Empire and a hermeneutics of vulnerability

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Abstract

The author proposes a hermeneutic of vulnerability as part of a
programme of an ethics of interpretation whereby readers not
only become aware of what the effect of their reading or
interpretation will be on others and for which they need to take
responsibility, but that will also limit the effects of any discri-
mination in future. Recognising vulnerability in oneself and in
others can further lead to unmasking privileged positions of the
past that the former political dispensation has produced and
which need to be fore-grounded for the sake of reconciliation.
In other words, it is unmasking the old prevalent colonial
power relationships in what has become the new "empire".
This article will start by looking at the way people have histori-
cally been made vulnerable by a particular understanding of
reality as empire with specific reference to the portrayal of
Africa as dark and wild, and how the historical narrow under-
standing of hermeneutics (Berkhof) fed this vulnerability.
Secondly, in order to recognise vulnerability, the author discus-
ses the need for a broader definition of hermeneutics as
scientific understanding. Thirdly he illustrates the need for a
hermeneutics of vulnerability by unmasking whiteness and the
psychological advantage it provided in history and, fourthly, he
explores a model of a hermeneutics of vulnerability in terms of
the exclusion of the "Other".

Introduction

Sixteen years into a democratic, nonracial South Africa that has abandoned
the crude biological racism of the apartheid years, the September 2010 issue
of *Die Kerkblad*, a mouthpiece within the traditionally white Reformed
Churches of South Africa *(Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika)* published an
article entitled "The regenerating power of the gospel in dark Africa" *(Die
vernuwende krag van die evangelie in donker Afrika)*, written by PJ (Flip)

Buys (2010:28-29). Bear in mind that the Reformed Churches of South Africa (RCSA) have at least at their general synods always claimed to have been critical of apartheid. But according to Hexham (1981:196) the churches never discarded the myth of apartheid. It should also be remembered that the RCSA synod refused to make a presentation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the issue of apartheid.

The abovementioned article narrates the story of the conversion of a traditional healer (referred to as a witch doctor in the text). Her practices were expounded as being almost sinful, clouding or "darkening" her under-standing of Christianity. Her son, an intelligent Christian theologian, played a significant role in her conversion. Of significance here is the title of the article which uses the adjective "dark" in reference to Africa.

How is it possible for such an article to be permitted publication in post-apartheid society? The title not only reveals the "whiteness" of the inter-preter but also fails to take cognisance of the effect on the African reader and audience. Moreover, does the rhetoric of the article's heading reveal the remnants of apartheid thinking slipping through the backdoor of "empire", the new global form of sovereignty (Hardt & Negri 2001:xii)? The article's title constructs within the Reformed tradition a particular white supremacy reminiscent of the colonial period during which destiny was associated with appearance, conflating salvation and racialisation. The publication of such an article in a church newsletter distributed within a predominantly white com-munity is symptomatic of an inability to take responsibility for the effects that the interpretations of those who have power can have on others. It seems to suggest that from a theological perspective the colonial empire still exists. A Reformed theological tradition aligned with and sensitive to its current presence within an African context needs to come to terms with its Western roots in a non-Western context. This involves a measure of vulnerability.

In this regard I propose a hermeneutics of vulnerability as part of a programme of an ethics of interpretation which considers the effects a parti-cular interpretation can have on readers. Within this framework I wish to put forward a hermeneutics which will not only make readers aware of the effect of their reading or interpretation on others (and for which they need to take responsibility), but which will also limit the effects of any discrimination due to their own "unresolved spiritual anxieties and political contradictions" within Western culture (Perkinson 2004:58). Recognising vulnerability in oneself and in others can lead to a further unmasking of privileged positions which the former political dispensation produced and which need to be foregrounded for the sake of reconciliation. In other words, the old prevalent colonial power relationships need to be unmasked in what has become the new "empire".

This article starts by looking at the way people are made vulnerable through a particular understanding of reality as empire, and how this vulnera-

bility is fed by a narrow understanding of hermeneutics. Secondly, to recognise vulnerability, the author discusses the need for a broader definition of hermeneutics as scientific understanding. Thirdly, he illustrates the need for a hermeneutics of vulnerability by unmasking whiteness. Finally he provides a theoretical model of a hermeneutics of vulnerability.

Africa and empire

The reference to "dark" Africa in the abovementioned article alludes to early modernity's economic expansion of the sea routes and its contact with people who were very different from those of Western Europe. The latter drew on earlier Hebrew, Greek and Christian efforts to deal with differences. Wildness is one such category. In Hebrew Scriptures, the notion of wildness is the opposite of blessedness, a contamination that is biogenetic as well as political-religious (Perkinson 2004:54). For example, in the Hebrew tradition Ham becomes the bearer of the curse laid upon him because he revealed the nakedness of his drunken father. He shares with Cain the ideal of the "wild man". Later in the tradition "blackness", "Egypt", "Canaan", "accursedness" and "Ham" became synonymous (Perkinson 2004:54). The notion of wildness became crucial in terms of the duty to civilise and evangelise that which the Western interpretation of Christianity had laid upon itself. Civilisation and evangelisation soon proved to have severe existential consequences, because if "wild men" were saveable, they would be equal to the colonisers. But if they were equal, they could not be employed as slaves. And if they were beyond salvation, they could be exploited (Perkinson 2004:58):

> In Europe's earliest attempts to decipher the significance of its others in the conquests of new lands, soteriology became, in many cases, *the* decisive category of classification, *the* open question around which various trading, colonizing, and evangelizing initiatives organized their competing discourses of legitimation. Evident difference found its adjudicatory point in the discourse of salvation.

As *Die Kerkblad's* article shows, the word "black" very pertinently still poses the question of salvation, especially when one is confronted with traditional African practices which are regarded by a particular minority as indicative of impurity or evil. Success is proof of divine grace. The object of salvation still lies within the African wilderness portrayed as dark, but the subject of salvation lies within European Christianity.

Whereas civilisation and Christianity meant salvation for the soul, economic success in which Calvinism played a significant role (Perkinson 2004:62) became the driver behind capitalism's forceful insistence on

globalisation and what is referred to as "empire". Hardt and Negri (2001:20) see "empire" as:

> the centre that supports the globalization of productive networks and casts its widely inclusive net to try to envelop all power relations within its world order – yet at the same time it deploys a powerful police function against the new barbarians and the rebellious slaves who threaten its order.

The new barbarians and rebellious slaves are constituted by what can be called a coloniality of power (Maldonado-Torres 2007:243) that "refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism" and that defined far beyond the limits of the colonial administration mission "culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production". In present-day terms, "empire" as a coloniality of power appears to have outlasted Eurocentred colonialism. The demise of colonialism and the trumpeted advent of empire ignores one important factor, namely that political independence did not bring independence of power. The destruction of colonialism as a political order did not remove coloniality as the most general form of domination in the current world order (cf. Snyman 2010). A colonial matrix of power is still evident in the following spheres of influence (Mignolo 2007:156):

> control of economy (land appropriation, exploitation of labor, control of natural resources); control of authority (institution, army); control of gender and sexuality (family, education) and control of subjectivity and knowledge (epistemology, education and formation of subjectivity).

It remains a systematic repression (Quijano 2007:169):

> over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual.

The imperial master imposes his or her own ways of doing and saying, his or her own patterns of producing knowledge and meaning for the colonised.

Hardt and Negri (2001:191) argue that in this structure of empire, racism did not recede but in fact progressed, shifting from a dominant biological theory of racism to a racism based on culture. Differences among races are constituted by social and cultural forces and not biological

essentialism. However, racial supremacy and subordination are thought to arise through free competition and a market meritocracy (Hardt & Negri 2001:194) with the different other being integrated in the imperial scheme by way of a system of control, for example white supremacy and subordination in terms of degrees of deviance from whiteness (Hardt & Negri 2001:194).

Die Kerkblad is a publication of the Reformed Churches of South Africa (RCSA), and is a predominantly white publication. The rhetoric that arises with the reference to "dark Africa" immediately conjures up an image of white supremacy where European light skin colour provides a marker for being Christian rather than being part of Africa's paganism (cf. Perkinson 2004:157). In this context the Reformed tradition is associated with goodness and purity and darkness with impurity and sin. The European and white origins of the Reformed tradition are not dispelled by labelling Africa "dark". In fact, there is a Christian presumption of access to a superior truth in comparison with other religions and cultural traditions. This truth can only be attained when the African other crosses over, which the traditional healer's son did by studying in the USA.

Underlying this perspective is a very traditional view of hermeneutics as theological discipline. Hermeneutics is traditionally regarded as that theological discipline which teaches readers of the Bible those principles, laws and methods used to interpret the biblical text (cf. Berkhof 1980:11). In general, hermeneutics pertains to the interpretation of all kinds of writings, whether sacred or secular. *Hermeneutica sacra* (sacred hermeneutics) pertains to the interpretation of the biblical text as Scripture or as the inspired Word of God. To Berkhof general hermeneutics enables the reader to transpose himself or herself into the time and spirit of the author. With regard to the biblical text, transposing oneself into the time and spirit of the secondary author is insufficient: one "must learn to know the mind of the spirit" (Berkhof 1980:12).

Within this understanding, Berkhof (1980:12) poses two presuppositions: firstly, sin darkens understanding and it requires special effort to guard against error. Secondly, he refers to differences in men (sic) as follows:

> *Men differ from one another in many ways that naturally cause*
> *them to drift apart mentally.* They differ, for instance,
>
> (a)   in intellectual capacity, aesthetic taste, and moral quality resulting in a lack of spiritual affinity;
> (b)   in intellectual attainment, some being educated, and others uneducated; and
> (c)   in nationality, with a corresponding difference in language, forms of thought, customs, and morals.

These two presuppositions are clearly illustrated in *Die Kerkblad* article previously referred to. Sin darkened the understanding of the witch doctor, and her son acquired the necessary knowledge to help her move towards Christianity. What comes through in the article is the mother's initial lack of knowledge and spiritual affinity for her son's education. The reference to darkness, and the association with Kenya, provides a stark contrast with the white South African Afrikaans readership of the magazine, bringing home the differences in forms of thought, customs and morals. However, the reference to "dark Africa" is also reminiscent of 19th century colonial attitudes. Darkness here alludes not only to skin colour, but also to impurity and sin.

A broader understanding of hermeneutics

The traditional definition of hermeneutics focuses on the subject matter itself and the divine author behind the text. But it fails to ask the following questions: What are the perspectives with which readers approach a text? What do readers bring to the text in the interpretive process? Their failure to recognise the reader behind the text enables Bible-readers to mask their contexts from which the text is understood and present their readings as universally valid. Failure to recognise and acknowledge the readers' context lies behind the ability to refer to Africa as "dark".

Within Reformed circles one rarely sees any responsibility taken for the approach towards the biblical text as *text*, in other words a page with letters conveying information. Whereas a view on Scripture deals with its authority as religious text, an approach to the text deals with the epistemology and theoretical frameworks with which readers approach the text. No reader approaches any text *tabula rasa*. The question is whether readers always make explicit the baggage with which they arrive at the text. After all, reading a text involves one's own entire "being human": education, political views, economic status, religious views, social standing, age, gender, sexuality, geographical context and scientific worldview.

The problem is that this does not happen. When one reads from a position of power there is no need to make explicit any baggage brought to the text. In a church community where white members still form the majority, whiteness as a framework from which the world is experienced will not come under scrutiny. Nor will hetero-patriarchy. Cheryl Anderson (2009:152-153) sums up the problem:

> [B]iblical texts themselves and the controlling interpretations
> of the church encode the values and perspectives of privileged
> heterosexual males. Furthermore, biblical texts construct a
> gender paradigm of male dominance / female subordination
> that has been used historically to support the dominance of the

white Western Christian male over those who are nonwhite, non-Christian and non-Western (from the Two-Thirds World). Under this schema, homosexuality is condemned because it connotes a subordinate male, and males should always be dominant, and females should always be subordinate and never dominant. Fundamentally, then, the struggles against sexism, homophobia, white supremacy, neocolonial dynamics, and Christian violence against non-Christians are intimately connected. [...] "Any liberation struggle that does not challenge heteronormativity cannot substantially challenge colonialism or white supremacy."

If Hardt and Negri's empire consists of Northern America and Europe dominating the rest of the world in terms of trade and industry, and the economy, Anderson's church is an empire controlled by the white Western Christian male. But liberation from this hegemony entails a challenge not only of whiteness and colonialism, but also of heteronormativity and patriarchy. In other words, the reference to Africa as dark within a liberated African context is a symptom of something much deeper. It is not only racism that poses a problem here, but also sexism and homophobia.

Underlying these three issues is a particular theology that ascribes social roles to men and women on the basis of their biological composition. Epidermal evidence speaks unambiguously. Biology is destiny. The demise of apartheid may have forced people to reject any role that is linked to pigmentation, yet it plays a role in religious or metaphysical segregation. Racial discrimination may not be so overt, but for some reason it is still acceptable to discriminate on the basis of gender or sexual orientation.

When one is confronted by an article such as the example above, one realises that although raw forms of racism have been abandoned, there are still far more refined forms in existence. One wonders whether church members really think that apartheid was wrong or whether they still adhere to the myth of apartheid and just think it has been applied wrongly. After all, God reveals Himself in the Bible as a partisan deity who discriminates against other people, even to the point of instigating genocide in the Book of Joshua, referred to as a text of terror (Mbuwayesango 2004:69).

Interpretation from a position of power enabled by particular economic and political factors within an empire does not encourage any conscientisation. The continuing role of hetero-patriarchy is very explicit in the deliberations over the text concerning women in the ministry of the RCSA in the book *Manlik en vroulik in die kerk: geslagtelikheid en die besondere dienste* (Breed, Van Rensburg & Jordaan 2008). Nowhere do the three authors as readers of the biblical text take their sociopolitical location as white heterosexual men into consideration. Within the church they as men are

in power. With maleness being the norm, the construction of masculinity goes unrecognised. As with whiteness, it remains an unreflected norm. Women, not gender, are the object of discussion.

However, there seems to be a need to account for the subjectivity of the reader, be this as it relates to gender, race or sexual orientation. The authors (Breed, Van Rensburg & Jordaan 2008:201) state very clearly in their conclusion that despite the fact that the exegesis and hermeneusis followed the explicitly stated principles (chapters 2-4), it did not lead them to understand the biblical texts *similarly*. When one looks at the hermeneutical process they described, it ends with what they refer to as "hermeneusis", the move from the text to the audience for whom the text is being explained or read and for which there are no rules; and it is concomitant with the gift of prophecy (Breed, Van Rensburg & Jordaan 2008:64). They acknowledge that the exegete needs to conduct an analysis of the social context in which the text is being read, but this context is not determinative for God's revelation in the text.

But how does one get around the following problem as formulated by Kraft (1979:51):

> Much of the Christian populace, for example, has simply continued to assume that such features of our society as monogamy, democracy, our type of educational system, individualism, capitalism, the "freedoms", literacy, technological development, military supremacy, etc. are all products of our association with God and therefore can be pointed to as indications of the superiority of our cultures over all other cultures ... A cross-cultural perspective on our culture and the influence of Christianity in it gives no support to the assumption that through the influence of Christianity ours has become the most ideal culture in the world ... The basic institutions, values, and goals of a society are *ethnocentrically* evaluated as best and, therefore, sanctioned by the worldview of their culture or subculture. Other people's customs are judged to be inferior or at least inappropriate. And for most of the cultures of the world the ultimate ground for these sanctions is supernatural. It is by their God or gods that most people understand their worldview and their culture as a whole to be validated. [author's emphasis]

Because of the continuous presence of empire and thus of masking power which exploits others, something more is needed to lay bare these relationships of power and their concomitant possibilities of abuse and exploitation. The traditional definition of hermeneutics operates on the level of everyday

knowledge which obscures these relationships. The only thing hermeneutics as a method of exegesis can achieve is some clarity around the biblical text and the method used, resulting in a partial and naïve understanding. Power in empire allows for nonreflection, as everyone is supposed to accept whatever his or her position in the power relations is.

However, it is well known that in any communication situation the following factors are involved (see Oeming 2006:7-8):

- The author of a text as the sender of a message, communicating an insight or experience from the context in which he or she resides at the time of writing.
- The text or the message itself which contains in part linguistically what the author originally intended to communicate.
- The reader who reads the text and in the process tries to re-actualise the author's message. Re-actualisation is easier when the author and the readers share mutual interest generated by the same context. Re-actualisation is more difficult when the author and readers are removed in terms of time and space, as would be the case with biblical texts.
- The subject matter itself, in other words the way in which the message is constructed.

The reader and the author are only connected with each other via the text and the subject matter. They have no direct contact. The four aspects interact with one another and create a hermeneutical spiral that leads to deeper understanding. Any person has a particular understanding of the reality in which he or she lives. Understanding is determined by economic, political, religious and social factors, to name but a few. You need only read *Rapport, Sunday Times, Sunday Independent, City Press, Sowetan, The Times* and *Daily Sun* to realise how the sociopolitical location of the readers determines what is being reported in these newspapers. Each understanding is based upon a naïve knowledge or everyday knowledge, in other words knowledge that is commonly available in each society and that reflects a particular level of knowledge of that society's reality. It is a knowledge that is not usually reflected upon, so that people cannot really say why they believe what they believe. The task of science is to reflect consciously on reality. In other words, its task is to lay bare those factors and elements that make up reality: those ideologies from which reality is constructed and experienced. In terms of the politics of exclusion (racism and sexism) I am of the opinion that a hermeneutics of vulnerability can elucidate unreflected or masked ideologies with which readers approach the biblical text in the process of hermeneusis.

One such ideology is whiteness, which is pertinent to the discussion of the heading of *Die Kerkblad* article.

Unreflected/masked ideologies: whiteness

Whiteness usually operates from a position of invisible power and remains an unreflected norm. It is a naturalised position when you have the power to name or to define (Snyman 2008a:100). It is part of the common sense and operates in a covert way to underwrite racial attitudes if left unchecked. It masks power and privilege and establishes itself in contrast to others who are marked as different (Snyman 2008a:109). How does one unmask whiteness? Perkinson (2004:223) argues that there is no salvation for whites as white and there is no solidarity with others except as white. The only possible way is racial conscientisation (2004:224) by exposing it and subjecting it to analysis.

Whiteness can be seen as a set of linked dimensions, as Ruth Frankenberg (1993:1) states: Whiteness is:

- a location of structured advantages of race privilege;
- a standpoint or a place from which white people look
  at themselves, at others and at society;
- a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked
  and unnamed.

The argument is that race matters.[1] It shapes peoples' lives (Frankenberg 1993:1):

> In the same way that both men's and women's lives are shaped by their gender, and that both heterosexual and lesbian women's experiences in the world are marked by their sexuality, white people *and* people of color live racially structured lives. In other words, any system of differentiation shapes those on whom it bestows privilege as well as those it oppresses. White people are "raced", just as men are "gendered".

Frankenberg (1993:1) says it is imperative to look at the racialness of the white experience in a society where white people view themselves as racially neutral or nonracial. In a context of past racialisation, I would say the issue of whiteness receives a somewhat different slant, namely where and how race

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[1]   Cornel West wrote a book called *Race Matters* (1993). In the preface he recounts several
      incidents where race mattered, i.e. nine taxis refusing to stop for him in New York and being
      harassed by police in New York on fake charges of cocaine trafficking.

continues to matter in our public discourses, as the example above has shown.

Empire is synonymous with empire. David Roediger (1991) gives an interesting picture of how whiteness developed in the broad context of class formation in the USA in a book called *The wages of whiteness: race and the making of the American working class*. The title is significant because the main argument is that there was a significant nonmonetary profit in social, psychological and economic terms. The title alludes to WEB du Bois's reference to the public and psychological wage the white working class received because they were white, despite low economic wages. The pleasure of whiteness functioned as a wage for white workers (Roediger 1991:13): "That is, status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative class relationships, North and South. White workers could, and did, define and accept their class positions by fashioning identities as 'not slaves' and as 'not Blacks'."

Roediger has shown the psychological advantage whiteness offered capitalist and industrial society. It is the sort of advantage apartheid once promised to its adherents. The political changes of 1994 have removed to a large extent that kind of advantage with, *inter alia*, the introduction of affirmative action. But I am not sure the same happened at an economic level. Should one reckon with a destabilised political whiteness withdrawing into the psychological security provided by their economic strength? If true, does this psychological advantage translate into a continuance of racism on other levels? Did the psychological wages of whiteness disable the white community to recognise the marks of their Bible-reading practices, and does the association between whiteness and power create the context for an associative and admiring identification with biblical Israel and its heroes?

The reference to "dark Africa" is reminiscent of 19th century colonial attitudes, which created a safe haven for whiteness. The words "dark Africa" allude to the cultural significance of innocence and defilement. The subsequent rhetoric of innocence constructs a particular symbolic reality of black (darkness) embodying impurity and anti-God; and whiteness suggesting purity, God and innocence (Ross 1997a, 1997b). "Black" and "white" respectively receive soteriological attributes. These roots can be traced back to premodern Europe when Europeans tried to, as James Perkinson (2004:53) formulated it:

> discern cross-cultural meanings in encounters with other peoples around the globe after 1492 [issuing] in perceptions that increasingly connect immediate appearance with ultimate destiny. But this ready conflation of salvation and racialization does not begin *de novo* in that early hour of confrontation. It has its precursors in a whole set of categories within Hebrew,

Christian, and Greek thought that inform older European attempts to deal with difference prior to the radically new experiences of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In broad terms, the Judeo-Christian tradition's construction of religious reality boiled down to *the true Christian self* versus *an untrue other*, usually depicted as the anti-Christ, the pagan worshippers or the heretics. With the advent of Enlightenment, Christianity became entrapped in a racialised discourse as a colour line turned the earlier distinctions of Spirit-Flesh, supralunar-sublunar, and rational-irrational into new binary structures of deserving-undeserving and selected-dysselected that could serve the nation-states and Western bourgeoisie (cf. Wynter 2003:323).

In the Judeo-Christian imaginary, the blackness or darkness was projected as being degenerated by sin and thus supernaturally determined, via Noah's curse on Ham, to be the nearest to the ape. With the shift from supernatural causation to natural causation in the 19th century, the Negro became the naturally determined missing link between true (rational) humans and the irrational figure of the ape (Wynter 2003:304). Subsequently, whiteness started to embody humanity and blackness became suggestive of wildness (cf. White 1985:158 ff).[2] Ultimately, it would be people with black skins who would pay the "most total psycho-existential price for the West's epochal degodding of both its matrix Judeo-Christian identity and the latter's projection of Otherness" (Wynter 2003:306).

In South Africa, the European attempt to make sense of the "African other" was informed by Calvinism, as understood and practised by the first Dutch settlers. To them, soteriology constituted the prime category of salvation. To quote Perkinson (2004:58-59), "Black skin posed the question of salvation in its starkest form"; "pigmentation was made to conflate with Calvinist notions of predestination"; and "dark skin was made to prefigure a destiny of perdition". Black diabolical skin was instantly recognisable, triggering off a defence mechanism within the Calvinist settlers as God's elect to protect themselves from the possibility of perversion and pollution (Perkinson 2004:59). White economic success became regarded as proof of divine grace and the subordination of African citizens was interpreted as divine rejection, or rather "negative predestination" (Bastide 1967:321). The consequence was a socially significant marking of whiteness and blackness in the form of apartheid after 1948.

The power of the rhetoric of whiteness lies in its ability to unwittingly invoke, even in a public discourse of nonracism, its implied contrast, blackness. Ross (1997b:265) calls it "black abstraction", a lens through which

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[2]   For a full discussion on how the binaries of Spirit/Flesh became a racial binary of black and white that continues in a post-modern empire without colonies, see Snyman (2008b).

whiteness remakes the setting in which it makes the choices being played out. It acts as a comfortable shelter against the strange black other. Since empathy is easier to achieve with those one is familiar with (those with whom one shares an epidermal shade), the difficulty to empathise with the epidermal other makes "black abstraction" more likely.

The hermeneutics of vulnerability

In tandem with the empire's imposing powers from North America and Europe the current norm used to interpret the biblical texts is that of a white Western wealthy heterosexual Christian male (Anderson 2009:135). It is not explicit, thus rather a *mythical norm*, but it can be seen in what is being excluded as the "Other" or rendered vulnerable in the application of this mythical norm. The term "Other" here "refers collectively to all groups that are different based on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, or class" (Anderson 2009:135).[3]

   This norm is based on a few values that succeeded in othering a particular group (as can be seen in the agendas of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion):

   (i) Patriarchy

   Patriarchy is a social system that promotes male privilege. It is male identified, male dominated and male centred. The core values are defined by masculinity and the "ideal man", and certain qualities are devalued and associated with femininity. In elevating maleness it subordinates females, emphasising the obsession with control as men try to maintain their privilege by controlling women and anyone else who threatens that control (Anderson 2009:11). Feminist scholars as the "other" raise concerns about gender constructions and the traditional under-standing of women in biblical texts: women should be respected as people too!

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[3]   Frankenberg (1993:198−199) associates the normativity of whiteness with an unmarked presence within colonialism where "nonwhite" cultures were viewed as being of lesser value. Progress and industrialisation are regarded as synonymous with Westernisation (whiteness) and empire, whereas the other cultures are merely caught up in tradition and culture. With white being the norm, it is inextricably tied to domination – a position that leaves whiteness and nonwhiteness reified and robbed of their historical contexts (1993:202). She refers to a draining process by which any cultural practice that is not identical to the dominant culture is automatically viewed as not really white or not really cultural.

(ii) Heterosexism

Heterosexism is understood as a bias regarding sexual orientation whereby prejudice is denoted in favour of heterosexuality as the normative form of human sexuality. All sexual authority, value and power are centred in heterosexuality. Condemnation of homosexuality reasserts the dominant position of the male and reinscribes the subordinate position of the female, a position that leaves men vulnerable (Anderson 2009:12-13). Queer theology is an attempt to counter heterosexuality as the sole norm for sexual orientation and open a gateway for Christians within lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual circles.

(iii) Race/ethnicity

Heteronormativity defines racial, ethnic and religious boundaries which Anderson (2009:13) calls sexualised perimeters. From the position of white middle-class heterosexual men, African and Latin men are thought to be hyper-sexualised and Asian men hypo-sexualised. This distinction is also rooted in the notion of the normative sexuality of the white male which associates nonwhiteness with the feminine, in other words that which is less rational and more animalistic, rhythmic and childlike. In an effort to assert themselves over and against the European norms, theologies or approaches are qualified ethnocentrically, suggesting that the norm has excluded them, in other words people of African-American, Asian, Latin-American and African origin.

(iv) Religion

The white heterosexual male is also Christian (and Protestant), marginalising all other non-Christian religions. In some instances superiority is claimed over and against Judaism, and some will even go as far as to use the Holocaust in justification. The events of 9/11 in the USA unleashed a war on terrorism but it soon became clear how Islam has become implicated in this (Anderson 2009:14). Readings of the biblical text that take the Holocaust seriously explore inclusive ways that can affirm the validity of Christianity as well as Judaism.

(v) Western territorial expansion

The normative white heterosexual Christian male is also the heir to the colonial empires of yesteryear and current global capitalism. Missionaries were active agents of the imperial enterprise. The missionary position as a sexual image of intercourse with the dominant male on top of the passive female becomes a metaphor for the Christian social position indicating gender hierarchy and the social position of active male dominance. With colonial expansion, whiteness and heterosexuality became associated with the ability to dominate others whereas nonwhiteness became the position of the dominated (Anderson 2009:15). White supremacy is evident in European expansion since the 15th century, slavery and currently in global capitalism. The identification of whiteness with masculinity and domination has an influence on the view of land as being like a beautiful female to be entered, dominated, inseminated and owned (Anderson 2009:16). Western territorial expansion is seen in gendered terms with the missionaries harnessing, penetrating and possessing the land. There is a link between the current ecological crisis and the colonial paradigm of possession and domination. In contrast, postcolonial and decolonial readings explore European complicity in exploitation in the colonial and missionary enterprise.

According to Anderson (2009:19), the effect of this mythical norm is that the "other" does not matter, because of being conceptually rendered feminine and an object to be dominated and controlled. But this mythical norm has an attraction for the excluded other, who ends up supporting it as a value system that is simply taken for granted. It appears to be natural and the expected state of affairs. Anderson (2009:19-20) concludes:

These conditions could not develop if the powerful admitted that they were only speaking from their own particularity and were not taking the circumstances of other human beings into account. That admission can never happen, however, because it would deprive the powerful of their authority. Consequently, biblical traditions and biblical interpretations are developed by the privileged elite, but that group has had to mask or cover over the relationship they have to the determinations they make. Using comparable rationales, the church and the academy have justified their interpretations by contending that those interpretations are "divine" or "objective", respectively. In fact,

these interpretations only reflected their own perspectives and circumstances, but that tactic has been successful. Their views are the orthodox views, and any attempt to incorporate other human experiences into the deliberations can be rejected as "contrary to biblical teachings".

Where white and black meet in the new nonracial church structures within the RCSA, it would be dangerous not to take this mythical norm into consideration. The Reformed tradition is a European tradition and its members would act from a position of power in Africa. Whiteness is very much part empire. But being South African, in the words of Antjie Krog (2009:100), the tradition has "a unique opportunity to remove [itself] from under the umbrella of the international sanctity of white body and share the vulnerability of the black body". In the face of a white majority, a black minority in the church will feel quite vulnerable. But in the face of the black majority nationally, the white majority in the church will feel similarly vulnerable. The danger is that the latter may use their majority in the church to maintain a measure of power that has been lost in terms of national politics yet which they still possess globally.

Vulnerability refers to exclusion. Hermeneutics of vulnerability asks in what way the results of the reading of the Bible may lead to the exclusion of some people. The exclusion is based on a norm over which the excluded has no power, such as pigmentation, sexuality and gender.

The idea of a hermeneutics of vulnerability is based on what Emmanuel Levinas (1985:89) calls "the ethical moment". With the ethical moment he wanted to involve the other person with whom one enters into dialogue, with whom one reads the Bible at a visitation, or for whom one will interpret the Bible at a synod or church meeting. It is someone for whom one would be responsible.

The basis is the 6th commandment: "You shall not kill." The ethical moment comes into being in the meeting of two human beings, face to face. In this meeting they become for each other, metaphorically, someone without any relations, be these family, blood or community relations.

This meeting should be conceived in terms of the criticism of the prophets (Is 1:23; 10:1-2; and Jer 7:4-16) against Israel and Judah regarding the way they treated the poor, widows and orphans. These people were neglected, and society had to be continuously encouraged to look after them. The juridical status of women was of such a nature that when a woman's husband died, she was left vulnerable. She could not inherit and had no means to sustain herself. She could not return to her parents, as her parents had received a dowry for her (cf. Deist 2000:266).

Society's responsibility towards the poor, widows and orphans runs like a golden thread throughout the Old Testament and is closely linked to the

covenant. Whereas in the Old Testament it was meant to sustain Israel as a people, in Levinas's terms it becomes more generally applicable to all human beings meeting another where both are stripped, making them vulnerable, uncovered, naked. The one that is met is like a stranger, someone not part of your group. And even if this face invited you to violence, the 6th commandment's prohibition remains valid.

Not to kill the other affirms that radical responsibility that each person has towards another. The face of the other forms the basis of one's responsibility (Snyman 2007:133). The face that one sees demands a radical obligation on the part of the self not to destroy or violate the other. The physical presence of the other prohibits such a violation.

But violation need not be physical. Violation also happens when one denies the difference and the otherness of the other. Levinas (1969) calls this "totalising". Totalising occurs when one takes away the autonomy of the other by, for example, judging the person on the basis of his or her essence. This happens when men and women are judged in terms of their biology: men are strong and women are weak. Or, men are ordained to fill the offices in the church and women are ordained to services elsewhere in the church, provided they do not make decisions. In racism, totalising occurs when all people are judged similarly because of the colour of their skin. Totalising appears in the reference to Africa as dark.

It is in the face, in the look of an eye, that one meets responsibility (Phillips & Fewell 1997:4). The self experiences its own vulnerability, because the other may destroy him or her similarly (Levinas 1981:85). The self becomes the hostage of the other!

Conclusion

A hermeneutics of vulnerability is in tension with the exertion of power by way of biblical interpretation and theologising. Totalising happens when the vulnerables are expected to accept what has been argued in an authoritarian way (Snyman 2007:121). A hermeneutics of vulnerability allows one to ask ethical questions about the marks left on others in the process.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1988), in her 1987 presidential address at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in the USA, refers to the public-political responsibility of anyone dealing with the Bible. To her, biblical texts and their interpretations do not only involve authorial aims and strategies, but also audience perceptions and constructions. She (1988:9-13; 17-18) bases her arguments on two aspects, namely social location and political ethos. Social location refers to a relationship of power that is influenced by race, gender, sexuality, economy, etcetera, shaping the perceptions one might have of this position in which one finds oneself. For example, on a continuum of power, within a particular gender relationship

such as patriarchy, women will find themselves in a subordinate position and may perceive the world around them in that way: the readers' social location determines how they see the world, how they construct their reality and how they interpret texts. Political ethos refers to the political context in which the biblical text is read. Reading is not done within a political vacuum. The Bible-reader does not stand outside the common circumstances of life in society.

Schüssler Fiorenza then posits a double ethics of reading which constitutes two sides of the same coin: an ethics of historical reading and an ethics of accountability. Regarding the first, she argues (1988:14) that an "ethics of historical reading changes the task of interpretation from finding out 'what the text meant' to the question of what kind of readings can do justice to the text in its historical contexts". Schüssler Fiorenza (1988:15) defines the second aspect as being "responsible not only for the choice of theoretical interpretive models but also for the ethical consequences of the biblical text and its meanings". It is here that a hermeneutics of vulnerability enters the discussion.

An ethics of interpretation is concerned with balancing readers' responsibilities to the text, to themselves as readers and to those who will eventually bear the marks of our reading. In other words, an ethics of reading can be defined as that condition in which a reader takes seriously not only his or her social location from which the reading will be done, but also that of the author who once produced the text as well as that of the readers who are implicated by the text either as intended or real readers. In this way the historicity of the text, author and readers can receive its due.

But that is not the whole story. A reader also needs to take seriously the political implications of his or her social position in the act of reading within that particular society. "Taking seriously the political implications" also has a bearing on the author of a text, as his or her writing would have had consequences for the community in whose midst he or she produced the text. Thus, it implies that the author of the text needs to take responsibility for the political implications and consequences for the immediate audience (real or intended) of his or her writing a text within a particular community. An ethics of reading requires of the reader "an explicit articulation of one's rhetorical strategies, interested perspectives, ethical criteria, theoretical frameworks, religious presuppositions, and socio-political locations" for public scrutiny within a rhetorical paradigm of Old Testament studies (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988:18). A hermeneutics of vulnerability holds the Bible-reader responsible for this process and it renders its ethics public.

A hermeneutics of vulnerability focuses on the consequences that a particular interpretation or theological proposition might have on others. With regard to the black other with whom the Bible will be read in church meetings, and given white complicity in the maintenance of apartheid

between 1948 and 1994 and the fact that apartheid constituted an epistemic and civilisation break, this will not be an easy process. James Perkinson (2004:3-4) in his book *White theology: outing supremacy in modernity* says: "Part of coming to consciousness of oneself as white [...] involves daring to look into black eyes and not deny the reflection ... It entails confrontation with embarrassment of having already been 'found out' by one's (in this case) most frightening other." Thus, it is acknowledging the vulnerability of the other as well as recognising one's own vulnerability, especially in view of the past.

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