

Teaching the Bible in a South African intercultural context: A conversational paradigm

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SINOPSIS

Vir 'n meer korrekte oordra en verstaan van die bybelboodskap is kontekstuele relevante onderrig van die Bybel belangrik. Dit is slegs moontlik as horisonsversmelting van die drie kulture wat in so 'n gesprek ter sprake is plaasvind, naamlik: dié van die sender, die ontvanger en die Bybel. 'n 'Tertium' moet deur 'n hermeneutiese gespreksforum geskep word en moet die resultaat wees van 'n onophoudelike dialoog tussen geloof en kultuur. In hierdie kommunikasietransaksie, as 'n interpersoonlike dinamiese proses, is elke deelnemer onophoudelik betrokke by beide die enkoderings- en dekoderingsprosesse.

1. INTRODUCTION

There was a time when the missionaries in India were called 'dora'. The word is used to describe rich farmers and small-time kings. Such petty rulers bought large pieces of land, put up compound walls, built bungalows, and had servants. They also erected separate bungalows for their second and third wives. When the missionaries came they, too, bought land, built bungalows and compound walls and had servants. Like the rich farmers, they also provided separate bungalows for female missionaries who were stationed on the same compound, and for servants stationed on the other compounds.

'Dorasani' was another term used. The term did not describe the wife of

a dora for she could be kept hidden from the public eye. It described his mistress whom he often took with him in his cart or car.

The missionary thought of himself as a 'missionary', not realizing that there is no such thing in the traditional Indian society. This resulted in crosscultural misunderstanding. In order to relate to him, the people had to find him a role within their own set of roles, and they did so. Unfortunately, the missionaries were not aware of how the people perceived them to be (Hievert 1983:383).

Anthropologists, sociologists and theologians have investigated this misunderstanding. They have consulted books and conference papers on the topic. This paper is but a

modest contribution to the already advanced debate. However, on account of the very tense situation and the uncertainty of the future in South Africa, this paper should rather be seen as a plea for a contextually relevant teaching of the Bible.

The point of departure of this paper is the communication transaction, formulated as *the conversational communicational process* in teaching the Bible interculturally.

Teaching the Bible in an intercultural context entails three areas of concern namely *teaching, the Bible and intercultural context*. *Teaching* concerns the manner of communication, *the Bible* the contents, and *intercultural context* the context within which the didactics will take place. This latter area indicates the problem under discussion and the former two the dynamic areas that constitute the conversational process.

The following presuppositions have to be taken into account:

– In this paper the 'teacher' is traditionally a product of a Western culture (a westerner). This term loosely refers to a person who facilitates learning. The 'respondents' are the recipients who traditionally come from an African culture (Africans). The dangers involved in such loose referencing, which could easily be seen as an apparent oversimplification, are obvious. However, this has not been done merely to typologize or stress cultural differences in order

to create distance, but rather to distinguish between the two mainstreams of culture in South Africa. It must be emphasized that what is said in this paper concerns, and is also applicable to, any situation where biblical teaching takes place between cultures, regardless of race.

– The recipients referred to can be regarded as people who claim to be Christians and who have already been exposed to Christianity and are asking new and valid questions about faith in God. Regarding the religiosity of the South African population, 77 per cent of the population confesses to Christianity, according to the 1980 census (Burden 1991:18).

2. THE PROBLEM DEFINED

2.1 The complexity of a three-culture scheme in communication

In the South African situation 'we live in a community consisting of traditional Africans, Westernized Africans, Africanized Westerners, and traditional Westerners with all shades of acculturation linking those categories' (Deist 1991:42). Millions of black people living in cities no longer share the 'typical' traditional African ways, while white people living in rural areas do not necessarily share the traditional Western model of rationality (Deist 1991:42). Deist also points out that the South African youth between the ages of 13

and 18 most probably adhere to a totally different value system, world-view and subculture. In the same vein Burden refers to this heterogeneous complex situation as a multicultural, multireligious and multi-theological context (Burden 1992).

It is important to understand what culture really is in order to grasp this complexity and its implications. According to Shorter (1988:4) culture 'is what human beings share culturally, their customs, values, and distinctive way of living, that constitutes them as a recognizably distinct human group or society. Human societies not only possess a culture, but are distinguished by it from other human societies'. Culture is not simply about behaviour, it is also about ideas. This idea is expressed by the following definition in (Shorter 1988:5): 'A set of symbols, stories, myths and norms of conduct that orient a group cognitively, effectively and behaviorally to the world in which it lives.' This affects understanding. According to Burden (1992:3), culture is a human activity. Since religion is a human activity as well, it must affect and be affected by culture.

Instead of defining culture on a one-dimensional plane, Kwast (1972: 159ff) visualizes culture as consisting of a core and several successive 'layers', or levels of understanding around the core. He explains that the first thing a newly arrived visitor in a foreign country would notice is the people's behaviour. This is the outer

and most superficial layer of understanding. The second layer is the prevailing values. This involves choices about what is 'good', what is 'beneficial' or what is 'best'. Cultural beliefs are found at a deeper level of understanding and answer the question: 'What is true?' The core of any culture is its world-view, which is the answer to the most basic question: 'What is real?'

Cultures are varied and require diverse understanding and this can result in communication problems. Eugene Nida of the American Bible Society has made an important contribution towards an understanding of the communication problems in intercultural communication. His diagram on 'Structure of Communication' (Nida 1960:36ff) provides the basis of our consideration of the *three-culture scheme of communication* and has been converted to elucidate the contents of this paper.

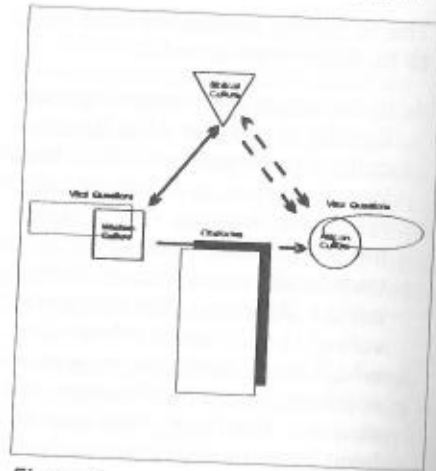


Figure 1

This diagram indicates the process involved in teaching the bible inter-culturally. At the primary level the message of the Bible was given by God through the history of Israel, the prophets and apostles in the language and cultural contexts of the people of Israel (indicated by the triangle). These messages are embedded in the cultures of the people of Israel which can be labelled as 'biblical cultures'.

At the secondary level the teacher looks in vertical and horizontal directions (indicated by the square). In the first place he looks at the Scriptures. The message is not his. He was not there and in the same situation as the prophet or the apostle when it was first given (1 John 1:1, 2) (Hesselgrave 1978:83). He is a member of a culture different from those represented in the Scriptures. He is from a culture which can be labelled as a 'western culture'. He has grown up in this culture and has been schooled in its language, world-view, and value system. He received the Christian message within the context of his culture as it was communicated by someone who most likely also belonged to his culture.

Now he must look in another direction — the direction of the recipient. At a tertiary level (of cultural difference), the recipients indicated in this paper are people from other cultures and have their own world view, value system, and codes of communication. They are from cultures labelled 'African cultures' (indicated by the

circle). The teacher must remember that the recipients have imbibed the particular ideas and values from their cultures as deeply as he has from his (Hesselgrave 1978:76).

Because of the three different cultures involved in this communication transaction, interferences in the communication process are inevitable.

They include the following:

- (i) External interferences. These include possible physical interferences in a didactical situation. The following also give rise to certain problems:

- Blacks and whites live in two different worlds in South Africa because of the legacy of apartheid. This influences their *perceptions* profoundly. Whites are largely immunized from the misery, powerlessness and hopelessness that the masses of the black population experience. Living in the relative tranquillity of a white suburb allays one's sense of urgency.

- The justification of group interests leads to ideological *distortions* and evasions. Many whites refrain from acknowledging the viciousness of the system and their guilt in creating and sustaining it. Many blacks in turn find it difficult to concede that white apprehensions are not entirely without substance (Nürnberg 1988:215).

- To further complicate the matter there are different theological perspectives and traditions, for instance, Roman Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal. Maybe we as 'Westerners' do not always realize how all the different Christian traditions burden the African people of our country. To quote but one example: A Roman Catholic Theologian, Jean-Marc Ela, from Cameroon, wrote: '... we must liberate African Christianity from its Babylonian captivity. Christianity in Africa has been made captive by Roman structures that are weighed down by an ecclesiastical mentality; by the sociological burden of a religion of the "other world"; by a form of piety and devotion of Christianity in decay; by the disguised apolitical stance of missionaries; by the massive apathy, irresponsibility, and intolerable greed of certain members of the clergy; by the disembodied spirituality by some indigenous lay people; and by the lack of awareness or infantilism of African religious trained clergy in a European fashion' (Nürnberger 1988). This of course also applies to other Christian traditions.

- A major obstacle is also not knowing the recipient's mother-tongue. How can one hope to enter the world of another not knowing his language.

- (ii) Internal interferences. Here we refer to the differences in values, attitudes, beliefs, convictions, frames of reference and expectations.
- (iii) Intra-psychological interferences. Here we refer to hatred, traumatic experiences, etc.

2.2 The consequences

The fundamental consequences of interferences could be confusion, and misunderstanding or even animosity towards the teacher (and probably also towards God) and his scriptural message.

3. TOWARDS A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

3.1 The conversation as paradigm for teaching the bible interculturally

According to Berger (Shorter 1988:48), there are three options that confront cultural and religious traditions in a multicultural society. Firstly, there is the deductive option, which is the refusal to communicate. It is, in effect, cultural encapsulation, a reaffirmation of old certainties in a neo-traditional manner. Such a course dooms a culture or a religious tradition to irrelevance and ultimate extinction. Secondly, there is the reductive option which implies estrangement and an acceptance of cultural and religious impoverishment. Finally, there is the inductive option whereby, according to Berger,

(Shorter 1988: 48) dialogue is regarded as the only possible answer to cultural and religious survival. Simultaneously there are three probable outcomes, according to Cohen and Middleton (Shorter 1988:48) who wrote about the interaction of ethnic cultures in Africa: 'Firstly, the discovery of interdependence between people of diverse cultures and religions; secondly, the cultural overlap or congruence where people may discover that there is an area of agreement between their images and conceptions; and thirdly, the outcome of incorporation. In this dialectical interchange people learn new interests from one another.'

The writer contends that the same applies to the interaction between 'Westerners' and 'Africans'.

In order to apply the three outcomes of Cohen and Middleton (Shorter 1988), a conversation forum has to be created in the didactical situation. This forum has to be constituted by the teacher, the recipient and the Scriptures. These outcomes are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Conversation, in the writer's opinion, is a call for openness and a willingness to undergo critical self-evaluation and to risk self-exposure. By *conversation*, which in this case is a socio-historic, dynamic hermeneutical process between the 'Western', 'biblical', and 'African' cultures, we understand the exchange of thoughts and words, the involvement of correcting attitudes and the recipient's situation, and acquiring a specific

direction. It is, however, emphasized that this conversation must take place in the context of a relationship.

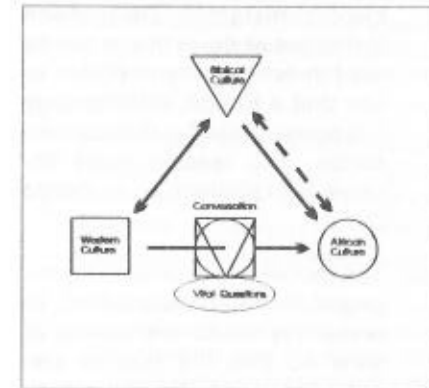


Figure 2

When the communication transaction starts as an interpersonal and dynamic process each participant is continuously involved in both the encoding and decoding processes:

- (i) For the teacher, cultural boundaries must be traversed in dual directions. His first responsibility is to study the Scriptures, always in terms of the 'biblical culture context'. In the consummation of hermeneutics, the teacher must take into account the cultural context in which the message was originally communicated, the background, syntax and style, the characteristics of the audience, and the special circumstances in which the message was given. His second responsibility is to 'study' the recipient. What applied for the

Scriptures must also be consummated here. The cultural context must be taken into account, as well as characteristics and special circumstances. The problem is that not all these things can be read in books. It is needless to say that a biblical anthropology is a prerequisite for this conversation. The teacher must observe his recipient as an *Imago Dei*.

- (ii) The recipient is to be actively engaged in this conversation, to reveal his world and points of view so that the teacher can enter his world. We can actually say that both the teacher and the recipient have to enter each other's world.
- (iii) The role of the Scriptures is to play a normative, authoritative guiding role in this conversation.

3.2 A closer look at the different constituents of the definition of conversation

- (i) The interchange of thoughts and words.
Critical activity:
Conversation must always have critical reflection. We refer to the Greek word *ἀνακρίνω* which means 'investigate', 'examine' as well as *συγκρίνω* which means 'compare', 'interpret'. This is precisely what has to take place in this conversation. Critical judgments must be articulated in both directions.

In South Africa we must strive to be communities in which the conversation is rigorous yet open, critical yet candid. We must seek to define criteria of excellence within our diverse theological and cultural communities in order to develop genuine communities of discourse in which people of differing and even conflicting points of view engage in critical conversation with one another. The greatest danger we all face is that our diversity will lead to fragmentation — to the creation of separate communities of discourse, each locked into its subworld of reality within its own standards of judgment (Thiemann 1991:168).

Deist (1991:42–48) in his discussion of South-Africanising Biblical Studies, pleaded for the 'complimentarity' (sic) of the 'African' and 'Western' poles of our differing epistemologies as well as the deconstructive manner in which they should interact'. He suggested a *modus operandi* with which we agree (Deist 1991:46): 'The various approaches, views and histories must interact critically, one deconstructing the other as it were, in order to facilitate the reconstruction of a *tertium*.'

In the Oxford dictionary "Tertium" is used in the context of "Tertium Quid", translated as "some third thing". It is something (indefinite or left undefined) related in some way to two (definite or known) things, but distinct from both. Such a *Tertium* has to be created through a conversational hermeneutic forum. The *ter-*

tium is the result of a continuous dialogue between faith and culture. This tertium should include an agenda with a contextual content, and must be a socio-historic matrix of interpretation.

(ii) Content

In South Africa we have traditionally drawn our theological resources from the European intellectual scene. Our failure to produce a distinctively South African theology may reside in part in our neglect of this indigenous philosophical and practical tradition (Thiemann 1991:169f; Pobe 1989:2).

According to Lombard and Smit (1990:52ff) there is a growing conviction amongst African theologians and church leaders that doing theology in Africa 'must be local in order to be real'. This point of view is based on the task of the formed Ecumenical Association of African Theologians at the Final Communique of the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians in 1977. Their task was described as follows:

We believe that African theology must be understood in the context of African life and culture and the creative attempt of African peoples to shape a new future that is different from the colonial past and the neo-colonial present. The African situation requires a new theological methodology that is different from the approaches of the dominant theologies of the West. African theology must reject, therefore, the

prefabricated ideas of North Atlantic theology by defining itself according to the struggles of the people in their resistance against the structures of domination. Our task as theologians is to create a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people (Lombard and Smit 1990:51f).

In a project considering the establishment of theological courses at the University of Namibia (Academy) in Windhoek some of the results were:

In a certain sense all theology is contextual, i.e. it arises with a particular situation and it reflects the problems and priorities of that situation. This does not, however, make the qualification 'contextual' superfluous tautologous, because it may happen — and it has indeed happened only too often that a theology from a particular context, e.g. the Western tradition, has simply been brought over into a new and completely different context. The result is often that answers are given to questions that no one asks, and that the urgent problems of the new context are not addressed at all. Theological training has often suffered in this way. Precisely because of this, Christians all over the Third World have been arguing for contextual theology, i.e. theology that is conscious of its own context, in recent years ... (Lombard en Smit 1990: 57).

The Institute for Contextual Theology in South Africa believes that contextual theology must start from the real-life situations; it must be a community effort; critical questions must be asked; resources (like information from other disciplines) must be used;

and it must be practical (Lombard en Smit 1990:58).

Based on these pronouncements, contextualization of Scripture must take place. The author agrees with this, but then contextualization of Scripture must not take place only on behalf of culture, but on behalf of understanding Scripture. It is not Scripture that has to adapt to a culture but the contents of a culture has to be used to understand the message of Scripture.

The following factors should be presented in the conversation (visualize concentric circles):

- (a) The third world context
- (b) The African context
- (c) The overall economic, social, political, cultural and religious contexts of South Africa
- (d) Contextual issues regarding congregations. Both parties, namely the teacher and recipients, must determine the agenda. Think, for example, of issues such as poverty, unemployment, conflict, racism, *et cetera* (Thiemann 1991:161; Lombard & Smit 1990:58).

Daneel takes it further. According to him future solutions do not lie in policy statements and the accompanying choice of keywords — such as accomodation, assimilation, contextualisation or transformation — but in the quality of cross-cultural, interhuman encounter, through which the incarnation of Christ, as the affirmation and judgment of all cul-

tures, becomes manifest (Daneel 1989:51). This interhuman encounter is determined by underlying implicit attitudes. To this we must now turn.

(iii) Attitudes

In a conversation both partners have to be open and willing to get rid of their presumptions. A synthesis, based on praxis, should be sought. They must respect each other as equal partners and try to come to a better understanding of each other in this conversation. They must try to accomplish a methodological democratization. All devices that can contribute to better and effective teaching should be used.

Such conversations require a combination of openness and self-confidence on the part of both conversation partners. Each must have a clear sense of what they can contribute to the conversation, as they seek to gain new insights from each other. The goal of this kind of co-operation is to create a new community of discourse, or a group that identifies a number of issues or questions which the members have in common (Thiemann 1991:160) and who seek to engage in mutually beneficial investigation of those problems. As Christians and parts of the body of Christ, we are mutually involved in one another's problems and needs and cannot distance ourselves from it (from the body)

The hermeneutical dynamic conversation cannot be dynamic if it has not transposed into praxis.

(iv) Situation involvement

Teaching the Bible is a reflective, cognitive activity. But it is a peculiar form of cognitive reflection, because its goal is not simply the further expansion of knowledge. Teaching the Bible must seek a practical goal, which Thiemann (1991:169) calls 'The formation of religious identity'. Situation involvement is not a task but part of being Christian itself (1 John 5).

Biblical teaching must again become serious because of the conviction that our identity lies in our involvement. And because of our involvement we must reflect on our identity in Christ. Therefore the conversation process and involvement in the situation of the recipient must entail reflection on religious practices. Some such practices are located within religious communities, whereas others may be broadly distributed within society and culture. Theologians and teachers of the Bible need to become involved in congregational practices (worship, preaching and counselling). By analysing the structures and language of those practices, theologians can identify their own basic convictions and value commitments and

seek to subject themselves to analysis and criticism. In so doing, they can seek to contribute to the reformation of those practices and the reformation of the human identities shaped within them.

(v) The acquisition of a specific direction

Ultimately, according to Pobee, if the teaching of the Bible is about reflection, articulating and experiencing God's self-disclosure in the world, then it is an engagement with the holy, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinatum*, the mystery which is great and awe-inspiring. Such an engagement evokes worship; it evokes the response 'my Lord and my God.' In the earliest communities the traditions of the church were preserved and transmitted in their worship. The earliest communities were worshipping communities.

Pobee wrote:

In Ghana the Anglicans love to refer to a theological educator called Fr Bernard Clements. When he died, Bishop Aglionby paid the following tribute to him: 'What they (ie native clergy) needed was a clear and definite knowledge of the teachings of the Christian faith so that they could take a true and living message to perplexed and hungry souls . . . He (Fr Clements) showed his men (students) how to worship God in the beauty of holiness, to draw out what was best in African customs and ceremonies and to adapt and ennoble to the worship of God those very things which made their appeal