THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION ON THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE: A METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION[1]

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Abstract:

After an introduction in which it is argued that no interpretation takes place in a vacuum, the article provides a short overview of the different ways in which sociological approaches are implemented in the interpretation of the Bible. The third part of the article describes the different levels according to which Biblical interpretation can be described, and how social dynamics impact on each of these levels. The fourth part deals with the issue of social transformation or change. The latest developments in sociological studies on social change are discussed briefly. Indications are also provided of how the study of social change can benefit the various case studies that are being done within the context of a research project with the title: 'The influence of different contexts of social transformation on Biblical interpretation.'

1.   Introduction

The interpretation of the Bible never takes place in a vacuum. Or, to put it even more generally, no interpretation takes place in a vacuum. This statement could, of course, be elucidated from different perspectives. By way of introduction, I would like to propose two related explanations of this statement.

a)   As I have indicated elsewhere[2], interpretation, including the interpretation of the Bible, is a multidimensional process in which various aspects of the communication process are in constant interaction. If one were to describe the communication process that takes place in any interpretation with reference to the most basic communication model, namely that consisting of the elements of sender-medium-receiver, one would say that interpretation is the product of the interplay of all these aspects. Not only does the synchronic structure of sender, medium and receiver determine the outcome of the interpretation process. The diachronic aspects of each of these communication elements are also active components of this multidimensional dynamic that we call interpretation. From this argument it follows that it would be a gross misconception to reduce the process of interpretation only to a one-dimensional process of interaction between a particular text and a particular, objective reader. The dynamics of interpretation are much more complex than such a conception suggests. Interpretation does not take place in a vacuum.

b)   A second explanation of this statement would entail viewing interpretation from the postmodern perspective of intertextuality[3]. According to a broader deconstructive view,

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2.   Cf. Jonker (1996a, chapter 6), as well as Jonker (1996b, 397ff.).
3.   Cf. my description of communities of faith as texts in the process of biblical interpretation (1999, 79ff.).

intertextuality refers to the interrelationships between texts in the broad sense of the word 'text' as referring to any object of understanding. It includes the textuality of all things. As Degenaar (1995, 7) puts it: 'A text becomes an episode in an all-enclosing textuality.' This makes clear that the interaction between texts (also between written texts and interpretive communities or individuals) is always reciprocal. With regards to the Bible, one could say that communities of faith, on the one hand, orientate themselves according to biblical texts. They understand themselves in the light of these texts; they find their identity formulated by these texts. On the other hand, however, different communities of faith also contribute towards the understanding of these biblical texts. Because of the creative role of the reader, one could say that communities of faith shape these texts 'in their own image'.

However, one should again not view this reciprocal relationship only from a synchronic perspective, that is, a description of the contemporary interaction between texts and interpretive communities. This relationship could also be described from a diachronic perspective. The reciprocal relationship not only manifests on the level of textual reception, but also on the level of textual production. Again with reference to biblical interpretation, communities of faith, within the political and cultural world of their time, formulated their religious experiences into initially oral, and later written, texts. These texts exercised an influence in the ever-new attempts at reinterpreting old texts and producing new texts. Textual interpretation or reception triggered renewed textual production. In postmodern language one could say that all texts (written or otherwise) carry traces of other texts (written or otherwise). All these texts exhibit a dialogic character - they are in constant dialogue with other earlier and contemporary texts. All these texts are intersections of other textual surfaces.

These arguments, and there are of course more than the two mentioned above, emphasise that our methods or strategies of interpretation should also reflect the multidimensional character of the interpretation process. They also stress that hermeneutical reflection on the influence of a particular factor in the interpretation process could never be undertaken without taking into account that this factor operates within a wider interacting network of influencing factors.

This explicit word of caution thus precedes the present attempt at determining the influence of different contexts of social transformation on biblical interpretation. On the one hand, the statement 'No interpretation takes place in a vacuum' reminds us that we should take into account the sociological dynamics of the worlds in which the biblical texts were produced, as well as the sociological dynamics of the contemporary contexts in which these texts are interpreted. On the other hand, however, this statement cautions us not to perceive sociological circumstances as the only factors influencing the process of biblical interpretation.

With these introductory remarks in mind, I would like to provide a short overview of existing sociological approaches towards biblical interpretation.

2.   An overview of sociological approaches towards biblical interpretation
Because of the numerous introductory works on sociological interpretation of the Bible[4], there is no need to provide a catalogue of approaches here, or to discuss the contributions of scholars like Mendenhall, Gottwald, Hanson, Carroll, Malina, Theissen or Meeks in detail. I

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4   Cf. *inter alia* the following: De Villiers (1984), Domeris (1988, 1991 and 1995), Garrett (1992), Gottwald (1992), Hartin and Petzer (1991), Holmberg (1990), Joubert (1991), Scroggs (1983), Van Staden and Van Aarde (1991) and Wilson (1984).

would rather like to call attention to certain distinctions that are being made with regard to the sociological study of the Bible, as well as to the possible modes of social hermeneutics. In this description I will depend on the distinctions and categorisations made by Gottwald in his summary article in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992, 79ff.).

According to Gottwald (1992, 79) a sociological approach could entail one of the following:

(i)   '... the practice of social scientific criticism of the Bible, which employs methods, data, and theories from the social sciences (anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology), in order to clarify the relationship between biblical literature and ancient society[5].' Within this category the monumental work by Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (1979), serves as a typical example of such an approach to the Old Testament, while the work of Elliot, Meeks and Malina serve as examples of New Testament social scientific studies. With regards to the Old Testament it is noteworthy that certain themes (e.g. tribal Israel, the formation of the state, and the functions of prophets and apocalypticists) have received the biggest share of social scientific attention. Rather meagerly studied to date, however, are the large-scale social structure and social change in the later monarchy, in the exile, and in the restoration and ongoing diaspora. In practising social scientific criticism, a word of caution is also appropriate: One should refrain from importing twentieth-century concepts such as our understanding of a workers' struggle, economic views of poverty and modern views on freedom into the documents of biblical times' (cf. Domeris, 1995, 208).

(ii)   '... the study of the social organization of ancient Israel, in its larger or smaller units, either at a given moment in cross-section (synchronics) or over a course of time, which may expand into a full-scale social history (diachronics).' This point more or less corresponds to what Garrett (1992, 90)[6] calls the 'social historical approach': '... (it) refrains from using sociological methods, confining attention instead to more traditional historiographic questions about the social background and practices of the (biblical peoples).' The work of Malherbe and Grant on the New Testament serve as typical examples of social historical studies.

(iii)   '... the identification of patterns of social life within the Bible claimed to be prescriptive or exemplary in some way for contemporary religious or secular life.' To my mind this category of Gottwald could just as well fit into any of the above-mentioned two categories, depending on the methods used. The distinction made in this category will, however, be taken up again later in the discussion of the modes of social hermeneutics.

At this stage in the discussion one should point out that social-scientific and social-historical studies represent a renewed interest in the world-behind-the-text. Whereas biblical hermeneutics experienced a shift from the world-behind-the-text to the text itself, and later on to the world-in-front-of-the-text, With the emergence of sociological methods interest

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5. Cf. also Garrett's (1992, 90) reference to Elliot's description of this approach: '... the approach labelled 'sociological' or 'social scientific' seeks to complement a conventional historical and exegetical analysis of the Bible and its environment with an orientation whose questions and objectives, modes of analysis and processes of explanation are guided and informed by the perspectives, methods, and research of the social scientist'.

6. Cf. also the distinction of Van Staden and Van Aarde (1991).

has shifted to the analysis of the interaction between the text and the world within which it was produced. Thus there has been a movement back to the world-behind-the-text.

Arendse (1995, 201) in his discussion of social-scientific criticism therefore answers 'Yes' and 'No' to the question 'Are the methods of social-scientific criticism essentially similar to the earlier historical-critical methods, or are they fundamentally different?' The similarity in these approaches lies in their common assumption of the strangeness or foreign nature of the biblical world and texts when viewed from the perspective of 20th-century readers or interpreters. 'Contemporary readers no longer share the time, space, customs, values, world-views, cultural knowledge, language, social structures and systems, political order, economy or mobility of its original audience or readers' (Arendse, 1995, 201). However, there are also significant differences between these two approaches. Arendse (1995, 201) tabulates some of these differences, of which the following one is of significance for the later discussion in this article: Historical criticism is more interested in asking the questions When? What? Where? and Who? concerning the beliefs, doctrines and experiences of biblical people. Social-scientific criticism in contrast is more interested in asking the questions How? and Why? with regards to these beliefs, doctrines and experiences.

The important questions of normative social hermeneutics still remain unanswered at this stage. How does the social-scientific study of the Bible benefit modern communities of faith in their search for meaning from these texts? How can the social-scientific study of the beliefs, doctrines and experiences of biblical people interact with the beliefs, doctrines and experiences of modern people? Or to link once more to Gottwald's third distinction with regards to sociological approaches: How can the identification of patterns of social life in the Bible claim to be prescriptive or exemplary in some way for contemporary religious or secular life?

Gottwald (1992, 87) distinguishes three modes of social hermeneutics:

(i)   Prescriptivist mode: The claim is made that the biblical social prescriptions should be obeyed in a literal manner. The assumption is that the Bible is in part a rule book and is more or less self-consistent in the social patterns it commands. The biblical social prescriptions are regarded as realizable in contemporary society. Adherents of this position are, however, necessarily arbitrary in selecting certain biblical prescriptions to be observed while disregarding others.

(ii)   Principle-oriented mode: The aim is to embody biblical principles in contemporary structures and circumstances that are recognized to be different, in one respect or another, from conditions in biblical times. Proponents of this mode are usually fully imbued with and atuned to their own culture and society. They contend that the best way to employ their biblical social heritage is not through invoking selective prescriptions from the Bible but through seeking to incarnate its major social values.

(iii) Mode of historical analogy: In this mode the crucial problematics of particular biblical situations are viewed as similar to the problematics facing present society. An attempt is made to view biblical practices and principles in a social context that has a structural affinity with the modern reader's social context. By attending to the structural and attitudinal clues available in the related biblical contexts, modern readers may learn how to interpret their situation more sensitively and act with more comprehensive ethical resources.

I think Domeris (1995, 208-9) is right when he concludes: 'Sociological studies have taken us some way towards a contextual reading of the Bible, enough to expose our own

prejudices and predilections. ... Clearly sociological studies are here to stay. They have not provided the definitive key for biblical research but they do take us closer to being able to interpret the Bible in context.'

3.   The impact of social dynamics on the interpretation process

With the above-mentioned more general distinctions in mind, I would like to elaborate more specifically on the impact of social dynamics on the process of Biblical interpretation. I would like to address the question of how social structures and processes have a bearing on the different elements that one could distinguish in the interpretation process. This question would give us greater clarity on what the focus of our present project should be.

But, of course, one should first spell out what the different elements of the interpretation process are. Although many additional, and even different, distinctions may be possible, I would like to utilise the distinction that has been developed in another research project in which the interpretation strategies of different Bible study groups are being observed and described. Six elements of the interpretation process are distinguished[7]:

a)   *Historical consciousness (World-behind-the-text)*: To what extent is an interpretation sensitive to the historical distance between the world in which the text originates and the contemporary context? To what extent is an interpretation sensitive to the way in which interpretation is influenced by historical forces (such as the social structures and processes of the time of origin) while it may at the same time also influence the course of history?

b)   *Legitimacy (Text)*: To what extent does an interpretation take the textual structures (be they grammatical, rhetorical or narratological) into account?

c)   *Fruitfulness (Tradition of interpretation)*: To what extent does an interpretation enable a particular tradition of interpretation 'to continue'? This requires both a degree of continuity and of discontinuity with respect to the tradition of interpretation (ecclesial, confessional, theological, hermeneutical) within which an interpreter is situated. The adherents of this tradition should be able to recognize their heritage in the interpretation and to identify the interpretation as an appropriate innovation of this tradition.

d)   *Sophistication (Interpretative strategies and heuristic keys)*: To what extent does the interpretative strategy and heuristic key which are employed in a particular interpretation take account of more than one similarity between text and context and also of the differences between text and context?

e)   *Relevance (Contemporary context)*: To what extent does an interpretation respond to a feasible analysis of the social, economic and political dimensions of a particular contemporary context?

f)   *Openness and inclusiveness (Ideological world beneath)*: To what extent is an interpretation free from ideological distortion? This has to be tested in conversation with ideology-critical analyses, being sensitive to the possibility of pervasive distortions through the ideologies of *inter alia* classism, colonialism, sexism, elitism and anthropocentrism.

How do social structures and processes have a bearing on these elements? After the brief description above of social-historical and social-scientific studies of the Bible, one could

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7.   Cf. the still unpublished article by Conradie and Jonker: 'In search of relatively adequate biblical interpretation.'

assert that element (a), namely the world-behind-the-text, element (e), the contemporary context of interpretation, as well as element (f), the ideological world beneath the interpretation process, are the main foci of these studies. The value of sociological studies for these three aspects is self-evident. Although it has been indicated above that there are still historical periods in biblical history that have not been covered adequately in social-historical and social-scientific studies, the main focus of these studies is exactly the world-behind-the-text[8]. It has been indicated above that the aim of social hermeneutics is to relate the social structures and processes of the world-behind-the-text to the contemporary context in which the interpretation process takes place. Therefore the contemporary context also receives a fair amount of attention in these studies[9]. Many approaches that could be classified under the heading 'Hermeneutics of suspicion' (such as Marxist and feminist criticism) reflect on the power struggles that take place under the tranquil surfaces of texts. These approaches therefore attempt to unmask the hidden ideological biases that haunt all facets of the interpretation process[10].

Two other elements, namely (b) the text itself, and (c) the tradition of interpretation - although not at the centre of attention of social-historical and socio-scientific studies of the Bible - also receive a fair amount of scholarly attention. Some socio-linguistics studies, for example, reflect on the impact of social dynamics on the grammatical and rhetorical structures of the texts themselves. These studies illuminate some of the mysteries of the close relationship between the social world and language. With regard to the tradition of interpretation some attention is given to the sociological factors that guided and influenced the theological and ecclesiastical trajectories from the early Christian church to contemporary Christianity (to take my example from one specific community of faith that has its roots and orientation in the Bible)[11].

In my view, the remaining element, namely (d) the interpretative strategies and heuristic keys, receives limited attention. Because of the interrelatedness of all the different factors involved in the interpretation process, one would not be able to state that this element is completely neglected. However, it seems that this factor is on the periphery of attention when it comes to sociological approaches to Biblical interpretation.

Before I proceed, let me first elaborate on what is meant by interpretative strategies and heuristic keys. I will start with the latter. Heuristic keys are those concepts to which interpretative communities typically give preference when unlocking the theological meaning of Biblical texts. Conradie (1998:174ff.) indicates that 'heuristic keys are typically derived from the dominant beliefs, doctrines, values, customs, and habits of interpretative communities. They are not directly derived from either the Biblical texts or the contemporary world but are precisely the product of previous attempts to construct a relationship between text, tradition and context.' These concepts play a mediating role in the interaction between (in the case of biblical interpretation) ancient contexts and texts, and

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8. Cf. the discussion in Chapter C.6 of Conradie *et al.* (1995, 197ff.).
9. Cf. Arendse (1995, 202): 'What is needed, then, is an approach to the Bible that makes a form of 'time travel' possible, thus successfully overcoming the 'communication gap' between ourselves as contemporary readers of the Bible within our world, and the biblical texts and the world of their original audience(s) and/or readers. But more than this, an approach is also needed to help reconstruct the social and cultural structures, processes and forces at work in the ancient world in which the biblical texts and ideas originated. Social-scientific criticism is one approach that helps to make possible both aspects of 'time travel' and 'social-cultural reconstruction'.'
10. Cf. the discussion of these approaches in Chapter C.7 of Conradie *et al.* (1995, 211ff.).
11. Cf. e.g. the work of Nürnberger (1992, 1993, 1994 and 1997).

contemporary contexts. According to Conradie (1998:174ff.) these heuristic keys have a double function in theological interpretation. 'They provide a key to unlock the meaning of both the contemporary context and the Biblical texts. They therefore (and simultaneously) enable the interpreter to establish a link between text and contemporary context. Heuristic keys are not only employed to find similarities but to construct similarities, ... if necessary.' Conradie also emphasizes that heuristic keys, apart from their constructive function, have an ideology-critical function: 'They enable interpreters to identify and construct the meaning of the text (and the context) but they also provide a tool to evaluate the available evidence and to unmask (in terms of that particular perspective) any distortions in the process of interpretation (in the world behind the text, in the text itself, in the history of interpretation of the text and in the contemporary context)' (Conradie, 1998:176). However, Conradie does not give any indication that these heuristic keys, or to be more specific, the selection of heuristic keys, should also be viewed ideological-critically. But I will come back to this point later.

What, then, are interpretative strategies? These strategies should be distinguished from exegetical strategies or methods, such as historical-critical strategies, structuralist methods, ideological-critical approaches, etc. Interpretative strategies are rather those strategies that readers and interpreters of the Bible use to bridge the gap between text and contemporary context. In the publication *Fishing for Jonah* (Conradie *et al.,* 1995:44ff.) three groups of strategies are distinguished. Within each group there are a variety of strategies ranging from more sophisticated applications of the strategy to more crude forms. The three groups are the following: (i) The strategies in the first group are interested in identifying statements of abiding validity and truth in the Bible; (ii) The strategies in the second group all want to find the similarities or analogies amid the differences between text and context; (iii) The strategies in the third group are more dynamic and want to identify the way that the meaning of the text could be applied and appropriated in a changed form in the new context[12].

It is clear that the selection of heuristic keys would be fundamental to each of these strategies. One would even be able to argue that the selection of particular heuristic keys would lead to specific interpretative strategies. For example, if a reader typically uses the heuristic key 'God's love' to unlock theological meaning from Biblical texts, he or she would most probably revert to the strategy of identifying eternal truths in the Bible. However, someone to whom the key 'liberation' is preferable, the third strategy, namely identifying how the meaning of biblical texts could be adapted, applied and appropriated in ever-new contemporary contexts, would probably be the strategy to which such a reader would revert.

Earlier in this discussion I argued that the role of heuristic keys and interpretative strategies in Biblical interpretation has, to my mind, been neglected thus far in sociological studies. I would now like to proceed to a preliminary reflection on how the present project on social transformation and Biblical interpretation could possibly contribute to bringing this particular aspect of the dynamic interpretation process into focus.

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12. Compare these strategies to the different modes of social hermeneutics presented by Gottwald (1992, 87) and that were described above. Gottwald's first two categories more or less correspond to the first category mentioned here, namely to identify statements of abiding validity. Gottwald's third category more or less corresponds to the second category discussed here, namely the identification of analogies amid the differences.

4.   Social transformation and biblical interpretation
4.1   The sociological study of change

A major problem that confronts contemporary scholars in their attempts to relate social transformation to Biblical interpretation is the restrictiveness of the assumptions of continuity and linearity underlying most sociological theories of social change. The problem of the sociological study of change is summarised by Hallinan (1997, 1ff.) as follows: 'Most sociological theories assume that social change is a continuous process and assume that change is linear and predictable. ... Due to their reliance on the assumptions of continuity and linearity, contemporary models of social change typically describe only certain periods in the life of a social system and only inadequately address other critical phases. ... Catastrophic societal events that create discontinuities in a social system, at either the macro or the micro level, present the greatest challenges to current theories of social change. And much recent history has been characterized by such events. ... While our present theories of social change have made significant contributions to our understanding of social changes in less dynamic, slower paced periods of history, theories must now address social change during times of accelerated change, global connectedness, instant communication, and sophisticated technology. ... We must question the assumptions of continuity, linearity, and stable equilibrium that form the foundation for most models of social change and replace them, when necessary, with more realistic assumptions that better fit the data.' From this presidential address at the American Sociological Association Meeting in 1996 it becomes clear that even the sociological study of change is changing drastically at the moment. Hallinan in her address suggests that the older deterministic and probabilistic models should be replaced by models that are utilised with great success in the natural sciences, namely catastrophe and chaos models[13]. According to her catastrophe and chaos theories suggest that explanation rather than prediction should be emphasised in our models of social change. She therefore concludes (1997, 9): 'If sociologists agree that contemporary theories cannot explain the dramatic social upheavals of the past decade and if we suspect that our assumptions about social change are not universal, then dissatisfaction with current theory may indeed lead us to a fundamental shift in how we view social change processes. We must be able *to describe social change in a society that is instantaneously and globally connected, economically interdependent, highly technologically sophisticated, and in which the distribution of resources is increasingly less equitable.* Powerful new models such as catastrophe and chaos models may stimulate us to rethink our fundamental assumptions and broaden our perspective on social change' (my italics).

The present article does not purport to make a substantial contribution to the discussion of change within the social sciences. It rather wants to read the trends in the social sciences and, from these trends, wants to deduce certain guidelines for the present research. From the above discussion the following could thus be deduced with regard to the investigation into the relationship between social transformation and Biblical interpretation:

- The relationship between social transformation and Biblical interpretation could not be investigated in general terms. It has to be limited to specific periods in specific communities[14].

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13. Cf. also Gregersen & Sailer's (1993) discussion of the implications of chaos theory for social science research.
14. The establishment of such a period of study is, of course, no easy task, as Smelser (1968, 266) already indicated: '. the phases are not actually identifiable empirically, each beginning and ending abruptly, and giving way to the next. Empirically they fuse indistinguishably into one another. The establishment of phases

- When dealing with the variable 'social transformation' in this investigation, one should keep in mind that linear or cyclical models of social description have proved to be inadequate. The emphasis should be on description and not prediction.
- The description of social processes in a specific community during a specific period of time should be done within the context of the broader forces and tensions in society. One such force that could serve as a broader context of description is the tension between globalisation and localisation. The contribution by Groenewald in this volume reflects on this broader tension[15].
- Related to the previous point, one should bear in mind that social processes in a specific community during a specific period are interrelated to numerous factors. Political, economic and religio-theological factors are examples.

4.2 Describing the interaction with heuristic keys

The following procedure[16] could thus be suggested for the description of how social processes prompt the selection of certain heuristic keys that play a dominant role in the Biblical interpretation of a specific community during a specific period of time:

- The first priority should be to select some case studies from diverse sociological areas and diverse periods of time, but also (to make comparison possible) with some common denominator among them. In a NRF-funded research project with the title 'The influence of different contexts of social transformation on Biblical interpretation' four case studies have been selected. Two of these studies have been selected from different periods in South African history, as well as from different social contexts. The first will examine the period of theological legitimisation of the apartheid ideology among the white Afrikaner community during the 1960s and 1970s. The second will investigate the period of resistance against the apartheid ideology (with its manifestations in the church and in society) among the so-called coloured community during the 1980s. The third case study will look at the different views on the position of women in the Malawian CCAP church during the 1980s and 1990s. The last case study will investigate the socio-ethical reflection on homophilia in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands during the 1980s and 1990s. The common denominator among these case studies is the Reformed theological and ecclesial tradition. This theological tradition has strongly defined views

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freezes the flow of historical process. ... any effort to assign absolute time units ... to the phases is bound to be arbitrary, because the phases do not have the empirical visibility to permit such precision. Sometimes it is necessary to settle for a relatively indeterminate 'before-after' characterization.'

15. Smelser (1994, 135ff.) indicates that as early as the 1960s the term 'global' was increasingly used by sociologists in their attempts at describing social systems. However, he also indicates that 'the process of globalization has been thrown into doubt with the recognition of the evidently opposing tendencies toward localism and national and subnational fragmentation that have accompanied the process.' Cf. also Touraine's (1998, 165ff.) description of this tension in his summary of the social transformations of the twentieth century: '.... we are in a world on the brink of worldwide civil war ... What I mean is that the world system is now divided and is turning against itself. ... Because these systems of control are coming apart, we are now seeing the triumph, in the most diverse and contradictory forms, of what can only be termed individualism. ... it is in a world without institutions, a world with simultaneously a global and an individualistic outlook, that the fissures and fractures ... are appearing and widening.'

16. The distinction of procedural steps for the investigation does not suggest that any study of this kind could proceed according to a rigid pattern. This distinction rather has the aim of identifying the important areas that should be investigated in this study. In the author's view such a study would be inadequate if all these areas are not covered.

on the interpretation of the Bible and the hermeneutical principles that guide interpretation[17].

- The second priority would be to identify certain influential theological or ecclesial documents in the regional and temporal contexts of each case study. These documents should be representative of the way in which that specific ecclesial community reacted to the specific social issue. Official ecclesial decisions, statements and confessions normally contain the condensation of theological thinking and Biblical interpretation with regard to specific social issues. Although these documents are at the time of formulation not always a reflection of the views of every member of that church group (not even the view of the majority of the members), they normally function symbolically within ecclesial communities, gradually shaping the minds and views of members, and representing the official point of view of that church in public.

  In the two South African case studies mentioned above, two influential documents will be studied. With regard to the Dutch Reformed Church's reaction to the government's policy of separate development and segregation in the 1960s and 1970s the document 'Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif' (RVN) that was endorsed and accepted at the General Synod of 1974 will be investigated. In the second case study, namely the resistance against the apartheid ideology during the 1980s, the Belhar Confession will be investigated. A draft version of this confession was accepted by the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1982, and it was officially ratified as the fourth[18] confession of the church in 1986. In the other two case studies, namely the issue of homophilia in the Netherlands, as well as the issue of the position of women in the Malawian CCAP church, a selection of official synodical decisions and reports (even if these reports were rejected by the synodical meetings) will be investigated.

- The next step would then be to describe the strategies of Biblical interpretation that are represented in those documents. This description could possibly proceed in the following way:

  (i)   All the direct and indirect references to the Bible in these documents should be identified;

  (ii)   A thorough exegetical study should be made of these Biblical references in order to become acquainted with the scholarly views on these texts. Especially social-historical and social-scientific studies should feature as discussion partners[19] in this exegetical study. What were the social conditions, values and tensions during the phases of textual production and reinterpretation that could possibly have had an influence on the contents of the texts?

  (iii) From the selection of texts in each document (or group of documents) an identification of dominant heuristic keys should be attempted. As described above, heuristic keys are concepts that are typically derived from the dominant beliefs, doctrines, values, customs, and habits of the interpretative community.

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17. However, it will certainly become clear from these case studies that the Reformed hermeneutical tradition, in interaction with sociological factors, undergoes certain distortions and aberrations in local circumstances.

18. The others are the 'Heidelbergse Kategismus', the 'Nederlandse Geloofsbelydenis' and the 'Dordtse Leerreëls'.

19. The metaphor of 'discussion partners' in the process of Biblical interpretation is described more fully in Conradie *et al* (1995, 36ff.) and Jonker (1997, 75ff.).

Are there any patterns of such dominant themes or concepts to be discerned from the document's selection of textual references?

(iv) The way that these textual references function in the argumentation of the document will reveal something of the interpretative strategies (as described above) that are being utilised by the author(s)[20]. These interpretative strategies should thus be identified, and a description should be provided of how the heuristic keys operate within these strategies.

- Subsequently, the social dynamics of the time during which the selected documents were produced should be described. In this description the problems involved in the description of social change should be kept in mind:

(i) The aim of this step should be description, and not prediction or evaluation;

(ii) The period covered in the description should be long enough in order to include sufficient factors so that social patterns could become apparent;

(iii) The factors that will receive attention in this description could vary from one case study to another. With regard to the two South African case studies, political and economic factors would, for example, be of the utmost significance in the description[21]. The Malawian case study would probably benefit from a description of the cultural and ecclesial factors, while the Dutch case study would need a description of the changes in values and the process of secularization of society;

(iv) The description should also be sensitive to the broader tensions in society, for example, a strong tendency towards globalisation or localisation[22]. These tensions form the backdrop against which the processes of social transformation develop.

- The most interesting would then of course be (and that is the aim of this investigation) to determine the influence of these social processes on the selection of heuristic keys and interpretative strategies. Questions such as the following should be asked: Are there any correlations between the measure in which social transformation processes affected the interpretative community and the concepts they chose to unlock meaning from Biblical texts? What function did Biblical interpretation according to the selected heuristic keys and interpretative strategies have for the interpretative community?

The last question mentioned above of course emphasises that the relationship between social processes and Biblical interpretation (or for that matter, any interpretation) is a reciprocal one. Social transformation influences the way the Bible is read, but Biblical interpretation also influences society. This influence of Biblical interpretation on society (society at large, or the local society to which the interpretative community belongs), however, should not be viewed uniformly. Different modes of interaction could be distinguished. The following fourfold distinction can, for example, be made:

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20. In ecclesial decisions, statements and confessions, the author(s) is normally unknown or undefined (such as a synodical meeting). However, these unknown and undefined authors normally exhibit the dominant interpretative strategies respresentative of the ecclesial community of which they form a part.

21. The contribution by Groenewald (1986, 18ff.) could, for example, be of great help with regard to the two South African case studies.

22. Cf. again Groenewald's contribution in this volume.

(i) *The mode of legitimisation*: The present social order is accepted uncritically, and Biblical interpretation serves the purpose of *reinforcing or strengthening* this order;

(ii) *The mode of accommodation*: The present social order is accepted as norm, but Biblical interpretation serves the purpose of *including others* into this order;

(iii) *The mode of apology*: The present social order is accepted with cognisance of alternative social orders. Biblical interpretation then functions as *explanation* of the present order over against other social orders;

(iv) *The mode of resistance*: The present social order is rejected, and Biblical interpretation serves the purpose of *criticising* the present order and advocating an alternative order.

In determining these modes of interpretation one should, of course, take the broader tensions in society into account. The influence, for example, of tendencies towards globalisation or localisation in society should be considered.

- After the descriptive study according to the procedure elaborated on above, the project would deliver significant results to make a comparison between the different case studies. The following questions should then be asked: Are there any patterns to be observed with regard to the heuristic keys and interpretative strategies that are normally selected when each of the above-mentioned modes of interpretation is utilised? Do these modes of interpretation have a similar transformative effect in societies with stronger tendencies towards globalisation and localisation?

5. Conclusion

I want to conclude this article (which I have subtitled 'A methodological reflection') with a quotation from Gottwald (1992, 88): 'The question of which social structures and behaviours were the 'right' ones in biblical times and which are the 'right' ones for us all will always remain a matter of dispute. To determine 'rightness' in these contexts necessitates critical social ethical judgement. Such judgement is developed within the discourse and practice of the various communities that constitute church and society, and in which many factors such as class, race, gender, and religion are at play. There simply is no 'neutral' or 'objective' biblical social ethic. But the 'lesson' derivable from this reality is not sheer ethical relativism and cynicism but informed moral agency by a 'responding' self in a 'responding' society.' The present research project is an endeavour towards stimulating such 'discourse and practice of the various communities that constitute church and society'.

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