THE RELIGIOUS PERFORMER AS S(M)OOTHSAYER[1]

Gerrie Snyman
Department of Old Testament
University of South Africa

Abstract

This article is about the need to hear the dissident or strange voice suppressed by officiality. It finds its point of departure in the debate between Professor Sakkie Spangenberg and Dr Fritz Gaum on the issue of revealing a voice that is uncomfortable to the church. Taking its cue from literal reading's tendency towards monological speech, the article argues that the shift from orality to literacy overlooks social embeddedness of utterances. This embeddedness is illustrated with the role power plays in the praise songs in (Southern) African society. These praise poems exhibit the same dialogicity one finds in the Russian skaz and the stories of Herman Charles Bosman. In the face of power, the single official voice wants to overpower all the other voices in its claim to direct access to the reality. It tries to keep dissident voices from the public space.

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When people ask me - as they often do, how it is that I can tell the best stories of anybody in the Transvaal (Oom Schalk Lourens said, modestly), then I explain to them that I just learn through observing the way that the world has with men and women. When I say this they nod their heads wisely, and say that they understand, and I nod my head wisely also, and that seems to satisfy them. But the thing I say to them is a lie, of course.

For it is not the story that counts. What matters is the way you tell it. The important thing is to know just at what moment you must knock out your pipe on your veldskoen, and at what stage of the story you must start talking about the School Committee at Drogevlei. Another necessary thing is to know what part of the story to leave out.

And you can never learn these things.

Herman Charles Bosman, Mafeking Road (1983)

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1. Acting like frightened rabbits?

In reaction to criticism on his book *Paul: the mind of an apostle*, AN Wilson (1997:19) asks the following:

'Why are so many modern Christians terrified of knowing the truth about the New Testament and the origins of Christianity? Why do they react like frightened rabbits whenever anybody, [...] writes a book on the subject - not with the aim of shaking faith, but with the desire to see what was actually passing 2 000 years ago and had a very different way of perceiving the world?'

The concern of this article is not the content of different views, but the need for the unsettling and strange voice within the public sphere. It seems that there is a tendency to reduce the modern 'soothsaying' function of theological scholars to the pacification of believers, appeasing them in the comfort of official church doctrines and perhaps tricked into a belief of having the final truth. However, soothsaying, in its ancient sense of telling the truth, alludes to something unsettling, unsoothing to the hearer. Connected with divination, it entails someone foretelling the future. Somehow, in religious terms, the business of soothsaying suggests a form of religious communication in which the will and intentions of divine beings (whether coerced or given by their free will) are made public (cf De Waal Malefijt 1968:215). The religious performer then serves as a conduit for this divine information, revealing divine truth to human beings either in the form of what will be happening in the future or by way of explaining past events.

I will argue the following:

- The public sphere is not the sole domain of the trained reader, the powerful church official or the untrained reader, the John Citizen in the pew.
- Since dialogue is induced by the nature of the public sphere, any aspiration to monologicity should be resisted, because it dampens (kills) creative discovery within religious communities.
- Monologicity is a remnant of the transformation of orality to literacy, when the subtility of the social and contextual features in oral communication was replaced by the feature of permanency inherent in writing.
- Stories are essential in maintaining and legitimating dominant power and ideologies.

The discussion starts with what I perceive to be the root cause of monologicity, namely literal meaning. Secondly, since literal meaning lost its natural search for shared interest within a literate context, the discussion reviews the notion of shared interest in storytelling, especially as a way to establish and maintain social control with special reference to the manner in which the stories within African praise songs effectuates that kind of control. The role of the praise singer in maintaining a delicate balance of power between the chief and the community leads to the third related topic, namely double voicedness. The latter tries to strike a balance between the official voice as monologue and the dissident voice trying to establish some dialogue. Fourthly, after having traced the roots of double voicedness to dialogicity within Russian oral narration (*skaz*) and the stories of Herman Charles Bosman, the conflict in the public sphere engendered between the monological and the dissident voice is be put on the table. Of particular concern is the role of the strange voice associated with dissident views in opposition to the monological voice associated with the official point of view.

But before discussing stories and its maintenance role of power, let me briefly allude to the situation against which I am writing about the public.

2. Fear of confusion

In 1996 Professor IJJ Spangenberg released the proverbial flutter in the Dutch Reformed 'dove coat' when he asked serious questions about the Church's view on Scripture (1996). In his mind the DRC had changed front twice in his lifetime: first over apartheid and then over women in the ministry. His remarks reported in *Beeld* (1996) and *Rapport* (1996) unleashed a flood of criticism. It was as if he had come up against a brick wall of fundamentalism, requesting believers either to imitate the creeds or keep quiet!

The debate that followed Spangenberg's paper was mainly led by academics and church officials vested with power, the latter 'defending' the beliefs of the untrained and unskilled readers appeased in the *kinderlike geloof* (childlike belief). One of the arguments against Spangenberg was that he dared to air his problems in public at an academic meeting of the Old Testament Society of South Africa. It was implied that he should have aired his problems in the privacy of the synod (cf Misckhe 1996).

Spangenberg's 'mistake' was that he had spoken to the outside world. This is perhaps the gist of one of the arguments of his main critic, Dr. Fritz Gaum, the editor of the DRC's 'newspaper', *Die Kerkbode*. Firstly, after having paid lip service to the problems generated by a fundamentalist reading of the Bible, Gaum (1996a, cf also 1996b) emphatically states that academics should *know their limits*, because, as he suggests, there is a link between reading scriptures in a cold clinical fashion, ignoring what he calls a *kinderlike geloof*, and the meaninglessness of an empty grave (of Jesus). Secondly, he thinks it will be good for theologians, when speaking to the outside world and having their statements reported in the press, *to think twice* before they reveal strange views and formulate carefully so that their views will not be misunderstood.

In these arguments the following comes to light:

(a) Insistence on airing dissident views in a synod (church meeting) first, signifies that some churches operate within a monological milieu more or less equivalent to totalitarian systems.

(b) The juxtaposition of a critical reading of the Bible based on scientific reasoning with a childlike reading (implying a naive or uncritical reading) bestows on the latter reading a competence of judgement based purely on ideology in the negative sense of 'the sham and semblance of truth' (cf Smith and Hyde 1991:447).

(c) The fact that critical scholars are admonished to think twice before speaking in public, leaves the impression that church officials, as (self-?) appointed guardians of the truth, fear confusion within the flock. Fear of confusion within the flock is, of course, a severe indictment against the members of any church, because they are not regarded as mature enough to handle any point of view that may differ from the official one.

(d) The effect of the criticism levelled against the more informed and skilled (trained) readers who dare disseminate their views to the unsuspecting public who becomes unsettled in the process, is that they are regarded as renegades who should be treated with suspicion. Not only are they insensitive to their potential audience, but they may also lack a childlike belief. And everyone knows where it leads to.

(e) The reaction to Spangenberg is in effect an affirmation of that at which he aimed his remarks: a single and very monological voice speaking for everyone. If people do not want to participate in the monologue, have they forfeited the right to say anything against the official voice from an academic podium? What is to become of academic freedom and freedom of expression as represented in the manifest of human rights in the Constitution (article 16)?

In a book religion such as Christianity, the art of (ancient?) divination has become superfluous, because the will and intention of the Christian deity are believed to be at hand in the religion's book of faith. Instead of turning to God for direct communication (there are groups who believe in extra-biblical direct communication from God), some resort to the biblical text to figure out God's will and intentions. With the help of certain presuppositions (the equation of the biblical text with the actual words of God, the perspicuity of the text) the Bible actually becomes the Christian deity delivering oracles via its readers.

Within these circles the Bible reader becomes a conduit for the text / God through which the revelation of God's will is presented as a mere affirmation of what the text is purportedly saying. Praying in interpreting Scriptures becomes important, since prayer apparently safeguards the ensuing interpretation against invalidity or incorrectness. To ignore the social embeddedness of both the text and its readers, the door is opened for 'reader inerrancy'. It then becomes extremely difficult to disclaim particular readings. Kathleen Boone, in her book *The Bible tells them so. The discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism* (1990:78) says of this:

> One cannot adequately appreciate the power of extra-biblical authorities, such as preachers or commentators, without recognizing that the interpretative presuppositions upon which their pronunciations are based are largely invisible to the person in the pew. Such persons have little basis for disputing statements and arguments which appear to be found in the Bible 'itself '.'

It is as if the monological voice of the churches has turned its members into an uncritical and unsuspecting public, nurtured in the effacement of the distinction between text and interpretation. All they are trained in, is a literal reading where the interpreter does nothing else than expounding the plain sense of the text (cf Boone 1990:79).

3. Monologicity as based on literal reading

The juxtaposition of a childlike belief with a critical reading of the Bible is founded upon a peculiar reading of Jesus' exhortations to his followers to become like children (Matthew 18:1-10). In some circles, his words are interpreted as meaning that one should believe like a child, uncritically accepting which is given; in other words, a naive belief (cf Faber van der Meulen 1996:353). Such a reading, obviously based on the psychology of a child, fosters what is known as a 'literal ' reading of the biblical text. Ignoring the *etic nature* of the text and reader, this reading can easily be co-opted by those in powerful positions to establish and maintain those readings of the biblical text that will ensure that no one will ever criticise the monologue of the ruling elite. After all, children merely accept what authoritative figures give them!

What is behind 'literal meaning'? It is regarded by some as a myth (Rommetveit 1988). Although it may be brushed aside as an illusion, the myth of literal meaning should be recognised as a social reality constructed by people, a social reality in which they live their lives. Literal meaning provides them with the means to explain the riddle of how the Many may become the One.

Literal meaning is built upon a common sense notion that the word in isolation has a general basic down-to-earth meaning. The latter is context-free and thought to originate from a pervasive and profoundly objective world. It is mythical, because it ignores perspectivity inherent in human communication, defined as a 'dependency of linguistic meaning upon tacitly taken-for-granted background conditions' and 'embeddedness in communicative social interaction' (Rommetveit 1988:15). Literal meaning ignores subtle social and contextual features; it does not tell the whole story.

There is nothing wrong with the point of departure of literal meaning, namely a common-sense belief in the *possibility* of *mutual understanding*. However, the problem according to Rommetveit (1988:15) is that this common-sense belief is founded upon a naive realism (natural attitude) that the world is an inter-subjective world, common to all. Two observations can be made: (a) It is true that in everyday conversation the attention of the dialoguing partners is converged on particular objects, thus creating a *shared perceptual*

field. Shared interests imply a joint commitment with respect to perspective on the talked-about subject. (b) It is equally true that this perception is secured through verbal means. But a shared perceptual field secured through verbal means does not constitute an *invariance* between representations and material objects in the external world as if they are common to all (Rommetveit 1988:16). The reality of social and contextual features (i.e. self-evident background assumptions and naively mastered skills) with which dialoguing partners establishes their shared perceptual field makes the process unstable and transitory. Rommetveit (1988:15) argues that mutual understanding is achieved in a *temporary* shared interest and not in *invariant* meanings of words and expressions. Meaning (even so-called 'literal' meaning) is socially embedded: in the language people speak and in the culture to which they belong. This social embeddedness is not always apparent, because meaning often appears to be contingent upon presuppositions, morality and knowledge of the real world.[2]

In an oral situation, the meaning of words can be ratified in a succession of concrete situations, accompanied by intonation and gestuality, all contemplating a specific definition. A word can be altered, but not once it has been written. The recorded word suggests *ontic* closure as well as *epistemic* closure when readers can obtain knowledge of what the author meant, provided the author expressed him / herself accurately.

Thus, if accuracy of expression can be assumed, literal meaning seems quite plausible, even to the point of endorsing it as faith in disguise (Rommetveit 1988:24). However, given the social embeddedness of the author, a mutual interest between the author and any reader has to be established before one can talk about literal meaning. And given the ancientness of the biblical texts, especially their remoteness in terms of time and space and the anonymity of the authors, it is evident that such mutual or shared interests can never be established in full. There will always be a residual of indeterminacy.

The assumption of accuracy of expression, linked to the possibility of knowing the author, provides the foundation for a belief in 'literal meaning'. Thus, the biblical text is ontically closed and knowable in terms of the atomic linguistic structures of words, sentences or paragraphs. Reading the text in a literal way has led to an unwarranted (religious?) faith in a text made up of 'eternal sentences' carrying incontestable truths, sentences that are uncontaminated by the practical concerns of mortal beings (cf Rommetveit 1988:23).

I am aware of the trap of cultural pessimism with its nostalgia for a preliterate orality provoked by the great Fall caused by literate society. To regard orality as more pure than literate culture is probably an overly romantic assumption (cf Fornäs 1995:162-163). To attribute the rationale of literal meaning to the shift from orality to literacy is not meant as a degeneration of the literate mode. It is rather intended to problematise writing in terms of

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2   Rommetveit (1988:29) provides the following example:

A: 'Jim tries to get me fired from the job by spreading false rumours about me.'

B: 'That's dirty!'

Situation *one:* as friend A refers to Jim's rumours, his eyes met the eyes of friend B who utters his words. It is obvious that B's words refer to Jim's false rumours.

Situation *two:* while referring to Jim's false rumours, A was also pouring tea in a tea cup. However, this cup was not very clean (or used by other conversation partners that left the table!). B's words may then refer to the dirty tea cup and not Jim's false rumours.

Rommetveit (1988:29, my italics - GS) argues: 'My privilege as a speaker to decide what is meant and / or referred to by what I say to my conversation partner at any stage of our discourse is *constrained* in an orderly fashion by our mutual commitment to the temporarily shared world at that stage.'

resistance against ideological control by those in power.

In the shift to literacy the social embeddedness of utterances seems to have become overlooked. With the new possibilities that have been opened up by literacy, new conceptual dimensions were drawn, resulting in new symbolic modes of technology, social organisation and patterns of socialisation (cf Olson 1988:127). With texts obtaining a reputable status, oral testimony and dreams became sources of reliable evidence to a much lesser extent.

Perhaps literacy's enabling features within modernity led to a sentiment that erased the experiences and the traces of the earlier symbolic mode(s). Today, just as personal computers (secondary orality) expand rather than dissolve the capacities of the written word (cf Fornäs 1995:162), literacy should be viewed as an expansion of the oral mode. In this way the mythical character of 'literal meaning' can be exposed.

To argue that the permanency of writing dissolves orality's link between form and meaning (cf Olson 1988:125) amounts to an erasure of the experience of the earlier pre-literate mode. Literal meaning, in its attempt to benefit from orality's mode of direct or immediate referentiality, loses out because it ignores the immediate context in which referentiality takes place! Closure of meaning, which is only possible when two dialoguing parties have absolute certainty on the material objects within their mutually shared perceptual field, is assumed with literal meaning. But since one dialoguing partner is (usually?) absent in literate communication, certainty on the material objects within a shared perceptual field, has to be provided by the partner present. This impossibility should make one wary when dialoguing partners of ancient biblical texts accept mutuality of interest with the author without argument or any reasoned inquiry.

The notion of social embeddedness in a predominant literate society can further be explained with reference to the notion of 'interpretive' communities (à la Fish) or 'textual' communities (à la Stock and Marcus 1992:109-113). An interpretive community is, so-to-speak, a small-scale society in which possible meanings in literate and oral communication are circumscribed by tacit knowledge and assumptions (cf Marcus 1992:109). But since we are dealing with texts in literate and scribal societies, one can go one step further and talk of textual communities which consist of groups of people whose social activities are centred around texts and a literate interpreter of these texts (Stock 1983:522). This would perhaps be a fitting description of most of our (Christian) religious communities (even in the so-called oral or residual-oral culture): for them individuals, able in mastering texts, are essential. It is from their mastering of texts that there can be a move towards thought and action. The actions of such a community are centered around texts, or perhaps more precisely, around the literate interpreter of these texts. The members of these groups associate on voluntary basis and their interaction revolves around the *mutually* accepted meaning of the text. However, this common understanding that provides a basis for their thoughts and actions (cf Stock 1983:522), is an understanding of the text amidst the members of the group. The relation of the group to the text is determined by the interpretation of the literate interpreter. If he or she understands the text in a literal way, the problem of literal meaning is not solved. But the group dynamics make one thing clear: it seems natural that any threat to their understanding of the text would result in a defence of the text and its interpreters.

Stock roots his idea of textual community in the work of the heretics and reformers of the late Middle Ages (11th and 12th century) who resorted to textual precedents for justifying deviations from what were then considered customary or unwritten ecclesiastical norms (1983:88). It is obvious that Stock's interpretation of literacy constitutes a

degradation of and an improvement on orality. Literacy became a motor for change, since the heretics and the reformers used it to alter ecclesiastical institutions and the individuals participating in them. They used texts to structure the internal behaviour of their respective groups. Simultaneously, they provided solidarity against the outside (orally oriented) world deemed as a universe beyond the revelatory text, representing a lower level of spirituality. Textuality was a step towards the perfection of thought and a complete understanding of God (1988:90-91).

When the rationality becomes threatened in a textual community of this nature, it seems natural to position the 'hassler' as a heretic situated in the outside world. Furthermore, any rationality different from that of the group is interpreted as a rationality aspiring to overthrow the incumbent literate interpreter of the community. Given literal meaning's inability to recognise social embeddedness of meaning, the text itself became associated with meaning: the text means what it says. Any noises made sounding of a different meaning, were deemed an attack on the text itself. Thus, in Reformed theologies with its autonomy of Scriptures coupled with literal meaning as the only possible meaning, the biblical text was regarded as only in need of reading. It was not regarded as in need of interpretation, because the text simply meant what it said! The rest was all made up, a product of fantasy (cf Olson 1983:127). In this way, so it appears, it was possible for the rise of the new overwhelming monological voice of a literate literal reader disguised as the voice of God.

As these groups progressed the texts, around which their behaviour and actions were organised became internalised in such a way that they no longer were spelt out. Stock (1983:91) regards this as a clear sign for passing the threshold of literacy. The text and the understanding of the text constitute the shared assumption with which the members discuss, debate or engage in interpreting the Bible.

Regarding the social reality of the myth of literal meaning the following should be taken into account:

a) literal meaning enables readers to create a direct line of correspondence between the text and its reference, regardless of whether the correspondence was intended by the author;

b) the inability of literate or semi-literate interpretive communities to recognise a connection with orality in terms of social embeddedness of meaning, not only conveys a misplaced sense of superiority over orality, but it eventually impoverishes literacy in attaching papal status to texts.

Let me return to the allusion of 'childlike belief' in Gaum's vitriol against Spangenberg. The text of Matthew 18 is not mentioned, yet it is the assumption (probably in conjunction with other texts) on which dissident views are rejected. If I am correct[3] in linking Gaum's reference to childlike belief, Matthew 18 and an uncritical reading of texts, the story of Jesus and the children effectuates a particular social control. One of the problems regarding stories is that they are easily co-opted by the powerful to maintain the established order. If the story in Matthew 18 is indeed used for justifying uncritical or naive readings of the biblical text, the interpreter can avert any critical reading that causes discomfort and confusion. This kind of critical reading is associated with an attitude that is in direct contrast with Jesus' supposedly direct words and intentions[4]. After all, literal reading of Scripture

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3 Of course, if I am not correct in Gaum's reference, I believe Faber van der Meulen provides enough evidence for the possibility of such a reading.

4 Without taking the story's social embeddedness into account, it is indeed possible to read the story as an

only reproduces what God (and Jesus) say(s).

But let us now take a closer look at this power play whereby the powerful co-opt a story to maintain their power. A potent example seems to be the African praise song where the aesthetic principle of poetic license has been the subject of a historic struggle: 'It has occasionally been appropriated, in its role as medium for commenting on power, by those in power and used as a vehicle of propaganda on behalf of ruling groups' (Vail and White 1991:319).

4. Stories and African praise songs

The example of literal reading, or the myth of literal meaning, is examples of the programme of modernity: it intends to decontextualise the text and to isolate it from historical situations. However, in an effort to follow the law of the text (Miller 1987; Snyman 1997), it becomes necessary to look at the historical moorings of the text. From a rhetorical point of view, the ancient text created a rhetorical situation that caused a certain mode of formulation, resulting in the construction of a social reality coupled with a particular order of social control. And this is where African praise songs come into the picture.

The performance of an African praise song is a public storytelling affair. Indeed, stories are believed to be a very important genre in oral society. In oral society knowledge cannot be stored in abstract categories. Instead, it uses stories about people to organise, store and communicate knowledge. As a performance, an oral story is an event in time. Time is not an abstract entity; neither is it culture independent. For an oral narration to take place, performer and audience have to be together at the same time and place. But since the performer and audience are not equal in power, the larger context of the power structure in the society determines the rhetorical situation that will be created during the performance.

Stories are an extraordinary powerful discursive form to help effectuate social control (cf Sienaert 1992:160, Witten 1993:100, 105). They not only entertain, according to Van Dijk (1993:125) but they have persuasive functions: they criticise, attack or ridicule people, inform people about the code of institutions.

This is the nature of the stories sung[5] of ancient African leaders in Southern Africa. For example, the Ndebele royal praise songs of the previous century, despite accepting Mzilikazi's supreme authority and the hierarchy within the kingdom, offered enough scope for comment on and criticism of his leadership and policy. Some songs were critical of Mzilikazi's pleasure at entertaining white men in his kraal while these white men's Cape compatriots were killing other Africans and seizing their lands (Vail and White 1991:91).

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admonishment for an uncritical reading of any text. However, such a reading takes modern children psychology into consideration! When one considers, as Faber van der Meulen (1996:359) argues, the Qumran community, the exhortation to become like children simply demands of Jesus' followers to become unimportant. Qumran regarded children as impure. They were not allowed in the end battle between the Son of Light and the Sons of darkness, because of the presence of angels. The presence of children would constitute a sacrilege. In his time, children were simply negated, they did not receive any respect and they were not able to hold their own ground. They were not trusted and were dependent. It is to these people that Jesus seemed to have aimed his ministry: the marginalised people of society. This is hardly the code the other interpretation would imbue.

5   Praise plays an important role in social life in African culture in South Africa. It even permeated the official level with the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president of the country. According to Stuart and Cope (1968:21) praises are expressions of public opinion and provide a means of social control, for they are shouted out at occasions for all to hear. They act as incentives to and rewards for socially approved actions, and they serve as a reminder of those qualities worth praising.

Furthermore, ordinary people were allowed to take part in the songs, presenting their requests and comments to the king. In this way, an autocratic ruler remained in touch with the concerns and wishes of his subjects (1991:89). These were sometimes expressed with impunity and could not have been directly conveyed to the ear of the king without bringing the complaining parties into trouble or danger!

The praise song is a song composed in the act of performance. It is usually presented in public before an audience (the subordinates) and the ruler (president, chief, even academics!). As an act created during the performance it can be quite spontaneous, but it can also make use of standard praises that are in stock in the society. They may be praises received from the ancestors (cf Opland 1990) or praises that were formulated on earlier occasions not so far back in history. The latter rely on memory to a great extent. Whereas the act of performance in this case is a matter of recollection and perfection, a sticking together of stock phrases, the praise song that is composed as the performance goes on, tends to be more responsive to the immediate context of performance.

Memory plays an important role, but it is memory aided by the poet's own intervention. A chief's praises emerge from not only his ancestors, his family or his contemporaries, but form the creativity of the praiser as well. In the end it is the praiser who assembles, arranges and produces the performance (cf A T Cope 1984:14, 27). This brings me to poetic licence and freedom of expression.

The comments made in these songs are privileged because the song form carries with it a freedom of speech beyond that which would have been tolerated in other circumstances (Vail and White 1991:92). For example, the achievements of Mzilikazi's legitimate successor, Lobengula, were never praised. Instead, his 'praises' constituted a diminutive image of his predecessor: Whereas Mzilikazi was the bush buck that steps carefully on the rocks, Lobengula was the bush buck that strikes hooves and damages stones. Lobengula's 'achievements', in the light of the Ndebele's predicament in the early 20th century, brought him blame and not praise for what was happening to the Ndebele people! In this way, Mzilikazi's authority was upheld as a model on which later rulers could mould their regimes. The stories of Mzilikazi were essential in maintaining and legitimating later dominant power and ideologies.

One crucial aspect of the speech codes in these songs is the regulating of boundaries between the members of a society. It serves to legitimate the hierarchy by celebrating its achievements. The praise song itself becomes a vehicle to set the boundaries between a chief or king and his subordinates. But it also sets the boundaries for the chief or king in terms of good government. Comaroff (1975:144) refers to the indigenous model of incumbency in praise songs where a clear distinction is made between the office and its holder. The office represents continuity and unity of the chiefdom and the office holder is merely regarded as a temporary occupant of the office. Based on the general rules of good government the office holder is measured against his achievements.

When a chief rules by public support and not merely by birthright, it is important for him to maintain that support in the face of rival claims (cf After 1983:156). In order to be effective a praise song must obtain the maximum public support. Support can be achieved by calling the chief different names in order to link him to the different groups with whom he shares interests and from whom he can expect support. For example, a praise in which the chief's clan name is mentioned, generates clan solidarity, while his age set name generates loyalty amongst his peer group (cf Apter 1983:156). The legitimacy of the chief depends on public support, but it does not mean he will be whitewashed. In the Xhosa social sphere where fissions occur easily, the Xhosa praise songs would strike a delicate balance of

public support and public criticism (cf Apter 1983:164): while trying to arouse and retain the tribe's loyalty to the chief, the praise poet will also announce the truth as he sees it. Since the praise poet has a responsibility to the community as well, the balance of support and criticism fulfills an important socio-cultural function (cf De Wit & Erasmus 1993). One should add that, despite the criticism these songs level against the rulers, they never challenged the legitimacy of the rulers.

However, in the past praise poetry became an important political tool to office holders. They could not resist the temptation to manipulate speech in order to serve their own political agenda. The undermining of free speech by legislation in the Bantustans of the former apartheid government successfully thwarted the role of the praise poet as objective mediator between the people and the chief. It successfully drowned the strange voice, turning the praise poet into the chief's stooge (cf Kaschula 1991:48)[6]. It is possible for the chief himself to compose a praise song, but obviously those praises would be very one-sided and monological. The Swazi royal praises of King Sobuza II showed how the power of the king could turn the supposed dialogue into a monologue, thereby seizing the poetry of the song as a means of propaganda in the service of the state (Vail and White 1991:192).

Something more seriously happened in Malawi under the presidency of Kamuza Banda. Education and literacy caused intellectuals to move beyond the politics of patronage and paternalism that was rife in colonialism. The Malawian intellectuals felt they had a claim in their own right, but under Banda's regime a Censorship Board prohibited any publication that was likely to give offense to religious convictions or public feelings or harm the relations between sections of the public (Vail and White 1991:285). The result was the dominance of the monological voice of Banda as ruler. The dissident or strange voice sought other venues to make itself heard, such as Jack Mpanje's poetry with its illusion of orality as a medium to criticise the monological voice of Banda's government.

In ideal circumstances the praise singer will hold the key to power during the performance of the praise song. In these circumstances the chief or ruler will heed to his advice. In reality, the chief will rather look to subdue the singer's strange voice or appoint someone that could speak the ruler's monological voice. I think the case of Gaum versus Spangenberg corresponds to this situation: the powerful would rather have Spangenberg to speak the monological voice of church doctrines. But they want him to speak at a place where they can control the outcome: the synod.

However, it is the presence of the strange voice that endows public theological discussions with an awareness of a dialogic event, an awareness of other, different voices (cf Goosen 1992) that cannot be controlled by any governing body. Let us take a closer look at the strange voice.

5. The strange voice / double voicedness

I have started with an example of the effects of monologicity within a theological discussion. I have tried to explain in two ways the role of the monological voice in drowning the strange or alien voice.

- *Firstly*, I have tried to establish a link between monologicity and a literal reading of the

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6   It has happened in the past that chiefs did not take lightly to criticism and used security legislation to silence these praise poets. The traditional role of the praise poet has come under political pressure, because he could no longer speak freely with political talk edited or censored by the political ideology of the chief (cf Kaschula 1991:49). The move is now towards institutions or organisations resisting political subordination such as trade unions whereas protest praise poetry was rife in the days of apartheid (cf Sole 1987).

biblical text in its ignorance of or lack of interest in an utterance's social embeddedness that furnishes it with the possibilities of different voices; and

- *Secondly*, I focussed on the use of a story in effectuating social control, especially in the case of the African praise song where the possibility of drowning the dissident voice is very strong and real.

Praise poetry is a medium that creates a public space for critical interaction between the powerful and subordinates. Within this public space, according to Apter's model (1983:166-167), the praise poet acts as a mediator between the people and the chief. Firstly, he speaks to the public on behalf of the chief in order to confirm the latter's legitimate authority. Secondly, he speaks to the chief on behalf of the public who evaluates his performance against the requirements of the office. It is this mediating position of the praise singer, singing in a double voice, so to speak, that I want to link to Bakhtin's dialogicity (1969), double voicedness or the presence of the strange voice.

In the debate I am alluding to in this article, there clearly are two voices present: the monological voice of official doctrine and the strange and alien voice of the dissident. These two do not coexist within the church. In fact, it seems as if the monological voice wants to swamp the strange voice by referring the utterance of the strange voice to the sphere of a battle where the fate of the alien voice can be decided. The effect is that only one voice is possible, and the struggle is aimed at defending the position of the monological power.

Within dialogicity, the strange voice does not fight to be the next monological one. Just as in the Ndebele praise songs where the legitimacy of the chief is not questioned, the legitimacy of the monological voice as voice is not questioned. The question is whether this voice leaves room for other voices just as the chief leaves room for other voices critical of his reign.

The predominance of the monological voice lies in its association with the official language and the latter's affiliation with official power. According to Hohne (1994:229) official language is a language that buys into power. It manifests an urge to monologicity and it adheres to the ruling forces who set up the grammar. Officiality is synonymous with monologism. It tries to erase the otherness of the unofficial voice, or to render it voiceless by reading the lines for it. Any manifestation of unofficiality is regarded as a crime against 'nature', that is, as officiality sees things.

But wherever there is official language, there is unofficiality! Even so, unofficiality is not valued in society, because it is rule-breaking in form as well as in spirit. For example, unofficial languages are ungrammatical, slangful, nonlinear, and would appear in the speech of marginalised people such as children, peasants or the uneducated (cf Hohne 1994:230). The greatest sin against officiality is unofficiality. Unofficiality simply seeks to demystify officiality. As Hohne (1994:232) suggests, it never tries to officialise itself by obliterating officiality: it seeks to unseat, not to be crowned.

The basis for the recognition of an official or a strange voice is found by Bakhtin (1984:192) in orality and everyday practical speech. The latter abound with other people's words, which either merge with one's own voice and reinforce one's speech, or are simply taken over by oneself and inhabited with aspirations strange to the original words:

> 'When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by others' voices. No, he received the word from another's voice and filled with that other voice. The word enters his context from another context, permeated with

the interpretation of others' (Bakhtin 1984:202).

In Russia, where the notion of dialogicity within literary criticism was identified, double voicedness had a distinct socio-political origin which may help us to understand the need for the strange voice. According to Hodgson (1983:122), the Bolshevik state was not very friendly towards the fact that art did not succumb to propaganda. The state saw literature as a reflection of reality with an extreme utilitarian value. Words were mere labels bearing a one-to-one relationship to their referents in the non-fictive world (1983:136). The page as mirror encouraged little, if any, creative initiative on the part of the writers. There was no allowance for agency in terms of an encoding or decoding function. Such a hermeneutic encouraged a literal reading focusing on the referential character of the plot.

It was against this mode of referentiality that *skaz* developed, focusing on the generating of meaning and not on reference, wishing to engage members of a given community in the act of creative discovery rather than the rehearsal of a predetermined lesson (cf Hodgson 1983:136). This, of course, is what *Oom* Schalk Lourens tries to do (cf English 1989). Let me return to the advice that unschooled man of wisdom gave on the *stoep* of one of the farmhouses of the Great Marico at the beginning of the article. With a typical Bakhtinian double voicedness he proposes a shift of interest in stories: from plot to the art of narration (cf English 1989:155). The story itself is not that important, but the way it is construed and presented by the author with the help of a narrator.

What strikes me as important in this process, is the relationship between the author and the narrator[7]. The more independent the narrator is, the more ambivalent speech becomes and the more the narrator is in the employ of the author, the more the narrator is stylised according to the author's wishes. On the one hand, the narrator is regarded as someone with his or her own voice, yet, at the same time, enabled by the author to present the latter's thoughts.

Skaz is a form of authorial discourse in the mode of narration suggestive of oral delivery in which a narrator is employed to introduce a socially defined alien voice bearing a range of values and points of view the author needs (cf English 1989:155). *Oom* Schalk Lourens constitutes such a narrator. In the remote Marico *veld* he represents the voice of the people, not only in a figurative sense, but in a very literal way by his admixture of Afrikaans words and Afrikaans phrasing in English. And one can be sure that his voice was not always that of Bosman himself, especially his comments on English culture!

The importance of *skaz* in our discussion is its ability to house besides the official and authorial voice one that is totally different. Bakhtin (1984:192) defines that voice as a voice, socially distinct from the author, originating within the realm of orality in the guise of a storyteller or non-literate person belonging to the lower social strata of the people without power. It is as the voice of the voiceless that *skaz* becomes useful, in theological discussions too, especially in the presence of authoritative theological propositions. In societies where authors have no unmediated expression of thought, the authors' thoughts are refracted into someone else's speech. The existence of two voices in *skaz* presupposes a dialogue between

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7   *Skaz*, according to Szilárd (1985:183) is a non-literary form present in developed literature, caused by the disintegration of the main stream culture into various subcultures. Hence the opposition between main stream culture and subculture, in this instance in terms of written and spoken language. The latter is seen in terms of the informal and the spontaneous, bearing the imprint of the trustful, the patriarchal and human relations. The written word is regarded as formulated by class-society and the State, carrying with it all the complexities of the official existence of humankind (cf Szilárd (1985:183). But one thing must be stressed: the separation of spoken and written forms is very much emphasised in Russian culture.

an author and a narrator. The author is the one who is able to express his thoughts in a literate way, and the narrator, to whom literature is strange, expresses his or her views through oral communication.

In a distinctive way the mediating position of the narrator resembles that of the *imbongi* in African culture in South Africa, presenting his own thoughts yet at the same time restricting his words so as to voice public opinion. Just as the narrator finds him or herself in a power relation with an author, the praise singer relates himself to the power of a chief and his subordinates. This type of social control is instructive for biblical literature. The *izibongo*, like any narrative, has a socio-cultural function in imbuing values and establishing or maintaining particular power relations by projecting the values and ideas of the chief to his people as audience, yet at the same time, laying bare the needs and the criticism of the disenfranchised. The language of the subordinates is refracted through the praise singer, profoundly affecting the language of power.

It is the effect of dissident views on officiality that the current plea for the strange or dissident voice within theological (and ecclesiastical) circles should be understood. A monologue, although leaving the impression of standing on its own, contains those perspectives against which it militates. The appearance of the strange voice (or voices) merely underlines the perspective or perspectives that played a role in the formulation of the perspective that gave rise to the monologue or official doctrine in the first place. One perspective presupposes the presence of other perspectives which defined that perspective. It means that no voice can claim immediate access to the reality, but only access mediated by other perspectives (cf Goosen 1992:27).

The moment any single voice claims direct access to the reality, it aims to overpower the other voices and to exclude them from the public arena. Dialogicity, *skaz*, double voicedness / alien voice is all focused on power and the public sphere, intent on unseating the power of the official and monological voice bent on keeping the unofficial voice from the public space.

6. The public

Noam Chomsky once said in an interview in the *Guardian* (23 November 1992) that the basic idea which runs through modern history and modern liberalism is that the public has got to be marginalised. The general public are viewed as no more than ignorant and meddlesome outsiders, a bewildered herd. Some public figures, especially authors and film stars, do not hold the idea of 'public' in the sense of the community or a group of people as a whole, in high esteem. In a very platonic sense, the public is regarded as something highly contemptible.[8]

Oom Schalk Lourens' public reminds me of people easily duped into believing to be the very seat of sovereignty regarding certain issues on which their decisions are needed. The

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8   A few quotations will illustrate the point:
    *   Yes; the public is wonderfully tolerant. It forgives everything except genius - Oscar Wilde.
    *   The public, with its mob yearning to be instructed, edified and pulled by the nose, demands certainties; it
         must be told definitely and a bit raucously that this is true and that is false. But there *are* no certainties -
         H L Mencken (journalist in the USA).
    *   The approval of the public is to be avoided like a plague. It is absolutely essential to keep the public from
         entering if one wishes to avoid confusion. I must add that the public must be kept panting in expectation
         at the gate by a system of challenges and provocations - André Breton (French surrealist).
    *   There is not a more mean, stupid, bastardly, pitiless, selfish, spiteful, envious, ungrateful animal than the
         Public. It is the greatest of cowards, for it is afraid of itself - William Hazzlit (English essayist).

rhetoric in their midst creates an assumption of competence according to which the person is led to believe that he or she possesses the requisite knowledge for making that competent decision. But this is deception, as *Oom* Schalk confesses. Instead of knowledge, the people possess ideology, in his mind the sham and semblance of truth. They are, indeed, confined to a life of common sense, of mere opinion, of ideology, of untruths when the desire to see what was actually passing 2 000 to 4 000 years ago and what the perceptions of the world was then are withheld out of fear for shaking their faith.

An argument in favour of keeping dissident views from the public space and to confine them to the privacy of the synod might be the impression that a critical view will have a chance equal to that of the official view to gain acceptance. But the egalitarian chance is only an appearance, because textual power is political power. Reading is contextual with different readers standing in 'asymmetrical relationships' regarding power and their ability to speak about the text within their textual community (cf Castelli et al 1995:58). Officials holding official views have a considerable advantage over dissidents, especially when they taint unofficiality by attributing to it its own crimes (cf Hohne 1994:231).

Fisher (1987:71-72) distinguishes between public (moral) arguments and privileged or reasoned discourse. The latter is submerged by ideological and bureaucratic arguments considered by the experts. The former is public, that is, available for wide consumption and aimed for the polity at large, the untrained thinkers. Public argument crosses professional fields. Despite it not being contained in the way legal, theological or scientific arguments are contained by particular conceptions of argumentative competence, it nevertheless invites participation by field experts who tend to dominate by the rational superiority of their arguments. Their presence makes it difficult for the untrained thinker to win the argument.

Perhaps the public is not so idiotic and uneducated after all. They are able to assess those good reasons that Walter Fisher (1984) says warrant a story. 'Good reasons' are defined as those elements that provide warrants for accepting or adhering to the advice fostered by any form of communication (1984:48). These good reasons, varying in form among situations, genres, and media of communication, comprise narrative probability (what constitutes a coherent story?) and narrative fidelity (whether the story an audience heard rings true in terms of the stories they know to be true in their own lives) (cf Fisher 1984:64).

What is the role of the expert in public argument? Fisher (1987:73) attributes to the expert the role of counsellor imparting knowledge and not that of telling the story that will end all stories. The public has its own criteria for determining whose story are most coherent and a reliable guide to belief and action. Narrative probability and narrative fidelity are culturally acquired through faculty and experience. They do not need to be taught. Education may only refine them and make them more sophisticated. People are reflective and they construct stories of their lives from that reflection. That reflection also enables them to judge stories (Fisher 1987:75). When the full range of good reasons is taken into account, trained and untrained thinkers meet on the common ground of their shared *human* interests (Fisher 1984:73).

But these shared human interests or common ground may prove to be fairly coercive to enforce consensual community standards. Its coercive power is the other face of its communal character, registering itself as 'the historically informed and common ways that members of a community see, interpret, and become meaningfully involved with things and with others, thereby sustaining a world of common sense and common praxis, a world of 'publicness' (Smith & Hyde 1991:448, cf Heidegger 1986:126-127). The world of publicness rules by the dictatorship of the other: people read, see and judge as others do. It

is this 'other', according to Heidegger, that prescribes what can and what cannot. In this respect, it provides a sense of order to what otherwise would have been a state of confusion.

Officials may feel that open criticism is to wash dirty laundry in public. However, publicness is an inescapable condition for our human existence. We are shaped by the perspectives prevalent in the public sphere. Heidegger (1986:118) regards the world of publicness *a being with others*:

> '*Mit* und *Auch* sind *existenzial* und nicht kategorial zu verstehen. Auf dem Grunde dieses *mithaften* In-der-Welt-seins ist die Welt je schon immer die, die ich mit den Anderen teile. Die Welt des Daseins ist *Mitwelt*. Das In-Sein ist *Mitsein* mit Anderen. Das innerweltliche Ansichsein dieser ist *Mitdasein*.'

Even being alone presupposes some being-with-others. One can only be alone because the Other is not present! Is the history of the church, and the trail of blood it left not evidence enough for the way in which the church lived its being with others?

It is the influence dissident views will have on the 'others' in the church that bothers Gaum. But in his effort to provide good reasons why the strange voice of Spangenberg should be disclaimed, he denies the 'other' in the church to use their own good judgement. Is the public in his eyes not competent to judge for themselves? Or is his problem the supposed superiority of the arguments of the trained reader over the untrained thinker who cannot win the argument?

There are two aspects that should be recognised by the assignment of the debate to an event that will take place at a particular time and space (a synod). Firstly, the public is denied access to the arguments of those thinkers who beg to differ from official points of views. In this way the powerful will be able to maintain the coercive power of the community. In the synod dissidents like Spangenberg can be forced to see what the community see.

Secondly, there is a definite shift towards a 'personal responsibility'. It is a move away from the church as a constituting element of the polis towards the individual believer with a moral conscience as a member of that polis. This development is contingent with the erosion of involvement in the public sphere that is taking place in Western society at the moment (Mackey-Kallis and Hahn 1991:1). The focus on personal or individual responsibility enables churches to ignore their corporate or collective responsibilities. Instead, the churches' actions are regarded as those of localised private actions of which the larger community of churches bears no responsibility (cf also Spoelstra 1997). Ironically, whereas the churches do not seem to possess any sense of corporate responsibility towards the polis (especially regarding the past), they demand from individual members responsibility vis-à-vis their thoughts and actions in the public sphere.

The focus on the individual makes scapegoating or victimisation easier, especially when the problem can be defined in moral terms. I think this is what Gaum has done with considerable success in his reaction to Spangenberg: by attributing to him meaninglessness of a Christian symbol, Gaum makes Spangenberg the scapegoat for the problems created by the DRC's changing front. The solution that is presupposed is a matter of self-will and (un)restraint instead of deliberating on the churches' actions in the past and their effects on hermeneutics and church doctrines.

According to Kenneth Burke (1970:17-23) scapegoating is the logical consequence of the negative in language which, in turn, puts the focus on morality. Scapegoating can be very rational, especially when officiality tries to attribute to unofficiality its own crimes. Thus, by linking a critical view of Scriptures to Jesus and his resurrection, thereby

implicating belief, dissident views are scapegoated for rendering belief useless and without any content. Social ills in society and religious problems are directly attributed to dissident views. They are being made to feel they deserve the problems they have created just as people suffering from diseases, such as cancer, Aids and heart attacks are made to fall within the control of the individual (cf Kirkwood & Brown 1995:56)[9]. The individual believer has the obligation to follow the doctrines and teachings of the church. Any defect in society is attributed to the lack of following these teachings. Thus, it must be the individual who is to blame for these problems. It is similar to the *Dont't do crime* campaign on the SABC where the answer to crime is thought not to lie so much in a social answer, but rather in the freedom to control individual behaviour.[10]

7. Conclusion

The social embeddedness of meaning makes it difficult to ignore the strange voice. If one accepts that words are not neutral but already inhabited by other voices, it means that the monological voice, despite its claim to supremacy and legitimacy as a single voice, is inhabited by other voices. The periodical surfacing of the strange, or in this case, dissident voice, does not constitute a dispute that has to be resolved at all costs, because even after its resolution the other voice or voices will remain, reminding the monologic voice of those perspectives it was partner to.

Because one voice is constituted by other voices, the issue is no longer a struggle for power reminiscent of the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. It is only the unsettling of an assumed supremacy of one voice, without challenging its legitimacy as a perspective originating within particular circumstances. What is challenged, though, is its claim to persuasiveness and universal validity in time and space. Dialogicity and the non-neutrality of words necessitate recognition of the social embeddedness of our reading and writing practices. In other words, Bible readers belong to textual communities and they read texts within social contexts whose dynamics create very local readings relevant for their respective communities.

The African praise song reminds us of the socio-historical context of stories. Furthermore, the social dynamics associated with the praise song indicate a tolerance towards dissident voices. The strange voice is needed to balance power, although it is not always appreciated! Hence, when critical (academic) questions about ecclesiastical behaviour and hermeneutics are raised, they voice a concern about power becoming too monological in its execution. The questioning of doctrinal assumptions is simply an act similar to the praise singer voicing concern regarding a chief's execution of his office. But the praise singer never delivers criticism in the privacy of an audience with the chief. It is done in public for everyone to see. Chieftaincy is a public office.

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9   Piling guilt on a sick person is tantamount to kicking a dog lying down! It definitely does not ease the guilt. Human behaviour does not create the biological laws and processes whereby disease occurs. Kirkwood and Brown (1995:59) suggests that questions of responsibility for disease can only be solved rhetorically, since the province of rhetoric is the realm of the uncertain and the probable, as Aristotle once claimed. Rhetoric is a method for answering at best undecidable questions. There are many uncertainties regarding diseases and by offering a mix of likely risk factors, scientific knowledge can at best only speculate about probabilities.

10   The crime problem is treated as a moral one and it leads one to identify people as victims and enemies. Once identified, the victim or enemy has no means of escape, and can easily be kept in a dark defunct mineshaft. Then it is possible for a commissioner of the South African Corrective Services to argue that criminals guilty of murder and rape are animals and do not deserve to stay in daylight, or for the National Government Minister of Tourism to argue that criminals have lesser rights than ordinary citizens.

Dialogicity assumes publicness. The idea that words are already inhabited by other voices, filled with the aspirations and evaluations of other voices, implies publicness. The common availability of words, inhabited by different aspirations and permeated by various interpretations, sometimes reinforcing one's own voice, sometimes taking over one's voice, sometimes inhabited with one's own aspirations which may be alien to the strange voices, suggests a world of publicness. Discourse appears to be inhabited by other discourses. Professional discourse is inhabited by non-professional as well as discourses from other professions. Words, inhabited by other voices, bring those voices into play, because a word, so it seems, only exists by grace of different voices. Words are traces of other words, texts are traces of other texts and discourses are traces of other discourses. The public nature of dialogicity does not require of the strange voice to declare its strangeness in the privacy of a monological audience, which only serves to smooth the course of monologicity. Monologicity's striving to deprive the strange voice of its publicness is an act of power suppressing much needed mechanisms to check and balance that power.

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