

RESEARCH AND TRUTH? ADJUSTMENTS IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY IN THE LIGHT OF CHANGING CONTEXTS

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Abstract

The reformulation of a theological research policy is necessitated by a post-apartheid environment as well as developments concerning the value, preconditions and manner of research. One could, for example, refer to the changing concept of truth and how it affects research. In this paper it is argued that systematic theology is practised today in a context that could be typified as postcanonical, postconfessional, posttraditional, postsecular and interreligious. As a consequence of these influences a society oriented theology is proposed that could benefit specific denominations as well as society in general. A society-directed theology presupposes the presence of a strong religious inclination within our society which defends such an overarching theology. Such a theology should develop a societal hermeneutics which identifies, explains and criticises the dominant religious motives, power games, values and so on operative within different religious sectors of society. It sensitises interest groups to social and religious issues of concern. A society-oriented theology is thus pluralistic, contextual, and committed to dialogue.

1. Research and Truth

1.1 The future of research

Research, including theological research, is questioned in post apartheid South Africa. It can be viewed as elitist, Western-oriented and inappropriate in a third-world country where the emphasis is increasingly on primary education.

It is difficult to counter these arguments credibly. Can research products really be measured, and what are they worth? Is most research not simply the compilation of other research? How resourceful and creative is research, in fact? Can research be defended by falling back on the argument that its true value cannot be measured?

The taxpayer expects that the money spent on research should serve the community both directly and indirectly. Should research monies not rather be used to buy tested research results from overseas, or to limit research to that which is of benefit to the community?

Questions such as these demand the evaluation and review of the research policy of any institution or research body. A research strategy and policy would have to be convincing to justify a future for research.

One can expect education to play a prominent role in the following couple of decades. For this reason it should be as effective and goal-oriented as possible. The danger of fundamentalism is great in a newly found democracy where there is either a naive grasping at modernistic ideals to ensure a better life for all, or a reactionary

rejection of modernism¹ and institutions that can be associated with it, since it has so far failed to benefit the majority of the people in the country.

The public should have the opportunity of participating in an open research forum. The best research cannot always be limited to academic circles. Neither may good research be limited to pragmatically important or scientific research. Criticism of one-sided technological development is indispensable for the protection of humankind and its total environment. Without this, the only task of future research might be to attempt to rectify the mistakes of the past.

There is 'useless' research without which no society can manage. This concerns more particularly the aesthetic and religious dimension of human existence. Without this, all other research would be doomed. The value of research cannot always be measured. The value of research does not lie only in pragmatically applicable research results. No society can exist without making some sacrifice to poetic, aesthetic and religious demands.² In this sense research that may seem to be 'useless' does have a place.

Theology, churches and religious groups in the country are among the most important instruments which can influence people, change values and contribute to establishing a new world and human ideal, together determining future expectations. It is unthinkable that a sociopolitical revolution such as the one we are experiencing would have no effect on the agenda of any living religious group or relevant theology. It would be a tragedy for theology to fail to take up the opportunities and challenges that such a change brought about. It would be the task of the theological research, among other things, to reflect (and look ahead) critically in the process and attempt to make a contribution. The repetition of mistakes of the past should be avoided as far as possible -- not because this would guarantee a faultless future, but because this would be the best alibi for justifying today's decisions tomorrow.

1.2 Research in Africa

During a time when emphasis is laid on contextual Africa-oriented research³, the historically contingent circumstances within an African context will have to be

1 In a new democracy such as that in which we find ourselves, there may be groups that seek their salvation in traditions that were suppressed in the past but which have been revived. Tradition is idealised and everything that is foreign to tradition is rejected. This is a minority view which is generally dominated by a more progressive approach that wishes to retain the old tradition and adapt it to the 'technological age' in the hope that it will result in a better life (cf Scannone 1992:83). In an uncertain situation such as our present one, fundamentalist viewpoints usually flourish (Lechner 1993:22-24). The disappearance of fundamentalism is, according to Lechner, a precondition for the revival of religiosity. He views fundamentalism as being chiefly a modern problem. 'It actually strives to reorder society; it reasserts the validity of a tradition and uses it in new ways ...' (Lechner 1993:30). Fundamentalism, like modernism, is counteracted by a process of pluralism and universalism.

2 It stands to reason... that the apparently 'useless' has an irreplaceable value in any discipline and broader society. This must be stressed at a time during which technology for economic survival is being overemphasised. The aesthetic and poetic in theology is expressed particularly in the doxological nature of theology. Doxology serves to counter rationalism. Since doxology includes religious experience, it can also help promote an ecumenical and community-oriented spirit. 'The emphasis on experience in theology opens the possibility to reclaim the nature of systematic theology as doxology' (Naude 1994:ff; see also Du Toit 1992:70).

3 The distinction between 'Eurocentric' and 'Afrocentric' has limited practical value since it is no more than a vague indication of a *predisposition* without the possibility of there being an exact identity of and delimitation between the two emphases (cf Du Toit 1995:41-42).

thoroughly taken into account. This does not mean that the international interconnectedness of research and the influence of new epistemological models in the process of research can be ignored.

Serious consideration will have to be given to what *theologians from Africa* have to say regarding the position and role of theology in Africa. In this connection the document of the seventh international conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), held in December 1986, is of importance. This document, which was compiled after the meeting, contains a proposal for a theological model which, in my view, lays down important guidelines for what may be typified as a society oriented theology. The following are a few appropriate pointers (see *Commonalities* 1990:195-213):

- 'Liberation is the common theme and central concern for all of us, because the central and common experience of all has been domination and oppression, whether colonial, racist, sexist, or capitalist. Basically this calls for a theology of the other - the other race, sex, culture, dignity, honour, and land. That will include a theology of conversion to the other and to the God of the other.' (point 14)
- 'The living religions of Africa and Asia call for a conscious incorporation of theologies other than Christian into our thinking. This is especially true about Christology. It is impossible to accept that the majority of humankind would be deprived of the benefits of redemption and salvation. The Jesus of Nazareth should be expanded and considered also as the total and cosmic Christ.' (point 21)
- 'Third World theology is theology as if people mattered. Its concern is not the neatness of a system but the liberation of the people. It is not elaborated in the academy but developed by the communities of the poor. It is the people who have the authority of the word.' (point 28)
- 'Professional theologians are the community's servants in interpreting events and in systematising the community's experience. Their fidelity and responsibility to the community are essential to the concept of theology.' (point 29)
- '... We have learned to show more respect and concern for people than for systems. Turning to people we have become more cautious of scientific theories. People's wisdom is a far safer guide.' (point 36)
- 'Third World theology is bound with the life and death of the poor.' (point 37)
- 'Traditional religions speak to the problems and needs of everyday life - they deal with food and health, droughts and floods, hunting, fear, fertility, while Western Christianity appears to be too mental, abstract, juridical. Religions must not be disconnected from socio-political situations and problems.' (point 49)
- 'Things have changed; traditional religions are reviving; the hegemony of Christianity is being challenged; a new sense of the divine history is taking shape.' (point 50)
- 'EATWOT has devoted through the years special efforts to the understanding of and to the dialogue with non-Christian religions and cultures. But we have not explored their traditions and symbols in relation to liberation and human promotion.' (point 56)

It is clear that most of the current burning questions in Western theology are reflected here. There is enough material to provide a contribution to developments in Western

theology from an Africa-oriented perspective. Some of these points will be taken up in the proposal for a society-oriented theology which will be presented during the discourse.

A contextual theology in Africa need not be a third-world theology, even if it is directed at the problems of the Third World. The challenge would be to design a theology of the day for the people without excluding essential theological research (cf Du Toit 1995:38-57). The problem of poverty in Africa is so overwhelming that it could monopolise the entire theological agenda. If theology is to make a contribution there will have to be freedom, so that theology is not limited to a reconstruction-and-development theology. The challenge is to undertake research with an avant-garde character which is simultaneously contextual and society oriented.

1.3 Research, modernism and truth?

Research can be a myth. The faith that people place in research rests largely on modernistic proposals that can no longer be entertained. A modernistic view of research presupposes the existence of truth *an sich*. Truth in modernism is not problematic since the ideal of the attainment of truth is accepted. This goes with the correspondence theory of truth and sees truth itself as that which is modern (Malpas 1992:287).

It is believed that we can progressively get closer to the truth through research. Improved methods, the elimination of mistakes, more precise and consistent use of language and the like bring about growth and development towards truth. The closer we are to the truth, the better our lives will be. Science improves our lives.

Truth presupposes unity. That which is true excludes that which is false. In practice research leads not to unity, but to variety. This creates a great deal of uncertainty since the single godly truth must now make way for a multiplicity of human truths which, in their variety and contradictions, reflect an ambiguous world. This creates tension in people who wish to fit truth in a binary fashion into a black-and-white scheme. In the words of Kundera (1988:6-7): '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 could not regard matters and know things other than from a certain perspective. Nevertheless, people wish to place everything in a true-false and a good-evil relationship (Allen 1992:230). This is especially so in the South African context.⁴

In a multiple context theological research can at most attempt to let justice be done to the variety of perspectives within a society.

1.4 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 just an imperfect phenomenon. Truth does not lie above and outside this truth, but appears in a variety of forms within this truth. These are determined by time, cultural history, tradition, and the particular rules of the

4 Fundamentalism is strongly grounded in South African communities. Ironically though, the cultural plurality of our context should limit fundamentalist characteristics since the multiplicity of viewpoints should promote openness. This presupposes that groups should be exposed to each other -- something that was not the case among us in the past. Religious apartheid, in particular, flourishes and there is little true exposure to one another. Religious apartheid can no longer escape criticism.

language and the community using it. Our image of truth has become *Escher-like*: detail makes sense within context, but the whole is never without paradox or contradiction.

Research, in the Nietzschean sense, has become decadent. To Nietzsche decadence meant that the unity, the whole, had been lost (Jay 1988:2). In the history of Western philosophy the misleading nature of truth has often been pointed out. The history of human thought is full of attempts to centre truth in system, dogma and book; to organise meaning, to determine rationality, and to standardise method as the means of access to truth, and so forth. But what we call truth is in fact a process, a piece of rational history, a game -- although it is generally treated with deadly seriousness (cf Thiselton 1992:11).

Truth remains a working hypothesis which we cannot do without. It often functions metaphorically in our use of language. We have to construct essential truths, but these are not absolute truths (Runzo 1986:44).

No religion would be able absolutely to dispense with certain truth criteria which are used as the norm for evaluating other religions (cf Küng 1990:37). The 'truth' is still the basis of differing from someone else.

1.5 Truth and relativism

The reaction to a postmodern view of truth, in which truth is always deferred and no final meaning can be arrived at, is the question of whether we have not irrevocably degenerated into relativism. How can truth and relativity be reconciled? This depends on how relativism is viewed. Relativism⁵ refers to an epistemological position in which the accuracy or otherwise of value or truth judgements is determined by the individuals making the particular judgements (Runzo 1986:27).

Relativity includes finiteness, contingency, historicity, fallibility and traditional and cultural determinedness.⁶ However, this is not absolute relativism, but merely an acknowledgement of the nature of our existence (Gunton 1990:252ff). Relativity concerns an indication of relationships and influences that combine to determine viewpoint. It indicates the relations of things to one another and, in this sense, we could speak of relativism as relational thought. It is the process of reference that brings about understanding by concentrating attention on all the role-players who have a share in the outcome of a matter. Those who cease to relativise must also cease to refer, to make new associations and work out new contexts.

This brings to the fore 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 the determination of truth?

5 Runzo (1986:5-17) regards theological relativism as unavoidable because of the nature of the truth claims in theology. He bases theological relativism on conceptual relativism. This has to do with the question of whether a relativistic epistemology can be reconciled with the inherent absoluteness of religious faith. The absolutes with which we work are often the result of inculturated patterns of thought. The work by Peter Berger, Jean Piaget and Thomas Kuhn has led to this realisation.

6 A number of attempts have been made to counter religious relativism. Runzo (1986:18) discusses three of these. They are the attempt to ground truth in mysticism or religious experience, the attempt to ground truth claims in speculative metaphysics, and the attempt to ground them in church kerygma.

Relativism opposes reductionism⁷ and absolutism. It reacts against fixed concepts that are totalitarian and binding. No thought is possible without relativising.

Relativism is, however, itself relative (cf Van Niekerk 1992:125ff). It is relative in relation to the language game, rules of thinking, 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 the myth the leopard keeps its spots, although he can talk (cf Den Bok 1995:39).

Contextual and anti-reductionist thinking is *per se* relational and relative thinking which was traditionally not the sole prerogative of systematic theology. It is hard for systematic theology to unambiguously reflect the contemporary spirit of multiplicity. One could scarcely systematise today without serious reduction.

There has been a development in views on truth. One of the views that has influenced the West the most is the *pragmatic view of truth* in which truth is technological advantage. Technology determines the outcome of wars, puts humans on the moon, determines the gross national product and the budget, et cetera. Technology, as the determinant of prosperity, becomes the norm for determining learning content, government policy and ethical systems. The financial implications of truth are recognised and are reflected in the gravity attached by governments, universities and churches to the truth brought about by money.

Seen biblically, 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 better typify reality than a substantial ontology.

It is therefore better to ask 'What does it mean?' than 'What is truth?' What something means is always related to our predetermined conceptions and views. Nevertheless, there is greater scope for change and a broadening of our views in the question 'What does it mean?'

2. A Changing Context and the New Profile of Systematic Theology

2.1 Have we reached the end of practising Western theology?

It is understandable that many think we have reached the end of practising Western theology. By the end of the nineteenth century biblical theology⁸ had already degenerated into the religious history of Israel and the early church. The question is whether there is still scope for creative new research within the old paradigm of thought. Despite much attention being given to the questions of method and the task of theology, no consensus has been arrived at (cf Du Toit 1995:47ff). Problems concerning the status of the text and the epistemological value of theology (which

7 Anti-reductionism in theology has come to the fore mainly in the science-theology debate and especially in the work of Arthur Peacocke. It is associated with a holistic approach in which concepts can be understood only as a function of a larger whole. The parts affect the whole (upward causation) and the whole the parts (downward causation). Fuller mentions four implications that anti-reductionism has for theology. It makes it easier to understand that God has a personal relationship with the created order, it allows for the mystical in both science and theology, the idea of an emergent reality explains the operation of God on all levels (pantheism) and it has answers for the body-mind problem (see Fuller 1994:433-437).

8 Biblical theology differs from systematic theology in the sense that it is more historical than logical, that it indicates what a text meant in its context and not what it means now or what its place is within the broader theology.

includes the question of truth) remain on the agenda of systematic theology. Theologians use the Bible within a non-biblical framework (McKnight 1990:98). The new exegetical and hermeneutical concepts have questioned the classical, orthodox-reformed doctrinal concept of 'truth' as a set of rational and objective certainties (Deist 1994:174).

The rules of the game have changed to the extent that we should perhaps now speak of a new game. We have come to the end of a modern, patriarchal, metaphysical closed-identity theology. This is perhaps the unavoidable result of a hermeneutic development that began with the Reformation. Belief in the Book as the carrier of eternal, godly truths, which had only to be discovered and exploited, has come to an end. The very book that Luther had to take from the hands of the pope to give to members of the congregation to read for themselves and become free became, in the hands of members, a new set of rules comprising hard fundamental truths that brought new chains. The truth of the Book promotes exclusivity and a rejection of everything and everyone differing from the interpreted and appropriated norm. The world must conform to the Book. The world, however, has outgrown the belief in the book.

The acceptance and tolerance of differences, the democratisation of faith, and the multiplicity of norms, et cetera, are the realities of our day which come into conflict with the authority of tradition.

Systematic theology, as traditionally practised, struggles with questions⁹ such as its relationship with biblical sciences, the accommodation of literary theories and recent philosophies, the place in the curriculum, the relationship with world religions and a general lack of currency and credibility. Theology is often no longer as systematic as it was traditionally. We now have genitive theologies (such as the theology of liberation, theology of hope), adjectival theologies (ecological theology, feminist theology) or nominal theology (the theologies of Barth, Jüngel, Moltmann, Ebeling). In these, the norm of systematisation within church or confessional context no longer obtains.

Dogmatics or systematic theology¹⁰ is seen, within the reformed context, as ecclesiastical, confessional, systematic, critical, topical and practical (see Van Genderen & Velema 1992:20-26). Despite a tendency for continuous adaptation, self-criticism and currency, systematic theology is often experienced as traditional, autocratic, lacking in imagination and uncreative. Hermeneutically, apologetically and historically, it is repetitive. Without denying the role that traditional dogmatics plays in ecclesiastical training and in the maintenance of confessional identity, it must be stated that there are few examples within ecclesiastical dogmatics of taking the initiative, few in which modern feelings about life are accommodated, the reality of the day is reflected and credible theologies are developed.

Systematic theology systematises by describing textual panoramas. A panorama such as this is euphoric, synoptic, intellectual and relational. What may be experienced, from below, as a maze of texts and textual relations may be united, from above, by dogmatic 'supervision' into a complete jigsaw puzzle. It is nevertheless clear that such a panoramic overview is a compaction of truth, which does not do justice to its

9 Many perspectives on the theological 'transitional period' could be described. For a view from Reformed theology, Spykman's work (1992:40-63) will serve as an example.

10 For an exposition of the terms 'dogmatics' and 'systematic theology' see Pannenberg's chapter on *Dogmatik als systematische Theologie* in his *Systematische Theologie I* (1988:27ff).

polysemous nature. The panoramic vision allows for only one synoptic metanarrative, which offers a single explanation and quashes all other accounts. Although systematic theology is especially a textual science, systematisation often takes place by prejudicing the text and ignoring the contexts within which it works.

Systematic theology has, however, gone through an irrevocable process of 'unbundling'. It will have to accept that its story is a serial and that all episodes cannot fit into one corpus or instalment. The dogmatic text is a new story that builds on many other stories. It is a new creation, a re-interpretation and destruction of other texts (Du Toit 1987:166ff).

It would appear that theology in narrative form communicates much better today than it systematises. In a similar fashion the novel has become the carrier of a new philosophic genre, such as is evident in the work of Kundera (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, rational theories, et cetera, are only some of the co-determinants of the network of understanding.

The following factors could be pointed out as examples of the fact that we have come to the end of practising the theology we learnt in the post-Reformation period. Theology has become irreversibly postcanonical, postconfessional, postsecular, postmodern and interreligious. We shall give this brief attention.

2.2 Postcanonical

In general, the church operates with a set view of truth. This has had the result that a multitude of shifting religious and biblical metaphors, dynamic meanings and changing contexts have become fixed (see Thiselton 1992:110). A changing reality and dynamic source of revelation¹¹ is often denied or ignored, specifically to give the unyielding truth authority. Authority¹² that exercises any influence is, however, relational, fluid, contextual and dynamic.

11 The concept of 'revelation' is the core of the reformed claim to authority. Kelsey, however, convincingly showed that there was no concept such as biblical revelation. The number of biblical references to the ways in which God communicates with humans does not fit within 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). He regards the idea of 'scriptural authority' as a postulate that can function pragmatically in the life of the church (208ff). There is a great difference between the manner in which biblical authority functions in the church and how it functions theologically (94ff).

12 The implication is not that there is no authority. Calvin's view that without the Bible we would not be able to recognise the world as God's world is indicative of the influence that an authoritative source exercises on people's minds (cf Gunton 1990:257). In this sense believers read the Bible 'differently' from other literary works since, before they begin to read, they accord the Bible an authority that influences the reading expectation as well as the appropriation of the text. The Bible is not the only authoritative source today. There are many legitimate authoritative sources influencing people, which do not always harmonise with one another.

Canonical history indicates that the choice of what should be canon is related to church strategy and not textual integrity.¹³ The idea of a scriptural document that is elevated to immovable canon¹⁴ with the associated authority was broken by the idea of intertextuality. If a canon is influenced and determined by other writings, the implication is that the writings also have canonical value. This immediately makes the canon far too broad in scope and it spreads its authority over an indeterminate corpus of literature. We could at most speak of a continuing 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 is done in systematic theology is, moreover, complex¹⁵ and the concept usually says more than what is contained in the canonic context (cf also Kelsey 1975:100ff). As a proposition, the concept is usually an impoverishment of the graphic and metaphorical use of language in the text.¹⁶

The text of the Bible is not a uniform corpus of writings either. One could hardly speak of a text from the Old/New Testament. For example, until the Christian era the 'text' of the Old Testament was fluid. Different canons obtained in different communities and different manuscripts of the same books were used in different places. The text of the Old Testament is a set of intertexts (Deist 1994:172). In addition, there is no such thing as a fixed textual meaning. The variety of textual traditions, the different ideologies of the ancient authors, the long history of interpreting texts and the historicity of exegetes make this unlikely (Deist 1994:173).

2.3 Postconfessional/traditional

The fact that theology is working in a postconfessional and posttraditional era does not mean that tradition and confession¹⁷ no longer play a prominent role. It does mean that

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- 13 '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. 'cononical', writings is *sufficient* for that purpose' (Kelsey 1975:105).
- 14 Vanhoozer correctly views the function of the canon as the determination of the books that comprise the Bible and not the determination of meaning. It is his conviction that the determination of the correct literary genre and language game that applies in a text will enable us to use dogmatic concepts correctly (Vanhoozer 1994:100-102). This presupposes, in turn, a fixed core of meaning which supports the ideal of hunting down the 'real meaning'.
- 15 Thiselton (1992:38-51) distinguishes at least six levels at which readers might transform the text consciously or unconsciously. These are (1) intertextual, (2) situational or temporary, contingent, (3) horizontal, (4) semiotic, (5) hermeneutic, and (6) in relation to other textual theories.
- 16 The unbiblical concept of 'original sin' is an example of how the formation of concepts completely exceeds textual meaning. 'Concepts, unlike symbols and metaphors, do not create new meaning but wring the life out of language' (Vanhoozer 1994:105).
- 17 Spykman (1992:128-133) accepts biblical theology throughout as a confessional theology (which of course accords with the reformed view regarding the authority of the Bible). He considers that it counters reductionism (moral or historical reductionism, for example), that it hermeneutically indicates the christological meaning of revelation and counters tendencies towards rationalism, pietism and legalism.

there is a critical and self-conscious communion with confession and tradition in the realisation that the Christian faith tradition, like any other tradition, is a design 'from below'¹⁸ (Kuitert 1992:28). In the church, tradition and confession still fulfil the function of satisfying the need for identity and certainty (cf Kelsey 1975:95ff). Identity means that there is inclusion and exclusion. This offers exclusivity, accepts the individual viewpoint as the truth and cannot tolerate what stands outside it as truth. More and more people are no longer content to work with such an identity. For this reason church identity in many denominations has become an open, postconfessional identity¹⁹, in which identity is also often found outside one's own group and there is no longer a feeling of exclusivity and intolerance towards others who differ from one's own tradition and profession of faith.²⁰

Tradition had its origins as a result of conflicting interpretations. MacIntyre (1988:349ff) views tradition as a religious argument cast in narrative form. This narrative is continually being argumentatively reconstructed to correct inconsistencies. Tradition presupposes the existence of conflict within one's own tradition and between different traditions. To belong to a tradition is to be part of an argument. To keep tradition alive is to keep the argument hot (topical) by casting it within an altered contextual narrative (cf Davis 1994:110).

This does not, however, mean that it would be experienced by most of the congregation as topical and as reflecting the particular time in which we find ourselves. Tradition is experienced as static identity, unavoidably bound for fossilisation and the accompanying forced attempt to make it relevant and typify it as progressive development, depending on its new narrative form (cf Schüssler Fiorenza 1991:73ff).

A posttraditional and postconfessional theology will have an understanding of the historically bound nature of traditions, the context of the history of its origin, the truth concept with which it works and the need for contemporary narratives which include the historically contingent needs of the time in which they function (cf, eg, the Barmen Declaration and the Kairos Document).

2.4 Postsecular

The term *secularisation* has its roots in the Christian distinction between the spiritual and the secular. If the process of secularisation should be completed, it is said, the

Ironically, his viewpoint indeed leads to reductionism since the Bible (with the use of hermeneutics and everything) is still read from one or another master narrative and chief motive, which is absolutised and gains confessional status.

- 18 The distinction 'from below' and 'from above' -- to indicate a theological design which regards the norm as being either in humankind in its context, or in God in his word -- is artificial. In a similar binary way *nature* could be placed in apposition to *grace*, the *holy* against the *profane*, et cetera (see Spykman, for example, 1992:41ff). It would be impossible to do one without the other. The allusions 'from below' and 'from above' are used because this is how they came to theology, and they broadly indicate a theological approach.
- 19 '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).
- 20 It is an open question whether mission work in the old meaning of the word is still possible. It not only uproots other societies, but in the past was imperialistic and culturally inclined to be chauvinistic. It ought to be replaced by intercultural and interreligious discussion, where equal partners introduce themselves (and their faith) to others, learn from one another and take decisions that guarantee freedom of religion, as well as arranging affairs of common interest.

spiritual sphere would disappear and everything would become secular. Secularism is traditionally viewed as the absence of the experience of the supernatural or transcendent in people's lives. In the process of secularisation people have reacted against what is termed the oppressive domination by the church via the supernatural, the separation between God and the World had to be set aside and humankind became the reference point for reality (Kasper 1990:85).

Secularism was especially feared by the church because it maintained a modernistic view of life, was positivistically inclined, worked with a closed world-view and regarded humankind as its own saviour.

The process of secularisation did not, however, lead to the end of religiousness.²¹ We can point to our time as a postsecular time in which the process of emancipation of members of the church has progressed far and is still continuing, but in which there is a simultaneous strong religious undertone in society. In some places the church has become a subculture, but religiousness 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 practice ethics and natural scientists who put ecology, the future of the world and the quest for God on the agenda. This has all become possible in a postsecular society.

The 'limits-to-growth' awareness of the seventies, the new scientific philosophy with undertones of relativism and methodological anarchism, and the postmodern have ushered in the postsecular period (Van Peursen 1989:38). It is characterised by an interweaving of the natural and the supernatural, with the realisation that meaning does not lie only in the natural. In a postsecular context the discussion concerns the relative and the universal, emphasis is placed on the informal community where intercultural contact takes place and a fixed identity is replaced by a dynamic and open identity (see Van Peursen 1989:39).

Modernism could therefore not exclude religion. Indeed, it was religion that was the creative energy that had to fill the void between reality and Utopia left by modernism (cf Beckford 1993:10-12).

The disappearance of religion is therefore an illusion (Ter Borg 1994:15; Beckford 1993:7). Religiousness is an anthropological given. Religiousness as a routine, tradition-determined system is certainly on the decline (Ter Borg 1994:20ff; Beckford 1993:15ff). Religion will survive although 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 on religiousness.²² The systems of meaning that religions offer are becoming more variable.

Postsecularism is forcing theology to express religious experiences over the whole spectrum of human experience, and it contributes towards the imparting of a common understanding which is essential to survival (Ter Borg 1994:17). This is theologising

21 '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' (Kasper 1990:86).

22 'De nieuwe godsdienstigheid is immers al goeddeels buiten de geïnstitutionaliseerde godsdiensten en kerken getreden of ten minste in een tegenbeweging tot de officiële lijn: een onconventionele, onorthodoxe godsdienstigheid, die helaas door de grote kerkgenootschappen nauwelijks wordt opgepakt' (Küng 1990:81).

'from below'. It balances the role that world-view and attitude to life exercise on religious experience, since they are mutually determinative.

2.5 Postmodern

Postmodernism is the critical reaction to the bias and the demands of modernism, to the arrogant expectations and optimistic faith in progress that has accompanied it. This does not mean that postmodernism can be entirely separated from modernism.

Postmodernism also does not mean that modernism and everything associated with it now belong to the past. It is, rather, a recontextualisation and re-evaluation of the place that reason, truth, understanding, culture, God, history, the book, the self, and values, et cetera, occupy in our lives. It is the acknowledgment of a variety of methods, approaches, pathways, paradigms and lifestyles, to truth and science. It is the meeting of a variety of cultures, lifestyles and value systems that can each lay claim to legitimacy.

Postmodernism does not mean total relativism. Without making postmodernism a new saviour, one can state that it contains special elements which, in the present African context with its multiplicity of traditions, language groups, ideologies and cultures, a distrust in reason, the co-existence of European and African indigenous lifestyles and ethics, et cetera, can help us orientate ourselves (Du Toit 1988:38ff).²³

2.6 Interreligious

'If other religions are nonsensical', said M H Kuitert (1992:24), 'then Christianity is also' (my translation). Today there is a new realisation of the individual rights and place of world religions. Indeed, no peace is possible without religious peace which implies mutual tolerance.²⁴

When anthropology is seen as the hermeneutical gateway to religion, one can discern similar anthropological elements in most religions. Most religions also use metaphors that are analogous to one another. This does not mean that there is a common core or that different religious stories are reconcilable (see Peters 1992:334-348). Today there is fairly wide consensus that there should be tolerance between religions and that an exclusivistic attitude should be replaced by one of nuanced inclusiveness.²⁵

To date little has come of the accommodation of world religions in systematic theology's interaction with social questions. There has been a concentration on the relationship with the natural sciences and secular reality (atheism). Theologies such as the feminist and freedom theologies, as well as influences such as deconstruction, still

23 Scannone (1992:84): 'Post-modernism, 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'.

24 For the person that is driven religious freedom would be the freedom of the grave. If I have truth, and religious reality is divided into a true-false scheme, everyone who does not think as I do cannot be right or be accepted. Alves (1979:195) expresses the view 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.'

25 For an explanation of the exclusive and inclusive points of view see D'Costa 1990:52-116.

have a good case in the tradition of Western theological training. In the past theology was very selective about the matters it dealt with. Total reality had to be considered, and this included not only challenges posed by people such as Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Einstein, but also those of other religions. D'Costa points out that the world in which we live also consists of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, devotees of new religions, practitioners of tribal religion, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and other groups. Within these groups we also find the reality of oppressed women, the poor, atheists and scientists (D'Costa 1992:326-328, 331). The universality of the Bible and the nature of authority are no longer accepted without difficulty by African theologians.²⁶

Religious pluralism requires theological pluralism, which has the entire religious reality as its field of study. Religious pluralism is a given that can lead to the enrichment of theology. John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Paul Knitter, in particular, attempted to place all religions on one level, 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 that envisages a single world religion. The supposition is that Western theology, as a result of colonial feelings of guilt, is overcompensating with a sort of world theology that is relativistic and pluralistic (D'Costa 1992:328). The design of one overarching world religion -- which, at the anthropological level, includes the essence of humankind, and at the level of the science of religion includes the characteristics of all religions -- is not only undesirable, but would also be an unrealistic ideal which would probably result in a new form of imperialism.

There are unbridgeable dogmatic differences between the religions, as well as conflicting claims to truth. The salvatory concept in Christianity is, for example, unique and it would be futile to attempt to arrive at a synthesis between the different religions (see Pannenberg 1990:101). Unanimity regarding differences in dogma and claims to truth has not been achieved even between different denominations within Christianity itself. Different systems can ordinarily be seen in juxtaposition and alongside one another, without any further attempt to reconcile differences. This concerns knowledge of oneself and others, and the acceptance of the religious reality as polycentric.

Discussion regarding claims to truth within the different religions should be undertaken to take account of the nature of the differences and claims to truth, so as to understand one's own tradition as well as that of other religions (cf Pannenberg 1990:103).

3. The Design of a Society-Oriented Theology

3.1 Disadvantages of an exclusive church-oriented theology

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

The church is one of the most important places -- but far from the only place -- for religious experience. The church has a large share in the development of theology, but

26 Oduyoye (1990:103) says the following: '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 'uniqueness of Christ' and the Christian affirmation of the 'uniqueness' of Christ'.

does not control it. There are usually too many role-players exhibiting their wares in the religious marketplace.²⁷ Theology is practised in a cocoon if it does not take cognisance of the entire religious profile of a particular society. It should have the task of presenting religious thought accessibly and credibly to as many individuals, traditions and interest groups as possible.

An ecclesiocentric theology not only leads to theological poverty, but it is a self-centred, introverted theology. For this reason one could question the objectivity and neutrality of theological research at certain faculties, in so far as it often uncritically supports church practices, the political status quo, the interests of those in power, et cetera. The need for interdisciplinary contact, a greater openness towards other religions, a need for a democratisation of faith, the grouping together of theological faculties and seminaries of other denominations, and so forth, underline a greater theological commonality that can be adopted by a society-oriented theology.

A theology such as this is far more than a theological ethic for societal questions and more than an ecumenic activity. 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.

Such a theology would take into account all factors that play a role in religious reality, offer a forum for thought and the mutual influencing of groups, criticise religious viewpoints and declarations and help religious groups to exercise social criticism and pressure as far as possible within their separate and communal contexts.

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

This would still allow room for separate traditions to be studied, but such study would not take place in isolation. It would presuppose a process in which members of different groups would learn to be tolerant of one another. Tolerance does not, however, mean syncretism, and openness towards others not a loss of identity.

3.2 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 plan the development of any *world religion*, nor attempt to unite religions. There is a new sensitivity in the West for any form of religious imperialism in which another is forced to abandon his or her God and accept mine as the only true God or, within the same tradition, another is forced to come closer to my view of God and the world. This would be a new form of imperialism and deny the multicoloured religious reality. The theological reality is a communal reality in which exposure to all points of view is necessary for us to understand one another.

27 Cochrane 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' (Cochrane 1994:35).

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

A society-oriented theology would not be syncretistic or eclectic, although it is acknowledged that there are degrees of correspondence between all religions.

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 lead to theological poverty. A society-oriented theology is a *contextual theology*. At the same time this implies a *multiplicity of theologies* since there is a multiplicity of contexts.

3.2.1 Factors that necessitate a society-oriented theology

There is statistical evidence that our *society is predominantly religious* and not agnostic or atheistic. It has also been shown that a postsecular society has strong religious characteristics. No co-ordinated attempt has, however, been made to analyse, interpret and co-ordinate the religious values operating within a society. A society-oriented theology would usually acknowledge the religious nature of the reality that needs to be understood in its plurality.

The different religious interest groups in our society are influenced by far-reaching social factors. There is no opportunity for different groups and traditions together to consider this influence. Religions that consider that one should blindly believe what has always been believed remain blind. In any event, there is no 'blind faith' that is not determined by the world-view of the day.²⁸

We all know the influence that the world of literature and art, philosophical writings, and the problems of society, et cetera, have on theological thinking. It is also clear that contexts such as poverty, oppression, ecological threats, and the loss of simple value systems have a determinative effect on theology. These and other factors already make theology a social theology.

Among the most important factors that determine the world-view of present-day communities are the implications of the new cosmology, the new biology and *quantum physics*,²⁹ ecological questions, poverty, the political dispensation, the influence of

28 The following remark by Runzo (1986:211) is appropriate here: 'A leap of faith inherently involves one's total outlook on the world. There is no single world-view schema which is 'the' Christian conceptual scheme.'

29 Theology and human sciences in general have in the past reacted against a positivistic and closed world-view that was promoted by the natural sciences. These circumstances have now changed into a post-Newtonian open world-view which, within the context of quantum mechanics and the new cosmology, offers scientists the opportunity of coming to the fore with a theological design. Theology is especially confronted by the world-view of the new cosmology. In Arthur Peacocke's theology, for example, we find a total redefinition of 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 is in harmony with that which we can deduce from his work of 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 physical processes (1986:99). With regard to God, there is only a self-imposed, limited all-knowingness and eternal presence (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 unknowable (1993:121-122). These and

information and communication systems, and ethical, governmental and social questions. They force religions to reformulate their viewpoints and dogmas. The creation theologies of the different religions are influenced by the same scientific model and the implications that this holds for most theologies. It is inevitable that religions will draw closer to one another.

The Christian church in Africa is characterised by a plethora of church denominations which are the result of the different missionary activities of a divided Christendom. A society-oriented theology usually acknowledges the guilt of a religious division imposed on African churches and attempts to bring the traditions closer together.

A society-oriented theology would therefore attempt to bridge the divisions between, for example, church and theology, church and church, church and other religions, and theology and the world.

3.2.2 The design of a religious society-oriented hermeneutics

Religion is an anthropological given. It can be considered a human characteristic, which needs to be understood and explained. For that reason, there is a need for a social hermeneutics, which can recognise the analogous characteristics in most religions without reducing one characteristic to another. A hermeneutics such as this could promote better understanding between religions and be aware of the danger of a world fundamentalism that would threaten many religions and attempt to counter the danger by fostering understanding.

A religious social hermeneutics would be an approach 'from below' that is historically contingent and contextual. It would read all the texts of a society to understand that society, and not simply texts that have been elevated to canon. These texts would be critically analysed and brought into context with the ethical systems and practices that obtain in a society. It could also investigate the spiritual impact of documents, liturgical practices, and so forth.

This would mean that a religious text could be read like any other text without the censure 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 give meaning to the fragmentating pluralism of today. The imparting of meaning should, however, be anti-reductionist and take care not to reduce one phenomenon to another. Pluralism, which can easily lead to not unfathomable fragmentation, should be accompanied by the emphasis of *universal* characteristics which make understanding possible and can be seen as cohesive factors. Influences that prevail throughout the world limit religious exclusivism (cf Davis 1994:133ff).

3.2.3 A forum for dialogue between religions

A society-oriented theology would offer a *forum* for critical discussion and discovery of the self and others, in the light of a common way of life, with its problems and

many other doctrines have been reconstructed to harmonise with physics and not give offence to modern man. God can therefore not be held responsible for suffering, the biological need for suffering is demonstrated and God is seen as one who shares in the process of suffering (1984:68-69; 1986:132; 1993:126).

challenges that require religious reaction. A society-oriented theology would be a dialogical theology that would involve all viewpoints in the dialogue as much as possible.³⁰ Participation by persons from different traditions makes theological thinking more representative.³¹ A society-oriented theology could bring the viewpoints of groups strongly to the attention of the broad community. This sort of influencing is currently done by the media. Nonetheless, there is no co-ordination of religious viewpoints in our society today.

Habermas's communication theory could, despite the criticism brought against it, still serve to guide such a society-oriented theology. His contribution may be seen mainly in the philosophy of intersubjectivity that the subject-centred view of reason tries to defeat (cf Van Niekerk 1992:180-200; Rorty 1989:62ff).

3.2.4 The promotion of religious transparency and the empowerment of people and religious groups

A society-oriented theology would wish to promote religious transparency. It should be aware of the influence wielded by religious groups in a society and the *power* they have.³² The use of this power should be as transparent and open to criticism as possible. A society-oriented theology is therefore simultaneously a *religious criticism* that discusses the value systems that are at work in a community and the power-play associated with them. For this very reason a theology for the open market is essential. It would make all religions aware of -- and critically predisposed towards -- all forms of the exercise of power within one's own tradition, but also within other religious traditions and in society. Where it limits the exploitation of power, it also contributes to meaningful empowerment of all people. All religions, indeed, claim to empower people.

Empowerment affects not only the inner spiritual attitudes of people, but also their external physical circumstances. It is impossible for a pluralistic society to deal with societal questions in a meaningful way without taking into account the viewpoints of all religious groups. The intention is for different religious-ethical viewpoints to be expressed and compared, for them to be debated and, if possible, for joint actions to be decided upon.

Problems in a society generally affect communities across religious boundaries. Nevertheless, problems are often dealt with from within a single particular religious framework, with the exclusion of other communities. In this connection a prominent

30 Dialogue, even between religious people, should be regarded in a positive light. Samartha (1981:59) mentions a few of its 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.'

31 In answer to the question as to whether intercultural communication, understanding and rationality are possible, the response should be positive, without any romanticising of communication and despite objections (cf Van Niekerk 1992:39-46).

32 The powerlessness of people is often the predisposing cause of violence and exploitation. Religious groups should monitor power, criticise the abuse of power and help to empower people. See Balcomb (1993:150-178) regarding the religious use and abuse of power.

Muslim theologian, Moulana Faried Esack, 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. ¼ 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' (cited in Petersen 1994:23).

3.2.5 The promotion of religious experience and spirituality

At a time of religious experiential poverty there needs to be an openness towards the experiences of others, which can bring about a new source of spirituality in one's own tradition. There are many forms of *religious experience* and realisation which need to be noted, and which should be integrated into theological thinking.

A society-oriented theology should offer a forum for the *promotion and experience of spirituality*. There is a new consciousness of the value that spirituality has within any religion. The acknowledgement of spirituality in other religions helps break down intolerant exclusivity.³³ It is a reaction against a religious tradition in which God is held captive within a suburban framework, religious experience has disappeared and a petty morality has replaced spirituality.

The spirituality in question is not a mere inner world of imagination and cannot be understood without a struggle for justice and freedom (De Gruchy 1991:90).

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33 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).

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