cf Küng 1990:37). 'Truth' remains a condition for disagreeing with others.

Truth and relativism

The postmodern notion that truth is always deferred and no meaning is ever final raises the question: have we not irrevocably succumbed to relativism? How does one reconcile truth and relativism? It depends what we mean by relativism.[4] The term refers to an epistemological

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4 Runzo (1986:5-17) considers theological relativism inescapable because of the nature of theological truth claims. He bases theological relativism on conceptual relativism. The question is whether a relativist epistemology is compatible with the inherent absoluteness of

position where the validity or otherwise of value judgments and truth claims is determined by the individual(s) making that judgment or claim (Runzo 1986:27).

Relativity includes finitude, contingency, historicity, fallibility and traditional and cultural determinism. This relativism is not absolute but merely an acknowledgement of the nature of existence (Gunton 1990:252ff). Relativity entails pointing out relations and influences that co-determine perception. It indicates the interrelatedness of things and in this sense we could speak of relativism as relational thought. It is a process of reference that generates understanding by focusing attention on all role players who have a share in the outcome of a matter. When we cease to think relationally we cease to refer, make new associations and allow for new contexts.

That brings us to the question of authority: who determines that something should be seen as absolute, and why? What sources, ideologies and power strategies are at work in determining truth?

Relativism is the antithesis of reductionism and absolutism. It repudiates fixed, binding and totalitarian concepts. We cannot think without relativising. But relativism is itself relative (cf Van Niekerk 1992:125ff). It is relative to the language game, rules of logic, epistemology and genre with which we work, consciously or unconsciously. There is a fixed core of meaning, without which meaning, understanding and language are not possible. Even in myth the leopard retains his spots, although he can talk (cf Den Bok 1995:39).

Contextual, anti-reductionist thinking is per se relational and relative, which traditionally was not typical of systematic theology. It is difficult for systematic theology to reflect the *Zeitgeist* of multiplicity

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religious belief. Often the absolutes that are operative are simply a result of inculturated thought patterns. This realisation dawned partly as a result of the work of Peter Berger, Jean Piaget and Thomas Kuhn. A number of attempts have been made to counter religious relativism. Runzo (1986:18) discusses three of these. They are the attempts to ground truth in mysticism or religious experience, to ground truth claims in speculative metaphysics, and to ground them in the church's proclamation.

without ambiguity. One can hardly systematise today without serious reduction.

Conceptions of truth have evolved considerably. One of the most influential in the West is the pragmatic view of truth as technological advantage. Technology determines the outcome of wars, puts humans on the moon, determines the gross national product and budget, you name it. Technology as the determinant of prosperity becomes the norm for deciding on curricula, government policy and ethical systems. The financial implications of truth are recognised and are reflected in the importance governments, universities and churches attach to truth as a money-spinner.

From a biblical point of view truth is neither a value system nor a set of propositions, but a living relationship with God (Deist 1994:174). If one has to think ontologically, then a relational ontology may typify reality more aptly than a substantial ontology.

Hence we should ask, "What does it mean?", rather than, "What is true?" Naturally the meaning we assign something always relates to our preconceived notions and perceptions. Yet the question of meaning offers greater scope for broadening and changing our views.

A changing context and the new profile of systematic theology

The polysemous and shifting nature of theology

One can understand why many people think that Western theologising has reached the end of the road. By the end of the 19th century biblical theology had already been downgraded to the religious history of Israel and the early church. The question is whether the old paradigm still offers scope for creative new research. Despite considerable attention to methodological issues and the task of theology, there is no consensus (cf Du Toit 1995:47ff). Problems concerning the status of the text and the epistemological value of theology (including the question of truth) remain on the agenda. Theologians use the Bible in a non-biblical framework (McKnight 1990:98). New exegetical and hermeneutic concepts cast doubt on the classical, orthodox Reformed

doctrinal concept of truth as a set of rational, objective certainties (Deist 1994:174).

The rules of the game have changed to the extent that we should perhaps speak of a new game. We have reached the end of modern, patriarchalist, metaphysically closed, identity-theology. This could be the unavoidable result of a hermeneutic development that began with the Reformation. Gone is the belief in Scripture as the vessel of eternal, divine truths that merely have to be discovered and exploited. The very book that Luther had to snatch from the pope's hands and give to his congregation to read for themselves and be free became, in their hands, a new set of rules comprising hard fundamental truths that forged new chains. The truth of the Book breeds exclusion and rejection of everything and everyone that differ from the interpreted, appropriated norm. The world must conform to the Book. But the world outgrew the Book. Acceptance and tolerance of differences, democratisation of faith and multiplicity of norms are the realities of our day, which conflict with the authority of tradition.

Traditional systematic theology grapples with issues[5] such as its relationship with biblical sciences, accommodation of literary theories and recent philosophies, its place in the curriculum, its relationship with world religions and a general loss of currency and credibility. Often theology is less systematic than it was traditionally. We now have genitive theologies (e.g. theology of liberation, theology of hope), adjectival theologies (ecological theology, feminist theology) and nominal theology (the theologies of Barth, Jüngel, Moltmann, Ebeling). In these theologies the norm of systematisation in a church or confessional context no longer applies universally.

In Protestantism, dogmatics or systematic theology, is seen as ecclesiastic, confessional, systematic, critical, topical and practical (see Van Genderen & Velema 1992:20-26). Despite a tendency to continuous adaptation, self-criticism and relevance, systematic theology is often experienced as traditional, autocratic, unimaginative

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5   There are any number of angles on the theological 'transitional period'. An example from the Reformed tradition is the work of Spykman (1992:40-63).

and uncreative. Hermeneutically, apologetically and historically it is repetitive. Without denying the role of traditional dogmatics in ecclesiastic training and the maintenance of confessional identity, it must be stated that there are only rare instances when ecclesiastic dogmatics displays initiative, accommodates modern feelings about life, reflects the realities of the day and develops credible theologies.

Theology systematises by describing textual panoramas. These are euphoric, synoptic, intellectual and relational. What may be experienced, from below, as a maze of texts and textual relations is unified by dogmatic 'supervision' from above into a coherent jigsaw puzzle. It is clear, however, that such a panoramic overview condenses truth without proper regard for its polysemous nature. A panoramic vista permits only one synoptic meta-narrative, which offers a single explanation and quashes all other accounts. Although systematic theology is pre-eminently a textual science, systematisation often operates by truncating the text and ignoring the contexts in which it works.

But systematic theology has gone through an irrevocable process of 'unbundling'. It will have to accept that it is a serial story and that all episodes cannot be squeezed into one corpus or instalment. The dogmatic text is a new account that builds on many other stories. It is a new creation, a reinterpretation and erasure of other texts.

Present-day narrative theology appears to communicate much better than it systematises. In similar fashion the novel has become the vehicle of a new philosophical genre, as can be seen in Kundera's work (see Kundera 1988).

Systematic theology, like most other disciplines in theology and the human sciences, has become irreversibly interdisciplinary and, therefore, pluralistic (Vanhoozer 1994:98). Hermeneutics, the act of understanding, has become irreversibly polysemous (Thiselton 1992:611ff). Linguistic theories, structuralism, textual theories, narrative and metaphor, and rational theories are only some of the co-determinants of the hermeneutic network.

The following features serve as examples indicating that we have reached the end of theological practice as it evolved in the post-Reformation period. Theology has become post-canonical, post-confessional, post-secular, postmodern and interreligious. Let us briefly examine each of these predicates.

Post-canonical

By and large the church operates with a congealed view of truth. As a result a host of volatile religious and biblical metaphors, dynamic meanings and changing contexts have become fixed in dogma (see Thiselton 1992:110). A changing world and dynamic source of revelation[6] are often denied or ignored for the specific purpose of giving static truths authority. But to exercise any influence authority[7] has to be relational, mobile, contextual and dynamic.

The history of the canon tells us that the choice of what to include in the canon depended on church strategy rather than textual integrity.[8] The notion of a scriptural document elevated to fixed canon[9] with

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6   The concept of revelation is the core of the Reformed claim to authority. Kelsey, however, convincingly showed that there is no such concept as biblical revelation. The various biblical references to the ways in which God communicates with humans do not fit the single concept to which theologians have reduced it. "So too, it has been argued that the concepts of 'revelation' employed by many theologians in the neo-orthodox period not only cannot pass muster as syntheses of biblical concepts of 'revelation', but are in their own right conceptually incoherent and are incapable of ordering the variety of theological claims that have been subsumed under them" (Kelsey 1975:209). Kelsey (1975:208ff) regards the idea of scriptural authority as a postulate that can function pragmatically in the life of the church. There is a big difference between the way biblical authority functions in the church and how it functions theologically (Kelsey 1975:94ff).

7   This does not imply a complete absence of authority. Calvin's insistence that without the Bible we cannot recognise the world as God's world indicates the influence of authoritative sources of human thought (cf Gunton 1990:257). In this sense believers read the Bible 'differently' from other literary works, because they assign it authority before they read it, which colours both their expectations and appropriation of the text. Nowadays the Bible is not the sole source of authority. There are many legitimate sources influencing people, and these cannot always be harmonised.

8   "The truly crucial factor in selecting writings for canon was not the contingent facts about their authorship but simply the usage and judgement of the 'one true church, spread throughout the world'. That is, in declaring just these writings 'canon', the church was giving part of a self-description of her identity: We are a community such that certain uses of scripture are necessary for nurturing and shaping our self-identity, and the use of just these, i.e. 'canonical', writings is sufficient for that purpose" (Kelsey 1975:105).

9   Vanhoozer correctly views the function of the canon as the determination of which books

concomitant authority broke down when faced with the idea of intertextuality. If a canon is influenced and determined by other writings, it implies that those writings, too, have canonical value. This immediately makes the canon far too broad and spreads its authority over an indeterminate literary corpus. We can at most speak of an ongoing process of canonisation (cf McKnight 1990:173).

For this reason a distinction is made between Scripture as source and Scripture as canon. "As source, the Bible is seen as an assemblage of greatly differing strategies for recollecting, interpreting, and sharing the community's witness concerning God. They defy harmonization. They do clash. It is impossible to affirm them all simultaneously" (McKnight 1990:101).

To move from canon to concept as happens in systematic theology is, moreover, complex[10] and the concept usually says more than what the canonical text contains (cf also Kelsey 1975:100ff). As a proposition, the concept usually impoverishes the graphic, metaphoric language of the text.[11]

Besides, the biblical text is not a uniform corpus of writings. Indeed, one could hardly speak of an Old/New Testament text. Until the Christian era, for example, the 'text' of the Old Testament was fluid. Different canons were recognised in different communities and different manuscripts of the same books were used in different places. Thus the text of the Old Testament is a set of intertexts (Deist 1994:172). Nor does a text have any fixed meaning. The diverse textual traditions, the ancient authors' differing ideologies, the long

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constitute the Bible and not the determination of meaning. He maintains that determining the correct literary genre and language game functioning in a text enables us to use dogmatic concepts correctly (Vanhoozer 1994:100-102). This presupposes a fixed core of meaning, which supports the ideal of hunting down the 'real meaning'.

10 Thiselton (1992:38-51) identifies at least six levels at which readers may transform a text, consciously or unconsciously. These are: (1) intertextual, (2) situational or temporal, contingent, (3) horizontal, (4) semiotic, (5) hermeneutic, and (6) in relation to other textual theories.

11 The unbiblical concept of 'original sin' is an example of how conceptualisation flagrantly exceeds textual meaning. "Concepts, unlike symbols and metaphors, do not create new meaning but wring the life out of language" (Vanhoozer 1994:105).

history of textual interpretation and the historicity of exegetes make this unlikely (Deist 1994:173).

Post-confessional/traditional

The fact that theology is working in a post-confessional and post-traditional era does not mean that tradition and confession[12] no longer play a prominent role. What it does imply is a critical, self-conscious approach to confession and tradition, realising that the Christian faith, like any other tradition, is a design 'from below'[13] (Kuitert 1992:28). Ecclesiastically tradition and confession still fulfil the function of satisfying the need for identity and certainty (cf Kelsey 1975:95ff). Identity entails inclusion and exclusion. It offers exclusiveness, accepts its own viewpoint as true and does not tolerate any extraneous truth. More and more people are no longer happy with such an identity. As a result church identity in many denominations has become an open, post-confessional identity,[14] often found outside one's own group, and there is much less exclusion and intolerance of those who differ from one's own tradition and creed.[15]

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12 Spykman (1992:128-133) consistently accepts biblical theology to be confessional (which, of course, accords with the Reformed view of the authority of the Bible). He considers that it counteracts reductionism (eg moral or historical reductionism), hermeneutically discloses the christological meaning of revelation, and counteracts rationalist, pietist and legalistic tendencies. Ironically, his view itself leads to reductionism, since the Bible (notwithstanding hermeneutics) is still read from the angle of some master narrative and leitmotiv, which is given absolute and confessional status.

13 The distinction 'from below' and 'from above' to indicate a theological approach which locates the norm either in human beings and their context or in God is artificial. In the same binary fashion one could contrast nature with grace, sacred with profane, and so forth (see e.g. Spykman 1992:41ff). It is impossible to do either without the other. The labels 'from below' and 'from above' are used because that is how they feature in theology as a broad indication of a particular theological approach.

14 "A post-conventional or universalistic identity ... no longer focuses upon norms or concrete moral rules, but upon the principles lying behind the rules. For that reason the orientation is not to external authority, which is now replaced by a personal autonomy" (Davis 1994:137).

15 It is a moot point whether missionary work in the original sense of the word is still feasible. Not only does it uproot other societies, but was also historically marked by imperialism and cultural chauvinism. It should make way for intercultural and interreligious dialogue, in which equal partners introduce themselves (and their religions), learn from one another, and make decisions that ensure religious freedom and arrange matters of common interest (cf Kuitert 1992:214-215).

Tradition grew from conflicting interpretations. MacIntyre (1988:349ff) views tradition as a religious argument cast in narrative form. This narrative is continually being reconstructed argumentatively to correct inconsistencies. Tradition presupposes conflict both within one's own tradition and between different traditions. To belong to a tradition is to be part of an argument. Keeping it alive entails keeping the argument hot (topical) by confronting it with narratives from a different context (cf Davis 1994:110). This does not mean, however, that the majority of congregants will experience it as relevant, addressing the present day and age. Tradition is experienced as static identity, unavoidably reliant on fossilised material and the concomitant forced attempt to resuscitate its relevance and describe it as progressive development, depending on its new narrative form (cf Schüssler Fiorenza 1991:73ff).

A post-traditional and post-confessional theology will acknowledge the historically confined nature of traditions, the context of their history of origin, the truth concept they work with and the need for contemporary narratives, which incorporate the historically contingent needs of the time in which they function (cf e.g. the Kairos and Belhar documents).

Post-secular

The term 'secularisation' has its roots in the Christian distinction between spiritual and secular. If the process of secularisation were to reach its logical conclusion, it is argued, spirituality would disappear and everything would be secular. Secularism was traditionally viewed as the absence of any experience of the supernatural or transcendent. In the process of secularisation there has been a reaction against what is termed the oppressive domination of the church via the supernatural; the separation between God and the world was rejected and humankind became the reference point for reality (Kasper 1990:85). The church's main fear of secularism was because of its modernistic outlook, its positivistic leanings, its closed worldview and its notion of humankind as its own saviour.

The process of secularisation did not, however, lead to the end of religiosity.[16] Ours may be described as a post-secular age, in which the emancipation of church members has progressed a long way and is still continuing, but in which society also has strong religious undercurrents. In some societies the church has become a subculture but religiosity has not disappeared. In many respects the world has even become a witness for the church! It is secular people who speak of spirituality, secular writers who call people to righteousness, freedom fighters who practise ethics and natural scientists who put ecology, the future of the world and the quest for God on the agenda. All these things have become possible in a post-secular society.

The 'limits-to-growth' awareness of the 1970s, the new scientific philosophy with its undertones of relativism and methodological anarchism, and postmodernism ushered in a post-secular period (Van Peursen 1989:38). It is characterised by an interweaving of nature and the supernatural, with the realisation that meaning does not lie only in natural phenomena. In a post-secular context the debate centres on the relative and the universal, the accent is on an information society where cross-cultural contact takes place, and fixed identities are replaced by dynamic, open identities (see Van Peursen 1989:39).

Thus modernism failed to oust religion. Indeed, religion provided the creative energy to fill the gap between reality and utopia left by modernism (cf Beckford 1993:10-12).

The phenomenon of religion will not disappear overnight, if at all (Ter Borg 1994:15; Beckford 1993:7). Religiosity is an anthropological datum. As an institutionalised, traditional system it is certainly on the decline (Ter Borg 1994:20ff; Beckford 1993:15ff). But religion will survive, although the church of the future and its forms of expression will look different – just as love survives, even if the structure of the traditional marriage has changed. The church does not have a

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16 "That is why secularisation is nothing but the death of religion, without the estrangement between the profane life world and religion as represented by the 'Sunday world'" (Kasper 1990:86 – our translation).

monopoly of religiosity.[17] The systems of meaning that religions offer are becoming more protean.

Post-secularism is forcing theology to articulate religious experiences across the whole spectrum of human conceptions of meaning, and it helps to impart a common understanding, which is essential for its survival (Ter Borg 1994:17). This is theologising 'from below'. It recognises the influence of worldview on religious experience, since the two determine each other.

Postmodern

Postmodernism is a critical reaction to the biases and presumptions of modernism, to the arrogant expectations and optimistic faith in progress that accompanied it. This does not mean that postmodernism is entirely separable from modernism. Postmodernism also does not mean that modernism and everything associated with it belong to the past. Rather it is a re-contextualisation and re-evaluation of the place that reason, truth, understanding, culture, God, history, the Bible, the self, values, et cetera, occupy in our lives. It acknowledges the validity of diverse possible methods, approaches, paths and paradigms for truth and science. It is a meeting of different cultures, lifestyles and value systems that can all claim legitimacy.

Postmodernism does not mean total relativism. Without presenting it as a new saviour, one might say that it contains elements which can help us orient ourselves in the present African context with its multiplicity of traditions, language groups, ideologies and cultures, mistrust of reason, co-existing European and African indigenous lifestyles and ethics, et cetera.[18]

17　"New religiosity has for a large part moved beyond institutionalised religions and churches or at any rate functions as a counter movement to the official line, an unconventional, unorthodox religiosity, which is, alas, barely recognised by major denominations" (Küng 1990:81 – our translation).

18　Scannone (1992:84) writes: "Postmodernism, with its critique of logocentrism and the totalitarianism of reason, and its stress on plurality and difference, enables the Third World to free itself from Eurocentrism or any centrism which tends to oppress, and to recognize its own difference and sapiential rationality within plural rationality."

Interreligious

"If other religions are nonsensical," says Kuitert (1992:24), "then so is Christianity" (our translation). Today the rightfulness and place of world religions are realised afresh. Indeed, there can be no peace without religious peace, which implies mutual tolerance.[19]

If one uses anthropology as a hermeneutic gateway to religion, one discerns similar anthropological elements in most religions. Most religions also use analogous metaphors. This does not imply a common core or that different religious stories are reconcilable (see Peters 1992:334-348). There is fairly wide consensus that there should be tolerance between religions and that exclusivism should make way for differentiated inclusiveness.

To date systematic theology's interaction with social issues has done little to accommodate world religions. The focus has been the relationship with the natural sciences and secularism (atheism). Trends such as feminist and liberation theology, as well as influences like deconstruction, still stand squarely in the tradition of Western theological training. In the past theology was very selective in the matters it dealt with. Reality had to be treated in its totality, which included not only challenges posed by people like Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Einstein, but also those of other religions. D'Costa (1992:326-328, 331) points out that the world we inhabit also consists of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, adherents of new religions, practitioners of tribal religions, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and other groups. And within these groups there is the further reality of oppressed women, the poor, atheists and scientists. In addition African theologians do not take the universality of the Bible and the nature of authority for granted.[20]

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19 For the engaged person religious freedom would be the freedom of the grave. If I have truth and religious reality is dissected into a true-false scheme, everyone who differs from me must be wrong and unacceptable. Alves (1979:195) puts it thus: "And since orthodoxy is bound up with the crucial problem of the eternal salvation of souls, absolute truth must be intolerant. Only doubters can be tolerant. When love of truth is identified with actual possession of truth, the advocates of truth must be intolerant towards those who have a different way of thinking."

20 Thus Oduyoye (1990:103) says: "A new hermeneutic for reading the Bible has surfaced in all EATWOT regions. Questions of the universality of the Bible and the nature of its authority rise out of our experience of other religions and emphasize the need of the

Religious pluralism requires theological pluralism, with the whole of religious reality as its field of study. Religious pluralism is a given that can enrich theology. Scholars like John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Paul Knitter sought to put all religions on an equal footing, all revolving like planets around God as their sun (Pannenberg 1990:97).

Many see the recognition of religious pluralism as the beginning of a process aimed at a single world religion. The supposition is that Western theology, burdened with postcolonial guilt feelings, is overcompensating with a sort of relativistic and pluralistic world theology (D'Costa 1992:328). An overarching world religion – which, at the anthropological level, includes the essence of humankind, and at the religious studies level the characteristics of all religions – is not only undesirable, but also an unrealistic ideal that will simply result in a new form of imperialism.

There are unbridgeable dogmatic differences between religions, as well as conflicting truth claims. The concept of salvation, for example, is peculiar to Christianity although others have their equivalents, couched in different metaphors (e.g. nirvana), and any attempt at interreligious synthesis would be futile (see Pannenberg 1990:101). Unanimity on differences in dogma and truth claims has not been achieved, not even between Christian denominations. Systems can simply be juxtaposed without any attempt to reconcile differences. It is a matter of knowing both oneself and the other and accepting a polycentric religious reality. The truth claims of different religions should be discussed to determine their nature and the differences between them so as to understand both one's own tradition and those of other religions (cf Pannenberg 1990:103).

'uniqueness of Christ' and the Christian affirmation of the 'uniqueness' of Christ."

Design of a society-oriented theology

Disadvantages of an exclusively church-oriented theology

Teaching theology at state subsidised universities today could hardly be justified if it remained exclusively ecclesiastic. Theology at a state subsidised university should far rather be society-oriented.

The church is one of the principal places – but certainly not the only one – for religious experience. It plays a major role in the development of theology but does not control it. There are simply too many merchants displaying their wares in the religious marketplace.[21] Theology is practised in a cocoon if it does not take cognisance of the entire religious profile of a particular society. Its task should be to present religious thought accessibly and credibly to as many individuals, traditions and interest groups as possible.

An ecclesiocentric theology is not only impoverishing but is self-centred and introverted. For this reason one could question the objectivity and neutrality of theological research at certain faculties, insofar as they often uncritically support church practices, the political status quo and the interests of the powers that be. The need for interdisciplinary contact, greater openness towards other religions, democratisation of faith, interdenominational theological faculties and seminaries underscores the importance of greater theological commonality that can be pursued by a society-oriented theology.

Such a theology is far more than just a theological ethic for social problems or an ecumenical action. It is a religiously pluralistic, interdisciplinary theology that critically examines the nature, function and meaning of religious sources, traditions, ethical systems and ways of thinking.

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21 Cochrane (1994:35) emphasises the importance of local theologies. He refers to the construction of theology at different levels. "I choose to call this method 'a Gestalt of theological construction'. Its starting point remains the local community. Its commitment is shaped by the 'epistemological privilege of the poor'."

A society-oriented theology would take account of all factors that play a role in religious reality, offer a forum for reflection and mutual influencing of groups, criticise religious viewpoints and statements and help religious groups to exercise maximum social criticism and pressure in their separate and common contexts.

A society-oriented theology should equip students and members of religious groups to play a reconciliatory role between religions and opposing groups and viewpoints in a broad social context. It should help students to read and interpret religious sources, understand how traditions work and deal with ethical problems. It should promote a critical attitude, investigate the nature of mysticism and spirituality, and find ways of promoting mutual understanding between religions.

This would still allow the study of separate traditions, but not in isolation. It would presuppose a process in which members of different groups learn from one another. Tolerance does not, however, mean syncretism and openness towards others does not entail loss of identity.

Contours of a society-oriented theology

To avoid misunderstanding it is necessary to state what a society-oriented theology ought not to be.

It should not set out to evolve into a world religion nor attempt to unite religions. The West has become sensitive to any form of religious imperialism, which forces others to abandon their God and accept mine as the only true God or, within the same tradition, forces others to embrace my view of God and the world. This would be a new form of imperialism that denies the variegated nature of religious reality. Theological reality is a communal reality, in which exposure to all points of view is necessary for us to understand one another.

Hence a society-oriented theology would not proclaim a new source of revelation or a single way to salvation. It would not serve any oppressed or disadvantaged group but would take the whole of reality as its agenda.

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While acknowledging that there are degrees of correspondence between all religions, a society-oriented theology would not be syncretistic or eclectic.

The purpose of a society-oriented theology would not be to establish a new blueprint for theologising or to design an overarching theology for all religions. This, indeed, would impoverish theology. A society-oriented theology is contextual. At the same time it implies a multiplicity of theologies, since there is a multiplicity of contexts.

Factors necessitating a society-oriented theology

There is statistical evidence that our society is predominantly religious and not agnostic or atheistic. We have also noted that post-secular society has marked religious features. No concerted attempt has been made, however, to analyse, interpret and coordinate the religious values operating in a society. A society-oriented theology would acknowledge the religious nature of a world that needs to be understood in its plurality.

The various religious interest groups in society are influenced by far-reaching social factors. There is no forum where different groups and traditions can consider this influence together. Religions that insist that one should blindly believe what has always been believed remain blind. Besides, there is no 'blind faith' that is not determined by the worldview of the day.[22] We all know the influence that literature and art, philosophical writings and societal problems have on theological thinking. Issues such as poverty, oppression, ecological threats and the loss of unambiguous value systems likewise affect theology decisively. These and other factors in themselves make theology a social enterprise.

Among the principal determinants of present-day worldviews are the implications of the new cosmology, the new biology and quantum

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22   The following remark by Runzo (1986:211) is relevant: "A leap of faith inherently involves one's total outlook on the world. There is no single worldview schema which is 'the' Christian conceptual scheme."

physics,[23] ecological issues, poverty, the political dispensation, the influence of information and communication systems, and ethical, governmental and social questions. They compel religions to reformulate their viewpoints and dogmas. The creation theologies of the different religions are influenced by the same scientific model and the implications it has for most theologies. This will inevitably bring religions closer to each other.

The Christian church in Africa is characterised by a plethora of denominations, the result of the diverse missionary activities of a divided Christendom. A society-oriented theology acknowledges guilt for the religious division imposed on African churches and attempts to bring them closer together. Thus a society-oriented theology would attempt to heal the divisions between, for example, church and theology, church and church, church and other religions, and theology and the world.

Design of a religious, society-oriented hermeneutics

Religion is an anthropological datum. It can be considered an essential human attribute, but one which needs to be understood and explained. This calls for a social hermeneutics, which will identify analogous characteristics in different religions without reducing one characteristic to another. Such a hermeneutics would promote better understanding between religions and awareness of world-wide funda-

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23 Theology and the human sciences in general have reacted against the positivistic, closed worldview promoted by the natural sciences. That has now changed into a post-Newtonian, open worldview which, in the context of quantum mechanics and the new cosmology, offers scientists an opportunity to present a theological design. Theology in particular is confronted with the worldview of the new cosmology. Arthur Peacocke's theology, for example, totally redefines core theological doctrines in the light of the new cosmology and physics. Peacocke (1993:154) accepts that theological doctrines cannot oppose scientific discoveries. God's very being accords with what we deduce from his creation. This implies, among other things, the following. God is transcendent but also immanent in the process of creation (panentheism), which means that in the work of creation he is dependent on both law and chance, just as we have learnt in our study of physical processes (Peacocke 1986:99). God has only a self-imposed, limited omniscience and eternal presence (Peacocke 1993:121-123). He has made the world in such a way that there are parts over which he exercises no power, and there are things whose outcome he does not know, since they are by their nature unpredictable.

mentalism that is threatening many religions, and would attempt to counteract it by fostering understanding.

A religious social hermeneutics would be a historically contingent and contextual approach 'from below'. To understand a society it would read all its texts, not only those with canonical status. It would critically analyse these texts and bring them into line with the ethical systems and practices obtaining in that society. It could also investigate the spiritual impact of documents, liturgical practices and the like. This means that a religious text can be read like any other text without the censorship of canon, council and confession, simply for its inherent force. A 'good' religious text, like any good literary text, should be accessible to the whole community.

A society-oriented hermeneutics is needed to support the drive to find meaning in the fragmenting pluralism of our day. In the process it should guard against the reduction of one phenomenon to another. Pluralism, which can easily lead to rampant fragmentation, should be accompanied by an emphasis on universal characteristics that promote understanding and can be seen as cohesive factors. Influences that function globally limit religious exclusiveness (cf Davis 1994:133ff).

A forum for interreligious dialogue

A society-oriented theology would offer a forum for critical dialogue and discovery of self and others, in the light of a shared life world that poses problems and challenges demanding a religious response. A society-oriented theology would be dialogical, maximally involving all viewpoints.[24] Participation by adherents of different traditions makes theological thinking more representative.[25] A society-oriented

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24 Dialogue, even between religious people, should be regarded positively. Samartha (1981:59) mentions a few characteristics: "1. Dialogue does not in any way diminish full and loyal commitment to one's own faith, but rather enriches and strengthens it. 2. Dialogue, far from being a temptation to syncretism, is a safeguard against it, because in dialogue we get to know another's faith in depth. 3. Dialogue is creative interaction which liberates a person from a closed cloistered system, to which he happens to belong by an accident of birth. 4. Dialogue is urgent ... in order to repudiate arrogance, aggression and negativism of our evangelistic crusades, which have obscured the gospel and caricatured Christianity as an aggressive and militant religion."

25 Without romanticising communication and despite objections, the answer to the question

theology could draw public attention to the various groups' viewpoints. This sort of influencing is currently done by the media, but so far there has been no coordination of religious viewpoints.

Despite the criticism brought against it, Habermas's communication theory could still provide guidelines for a society-oriented theology. His contribution lies mainly in the philosophy of intersubjectivity, which seeks to overthrow the subject-centred view of reason (cf Van Niekerk 1992:180-200; Rorty 1989:62ff).

Promoting religious transparency and empowerment of people and religious groups

A society-oriented theology would seek to promote religious transparency. It should be aware of religious groups in society and the influence and power they wield.[26] The use of this power should be as transparent and open to criticism as possible. Thus a society-oriented theology is a religious critique of the value systems at work in a community and the power play associated with them. For this very reason it must be an open market theology that makes religions aware – and critical – of all forms of power play in their own traditions, in other religious traditions and in society. Inasmuch as it limits exploitation of power it will also meaningfully empower all people. After all, that is what all religions claim to do.

Empowerment affects not only people's inner spirituality but also their external physical circumstances. A pluralistic society cannot meaningfully deal with social problems without taking into account the viewpoints of all religious groups. The aim is to articulate and compare different religious and ethical viewpoints, debate them and, if possible, decide on joint action.

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whether intercultural communication, understanding and rationality are possible should be affirmative (cf Van Niekerk 1992:39-46).

26 People's powerlessness is often a predisposing cause of violence and exploitation. Religious groups should monitor power, criticise its abuse and help to empower people. See Balcomb (1993:150-178) for the religious use and abuse of power.

Social problems generally affect communities across religious boundaries. Yet they are often dealt with in terms of a particular religious framework, to the exclusion of other communities. In this connection a prominent Muslim theologian, Moulana Faried Esack (cited in Petersen 1994:23), said of the Kairos document: "The Kairos theologians have not understood the universal nature of what they have produced and they offer it only to Christians … It comes from a deep-rooted Christian (European) arrogance that leads to ignorance of other faiths and indifference to the possible contribution of their adherents to the creation of a just society."

Promotion of religious experience and spirituality

At a time when there's a paucity of religious experience in the Christian tradition there is a need for openness to the experiences of other traditions, which can be a new source of Christian spirituality. There are many forms of religious experience and expression which need to be noted, and which should form part theological thinking.

A society-oriented theology should offer a forum for the promotion and experience of spirituality. There is renewed awareness of the value of spirituality in any religion. The acknowledgement of spirituality in other religions helps break down intolerant exclusiveness.[27] It is a reaction against a religious tradition in which God is imprisoned in a suburban framework, religious experience has disappeared and bourgeois morality has replaced spirituality. That spirituality is not just an interiorised world of the imagination and must be understood in the context of the struggle for justice and freedom (De Gruchy 1991:90).

The attributes ascribed to theology in this chapter accord with a postmodern approach that reflects the diversity of our society. Theology is a textual science and research into the nature and

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27 As Hick puts it: "When I meet a devout Jew, or Muslim, or Sikh, or Hindu, or Buddhist in whom the fruits of openness to the divine reality are gloriously evident, I cannot realistically regard the Christian experience of the divine as authentic and their non-Christian experiences as inauthentic" (Pannenberg 1990:102).

exposition of texts led to the birth of postmodernism. It is the archaeology of texts that revealed the layered character not only of texts, but also of human nature, truth and tradition. To put all this in perspective the next chapter looks at theology in a postmodern context.

Chapter 4

POSTMODERNIST ASPECTS
OF THEOLOGY

Introduction

To define postmodernism would be modernist inasmuch as definition is a hallmark of modernism. Postmodernism, by contrast, is characterised by acceptance of the openness and incompleteness of our thought and definitions. Consequently this 'school' of thought cannot be encapsulated in a definition and we confine ourselves to noting a few features of a wide-ranging movement. Indeed, many aspects of a postmodernist attitude can be identified in the work of authors from the modern era and even before that. The postmodernist attitude features mainly in literature but is not restricted to it. One hears of postmodernist architecture, art, music and the like. Nor can it be judged in isolation from structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstructive thinking. In fact, deconstruction itself may be regarded as a postmodernist theory (Murphy 1987:418).

Postmodernism recognises the openness, indeterminacy, hence nomadic and metaphoric (diaphoric) nature of existence. It means standing on soil that is being undermined, measuring the immeasurable. It entails accepting the fragmented, therefore textual, palimpsest (text overwriting a previously erased text) character of life. It is a consciously mimetic attitude that deconstructs every construction, points out the ideological quality of every utterance, and de-canonises father figure, god, author, subject, culture and knowledge. Thus postmodernism is radically iconoclastic. It is playful, laughingly relativistic and ironic, turning truth into carnival. It is lingual, symbolic, semiotic. It is perspectival and pluralistic.

Although postmodernism has brought greater humility about rationalistic assertions, it does not deny the possibility and task of thought, more especially of radical thought. On postmodernist grounds one would be critical not only of claims to scientific objectivity but

also, at a societal level, of developments that led to modern technological civilisation (Palmer 1975:319).

Modernism

Broadly modernism can be traced to the age of Enlightenment, although it entails an attitude rather than just a historical era. We use the term to refer to a mental stance that puts the spotlight on reason, the subject, the infallibility of science and absolute truth. To many modernism's promise to use science and technology to emancipate humankind and make the world a better place remained unfulfilled. They feel that, despite the 'achievements' of modernity, their situation is even more dismal than in the days when they had to forego these privileges.

In many respects post-Enlightenment Western thought remained trapped in the metaphysical tradition with its emphasis on subject-centeredness, logocentricity, ethnocentricity, phallocentricity and egocentricity (cf Derrida's works, e.g. *Of grammatology* (1967), *Writing and différence* (1967), *Dissemination* (1972), *Margins of philosophy* (1972) and *Glass* (1974)). The overemphasis of objective, independent truth led to dualism by inserting a distance between knowing subjects and the knowable, quantifiable, measurable objects around them. In this view knowledge has an objective identity and truth exists autonomously, irrespective and independent of human beings and their manifold interpretations of it. That was to form the basis of fundamentalism,[1] the typical position of arrogant modernists. There is no denying that all Westerners share an internalised modern consciousness, so we find it difficult to step outside that modern mindset in our reflection (Berger 1980:7f).

The criticism of modernism is sweeping. It questions even positive aspects, such as academia with its sophisticated testing methods and liberal solutions to social problems (Palmer 1977:366). In fact, the very things that had offered such promise and pretensions failed to

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1   Fundamentalism can be defined from many angles. Here it refers to an approach focusing on textual literalism (cf biblicism, the emphasis on canonical authority), objective facts (truth, including historical truth, is independent of human beings) and realism.

withstand the test of time. To inveigh against modernism rhetorically is easier than to dispense with it in practice, given all the implications of such a choice. Neither can the problem of modernism be solved by applying its own remedies, that is, simply more knowledge, science and technology. For this reason it is impossible to bring modernism to a 'good' conclusion, as Habermas would have it. According to Lyotard (1985:37) modernism has been liquidated.

Theology and modernism

In many respects the church's theology has never been 'modern', or at any rate it never appropriated theological modernism to any appreciable extent.[2] Theologically modernism was viewed in the same light as liberalism and the rise of historical criticism. On the whole the Protestant churches were impervious to these notions and theologians like Barth, with his insistence on God's total absolutism and the total relativism of human beings, put a damper on the advance of modern theological developments. Hence even though modernism never came to fruition in theology, it could be that many postmodernist angles will be explored in this discipline. Fully fledged modernism is not a precondition for experiencing a postmodernist feeling. Theologically modernism was seen as relating to secularisation.

Postmodernist aspects of theology

Theology reflects the thinking of its time. Its preoccupation with 'eternity' does not prevent the traces it leaves in history from showing marked resemblances to the profane thought of that time. When we speak about theology or the church we are clearly not speaking of a uniform approach or a general trend. The religious scene is far too variegated for that. Hence we can at most discern postmodernist tendencies or features. Still, we need to ask in how far postmodernism

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2   It may seem odd to relate theological modernism to modernism as we have outlined it. After all, in theology modernism concentrated more on, for instance, the historical dimension, with the accent on the origins of texts and the cultural, social, literary and religious factors involved. Theological modernism is certainly opposed to an approach insisting on eternal, immutable, objective truth divorced from human subjects. It is not to be dissociated from Protestantism, which responded mainly by falling back on fundamentalism. Hence modernism as we have described it conforms more to the standard Protestant approach.

relates to theology at all. For instance, how susceptible is theology to deconstructive criticism?

Can theology, which traditionally dealt in eternal truths and dogmatically and canonically claimed an interpretive prerogative to dictate human conduct, relinquish this position? The question cannot be answered unequivocally. After all, who answers on whose behalf? What cannot be denied is that the churches and theology, despite all their objections to, say, modernism, were irrevocably influenced by modernity. Thus postmodernism will have an impact on this sphere as well. Some will consider the postmodernist idiom irreconcilable with religion because of its post-Christian and post-religious features. But it does not follow that postmodernism excludes questions about God. People cannot voluntarily rid themselves of God or the notion of the divine, any more than they can rid themselves of metaphysics, language or myth. One way or another, these (ultimate) questions keep popping up in the human mind. In no way can postmodernism be characterised as purely atheistic. It continues to ask about God, albeit in a new way. Its thinking differs from God-is-dead theology.

So far no thorough-going postmodernist theology has been worked out, although there are points of contact with process theology (cf Cobb & Griffin 1976). Nonetheless contemporary theology displays many postmodernist traits. But it is not a uniform, demonstrable movement. Thus one often finds clearly discernible postmodernist elements side by side with sharply conflicting ones. Some theologians consciously adopt a deconstructive strategy. Here one thinks of the work of TJJ Altizer, MC Taylor, C Raschke, C Winquist, H Smith and D Griffin. This chapter does not pertinently focus on them, although they are mentioned. The concern is rather with postmodernist features in theology generally.

Anti-fundamentalism

With its rigid subject-object distinction and its notion of the attainability of knowledge modernism provided fertile soil for fundamentalism in the ecclesiastic atmosphere. In light of divine providence history was viewed anti-naturalistically as a divinely

willed, hence inescapable, harmonious sequence of events, from which human capriciousness and influence are excluded. If God's hand was discernible in everything, history was clearly a meaningful, progressive development, teleologically and all but a-temporally bound for a final destination. Human beings were in effect mere spectators of a process God had eternally decreed and of the struggle between God and evil. History could be researched objectively. This worldview was extended to epistemology, where reality existed objectively, independent of human actors, who can align their thinking to it through research and knowledge. Naturally the thinking self with its 'natural' rationality was focal in this process.

The approach to language was similarly realistic: it was seen as a window offering a view of the world but otherwise uninvolved in it. Typically this was accompanied by profound suspicion of language per se. Language does not offer adequate epistemological access to the world or serve as a suitable vehicle for ultimate truths. This is reminiscent of Heraclites, who regarded the Logos as something objective outside us, to which we can refer, which we must heed and which is not dependent on us. This approach presupposes that reality can be fully known and described. In such a paradigm fundamentalism flourished. Nietzsche exposed the fallacy: the world cannot be known, hence it cannot be fixed in language. Its true nature remains hidden.

Anti-fundamentalism is a typically postmodernist attitude. It is not unknown in theology, and the emphasis on the historically contingent, relational and contextual nature of texts, truth and culture can be liberating for religion as a whole. For instance, an anti-fundamentalist approach allows creative participation at an ethical and even a doctrinal level, thus breaking the absolutist stranglehold that religious traditions often exercise unthinkingly. Fundamentalism with its unequivocal truth concept has to make way for a multiplicity of interpretive options and different interpretations of truth. The struggle against fundamentalism is stymied by the security it offers. After all, final, absolute truths help us to cope with a complex world.

Theological and ethical pluralism

Anti-metaphysical and anti-fundamentalist developments in theology go hand in hand. In fact, victory over the narrow fundamentalist (literal) approach paved the way for a metaphoric, symbolically polysemic perception of God and human reality. Theology and the churches have always had a multitude of views, dogmas and ethoses. With the emergence and development of exegesis and historical criticism the notion of textual pluralism took root: a single text was the product of numerous authors, schools and traditions, and was expounded and applied differently in every new situation. The appearance of different churches in the same community, the development of diverse theologies, the lack of consensus on interpretations of biblical passages – all these paved the way for a host of theologies, denominations, ethical and dogmatic systems and worldviews (Berger 1980:17f). We know that our lives and thought are governed by structures, paradigms and models. But our individual models are mere models, and my particular structure does not replace objective reality. So the other's salvation doesn't necessarily hinge on acceptance of my model (Schiwy 1971:23f).

The plurality of moral norms, systems of reference and ethoses is experienced mainly at the ethical level. In his *After virtue* MacIntyre (1984:51-78) showed that the attempt by modernist Enlightenment thought to justify morality was bound to fail: because the basic premises of opposing ethical theories are incommensurable, society can forget about ever reaching consensus. Because all ethical premises are inferred from other premises, there must be one ultimate premise somewhere that can be taken a-rationally (religiously) as a point of departure. Reason leaves us in the lurch in the search for unshakable premises – each remains arbitrary. Besides, we no longer live in societies with a common cultural tradition and moral norms. In the modern age ethical issues have become so objectified and rationalised that individuals experience themselves as isolated decision makers who have to make their choice from a multitude of moral frames of reference.

Modern ethical systems tried to found their theories on the rational, impersonal basis of fixed moral truths (whether the norms derive from the Bible of from Kantian practical reason, the premise of an absolute ground remains the same). Modernism puts such emphasis on this norm that its contingent historical and situational aspects are understated. It primarily concerns the specific choice that is made and the model in which that occurs. In other words, the objective system or model is accentuated to the exclusion of the individual as a unique person and character.

Postmodernism allows scope once more for individual persons, embedded in particular communities, whose contingent historical and shifting values influence them interactively. Plurality is not denied, but the ethos is re-humanised by linking it to the narrative frameworks in which individuals live. Above all, it allows for the *différence*[3] character of society, in which certain ethical viewpoints (specifically distinguished from differing ones) are devised by way of narrative. The negative (diaphoric) design of ethical premises is acknowledged by juxtaposing various options that function dialogically (cf Cobb 1986:310-321).

Textual and metaphoric character of theology

Recognition of the linguistic character of existence, the textual, relational and metaphoric nature of theological utterances, creates scope for a new theological paradigm that resonates with the postmodern idiom. Theology (more especially dogmatics) cannot disregard the findings of other textual sciences. The semiotic nature of theological texts, their interdependence and the relational, relative character of propositions apply to theology no less than to other textual sciences.

The diaphoric 'not-so' component of metaphors, in which paradox, vagueness and ambiguity predominate, ensures the linguistic tension

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3   *Différence* means 'to differ from' and 'to refer'. The term indicates the interdependence of everything, the fact that something can only be understood in terms of its relation to other things. Ethical systems in society cannot be understood without allowing for the background against which they arose by way of reaction or response.

necessary for creative reinterpretation and re-contextualisation of what the metaphor is about. If one uses diaphor as one's theological model, it permits a kind of 'negative' theology, which expresses the juxtaposing, paradoxical aspects of the discipline. Diaphorically, logocentric positions are simultaneously posited and retracted; entities are presented even while one seeks to subvert them; the *différence* character of language is highlighted and linguistic tension is maintained, without which one cannot theologise. Diaphor puts us in an intermediate position, a gap, a crack where revelation and concealment occur simultaneously. The 'opening up' of the metaphor is a moment of zero reference when the text 'happens' and, in the thrill of that immediacy, no longer defers meaning but celebrates it. In that celebration meaning is appropriated by the reader's own imagination and by spontaneously improvising associations with the metaphoric text. In a way that moment when understanding dawns is one in which a facet of the world becomes transparent and is celebrated destructively. Metaphor endlessly decodes and re-encodes meaning across the whole spectrum of human interpretation.

Theological texts, like poems, do not refer: they represent something, hence are self-referential. The free play of linguistic signs rules out any straitjacket of reference. It determines theology's openness to the future, its equivocal, playful, nomadic character.

Linguistic suspicion and epistemological **mistrust**

Acknowledgment of theology's dependence on metaphor has implications for its epistemology. The objective scientific propositions peculiar to modernism are no longer self-evident. Wittgenstein said that language cannot accommodate metaphysical statements. What cannot be said must be left unsaid. His attempt to try and minimise misinterpretation by means of unambiguous word usage was short-lived, because linguistic precision cannot be assured and language never fully expresses what we have in mind. There is always tension between the private (inner) and public side of language. Its public nature requires observance of the rules of the linguistic game. It imposes limits on the 'I' seeking to express itself. In their expression even the most powerful emotions are hidden behind the clichés of

public rhetoric. It is no longer 'me' speaking, but language operating by itself as an autonomous system; it does not refer to my feelings but to the statement's place in the linguistic system (Bertens 1986:143). Thus one might say that the individual has disappeared, because true individuality cannot be verbalised and language and its structures appear to have an independent life of their own. The innermost truth – the individual person – remains unspoken.

The inauthenticity and unreliability of language have become the point of departure. Language itself has been demythologised. It conceals more than it reveals. It cannot even, says Derrida, establish a firm connection between linguistic sign and reality, for that would already be metaphysics (Bertens 1986:146). There is no such thing as innocent language (Trachtenberg 1985:232). Even metaphysics will never be vanquished, for while we remain tied to language, we are tied to metaphysics, we exist in language and we think with the metaphysical ballast that is peculiar to language (Kearney 1984:112). Postmodernism 'de-lingualises' everything (Van Reijen 1986:44). The appropriate response would be silence. This approach is reflected in plot fragmentation, discontinuity, play and meta-fictional comment, in which language and author are themselves interrogated (Bertens 1986:149-150).

Relativising tradition and dogma in view of new conceptions of history, language and culture

God's voice may still have been one voice before it was heard, but the moment it was heard (i.e. the moment of revelation, birth of tradition) it disappeared behind a multitude of echoes, each of them rendering it differently in contradiction and opposition to other echoes. This makes tradition and dogma burning issues. Ever since the 2nd century Western logo-centrism has been a cornerstone of theology. The de-centring of the word (and dogma) highlights the historicity and contingency of Christian texts. Thus Von Harnack engaged in a de-hellenisation of Christian dogma, and Bultmann in a demythologisation of biblical data. Yet the Protestant churches (cf also the Roman Catholic Church) and Protestant theology have still not evolved a searching, coherent approach to tradition (O'Leary 1985:147-155).

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Historical criticism helped theology to recognise the relativity of its own position. The result was not total relativism but relative relativism with the accent on the relational nature of knowledge. This led theology to criticise and relativise the absolute claims of dogmatics and institutional structures (Küng 1987:217).

Postmodernist de-totalising thought, with its emphasis of the narrative (and subjective) character of history (Ricoeur), was bound to highlight its contingent, rhetorical, anthropological, non-progressive nature. Because history itself is ideologically structured, it undeniably has aspects of power and exclusiveness and a symbolic basis.

Church doctrine, too, is determined by history, anthropology and culture. Religion is essentially linked to social and cultural beliefs and religious patterns. As a result doctrines that originated in one era are often irreconcilable with patterns, dogmas and ethoses that emerge in another era. Thus a dogma or creed will lose its impact on people living in another age, who are no longer affected by the background circumstances that gave rise to that particular pronouncement.

Lindbeck points out the influence of language, symbols and culture generally on the form religion assumes. Each religion functions in its own interpretive framework. Culture and language are what makes experience (including religious experience) possible (Lindbeck 1984:34f). Dogmas are neither primarily propositionally structured philosophical schemes (i.e. timelessly objective), nor purely symbolic expressions of inward experience (i.e. purely subjective). They are rules to organise life and identity in a particular tradition (i.e. contingently and socially determined). The doctrinal/dogmatic core of a tradition provides the 'grammatical' rules that structure life and identity from within (Davaney 1987:197-198). But life and identity change over time. In view of that a critical approach to tradition and dogmatic relativising may be regarded as fertile soil for cultivating authentic, contemporary traditions and dogmas.

Establishing and decentring the subject

Establishing the subject

Hegel maintained that Christ's coming to the world established the principle of subjectivity, hence the inviolability of the individual. This is demonstrated by the view that individuals, being created in God's image with an immortal soul and an eternal destiny, have intrinsic value. That value is evident in the notion that every human being can have a direct relationship with God (Böckenförde 1986:111). Christianity is noted for the unique position it assigns individuals, more especially their inwardness, soul, salvation, conscience, thought and faith, all of which led to the centrality of the subject. Augustine, originator of autobiography as a genre focusing on the inner person, reinforced this view.

This centring of the subject is also found in the age of the Reformation. In their search for certainty and truth both Luther and Descartes found their answer in the subject – Descartes in the thinking and Luther in the believing self. The Cartesian subject identifies truth with knowledge: truth is what is true to me, the subject. Hence all that exists reflects that subject. The establishment of the subject as a rational self ensured the logocentric development of Western thought.

If human beings are by definition subjects, everything else – including God – are objects. Then human beings contain infinity, they have drunk the sea and have killed God (Taylor 1984:22).

Decentring the subject

Postmodernism experiences the Copernican revolution at a mental, subjective level. The geocentric centre – human beings as rational subjects – had to make way for the individual as an unstable, floating subject. Essentially the struggle for the subject is a struggle for dominion. Human beings have always been searching for permanence, a fixed point of reference, ultimate truth. Everything had to be whole and fit into a controllable, human order. In their search for meaning humans found it in knowledge, in the mind that structured and

interpreted the world meaningfully (thus finding meaning in their own, self-created meaning). This anthropology, moulded on such a view of the subject, became the basis of virtually all sciences (Vandermeersch 1985:260).

By the same token Protestant culture put the accent on self-realisation through work: in people's work, too, the subject would be focal. They would find meaning in work. Underlying such a meaningful work ethic is a mystical perception of the self as a bearer of infinite potential (talents) with which human beings are endowed and which, in obedience to God, they have to explore and develop.

Once they entered the industrial age, however, people found less and less self-actualisation in their work and their leisure time became more important. There they hoped to find the self-actualisation that eluded them in the workplace. Meaning (identity) comes at the end of an alienating (identity-less) work day. Meaning and identity are found in a leisure time culture, centring on the immediacy of the person's own body and bodily consciousness. Thus the subject was decentred by shifting the focus from rational consciousness and meaning to physical, sensory reality. This shift in emphasis from rational, one-dimensional truth to bodily (in a way the body is distinct from reason and consciousness) pleasure, multiplicity and the like furthered the decentring of the subject. The search for the self via personal corporeality, one's own body, meant that the accent was not just on pleasure but also on health and diet, as one observes in everyday conversation (cf Verster 1986:193-4).

Society cannot exist without a structure that allows for *différence*.[4] Dogged searching for 'lost' *différence* may lead to fabrication of artificial differences purely to promote consumption. People living in a one-dimensional society are lured with 'multiple' dimensions, at a price and with addictive consequences. The focus on the body is exploited by manipulating human needs. Needs are dictated and satisfied artificially (Marcuse 1968: 14ff).

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4   *Différence* in this context refers to the socially foreign, the novel, which has more dimensions than the bureaucratic uniformity peculiar to bourgeois existence.

A postmodern doctrine of God?

'God-is-dead' theology could be regarded as typically modern. Following Bonhoeffer's radical secularisation of Christianity, it envisaged rendering God immanent and thus realising his kingdom. Radically secularised Christianity could focus on this world to make it a better place. Such a theology is inconceivable without the optimistic modern faith in progress. To many the realisation of God's kingdom on earth remains a dream, which is why they revert to an 'interiorised' Christianity with the accent on religious and mystical experience.

If the death of God is typical of modernism, will postmodernism resurrect him? The answer to this question does not merely concern God's life or death, but also what God we have in mind when we say that he is dead (Gisel 1981:87). Perhaps the god envisaged in God-is-dead theology deserved to die, because theology had pinned him down rationally. This, of course, is what Nietzsche had in mind with his 'God is dead' dictum – it is the God of modernism.

Modernist features of the doctrine of God included a metaphysical effort to make God the object of human operational knowledge, thus permitting neutral pronouncements on God and 'defending' him by means of a positivist concept of revelation and an authoritarian notion of the canon. A modern doctrine of God in fact reflects the self-centred human subject. Such a doctrine of God is logically closed, in that God is held captive by the demands of a scholastic, orthodox, speculative or whatever system. The shift in the classical doctrine of God started with the acknowledgment that God himself is relational and can only be understood in relation to his creation. The only way he can be known is through his 'inward' relationship with himself and his 'outward' relation with his creation. Barth maintained that the divine being could have a *Gegenüber* (interacting other) as an object of divine consciousness. Rahner links the immanent to the economic trinity, in that God's essential being (as he exists in himself) is linked to his extrinsic activity and both 'sides' of his being are put on a par. Hegel pointed out that relationship cannot be divorced from the logical concept of essence. Thus relationship (*différence*) is an essential part of the deity.

God is not essentially different from what we consider to be his attributes. Thus in creating the cosmos he linked himself fundamentally with (made himself dependent on) his creation and history. In this regard Hegel maintained that the finite cannot be viewed in isolation from the infinite, since that would impose a limit on infinity (Pannenberg 1987:250-256). In such a context God's human face is revealed: a God whose being is in the making, who can change and who demonstrates his love of humankind pathically on the cross.

Post-metaphysical thinking about God is couched in the language and signs used to refer to him, which represent divine reality. It is a language resembling poetry. Negation is basic to all symbolic activity. It enables us to distinguish between what is and what is not. Logically something is either true or false, positive or negative. In poetic semiotics, on the other hand, both yes and no, the asserted and the refuted can coexist. Poetry posits the existence of the non-existent (Mortagne 1986:156f). This untenable contradiction is comparable to antilogy, oxymoron and diaphor. It evokes mutually exclusive signifiers. Consistent co-positing of these signifiers creates a special kind of linguistic and semantic tension that leads to constant reinterpretation, linguistic play and destruction of meaning.

God is a text. Like most texts, it is criss-crossed by other texts, full of traces of other traditions, never finally interpretable but always open to reinterpretation of existing interpretations. Hence the document that is God is an open canon. It is destined always to be rewritten, and each author is eclipsed by the palimpsest author of the next version. No final claim to power is possible and every power strategy is deconstructed in each new 'truth claim'. God is a quotation and exists by restating himself differently in each new quotation. The name of God must always be accompanied by a footnote, an apology for the incorrectness of the text, for in reality he is different. Thus religion is a never-ending interpretation of the name of God.

Ortho-practical implications of post-modernist theology

Recourse to mysticism

The church could be described as both premodern, modern and postmodern. There is no overarching denominational classification, no unanimous literary corpus, no dogmatic or moral consensus. This very ambiguity makes the ecclesiastic and religious world postmodern. Protology and eschatology no longer carry the weight that they are assigned in some biblical passages, or that they used to carry in the early days, for instance under extreme persecution (cf Taylor 1981:3). To many people their religion, and hence their church, are immanently world-oriented.

Immanence does not necessarily preclude the esoteric, mysticism and supernatural experience. In fact, it insists on these, since the need for these experiences now has to be met ritually. If the imaginary world of angels, fairies and gnomes has fresh appeal for postmodern minds, it is not surprising that in religious practice, too, there is a renewed need for a God who is not only known doctrinally but is experienced imaginatively in mystical encounter.

In a way the secularisation programme failed. Secularised religion could not always make God 'true' or 'real' in the world, as it hoped. Alas, the kingdom was not fully established, as believers wanted it to be. One could still be sure of a God above and beyond the world, but once he became part of it, he was experienced as gone forever. He was ousted from nature, from imagination, from emotions. The need to experience God anew, and especially to experience him emotionally, has to be met and many people satisfy it in charismatically oriented Spirit religion. Thus the cyclic is reinstated alongside linear and experiential religion (repetition of the same experiences) cyclically repeats the cultic encounter with the Godhead.

The non-subjectivity of human beings is nowhere more evident than in Spirit theology and Spirit experience. They attest voluntary, self-immolating surrender to the Spirit. This kind of religion does not require people to be – indeed, it forbids it. In spirit possession

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language ceases (becomes nonsensical glossolalia) and logocentrism merges into experiential enjoyment of non-subjectivity. Spirit-oriented religion relinquishes dogmatism (rationality) and reaches a zenith in irrational, mystical spiritual experience.

Corporeality and power

The church played a decisive role in shaping perceptions of human corporeality and in subjugating it (along with sexuality). This relates directly to the Western development and perception of the subject (Foucault). The church was a major factor in the process. Christian ethics saw its task as regulating the body and its passions. This led to the notion of interiorisation (Vandermeersch 1985:258). Western history is one of progressive subordination of the subject to a power that became increasingly comprehensive and anonymous. Public behavioural codes and morality in all societies trigger the origin and experience of a separate, non-public 'I'. Separation of the public and the private self means that people are not instinctively identical with their bodies but are parted from them. The body is eyed suspiciously, for it is a hotbed of lusts that have to be repressed.

Christianity links the inner person directly with corporeality (the 'flesh', lust). In the interiorisation process desire was singled out as the crux of human subjectivity. The inner self is the seat of evil, original sin. According to Augustine religious individuals must constantly purge their inner selves of sin, which requires continual self-analysis and self-preoccupation. This hermeneutics of the body (inner person) is typical of the Christian tradition (cf Vandermeersch 1985:265-276).

Postmodernism makes it possible to rewrite anthropology. Human beings 'change' as perceptions of human nature change. The post-modern accent on the person should not be seen simply as a return to past forms of humanism (cf Kearney 1987:43). Kearney sees new ethical possibilities opening up in the decentring of the subject. Dismissing the notion of an origin, which easily results in a fixed anthropology, permits us once again to see people as creators of history. The spotlight is on creative, postmodern imagination which

makes us see the face of the other once more (cf Levinas), which makes us search for ways out of the labyrinth of technologies and ideologies in which we are trapped. Postmodernism presents a possible alternative for human beings as a workable hypothesis. The knowledge that truth does not lie in the self but actually emerges from our response to others permits a new, imaginative (anti-moralistic) ethics.

This ethics assumes the existence of a narrative (discursive) identity, reminding the self of its unfulfilled promise to the other. The narrative self is not a fixed centre but a continually self-correcting identity which knows that its story is never complete and remains tied to the other. It stands over against a substantialist or ego-logical identity and knows that alterity is part of the self. Thus identity always demands the other (*Gegenüber*), from whom the self must (and can) differ so as to gain its identity (cf Taylor 1982:108-9). Personal identity includes social identity: the other reminds me that the self is never sufficient (Kearney 1984:55f).

Maybe an anthropology that recognises and focuses on the universal human being simply as a person, which reflects on human beings with anthropological honesty, protects their rights and protects them against all sorts of power strategies, will remain but a dream. Yet one finds a spark of hope in the ecumenical movement and liberation theology, which already reveal inklings of such thinking. Black theology, feminist theology, liberation theology and many other attempts in Christian ethics each took up the cause of a specific oppressed group and became involved in its struggle to a greater or lesser extent. Ecumenically, according to Küng (1987:218-219), a development from particularism to universalism is inescapable. It opens up fresh possibilities for postmodernist religion.

Technology

Christianity prided itself that Western progress was the result of the church's contribution to the de-deification (secularisation) of the world. The church's emphasis on vocation, achievement and work

promoted the Western competitive mindset with its accent on technology and science.

We know that we have changed the world technologically and sociologically (Garvin 1980:146). Our minds have been extended technologically and are experiencing a 20th century gnosticism, in which computers and the media play a leading role. Mind is seen simply as information, which determines the immediacy of everything (knowledge, people, things) by putting the accent on thought. Thought incessantly seeks to reproduce itself, until it is the only reality left. The mind – hence information – is everything. In gnostic fashion matter is blurred by knowing (light) (Hassan 1980:124). Everything becomes interpretation. The surrender of consciousness to universal consciousness, the recognition of information as universal information, makes mystical participation in universal mind a real possibility (Palmer 1977:372f).

In a postmodern world there is no longer any knowledge, nor individuals acting as purveyors of truth. All we have is information and only those with access to a computer have access to that information. The altered status of knowledge has changed the human environment. The 'information environment' has become our natural world. It both threatens and blesses us, and we have to respond to it. Knowledge merely has exchange value (cf Hudson et al 1986:349f). Technology is a-linguistic, so our world has no language (Van Reijen 1986:45). Nature and God have been replaced by technology and the mass media. Human beings are totally dependent on the anonymous power of multinational capital (Kearney 1987:49).

Ecology

The present ecological crisis is a result of the contradistinction between reason and nature. Christianity shares the blame for the de-deification and de-sacralisation of the world and turning it into an object for human domination. Humankind demonstrates its status as the image of God by dominating creation. God has 'stopped' creating and we must carry on the work. Through our work and culture we must discover nature's hidden laws and use them to subjugate the

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earth. This view sets humankind over against nature, so that people no longer feel 'one' with a 'God-saturated' world. Instead they are one with God – a non-pantheistic God who does not dwell in nature. The people of antiquity would have found such a clinically objective worldview impious (Böckenförde 1986:112-3). The Christian notion of dominion over nature contributed greatly to modern technocracy. The mind is a tool to dominate and regulate the world (consisting of passive, mute objects). But the world consists not merely of mute objects, but of human persons who should not be subjected to this manipulative attitude (Palmer 1975:320).

Nietzsche pointed out long ago that the search for scientific, objective truth is simply a veiled quest for security through world domination (Palmer 1975:324). Postmodernism needs to evolve a totally different approach to nature (cf Maurer 1986:277-282). We are increasingly realising that human history has to be synchronised with nature's history (Küng 1987:218). The church and theology will have to put far more effort into evolving and implementing an ecological ethics that tackles the problem, not primarily from a technological angle, but above all from ethical, economic, political and social angles.

Postmodern reading of texts hinges on reference. A text is a convergence of a multitude of worlds. The author's world, her intertextual world, her prejudices are in contact with the reader's world, his ability to comprehend and the reader's framework with which the textual world is connected. Not only language refers in a text, but a text also creates its own intra-text with its own truth and ethos. Theological texts, unfortunately for some, do not refer unequivocally to extraneous realities. That is what the next chapter is about.

Chapter 5

TEXT, REFERENCE, TRUTH

Introduction: signs and reference

Reference has become a focal issue in hermeneutics, literary theory and theology. It affects most other questions regarding text, meaning and truth, such as the following: How does reference occur in a text? How do texts refer to each other? How does signifier refer to meaning? Others concern intra-textual references to extra-textual reality, the way figures of speech like metaphors refer and the relation between reference and truth. Since reference has to do with relatedness and relativity, it has epistemological implications for a science like dogmatics that works with texts. Reflection on texts and how they signify, refer to truth and represent it has raised questions that dogmatics cannot evade. To come to grips with the textual world we need to look at the foundation of all texts: the sign system.

Sign systems are basic not only to texts but to the whole of human life. They are prerequisite for human existence (Du Toit 1984:43f). Our life world is full of signs. Usually they serve as equal-to signs and are used to refer to people, events, things or ideas. We communicate in signs – linguistic signs, physical signs, symbols. We are born into an established sign system, learn to handle it, live in it and contribute to its growth and change. Whatever we may think about these signs, we can't escape them. Even if a writer reacts against the language, style, customs and signs of her times, she does not do so in a vacuum but has to use that same language and the sources of her era.[1] Sign

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1   "Aussi l'écriture est-elle une réalité ambiguë: d'une part, elle nait incontestablement d' une confrontation de l'écrivain et de sa société; d' autre part, de cette finalité sociale, elle renvoie l'écrivain, ... aux sources instrumentales de sa creation ... Il n'est pas donné á l'ecrivain de choisir son écriture dans une sort d'arsenal intemporel des formes littéraires. C'est sous la presssion de l' Histoire et de la tradition, que s'établissent les écritures possibles d'une écrivain donné ..." (Barthes 1964: 18-19) [Writing is also an ambiguous reality: on the one hand, it is born incontestably from a confrontation of the writer and his society; on the other social factors influence the instrumental sources of his creation … It is

systems can be extremely complex. A sign doesn't always refer to just one thing: it can have many meanings. Normally signs are so much taken for granted that we use them unthinkingly. Many social, religious and physical signs function at an everyday level, unarticulated and unconsciously. Words, too, are signs and function like household articles: they are never ends in themselves but serve some purpose or other. The same applies to signs. Although there are times when we are aware of their instrumental or sign character, these are exceptional. Usually we are unaware of the sign as such.

Despite the variety and complexity of sign systems, and even though not all signs refer in exactly the same way, by and large society seems to operate satisfactorily with the sign systems it has. When the meaning of a sign changes or it becomes outdated and no longer has its conventional meaning, it may be rejected and replaced by a new sign. As a result sign systems in all societies are continually changing and moving on. Verbal signs are 'stored' in dictionaries, but in real-life conversations they are constantly linked in distinctive ways to convey meaning. Just as we can arbitrarily combine words in an infinite number of sentences, so sentences can be combined in an infinite number of texts and an infinite number of texts can be interlinked in a piece of research or study. Thus we do not simply have individual words, sentences or texts as a fixed, eternally valid norm. Anyone operating with signs in the form of words, sentences and texts is constantly on the move within these systems.

If people live linguistically, they live in and by signs and, more especially, by their interpretation. Derrida maintains that nothing exists that is not interpreted. Everything is interpretation (James 1980:303). Interpretive traditions also arise in societies and have great normative authority. A textual tradition may become so widespread and entrenched that it appears to be able to manage as a world on its own without the 'world' around it. The development of a textual culture with a textual (hence literary) tradition gradually led to a

not given to the writer to choose his writing from a kind of timeless arsenal of literary forms. It is under pressure of the history and the tradition, that the possible writings emerge…].

distinctive world of texts and authors. In due course it produced its own rules, norms and reference systems; texts built on other texts, were rewritten, commented on, appended and amputated. This world is no longer concerned with an 'outside' world, with which the inner world of the text, or the world of meta-texts, has to correspond. Its sole concern is the intra-referential world of the text and the texts themselves. It has adequate means to function independently. After all, are 90 percent of all books not just books about other books?

The religious world, too, is a world of texts. To understand Western religious and theological development one has to consider the evolution of that world.

Relation between the intra- and extra-textual worlds

Reference of word, sentence and text

Textual reference has to do with the interactions between linguistic elements (references between words and sentences), structural elements (structural balance and proportion within a text), literary elements (references between texts, stylistic comparisons), references between intra- and extra-textual elements, and so forth. Not all words refer. As a rule nouns, generic names and adjectives refer (adjectives, indicating attributes, do have meaning in their own right but no referent). As signs words, sentences and texts refer to each other. Just as a word acquires meaning from its relationship to other words, so sentences and texts acquire meaning in a broader context from their relationship to other sentences and texts.

We owe the fruitful if problematic distinctions between synchronic/diachronic, *langue/parole* and signifier (*signifiant*)/signified (*signifié*) to De Saussure. Signifiers constitute the expressive layer in a text, the signified is its substance (cf Barthes 1963: 111). De Saussure insisted that language only has differences, no positive terms. Thus he relativised 'identity', the cornerstone of all metaphysics. He pointed out that a word's meaning is not so much its referent as the acoustic images and mental concept connected with it. Hence the accent is on the 'inner world' of meaning rather than the

'outside world' where these things are physically observable. This distinction dissolves the age-old association between thought (*intellectus*) and external object (*res*).

The distinction between *signifiant* and *signifié* (signifier/signified) remains confined to the inner world of the sign. The notion that words refer denotatively to a (specifically demonstrable) outside world underlies the conception that words have a 'basic' meaning (Carson 1984:65). Although the word 'horse' may refer to a real-life, extra-linguistic entity as well, in a sentence or predicate it refers to the mental meaning that the sentence or proposition seeks to convey. In that sense the word's specific purpose is immanent in the sentence. A sentence does not have to refer to a demonstrable object and can make a statement independently of the real world.

In some respects the same distinction applies analogously to sentences and the text as a whole. Often words as signs refer ambiguously or equivocally. The equivocal word 'mine' (source of minerals, mine of information, landmine, belonging to me, etc) acquires meaning in the filtering process of the sentence.

As the eye is not conscious of itself, so words, sentences and texts as signs want to focus instrumentally on the meaning at issue with no regard to their literal meaning. There is a Chinese saying that 60 percent of what we see lies behind, not in front of the eye. Thus the text with all its components is focused on its central topic or meaning, making it an intra-textual affair. The desire for a univocal connection between text and reality is rooted in the metaphysical notion of *adequatio intellectus et res*. Just as meaning is the correspondence between an extraneous, real-life object and my thinking, so the meaning of a text is the correspondence between text and extra-textual reality. But the concepts 'real' and 'self' are themselves problematic, and have, moreover, acquired different meanings in the modern age. Reality is ultimately a highly subjective concept and the 'self' as the seat of all self-awareness and judgment is not a reliable, fixed point of reference (Du Toit 1984:208-211). Besides, the text obviously has implications for the extra-textual world. That world concerns the interactions triggered between text and reader, text and other texts,

text and tradition, text and reading public, et cetera, rather than a denotatively demonstrable outside world.

The problem in textual interpretation often arises when one looks into the extra-textual context and asks what a text has to say to the present situation, what ethical or normative guidelines it offers for its readers' particular circumstances. Here the primary consideration is usually the circumstances, not the text. Just as the meaning of words is filtered from context, so the meaning of a text is filtered from an extra-textual, real-life context. To assess the legitimacy of such inferences one has to determine what type of literature it is and whether it lends itself to these inferences. One has to distinguish between the world that the work opens up to readers in their text-oriented association with the text, and the world they extort from the text with a view to certain power strategies. Inasmuch as they convey meaning all texts can be related to readers' personal worlds. But it is not easy to make the meaning that a particular reader extracts from a text normative for everybody else. As a rule such inferences are only drawn from texts that lay claim to normative authority, such as scientific or religious works.

But often they are the very texts that are enslaved to some ideology. Theological texts, too, may be guilty of this when they are used exclusively for an ulterior purpose such as producing theories or dogmas. In the process of creating dogma the text and its context do not really feature. The problem is that such inferences exceed the context of the text and that abstract, a-contextual norms tend to be concretised quite differently, often in contradiction to that context. When a biblical concept like love or justice is concretised, people will disagree about the way it is done, for the simple reason that in any abstraction the word loses its reference to an individual object and acquires generalised meaning (Ricoeur 1978:107). Some writings – let's call them utility texts – in fact draw their meaning entirely from literal references to the outside world. Here we think of recipe books, telephone directories or collections of moralistic maxims. Utility texts can be regarded as guidebooks telling us nothing but the information they contain. They are unambiguous, totally exclude their readers as subjects, objectify them and dictate their actions. Unless one adheres

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to the letter of the text, it fails to serve its own purpose or that of the reader. It does not involve my subjective world the way a novel or a poem would. The same applies to many morally prescriptive religious texts. They simply dictate rules of conduct with no regard to my life world – they fail to open up a world (Du Toit 1984:234-238).

Zero reference of texts

Fictional language, which is not primarily aimed at referring to the real world, is no different from language that does refer to reality. There does not have to be a difference between language that refers to the outside world and language that does not. Hence a text can be free from all extraneous questions, subjective judgment, any attempt at psychological interpretation, any historical and redactional evolution. We can deal with the text alone, the text as structure and interrelationship. Yet the text is more than that, for its structure and contents don't guarantee what it says, that is, its world.

A text is not merely *about* something – it *is* that something. As a sign it is what it signifies and deals with. That is the notion of zero degree of writing (reference) originated by the Dane Bröndal. He sees the zero degree as a neutral language sign with no external reference, directly containing its own reference. Thus inside and outside, words, things and people coincide directly (Hillenaar 1982:4). Ricoeur faced the problem that poetic texts usually do not 'refer' at all. A poem doesn't want to refer: it evokes things. What it seeks to refer to is the poem itself – it is self-referential. Roland Barthes (1983) works with the same idea. He advocates a language that is not burdened with the duty of constant reference or representation. He puts the accent on an intransitive writing style. Writers do not always specifically want to communicate but seek to create and express themselves in and through language. Hence the emphasis is on free play of linguistic signs without the straitjacket of reference.

Post-structuralism: reference and différence

It was the post-structuralist Derrida who initiated the use of the term '*différence*' (differing, referring or displacing) in his deconstructive

framework. He sees hermeneutics as the process of discovering the ambiguity in texts and cultural products, thus opening up the possibility of new ideas and actions (Lundin, Thiselton & Walhout 1985:35). Post-structuralism is an approach that reveals the conventions and methods responsible for the meaning of a text, but at the same time stresses that these very conventions and codes actually exceed and subvert (deconstruct) the text (Van Luxemburg, Bal & Weststeijn, 1984:80f).

Différence indicates difference and reference. The moment something refers (a sign refers to something else) a difference arises between the present sign/meaning and some other sign/meaning. The moment I become aware of a new sign or issue is a moment of losing identity and acquiring a new one, a moment of *différence*. Thus *différence* is both identity and non-identity. The parallel with metaphor is obvious. Metaphor epiphorically identifies God with a rock, while diaphorically it excludes any identity between God and rock. The sign's character of *différence* and the ambivalent, diaphoric nature of metaphors are unacceptable to identity logic. Derrida sees signs as traces (*voie*). He sees language as essentially a trace, hence as constant reference.

Not only signs as words and texts refer to each other by differing from each other; texts as signs function in the same way. An entire text may function as a sign, may refer to and differ from other texts. Our corpus of knowledge in fact comprises an interrelationship of differentiated signifiers recorded in texts, which Derrida regards as a single, huge text. He calls this network and interdependence of texts the intertext (Merrell 1985:1-2).

To Derrida writing is an indirect, interpretive response to the world. To write is to interpret. Virtually all reference entails interpretation. Often it is a matter of interpreting interpretations rather than things. As a signifier a piece of writing perforce refers to other signifiers (Derrida 1978:278). Hence according to Derrida the analysis of a text or act of writing is an analysis of a multidimensional, diachronic series of signifiers. Each bit of writing simply augments another bit of writing. There is no stable core that gives an expression fixed, eternal

meaning. Thus a text or piece of writing is a metaphor for all human activities, which occur as a chain of differentiated references (Dean 1984:4). There is no original activity or signifier providing a fixed, eternal point of reference.

The search for the 'original' meaning of a word, a sentence or even an entire work easily leads to fundamentalism, whereas an accent on its relational, synchronic dimension comes closer to 'truth' by actually obfuscating it so we can rediscover it. Derrida calls a sign, in the sense of a self-sufficient word or text that contains its value in itself without reference to other signs, a transcendental signifier. But that belongs in the metaphysical realm, which allows for self-contained truth without any other context. Derrida calls such falling back on an always unproblematic given that simply 'is so' a metaphysics of presence. Reacting against it is to react against the alleged immediacy of the signified in the signifier. (This criticism also applies to the rationalistic, Cartesian identification of the thinking self with the outside world – Bernstein 1983:16-20, 115-118.) The interdependence of texts and signs means that the rigid Saussurean distinction between synchrony and diachrony is also untenable (Berns, Ijsseling & Moyaert 1979:60). According to Derrida the notion of a fixed signifier and meaning – that is to say, unequivocal meaning – derives from a theological view of the sign that is peculiar to phenomenology and structuralism. (Cf in this regard Barthian theology's emphasis on the eternity of God as revealed in Christ and recorded in Scripture – Dean 1984:13.)

Religious texts claim to work with pure signifiers and pure meaning, at any rate inasmuch as the text rests on divine authorship and meaning. Such signifiers are independent of any other signifier, hence ontologically independent and not traceable to any antecedent. Naturally this also detaches such signifiers from all other signs, from the sign system, and hence from language itself.

The text's reference to the world it opens up

The connotative-denotative distinction that divides the extra-textual and intra-textual worlds is purely theoretical. Usually the experience

of a lifetime and a world of knowledge is assumed in order to understand just a miniscule fraction of the world a text refers to. The text also presupposes what it does *not* refer to. Although the outside world and the reader's book knowledge are assumed, the text does not deal with a different world or the reader's knowledge. A work or a text cannot be broken up into sentences or words that are then compared with scraps of reality by means of equal-to signs. The world of the text is where horizons merge.

Heidegger's *Welt-Erde* distinction with reference to artworks remains illustrative of the way texts operate. He considers the substance (*Erde*) of a text or artwork to be everything that can be objectively inferred from it, from structure to contents. He juxtaposes this with the world (*Welt*) of the work, which cannot be extracted from it but emerges when a text or artwork captures our attention. The world that a work opens up to a reader, listener or viewer cannot be accessed by exertion but is experienced as the work's revelation, that which relates to human beings, hence an arresting world that can no longer be discussed in a detached manner. *Erde* can be handled hermeneutically and structurally, but *Welt* resists every form of external control. In this regard Ricoeur distinguishes between distancing oneself from a work and appropriating it, which are dialectically linked. This strained juxtaposition leads to creative reconstruction of the text, performed face to face with the text (Heidegger 1975:15-88; Du Toit 1984:42-56; see also Lundin, Thiselton & Walhout 1985:49-50).

The world of the text is independent and not reliant on the outside world for its authentic communication. If the outside world is reflected in the text at all, it is always in such a way that the text is the world's point of reference, not the other way round. After all, the text does not simply replicate the outside world but describes, interprets, creates it. When Aristotle refers to the text's mimesis (imitation) of reality, it is not imitation in a literal sense. Mimesis re-describes reality. Ricoeur pointed out that even historical texts do not refer to reality unequivocally. They have the same narrative structure as fictional accounts (Du Toit 1984:57-63).

So much for Ricoeur. The world of a historical text is the text itself, not the factually verifiable outside world. Secondly, reading or writing history means interpreting the past as equivocal, temporal successions of human interpretations of other human interpretations, ad infinitum. Historical texts par excellence rely on other texts and statements, signs and codes in an endeavour to reconstruct, and their reconstruction is but another link in the chain of interpretation. That affirms the nomadic character, not merely of all texts but of historical texts in particular. Dogmatic texts, too, can be viewed thus.

The textual world is autonomous. A work's meaningfulness lies in the text, even if the text's operation is determined by a reader with a particular horizon. Texts do not refer unequivocally. In a sense I never read the same text twice, not if we bear it in mind that the text is my interpretation of it, not if the essence of a text is seen to be the interpretive event that can never be pinned down. We cannot but return to texts with ever changing horizons. Then we may look in vain for a repetition of an earlier experience when the text moved us, or maybe something new emerges. That is the reality of the way texts operate – what is called the world of the text.

Reference of metaphors

Here we speak of metaphor in a broader context than just that of a figure of speech. A sentence or an entire text can function as a metaphor. What the metaphor seeks to convey is not what is written there, and what it literally says is not what is intended. A metaphor is a mental cue. It stimulates thought but does not necessarily dictate it. It suggests meaning but does not spell it out as similes do. Its power lies in the conflict between its comparative dimension (epiphor) and its non-comparative aspect (diaphor). Metaphor both refers and does not refer. It avers that something is so and simultaneously denies it. If one were to isolate just one element – the epiphor – it will no longer be a metaphor but simply an unambiguous reference, a word substitution or word play.

The diaphoric 'not-so' component of metaphor with its accent on paradox, vagueness, ambiguity and polysemy is comparable to the

Erde of a text (structural elements, substance), from which the *Welt* (the text's communication, reconstruction of meaning) is born in the revelational moment of creative reinterpretation and re-contextualisation of what the metaphor is about. The 'opening up' of a metaphor is a moment of zero reference, the text as a happening which, in the delight of immediacy, no longer defers meaning but celebrates it. In this celebration its meaning is appropriated by the reader's own imagination in spontaneously improvising association with the metaphoric text. To some extent the happening of meaning is a moment when a facet of reality becomes transparent. That moment of transparency also destroys it. Think of a joke, which is never as funny again as the first time one heard it. The same applies to every facet of metaphoric reference that makes something transparent. The potency of a genuine metaphor actually lies in its ability to conceal meaning behind the 'not-so' element, the element of *différence*. Every obscuration of meaning leads to a reshuffling of the cards for the next game.

An interactive perception of metaphor, when its two elements are seen as influencing each other, makes it impossible to treat metaphors simply as condensed similes, linguistic ornaments, word substitution or predication. This implies that words are not assumed to have fixed, unvarying meanings, but that meaning happens as a result of an interaction between words and contexts (Du Toit 1984:92-93, 349-350). A metaphor is an awkward reminder that not all phenomena are readily captured in codes. In metaphor meaning is decoded and recoded across the entire field of human interpretation.

The fruitfulness of metaphor for theological work is self-evident and there is growing interest in metaphor in various quarters. Crossan's work is an example of the incidence and use of metaphor, a diaphoric accent on things, the use of juxtaposition and the like. In his reconstruction of Jesus' key parables he shows that parables display an inherent tension which is also their strength. He points out the polar inversion of expectations, the use of juxtaposition and polyvalence, as a means of changing listeners' opinions. Parables effect a polar inversion of expectations and are couched in metaphor. Crossan him-self devises what he calls a 'negative theology' in line with Derrida's

notions, in which the absence of a centre of meaning underscores the playful element. This cannot be divorced from the diaphoric model (cf Crossan 1980:8-11, 51-65; cf also Strijdom 1986).

The emphasis on metaphoric openness, polysemy and creativity shows marked resemblances to the deconstructive view of the *différence* nature of linguistic signs. Metaphor doesn't seek to fix meaning – it lives by relatedness. It relies on imagination or diaphoric tension that gives rise to continual reinterpretations of a world that cannot be finally articulated.

Nature of truth in theology as determined by the nature of reference

Role of faith in the reference of religious texts

The borderline character of religious language (in that it refers to pivotal moments of life) lies in its relational or referential nature. But how does language refer in religious texts? We refer to God via faith and the language of faith. Thus faith is both the vehicle and the condition for revelation. A text engenders faith when it opens up a world that moves and changes people, an experience that could be defined as an experience of insight, conversion or re-creation. The manner in which religious texts open up a world that moves readers is no different from that of other texts, neither does their language differ from that of other texts. Yet religious texts do move people in a different way. The difference lies in the way they refer their readers to an often supernatural dimension. The expectations people have of a religious text largely determine how it speaks to them. To them it is on a different level from secular texts, in which God is not the speaker.

To believers the referent of religious texts – in the final analysis always God – is an extra-textual world, although God is revealed only intra-textually and is not extra-textually demonstrable. The faith that the text 'opens up' to the reader is experienced as a gift. As a rule faith is instilled by way of texts – reading, hearing and interpreting texts. The biblical text itself claims to engender faith.

The Bible contains many references to historical and other facts that can be checked in other sources to affirm the claims of the biblical text. But ultimately the referent is not historical facts but the transcendent, divine world that is knowable only to faith. In a sense religious texts that claim to be divine revelation and speech are non-referential, since divinely spoken words, which the text purports to convey, make any reference to other texts or truths redundant. Thus religious texts are auto-referential in that they contain their own authority and referent. Inasmuch as the biblical text invokes faith in order to communicate it is auto-referential, for faith – the condition for 'true' reference – is inspired by the text itself. The same applies to the operation and appropriation of basic metaphors like Christ, salvation, love and the like: they become real to readers through the operation of the text itself. To be sure, the texts are embedded in the context of a particular religious community, where they feature in proclamation and a congregational lifestyle, but the source engendering faith in their subject matter remains the texts themselves. Nonetheless their readers' point of reference is the tradition in which they live and which determines how the texts will refer for them (Van Huyssteen 1986:157).

To believers religious truth is the truth of their faith. Hence the truth of a religious text is not ontologically present in the actual text, its structure or the facts it contains – it derives from the faith the text inspires in its readers, which turns it into experience. If the text is used as proof of a denotative, extra-textual world, the prerequisite of faith as a God-given access to religious reality would no longer apply. This gives religious texts a solipsistic character, in many respects similar to that of poetic texts with their focus on the intra-textual world. That is why revelational texts need no verifiable outside world. One could make a case for a metaphysical view of religious texts, but that falls outside the scope of this chapter.

The foregoing explains why religion puts the accent on the word event (Ebeling 1960, 1969, 1975a) or a dynamic doctrine of inspiration (Barth), in the sense that the text as a living event effects change in human beings. (Cf also Barth's *analogia fidei*, according to which the subject is personally involved in the text event and has to appropriate

its revelation personally. See CD II/1:81.) Since religious texts usually become established over time and their authenticity is no longer questioned, the text also creates a special framework of expectations, because its revelational status gives it the potency to keep generating experience.

Religious texts do not refer unambiguously: there are many possible interpretations and views, which can give rise to dissent. In the Christian tradition Scripture has functioned as a source of signs for an infinite range of references that were recorded in diverse creeds and theological works. The very multiplicity of such works proves that Scripture is not reducible to a few univocal signifiers.

Thus the reference of dogmatic texts is primarily intra-textual. This has radical implications for dogmaticians' approach to truth, which has shifted from abstract, metaphysically oriented explanation to linguistic, intra-textual interpretation. Hermeneutically this was made possible by accentuating the nature of religious language and the metaphoric style of God-talk.

Reference and dogmatics

The referential nature of language profoundly affects dogmatics. Not only does it function primarily by citing other texts, but the texts it refers to are themselves references to and for other references. Dogmatics cannot dissociate itself from other textual sciences. It has to take cognisance of the sign character of texts, their inter-dependence, relational nature and the relativity of their pronouncements. In this shifting world of references dogmaticians used to try to use aerial photographs to survey the territory and explore it. While this is always euphoric, it is highly selective. Barthes points out that in panoramic views one usually looks for familiar beacons (signs) to orient oneself. One looks for signs that one unearths from memory and knows they have to be there. Because of the altitude such views are always ecstatic, yet also intellectual because the mind probes, identifies, subdivides and relates. Such deciphering also initiates the viewer into holistic perception (cf Barthes 1983: 237-250).

Dogmatics lives by textual panoramas. It is euphoric, wide-ranging, intellectual and relational. What is experienced as a labyrinth of texts and textual relations can be pieced together into a coherent jigsaw puzzle by means of 'supervision' from above. Yet such a panoramic overview clearly compacts reality, hence does not do justice to its polysemic magnitude.

Just as we cannot, Bultmann-style, strip myths down to pure meaning, so we cannot ignore the narrative, the text as an entity, abstracting only its conceptual, dogmatic or metaphoric core (Kelsey 1975:34-37, especially his discussion of Wright's method). Dogmatics has to accept that its story comes in serial form and all episodes cannot be squeezed into just one corpus or instalment.

Yet dogmatics must ultimately create a new text across the boundaries of individual texts. A dogmatic text is a new account building on many other accounts. It is a new creation, a reinterpretation of other texts. If the text as it stands (e.g. the biblical text) does not need to be altered in any way, we might as well burn all our theological libraries, for their works would merely either repeat or deviate from what the Bible says (Eco 1984:399).

Dogmatics undeniably has a character of *différence*. Its history is largely one of interaction between dogmatic texts. That determines its openness to the future, its metaphoric polysemy and its playful element. Thus the built-in, self-relativising nature of dogmatics should assure its modesty in facing future challenges.

The matrix of texts, like that of language, is life itself. The theological world of texts is always complemented by a living tradition, a cult, et cetera. Neither is theological language distinct from religious experience of reality – an experience that includes God, the world and humankind. But this world cannot be explained and described unequivocally. It is paradoxical, polysemic, often mysterious. Hence religious texts that seek to re-describe such a world have to be polysemic, ongoing, even paradoxical. The requirement that a text should refer univocally to an extra-textual reality would not guarantee

a metaphysically fixed, eternal text. Not even divine reality can be described thus.

The immanence of religious texts is comparable to the 'immanence' of faithful prayer. To the believer the prayer has to do with reality, whereas in fact it has its own reality, 'my' reality, just as a text is about a textual reality. The prayer may be written down or repeated, but it cannot replace the event, the 'encounter' of prayer. By analogy this applies to the world that a text opens up.[2] The undeniably textual character of dogmatics has implications, not only for its intertextuality but also for its provisional and nomadic nature. It need not be experienced as restrictive – in fact, it can open up new vistas. The metaphoric character of dogmatics also offers scope for the creation of new concepts, theories and dogmas (cf Van Huyssteen 1986:163f). It opens up possibilities, moreover, for the inter-confessional and intercultural activities of Protestant theology.

It would be reductive, after all, to inquire yet again into the criteria for theorising, as if by so doing one could somehow reach consensus on ultimate principles in this regard. To a great extent the whole of post-Barthian theology has been a sterile wrangling about the demand for verification procedures (cf Kuitert 1973:111-114). In the quest for verification the Bible cannot be glibly advanced as the criterion. In dogmatics, says Kuitert, the Bible does not function as a criterion but rather as the source of Christian knowledge of God. The complexity of the hermeneutic process precludes such a simplistic, 'fixed mono-criterion' approach (Kuitert 1973:123).

The diaphoric nature of dogmatic propositions can also provide a model that allows for the *différence* quality of dogmatic activity. It underscores the textual character of any theological or religious utterance, in which metaphoric interaction of worlds, juxtaposition of entities and diaphoric double vision of things sustain the tension of the text, yet at the same time prompt subversion of the same entities in ongoing reinterpretation of these realities. The textual play element

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2   Cf Du Toit (1984:153-267) for the way the whole of reality is experienced religiously and expressed in texts.

relativises truth in the sense that it is 'destructively' celebrated in the moment of discovering meaning: "Meaning must await being said or written in order to inhabit itself, and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning" (Derrida 1978:11).

If reading texts is that difficult, how can we ever be sure that we understand them correctly? Or should all texts that do not refer equivocally (as scientific texts purport to do) be relegated to the realm of imagination and aesthetics? Is theological truth purely poetic?
Before we proceed we must first zoom in on the issue of truth.

Chapter 6

THE END OF TRUTH?

Introduction

Issues relating to truth raise basic, persistent questions for humankind which can never be answered finally. Since truth concerns our way of judging and evaluating, our worship, value systems and the like, it functions on the theoretical, existential and pragmatic levels every day. Truth is multifarious and one can only try to explicate its different meanings in different contexts. It may refer to linguistic rules, the rules governing logical propositions, pragmatic truth, rhetorical truth, maybe religious, ideological, economic, political or existential truth. The notion of truth is linked to the notion of being. To answer the question of being is to get to the truth. We want truth because we believe in it and feel it is beneficial to all of us. It is impossible to explicate the multiplicity of theories and beliefs in this regard, or to trace the implicit and explicit manifestations of truth in theology, literature, philosophy, ideology, et cetera.

The following questions are commonly asked in Western philosophy: Why are we attached to truth? Why truth rather than lies? Why truth rather than myth or illusion? How come our societies assign 'truth' such value that we are held in bondage? (Allen 1993:150-151). These questions are difficult to answer, especially when one considers the persistence and dominance of truth as a function in society.

Although we like to believe that truth is universal, there is no final criterion. Despite all endeavours to find one (experience, proof, general opinion, etc), each criterion has always needed a further criterion to support it. It is only in a given context like analytical philosophy that truth can be specified as that which is congruent and without contradiction. But analytical philosophy, a specific metaphysical system or religious theory, does not necessarily determine truth. Nor is it possible to live in a consistently analytical

manner. Even those who propound highly sophisticated theories of truth or pride themselves on the scientific exactitude of their judgments often fall back on naive ideas of truth in decision making.

What is incontrovertible is Western people's unshakable belief in truth. Truth has played an enormous role in the process of industrialisation and the expansion of science and technology. Consequently many believe that truth will improve all things: our style of living, the scientist's reputation, the politician's credibility, whatever. It is the immovable mover of our language and thought. Unless we subjectively accept and adhere to objective truth no understanding is possible, no communication sensible and nothing concrete can be achieved.

The 20th century witnessed the triumph and decline of the notion of truth. Two world wars left people despairing of their ability to improve the world. Truth came to be challenged insistently.

The *fin de siècle/début de siècle* phenomenon: truth and eschatology

At the start of the 21st century one finds eschatologies flourishing again. Belief in the end- time seems to be as popular as belief in truth, helping many to find renewed meaning in life. They believe that truth will triumph in the end, that everything will become clear when the naked truth is revealed. This truth is not human truth but the truth about human truth. Eschatological truth is God's verdict on the human world.

But there are also those who do not believe that anything will be 'revealed' at the end, whenever that may be. If there is one hallmark of the end of the 20th century (and the end of time), it is the end of truth. What will be revealed at the end is not a new or a final truth, but simply no truth at all. If one thinks on these lines, the end of truth can be seen as the end of God, since God is said to be truth. Belief in the end of truth can also be seen as the end of eschatology.

Truth is our floating centre of gravity. It is the very glory and humiliation of being. We are not, however, heading for neat solutions to all riddles and truth will not triumph in the end. Truth is celebrated, terminated and reborn in an ongoing process. The history of the quest for truth is a history of repetitions. Despite all our endeavours we get no closer to the end of that rainbow. What is unique to the late 20th and early 21st centuries is the realisation, more forceful than ever before, that there is no longer any fixed, eternal truth and we have to settle for contingent, historical truths.

The historical, contextual and contingent nature of truth gives it the quality of a lie. A lie is accepted as true for as long as it is believed. A lie professes to give answers, to be real, to stand for things as they are. It is not recognised for what it is until its time is spent. When a lie is uncovered, truth emerges as that which was not, which did not exist and had the character of non-being. Uncovering a lie reveals truth retrospectively. In the Hegelian metaphor, wisdom begins at dusk when Minerva's owl takes flight. At the dawn of each new era we usually admit that things were not quite as we thought they were, that in many instances we were misled. This is the time of wisdom. It was only at the end of World War II that the horror of Nazism was recognised. The same applies to apartheid. At the start of the new millennium we recognise that everything we believed in the past century was not true, or is no longer held to be true. Especially our belief in truth can no longer be considered true.

Modernism and the concomitant technological violation of the planet were not 'true'. The consequences will be felt in the 21st century and new ecologically sensitive truths have to be found.

The end of truth – a postmodern fad?

Some postmodernists believe that truth has come to an end. Malpas (1992:295), for example, maintains that postmodernism does not relativise truth, but denies the very possibility of such a notion. Truth has been replaced by play of meaning, discourse, power, words, and so on; it is no longer a significant part of the game. In postmodernism the concern for truth, its very meaning and the criteria determining it

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came to be seen as purely contextual. According to Griffin (1988:9) reflections based on language, psychology and the sociology of knowledge are beset by philosophical doubts about whether perception has a given (as opposed to a constructed) element and whether the notion of truth as correspondence between idea and external reality is at all meaningful.[1]

Postmodernists deny the existence of truth as an autonomous entity. They make no attempt to retrieve what has been denied or to reconstitute truth. In this sense postmodernism does not offer a solution to the problem of truth. It simply negates modernism's truth claims by pointing out the provisional nature of truth. Thus, according to Malpas, postmodernism remains in the thrall of modernism and the concomitant crisis. The crisis is simply postponed and we await a new version of it. Hence the postmodern reaction is incomplete, because it doesn't really help us to come to grips with the problem of truth (Malpas 1992:296).

More especially postmodernism rejects truth as an exclusive, transcendent notion. It rejects truth as relating to any specific entity that takes our speech beyond the human realm into a unique, transcendent reality. Rejecting this relation does not imply rejection of truth as such. But it recognises the boundaries of truth claims and the conditions under which they function.

The notion of truth could be maintained, for example, on the precondition that it is limited to the fragmented nature of human speech, the consequence of the denial of any notion of truth that may apply to all speech. In postmodernism the relation between speaker and listener, reader and writer has been complicated by fragmentation that inhibits real encounter. This reduces the relationship to play, in which all reference becomes part of the game itself (Malpas 1993:298). It should be noted that speech is possible even when meaning is

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1   This is the position of realism, namely that material objects are external to us and independent of sense experience. Realism is opposed to idealism, which holds that such material objects or external realities only exist by virtue of our knowledge or consciousness of them; the whole universe is dependent on mind or in some sense mental (Devitt 1984:11-24).

fragmented, for meaning can always be reconstituted. In this sense one could still speak of truth, but a different notion of truth – one that does not refer to a world beyond us, although such a world is implicated in the acts of speaking and writing. Truth is the ever present possibility of connecting and understanding utterances, different beliefs and sign systems (Malpas 1993:298).

In this sense it is untenable to totally deny the possibility of truth, because that would effectively rob us of the capacity to speak, understand or judge.

The end of religious truth?

The end of truth implies the end or death of God, because God is said to be truth. The aim of this chapter is not, however, to reintroduce an outmoded death-of-God theology. We know that the demise of that theology left God still very much alive in many religions.

The end of religious truth is the end of any exclusive religious truth. This emerges pertinently in the impact of world religions on Christian theology. There is no universal, supra-religious criterion, unassociated with a specific faith, to judge between religions or to judge a given religion. We know that religions cannot be proved to outsiders. Any norm to determine what is true religion in a particular tradition must derive from that religion itself. Neither can one describe from outside what is only to be experienced from within (Vroom 1989:52). Hence there are no strictly neutral norms for evaluating religions. It is impossible to reject any religion, for the very reasons for rejecting it are connected with a specific religion (Vroom 1989:62).

One might ask whether the notion of truth as it functions in world religions could not serve as a common denominator to bind religions together. There are in fact interesting parallels between different reli-gions. Vroom (1989:301ff) mentions five ways in which the notion of truth functions in religions. These ways are common to most religious traditions. The first is as public knowledge (doctrinal), which is more or less the public teaching of a religious tradition; secondly, as comprehended knowledge (*veritates*), when truth generates a degree

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of insight; thirdly, as practised knowledge (*vera religio*), which refers to true religion in the sense of faith in practice and obedience to its rules; fourthly, as the moment of understanding (*intellectus verus*) in the sense of true religious understanding through religious experience; and lastly, as transcendent (*veritas*), when truth is identified with God as the truth.

Religions do display a family likeness on many points. All take the same peculiarities of existence into account; all apply qualifications to religious language; all point out similar imperfections in human nature; and so on. These similarities, however, pale into insignificance in the face of the differences and believers in different traditions do not consider them to be a unifying factor.

It is fallacious to define religions in terms of a single basic belief or truth. Their truth claims are not monolithic despite family resemblances. Corresponding beliefs in different traditions cannot simply be equated. People do make truth claims concerning the nature of the transcendent, humankind and the world. These claims differ. The criteria for assessing religious truth claims are not such that they permit intersubjective appraisal of what is true and what is false.[2] Truth claims must take cognisance of experience. Beliefs that have not been experienced remain superficial. Experience and interpretation must always be considered together.

The most promising procedure for evaluating competing truth claims, according to Vroom (1986:384), is to consider whether a religious tradition pays due attention to all aspects of life (what Vroom calls existentials). This emphasises the existential and pragmatic aspects of truth. Truth in this sense is truthfulness, when people's beliefs influence their lifestyle on a day-to-day existential level.

The truth of religions must be seen as contextual, operating within the parameters allowed by tradition and confession, and influenced by

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2   On the issue of interreligious verification and the question whether neutral, universal human assessment of religious persuasions is possible, Vroom (1989:370ff) mentions the following conditions: valid religious knowledge should be systematic; well founded; intersubjective; discovered in freedom; and presented with a critical mind.

historical circumstances. There is no single religious truth – only a multiplicity of truths in the various traditions.

The end of scientific truth?

The truth claim of modern science, which rests on a mechanistic, reductive worldview, is no longer accepted (Griffin 1988:13). Our views of science and truth are constantly changing. According to Mooney (1991:294) science has come to be seen as a relativistic project, influenced to a considerable degree by social ideologies and attitudes. As a result its imperialistic claim to be the one road to certain knowledge has been much eroded and it is increasingly viewed as just one of the ways in which humans seek to make sense of their world.

After the appearance of Kuhn's work (see Kuhn 1962:76ff) it was realised that natural science can no longer claim to work with fixed ideas. It is caught up in the same historical flux as the human sciences. From this point of view human ways of thinking about nature can no longer be seen as the work of 'pure reason' transcending the contingent historical situation. All thinking should be seen against a historical, cultural and social background, as the work of finite beings grappling with particular problems in specific situations (Toulmin 1989:234-236)

Truth is not identical with science. Scientific language serves to verbalise observations, formulate theories, explain phenomena – not to present a blueprint of truth. Empirical sciences produce probable findings, not ultimate truths. Scientific methodology is not appropriate for answering questions of value (Davis 1994:31; see Appiah 1992:186). Scientific theories are said to be true, not because they present us with a precise replica of the natural phenomenon under investigation, but because they make it possible to give a rational account of natural entities, their states, relationships and interactions. Scientific theories reveal natural phenomena as they manifest themselves, independently of any theory (Kockelmans 1993:148).

Science cannot claim to be true in the sense that its theories are universally valid. No scientific theory can claim universal validity outright, since that would imply replacement of the knowing subject, which cannot be universally guaranteed because knowing subjects are not universally the same (Van Niekerk 1992:207). Science plays its own game, as Lyotard (1984:40) indicates. It cannot legitimise language games other than scientific ones. Scientific knowledge requires the retention of only one language game or denotation and the exclusion of all others. The game of prescription, for example, eludes it. It is incapable of legitimising itself.

Scientists who are sceptical of the truth value of the human sciences with their narrative dimension must remember that scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative kind of knowledge, which, from its point of view, is no knowledge at all (Lyotard 1984:29).

Modern science abandons the metaphysical search for a first proof of transcendental authority as a response to the question, 'Who decides the conditions of truth?' It recognises that the conditions of truth, the rules of the scientific game, are immanent in that game, that they can be established only within the bounds of a debate that is itself scientific, and that there is no proof that the rules are good other than expert consensus (Lyotard 1984:29).

We have reached the end of scientific truth[3] in the sense that it gives access to truth, a truth which has to be accepted universally and which must necessarily influence all other sciences.

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3 David Griffin (1988:8-9) rejects a radical postmodernist view, according to which science neither offers nor seeks truth. He acknowledges, however, that science is not a value-free enterprise and that values other than rational and empirical ones essentially shape the worldview of the scientific community.

The end of metaphysical truth?

The end of metaphysics as the end or consummation of truth epitomises the development of the notion of truth in the West. To speak of the end of metaphysics, of truth – or of any other discipline, for that matter – is not really possible, since one can radically question the metaphysically determined meaning of 'end' (Sallis 1986:17).

Nietzsche said of metaphysics that it is the science which deals with the fundamental errors of humankind – but treats them as if they were fundamental truths. According to him a metaphysical world could exist – the absolute possibility of it can hardly be disputed – but one could do absolutely nothing with it. For one could assert nothing whatever about it except that it is an inaccessible, incomprehensible being-other; a thing with negative qualities. Even if the existence of such a world were ever so well proven, knowledge about it would certainly be the most useless of all forms of knowledge, even more useless than knowledge about the chemical composition of water is to a sailor in danger of shipwreck (Hollingdale 1968:39-40; 192). For Nietzsche metaphysics is dead because God is dead, being is a fallacy and the true world a fable.

The end of metaphysics was asserted by Kant when he proclaimed the completion of the metaphysical project. He stressed that no single metaphysical problem remained which had not been solved, or for the solution of which the key had not been supplied. According to Hegel metaphysics would come to an end in the sense that its history would be assimilated into the full actuality of spirit. The end of metaphysics, Heidegger argued, is not its termination, its failure to continue or its decline into some kind of impotence, but rather its completion in a different kind of assimilation, which Hegel would call *Aufhebung*. The end of metaphysics in the sense of its completion simultaneously includes its displacement (Sallis 1986:19-21). The death of meta-physics can be compared to Heidegger's view of death, where death is not the end of Dasein like a road which stops or fruit which ripens, but the supreme, unsurpassable possibility of Dasein. What is left is the task reserved for thought after the end of metaphysics (Sallis 1986:22-23).

The end of truth in its religious, scientific and metaphysical modes is perhaps only the end of a specific view of truth in the West. Developments in these fields affect the fibre of Western societies and open up the identity of the West to re-determination in a process of exposure to new contexts of meaning.

Theories of truth[4]

In discussions about truth virtually all authors define scientific truth according to the correspondence theory. The coherence and pragmatic theories are considered to be more concerned with the criteria to be met in a particular context. Truth as correspondence, by contrast, is truth of a certain nature, valid under certain conditions. Traditionally the correspondence theory of truth saw the essence of truth as correspondence between judgment and object. This conception, according to Kockelmans (1993:143), is fraught with serious difficulties. What is meant by correspondence? The judgment must describe the thing as it is, yet it can never become identical with the thing. The correspondence is neither between two representations, nor between one representation and a 'real' thing, nor between two cognitions. It is rather between the substance of a claim about a thing and the thing itself insofar as we can discover it, independently of our claim to do so by means of some intersubjectively acceptable process of confirmation. The 'thing' manifests itself in a particular context of meaning.

We can only claim that our judgments state how things are in some limited context of meaning or, in the final analysis, from the perspective of meaning as a whole, which is humanly inconceivable. Thus every form of revealing implies some degree of concealment. By revealing one thing I conceal another, and by adopting one perspective I disregard other, similar perspectives. If every human effort to reveal things as they are implies various forms of concealment, then for us truth in principle always entails untruth. Yet I can still maintain that my claims are true to the degree that they reveal things just as they

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4   It is impossible to expound all the different theories of truth within the scope of this chapter. We confine ourselves to some aspects of correspondence theory. For a general introduction, see the work by Kirkham (1992: 73-140).

manifest themselves. If human beings could make truth claims that are totally independent of limited, historical contexts of meaning, final truth might be possible. But truth will always be limited and finite and, in principle, accompanied by some untruth. Thus it is always open to revision (Kockelmans 1993:145).

It would be a mistake to overrate the contribution of truth theories to the problem of truth. Even the most popular of these, the theory of correspondence, must be modest and must acknowledge that correspondence is not absolute, definite and comprehensive, but provisional, limited, contextual and to some extent creative (see Kockelmans 1993:149).

Truth and power

If God is truth, then truth is God. In this view truth is an unshakable, immutable, eternal entity. The dominant truth, however, seems always to be the truth of the dominant group(s). It is vested in theological and metaphysical power schemes. Truth is only outwardly independent of the group that wields power.

In the history of Western thinking truth was not considered a problem at all until Nietzsche started questioning it. He asked why we want truth rather than untruth, uncertainty, even ignorance. He revolutionised the classical view of truth as being, and instead linked it with becoming and activity. He saw it as power, because what passes for truth serves life in some way. Ideas are good or bad depending on the activity or domination they facilitate, and since we know no way of honouring an idea other than by calling it true, the first predicate with which it is honoured is the predicate 'true'. What matters is not so much truth itself but the life, the power that it serves. Fit or failure to fit is beside the point. Its value for life is ultimately decisive (Allen 1993:43-44).

Nietzsche ridiculed the idea of truth's inherent value as if there were an actual drive for knowledge that blindly pursues truth regardless of questions of usefulness and harm. The world of practical interests

cannot be understood without considering what it presents as the truth. Thus Nietzsche literally stood the classical notion of truth on its head.

Foucault was suspicious of all universal truths. He rejected any external position of certainty beyond history and society. His main tactic was to historicise any supposedly universal category such as human nature. He knew that truth claims are always inescapably bound up with the epistemic drive for mastery and control, even (or especially) when it is masked by a rhetoric of liberal humanistic values or emancipatory critique (Norris 1993:257). He speaks of the 'government of truth', meaning the power over human conduct and way of living that Western societies have long conferred on those authorised to speak from a position of knowledge and in the name of truth. Nowadays we experience this power above all as the truth of norms and authorities, the experts' truth concerning what is standard or deviant, safe or dangerous, same or different. A massive discourse of disciplinary expertise bolsters the government of conduct as never before, yet this discourse is not legitimised by either contract, conquest or divine right. Thus political power is exercised whenever one person acts with a view to governing another or others, and this is not always or even usually the work of state agents (Allen 1993:154-155).

According to Foucault (1980:98) power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised in any one place, is never in anybody's hands, is never appropriated as a commodity or as wealth. It is employed and exercised by way of net-like organisation.

The new South African state has changed from rule through power to rule through justice as described in the constitution and bill of human rights,[5] so one can expect an abundance of truth rhetoric from a new

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5   Here one should heed Derrida's warning when he said that the origin of authority and law presupposes mindless violence, since there is no meta-standpoint from which to justify the establishment of law and authority. On the contrary, the justification itself institutes, through a power strategy, the order it is meant to justify. This, of course, makes the law indestructible. We must remember that the law irrevocably transcends human beings to the

government. The constitution guarantees an open and democratic society based on freedom and equality. Thus transparency is demanded from all sectors of society, because secrecy is the sworn enemy of all truth. But how transparent can society be and how obvious the truth? It depends on our perception of authority and our courage to respond when the emperor is naked. Foucault makes it possible to replace truth with freedom.

Empowerment of others is possible through solidarity. Rorty sees a parallel between the idea that it is in one's own interest to be just and the Christian claim that perfect self-realisation can be attained through service to others. Both sayings urge us to believe that what is most important to each of us is what we have in common with others. The wellsprings of personal fulfilment and human solidarity are the same. Rorty replaces the notion of truth with that of commonality or solidarity. Solidarity consists simply in our common capacity to suffer and feel pain. For him there is such a thing as moral progress towards greater human solidarity. But that solidarity is not seen as recognition of a core self, a human essence in all human beings. It is rather the ability to increasingly recognise the unimportance of traditional differences like tribe, religion, race and customs compared to similarities in the experience of pain and humiliation (Rorty 1989:192). This has major implications for the South African context, as will be seen in the section on the Truth Commission.

Narrative truth

Truth as metaphor

The metaphoric nature of truth has been emphasised in Western thinking. A story is often an extended metaphor, which mimetically replicates life to underscore a certain message. As we live in language,

exact extent that it depends on humans alone. It is up to humans and humans alone to concretely interpret the law, without any guarantee that this concretisation is the ultimate one. The same applies to a bill of human rights. Human rights imply the idea of a human nature in which these rights are grounded. That nature is not some essence, a given which can be grasped intuitively. On the contrary, it is a nature which people attribute to themselves in human rights declarations and, furthermore, a nature whose definition must always remain open (see Van Haute 1993:263-267).

so we live in stories and metaphors. Truth parades in metaphoric dress. Truth makes us bedouins, travelling through history, enjoying our truths (meadows and plains) while they last. Sooner or later we have to take down our tents and move on. Truth is the inn where we find refuge in the storm of uncertainty, the mask we wear by social agreement, the voyage which never seems to end (Blumenberg).

Postmodernism has demonstrated the metaphoric nature of all communication, thereby shattering the untenable assumption of the logic of identity (Zelechow 1993:122). Metaphor opposes the harmony of identity by stressing difference and creating new meaning.

Truth as story

We understand ourselves and our world as a story. By story is meant the unfolding of narrative meaning through which the past becomes meaningful in terms of the present and future projections. Life is uncovered in our stories. Story is the mode of our being in the world. This unfolding of life in the mode of story is the 'essence' of truth. Truth is not that which is unfolded or revealed but the unfolding process itself (see Gelvin 1990:125). This accords with Heidegger's conception of truth as a process of unveiling.

But not just any story or inquiry will unfold truth. A 'false' story is not one which reveals misinformation or misunderstanding of an essence; rather it is one which does not reveal at all. The metaphor of unfolding stresses truth as a dynamic movement, not a static relation between a cognitive subject and a known object. Reality is to unfold and the unfolding itself is truth. Truth is no longer a mere servant of knowledge, nor a predicate of a sentence. It is not merely a different name given to reality, nor is it equated with fact. Because it is the unfolding of reality it is not restricted to representations (Gelvin 1990:125-128).

In the fragmented world of modernity, however, it is difficult for stories to be told and counsel to be handed on: stories are few. But without them we are no longer able to communicate our experiences. We cannot tell our lives any more. Our lives have been taken from us.

There are no experiences left, since the modern world seems to destroy the foundation of real human experience from which true stories grow (Andersson 1993:164-165).

Wisdom as the epic side of truth has lost its ground in a society where language is reduced to prolific exchange of information in a technocratic world. According to Benjamin's philosophy of history (see Andersson 1993:164ff) our historical world is not intelligible within the dialectic of Hegelian dynamics and telos. The wreckages of history seem to leave us with nothing but barren structures, deprived of any final meaning. Viewed as text, the field of historical action has lost uniformity and meaningful continuity. It seems impossible to approach history as the story of humankind (Andersson 1993:169).

The notion of memory gives us access to an experience of history in its discontinuity. The redemptive power of the image can then be traced back to what was not fulfilled, to what the directionality of historical action has forgotten (Andersson 1993:173).

Thus it is through storytelling that we are healed.

The functioning of truth in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission[6]

Every society faces the problem of its own legitimation. There are many ways to gain legitimacy. It is normally done through a process of self-justification, by appealing to some ideal of justice, truth, a divine origin, or through suffering. The discourse of self-legitimation becomes an interpretive model for the self-understanding of that society.

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6   The TRC had three committees:
  • a Committee for Human Rights Violations, which investigated and reported on gross human rights violations "committed in the course of the conflicts of the past"
  • an Amnesty Committee to hear applications for and grant amnesty to those who made full confessions
  • a Committee for Reparation and Rehabilitation, to make recommendations to Parliament on recompensing victims.

In post-apartheid society suffering is a special form of legitimation, in particular unifying all who suffered on account of their race under the old system. People who suffered because of their race not only identify with some stories of extreme suffering but also claim these stories for themselves. Especially the unjustified suffering of the innocent gives them the right to compensatory or, as it is called, affirmative action.

It must be acknowledged that one of the motives behind the insistence on a truth commission is to get access to these stories and so enhance the legitimacy of government policies, the process of compensatory action, and unacceptable actions by youth groups who are still suffering because of past injustices. It also identifies government as keen to seek and uphold truth.

These stories serve, moreover, as symbols of understanding, helping people to understand what happened to them in the past so as to cope in a new present. Perpetrators must face those whose loved ones they killed, face the enormity of the pain and suffering they caused others, and recognise the immorality and inhumanity of their deeds. These stories must be told to ensure that such deeds are never committed again. One can only agree with this passion, and presumably we shall never have a repetition of Auswitch, Dachau or an apartheid government, although one could expect human cunning to fabricate new and weird atrocities under cover of new 'truths'. We must distrust truth in any society. A sense of justice and respect for truth features in even the most tyrannical, oppressive or degrading regimes (Balcomb 1993:252).

Among whites these stories of truth instil feelings of guilt and complicity in the deeds of the past. If you have not suffered because of your race, you are automatically part of those who inflicted the suffering. The TRC undeniably widened the divide between races, but that is offset by its tremendous meaning for those who suffered under apartheid.

 Of course there was a lot of internal consistency in the paradigm of the previous government. Foucault reminded us that truth is not

distinct from power. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by means of multiple forms of constraint (Allen 1993:150). It was part of the previous government as it is part of the present government.

Truth as a belief of the apartheid system was clung to because of the security it offered. The fact that so many people changed their minds so quickly under a new government stresses that truth is to a large extent a matter of self-interest. Like power, it is determined by a complex of strategic relationships which are socially conditioned. It does not function in abstraction. With a new set of social conditions in a post-apartheid era, the set of truth standards of the apartheid era simply doesn't count any more. People who find it difficult to switch from one set of standards to another are likely to reject truth altogether.

For example, it is remarkable that it was especially Auschwitz and Dachau that made Europeans, and more particularly Germans, realise that modernism and, with it, truth had come to an end. Of course Hiroshima and Nagasaki strengthened this awareness, but somehow the massacre of the Jews had more impact because of the prolonged period of the killings, their premeditated nature and the concentration on a specific people. Auschwitz was a revelation of nihilism but also of the destruction of humanity at the hands of modernism. Auschwitz accorded perfectly with the gist of modernism. If God died at Auschwitz at the hands of modernism and rationalism, then, it seems, so did the possibility of truth. Nazism not only achieved the destruct-tion of truth but also the destruction of the hope of modernism (Malpas 1992:291-292).

Apartheid did not merely depend on a modernistic worldview, it invoked science and religion as witnesses to its truth. The question is to what extent disillusionment with the 'truth' of the apartheid era will contribute to a total relinquishment of the notion of truth.[7] Security forces were given carte blanche for the sake of the 'safety' of whites and had a free hand under cover of numerous states of emergency.

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[7] The same goes for the credibility of Christianity in South Africa. The tragic connection between Christianity and apartheid has resulted in the erosion of many people's belief in a caring God or a relevant Christianity (see Nicolson 1994:409-419).

But was the Truth Commission free from prejudice and political motives? It was meant to be of a religious and judicial nature – the two powers symbolising truth in our country. While its judicial task was to uncover, its religious responsibility was to reach closure through forgiveness and indemnity. The principle was reconciliation through truth, redeeming our memories, not setting up Nuremberg-style trials but providing an opportunity for confession and cleansing. It was, however, a forced confession, because you could be brought to trial if a victim told a story that implicated you and you had not come forward. It must be remembered that most of the torture that took place in the past happened in the absence of witnesses. That being the case, victims were dependent on the confessions of the perpetrators.

Remorse is, however, no prerequisite for confession. Examples of the healing that was promised were taken from other nations' histories. They were 'healed' by absolving nearly all those who were involved in abuses in return for knowing what happened in darker days.

Ironically, all those people were tortured in the apartheid era by security officers who wanted to extract the truth and knew that the only way to do so was through torture (DuBois 1991:47-62; Norris 1993:257ff).

That truth remains ambivalent. From one perspective it is accepted that freedom fighters should be granted indemnity for their deeds; from a different perspective it was asked why those who were 'only doing their duty' must be taken to task.

What the nation wanted was the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. By getting to the truth through the commission the Sowetan (1995/1/12:12) believed that confidence in discredited institutions such as the security forces and government in general would be restored. That implies that once the Truth Commission had uncovered the past – that is, its lies – we would henceforth have a clean and trustworthy government and security forces.

In this whole exercise truth was sought on various levels for different reasons. Those who had lost a son, daughter or loved one were

involved on a personal level, while others wanted the truth for the sake of political and power expediency. As Sylvia Jele (Weekend Star 1995/2/5:8) said, "I don't seek revenge, I just want to know why and how my son was killed." But when legalism takes over our brains get befuddled; we forget why we started down the road in the first place. Most probably Sylvia never got the answer she expected, because the reasons given would have been foolish ones – which, however, would have made perfect sense in the context in which they were given. There is a truth that belongs to all, though it is known only to a few. It is the kind of truth that concerns human freedom. Truth that inhibits that freedom must be criticised and truth that advances it must be fostered.[8]

The future of truth

Truth must lead to freedom. Empowerment of all means the multiplication of truth. If all are to be empowered, then everyone has a right to the truth. This does not mean that no universals exist. Universals do, however, acquire a unique identity within a specific context. Truth is simply the way we read reality, how we understand our world and ourselves. We tell these stories not in the belief that they will get us anywhere but simply to reflect on the place of our being.

Believing in truth as truth is to believe in truth as something in itself (*Ding an sich*). However, according to Zizek (1991:200), humans themselves are the *Ding an sich*. It is we who posit the absolute and then start the never-ending search for it. Of course we can never find it, but we cannot give up the ideal. This makes it impossible for us ever to eradicate the paradox that marks our existence.

Truth is given with humanness. Although we cannot do without it, we can try to grasp its use and misuse, its importance and pretensions, its influence on us. We can never own truth, neither are we prepared to live without it.

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8   We cannot escape our freedom, no matter what it entails. Thus we must also face the radical contingency and replaceability of our truth as it operates in our language games. Trying to shake off our finitude is to try to become God (Caputo 1983:666).

There will always be those who insist they are telling the truth. And as Oscar Wilde said, "If you persist in telling the truth, you will be found out!" Then there are those who incautiously maintain that there is no truth and so negate their own statement. We are indeed doomed to search for truth within our contingent historical contexts, where the truth we find according to our language rules, rules of logic and convention gives us some consolation. This will be coloured by the knowledge of the provisional nature of our time and place in history where we can do no more than see dimly in a mirror.

But truth is one. God is one. Truth must be one, for a multitude of truths permits the possibility of conflict and contradiction. If truth is tampered with, unity is next. But no-one can deny that our world has become irrevocably diversified. How does one handle diversity? Are we able to represent infinite diversity? Are we not biologically condemned to reduction? Representation refers to justification based on established methods. Cultural and religious pluralism often entails mutual negation. How can the contradictions of diversity be represented meaningfully? The next chapter seeks to answer the question.

Chapter 7

THE ONE AND THE MANY: LIVING WITH PLURALISM

Reductive unity or perplexing diversity?

Unity and multiplicity or diversity are part of our world. Human beings have no choice: they cannot opt for either one or the other. Unity and diversity are not just an age-old problem, debated even in Greek and medieval times; they characterise the 21st century as well, and have been much in the limelight ever since the events of September 11. In the history of philosophy they have posed such a problem that they seem to structure our very thinking in binary oppositions. The pendulum swings between reductive unity and complex, perplexing diversity. The dilemma manifests itself differently in different eras. Unity and diversity must be viewed in a broader semantic field, where they give rise to further binary distinctions: homogeneity versus heterogeneity; universality versus particularity; holism versus monism; centring versus decentring; coherence versus inconsistency; monism versus pluralism; general versus specific; unambiguous versus equivocal; and so forth.

Fuelled by the physical sciences and technology, modernity saw the unitary ideal reach an optimistic zenith. The world, so it was thought, could be subjugated to definition and natural law and manipulated to the benefit of human beings. Westerners believed that, by rational and technological means, through structure and method, they could discover 'truth'. That truth would put them in control. In the modernist context diversity was equated with chaos. The modernist reduction made it possible to map the cultural landscape. Humans knew where they came from and where they were heading.

That optimism was relatively short-lived. The experience of two world wars, together with developments like post-structuralism and post-modern criticism, cut the modern ideal of unity down to size.

Concepts that once offered identity and certitude were criticised and linked with fundamentalism, essentialism and traditionalism. Physical scientists admitted that the models they used could be replaced by different ones, hence their explanations of empirical reality were neither exact nor immutable. The closed Newtonian worldview, which bracketed the whole physical world under a few natural laws, made way for an open worldview in which relativity and quantum indeterminacy reaffirmed the role of the subject. In the religious sphere the ideal of ecumenical unity was relinquished and it was accepted that religious truth is diverse. Culturally there was a new accent on the value of all cultures and cultural chauvinism and imperialism came under fire. Sociologists and anthropologists showed new respect for local context and ethnicity (see Degenaar 1996:11).[1] Reappraisal of corporeality splintered the unity of the mental world. Rationality was rooted in biological reality. Reason is mediated by emotion. The amygdala and hypothalamus, which play a major role in emotion, mediate all thought (reaffirming in a different way the Augustinian notion that true knowledge is always mediated by love). The implication is that objectifying reason, with its logic, systematics and coherence, is subject to emotive influences that are less easy to control. Emotive influences, while varying from one person to the next, are inherent in the human species. Hence they transcend disciplinary, linguistic and cultural boundaries. Rationality does not operate differently in theology and the natural sciences; African rationality is no different from Western rationality.

Unity made way for the concept of holism or integrated diversity – interdisciplinary work in the academic sphere, a focus on a relational rather than a substantialist ontology. Nothing is static, everything is interrelated.

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1   By way of example one could note that as nation-states declined, ethnic regroupings based on language emerged. The former Soviet Union spawned new political entities like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tadzhikistan and Turkmenistan. According to Lemaire (1976:93) ethnocentrism is the universal tendency of groups to use their own lifestyle as a yardstick for judging all humankind. This naive, normative and absolutist overestimation reinforces group integration and enhances individual self-identification within the group. Ethnocentrism remains fairly innocuous as long as the groups have little contact – which is not the case in South Africa.

The metaphor of the perennial tourist describes a postmodern 'citizen' situated in a globalising context. As tourists such citizens have 'open' visas but no passport, for their country of origin is irrelevant and their residence 'abroad' is not restricted. Notions of locality, place and space have changed. Reality cannot be mapped, identity is open,[2] the point of gravity has shifted. Hence our worldview is governed by an environment of growing diversity.

Diversity, unity and morality

What compounds the problem is that unity and diversity are often not regarded as philosophical models or modes of existence but are judged on moral grounds. Unity is good, diversity bad. But moral judgments of unity and diversity are usually guilty of a categorical error: unity is not good and diversity bad, or vice versa. Both are inherent in our world and integral to our mental structure. That does not mean that the way the distinction between the two influences our lives and our living does not have moral and ethical implications. Unity undeniably creates power and may be misused to acquire power – hence the scepticism about master narratives that swallow up all alternative accounts.

Both unity and diversity are mental constructs, modes of under-standing, and can be perceived differently. Way back the Greek philosopher Heraclites already observed that there is unity in diversity and diversity in unity. What passes for unity is in fact a reduction of a far more complex reality, which we simplify into a single world to make it manageable. Besides, there are many points of resemblance in diversity – the broader its scope, the more likely we are to find resemblances. In the medieval universality dispute the unity-diversity dilemma reached a climax.[3] In this debate the church and theology

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2 An open identity presupposes exposure to the other. As Charles Taylor (1994:33) puts it: "We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us. We need relationships to fulfil, but not to define, ourselves."

3 The universality dispute produced two approaches: realism and nominalism. Realism gives the universal (unity) priority over the individual (diversity): *universalia ante res*. Nominalism posits that only concrete phenomena (diversity) are real. There are no universal concepts (unity) in the real world, only in our minds: *universalia post res* (see Störig 1972:228ff).

played a significant role. To a great extent the church and certain unitary theologies remain the last bastion of an ideal of unity that seeks to amalgamate all cultures in a specific Christian worldview.

Unity and diversity only assume particular contours in a given context, in which a host of factors like scarcity, danger[4] and exploitation play a role. It should be noted that many of us are guilty of ethical ethnocentrism when we use our own morality as a criterion for other cultures. Acceptance of other cultures in their own right, including their moral systems, inevitable leads to ethical relativism (see Lemaire 1976:96-97).

Globalisation and unity

Globalisation epitomises the problem of unity and diversity. Globalisation unifies. It is unifying global communities on an unprecedented scale, yet at the same time bombards us with a complex, infinite diversity of information, ideas and values. Common responsibility for the future of the planet demands globally shared values. In this respect globalisation is irreversible and imperative because of the worldwide responsibility for environmental issues, peace and human rights. Respect for democracy, nature conservation, the rights of women, children and refugees is common to most people. Communication technology and the media promote shared values and appraise world events with instant effect. Via the internet cultural space becomes cyberspace, in which citizenship depends on participation in that cyber-world. Within a few days the media had entrenched the concepts of terrorism and a just war on it against the background of September 11 rhetoric (Neuland 2002:13-18).

The same media also present economic globalisation as irreversible and inescapable, without probing its connection with the September 11 debacle. Economic globalisation has a worrying aspect in that it assumes features of economic imperialism.[5] It obliterates national

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4   There is hardly a country that does not face some kind of risk or danger. Risk analysis and risk prevention are part of our general orientation. Risks in this context are often unpredictable (like 11 September) and unconventional (see Neuland et al 2002:69).
5   As Khor (2001:11) puts it: "This has led to the erosion of national sovereignty and narrowed

boundaries and opens the marketplace to everyone. That presupposes that everyone shares in the global consumer culture and upholds consumer values (see Keith 1997:188; Baudrillard 1998:67ff; Featherstone 1995:75ff). Governments are under pressure to relax currency controls; multinationals spread their interests around the world and acquire growing power over governments to respect their values and conditions so as to attract investment and create jobs. They increasingly encroach on national sovereignty, provoking sharp criticism. If one looks at the hundred largest economies in the world, 51 of them are companies and only 49 are countries, implying that multinationals already own more than half the planet. Their growing power to influence culture – via the media, consumer goods and economic behaviour, or by pressurising governments to modify economic rules to suit their ends – is beyond doubt.

Globalisation and diversity

Cultures around the world are becoming increasingly decentred. Local cultures are less and less able to offer an adequate worldview. Cultural fragmentation, cultural isolation, cultural dislocation[6] and cultural alienation[7] are the reality of many present-day Afrikaners' world. In the white African context cultural fragmentation is evident in the emergence of numerous political, religious and other minority and splinter groups. Cultural isolation is manifest in a sense of being swallowed up by an exclusively black nationalist agenda and a feeling that the Afrikaans language is being restricted. Cultural dislocation refers to a sense of loss of their land, their government, their self-determination. The Afrikaans term '*kultuur-eie*' (approx.: 'peculiar to

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the ability of governments and people to make choices from options in economic, social and cultural policies. Most developing countries have seen their independent policy-making capacities eroded ... large corporations have taken over a large part of decision-making even in developing countries."

6   Many Afrikaners have emigrated to other continents. Others 'emigrate' to a minority group, which are commonly marked by memories of the past and alienation from the present. There is also spiritual emigration: a retreat into the inner sanctum of the church, the soul – and the Afrikaans language.

7   To many Afrikaners citizenship lost its function once the Afrikaner government lost power. Their national symbols, flag, national anthem, Day of the Vow, Kruger day, Republic day no longer exist. Afrikaner identity was closely linked to these symbols; the same applies to the changing of names of streets, buildings, cities etc..

a culture') has become synonymous with apartheid ideology. Cultural alienation is exacerbated by a rewriting of Afrikaner history, which is to some extent being equated with a history of oppression and injustice. Against this background there is a search for a new cultural identity, which has to be found in contexts of cultural multiplicity.

Fundamentalism, essentialism and traditionalism obstruct the ideal of creative diversity

To realise the ideal of integrated diversity the idea and reality of essentialism, so integral to Afrikaner tradition, will have to be adapted. Essentialism is rooted in the Aristotelian view of identity (De Jong 2000:12ff). In the Afrikaner context religious/theological essentialism is a cornerstone of a broader, culturally essentialist construct. Afrikaner culture was strongly marked by the Calvinist tradition and its perception of essences. This is apparent in such terms as 'Christian National Education', 'Calvinist heritage' and the like. The essences are expressed in concepts like canon, confession, purity, truth, tradition, and their opposites in notions like sect, heresy, heretic, dissident. The premise is that culture, like the Christian tradition, is homogeneous – a monoculture. There is only one gospel, hence only one truth. 'One faith, one hope, one baptism' means one creed, homogeneous behaviour, identical values and ethical principles. But truth is always wrapped in a cultural garment, which displays new styles in every era. The church sees these as minor variations that do not affect the essential truth. But essences are not immutable, and radical changes in our worldview require reformulation of religious truths.

Essentialist thought is not confined to the immutable nature of the essence of Christianity. It also includes the following: the difference between Christianity and other faiths; the essence of Christianity over time; what constitutes the invariable core of Christianity and what are variable side issues; what is and what is not authentic (intrinsic) in a tradition; and finally, what value does such a tradition have for human beings? As a rule religious essentialist thought influences cultural essentialism. Identical religious views on categories like truth, value and behaviour are equally applicable to culture. The questions are not

always verbalised reflectively but are tacitly assumed when communicating with and evaluating other cultures.

The high priority that churches assign to unity makes it hard for their members to be open to diversity. Because the church, more especially the Afrikaans churches, still influence society significantly, they have to be persuaded of the value of creative diversity as part of the endeavour to open people's minds. The process will not be easy, particularly if one considers that the three Afrikaans sister churches have been unable to unify over many years by opening up to the minor diversity to be found among them. The Dutch Reformed Church's struggle to unify with the *Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk* (Unifying Reformed Church, the former 'daughter' churches, comprising blacks and coloureds) – albeit in a very artificial union – shows how difficult the church finds it to open up to diversity. This notwithstanding the fact that these churches all have the same credal basis and witness to similar spiritual experiences. More than doctrinal truth is at stake. It shows that a large white component of South African society is not ready for the challenges of cultural diversity.

Naturally no-one can handle infinite pluralism. We can only cope with it up to a point or lapse into total anarchy. Are we living with unmanageable multiplicity? What could be the real obstacle? It cannot be only cultural differences, for we have already come a long way in cross-cultural communication. Is it plain racism, one might ask. If so, what is the essence of it? What does it mean if people differ essentially, in their faith or their culture?

The notion of essences is modernistic. As in the case of a broad tradition like Christianity, the essence of a culture such as that of the Afrikaner cannot be captured in a few definitions. Cultures are polysemous and their distinctive features and boundaries cannot be pinned down. Hence one finds diversity and variety not just between cultures but also within each individual culture. Afrikaner culture offers many examples of such diverse perceptions and experiences of the world. There is usually a discrepancy between a culture as frozen in essences and definitions and its realisation in the language, customs and rites of its members. There is a discrepancy between standard

Afrikaans and colloquial speech;[8] between creed and experience, theory and practice, ideal and reality, unity and diversity.

This does not mean that we cannot discuss cultures or that they have no identity, merely that we should not try to look for essential differences. I propose two solutions to the dilemma: focusing on narrative rather than essential identity; and secondly, the example of the interaction between organism and environment as demonstrated in socio-biology.

Narrative identity

A more satisfactory way of expressing the texture of a culture is that of narrative individual identity, where culture is articulated in the form of personal stories and experiences (see De Jong 2000:166-170). It is a 'bottom-up' approach from the existential labyrinth of diversity. Narrative identity puts the accent on the diversity and multiplicity of identities. One of its advantages is that human experience and emotion are mediated by recognising oneself in the other. It is a humanly oriented identity, in which the normative buffers that usually separate cultures become blurred (Levinas; Martin Buber).

Narrative identity cannot escape the fixed images enshrined in traditions. Indeed, we are always influenced by limits to our identity laid down by tradition. But these limits are constantly shifting and the shifts accelerate when the environment changes radically, as in the transition to a post-apartheid society.

Personal identity is determined by stories that impart meaning to our lives. The aggregate of narrative identities in a society should by rights form its tradition. Unfortunately it is not possible to reflect the

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8 Establishing standards at whatever level is convenient for evaluative purposes. But the standards should be critically assessed to see if they do not involve centralised power interests. The standard Afrikaans dictionaries and standard Afrikaans vernacular do not properly recognise the vocabulary and idiom of the coloured population, which is predominantly Afrikaans speaking. With reference to the deconstructionist opposition to essentialism Gutman (1994:18) writes: "Although deconstructionists do not deny the possibility of shared standards, they view common standards as masks for the will to political power of dominant, hegemonic groups."

multitude of narrative identities in a tradition, hence it cannot have just one standard interpretation. Some narrative history underlies most traditional customs and habits and they cannot be understood without telling that story. Different communities also draw different conclusions from the same historical documents. The diversity of the stories in fact constitutes the cultural richness of a tradition. Each story encapsulates the meaning of a tradition in its own distinctive way.

Identity emerges in encounter with the other. That encounter is characterised by binary recognition of what is similar or familiar and what is different. But the encounter proceeds differently depending on whether the 'other', with his or her differences and similarities, belongs to one's own culture or to another culture. We always explore the unfamiliar in terms of the known. I interpret other cultures in terms of my own, which is seen as normative.[9] It is still an apartheid attitude of control. The term 'managing diversity' is an example. Diversity is managed by drawing a map of the cultural landscape so one can travel without making undesirable contacts or being submerged. The concept of management has unsavoury connotations of control, power and paternalism – besides being highly modernistic. When we manage diversity it is once again cast in a controllable, comprehensible form. As a rule the managed have little say, because they are in the subordinate position of employees or dependants. Of course, for pragmatic reasons we have no option but to 'manage' situations like the labour environment. Ideally one should, through dialogue, arrive at a management model that takes maximum account of the diverse sentiments and needs in the 'managerial environment'. That can only be done in an arduous process of exposure and opening up to the other. Multiplicity and diversity pose a threat and create insecurity because they represent what is foreign, incomprehensible and hence unpredictable. A narrative encounter that recounts the other's personal history and needs helps to make diversity less threatening.

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9   Thiselton (1995:50-51) puts it thus: "It is not good enough to approach that text or person with supposedly value-neutral observation. For then, as Hume and Kant perceived, we shall at once begin to impose upon what we seek to understand prior categories of thought and stereotypification [sic]. The first requirement is respect for the otherness of the Other as Other. This invites not observation but listening."

Openness to diversity has certain advantages. It stimulates a critical attitude towards untested preconceptions; the construction of a new identity; liberation from authoritarian structures; differentiation and new identification; overcoming binary oppositions (white culture/black culture, Western culture/African culture).

Biological foundation of cultural diversity

Cultures not only have a biological foundation, they are biologically determined. The example of biology also provides a model for cultural dealings with diversity. In nature diversity in the biosphere is determined by the possibilities offered by the ecosphere. Diversity is subject to harsh natural laws. These cannot simply be reduced to the 'survival of the fittest'. A complex multiplicity of factors have to be taken into account. The hierarchical systems constituting an ecoprofile are characterised by power and power struggles. Unlike human power struggles, they are confined to the physical level, since they cannot expand to an ethical level as happens among human beings. Among mammals one does find 'emotions' and, in context, a 'culture' and 'behaviour', which are the subject of fascinating studies (see De Waal 2003: 122-134).

Drees (1996:204-205) finds it natural to interpret the human constitution and human behaviour by analogy with those of other species.[10] Human behaviour and ethics also have a biological basis. That is not to say that ethics is deterministically linked with our genes, only that it is strongly determined by them. According to Drees (1996:207-208) the evolution of cultures with moral codes is governed by two factors: group cohesion (group versus non-group interests) and indirect reciprocity as a mechanism to promote individual interests in the group context. Accepting that evolution influences ethics implies accepting human self-interest. That self-interest is camouflaged by moral terminology. Ethical principles often camouflage immoral motives. The finest ethical principles were used to justify apartheid;

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10 For a discussion of aetiology (in behavioural research) applied to human behaviour, see Lemaire (1976:318-334).

proponents of black empowerment and affirmative action likewise invoke moral principles. All ideologies and most power interests use a moral/ethical buffer. Ethical systems claim universality in the framework of an assumed unity.[11]

An analogy of self-vindication of power in the biological realm may be found in autopoietic processes. The same autopoietic (lit. 'self-generative') cell structure[12] of self-duplication and self-maintenance characterises social structures like the church, politics and education. Human beings are autopoietic entities in the sense that they are autonomous and independent. Human societies are biological systems in that they survive according to autopoetic principles and their appearance and apparent goal may change (Mingers 1989:172). Luhman (1982:131) maintains that social systems are like autopoietic systems, self-referential and based on meaningful communication that interrelates events which keep the system intact. Social systems reproduce events that are components of the overall system, hence they are self-referential.

Self-referential systems define themselves and maintain their boundaries. They change their structure in an evolutionary way. Like evolution, society cannot plan itself. When a self-referential system does manage to plan itself, the evolutionary change process accelerates. But autopoietic systems are influenced by changing environments. Because societies are hyper-complex they are obliged to try and manage that complexity (Luhman 1982:132-135). Note that

11 Keith (1997:254) writes: "... the experience is that particular norms prevail largely as a function of power relations, with the priorities of sectional interests flushed in the guise of universalities".

12 The autopoietic principle derives from the functioning of a cell that produces a large amount of chemicals that remain inside it. These chemicals are themselves involved in the cell production process. Cells are autopoietic in the sense that they produce only themselves. They are not allopoietic in the sense of producing something else, or heteropoietic in the sense of producing something else for a different purpose. Hence a cell is a network of produced components that support the production network which gave rise to them. They interact with the environment and do so selectively, which makes the cell adaptable to the environment. But the environment does not specify which adaptations have to be made. Autopoiesis is an example of how systems can function in a decentralised, non-hierarchical fashion simply through individual interaction with other components of the system (Mingers 1989:168-170, 173; Du Toit 2000:506-526).

in hyper-complex societies the accent is on differentiation rather than identity, autonomy rather than control, dynamics rather than stability, and evolution rather than planning. That is typical of present-day postmodern societies, of which South Africa is a good example.

The value of self-preservation and self-duplication cannot be upheld if the organism fails to adapt to a changing environment. As a rule a changing environment is experienced as threatening and adaptation may be either systematic or radical. In an evolutionary sense there is no transcendent norm that determines whether or not adaptations should be made. That depends on the principle of survival.

Cultural diversity may be viewed against the background of biodiversity. Biodiversity is the aggregate of genes, species and ecosystems in a given area. Cultural diversity is the product of thousands of years of development and biodiversity the product of millions of years of evolution. Although there are more species on land than in the sea, marine biodiversity is greater because land species are more closely related to each other than those in the sea. Applied to the cultural sphere this means that cultural diversity in South Africa, where white and black live side by side, is greater than, for instance, in America or Europe, because there the cultures are more closely related than in Africa.

Like biodiversity, cultural diversity promotes adaptation to changing circumstances. Cultural diversity manifests itself in linguistic, religious, ethical and aesthetic diversity.

The *ubuntu* model

Although the notion of *ubuntu* suffers from over-exposure and is much romanticised, it remains an important African-oriented and contextual ethical model. The reason for choosing it is not primarily because it exemplifies integrated diversity, but because it illustrates the interdependence of people in a community. It is also close to the model of narrative identity discussed above. In the ubuntu model integration of diversity is evident in interpersonal relations and in relations between people and nature. As everyone knows, ubuntu

stresses that people are responsible for one another and determine each other's identity. Your identity is your place in the community: I participate, therefore I am (Shutte 1993:46-51).

Communal interdependence puts the accent on social harmony. Ubuntu ethics assesses individuals not in their own right but in their relationships. The community is the prime determinant of individual identity. Rather than opposing the individual's narrative identity, it actually takes it into account. The personal circumstances, needs and beliefs reflected in the individual's story are incorporated into the story of the community. That story is continually influenced by the stories of individuals.

To participate in life means to be part of the conditions that make life possible, which is why participating in the community is essential. A system displaying marked communal features should be understood by analogy with an organism. When individuals are alienated from the community as their source of nourishment their lives come to an end (Shutte 1993:48-49, 51).

What makes ubuntu interesting is that communities are always marked by diversity and individuality. When differences arise, they reach consensus, which is not the same as unanimity. The *indaba* process epitomises narrative identity in action. The individual's story is heard and integrated with those of other individuals. Consensus and reconciliation imply accommodating differences. There are no dualisms, be it those of God-humankind, humankind-nature, mind-body or whatever. This accommodative way of dealing with differences illustrates how adaptations in a diverse environment can be experienced positively.

However, ubuntu ethics is localised and often confined to isolated communities. The real challenge is to develop it as a model of integrated diversity to the benefit of all. Then it would give the individual a face and minority groups a voice in the larger whole.

To sum up: Human beings make their environment and are made by it. The relationship is reciprocal – neither wholly deterministic nor

completely arbitrary. In social constructivist programmes adaptations are not controllable. Instead they happen on an ad hoc basis of constant adaptation when creative interaction with the environment opens up surprising options. Refusal to adapt to a changing environ-ment implies that our worldview and behaviour are determined by a world that exists only in our imagination or in memory. Dealing with a diverse world requires promethean imaginative powers – though we may occasionally burn our fingers. We know that wisdom and truth will only descend at dusk when Minerva's owl takes wing. At least we should know then that we have lived in multiplicity.

Is postmodernism the owl taking to the wing in the twilight of the 20th century? And do we have a telescope to peer into the mists of the 21st century? Apparently not. Hopefully the 21st century will bring greater collective responsibility for the environment and meaningful community life. Early signs of this emerging ethos are displayed by people who are secular but not a-religious – a gladdening phenomenon, but a threat to the church. That is what we shall be looking at next.

Chapter 8

FIN DE SIÈCLE/DÉBUT DE SIÈCLE AND POST-SECULAR SOCIETY

Introduction

South Africa has always been said to be a very religious country. However, the moment one begins to analyse what is meant by 'Christian' in the statement that most South Africans are Christians, it becomes clear that the religious scene is more varied and dynamic than the statistics indicate. The profile usually drawn of South African Christianity omits the thousands of African Initiated Churches, to which most Christians in this country belong.[1] What is needed is a more accurate profile of South African religious reality. We also need to consider how the transition to a post-apartheid society will influence the religious scene. How will a new, religiously neutral government affect religions? What impact will the new constitution – one of the most liberal in the world – have on values and morals? And to what extent will the end of white religious and political power, rarely questioned in the past, influence adherents of these religions?

In a post-apartheid, democratic and pluralistic South Africa, where conflicting forces and a plurality of truths seem to coexist, where the lifestyles of its inhabitants range from premodern to modern and postmodern, one may expect fascinating social and religious phenomena to emerge. There is, for example, a strong possibility of a resurgence of African traditional religion in both African Initiated Churches (AICs) and black mainline churches. There is also the question of the direction the mainline (traditionally white) churches

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1   The 2001 statistics provided by the *World Christian Encyclopedia* are as follows for the Independent Affiliated Christians in South Africa: Around 1900, 1,303,700; mid-1990's 14,965,000 (comprising 44% of the South African population); mid-2000, 18,500,000 (comprising 78.8% of the South African population); and projected for mid-2025, 37,250,000 (comprising 50% of the South African population) See Barrett, Kurian & Johnson: 2001: 675).

will take. To what extent will they allow their truths and customs to be Africanised, and to what extent will they try to survive in a ghetto subculture? Will the projected process of secularisation, which has been warned against so often in the past, escalate or will a new context of religious interaction emerge in which religions are now on an equal footing? How will African custom, which makes no distinction between sacred and secular, influence our society? How will the weakening influence of institutional religion affect people's lifestyles?

Fin de siècle

In the late 20th century we began to get a panoramic view of a cultural and historical landscape criss-crossed by dreams, ideologies and philosophies that could not keep the avalanche of change and disillusionment at bay. The monarch of modernism has abdicated in favour of a multiplicity of self-critical, neo-modern and postmodern rulers.

At the beginning of the 21st century one finds religions and eschatologies, both positive and negative, flourishing once more. On the negative side are the threats of economic globalisation, global warming, dwindling resources, religious conflict, poverty and disease. Positive indicators are a new interest in traditional religions, recognition of the importance of cultural roots, and acceptance of modes of interpretation and explanation foreign to modernism. The metaphysical, even religious overtones of the new cosmology and quantum physics seem to tolerate the paradoxical, the subjective and the incommensurable. This differs from the rigid empiricism of the natural sciences and should favour the human sciences approach with its subjective and existential elements. Rationalism and realism must be broadened to include important hermeneutic factors – subjectivity, values, faith, which cannot always be quantified or fitted into existing models.

On the religious front it must be accepted that religious and cultural pluralism are a given, that the different world religions are here to stay and that they play an irreplaceable role in their respective communities. Christian missionaries' projections of global evangelisation

before the turn of the century have not been realised, and *should* not be realised in view of the potency of indigenous religions and the importance of cultural wholeness. Religious freedom implies a free-market environment where religions and theologies, spirituality and rationality, transcendence and immanence are in vibrant interaction. All these things will help to shape our post-secular world.

Formal institutions are being complemented or replaced by community initiatives, and official doctrinal legacies by a new appreciation of experience as expressed in stories. The point is, are these developments contributing to the human search for meaning? All life-generating metaphors are welcomed and assimilated into the process of religious signification. This new terrestrially oriented openness is what we call post-secularism.

From secularism to post-secularism

A long-standing consensus on classical versions of secularisation theory has broken down in recent decades. The 'extinction of religion' argument is that unbelief has taken the place of faith, reason the place of the Bible, politics the place of religion and the church, earth the place of heaven, work the place of prayer, material want the place of hell, and humanism the place of Christianity. This has not happened, according to Küng (1994:14): today it is obvious that neither the 'abolition' of religion by atheistic humanism (Feuerbach), nor the 'extinction' of religion by atheistic socialism (Freud and Marx) were accurate prognoses. On the contrary, Küng argues, faith (!) in the goodness of human nature (Feuerbach) has proved to be a plausible projection, faith in a future socialist society (Marx) to be a consolation governed by particular interests, and faith in rational science to be a dangerous illusion. Though we must take the problems of both theoretical and practical nihilism seriously, Nietzsche's prognosis of the death of God has turned out to be false. Religion, it seems, always rises phoenix-like from the ashes. Küng cites the Soviet Union and China as examples of the return of religion in the new, postmodern era.

Religion's stubborn refusal to disappear has prompted a major re-evaluation of inherited secularisation models. The 'facts' are not much disputed: new religious movements mushroom; older movements like Pentecostalism and Mormonism are expanding; religious fundamentalism and spirituality thrive throughout the world (see Chaves 1994:749).

The secularisation thesis: why it has not been realised

Definition

Bonhoeffer (1953:360) defines the theological concept of secularisation as follows:

> And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi Deus non daretur* [as if God is not given]. This is just what we do recognize – before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who has forsaken us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on the cross ... This will probably be the starting point for our 'secular interpretation'.

Secularisation refers to the diminution of the social significance of religion (see Wiersenga 1992:74-107). The term 'secularisation' has become a metaphor with many meanings, depending on the user's standpoint. It designates a complex state of affairs. According to Berger (1969:107) it is the process in which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. Wiersenga (1992:75-76) stresses the reaction of religion against metaphysics and mentions that secularisation can only accept a theology that is realistic and practical, that can be portrayed and

experienced. Wilson (1982:149-150) sees secularisation as a process in which religious institutions, actions and consciousness lose their social significance. This does not mean that individuals have relinquished their interest in religion but merely that religion ceases to be significant in the social system.

Crippen (1988:319) sums up the secularisation thesis as follows:

- the transfer of real property and its influence from ecclesiastic to civil authorities;
- the transfer of socialising influence (community governance, schools, taxation) from ecclesiastic to civil authority;
- the decline in popular commitment (economic and moral) to agencies specialising in supernatural concerns;
- the decay of religious institutions;
- the shift from 'religious' to 'technical' criteria as motives for behaviour;
- the shift in consciousness away from a generally religious framework towards an empirical, rational, and instrumental orientation;
- the separation of emotion and judgment from perceptual analysis.

History

The term 'secularisation' has its roots in the Christian distinction between spiritual and secular. If the process of secularisation were to be completed, it is said, the spiritual dimension would disappear and everything would be secular. Secularism was traditionally viewed as the absence of supernatural or transcendent experience in people's lives. In the process of secularisation people have reacted against what is termed oppressive domination by the church via the supernatural; the separation between God and the world had to be overcome, and humankind must become the reference point for reality (Kasper 1990:85).

On the religious front theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer,[2] Friedrich Gogarten, Paul van Buren, Harvey Cox, Thomas Altizer, John Hick, Jürgen Moltmann and several liberation theologians led the way in verbalising and interacting with the idea of secularism (see Heron 1980:152-168).

Influence of modernism and pluralism

Modernism has been named as a major contributor to secularism. Modernism is inconceivable without Christianity, which was prerequisite for modernisation (Beckford 1992:13). Hence it could not exclude religion. Indeed, religion was the creative energy that had to fill the void that modernism created between reality and utopia. Modernism can be seen as constitutive of religion, ambivalent towards religion or exclusive of religion.

There is a sense in which modernism embraces religion. Talcott Parsons (discussed in Beckford 1993:12ff) argues that the process of modernisation involves the extension of Christian values to more and more spheres of life, the differentiation of religious organisations from the rest of society, and the evolutionary upgrading of ethical conduct. The more religious institutions are differentiated from politics, education, law and medicine, for example, the more likely it is that religious values will be refined, rationalised and diffused throughout society. According to this view civil religion fulfils the function of sanctifying a society's highest ideals and preventing governments from claiming divine sanction for their actions. The prospects for modernism in non-Christian countries are correspondingly poor (Beckford 1993:13).

This positive evaluation of modernism becomes more ambivalent in the thought of Berger, where religion is seen as a victim of modernity and a potential source of resistance. Technological rationality is particularly threatening, because it leads to fragmentation of social and moral life.

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2 Bonhoeffer (1953:346) says about human autonomy: "I therefore want to start from the premise that God shouldn't be smuggled into some last secret place, but that we should frankly recognize that the world, and people, have come of age, that we shouldn't run man down in his worldliness, but comfort him with God at his strongest point ..."

A third option is to juxtapose religion and modernism, with the religious community and secular society as two separate entities. The broad societal system does not rely, or seeks not to rely, on a moral order but on the technical order (Beckford 1992:14).

More than anything else science and technology are seen as the culprits causing secularisation or, to use Berger's (1992:26) term, this "metaphysical road accident". If science stands for comprehension of the world and human autonomy, the assumption is that religion is based on human helplessness in an incomprehensible world. It cannot be denied that science fosters a mindset impatient of mystery, demanding rational explanation instead of supernatural causation. That is why Max Weber used the phrase 'disenchantment (i.e. de-mystification) of the world' instead of 'secularisation' (Berger 1992:28-9). It is impossible, however, for the average Western Christian to ignore the findings of science and adopt an unscientific, a-scientific or post-scientific position. This may explain the popularity of new cosmology and quantum physics, because they allow for the influence of what cannot be scientifically explained.

Berger (1992:13) speaks of truths that he thinks we may have lost in the process of modernisation. He writes:

> Our ancestors didn't know about particle physics, but they spoke with angels. Let it be stipulated that through the knowledge of particle physics we have gained a new measure of truth. But could it be that we have lost truth when our conversation with angels came to a stop? Can we be sure that the truths of modern physics necessarily imply the untruth of angels? I'm strongly inclined to believe the opposite.

Pluralism has played an important role in secularism. Pluralism is the co-existence of different groups in one society, with a measure of civic peace. Religious pluralism is one of several varieties of this phenomenon. Co-existence has been accomplished in the past, not so much by lofty ideals of tolerance as by the erection of barriers to social relations. The adage that good fences make good neighbours is

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valid in this regard (Berger 1992:37-38). Via urbanisation, the influence of the mass media and the interaction of worldviews, people experience the workings of pluralism. Berger (1992:39, 41) speaks of a process of cognitive contamination, in which the thought obtrudes that traditional ways of looking at the world may not be the only plausible ones – and that other people may have a point or two. A process of cognitive bargaining may ensue, with cognitive surrender and cognitive retrenchment as two sub-varieties.

Post-secularism

The 'limits-to-growth' awareness of the 1970s, the new scientific philosophy with its undertones of relativism and methodological anarchism, and postmodernism have ushered in a post-secular period (Van Peursen 1989:38). It is characterised by an *interweaving of natural and supernatural* and a realisation that meaning does not lie only in the natural. In a post-secular context the discussion centres on relativity and universality; the emphasis is on informal communities where intercultural contact takes place; and fixed identity is replaced by dynamic, open identity (see Van Peursen 1989:39).

The persistence of religion

Secular culture itself produces a deep need for meaning in life, hence also for religion. The fear that the advance of secularisation will make religion a peripheral, steadily waning phenomenon can now be considered unfounded and obsolete (Pannenberg 1988:43). Greeley (1972:241) maintains that there is a built-in trend in the human condition towards devising an ultimate meaning system and sacralising it. There is no reason to think that agnosticism, atheism, scepticism and irreverence are any more common today than they were in other ages and, conversely, no reason to think that faith, devotion, religious commitment and sanctity were any more common in the past than they are today. Thus the current situation seems to reflect the standard human condition.

Greeley (1995:79) cautiously suggests that an alternative to the faith/secularisation or Christianisation/de-Christianisation model

could be a model in which most humans will always be somewhat religious (and somewhat superstitious) as long as, conscious of their own mortality, they need meaning in their lives and reassurance for their anxieties. Some will be very religious, some will have little interest in religion, and most will be somewhere in between, except in times of existential crisis.

Thus the process of secularisation did not put an end to religiosity.[3] The disappearance of religion is an illusion (Ter Borg 1994:15; Beckford 1993:7). Religiosity is an anthropological given. Religion as a routinised, tradition-determined system is certainly on the decline (Ter Borg 1994:20ff; Beckford 1993:15ff). But it will survive, even though the church and its forms of expression will look different in the future – just as love survives, even if the structure of the traditional marriage has changed. The church does not have a monopoly in religiosity.[4] The systems of meaning that religions offer are becoming more variable.

The question is whether the church is the only body that can meaningfully fulfil the human need for belonging, security and meaning in life. Religion is no longer mediated only by the church. The one true church has fragmented into innumerable traditions and denominations (in this regard pope Benedict XVI recently reaffirmed that the Catholic Church is the only true church.[5] When it comes to God's representative on earth, the pope is *vicarius Christi*.

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3 "Darum hat die Säkularisierung nicht zum Absterben der Religion geführt, sondern zur Entfremdung zwischen die profan gewordene Lebenswelt und einer durch die Religion repräsentierten 'Sonntagswelt'" [That is why secularisation did not lead to the death or religion, merely to alienation between the secularised life world and religion represented by the Sunday world] (Kasper 1990:86).

4 "After all, by and large the new religiosity has already stepped out of the institutionalised religions and churches, or at any rate become a movement counter to the official line: an unconventional, unorthodox religiosity, of which the major denominations have unfortunately hardly taken cognisance" (Küng 1990:81; our translation).

5 The Vatican issued a document on 10 July 2007, restating its belief that the Catholic Church is the only true church of Jesus Christ. The sixteen page document, "Responses to some questions regarding certain aspects of the doctrine on the church", was prepared by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a doctrinal watchdog previously headed by pope Benedict. Formulated as five questions and answers, it says that, although Orthodox

Post-secularism, religion and the church

Many preachers depended heavily on the ghost of secularism to add force to their sermons. Now they have to find alibis for a not-so-secular society and a not-so-saintly church. In many respects the world has even become a witness to the church. It is secular people who speak of spirituality,[6] secular writers who call people to righteousness, freedom fighters who practice ethics and natural scientists who put ecology, the future of the world and the quest for God on the agenda.

Pastors can take it for granted that religion is implicitly present in people's lives, but how can it be made explicit and how can the church gain acceptance as the best place for fulfilling religious needs? Pannenberg (1988:44-45) rejects the options of either an authoritarian approach or assimilation to the secular worldview. As examples of excessive assimilation of theology to modern secularism he cites the 'death of God' theory, the theology of demythologisation, feminism and liberation theology (Pannenberg 1988:47-56). These approaches, however, may be seen as contextual theologies, expressing the feeling and needs of their time, and Pannenberg displays exactly the authoritarian attitude he denounces when rejecting them. A fine balance should be maintained between tradition and the need for theologies that express the convictions and requirements of a specific time.

Religion is more than just a phase in human evolution. The world is as fervently religious as ever. Traditional religion maintains a tenacious hold on vast numbers of people in almost all non-Western regions: in east and south-east Asia, across the Muslim world, in sub-Saharan

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churches are true churches, they are defective because they do not recognise the primacy of the pope (see CBC News at: http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2007/07/10/vatican-church.html).

6   According to Beckford (1992:18) there is far more overlap than difference between 'religion' and 'spirituality', insofar as both denote ways of thinking, feeling and acting which are oriented to supreme sources of meaning and value. Since its spirituality lacks the sense of communal obligation and collective ritual associated with public religion, it is only appropriate that it should flourish at a time when personal choice seems to be the criterion of well-being in so many areas of life.

Africa and Latin America (Berger 1992:32). Notable instances of the way religion permeates the contemporary world are the influence of evangelical Protestantism in Latin America, the resurgence of traditional religions in Africa and the strength of Islam. Modernisation and secularisation seem to have had little or no impact on these religions.

Even in the West, which has been most affected by secularisation, religion is anything but a historical artefact. Greeley (1995:91), using 1991 statistics for the West, rates Ireland, Poland and the United States as the most religious countries, while East Germany, Slovenia and the Netherlands are the least religious. Britain, New Zealand and West Germany are less devout but hardly unreligious. There is, however, no persuasive evidence of long-term religious decline,[7] except in the Netherlands, the former socialist countries and East Germany. Pure secularists, who believe in neither God nor animistic powers, are few and far between – except in East Germany, where a fifth of the population believe in nothing at all. The corresponding proportions are eight percent in Britain, six percent in Slovenia, five percent in West Germany and one percent in Ireland. Religion in its many subtle and diffuse manifestations persists, even among those who do not believe in God, or at least in a 'personal' God. Thus fourteen percent of atheists in Britain believe in miracles, eight percent pray every week, 27 percent believe in faith healers, 35 percent in fortune tellers, 17 percent in good luck charms, and 23 percent in astrology. This underscores the importance of religion in a post-secular age.

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7 Hammond and Shibley (1993:37ff) did a survey of a sample of 645 persons raised as Roman Catholics, of whom 407 have remained Catholic and 143 dropped out, 95 of the dropouts returning after a period of two years. Those who dropped out may have done so for secular reasons, but those who returned did not do so because of a reversal of these secular reasons. This supports Wilson's assumption that new religious organisations may emerge, but they will not have the economic, political, legal and cultural 'significance' that their predecessors may have had. Secularisation is thus a one-way process and when religious activities recur they do so in a different manner and in a new context. Wilson (1982:155) indicates that, whereas religion once permeated the very texture of community life, in modern society it operates only in interstices in the system.

Institutional control as opposed to a people's religion

There is a strong feeling that religion should be community based rather than institutionalised. Arnold Gehlen (discussed in Berger, Berger & Kellner 1974:85ff) shows that the hold of institutions on individuals is weakening on a global scale (he calls it de-institutional-ism). The institutional fabric, whose basic function has always been to offer individuals meaning and stability, has become incohesive, fragmented and thus less and less plausible.[8] Inevitably individuals are thrown back on themselves, on their own subjectivity, to find the meaning they require to exist.

The power of religion does not reside exclusively in religious institu-tions (see Bonhoeffer 1953:299). It also stems from people who harbour the seed of religion (*semen religionis*). Religious institutions usually insist that the power of religion resides in its God – who then authorises them to think, speak and act on his behalf. They are the custodians of tradition and watchdogs over doctrinal purity but often lose the people in the process. People find it hard to be self-reliant and look to the community for support. This widespread need has influenced community life, which was previously characterised by privacy and individualism.

Greeley (1995:153) shows that 'mechanical' society has been replaced by 'organic' society, *Gesellschaft* by *Gemeinschaft*, 'association' by 'community' (see Wilson 1982:153ff).

Harvey Cox (1984:240) sees people's religion as a resource for a postmodern theology, because it is not elitist, clerical or the religion of cultivated intellectuals. People's religion has a history of resisting and

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8   This is not to say that the church as an institution will disappear. Berger (1992:170) reminds us that religious experience would remain a highly elusive phenomenon if it were not preserved in an institution; institutionalisation is the only way to ensure the transmission of religion from one generation to the next. Human constructs only survive in an institutional form. Institutions relieve us of the burden of having to reinvent the social order, and indeed the world itself, every time we interact with human beings. But that does not detract from legitimate grievances against the over-regimentation of life by institutions and the fact that Western religious institutions often 'domesticate' and 'routinise' religious experience (see Berger 1992:173ff).

subverting the reign of modernity. Cox (1984:241) considers modern theology a repudiation of folk piety and popular religion. The task of modern theology was to purify religious belief and practice from the dross that seemed to make it an anachronism and an anomaly in the modern world. People's religion is a key to a postmodern theology. Cox cites liberation and feminist theology as examples of people's theologies. The deep rift that separates academic theology from people's religion does not apply to liberation theology. What makes these theologies more open to people's religion is that they grow from the experience of Christian base communities (Cox 1984:242).

Post-secularism and theology

The theory of secularism has been adopted by many theologians who, according to Berger (1992:26), start with the unexamined assumption that the modern human is unavoidably and irresistibly secular.

Many present-day theologians find themselves in the awkward position of being more secular than the world that they predicted was irrevocably heading for secularism, since they are more vulnerable to forces like rationalism, relativism and stripping the transcendent of its distinctiveness. But it is not easy to retreat into religiosity and regain one's innocence.

Post-secularism is forcing theology to articulate religious experience over the whole spectrum of human existence and it helps to impart a common understanding that is essential for survival (Ter Borg 1994:17). This is theologising 'from below'. It balances the influence that worldview and attitude to life exercise on religious experience, since they are mutually determinative.

Post-secularism and postmodernism

Postmodernism is a vague term serving different functions. Beckford (1992:19) singles out the following traits commonly associated with postmodernism:

- refusal to regard positivistic, rationalistic, instrumental criteria as the sole or exclusive standards of worthwhile knowledge;
- willingness to combine symbols from disparate codes or frameworks of meaning, even at the cost of disjunction and eclecticism;
- celebration of spontaneity, a derogatory attitude – lightness, irony and playfulness;
- willingness to abandon the search for overarching or triumphalist myths, narratives or paradigms.

Postmodernists are post-secular people who have come to terms with their religiously pluralistic, ever shifting and open world. They are trying to come to terms with the absence of God, history and self as fixed centres. Secularism hailed these modern, autonomous, rational people. Postmodernism curbs that optimism. Postmodern people must come to terms with the limits of reason, the perspectival nature of thought, contextuality of truth, relativism of language, cultural specificity of norms and values, and so on. It prompts a new openness to difference – differences of meaning, truth, culture, humans and God concepts. This receptiveness stimulates renewed appreciation of religion and the transcendent.

Regaining one's religiosity seems to be impossible without recognising the ongoing battle between childlike faith and reason that has come of age, between accepting God 'out there' as a construct of the human mind and refusal to forego that construct. It is the knowledge that, while the prophet (Isaiah 44:14-17) accuses pagans of carving their idols from cedar wood, he himself is carving his god out of words. Both gods are constructs.[9] We *make* our meaning just as we *make* our god. God becomes a symbolic focus of selfhood, 'useful' for a religious person. Theologising means participating in the construction of Babel. Babel is the religious symbol or source of power that humans prefer to carve for themselves. The result is a loss of criteria

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9   This example cited by Anthony Freeman (see his *God in us. A case for Christian humanism*, London: SCM, 1993) is discussed by Thiselton (1995:82-83). Freeman, having dismissed Isaiah's God as a mere human projection, finds no criterion to distinguish between the 'projections' of Canaanite polytheism, covenantal biblical relationalism, post-Kantian modernity and post-Nietzschean postmodernism.

to interpret meaning other than within a subculture (Thiselton 1995:84). Babel is the metaphor for the nature of language. Language is comparable to pieces and moves on a chessboard (Saussure, Wittgenstein), but the world of language is simultaneously 'a bottomless chessboard'; its play has no meaning beyond itself and it rests on nothing (Thiselton 1995:85).

According to Cupitt (quoted and discussed in Thiselton 1995:106ff), religious thought needs to be not just secularised but temporalised, mobilised. We urgently need a 'true' religion for the fleeting moment and the stripping away of layers of meaning.

The holy and the secular

Contemporary religious experience has shown how inadequate and misleading a strict separation of sacred and secular is. In our age people encounter the sacred as the deepest dimension of significant secular experiences, namely the pivotal points of their personal and social history. There is religious meaning in the vocation to become fully human (Baum 1973:19).

The holy and the secular in apartheid South Africa

Apartheid South Africa was marked by a close link between the religious and the secular. Until the end of the apartheid era it professed to be a Christian state. The preamble to the former constitution was explicit in its acknowledgment of the rule of the Christian God. In practice this boiled down to a system that came pretty close to a theocracy.[10] This was positively expounded in a theology of the kingdom of God. It is well known that Reformed

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10 The state was not a theocracy in the narrow sense of an ecclesiocracy, in which the church governs the state, as was the case in Calvin's Geneva. It would not allow unacceptable interference by the church. The Reformed churches accepted the specific responsibility of government, although as Christian rulers they had to govern according to the principles of God's word. The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) had a special commission, acknowledged by government, to liaise with ministers belonging to the DRC. Whenever the church differed fundamentally from government, it did not publicly confront or criticise it, but negotiated in terms of its commission. Most members of the ruling National Party were Dutch Reformed and the Dutch Reformed Church was often referred to as 'the National Party at prayer'.

theologians provided politicians with theological backing for the apartheid ideology for many years. It was firmly believed that it was God's pre-ordained will that whites, who possessed the only 'true' religion and civilisation, had to colonise Southern Africa 300 years ago to evangelise its people.

The Dutch Reformed Church, which played a leading role in government politics, was influenced by Abraham Kuyper's ideas. This accounted for its non-interference with government, whose professsional (Christian) politicians had to work out their own policies.[11] The church simply had to perform its prophetic task in relation to government (see *Publieke geregtigheid* 1990:64ff).

The term 'Christian National' was used to indicate that values incorporated into, for instance, the education system accorded with basic Christian and national principles. The 'national' component referred to the 'general' validity of the system – although it applied only to whites, since blacks did not have the franchise and education was segregated. The 'Christian' component referred essentially to Protestant Christianity with the emphasis on the Reformed tradition.

One can expect that in a neutral South African state there will be ample evidence of religious influence on the secular/neutral sphere.[12]

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11 This well-established view of 'leaving it to the Christian experts' is modernistic, deceptive and open to criticism. One cannot avoid the impression that the church, as an institution, was only prepared to make statements that could be defended as the absolute truth, the will of God according to his absolute word. In an interdisciplinary context (and in keeping with a democratic spirit) it is acknowledged that all people have a responsibility to participate in issues of national concern. By invoking the 'experts' many are deceived, or at least prevented from making their input. It was exactly this attitude of 'leaving it to the Christian experts' that beguiled people into believing that apartheid was the best system for the South African situation. It is also difficult to draw a line between the church's ethical guidance and political accountability. If the church is a watchdog over the state, it is politically involved.

12 In his opening of Parliament address in February 1999, President Mandela introduced the concept of 'RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) of the Soul' – the need for a value-based society in the attainment of our development objectives. He also clearly articulated the need for participatory development by the whole society rather than leaving it to leaders alone. He said: "South African society needs to infuse itself with a measure of discipline, a work ethic and responsibility for the actions we undertake. … related to this is the reconstruction of the soul of the nation, the 'RDP of the Soul': by this we mean first and foremost respect for life; pride and self-respect as South Africans … It means asserting our collective and individual identity as Africans, committed to the rebirth of the continent;

Black nationalism, the experience of a pluralistic identity, the zeal for nation building, the sense of Africanism, the relative absence of a sacred-profane distinction all add up to a very specific religious consciousness. Crippen (1988:325-326) has indicated that the nation-state represents the most dominant, extensive and inclusive boundary of moral identity in modern societies. The rise of modern nation-states and an international economic order over the past few centuries was associated with the emergence of civil religions of national identity and human dignity supported by a pantheon of Enlightenment ideals, including democracy, equality, justice, freedom and progress. The suggestion that 'old gods are growing old' may be amplified with the corollary that modern sacred symbols ('new gods') increasingly command the national allegiance of citizens in the modern world. Although traditional religions may be on the decline, religious consciousness remains powerful and manifests itself in new beliefs and rituals corresponding with modern organisational forms of dominance and exchange.

Many South Africans feared the effects of a neutral or secular state, for instance the implications for future religious education in schools.[13] South Africa is governed under a constitution in which human rights – including religious rights – are spelled out. Within these parameters religious groups and churches may operate freely without any special privileges.

There are several factors in favour of a neutral or secular South African state.[14] A cardinal consideration is pluralism. We have a

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being respectful of other citizens and honouring women and children of our country who are exposed to … domestic violence and abuse. It means building our schools into communities of learning and improvement of character. It means mobilising one another, and not merely waiting for government to clean our streets; or for funding allocations to plant trees and tend schoolyards. These are things we need to embrace as a nation that is nurturing its New Patriotism. They constitute an important environment for bringing up future generations."

13 A 1999 document on religious education in South African schools made provision for "educating learners to be religious" or "educating learners about religion and religions". It was decided that only the last option would be adopted in religious education on all levels of tuition.

14 There are several arguments against a Christian state. Such a state can hardly be tolerant of any non-Christian position. It can hardly accommodate pluralism and will find it difficult to tolerate those who differ from it. It easily falls prey to fundamentalism and an exclusive ethics that benefits only certain creeds in the broad Christian tradition. Nowadays states are

pluralistic situation which must accommodate not only different religions but also different cultural groups, and this seems to favour a neutral state.

Absence of sacred-profane dualism in African traditional religions

A fascinating aspect of African thought is the concept expressed by the Sepedi word '*seriti*' and corresponding terms in other indigenous languages, which can be rendered by words like 'power', 'energy' or 'force'. The Zulu equivalent (*isithunzi*) means 'shadow' as well and refers figuratively to a person's dignity and standing in a community. In Northern Sotho the word '*maemo*' indicates the presence of a person, the specific 'aura' she radiates.

The origin of all force, like the origin of the universe, is God. This force binds the universe and all humans together in an intimate ontological relationship. The force of all things, especially living things, is continually waxing or waning. Through the ancestors and manipulable spirit forces human beings continually influence each other, direct or indirectly. The dead play a crucial role in the universe of forces and continue to interact causally with the living. This makes it impossible to divide life into autonomous sectors (Shutte 1993:52-54).

Proposals for religious interaction in a future South Africa

The following factors, proposals and comments may be pertinent to religious development in a post-secular South Africa:

• One can expect African traditional religions to play a greater role in religious development in Africa. The African holistic approach to life, the absence of a distinction between sacred and secular and the importance of community life may have a real impact on Western-oriented religious thinking.

essentially secular, even when their constitutions or their traditions retain historical allusions to their purportedly religious origins (Wilson 1982:54).

- The new constitution with its emphasis on religious freedom should promote general acceptance of religious pluralism in a post-secular society. The persistence of fundamentalism and intolerance in most religions is, however, undeniable.
- Greater religious transparency and empowerment of people and religions call for urgent attention. The much neglected AICs in particular should be encouraged to articulate their views.
- Church unity should be promoted, especially between racially divided groups like the Dutch Reformed churches, which are still in the process of unification. If these processes succeed, it could have a fascinating influence on future religious development.
- An open-market theology is essential. It would make all religions aware – and critically so – of all forms of power play in both their own and other traditions and in society at large.
- A theology that is socially concerned must be practised. Paul Tillich said that no statement was theological which does not, directly or indirectly, contain saving truth. By 'saving truth' he means truth which is *done*: it resides in those who *do* the truth (Tillich 1948:117; see also 114ff).
- The logic of domination operating in our society must be replaced by a logic of freedom, acceptance and equality (Watson 1994:180-181).

The next chapter elaborates on the idea of secularisation, with the accent on secular spirituality. We trace its development and characteristics.

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Chapter 9

SECULAR SPIRITUALITY VERSUS SECULAR DUALISM: TOWARDS POSTSECULAR HOLISM

Introduction

The term 'spirituality' can mean anything from a profound spiritual experience to an aesthetic experience; or it can simply fulfil a rhetorical function as an adjective or adverb. It may also be used metonymically to signify a sense of ecstasy, self-transcendence, joy, growth, renewal; unity; profound meaning; insight; religious experience, and the like. McGrath (1999:2) defines it thus: "Spirituality concerns the quest for a fulfilled and authentic life, involving the bringing together of the ideas distinctive of … [some] religion and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of that religion." We shall use the term in light of this definition.

Rediscovering spirituality?

The revival of spirituality is a result, not of some sort of religious awakening, but of developments in the prevailing worldview.[1] The concept of spirituality cannot be understood in isolation: it needs to be related to the worldview and spirit of the times. Spirituality experienced in a world of phantoms and magic, gods and demons where humans are at the mercy of forces they cannot control is very different from spirituality experienced in a technoscientific world in which nature has been domesticated – a world in which the magic of

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1   The contemporary worldview is not readily subsumed under a few common denominators, because experience varies with the context in which it originates. First World worldviews differ dramatically from Third World worldviews. Holland (1988:42) sees the cardinal problems in the Third World as economic – the suffering of the poor; in the Second World the accent is on lack of freedom; and in the First World it centres on a cultural crisis (precisely what modernism is about: a crisis of progress). The point is that spirituality should be seen as closely related to the cardinal problems that preoccupy a culture. In every context worldview should be connected with that problem.

progress has turned into nightmare, a runaway train that can no longer be stopped.

The escalating use of the term 'spirituality'[2] is symptomatic of the experiential impoverishment of modern people. Modern institution-alised life has become so predictable that any experience that touches the individual is called spiritual. This permits a proliferation of spiritual experiences, which has restored people's sense of transcendence.[3] The experiences are limitless: any experience can acquire spiritual dimensions. The New Age movement offers plenty of secular experiences of this kind; there is the experience of techno-spirituality; the defiant experience of struggle spirituality during South Africa's liberation struggle; the experience of aesthetic spirituality that unites *aficionados* in a sensory Eucharist of sound, form and colour. Spiritual experience comes from reading a novel or watching a movie that takes one into a mind-broadening world of new meanings and broad new vistas. Friendships, comradeship, nature are experienced spiritually. Sex, illness, travel – just about any human experience – can affect us in ways that we interpret as spiritual. Rhetorically this is expressed in statements like: "a spiritually and gastronomically sublime meal"; "South Africa lacks a spiritual sense of national unity"; "my holiday in the Seychelles was a spiritual pilgrimage". In such contexts it is not inappropriate to speak of spiritual secularity.

But do spiritual experiences of this nature mean that the person is a religious believer? Is secular spirituality religion? Is spirituality not simply a technology of the human self? One hallmark of authentic religion has always been that human beings do not determine either God or fate but have to wait on God. If spirituality is no more than a technology applied for the sake of experiential stimulation, we shall end up disenchanted.

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2   Although the flood of literature on the subject is largely theological, the revival of spirituality probably originated in the 'secular' sphere, whereupon it galvanised the churches into reclaiming their 'spiritual property'.

3   The advantage of the term 'spirituality' in a religious context is that it does not discriminate between religion and denomination, or between believers and unbelievers. It is a human capacity accessible to all.

Spirituality, then, is not a phenomenon in itself. It cannot be guaranteed a priori but usually features a posteriori when describing encounters, events and experiences. It is not a new kind of religion. But then, it does not profess to be, although some New Age groups display religious traits.[4] Yet it is reductive to associate spirituality with practising adherents of traditional religions and secular spirituality with non-practitioners of these faiths.[5]

Secular spirituality, being the potential of all experience to assume a spiritual dimension, affects everyone. It is not confined to the religious or transcendent sphere but characterises the profane, secular life world. Whereas the medieval world was arranged around the church (*profanum* is the forecourt of the temple), today the church takes its cue from the world. The Christian church plays hardly any role in modern societies. Its role has been taken over by secular actors, such as the press, interest groups, certain laws, corporate values and ethics, and the human rights culture. Caiazza (2005: 12) writes: "The present state of affairs in Western culture is that religion as part of civil discourse is in retreat even in debates in which a religious perspective would be most helpful ..."[6]

From pre-secular animism to secular dualism to post-secular holism

Pre-secular animism

In animist (typically primal) religions God, non-human nature and human beings are interlinked. The world is animated, enchanted and

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4 Collins (1999: 106-113) lists the diverse sources on which New Age spirituality relies: "quantum physics, astrology, Celtic druidism, alchemy, spiritualism, Eastern religions, the occult, native American religion, witchcraft and animism."

5 Langdon Gilkey's secular theology seeks to demonstrate hermeneutically the religious substratum of secular culture on the basis of Tillich's thesis that "culture is the form of religion and religion the substance of culture" (see Peters 2005:851).

6 A number of complex factors contributed to this. They include the following: recognition of the plurality and equality of religions with differing claims; the specification (and relative restriction to the private domain) of religious rights in many constitutions; the exclusion of religious influence through constitutional entrenchment and implementation of human rights; the media's use of ethical issues to form public opinion; the establishment of global democracy with fairly similar values; globalism; and the role of the World Court.

God is to be seen – and feared – everywhere. This is known as the mythical or premodern phase. As culture developed humans, nature and gods were separated, and God and nature became objects of human contemplation. This was the 'substantialist' phase or modernism. In our present, post-secular era human beings, god and world are once more connected. This is expressed in postmodern holism, the context in which the term 'secular spirituality' should be understood.

In the pre-secular animist phase our forebears experienced intense emotions, which form the substratum of our spiritual experience: wonderment at the mystique of nature; fear of the unknown – the future, death, and the inexplicability of birth and growth; reverence for the world soul exuded by everything. At the same time trust in, and union with, nature and the gods, to whom humankind owed its survival, must have helped to instil the sense of security and belonging that are fundamental to spirituality.

The pre-secular animist mind did not differentiate between natural and supernatural and there were no dualistic distinctions between nature and gods, nature and humankind or humans and gods. The world was experienced holistically and harmony and disharmony, life and death, the comprehensible and the incomprehensible were kept in equilibrium.

Some sort of animistic wholeness is resurfacing in the present search for meaning in nature. Contemporary myths and religions remain major vehicles of that meaning. In his *Chance and necessity* Jacques Monod refers to myths and religions which served and motivated humankind for a hundred thousand years since the time of its origins up to the scientific revolution. That revolution "ended the ancient animist covenant between man and nature, leaving nothing in place of that precious bond but an anxious quest in a world of icy solitude". Within three centuries, science, founded on the postulate of objectivity, has secured its place in society – in people's practice, but not in their hearts (quoted in Miller 1995:156).

Secular dualism (modernism)

The five centuries since the start of the scientific revolution – the modernist era – were characterised by growing secularism. It was a period of scientific awakening, marked by dissection and separation. Separation entailed the following: mind from matter (the Middle Ages still clung to the Aristotelian world soul that animated everything); science from theology; church from world; natural from supernatural; physical sciences from human sciences; scientific from unscientific; and so on. Along with these divisions dualism became entrenched in Western culture. The discovery of reason and the accent on rationalism, which came with Descartes, and the concomitant separation of intellect and matter (*res cognitas* versus *res extensa*) ran through Enlightenment culture like a golden thread.[7]

With the rise of Cartesianism the medieval feudal order crumbled. Industrialism led to increasing urbanisation, establishing the typically individualistic culture of modernism that underpins secularism (see Du Toit 2004:4-6, 13-15). A hallmark of many expressions of First World spirituality these days is their individualistic orientation: spiritual experience is an end in itself for the benefit of the individual. Grassow (1991:53) observes: "The spiritual experience was never an end in itself ... Any spirituality that does not produce service is false." African spirituality, by contrast, is not concerned with personal sensation or fulfilment. It is ideally communitarian, experienced in identification with the lot of the poor and the struggle of the oppressed (see Worsnip & Van der Water 1991).

The term 'secularisation' (Latin *saeculum,* lit.: 'generation', 'age') originally referred to state confiscation of ecclesiastic property. In a

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7   Cartesian mind-body dualism inspired many other dualisms, including the sacred-secular distinction as we came to know it. The theology of that time generously accommodated this: the soul resided in the mind, was indestructible and eternal, while the body or flesh harboured human desires and sin. Life on earth was just a portal to real life in heaven, where eternal bliss free from bodily constraints awaited the faithful. 'True' believers were aliens on earth, destined to find their real home hereafter. The implication was that humans can do little to change the world, earthly pleasures are mostly sinful and to be avoided, and social injustice and political corruption are part of this dispensation.

religious context it relates to the erosion of religious traditions and an exodus from the churches. It may also connote theological developments which, in confrontation with tradition, curtail the absolute power of church dogma, especially the doctrine of revelation (the Bible). The common denominator is alienation, which lies at the root of secularisation.

Wiersenga (1992:75) sees secularisation as a process in which all areas of life and thought are freed from the influence of any form of metaphysics, including religion. In other words, it is a process in which 'secular' thought is emancipated (alienated) from the ecclesiastic tyranny of the Middle Ages. For the first thirteen centuries after the establishment of Christianity secularism was not a factor worth considering (Raman 2005b: 824) and its short history, coinciding with the scientific revolution,[8] is astounding.

Theologically secularisation is to some extent associated with the notion of humankind's coming of age, which in Bonhoeffer's work summons people to live as if God is not given. It implies that people take responsibility for themselves and their world rather than passively dismiss events as 'God's will'.[9]

Thus secularisation is the emancipation of the sciences, especially the natural sciences, from religious and metaphysical dependence. Hence it refers to the sciences' autonomy from the church and religion, their authority deriving from an independent theory of science, methodology and terminology, as distinct from ecclesiastic and religious pronouncements in areas applicable to their disciplinary field. Indeed, the sciences came to base their authority on their own bible (book of nature), as explained in Kepler's metaphor of two books (the book of God and the book of nature). The two-books metaphor, as well as all the dualisms to which it gave rise, eventually succumbed to the

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8   The Copernican revolution of the 15th century was perpetuated by, inter alia, the Enlightenment and the French and American political revolutions.
9   On the whole theologians showed little tolerance for human autonomy. Thus Pannenberg (1988:47-58) is condemnatory of what he sees as theology's excessive assimilation of modern secular culture. As examples of such theologies he cites 'God is dead' theology, demythologising theology, feminist theology and liberation theology.

postmodern reintegration of reality, because dualism "depended upon supernaturalism for its intelligibility" (Griffin 2000:29).

At the same time the 17th century saw various attempts to harmonise religion, science and philosophy. As Funkenstein (quoted by Bronislaw 2005:817) puts it, "the work of Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz can be seen as a high point of convergence between science, philosophy and theology". The subsequent parting of the ways (of physical science and religion) should be viewed in light of the logical and methodological problem of reconciling nature and supernature in a scientific discipline. Nonetheless such a process was initiated in the 17th century with a shift in emphasis to the autonomy of nature: nature had to be explained in its own terms. The locus of authority in the sciences is the *saeculum* – the world of nature – rather than the world of revelation and faith (McGrath, 2001:100). The early mechanistic worldview of Newton's time subordinated nature to "both the human soul and the Divine Creator. It was adopted precisely to protect God and the soul – a motive that disappeared from the mechanistic view of the nineteenth century" (Griffin 2000:27, 29-30).[10] For a long time the supposition was that nature required a transcendent ground to explain its existence. This is not necessarily the case any more. To many, nature is self-explanatory and self-explained (Crosby 2003:119).

In the context of secular dualism the distinctions between natural and supernatural, church and world, mind and body, and science an superstition became entrenched and, despite attempts to reconcile the

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10 New cosmology, new physics and new biology can stimulate faith or provide grounds for unbelief. For some it is a spiritual experience to survey the world depicted by science over the last few decades. From new cosmology to new biology and cognitive science, one cannot but marvel at the many-splendoured wonder of life. Holmes Rolston III (1996: 411) describes it lyrically: "If anything at all on Earth is sacred, it must be this enthralling creativity that characterizes our home planet. If anywhere, here is the brooding Spirit of God. So the secular – this present, empirical epoch, this phenomenal world, studied by science – does not eliminate the sacred after all; to the contrary, it urges us on a spiritual quest." Others, by contrast, felt liberated by the story of new cosmology and experienced a gradual shift to a 'different' worldview. Shermer (2004: 232) describes it happening in his own life as a systematic displacement of one worldview and way of thinking by another, "genesis and exodus myths by cosmology and evolution theories; faith by reason; final truths by provisional probabilities; trust by verification; authority by empiricism; and religious naturalism by scientific naturalism."

poles, the overriding feeling was one of alienation. Cartesian rationalism accompanied and co-defined modernism,[11] reaching a zenith in the late 19th century when it was curbed to some extent by postmodernism. Today we claim to have outgrown Cartesian mind-body dualism and to have rediscovered our bodily roots. Mind and rationality are rooted in bodily physicality (Wuketits); soul is not an entity existing independently of mind-body unity (Nancy Murphey); language and thought cannot develop without the human body and the very structure of language derives from our bodily movements and experience (Lakoff & Johnson); religious experience is explained in terms of physical brain functions (Newberg; D'Aquila); the very structure of the human phenotype is genetically encoded and we are making headway in unravelling these codes, thus learning more about human nature and conduct. These are only a few of the factors that account for our present body culture, in which health and fitness, youth, food, beauty, longevity, entertainment and sensory experience are the main preoccupations. Religion and spirituality cannot remain unaffected: spirituality returns to corporeal spheres[12] – those of the human body, nature (extension of our physicality) and society (Holland 1988:53).

Secularisation in the sense of scientific autonomy from ecclesiastic influence does not mean that all scientists have suddenly become atheists. Rather it indicates a realisation that there are questions and answers, problems and challenges that exist and need to be addressed without recourse to religion and the church. Our life world is bigger than the inner sanctum of the church and theology. Jackelén (2005:866-867) rightly views secularism as relating dialectically to religion, its "dancing partner or companion … rather than its antagonist".

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11 Peterson's (2005: 878) description of modernism is worth quoting in full: "Modernist thinking is mechanistic, atomistic, and consequently individualistic. Modernist thinking is given to totalizing metanarratives, seeking a unified truth that rejects pluralism and diversity. Modernistic thinking is reductive, especially in its scientific form. It is foundationalist and realist in its epistemology, often adhering to a correspondence theory of truth. It is ignorant of the way that questions of power, gender, and race affect putative claims to objectivity."

12 Paradoxically, the whole notion of virtual reality and cyberspace represents the non-corporeal. Aupers & Houtman (2005: 82) cite the example of respondents who agreed on the spiritual significance of a disembodied presence in the virtual realm.

Acknowledgment of the interdependence of the physical and the metaphysical, of immanence and transcendence, is expressed in the term 'post-secularism'. It is a realisation that our destiny lies on this planet. We have rediscovered our earthly bounds. Soul is indivisibly part of body; mind and body are one. We are God's co-creators and we can do something about our earthly plight. To some extent the ideal of God's kingdom can be realised on earth. Neither the secular nor the spiritual side of our lives can be ignored: both need to be explained, structured and interpreted. We have to take responsibility for human nature, come to terms with it and accommodate it. This brings us to post-secular holism.

Post-secular holism (postmodernism)

The renewed stirrings of spirituality are a feature of the late 20th and early 21st century. To quote Glynn (1997: 139): "Such is the great surprise as the twentieth century turns into the twenty first: the very logic of human inquiry is compelling a rediscovery of the realm of spirit, of God and the soul." Post-secular does not mean reverting to a situation in which religion reigns supreme, but that both the church and the world have expanded their realms to accommodate changing cultural factors and social contexts. Secular spirituality does not mean that religious practice has passed from the church's hands to the worldly domain, or that the church has become superannuated.[13] What has happened in Western Christian churches is that the role of dogma, creed and council has declined and changed. This should be seen as a natural evolution that occurs in all human activities. Thus it affects not only ecclesiastic doctrines but also the technosciences – "a shift occurring within both religion and the technical sciences, away from impersonal canonical meanings and toward indexical, pragmatic solutions" (Bronislaw 2005:819).

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13 Indeed, secularism (with the accent on rationality, disciplinary autonomy and scientific integrity) occurred within the Christian church itself via theological developments like historical criticism, textual criticism, literary and redaction criticism, and hermeneutics. With reference to the influence of physics Caiazza (2005: 17) rightly observes: "The success of secularism is based on the effects of technological advance rather than on the victory of scientific ideas in the conflict with religious belief."

In Bonhoeffer's sense secular spiritual people have come of age and are exercising their own choices – without adopting a condescending attitude towards religious values. God and humankind, science and religion, humans and nature must be viewed as a stereoscopic whole. "Secularism in the modern world," says Raman (2005:3) "is not a rejection of religion, nor the denial of religious rights. It is rather a framework in which every citizen can exercise his or her chosen mode of spiritual fulfilment, whether traditional or modern, theistic, pantheistic, or atheistic; and where the laws of the land will not be dictated by the rules set forth in any particular holy book."

In postmodernism religion is democratised and gods have to make room for each other. Gods are both mediated and threatened by the technological creativeness of human beings.[14] God concepts change as the notion of humans as images of God changes. Today human beings as images of God are understood against the background of human rights and dignity; God's image as described in divine revelation is expounded by science in the terminology of genetic mapping, cognitive science and socio-biology.

Postmodernism has questioned facile distinctions between natural and supernatural, science and faith; physical and metaphysical; assumption and proof. So far its questions and its challenge to science have not been answered satisfactorily (Raman 2005:825). The postmodern challenge concerns scientific method and notions of truth. Developments in physical science have added a metaphysical dimension. Caiazza (2005:13) puts it thus: "It seems that physics, the base science, can no longer give us visually precise pictures of either the atom, with its myriads attendant particles and intermingling forces, or outer space, now filled with waves of gravity, black holes, and dark matter." Gone are the days of knockdown arguments. Most 19th century physicists assumed that concepts like 'God', 'supernatural' and 'miracle' were metaphysical, while things like space, force and matter were real. Whitworth (2003:202) reminds us of Mach, "who argued that 'matter' is metaphysical, a mental construct which allows

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14 Technology (and, via technology, human beings) is assuming attributes analogous to those of omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience and eternal life, which were once ascribed exclusively to God's incommunicable attributes.

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us economically to describe the persistence of certain clusters of sense impressions. The concept of 'force', as in 'the force of gravity', is metaphysical: it allows us to attribute a property to inanimate bodies by analogy with our own experience; it is convenient to think of the earth 'attracting' smaller bodies, but it is not necessarily true."

Post-secular holism does not abrogate the distinction between natural and supernatural but, via the postmodernist idiom, indicates that interdependence at all levels is greater than we like to admit. Griffin (1988:17) puts it thus: "By recovering a vision of deity in which norms and values can have a natural abode, and by affirming a non-sensory level of perception through which such norms can be perceived, postmodern spirituality overcomes the complete relativism which followed from modernity's disenchantment of the world."

Philip Hefner (Zygon 2003:193) quotes Ewert Cousins who compares our age to the Second Axial Age in respect of the following characteristics: (1) a complex process of convergence that transforms the earlier move towards differentiation, without abolishing differences; (2) a spirituality of the earth that celebrates our roots in the natural world; (3) the recovery of the view of primal peoples that the entire human race is one tribe; (4) a turning towards the material world as the locus of spiritual reality, placing real-world global problems on the spiritual agenda; and (5) dialogical cooperation between the world religions in efforts to deal with these real-world problems, most notably peace, justice, poverty, discrimination and care of the earth.

African spirituality: a 'secular' spirituality?

Without romanticising African religion, the following comments (albeit generic and oversimplified) seem justified:

● African thought is holistic. It was never subjected to Cartesian mind-body dualism. "For the most part when they (Africans) looked upon the cosmos they saw Man, Nature and God as a unity; distinct but inseparable aspects of a sacred whole" (Paris 1995 :35).

- African cosmologies share one primary feature: their belief in a sacred cosmos created and preserved by a supreme deity. The three realms of reality (spirit, history and nature) are deeply rooted in mythologies and cosmologies (Paris 1995: 34).

- African religion is an example of a worldly religion with a secular spirituality. Its spirituality has always been bodily.

- Naturalism is not foreign to Africa, although the interrelatedness and interaction with nature should not be understood in the Western sense.

- African religion promises to be a stimulating dialogue partner for postmodern theology.

African spirituality is a spirituality of the marketplace, not housed in a church. Because African religion never acquired a temple tradition (with its concomitant preservation of holy scriptures and sacred truths), it makes no distinction between church and world, between sacred and profane. As a result Africa did not experience the crisis of modernism and the ensuing dualisms. The involvement of the supernatural (God and ancestors) in people's daily activities and vicissitudes is taken for granted. Technoscience is there to serve human beings, not the other way round.

Let us briefly consider 'struggle spirituality' as an example of African secular spirituality (Worsnip & Van der Water 1991).[15] Struggle spirituality was collective – something individualistic modernists find hard to grasp. It was characterised by a spirit that united and motivated black people collectively, a secular spirituality because it was experienced as spiritual in this world – a world where oppression prevailed and a will to freedom was alive.

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15 Religious fanaticism may also be regarded as a form of secular spirituality. Such groups tend to split off from the moderation of mainline traditions and link religion to political ideals. The difference between the spirituality of freedom fighters and that of religious fanatics is complex and calls for hermeneutic inquiry. In this regard Pannenberg (1988:31) cites Berger's diagnosis: "The resistance to the secular culture of the West in Third World countries has found its most viable end effective expression in the revival of a fundamentalist and militant Islam."

Although secularism does not pose a problem in Africa, most African countries experience it as a threat to African culture and tradition. Growing urbanisation and exposure to the market economy with its values of self-enrichment and individualism are alienating people from tribal traditions. Cosmopolitanism is superseding ethnic customs, traditional rites and African communitarianism (cf the ubuntu model).

Struggle spirituality was born of the struggle against poverty and political oppression, in which mutual dependence created a remarkable solidarity and unity, expressed in the ubuntu concept of 'caring and sharing'. In this respect struggle spirituality strongly resembles the spirituality, born of circumstances and lifestyle, of the early churches described in the New Testament book of Acts

Secular spirituality as techno-spirituality

Technological artefacts are processed nature. Modern life is inconceivable without them, prosthetically extending our bodies and forming an important part of our self-image. Nature's artistry is technology that evolved successfully over millions of years – technology which human beings learned in a much shorter time and promptly copied. Technology brings nature close to us and represents our tangible relationship with nature. In its virtual form it is increasingly influencing our anthropology. It assumes religious, even mystical features and has become *the* determinant of our hopes, well-being, peace and eschatology. Present day natural theology grapples with nature in its technological mode which confronts us with issues that can be typified as ecumenical, interreligious and intercultural. In our time technology has become the primary force that threatens to realise eschatology catastrophically. In this sense all people are daily grappling with a global natural theology and its ethical implications.

When we talk about nature, natural theology, nature spirituality and the like we mean more than pristine nature. These notions include something of our understanding of the physical vastness, the cosmological history of the universe; our understanding of humankind *written* by nature over many millennia – microcosm reflecting the grandeur, beauty and complexity of the macrocosm. More

specifically, it is nature invisible to the human eye. This is nature fraught with an intensely sacred dimension when we, its co-creators, take its blueprint in hand and are faced with the question: what is humankind?

Technology is par excellence the cultural artefact of our time, a product of the nature that humans have domesticated.[16] Traditionally technology was secular: it related to humankind as *homo faber,* could be bought, taught, upgraded and replaced. In classical Greek the term '*techne*' referred to art, that which characterises a craftsman's work. To many religious people technology was an alienating force, "the encapsulation of human rationality" that offered a means of combating religion and superstition (Aupers & Houtman 2005:81). Hence the spiritual dimension assigned to technology is a recent development.

As the antithesis of techno-spirituality one could posit techno-secularism, indicating that technological development is not dependent on, or sensitive to, religion. Caiazza sees the ethic of techno-secularism as the utilitarian highest good for the greatest number. This view is instrumentalist and materialistic. Techno-secularism would welcome the erosion of the dogmatic dimension of religion in order to put religion's ability to change people's lives and launch social movements to pragmatic use (Caiazza 2005:20).

Technology, like human beings, readily displays a banal side. That is because it is a mirror image of human beings, with all the human attributes of self-indulgence, indolence, lust for power, vanity and ostentation. Hence technology is never neutral.

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16 The religions of the book installed God in a temple and domesticated him; they put him in a library where he could be read; they put him in lecture halls and made him a debating point. But God is spirit, as early nomadic tribes experienced, and as spirit he travels with us. He does not belong in a temple – see Solomon's discourse at the dedication of the temple, when he acknowledged that no temple can ever contain God. Religion's 'domestication' of God went hand in hand with the domestication of nature. We made nature our object, described it and conquered it. We shamelessly 'plagiarise' its intellectual property that took millions of years to evolve and convert that knowledge into technology, which we use to the detriment of nature for our own convenience.

Few people understand the technology they use and the science on which it is based. Gone are the days when ordinary folk could take technological gadgets apart, understand them, piece them together again – and find they still work! Technology has been taken away from ordinary people, just as Latin prevented medieval Christians from reading the Bible for themselves, and as Galileo's 'book of nature' at the start of the scientific revolution was written in mathematics, thus making science inaccessible to lay people. That is why technology today has a mystical character for many people. "Technology is thought of as mysterious not simply because of ignorance but because it *is* mysterious" (Bronislaw 2005:819). Its mystical character stems from its inaccessibility and, like anything we do not understand, our expectations may far exceed its capacity. This gives technology an eschatological dimension: we blindly believe that in future crises we *will* produce the technology to save the day. Like miracles, the power of technology is limitless.

Jacques Ellul (quoted by Raman 2005a:828) describes his technological pessimism thus: "Nothing belongs any longer to the realm of the gods or supernatural. The individual who lives in the technical milieu knows well that there is nothing spiritual anywhere. But man cannot live without the sacred. He therefore transfers his sense of the sacred to the very thing which has destroyed its former object: to … [technology] itself." Ellul wrote this in 1964. Whereas the 1960s and 1970s were anti-technology, the current "attribution of spiritual meaning to the digital realm" represents a remarkable change (Aupers & Houtman 2005:85). Technology can in fact act as a surrogate for religion. Newman (1997:110-111) comments: "Technology's very success in contributing to the realization of ideals such as freedom, knowledge, happiness, and peace ... may lead the practical observer to believe that technology is a proper successor to religion." To Roy (2005:841) technoscience is "the cathedral of our culture".

For all these reasons technology is ambivalent. It can liberate and enslave. Human beings have become objects in a world where technoscience is the subject. Georg Simmel (quoted by Armstrong 2003:168-170) depicts technological society as ultimately evacuating

the subject and colonising the waste spaces of the self for capital. The machine becomes the surrogate for human beings, living on their behalf. Technology is "not simply ... a matter of devices or even techniques, but central to the notions of the human – and to the thinking self" (Armstrong 2003:176).

Considering all this, how is techno-spirituality possible? Jackelén (2005:869) explains the dependence of religion on technology as follows: "Throughout their history, religions have made use of technology in the widest sense. Meditation, fasting, dancing, and the application of hallucinogens are all examples of the use of technology in order to reach various states of religious experience." The use of modern communication and media technology and other electronic devices, mainly by charismatic mega-churches, is a well-known phenomenon (see Jackelén 2005:869). On a more macabre note we know that technology also serves the cause of religious fanatics, as evidenced by suicide bombings, and it is not impossible that religious differences may yet trigger a third world war.

Secular spirituality a model for postmodern natural theology

The science and religion debate is marked by efforts to make room for God in a closed worldview, in which secular science – along with the constraints of empirical observation, scientific methodology and causal connections – dictates the rules. But even the few loopholes left for divine action in the secular domain of nature are disputed. Known instances of natural phenomena which are seen to allow scope for divine action are quantum mechanics (Bohm), autopoietic cell systems in biology (Luhman), electromagnetism (Fagg), supervenient theories of mind (Murphey), the design principle (Dembski, Behe), and the many examples of fine-tuning in the anthropic principle (Peacocke). But they fail to convince and are questioned by the view that God voluntarily limits himself and submits to the natural principles and laws that he laid down.

New Age spirituality has many elements suggestive of a revival of natural theology, yet it is not the same. Traditional natural theology can be traced to Aquinas's attempts to naturalise theology in the same

way that Aristotle managed to rationalise the universe. Aquinas's natural theology produced the famous proofs of God's existence, which have at best ornamental value. William of Occam deconstructed that theology in light of God's limitless power and sovereignty – a strategy Karl Barth eventually applied to Brunner and all other attempts at natural theology (see Walach 2005:288).

The problem with relativising natural theology by invoking absolutes of faith, revelation, divine sovereignty or whatever is that it does not account for the relations between faith and rationality, nature and supernature, science and religion and, ultimately, church and the world. Thus it leaves believers with a paradoxical worldview. While it might still have been feasible in Aquinas's day, maybe even in Barth's, the pervasive influence of technoscience in our time is simply too overwhelming a threat for theology to ignore. That is evident from the amount of literature on the subject. What I have written shows that our life is so intertwined with technoscience, which in its turn is so integrally part of nature, that nature's role and its influence on our faith and thinking can hardly be overestimated. In fact, people are more aware of the interrelationship and interdependence of nature and human life than ever before. Theological ethics cannot pronounce from a transcendent height on all sorts of issues without acknowledging the inputs of medical science, socio-biology, and the cognitive and neuro-sciences.

Theologians and scientists alike, irrespective of the claims made by their respective disciplines, are restricted to human cognitive powers and the limits of provability. God's existence cannot be proved. But he can feature meaningfully in present-day worldviews if we connect the various aspects of our lives, our naive faith and our confined rationality, our neutral science and tainted ethics. Although many people seek and find God in nature, it does not mean that spirituality is returning to nature in the Rousseau's romantic sense. Neither is it a matter of inferring proofs of God's existence from nature, as Aquinas did. Instead it is a case of deepening human self-understanding through contact with nature and the natural sciences. There can be no true self-knowledge without knowledge of nature.

The term 'secular spirituality' fulfils such a bridging function, indicating the mutual influencing between the technoscientific and spiritual spheres. "Naturalistic belief-systems, however well grounded in science, simply cannot compete with super-naturalist religion when it comes to the provision of credible compensators for such rewards. Hence the failure of belief-systems such as scientific humanism and Marxism-Leninism to appeal to more than a few intellectuals" (Aldridge 2000:96).

At the level of natural theology secular spirituality serves as a bridge between faith and reason, nature and grace, science and theology, nature and supernature. Its hallmark is humility – the humility of informed ignorance (*docta ignorantia*), of the limitation of human power and the relativisation of religious absolutes. It is the link between God's kenosis (self-emptying) and human kenosis. It is human beings' emulation, as images of God, of his voluntary self-limitation. Just as God submits himself to the laws he laid down, so humans curb isolating, alienating rational and religious absolutes. One characteristic of the kenosis of a king who becomes a servant is *koinonia* – fellowship[17] with sufferers. Kenosis of religion leads to interaction with science and kenosis of science to interaction with every dimension of humanness. That is postmodern holism, which brings us one step closer to human integrity.

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17 In this regard Griffin (1988:15) writes: "… the modern desire to master and possess is replaced in postmodern spirituality with a joy in communion and a desire for letting-be."

Chapter 10

BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND UTOPIA

Introduction

The idea of ideology is turned into an absolute. It is based on a representation of reality and professes to be the sole and ultimate one. It may focus on a particular facet of reality like race (Nazism, apartheid), economics (communism, Marxism, capitalism, economic globalism), state forms (statism, democracy, aristocracy, fascism), nature (catastrophism, creationism), science (scientism, futurism, empiricism), truth (literalism, fundamentalism, foundationalism, essentialism), gender (feminism, sexism, chauvinism).

Although the grand ideologies of the 18th to 20th centuries no longer feature, ideology is alive and well, albeit well camouflaged. Examples here are technology, economics and advertising.

Ideologies usually manifest as solutions to problems. In part they fall back on accepted traditions, truths and customs, which are reformulated and presented as final solutions. In the final analysis it benefits only a selected handful (race, gender, country, corporate or interest group). Paradoxically multiplicity, diversity and complexity can also be ideologised insofar as they privilege certain people.

Impossibility of a simple approach

Any reflection on ideology should not be just another interpretation of the world, but should seek to change the world by explicating past interpretations.

Venturing into the labyrinth of ideologies is a presumptuous enterprise. This rose not only has a thousand names: it has many shapes, which, moreover, keep changing. From a blinkered point of view one may well characterise traditional communism, capitalism, nationalism, socialism, humanism, liberalism, colonialism, apartheid and the like as

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protagonists in the saga of ideologies; to an 'unblinkered' eye, on the other hand, everything is ideological. The notion that everything is ideological is bound to be unpopular, since it means that the battle cannot be fought without some sort of apology for one's own ideology. Neither is it wise to understand the opposition's ideology too well, since that would suggest that it is somehow excusable and such tolerance may well inhibit full commitment to the struggle.

Yet it is the very intensity of the struggle, the suffering and supplications of human beings that demand a considered hermeneutics of ideology. Hence this enterprise should not be regarded as a theoretical escape from the realities of injustice and ideological violence, but rather as a solid motivation for the never ending battle against all alienation and suppression brought about by ideologising human beings and their world. No ideology is innocent and every 'truth claim' has its hidden power strategies. Christianity is not exempted from this charge.

The entire social, political literary and theological world could be viewed as an ideological text. That does not mean that interpretation is confined to the structure of the text, rhetorical techniques, style and the like. One has to write a meta-text about that text, recognising the tradition in which it functions, its reliance on other texts, the strategies operating in it and its anthropological basis. The design of such a meta-text hinges on subversive rejection of ostensible, self-evident truth. One way of fulfilling this critical function is by looking at the impact of utopia on ideology. Imaginative and productive application of utopia as an ideologically critical principle breaks down its solipsistic operation. Hence according to Ricoeur (1975b) the interdependence of utopia and ideology, being the poles between which growth and change are possible, must be maintained. Understanding the operation of ideologies does not ensure their elimination, but it helps to make them healthily transparent.

One can speak about ideologies at different levels. The first is that of classical ideologies, which have long been philosophically, literarily and ideologically (!) objectified. They are the décor for the stage on which ordinary discourse on ideology takes place. They also

camouflage our contemporary ideologies that have not yet gone through the aging process of textual recording and objectification.

At the second level – that of rationalisation – one could examine the current operation of ideologies, either unarticulated or articulated but hidden, as they function in power strategies to provide ideological grounds for adopting a particular point of view. Examples include everyday conversations and writings on religious, social, political and ethical issues. At the third level – that of symbols – one looks at how symbols provide a medium in which ideologies function. The problem of ideologies can also be tackled in a post-structuralist framework, which would include critical scrutiny of their nature and operation. In such a framework one would have to deconstruct rather than construct. Such deconstruction of self-evident truths could enable us to view existing truths differently. A post-structuralist approach would strive to operate anti-ideologically as far as possible – proceeding not with a sledge hammer but with an eraser, so one can rewrite and possibly obliterate this palimpsest in its turn. It acknowledges that we cannot live without shaping ideologies, which means that we continually go beyond our own ideologies.

If every point of view, epistemology, social paradigm or ethical theory, every economic model or religious approach is seen as a power base for imperialistically elevating one's own truth to a norm or premise, can one still be credible without keeping silent altogether? And such a positional silence – for no silence is not positional – would amount to tacit endorsement of some kind of status quo.

In a postmodern framework the post-structuralist approach looks like perennial scepticism that precludes any meaningful point of view. Such a never-ending nomadic existence makes it difficult to commit oneself to a particular place, cause, truth or whatever. Yet its merit lies, not in elevating that approach to a method, but in accepting that it is a mindset that accompanies all reflection. Thus ideologies are seen as semiotic systems that require interpretation. The signs that convey ideologies are not only linguistic. They are also physical signs and symbols, social, cultural and religious or cultic signs.

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Different interpretive models

Ideology as distortion (misrepresentation) of reality (Marx, Althusser, Mannheim)

Ideology concerns the sacred cow of representation. It purports to offer the best explanation (representation) of reality, and on that basis it dictates lifestyles, modes of thinking and ownership, and social systems.

Here we are dealing with the age-old strategy of deception. As in all ideologies, we are dealing with lies, or 'selective truth' if you will (for their adherents take them to be true), which benefits a particular powerful minority. The ideology is usually that of the powers that be, who fabricate a version of reality that enables them to stay in power. This leaves the powerless with no ideology at all. They do not need an interpretive model to protect themselves, for there is nothing to protect. Orwell painted a frightening picture of such deception of people by means of television and total supervision. Misleading people amounts to controlling their minds, feeding them misinterpretations of reality that they believe because it is the only interpretation they have.

> We control matter because we control mind. Reality is inside the skull ... The fallacy was obvious. It presupposed that somewhere or other, outside oneself, there was a 'real' world where 'real' things happened. But how could there be such a world? What knowledge have we of anything, save through our own minds? All happenings are in the mind. Whatever happens in all minds truly happens (Orwell 1949: 228, 240).[1]

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1 Human behaviour is not readily controllable, being governed by an unmanageable number of cultures, worldviews and value systems. Politicians cannot lead the way, since they are elected on the strength of promises of job creation and economic growth. Sociology as a science merely describes and points out trends without prescribing. Religious precepts are largely confined to the moral domain. Globally the need for control is escalating because the human family shares a common fate. The most effective control is exercised at the level of economic globalisation and giant corporations, where money directs behaviour to some extent. The establishment of a world court and a culture of international human rights and

People obviously take the worlds they live in to be true. The question is, who and what are involved in creating and changing these 'mental' worlds? What is the norm for representing this world correctly?

Calling something a misrepresentation implies that the right representation is known. Thus every time an ideology is exposed it is implied that the exposure gives us access to truth. That, of course, is not the case. Nor do we need to know any ultimate truths to realise that injustice exists. On the whole society operates on the principle of comparison. When we measure our circumstances against those of other people, we soon arrive at a socio-relational criterion. Thus the poor in South Africa do not compare themselves with the poor in, say, Ethiopia but with the rich in South Africa. Unfortunately such measurements are usually confined to one side only, because the rich and the powerful are largely indifferent to the plight of the poor.

Normally ideologies are used negatively, since it is a matter of creating a false consciousness of reality. They are able to do so because they deal in sweeping statements and their claims are hard to verify. The problem with all macro explanations or systems is that they function reductively. Their assertions may be ever so fine sounding, but usually they present only a fraction of reality as a whole. Hence their falsehood lies in their reductionism.

Ideologies as legitimations of reality (Weber, Habermas)

One of the main functions of an ideology is to legitimise its viewpoints and actions. As a rule only the nice side is propagated; its

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the drive to institute uniform constitutional democracies and an international protocol for environmental control are all attempts at global behavioural control. With a few exceptions their success is limited to a handful of First World countries. Poverty, terrorism, disease and underdevelopment appear to be invincible. There have been attempts, like that of Hans Küng, to develop a code of international ethics. Since it is based on values and religion the prospects are not very bright, given the history of the ecumenical movement. There have also been attempts to identify common denominators of humanness, to which end disciplines like anthropology, sociology and Christian ethics are invoked (Rüsen 2006:265-276). The idea is that such denominators should form the basis of a global ethics.

distortions and biases are kept hidden. On the one hand most power institutions and their interests are already judicially, religiously and ideologically established, and therefore 'legitimate'. On the other hand they claim ever greater legitimacy (power) to further entrench their interests. Thus rulers use the mandate they were given (which may have been obtained democratically) as a springboard to broaden that mandate, beyond the powers already allocated to them, for the sake of personal or group interests.

The arguments (rationale) these rulers have to invoke are often inadequate to explain all their actions. The gap between the authorisation granted to rulers to deal with certain matters and the additional matters they take over is called surplus power (by analogy with Marx's term 'surplus capital', being what capitalists take from workers). This gap between power granted and power arrogated has to be filled ideologically. Likewise ideologists claim greater legitimacy than they are entitled to. An example was the way the South African Defence Force launched cross-border attacks and destabilised neighbouring countries under the apartheid regime. Their enfranchised constituency gave them no such mandate and these operations were regarded as self-evident execution of the army's mandate to defend the country. Those who questioned such actions (including the outside world) were given an explanation that relied on certain ethical premises in line with the overall ideology of apartheid.

A more recent example is Bush's alleged reasons for invading Iraq. They varied from liberating its people from Hussein's tyranny, the emancipation of women and minority groups, and the establishment of democracy. Thus rulers and ideologists are constantly compelled to rationalise their actions. As a rule they explain them as the results of unforeseen circumstances that arose, or as being in keeping with the powers granted to them (cf Ricoeur 1986: 181-215).

It is impossible to speak neutrally about ideologies. Anyone looking for a value-free approach will find nothing. Those who have no goals or projects can't describe anything and cannot invoke any science (Ricoeur 1986:312). So can people be blamed for their ideologies?

The constant rationalisation demanded from embattled ideologies makes ideological reality a dynamic, continually self-adjusting affair. Such a model does not permit stagnant structures and relations that have sole control of reality as a whole. In this regard Habermas makes the point, counter to Marx's contention, that there are not just forces of production (stagnant entities) but also production relations. The latter leave scope for constant input from human and variable factors. As a rule these relations are determined by established social systems, in which symbols that nations use for self-interpretation are operative. The functioning of power and ideologies can only be understood on the basis of such a symbolic structure and tradition. Hence even an ideologically determined society should be viewed relationally rather than ontologically. "We can no longer say that people first have a praxis and then have some ideas about this praxis, which is their ideology" (Ricoeur 1986: 223). Praxis itself is ideology.

Utopia as continual imaginative surpassing of existing reality

To understand the nature and operation of ideologies one has to examine the functioning of utopias. Ricoeur correlates ideology with utopia and views it at the level of both social and cultural imagination. Imagination can serve to defend an existing order, but it can also be used to break free from it. Ideologies, which replicate reality by legitimising the existing order, are distorted images of that reality, whereas utopia is the fictional power to reinterpret it (Ricoeur 1986: 309-310). Often the power of utopia is not recognised; it is down-graded to a mere literary genre with the accent on fiction and portrayal. Whereas ideologies usually operate by way of social critique, utopias are mainly a literary phenomenon and remain confined to the history of a particular utopia. Hence ideologies usually take precedence over utopia, which is endorsed by emerging groups from different social strata. Ideologies look to the past, whereas utopias are future-oriented and apparently incapable of changing the present in any way.

Utopia is a vista from 'nowhere' which refuses to take the existing order for granted. Hence the connection between utopia and hope is self-evident. One of the best ways to oppose a prevailing ideology is

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to present a utopia. It is a struggle between metaphors: one metaphor (ideology) is replaced by another (utopia) (Ricoeur 1986: xxix). This subversive operation of utopia, its capacity for the possible and search for something different, belongs to and functions at the same symbolic level as ideology. Utopia concerns a particular mentality which is comprehensive and, like ideology, involves all spheres of life.

In addition utopia looks for an alternative power system and is therefore no less dependent on power, power claims and domination than ideology (Ricoeur 1975: 23). "I have always been amazed by the fact that power does not have much of a history; it is very repetitious. One power imitates another... Power repeats power" (Ricoeur 1986: 298). The popular argument against change is that every tyrant is succeeded by another. But one tyrant is not necessarily the same as another. That is why some people prefer their 'own' tyrant to that of the opposition, and the oppressed group is sure that their 'own' tyrant will rule them better than the ruling one.

Utopia breaks free from power by replacing it. But it dreams of a better kind of power and we cannot deny that power may be experienced positively. The problem lies in the architect and wielder of power, not in power as such. No society is feasible without some degree of power. The problem lies in how it is applied. Although utopia is an imaginative variation on the power theme, its only options are either to deny all power or come up with a new system. The dream seeks to become a reality and is itself a power system.

Hence it is not true that all utopias seek to escape to an island. Saint-Simon in fact envisaged the world as the domain of utopia (Ricoeur 1986: 288-292). The essential quality of utopia is that it teaches us to look differently, to bracket the existing order and experience the alternative imaginatively. Utopia teaches us to realise the contingence of all systems and orders, and that they can be transcended (Ricoeur 1986: 300).

Various kinds of utopia have emerged in the course of history. One is Münster's chiliastically oriented utopia with its accent on the now. The humanistic utopia regards ideas, intellect, knowledge and

education as the only true power that gives access to a happy future. It is idealistic and its future orientation is evolutionistic and anti-anarchism. Postmodern people have come to realise that science will not save us. A third variety is the conservative utopia. Although it is actually anti-utopian, it becomes a utopia in its own right in its struggle against other utopias. It puts the accent on the *Volksgeist*, community, nation or state and its primary concern is to preserve the status quo (cf Hegel's influence). Conservative ideology emphasises patience: change takes time. The past is important to help us understand present developments and because it determines our development towards the future. The only problem is that the past is easily confused with the one and only truth and acquires the status of a divinely willed sort of reality. A fourth type is the socialist/communist utopia. It has features of all three of the aforementioned varieties. In this kind of utopia the future is already being prepared in the present, although it offers more than the present (cf Mannheim 1979: 173-236). The practice of this model has to a large extent rendered it implausible.

Our aim is not to elevate a particular type of utopia to a salvific model, but to see utopia as such as an approach in an imaginative search for alternatives. According to Mannheim the West has to a large extent lost its utopias, which makes it impossible to escape from its ideological impasse (Ricoeur 1986: 282-3). One could say the same about the inability to escape from the Hobbesian political model.

Utopia is a metaphor that sets ideologists thinking anew and inspires change. In this regard Fourier explained utopia in terms of the concept of pleasure or passion. He wanted to make the society of his day rediscover the truth that attraction and the power to attract are the secret of human life. The motivation for attraction is passion, the need for novelty and variety. Society represses all passion, hence any will to effect new combinations and change (cf Marcuse's Eros and culture). The future is not so much a matter of discovering new things but of remembering what we have lost.

Symbolic nature of ideologies: symbols as a gateway to an ideologically integrated worldview

Marx saw ideologies as reflections of existential processes. Thus ideology expresses or translates reality in terms of ideas. But can reality be translated adequately in terms of language alone?

Ricoeur regards symbols as vehicles of ideology par excellence. Human behaviour is symbolically structured and this structure is also the key to understanding ideologies (Ricoeur 1986:xiii). Both ideology and utopia concern human behaviour, which is mediated, structured and integrated by means of symbolic systems (Ricoeur 1975:21). Just as metaphor underlies language, so symbols underlie all human behaviour. Symbols in fact make human life socially meaningful (Ricoeur 1986:xxiv). At the symbolic level communication is particularly direct. Symbolic communicative acts express group values and are thus the key to understanding those values.

Analysis of societal symbols is a semiotic approach, in which symbols and signs give us access to group motivation (Ricoeur 1986:255). Actions are no less symbolic than language. Their symbolic meaning is the hermeneutic gateway to understanding them. It is easy to say that ideology represents and expresses interests, but how is that done? We can only know that if we know how symbols symbolise and convey meaning. In our thinking symbols are constructed and embedded. Once established in this way, symbols have broad application and are used as a model for social and psychological systems. In our thinking models are continually measured against other models, they influence each other and are reconciled to form a unitary system at macro level (cf e.g. Ricoeur 1986:257).

Ideology is particularly useful to integrate and harmonise various symbols that could function at different levels of society. When a society has a shared ideology it ensures the coherence of symbols functioning in disparate areas like education, religion and the economy. Such a system of shared, integrated images, ideas and ideals offers the adherents of that ideology an oversimplified, systematised

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orientation. Hence there is no social action that is not symbolically mediated beforehand. Marx's view that ideology functions only at the level of superstructure is no longer tenable. It is integrated with reality as a whole.

The fact that we are dealing with ideologically tinctured symbols that permeate our society as a whole does not mean that the struggle to legitimise power continues and information is still consciously distorted. The advantage of using symbols for ideological purposes is that they are polysemic. All sorts of issues, emotions, sentiments and the like can be vested and operative in one and the same symbol. Thus people may be opposed to a particular ideology, yet defenceless against its rhetorical power because it deals in symbols like 'love', 'justice', 'law and order', 'terrorism' and the like. On the face of it no one can object to these concepts. Yet in practice they can serve to legitimise actions that are not innocuous, but are unacceptable connotations and biased oversimplifications of certain realities.

This is where the church comes under the spotlight as a creator, vehicle and protector of societal symbols. The church is ostensibly politically neutral and Christian in its orientation. Nonetheless it often establishes symbols that are politically and economically harnessed to protect and promote power interests, structures and strategies.

This defencelessness against social symbols is often a result of shared ethical systems. White and black South Africans largely share the same ethical frame of reference, which has a strong Christian orientation. The problem is that people stare themselves blind at the signifier (word/sign/symbol) without probing its actual meaning.

The advantage of a symbol or linguistic sign is that it can have several meanings. Everyone believes in justice, but it does not mean the same thing to all people. Thus the same symbol can evoke a wide range of emotions and actions; conversely, a symbol does not evoke a clearly circumscribed meaning but an emotion – a sense (intuition) of justice, fair play, et cetera. Naturally symbols also appeal to ethnic sentiments, specific needs, economic and other interests, group fears and so on (cf. Gross 1985:58-70; Prinsloo 1981:127f). Symbol-laden ideologies are

analogous to myths in creating a picture of the world with which their adherents can identify – a picture, moreover, that holds a lot of promise for those who believe it.

An epistemologically oriented critique of ideology

Van Alpen applies a semiotically oriented critique of ideology cast in the mould of an analytical approach, hence relying mainly on empirical data that are described objectively and measured according to positivist rational norms. He also uses semiotic terminology (cf Van Alpen 1986:233-251). In the descriptive phase the aim is to describe ideologies as 'neutrally' as possible. The research field is human society with all its ideas, concepts, motives, values, rituals, artworks, et cetera. This inevitably raises the question of what norm to use for such a neutral description, especially since different paradigms give rise to different attitudes towards ideologies. Van Alpen's norm is whether the ideologies are used positively or negatively. Positive ideologies correspond to Ricoeur's use of utopia as imaginative ideals that influence groups positively. Negative ideologies assume that people have misconceptions about themselves, their interests, needs and the world. Interests are established by 'false' knowledge and need to be judged empirically. This entails evaluating false consciousness in terms of its factual accuracy, cognitive content, scientific rationality and meaningfulness. Positive science clearly is an ideology in its own right – according to this model a positive one. A particular group's interests are consistently judged according to their salutary effect on humankind as a whole. This approach resembles a social disposition and is comparable to the Kantian ethical criterion of the greatest good for the largest number of people.

Thus all social symbols, codes, myths, cults, values and the like are measured according to this model. Even solidly grounded ideologies (i.e. ones that comply with critical rationalistic requirements) are judged negatively if they are no longer meaningful and have become obsolete or outdated.

Van Alpen is mindful of the dangers of an overly narrow epistemological critique of ideology and criticises Adorno and the

Frankfurter Schule, whose attitude in this regard is predominantly negative. The obvious objection to this approach is that the lack of universally accepted norms offers new loopholes for particular power interests. Van Alpen personally judges concepts in terms of their perniciousness or otherwise.

This problem is analogous to the ethical problem of fixed norms in ethical judgments. There are various options: a casuistic approach that proceeds strictly according to accepted norms (rigid ideologies); situational ethics, in which individuals themselves apply broad norms to contingent situations (fixed norm plus personal discretion); and a relational, emotive, intuitive existentialist approach in which personal judgment, feeling or intuition is primary.

Something of the helplessness that characterises all ethical theories overcomes one when one starts looking for fixed evaluative norms. Human beings are evidently too complex to be schematised. The solution to a problematic situation may appear simple when one is looking for broad norms for large numbers of people, and most power institutions lay down 'good' norms of this kind. Yet they do not prevent injustice, exploitation, ideologising and deception.

The value of an epistemological critique of ideology is that it takes optimal account of such norms as logical consistency, rationality and verifiability, with due regard to its own limitations. Such an approach, as Hegel puts it, stands the world on its head (i.e. bases the world on the idea, for everything now functions according to the guidelines of ideas/rationality). Marx, on the other hand, wanted to stand the world on its feet, in the sense that he wanted to put his model into practice, whether it was one-sided or not.

The moment one starts looking for an alternative to the present order utopias and ideas compete, each presenting itself as the best solution. The final word will never be spoken. Ricoeur, with reference to Saint-Simon's notion of utopia, rightly points out that our utopias can overthrow a government and replace it with a 'rational' government constituted by experts (artists, scientists) – hence a government ruling according to the finest rational models. That will instate a new tyranny

by 'those who know best'. There will always be people who do not agree that a particular model is the best one. Hence ultimately all solutions (utopias) operate between two alternatives: to be ruled by a 'good' government or to have no government at all (Ricoeur 1986:198-199).

Thus a narrow, rationalistic approach with the accent on dialogue, truth and scientific rigour has certain limitations. It has to take the emotional factor into account (Fourier), as well as symbols and myths that can neither be negated nor simply ignored. That is why Habermas's insistence on both epistemological and anthropological categories is meaningful (Ricoeur 1986:218-9).

A semiotic approach to ideologies with the accent on ongoing discourse.

Developing a cultural semiotics

Ideologies are about power. Barthes pointed out the modern naivety of regarding power as just one thing or entity. Power is all pervasive and can be observed everywhere in society: in fashions, public opinion, entertainment, sport, the news, the home, personal relations. The struggle against powers (plural) brings us up against language as a vehicle of power. All language is classification and all classification is oppressive (Barthes 1983:457-478). But there is no way out of language, hence language – which is articulated only in texts – can only be combated in texts. It is in texts as documents that knowledge must incessantly reflect on itself, not just epistemologically but also dramatically.

We are condemned to a continual game of signs – signs that usually do not refer to their ostensible points of reference. Hence we are condemned to a process of ongoing re-signification. The very word 'ideology' confronts us with both word and idea, and the two are continually at loggerheads. Ideology itself is not a fixed body of knowledge but a process of signification (Klopper 1987:122). Althusser indicated that ideologies are not just ideas in people's heads but grow and change. They are about a signification relation entered

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into between subject and world. Thus they are not apt descriptions or realistic portrayals of reality but an imaginative, created world inhabited by people. Just as language is a system in which meaning is imparted through difference (*différence*), thus the world of ideas imparts meaning by continually shifting the links in the chain of signification.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural approach to culture is well known. He was trying to trace the unconscious structures that influence cultural patterns. As in linguistics, cultural structures are arranged in binary oppositions, resulting in a network of systems that classify the data encountered in a society. Just as words convey negative meaning and become meaningful because of their very difference (*différence*) from other words, so everything in society is structured relationally and meaning in the social and other spheres is shaped and given substance by showing how a phenomenon differs from other systems, customs, morals, cults, symbols, et cetera. Thus an ideology lives by virtue of its difference from other ideologies. If there were no other ideologies, there would be no rationale for one's own.

Many cultural systems can be explained in terms of the basic need to handle the binary oppositions found in a society (cf nature-culture, male-female, black-white, rich-poor, etc). These structures are reflected in such things as a culture's myths, rituals, metaphors and classificatory systems. Although we can learn a lot from this approach and it can accommodate many social phenomena, it is open to criticism and strongly influenced by a Cartesian view of structuring reason as the sole creator of culture (cf Schreiter 1985:48-19).

Schreiter traces the contours of a cultural semiotics. It is heavily dependent on structuralism but tries to remedy its weaknesses. Society is itself a text and the text we study is the whole of society in all its manifestations, in which cultural and other sign systems are established hierarchically (Schreiter 1985:39-74). Like other texts, its identity is determined by a long line of differentiated signs and sign systems, which in their turn refer to other signs and sign systems. The position that subjects adopt in this textual society determines their particular ideological premises and viewpoints. The communication

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horizon in which subjects live is full of different signs and symbols, which convey many things, including their ideological views – signs to which a subject refers almost uncritically.

Ideology and discourse

Following Frow, we prefer an approach in which ideology is not dependent on truth or error, or on a division of the world into two parts, one of which is invariably more true than the other. Ideology is a state of provisional discourse, not an entity or an inherent structure. There is also a close resemblance between ideology and the rhetoric functioning at the political, religious and other levels of a society. And ideology is not the only place where we encounter distortion of communication. Closer to the truth is the finding that certain rhetorical strategies with all their concomitant features underlie all communication.

A good example is the world of journalism. Journalists have relatively few symbols, with which they have to describe the whole of reality. Hence they fall back on a few 'master symbols' that have become an unquestioned part of societal jargon. They form part of society's collective unconscious and are expressed in these generalised, stereotyped symbols. As a result the particular makes way for the general and people's individual behaviour is described in generalised symbols (cf e.g. 'terrorism', 'law and order', 'sanctions', 'democracy', etc). Since all the information is crammed into the first paragraph of the item, there is no space to develop it argumentatively, so these data have to suffice as though they were facts. In addition only a sensational aspect of reality is presented as if it were the whole picture (cf De Wet 1984:10-44).

Propaganda must be viewed in the same way. The very existence of a term like 'propaganda' lulls the reader. Propaganda is a separate genre that does not form part of 'normal' discourse. It is something you will spot if you look closely enough. Hence the propagandistic character of all news and reports is not suspected. News is considered factual, not propagandistic. What is overlooked is that 'objective' reporting is couched in symbols that are themselves ideologically loaded.

We shall always be reliant on discourse. Ideology readily becomes a communication cancer if the systematic distortion of the communication process is not appreciated and combated (cf Ricoeur 1986:228). It remains a battle of words. Since at this level the words, symbols and metaphors are continually changing (cf Lacan), it will be marked by constant interpretation. Here the analogy at the psychological level, where distorted dreams are reconstructed, is illuminating. Just as the subject is protected by the constant distortion of dreams, so ideologies distort themselves so as not to be recognised for what they represent (Ricoeur 1986:241f). In this context Habermas devised a strategy for comparing psychoanalysis and ideological critique. The distortion between classes and groups is also linked to their language and symbols and at this level, too, the gap has to be closed (Ricoeur 1986:244f).

In the same context Zima introduced the term 'sociolect' (cf dialect), referring to the language of a specific social group. It contains buzz words and sayings that distinguish the group from other groups. These words are systematically arranged in a code, being a system of semantic differences and oppositions. In each historical context there is a socio-linguistic situation, in which sociolects interact. This is recorded in texts. Some buzz words from the sociolects of the new South African intelligentsia are 'employment equity', 'empowerment' and 'previously disadvantaged' (cf Kummer 1985:89-130, 111-112).

Conclusion

South Africa today is still in a period of ideological transition. As long as old ideologies are merely changed cosmetically and are not given new symbolic content, there can be no renewal. Many are asking to what extent the term 'new South Africa' is not just another distortion. The question is whether we can ever be free from the log jam of ideology and counter ideology, of impermissible utopias (censorship) and new interest symbols. This situation in fact calls for new, imaginative utopias, exposure of ideological rhetoric and power strategies, radical reinterpretation of realities and possibilities. That implies looking for and implementing new approaches. But that is

only possible as long as we see people not merely as a given (a species), but as not given, as not fixed, as a task (cf Ricoeur 1986:253).

The quest for an approach indicates that no single strategy is satisfactory, so we cannot simply rely on one or more strategies but need to adopt a particular attitude. That attitude will have to be open and must take into account the complexities of our world and our humanity without making it an excuse for experimental change. Such an attitude would acknowledge that we cannot escape our ideologies, but that openness to utopia – and not only to utopian elements in our own ideologies – can liberate us to a new vision of our world. It can at least cure us of our ideological blindness, even if it cannot always rid us of our inability to change ourselves (cf Ricoeur 1986:313). Understanding what it is that determines us at least opens up the circle to become a spiral. Such insight into what determines us is not simply relativistic – at most it is relative relativism. If we know that there are no eternal systems, that power can pop up anywhere in all its enslaving and misleading forms, that alternatives can be liberating and that new symbols generate new experience, then at least we are getting somewhere. It is a paradox: living a nomadic life in the city, crossing out our limitations and falling back on them, reaching out to the future with paradigms from the past – a diaphoric double vision of dream and reality, of sameness and difference.

In this chapter we noted the techniques used to establish ideologies. The way they are represented disguises the underlying power strategies – but does that not apply to every form of power, its use and abuse? The question is how power is represented if it is always hidden. If utopia can undermine ideological strategies, what can curb the strategies of power abuse? Weakness? Power sharing? Religious power is particularly difficult to identify and criticise, but we attempt this in the next chapter.

Chapter 11

BLESSED ARE THE POWERFUL

Introduction: why the theme?

At the time when negotiators were thrashing out a democratic dispensation for all South Africans there was a great deal of talk about power. Power shifts, loss of power, power sharing, seizing of power, et cetera were part of everyday conversation. The transition from a power-based to a constitutionally based state also brought a change in our perception of power. The new bill of human rights, the first in this country, means that all people are equal, at least judicially. They can claim the same rights and hence the same power.

That was nearly fifteen years ago, but the issue remains alive. This paper is a rethink of the importance of power as a positive entity; the intricacies involved in identifying, evaluating and distributing power; the possibility of effectively empowering people; the negative evaluation yet simultaneous misuse of power by the church and theology; the Bible and power; and the possibility of a sound hermeneutics of power.

Multidimensionality of power

Power is a positive precondition for life

Power is given with every form of life, however rudimentary. It does not simply reside in a single person, dominant idea or model, but is present and active in different guises in all spheres of life. It is integrally part of us, like our language. We are determined by power and we use power, although we may not be aware of the strategies we adopt and the ways in which power influences interactions and decision making.

One could define power in various ways without really coming to grips with the concept. Defining power may itself be seen as a power

strategy. Power is all pervasive and multidimensional. It may be experienced positively as love, the good, security, enabling power, protective authority and the like. But it may also be experienced negatively as oppression, manipulation, degradation, exploitation and want. Power is seen as neutral, neither good nor bad. Its definition hinges on human action and interaction, on human relationships. It is such a broad term that it cannot be finally pinned down. The word actually functions as a multivalent metaphor which acquires 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 with the issue of power (Mörchen 1980:28). The more powerful a life process, the more it can absorb or overcome non-being. Thus the 'power to be' or power of 'being' can be contrasted with 'non-being' (see Balcomb 1993:171).

Power is everywhere and manifests itself in different ways

Power can be identified and indicated but never limited to any specific manifestation, because it has so many forms. Its identity is open and changes continuously. It is vested in interest groups, persons, institutions, owners of means of production, people of a certain class, sex or race. Thus it radically affects culture: language, literature, the interpretation of sacred texts, the substance of religious doctrines, national customs, regional superstitions, academic theologies and political ideologies. Its multidimensionality makes it difficult always to recognise its more subtle manifestations and workings, especially where it is misused.

No one can escape the influence of power. Its exercise determines the belief system that underpins the intelligibility and legitimacy of a social order at any given time, and it continues to do so until the prevailing power is challenged by other powers. This makes recognition of power misuse vitally important.

Misuse of power through disguise

We are seldom confronted with flagrant, naked power. Usually it is intentionally or unintentionally camouflaged. It assumes different guises: in reverse form as manipulative impotence; in overpowering ways as enforced truth and provable facts; sentimentally as tradition; intimidating as superstition; et cetera. For those in authority it is important to keep their power hidden as far as possible. What is hidden is not criticised or desired by opponents aspiring to or challenging that same power.

As a rule hidden power is surplus power. Surplus power means laying claim to privileges and advantages to which you are not entitled, but which are claimed in the name of the common good or as part of your mandate. Thus we find parents abusing their children in the name of good discipline**,** defence services violating human rights and keeping important information from us for the sake of 'our safety', educationists taking decisions on curricula on the basis of biased ideological premises, medical doctors ruling out alternative types of medicine because they do not accord with their worldview, ministers deciding on the lifestyle and ethics fit for church members in the name of an ultimate authority, and so on.

Openly displayed power is not necessarily a threat. It is meant either to frighten off opponents or give security to supporters (cf military parades). An open display of power is frequently the visible symbol of an underlying ideology. But it is hidden, unarticulated power which subtly undermines. This hidden, surplus power is not recognised by the persons subjected to it and it gives those in authority a covert advantage. There is normally no organised force to counter an unnoticed escalation of power.

Critique of power abuse

Depending on their social and cultural environment, people may be more or less inclined to criticise power. Christians are commonly taught to submit to the powers that have been set over them. Those in authority (government, parents, educators, ministers, priests, etc) are

often identified with God. The Christian view of the state as divinely instituted implies that we are governed according to God's will. The power of the state is experienced as operative and present everywhere, which strengthens the perception of its divine nature. The government/state is experienced as a mystical entity which cannot be challenged. As a result consistent power critique is sadly lacking.

When power critique does occur it is often vacuous, idle talk. We tend, for instance, to concentrate on a handful of scapegoats, who function as an exculpation for the many other persons or groups that are misusing power. If everyone is condemning the scapegoat, there is no risk attached to jumping on the bandwagon. And eventually public power criticism becomes fashionable, harmless whinging, in which everyone indulges without any tangible results. In this way manipulative power strategies in, for example, education, defence and religion go unnoticed, since no one dares scrutinise these domains for power misuse. Over against this fashionable societal critique stand the prophets, who seemingly do not abide by the rules and who raise unpopular, uncomfortable questions. They are the ones who unmask beguiling symbols and misleading rhetoric. They ostensibly speak ahead of time and act out of turn, but are indispensable to counter the ever shifting operations of power.

Power for all: the possibility of power sharing

The best way to counter power misuse is to distribute power as evenly as possible. But that is easier said than done. Power is rarely quantitatively measurable, nor is it substantial like a cake that can be cut up and shared. Attaining perfectly balanced power relations is not only impossible; it may also be counterproductive, as power imbalances generate social dynamism. Perfect equilibrium of power would be a stalemate, where no consensus is ever possible and no decisions can be made. Perfect balance of power, ironically, implies 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, it must be possible to rock the boat, implying that power relations should never be totally unbalanced.

Power in itself is not evil. If it is true that too much power spoils character, then too little does the same. Promoting a fair distribution presupposes that there are people who want power and are able to use and incorporate it into their lives in a balanced manner. They must also be prepared to share it, to accept that another person may earn more power by working harder, and so on. Disregarding the possibility of attaining power for all or imagining that people are not interested in power would 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 and acquire as much power as possible for themselves.

Because power is experienced in interpersonal relationships, individuals' perceptions and power strategies remain important. Balance in this respect means that power is not a fixed entity which can be divided up 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. Equal power is prerequisite for credible relationships and personal interactions. People should be custodians of each other's power to ensure the continuance of healthy relationships. It is not easy to arrive at such an equilibrium. Rather, people strive to forge ahead in the race for power, to undermine each other's power and to use their superior power to benefit themselves.

Eliminate power and you eliminate life. We cannot proclaim freedom for all without genuinely trying to empower all. The proclamation of the long deferred charter of human rights must be followed by a programme enabling people to claim and experience those rights. The ideal is for all individuals to have maximum power in order to live their lives to the full. Promoting such general power sharing entails keeping power monopolies at bay and disseminating power over a broader spectrum.

A hermeneutics of power?

Is a trustworthy hermeneutics of power possible? Its function would be to highlight the power strategies functioning in institutions,

ideologies and lifestyles. To combat the misuse and promote awareness of the indirect influence of power we must foster a social hermeneutics of suspicion that unmasks the rhetoric of normality and probes beneath the surface to expose the true forces at work in the world (see Abraham 1990:20). That, of course, is not easy. We are usually unaware of all the forces at work in society and personal interaction. We have grown accustomed to social power structures and institutions, their claims and manoeuvres, without questioning them. Accumulating power is even appraised positively. It is part of a capitalist mentality, which urges people to acquire as much power as possible in a free market ambience.

The aim of developing a hermeneutics of power is to enable everyone to read the societal text critically. Societal text criticism is imperative for a free society. A hermeneutics of power could show up imbalances in the power game and suggest possibilities for fruitful, stimulating use of power. To this end everyone must learn to strengthen their power and use it without disadvantaging others. One of the best ways in which such a hermeneutics of power operates is through narratives. Stories disclose the familiar world of power abuse, oppression, humiliation and degradation that so many people experience every day. They may also parade as history, indicating that reality may be more hideous than fiction.

Part of developing a hermeneutics of power is to pay 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 exclusively masculine when there is not sufficient reference to the female sex. The terminology used in a theological text can be condemned if it favours a specific theology, view or ideology (e.g. process theology, liberation theology, evolutionism, Marxism). Language is perceived as green (ecology), black (liberation theology), red (neo-Marxism), and so on. Good rhetoric demands careful selection of words so as to exert maximum influence. Apart from language, the context codetermining the terminology must be taken into account. Discourse can never be totally free and neutral. Those who dictate the terms of discourse dictate the lines it will follow. This goes for church talk as well as

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academic talk. A hermeneutics of power can show how our harmless rationalisations, our symbols and common sense arguments, our theologies and eschatologies are infested with power strategies, manipulation and even 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 the like 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 the powerless, while in practice nothing is done to alleviate their lot. All too often people need the example of others' powerlessness to comfort themselves for their own relative powerlessness. The powerlessness of blacks under apartheid gave many whites a feeling of self-esteem and command. In many instances power given to blacks in a new dispensation issued in corruption and unaccountability.

The bible and power: an example from wisdom literature

The Bible plays an important part in people's perception of power. Striving for power is often seen as sin. Power imbalances often go unquestioned, social circumstances where people are misused (e.g. migrant workers, women) are considered normal, and so on. The attainment of power is spiritualised and transposed to the eschatological realm. The Bible may wield power quite subtly, as in the case of proverbs which are held up as examples. By the same token one must scrutinise Christian morality to see whether it really sets believers free or whether it is purely self-interested.

Proverbs can be seen as a subtle form of social control. Jacobson (1990:75ff) mentions the following. Proverbs have a cognitive function and are based on experience. Experience is generally considered authoritative. It is seldom questioned, which is why proverbs don't invite argument but clinch it. 'Truths' based on experience cannot be dismissed or questioned. Part of the strategy of a proverb is to sound authoritative. But invoking what everyone knows to be true is merely

the presupposition for the effectiveness of the proverb. The real key to its functioning is the way it reframes the current situation in such a way that the hearer has no option but to heed it. The point of proverb usage is, through verbal adroitness, to manipulate people's behaviour or attitudes (Jacobson 1990:81). A proverb can be seen as a specific kind of admonition focusing on behaviour. It consists of a topic and a comment on it, typically in a binary construction. There is no scope for any alternative view of the situation. Proverbs are pleasing to the ear because of devices such as metre, rhyme, assonance, vivid phraseology and the like. Thus we are entertained and manipulated simultaneously. The place assigned to proverbs may differ from one community to the next, but all communities have proverbs and most people are influenced and manipulated by them to some extent.

The power of religion

The attraction of a religion depends on the power it promises. Christian religion is pre-eminently about power. It promises, criticises, misuses power. In the typical *corpus christianum* the influence of religion is omnipresent. Religious rhetoric uses guilt, fear, human uncertainty, gullibility and superstition, the wish to influence and manipulate God to win support for the church, its policies, politics and programmes. Christianity is imperialistic. 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. (Of course, this is not peculiar to Christianity – it is innate in other religions as well.)

Although religion can liberate people, it can also shackle them to the church, to norms which are never questioned, to social involvement with selfish interests in mind, to a stifling morality. Instil enough fear and you have your followers in the hollow of your hand; hint that you hold the key to success and they follow you; make the church the doorway to social acceptance and everyone flocks around. We all know the power of tradition to which everyone must bow. No matter whether a dogma is totally outdated and has lost all appeal, it must be kept alive in our midst. The statues of the past watch over the

viewpoints of the present and censor everything which does not replicate their tradition. Thus we are ruled from the theological grave.

If the 'final' truth which the church invokes doesn't make sense, there is always the option of Tertullian's *credo quia absurdum est* (I believe because it is ridiculous – that is to say, in the eyes of the world). To the world God's wisdom is folly, the cross is a scandal, the beatitudes nonsensical. So often the church and theology oversimplify matters for the sake of dogma, a unitary theory or their ethical tradition. All social cross-currents, all ethical friction, everything unresolved and indeterminate is interpreted in the light of some master narrative to protect the tradition and lifestyle to which the church is accustomed. Church talk tends to smooth over and harmonise all events with its binary thinking and static clichés. This is a power strategy. Things are interpreted so as to make sense – especially if they don't. We usually explain events in terms of natural causes if it is possible, understandable and suits us. As soon as they become difficult to interpret, or when our interpretation meets with resistance, we add power to our assertions by offering transcendental explanations. God's guiding hand is seen in all that happens, everything works out for our own good, et cetera.

The versatility of religious power is evident in the oscillation between immanence and transcendence, depending on where religion fits into the social power structure. The transcendent capacities of religion are the secret of its survival. When religion is subjected to mightier earthly powers, eschatological hope is heavily emphasised as the metaphor of liberation. When socio-political developments fit the view of a specific theology, they may be interpreted as the establishment of God's kingdom.

A power theology versus a theology of weakness?

(Western) theology has undergone fundamental power shifts. To some extent it has lost the power it once wielded. This includes not only the influence that theologians and church policy used to exert on the state and individual life but also developments within theology itself. The process is linked with the end of modernity, of the metaphysical era,

and the objections to fundamentalism and absolutes (cf Mörchen 1980:44-49). Present-day theology is more modest in its truth claims, absolutes are deconstructed, theologies and religion are seen as coordinated, and the emphasis is on a multiplicity of views, methods and styles. Theological ideas have become inescapably hermeneutic, while truth keeps calling for interpretation. Truth sacrifices its exclusiveness to multiplicity and no longer works with the old dichotomy of truth-falsehood (Groot 1988:693).

For many power theology has become *the* theology since World War II. Power forms the basis of liberation theology, which champions the powerless. The power issue is inherent in feminist theology, ecological movements, ethics and so forth. But 20th century theology is also a theology of weakness, which proves how similar the two extremes 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 actually empowered people in their different contexts.

The power of the weak frequently lies in the will to curb the powerful. The weak are also strong, and the strong weak. This is very evident in the Pauline weakness theory: 'when I am weak, then I am strong'. Paul's weakness theology is simply a power theology – only it defines power and weakness differently. Paul uses the term 'weakness' to support his theological argument. He changes negative terms (weakness, folly, servitude, etc) into positive ones. Thus weakness becomes one of the cardinal signs of apostleship, because Paul equates it with the suffering and weakness of Christ. He sees the greatest revelation of divine power in the weakness of Jesus Christ, particularly on the cross. God wants to reveal his power through human weakness. He chooses the weak to shame the strong and teach them that they, too, are weak. Through his crucifixion Christ showed that God's weakness is stronger than the power and might of human beings. That is the Pauline view.

Redistribution of power implies redistribution of truth, accepting that the same human needs can be articulated and met in different ways. Redistribution of power implies 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 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 projects will not really empower the powerless and that they must simply be seen as mechanisms used by the powerful to retain their power. According to him proponents of third way theology usually have a political and economic stake in a stable society and their interests are best served in a situation of maximum reform and minimum disruption of the socio-economic infrastructure. 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 as the antithesis of spirituality (Balcomb 1993:163). Real power is not human but that of Jesus. The third way paradigm sees conflict, violence, liberation and oppression as related, a contradiction of peace, reconciliation, forgiveness and repentance (Balcomb 1993:155, 159, 161). This 'innocence', displayed in a disavowal of power, is an unconscious psychological defence against the painful knowledge of one's own complicity in violence (Balcomb 1993:165). But is this third way approach unbiased? Balcomb doesn't think so, as these groups almost invariably end up supporting the status quo and its power structures. The fact that people are part of the system implicates them in the power and privileges that the system offers or withholds (Balcomb 1993:167).

Although Balcomb's critique of third way theology is commendable, there are some difficulties. He sees atonement and consensus, love and

an accommodative attitude as questionable in themselves. His critique could be interpreted as fostering a consistently anti-establishment stance, whatever the establishment is like. No government on earth can satisfy all opposing groups. Even democracy can be seen as a third way option, as minority groups can merely take the place of the poor and oppressed. This approach gives oppressed groups an advantage simply because they are oppressed. The question is, who determines the norms for decision making? Power struggles include differing values, traditions, norms and the like, and these cannot always be negated or accommodated. The same process that topples one power structure may be used to topple the next.

The fact is that no one is totally neutral or unbiased. Preferences must be admitted and discussed. However, we still do not have an oppression-free society. Many are still in dire need of the basic means to empower them simply to exist. Churches and interest groups must be challenged to fight for the rights of the individual and to empower all. Empowerment must not be postponed to the eschatological end-time. It must be extended to as many people as possible so as to permit a more human, tolerant and just society.

Conclusion

Power is part of our humanity, but history abounds in abuses of power. Harmonious interaction with our physical, social and natural environment remains a dream. Thus a hermeneutics of power is a constant must. In religion in particular power abuse is camouflaged. So when representing reality we have to allow for the workings of power in whatever form. We also have to spot the power strategies featuring as subtexts. In this context Ricoeur points the way.

Chapter 12

THEOLOGY AS POETIC REPRESENTATION OF GOD:
THE HERMENEUTICS OF PAUL RICOEUR

Paul Ricoeur considers hermeneutics to be an exposition of life. He evolves a textual anthropology, in which the question 'What does it mean to be a human being?' is answered in terms of the textual world. His view of texts is also his view of human beings.

Textual exposition or interpretation is not a process one completes or a developmental phase one outgrows. It is something we live with all the time. The perennial interpretive task implies that meaning constantly eludes us and the process of understanding is never concluded. Ultimately our existence remains hidden. This hiddenness keeps unveiling itself enigmatically every time we attempt to grasp the world as a text. Each attempt seeks to make sense of the paradox of existence.

Ongoing interpretation implies that a definitive hermeneutic method that ensures understanding is not feasible. The dream of developing a hermeneutic ontology cannot be realised. Besides, the existence of such an ontology would conflict with human nature, which depends on continual interpretation (cf Ricoeur 1974:23). Gaining access to (textual) meaning does not mean that everything has now been said about that text. Not only are we constantly discovering meaning, we are also continually covering it up. We rely on intelligible, directly accessible, open texts for the functioning of our everyday lives. But we are equally dependent on texts that conceal meaning; those are the texts that invite us to a relationship of give and take, of being wounded and experiencing wonderment and existential renewal, of word event giving birth to a word that reinterprets human existence. As a garment the text conceals, but it also reveals through the slits. That slit fascinates us and ties us to the text. What we see affirms our experience of life but also exceeds and intensifies it. Our enjoyment of a text depends on both concealment and disclosure of meaning. What

strikes and delights us most is the surprise element in exposition, when the interpretation exceeds our expectations.

Paul Ricoeur belongs to the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, which focuses on reflection and interpretation. Phenomenology, existentialism, linguistic theory, psychoanalysis, structuralism, deconstruction, textual theories, metaphor and narrative all feature prominently in his thinking. He harnesses imagination, dream, metaphor and narrative to make the process of understanding a creative one. He charts his own course, because in his view neither existentialism nor phenomenology adequately answers the hermeneutic question. In his *Freud and philosophy* (1970) he is impressed by the importance of language for the process of understanding. Ricoeur (1987:358) reminds in his *Freud and philosophy* "…I have affiliated myself with those analytic philosophers who resist the sort of reductionism according to which 'well-formed languages' are alone capable of evaluating the meaning claims and truth claims of all non-'logical' uses of language." Ricoeur would accentuate much more than just formal language analysis and stressed, instead of endless fragmentation, the functional unity among the multiple narrative modes and genres.

Language is the forum where the ideas of Wittgenstein and British philosophers of language, Heidegger and phenomenology, Bultmann and biblical hermeneutics converge, along with questions about myth, ritual, faith and psychoanalysis (Thiselton 1992:347).

In the hermeneutic world he attracted attention as a thinker who assigns a special place to religious reading and understanding of Scripture. He concentrates on the challenge of making the text speak across cultural distance and alienation. He writes not as a theologian but as a religious philosopher. He is critical of religion, which he sees as post-critical, rational and interpretive, in search of a second naiveté (Thiselton 1992:348). We live in an age of suspicion in which faith has lost its immediacy. Our religious innocence is irretrievably lost and through continual interpretation we try to find a second naiveté.

Post-critical religion means critically rediscovering religion rather than giving it up. The cultural alienation and disparity of meaning between text and reader have to be overcome. Faith and thought interact in the process of understanding. It would be wrong to approach a religious text as if one had no religious presuppositions. They influence our understanding of the text, just as the text influences our presuppositions. We must understand in order to believe, but we also need to believe in order to understand (Placer 1987:40).

In the process of understanding we should not confine ourselves superficially to texts alone. The text poses a hermeneutic problem that profoundly affects the reader's (or listener's) situation. One of the roots of the problem is the widely prevalent sense of meaninglessness in the world today. The problem of proclamation, for instance, cannot be resolved without allowing for such a phenomenon (Ricoeur 1973b:215).

Poetic nature of religious language and religious texts

Ricoeur sees discourse as an event occurring in time, which has a subject (speaker), refers to a particular world and speaks to a recipient (addressee). Thus it is a comprehensive event. For religious experience to be an encounter it has to be mediated by religious language that has the character of a happening. But what is religious language? Theological language is 'unconventional' and cannot be equated with everyday, factual language. It turns a religious event into a revelation characterised by awe, surrender and worship. Religious language permits access to God without forfeiting our awareness of his otherness. The distinctive feature of religious language is that – unlike, for example, descriptive scientific language – it is referential.

Ricoeur sees religious language as analogous to poetic language. Poetic texts provide a model in that they re-describe the world. Religious discourse is analogous to poetic discourse because its referent is not necessarily found in the world of observable objects but in the world of the text. The text exceeds reality without passing it by. Religious texts create a world of their own with a distinctive frame of reference. They re-describe the world by means of a distinctive textual

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arrangement. Their peculiar frame of reference is reinforced by their reference, which is in fact ineffable – the name of God (cf Ricoeur 1977a:26; Klemm 1983:112-3). It is not a referent that we have comfortably at our disposal, for in reality it is this divine referent that expounds and illuminates the reader's (or listener's) existence. Religious texts describe their own world through metaphoric processes peculiar to all poetic language.

Religious texts and religious language are analogous to metaphor, because they, too, orient by way of disorientation. The referent of religious textual discourse is ordinary human experience, which is re-described in the light of what is taken to be God's Word – a Word that relativises human words and shows up our limitations (cf McCarthy 1989:19). Religious texts contain what Ricoeur calls boundary references – things like the kingdom of God, covenant, second coming and the like, which open up a world of their own and demand a decision from the reader/listener (cf Ricoeur 1975:65f; McCarthy 1989:18). In this sense religious language exceeds and intensifies poetic language, just as faith exceeds reason.

Ricoeur proposes a new conception of texts, which accentuates their autonomous action independently of the author and transposes the semantic textual event from the subject to the language of the text itself.

Dialectical relation between explaining and understanding

Ricoeur wants to overcome the 19th century dichotomy between understanding and explaining – a dichotomy forcefully propounded by Dilthey. Explanation was seen as proper to the natural sciences, while the human sciences were primarily concerned with understanding. Ricoeur no longer sees understanding as the readers' subjective attempt to put themselves in the author's shoes but as a happening between reader and text. One always understands from a particular position, which is strongly determined by the actual text. Understanding is not a matter of looking for the meaning behind the text but occurs in interaction face to face with the text. Objective exposition of a text (e.g. structural analysis) is as much part of that

happening as the process of understanding. To Ricoeur, then, the text is an independent entity distinct from its history of origin. Understanding and explanation are interdependent. Interpretation in fact indicates the dialectical relation between the two.

Interpretation is a process of attributing and appropriating meaning. Humans are interpreters par excellence. We interrelate virtually all things and perceive them in their interrelationship. We are influenced by other people's interpretations and our perception of people and things are determined by our interpretation of them. The act of appropriating meaning makes our existence meaningful, hence it is an existential event that affects our entire being.

Narrative and mimetic representation of reality

Ricoeur considers discourse to be narrative. In narrative discourse the narrator often disappears and the events 'speak' for themselves. It is the events that make history and historiography is our way of telling the story. God's acts in history antedate the written record. Hence a narrative is like a confession recounting what happened. It is not just a word event (*Wortgeschehen*), as Ebeling and Fuchs would have it, but refers to an act in history. Putting the accent exclusively on that record is too idealistic – the reality of the historical event must emanate from it (Ricoeur 1977:7). Ricoeur sees the biblical discourse about God as wholly narrative: law, prophets and wisdom literature all have a narrative structure (Ricoeur 1977:8-18).

It is the act which precedes the word that emerges in mimesis. Mimesis, as expounded in Aristotle's *Poetica*, is a textual imitation of human deeds. The text mimics reality in narrative form, in such a way that the reader sees it with new eyes (Du Toit 1984:61-2). Mimesis refers to our pre-understanding of human actions. It rearranges (refigures) them and thus changes our perception of them. Mimesis playfully activates the power of the alternative in textual form. Mimetically the gods are imitated in ritual, the human condition is enacted in theatre and actions are re-described in narratives. Mimesis underscores the importance of figurative events for stimulating thought (Schweiker 1988:23). Ricoeur (1987:263) refers to Aristotle's

link between *muthos* and *mimesis* and says: "That is why suspending the reference can only be an intermediary moment between the preunderstanding of the world of action and the transfiguration of daily reality brought about by fiction itself." Elsewhere he continues: "Narrative fiction, I said, 'imitates' human action, not only in that, before referring to the text, it refers to our own preunderstanding of the meaningful structures of action and of its temporal dimension, but also in that it contributes, beyond the text, to reshaping these structures and dimensions in accordance with the imaginary configuration of the plot. Fiction has the power to 'remake' reality … to the extent that the text intentionally aims at a horizon of new reality that we may call a world" (1987:368).

In narratives existential questions and answers emerge in the telling. The way to self-understanding is via narrative. We become the protagonists and the plot of our lives is unravelled. In narratives the plot discloses the paradoxical depth dimension of human temporality, which includes both our caring existence and our orientation to eternity (Schweiker 1988:29).

Symbols

Modernism was unable to get rid of our images, and we have just started to take our symbols seriously. We did not manage to get rid of our images iconoclastically and produce a definitive, water-tight interpretation of our symbols. Ricoeur regards the linguistic dimension, in which proclamation unfolds, kerygma is conveyed and myth is conserved, as wholly symbolic (Ricoeur 1973b:220). Symbolic language says something different from what it appears to say and creates meaning through double signification. Our existential potential and needs are expressed symbolically. To Ricoeur (1973b:220-221) symbols are rooted in psychological, cosmic and linguistic dimensions. Thus the language of the confessional uses symbols of sin like blemish, burden, aberration and the like, which stem from these dimensions. When these symbols occur we are clearly not in charge of our language: our language takes charge of us. The symbols take hold of our existential self-understanding. Their semantic purport is so rich that it is all but inexhaustible. They refer equivocally rather than

unequivocally, each meaning leading to the next. This is the same as what happens in dreams, where one dream lends itself to many interpretations. Symbols trigger reflection. Thought is not self-generating but lives by symbols.

Even in his early work on the philosophy of the will (see his *Freedom and nature*; *Finitude and guilt*) Ricoeur became aware of the importance of metaphors and symbols. Symbols have dual meaning and demand exposition. Their meaning is only indirectly accessible. They are rooted in non-linguistic soil that encompasses both humankind and the cosmos. Understanding presupposes openness and willingness to listen to the indirect language of symbols (Thiselton 1992:344). In symbols meaning is condensed and overlaps. This overlapping entails a never-ending process of interpretation.

Metaphor

A metaphor is more than just a word. It resides in a sentence and, in an even broader perspective, in the entire text. A sentence is not a mosaic of word fragments but a living organism. Hence metaphor should not be viewed substantively but as dynamically relational. It creates linguistic tension, offers stereoscopic vision, simultaneously presents both the so and the not-so and involves the listener/reader in creative interpretation. Metaphor is ambiguous and impressionistic. Its meaning is not crystal clear and fixed, its exact effect is unpredictable (Du Toit 1984:39-41; Ricoeur 1978:79).

Ricoeur (1978:21) sees metaphor as an interaction of two things, a calculated mistake that generates meaning. This view of metaphor as two interactive parts means that it cannot be regarded simply as an abridged simile, linguistic ornamentation, word substitution or predication. The premise is not fixed, immutable meaning of words but meaning arising from an interaction between words and contexts. Metaphorically the decoding and encoding of meaning extends across the entire field of human attribution of meaning (cf Du Toit 1987:163).

According to Ricoeur a word has several possible applications at any given moment. It can acquire new applications without forfeiting previous ones. This cumulative capacity of words is essential for metaphors to function (Ricoeur 1978:116).

Fictive ontology and reference

Reference has an undeniable "as-if" dimension. Ricoeur (1987:379) ventured to give an ontological dimension to the referential claim of metaphoric statements: "… to say, that to see something as … is to make manifest the *being-as* of that thing. I place the 'as' in the position of the exponent of the verb 'to be' and I make 'being-as' the ultimate referent of the metaphorical statement."

Ricoeur uses Frege's distinction between the sense and reference of texts. Sense indicates the internal, logical meaning of a text, while reference relates to its claims to truth and validity and points to an extra-textual context. No discourse is so fictitious as to be totally uninvolved with the real world, although the levels of reference vary. Fictional works still refer to reality, but a different aspect of it, and hence not in the same way as one would refer to visible objects. Ricoeur calls this the second level of reference, and this is the level that affects our existence in the world. At this level the interpretive process culminates in the subject's self-interpretation.

The text doesn't simply replicate mundane realities – that would be boring. It rearranges them in a way that permits a different way of life. The 'density' of the text, its referential potential and metaphoric modus operandi make interpretation an existential event. It refers to more than just the obvious. Reference is not always descriptive or denotative (demonstrable) (Du Toit 1984:56). Metaphor refers in such a way that language gives the imagination flesh. For the reference to be effective the reader has to participate imaginatively. Images must first be visible to the mental eye and in the mind before they can be embodied in literal reality. Hence reference is not primarily sensory (visual) but linguistic.

Metaphoric reference occurs at the second level (cf Michell 1991:165f; 186f). Whereas first-level reference is literally denotative, the second level is figurative. A first-level reference has to be followed by second-level reference, which does not deal with a less real world but which, via a complex strategy, refers to the depth structure of human existence. At this level reference creates a special textual atmosphere that cannot be effected by direct references. Ricoeur compares this distinctive world evoked by textual atmosphere to Husserl's *Lebenswelt* and Heidegger's *in-der-Welt-sein* (McCarthy 1989:13-14).

Heidegger, too, saw understanding not so much as direct perception of specific objects or situations, but as spotting the potential of a situation – its possible applications, interpretive contexts, existential potency (Thiselton 1992:351). This multiplicity of possibilities and the human capacity for forming metaphoric associations make understanding a dynamic process.

To Ricoeur the text's reference to its author and origin is less important. As a document it has a life of its own, independent of its author, and creates its own referential world. The author's frame of reference in creating the text is no longer that of the reader, and hence of the text. That does not mean that the text has no frame or structure of reference. But its words have referential potential, which it is up to the reader to actualise. The text refers to its own world, constructed through interaction between reader and text.

Operation of the textual world

In contrast to the historicism of 19th century biblical and literary criticism with its emphasis on the socio-cultural background of the text, Ricoeur believed that the accent should be on the world presented by the text where it encounters the reader.

For a text to be effective its interaction with the reader must include a distancing process, which is prerequisite for objectifying meaning. This is followed by a phase of appropriating meaning, that is actualising the text (textual events) – hence an existential experience.

The distancing between text and reader is not terminated by the latter's appropriation of meaning. As in the case of metaphor, there is a permanent tension, a juxtaposition, which leads to the reconstruction of the text (Du Toit 1984:55-56). The textual world is constructed through interaction between reader and text. There is no short cut.

A text can be interpreted ruthlessly and then pinned down to the meaning that the interpreter assigns it; or one can wait for that meaning to grow from patient interaction with the text. Waiting for the text means dealing with it respectfully, waiting interpretively for the text to 'open up'. That is Ricoeur's approach to texts, as distinct from those of Bultmann and Heidegger. Ricoeur offers no short cut to understanding. Heidegger linked the hermeneutic problem directly to the existential problem, whereas Ricoeur poses the existential problem only at the end of a long interpretive journey. It is a journey via codes and signs, to be found in cultural artefacts, language and texts. This is a reaction against the Romantic illusion that one can have direct access to self-understanding via other people's thinking (cf Michell 1991:52; Du Toit 1984:26f). What broadens my horizon and influences my self-understanding is the world opened up in the encounter with the text.

Appropriation of meaning is a growth process with the potential of revealing a new way of existence. Hermeneutics should mediate this potential without coercion. It cannot make choices on the readers' behalf which they have to make for themselves. That is Ricoeur's objection to Bultmann's proposal that mythological statements in the Bible should be expressed in existential terms (cf Wallace 1986:8).

Understanding a text means getting involved with it, interpolating my world into its world. That is how the text broadens my understanding and existential horizon. It reshapes my world. In the text human subject and world merge. They merge into text and have to be understood and perceived in the dynamic event opened up by this encounter.

Text and reader as equal but different subjects

To Ricoeur preaching is a paradox. Its message contrasts with the culture of the era. Referring to the Pauline statement that proclaiming the cross is folly to the world, Ricoeur observes that this is so because proclamation is not fundamentally rooted in our experiential world, bears no resemblance to it and cannot justify or prove itself. It is something that simply erupts into our culture 'from the other side'. Yet this kerugma became visible by becoming a facet of our culture in its own right. It created new words in our languages and was affirmed in art and philosophy. Naturally the process continues. The treasure is still contained in earthen vessels: the preacher's fragile attestation, the individual person's fragility and the life of the community (cf Ricoeur 1973:210).

Every era has a filter that determines what can be said in that era without forfeiting credibility. If the era does not permit the belief that the earth is round, it is better to carry on asserting that it is flat. The folly Paul refers to always came in the package of what was considered credible at that time. The cultural filter let through the language and images in which the foolish message was couched. Ricoeur cites the example of Harnack, who tried to pin down the essences of Christianity. Instead of seeking to discover a pure, unadulterated nucleus, we must remember that the cultural filter has its own rules, evident in the texts that observe them. If the cultural wrapping of the gospel strikes us as foolish in our time, it is a false folly and not the folly of the cross Paul is speaking about. The folly of the cross and resurrection should come to us anew in the permissible wrapping of our culture. We have to separate true *skandalon* from false *skandalon.* Ricoeur believes that is the real task of the demythologising exercise – to get rid of the false *skandalon* so we can once more confront the true one. The cultural vessel of the text must be deciphered so we can discover that which

exceeds the text: the proclamation of Christ's words and deeds. The problem of understanding will always be with us. In ancient hermeneutics Paul and his contemporaries grappled to interpret the Old Testament, in whose light Christ had to be expounded. Nowadays we have innumerable texts in whose light Christ needs to expounded (Ricoeur 1973:211). We are still expounding a text which we know to reveal and conceal meaning simultaneously. We know that revelation is a mystery and the answer a paradox.

So the exegete is not the boss but is subjugated to the text. That is the true hermeneutic circle. To understand the text I must believe it, and to believe it I must know what it says. What the text says I can only know by wrestling with the text and the struggle between true and false *skandalon* that it contains. This circle can only be broken by the believer within the exegete when he is true to the community, and by the exegete within the believer when she is true to the scientific principles of exegesis (Ricoeur 1973:212).

Christian proclamation must make the language of Scripture speak and must restore its power to convey meaning. That language must touch our being, our existence. That is how cultural distance and alienation are overcome (Ricoeur 1973b:216). Hermeneutics's real task is not to demolish the cultural framework of myth but to free the potential meaning contained in myth and symbols. To Ricoeur the text that needs to be read is the whole of human existence. That makes hermeneutics an activity that encompasses all of life.

In the final chapter we explore a practical application of hermeneutics in our ethically pluralistic world.

Chapter 13

THEOLOGY AND MORALITY: REFLECTIONS ON A NEW SEXUAL ETHOS

The church, chasticy and postmodernism

Are the biblical injunctions for human behaviour still applicable in a scene that is totally unlike the world of first century Christianity? Has the church's morality not got bogged down in the Victorian ethos of chastity? Does piety translate into a frozen form of chastity? Does the Bible have any clout in a climate of radically secularised postmodern sexual morality? We look into these and similar issues before expounding Matthew 5:27-30.

Linking chastity with postmodernism calls for a verbal *tour de force*: on the face of it the two terms are mutually exclusive. Yet to many church members both postmodernism and the ideal of chastity are perfectly real. This chapter attempts to fathom the postmodern sexual ethos and stimulate reflection on the design of an acceptable sexual ethos (read chastity) that spans all dimensions of human life and thus permits personal integrity.

The church not only functions in a postmodern era, but also ministers to postmodern people who have to live with a postmodern sexual ethos. Ministering to people who will not be dictated to but are open to persuasion entails questions rather than answers, tentative designs rather than blueprints. The challenge the church faces, then, is to try and understand present-day behavioural patterns and convey a message that is contextual, comprehensible and convincing.

What is a postmodern sexual ethos? It is one that takes cognisance of a multitude of sexual behaviours; of the influence of cultural and historical factors on sexuality; of numerous biblical contexts in which diverse sexual ethoses function; of a host of ecclesiastic and secular literary texts presenting different views on sexual ethics; et cetera. In

post-apartheid South Africa, where individual rights (including sexual 'rights') are entrenched in the constitution, the church cannot simply postulate a particular sexual ethos as a norm for society. Its voice has long ceased to dominate this scene. An alternative sexual ethos can be found in literature, where sexuality in all its forms is explicitly discussed; in whites' growing awareness of an indigenous African sexual ethos; in Africans' scrutiny of whites' sexual ethos; and in lifestyles that reflect people's sexual values. This multiplicity of sexual ethoses makes our situation postmodern.

In a religious context a postmodern understanding of self and others implies critical detachment from any unquestioned faith, pedantic prescriptiveness, exclusive creed and absolute ethos. Whereas formerly the church could take it for granted that marriage was the only acceptable outlet for sexual intercourse and society largely concurred, these days people are forming many other types of sexual relationships, from second and third marriages to premarital sex, extramarital sex, cohabitation, legalised same-sex marriages, homosexual relationships and promiscuous liaisons.

Faced with such diverse perspectives, value systems and religious emphases, preachers usually play it safe by presenting what they assume to be the dominant ethos among their congregants. As a rule their position is confidently traced to Scripture. But this response no longer satisfies everybody. The question is how the church's pronouncements and sermons should deal with a diversity of ethoses. Present-day society undeniably evokes and promotes certain sexual behaviours that accord with its structure and context. Cut-and-dried answers are not easy in such a situation. Present-day sexual behaviour poses many ethical dilemmas which complicate theological ethics and which preachers cannot resolve simply by quoting a few handy texts or promising that Jesus will sort it all out.

It would seem that the church's traditional position has been checkmated by the prevailing social ethos. Divorce is one example. Whereas it used to be totally unacceptable, nowadays no-one bats an eyelid and divorced congregants merely have to confess that after due consideration and prayer they concluded that, because of the

sinfulness of human nature and incompatible personalities, their marriage has broken down irreparably.

In a postmodern framework where no norm can lay claim to universal validity individuals prefer to remain free to espouse their own viewpoint, ethos and values. The ethos one chooses offers a certain identity, security and lifestyle. At the same time the person is fully aware that there are a great many 'equally legitimate' but differing forms of ethos, values and identity which other individuals may adopt in their own lifestyles, cultures, contexts or interpretive frameworks. Against this background it would be difficult to come up with an ideal of chastity that lays down universal norms for everybody. Hence one will have to devise an ideal that is imaginative, comprehensive and creative.

Ecclesiastic documents on a contemporary sexual ethos

There is no consensus on a universally accepted sexual ethos in church circles. This is reflected in ecclesiastic documents specifically dealing with changing sexual ethics (cf Fulkerson 1995:47ff). Fulkerson's findings from reports of the Protestant Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian and Evangelical Lutheran churches in America are pertinent. The position of most Protestant churches on contemporary expressions of sexuality (which usually include both a majority and a minority report reflecting more or less tolerant attitudes towards sexual behaviour) can be summed up as follows: the authority of Scripture must be upheld, but with due consideration of the human person concerned; sexuality is essentially good – a gift from God – but has to be handled properly; human identity is essentially sexual, hence its various expressions must be respected and receive attention.

The aforementioned ecclesiastic reports advance familiar arguments like the authority of Scripture, the role of historical criticism, and the historical and cultural contingency of biblical pronouncements. Most texts assume a connection between textual pronouncements and the various traditions in which they were made. It is accepted that authority does not apply independently of those who lay claim to it. Authority must be earned, that is, must make sense and be self-

evident. This presupposes that the text must speak in the modern idiom and offer guidelines for contemporary conundrums: "'Intelligibility' must come from contemporary relationships to the text ... We relate to the text as historical and finite, as well as redemptive" (Fulkerson 1995:56). The term 'prooftexting' is used to indicate that a text's evidential value lies in its actual argument. Thus a text is not presumed to make sense simply because some people assign it authority.

Lutherans warn against renewed reliance on justification through law observance. As a result they are wary of producing a set of precepts. Presbyterians underscore the normative value of the Jesus stories: "The Jesus story is an open story, since it continually challenges Christians to scrutinize the prerequisites they would require of those who would participate in this community of justice-love" (Fulkerson 1995:54).

Finally we turn to a recent pronouncement by the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (Boksburg, 7 June 2007) on gay members and ministers. Future DR ministers may be gay but not practising ones. According to one interpretation the church will accommodate gay elders, deacons and members without this proviso. Congregations may decide for themselves how to handle homosexual relationships among their members.

The synod decided as follows (with a majority of 299 over 66): "All human beings are created in God's image; salvation in Christ is for all humans and the Spirit was poured out on all believers. Accordingly we accept the human dignity of all human being." [Our translation.]

The DR Church thus decided that all people are included in God's love, regardless of their sexual orientation. They are accepted as members of Christ's church on the strength of their baptism and faith. But synod adhered to the church's original position that only a union between a man and a woman qualifies as a marriage. Promiscuity , whether homosexual or heterosexual, is renounced. Regarding the

ministry, synod decreed that homosexuals who want to be ordained have to remain celibate (see Neels Jackson, *Beeld* 8 June 2007).

These ecclesiastic documents probably represent the attitude most mainline churches would adopt. But they remain guidelines and ideals, accepting that sexual realities are very different. The church's dilemma about ethical problems need not detract from its worth: it is better to admit there is a problem than to deny it or come up with simplistic answers. Its contribution remains its emphasis of the religious dimension, that is the relation with God, which continues to matter to people with diverse ethoses.

Chastity

Chastity is an awkward word that has acquired predominantly negative connotations. It is associated with Victorian hypocrisy, puritan self-chastisement, an ascetic lifestyle in which celibacy and guilt feelings are interlinked, or simply with a dull, unadventurous life. The feeling the word evokes in many people is that it emphasises abstinence, guilt, aversion and the like rather than a happy, fulfilling sex life (see Weil 1990:18-20).

This feeling is not always unfounded. In some people chastity is warped piety, associated with a lifestyle based on guilt feelings or an unnatural ethos imposed by parents or other authority figures. Thus people may believe that if they are chaste and deny themselves sexual experience, practise celibacy, fidelity to a partner, et cetera, it makes them holy. But that is not necessarily holiness. Chastity in itself is not holiness, although one can link the two. It does not guarantee holiness, at least not in the sense that most religions understand it. Holiness is a process rather than a state, the result of an intense relationship with the Other/other that influences the person's entire lifestyle, in which commitment and sacrifice are rewarded with a sense of fulfilment and meaningfulness.

External factors may promote chastity or militate against it. Ideally chastity should be observed on the basis of belief and reflection. These days the high incidence of aids and HIV has led to renewed emphasis

on chastity. There are movements that persuade youths to take an oath of abstinence from premarital sex. National and international anti-aids programmes warn against promiscuity and propagate single-partner relationships. But chastity based on fear is still negative, without inner conviction or creativity.

To make chastity plausible and acceptable in the prevailing religious context would certainly require more than a mere repetition of a particular group ethos based on group interests and ideals. Chastity encompasses the whole human being and his or her self-realisation:

> Chastity, the importance of which is stressed by the whole Christian tradition, will therefore in the future have to be carefully distinguished from continence (abstinence from orgasmic pleasures). Chastity must be understood as the virtue which enables an individual to make a fully humanising use of his or her sexual dimension, not only in his or her relations with others, but also in relating to the cosmos and God (Thévenot 1984:82).

A good start would be a comprehensive, holistic, open view of human beings in all their contexts.

In positive terms this chapter views chastity as every person's accountability for her or his sexual ethos in all their relations with God, the world and fellow human beings. This presupposes that humans are sexually determined beings and accepts the reality of factors that remain important in all sexual relationships. They include the mystical nature of love relationships, the importance of equal partnerships, modesty, respect, differences, openness, responsibility, faith, commitment and mutual helpfulness.

Modernism and postmodernism

Postmodernism is a critical reaction to the biases and assertions of modernism and the concomitant arrogant expectations and optimistic belief in progress. That does not mean that postmodernism is totally distinct from modernism, nor that modernism and everything related

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to it are over and done with. Rather it is a re-contextualisation and reappraisal of the place of rationality, truth, understanding, culture, God, history, books (including the Bible), the self, values and the like in our lives. It entails recognising diversity of methods, approaches, routes, paradigms and lifestyles relating to truth and science. It is an encounter between many different cultures, ways of life and value systems, each claiming legitimacy.

Postmodernism is not a new kind of humanism – in fact, it declares war on humanism, because its emphasis on metaphysics and the soul, ethics and the role of conscience, psychology and the concomitant importance of freedom, and politics which assigns the individual a unique position, is no longer tenable. Humanism is seen as the ideology of modernism. It used the human sciences to slot individuals into a programme of subjugation and deprive them of their freedom. Humanism designed the Human Person, who had to serve as a model for each individual profile, who determined each person's identity and to whom everyone had to conform (Assoun 1987:27-28).

The modern sexual ethos

To understand what a postmodern sexual ethos entails one should first compare it with the modernist ethos. Although there are no absolutes in this regard, certain guidelines are discernible. Modernism has many diverse viewpoints and perceptions of sexuality changed greatly, yet there is a common denominator that can be called modernist. Films, literature, the church's proclamation, psychological models and the like could serve as criteria to probe the modern, Christian-oriented view of marriage and sexuality in the Western world. Modern humans are enlightened and secular. Postmodernism, too, is post-secularist but with a new openness towards transcendence (cf Milbank 1992:39ff).

The following characteristics, albeit not exclusive to modernism, can be identified:

● *A fairly fixed blueprint of what sexuality is, how it is determined, how it should be structured and what is permissible.* This includes a rigid perception of sexual identity,

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as opposed to postmodernism's greater openness. It implies acceptance and prescription of fixed norms that serve as universal guidelines (e.g. in the African context polygamy must be rejected).

● *A belief in manipulation (regulation) of sexuality in a social context for the benefit of the whole.*

● *Disregard of sexuality.* This is the result of Victorian morality that restricted the function of sexuality to procreation. It also entails acceptance of a double (public and private) morality (cf Barker 1984:8ff). It presupposes permitting an area of private morality where unacceptable practices can be accommodated.

● *Repression and denial of sexuality and the concomitant belief, expressed in Freud's* Civilization and its discontents*, that progress and civilisation are possible only if desire is repressed.* In keeping with this view Max Weber pointed out that the subjugation of the body as a result of the Calvinist ethic helped to establish capitalism (Simpson 1993:152).

● *Identification of God with masculinity and rationality.* Femininity, by contrast, represents the emotional, irrational, chaotic aspect. (For the church's negative view of women, see Phipps 1989:55ff.) This rigid classification led to a division of sex roles that oppressed women for a long time, since they were considered inferior. It came to be interpreted as sexism and came under fire, mainly from feminism.

The postmodern sexual ethos

A postmodern sexual ethos views sexuality very broadly. The new biology and developments in psychology emphasise that sexuality is not confined to the functioning of the genital organs but underlies every bodily cell and desire. Thévenot (1984:82) puts it thus: "In this sense sexuality is the masculine or feminine dimension which informs the whole reality of the individual from the first moments of his or her existence ..."

The postmodern worldview displays greater honesty about human abilities and limitations. In the areas of marriage, the family and sexuality there is greater awareness of the importance and fragility of relationships. Sexuality remains important, because people cannot live without meaningful relationships and these often include sex. Relationships are fragile because their complexity and closeness can easily cause them to break down. Acknowledgment of the impact of sexuality on human life includes acknowledgment of the impossibility of expecting that an ideal sexual lifestyle can apply and be enforced on everybody. To a great extent sexuality has become a metaphor for the lightness of life, the nomadic, fleeting nature of relationships, the unfathomable mystery of human beings.

The postmodern accent on corporeality is primarily a reaction to modernism's disembodiment of human beings, when the body was left out of account in any reflection on society and its members. The mind and its ideals were all that mattered (the body is but the prison of the soul). Things like pleasure, pain, desire, happiness and frustration were never considered decisive in modernist thinking (cf Simpson 1993:151).

Postmodern thinkers accentuate the body because it offers a fresh perspective on the subject and features prominently in the search for an alternative to a disembodied, abstract philosophy. The body becomes a symbol of everything that happens behind the screens of consciousness (Assoun 1987:24). The body is metaphor, sign and symbol that need to be expounded so that people will understand their subjective selves better. It has heuristic significance for our under-standing of the human mind.

A postmodern worldview recognises the historicity of human life and its concomitant variability. Sexual ethos, too, varies historically. Every age produces its own sexual ethos. Michel Foucault in particular highlighted the historical dimension of sexuality in his *History of sexuality* (1980b).

Postmodern perception of the body

Present-day culture is a body culture (see Du Toit 1990:11-21). The focus has shifted from mind to body. The new gateway to meaning is the body, not some idea, value or even religion. Human beings are viewed holistically. There is no room for exclusive glorification or total contempt of the body. In addition people are social beings and corporeality cannot be viewed outside the social context. Thus personal identity includes social identity. Others remind me that I am not self-sufficient but dependent on them (Kearney 1984:55f).

Human beings remain a mystery, even though we have penetrated to the most minute cells of their bodies. The human body must be respected, not only by the person whose body it is and more especially by other people.

Influence of the church on our perception of corporeality and sexuality

The church played a decisive role in shaping our view of corporeality, its subjugation and repression. This relates directly to the development and perception of the subject in the West (Foucault). Christian ethics saw it as its task to regulate the body and its passions. This gave rise to the notion of interiority (see Du Toit 1990:11-21). Western history is the history of the progressive subjugation of the subject to a power that became increasingly sweeping and anonymous. The public behavioural codes and moral systems of all societies give rise to the experience of a separate, non-public 'I'. Because of the division between the public and private 'I' people are no longer intuitively one with their bodies but are separated from them.

The body is regarded with suspicion, for it is a hotbed of lust that must be repressed. Pleasure is constantly denigrated in favour of powerful, noble, eternal values: truth, the hereafter, progress, happiness (also see Barker 1984:80ff). Platonism and Gnosticism already declared the body to be the prison of the soul: with its desires, material qualities and limitations it incarcerates the immortal soul. In the light of our experience of the modern sexual ethos this axiom can be inverted: the

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soul is the prison of the body! That is because the soul (for 'soul' read the influence of a repressive social ethos on human beings) denies the body and its nature, is dishonest about its needs and thus fails to do justice to the whole human person.

Christianity connected people's inner selves directly with their corporeality (expressed by the term 'flesh', full of desire). In interiorising human beings desire was singled out as the crux of human subjectivity. Evil, original sin lurks in the inner self. According to Christian religion people must purge their inner selves through constant self-analysis and preoccupation with the self. This hermeneutics of the body (inner self) is typical of the Christian tradition.

This hermeneutics is changing drastically. Increasingly churches are viewing human beings holistically. In how far the church is prepared to be accommodating and what part it will play in shaping a contemporary notion of the body and in how far the church still influences people remains to be seen.

Sexuality and textuality

Sexuality cannot be divorced from textuality. The world of texts plays a surprisingly big role in the perception and experience of human sexuality. Not only does the text determine sexuality; sexuality also determines the text. The novel is hardly conceivable without sexuality. It is the force behind the plot, the driving force of the protagonists in the story, the key to the dénouement of plots, et cetera. The new conception of the human body emerged mainly in literature. The body itself is a text that has to be expounded (see Emberley 1988:48ff for the role of fashion in the experience of corporeality). In late capitalism the body is subject to many forces, such as the imperialism of fashion, advertising, films and photographs. This cannot be overestimated. We shall not deal with the portrayal and interpretation of corporeality and sexuality in other art forms.

We live in a society with a multitude of conflicting values. Literature reflects frankness about sexuality by candidly depicting every conceivable type of experience. That does not mean that literature has to

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take the blame for a society's sexual ethos. The power of a literary work lies in its textual articulation of worlds in which people are already living. (See Sontag 1983:412ff for the relation between sexuality and textuality in Roland Barthes's work.)

Literary descriptions of sexuality contrast shrilly with the ideal proclaimed from pulpits. Preachers cannot present people with the biblical text without knowing what is written in other texts that their congregants read. The church has to enter the world of the text and be able to read the text as a world. To be able to understand and interpret the people of its age the church has to read the texts of its age. Only then can it present its own text and relate it to contemporary texts. But the church's text is not just a commentary on profane texts, neither is it purely prescriptive. Besides, the church's prescriptions are often based on misdiagnosis, so they fail to effect healing. Another question is whether any one church has a monopoly in deciding what constitutes health and can elevate its view to a universal norm. The church's task is to help individuals to integrate their lives convincingly with their own context and clarify their relations with God, the world, their fellow humans and themselves. The church's text (sermons, theological works, etc) must derive from the everyday world, just as Jesus' words were addressed to everyday people. Those words were above all understanding, pastoral and non-condemnatory.

Matthew 5:27-30

We conclude with some comments on Matthew 5:27-30. This pericope, which deals with adultery, is part of the larger structural unit comprising 5:21-48. It is the largest structural unit in the sermon on the mount. It contains six pronouncements with minor variations. They are as follows:

5:21-26 (anger)
5:27-30 (adultery)
5:31-32 (divorce)
5:33-37 (making oaths)
5:38-42 ('turning the other cheek')
5:43-48 (love for enemies)

Each pronouncement starts: "You have heard that it was said …", followed by the relevant Old Testament saying and then Jesus' comment on the text or oral tradition, starting with: "But I say to you …" (cf Kodjak 1986:86ff). In the case of anger, adultery and divorce the Old Testament quotations are reinterpreted, and in the case of turning the other cheek and loving one's enemies the Old Testament judgments no longer apply at all.

The various pronouncements in verses 21-48 have the same structure and should be read together for the sake of the message of the passage, which extends across the individual statements. The comments on adultery and divorce concern the need for self-assertion and gratification. Jesus responds to the need for self-affirmation (through adultery or divorce) by demanding self-denial. It is expressed metaphorically via the images of plucking out an eye and cutting off a hand (Kodjak 1986:94). These acts in themselves do not solve the problem, for the person is left with a second eye and hand, besides other members that can desire and tempt anew. Hence literal mutilation is not intended (Van Bruggen 1990:100). What Jesus proposes is self-restraint rather than self-assertion and self-affirmation, which harm the person. This accords with the ethics of the sermon on the mount, which proclaims that people receive the kingdom and the promised rewards through self-restraint.

But what is the theological implication of the statement: "Everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart"?

This undeniably relativises ethics. The outward act is relativised by the person's inner intention and disposition. The pronouncement puts all people on a par, since they have the same inner disposition and attitude towards one another, even if their actions differ. Who can claim never to have desired, never to have felt anger towards another (v 22), that their 'yes' always meant 'yes' (v 37), and so on?

Jesus not only takes the whole person into account, he also judges the total relationship between persons. The accent is on respect for others, the value of the individual – be it an outcast, tax collector or sinner. In

contrast to treating the other purely as an object, Jesus stresses others as independent persons (subjects). They are not at our disposal. The only right relationship with others is when they are accepted as persons (not objects). The person's claim on another may be determined by the formal relationship between them (employer-employee, parent-child, husband-wife). While the formal relationship may ostensibly 'work', there might still be no genuine openness, trust or intimacy. You only have a claim on the other if you have earned it through the attention, trouble and time you devote to that person. To be meaningful a relationship must always be reciprocal. If you don't have time for the other, you don't 'have' each other. Ultimately you only dispose over someone through love. It is part of the human condition, which makes everyone dependent on God's grace and Jesus' message about the kingdom.

People's 'natural' response is always to put their own benefit and affirmation first. Altruism is the exception, egoism the rule. In biblical terms this has to do with the sinfulness of the human heart. Jesus views humans in their totality. It is not just a matter of physical, outward deeds but also of inner attitudes and dispositions. Jesus exposes those who elevate themselves above others because, like the proverbial Pharisee, they outwardly observe social conventions while their hearts are evil. Hence we may appear to be chaste while inwardly we flout all rules. The rule of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus looks past human achievements and affirms an ethos of dependence on God, self-effacement and openness to others.

In a postmodern context the message of Matthew 5:27-30 can be applied in numerous ways. One could point out the human condition and what it entails. We are dependent on God and one another, relationships are fragile, human beings are vulnerable to exploitation and must constantly examine their own motives. Their relationship with God is limited by ulterior motives, superstition and a will to power. One could be critical of all the ways in which people restrict themselves and one another. The ideal is to insist on maximum space for people to actualise themselves. That implies a responsibility to know ourselves, get to know the other and respect the difference. The difference that belief in God and Christian discipleship entail must be

spelled out. It implies a holistic anthropology which takes the entire person seriously, in all her relationships. In this context chastity means optimal self-actualisation of the person's essential self with due regard to the other/Other to whom he relates.

That does not mean that selfless love excludes eroticism. Altruism is not necessarily antithetical to eroticism – indeed, it may be motivated by it. It would be hard to prove that selfless love never entails some kind of personal reward. Even my claim to conform to a noble ideal is a motive for a noble deed. Our love for others includes the ideal of God's kingdom, Jesus' compassion and the movement of the Spirit, without excluding genuinely human feelings such as erotic desire.

POSTSCRIPT

"...the change of seasons is for me not a regrettable nuisance, something to be avoided, but a part of "earthly life that lives from, by and within this change" (Soelle 2007:48).

The basic themes of this book are the way the world is interpreted/represented as a religious world. The approach is hermeneutic, the interpretive method of the human sciences. Textual hermeneutics must include a hermeneutic of the world in which the texts are read. Religious texts mirror not just the world of the church and theology. They also reflect the secular world.

How does a textual science like theology refer to God as an invisible reality? What are its truth claims? We considered how the text and its footnotes refer to truth; how pluralism and diversity are represented; how theology represents God in our world. How can theology dissociate itself from the ideologies of its day and how can these be overcome prophetically with the aid of dreams, utopia and hope? We examined how ulterior factors like power and control feature in the way we experience the world and do our theology. We looked at textual reference and representation, concluding with an application of a biblical text to the concrete facts of human sexuality.

Naturally the last word on the representation of transcendence in human culture remains unspoken. That is the ongoing task of theologians and anyone who wants to know why we think and experience the way we do. Our semiotic lingua franca is constantly changing. Reading the signs of the times is to break free from the ersatz simulations of our age to experience the reality they represent.

Theology remains part of life's cycles. It expresses the broad spectrum of human knowledge, emotion, fear and hope. We are subjected to

life's seasonal changes, but within these faith, hope and love remain invariable. Each season holds the promise of future potency.

In his *Confessions*, book X (1969:165) Augustine expresses the challenge of understanding and the question about our life world in his reflection on memory:

> What, then, am I God? What is my nature? A life that is ever various and manifold, and exceeding immense. Behold in the plains, and caves, and caverns of my memory, innumerable and innumerably full of innumerable kinds of things, either through images, as all bodies; or by actual presence, as the arts; or by certain notions or impressions, as the affections of the mind, which, even when the mind doth not feel, the memory retaineth, while yet whatsoever is in the memory is also in the mind – over all these I do run, I fly; I dive on this side and on that, as far as I can, and there is no end. So great is the force of memory, so great the force of life, even in the mortal life of man.

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