

## BIBLICAL STUDIES ENCOUNTERS AFRICAN RELIGION

### The pedagogical implications of religious diversity

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#### Abstract

*In South African schools, Biblical Studies has been taught with little consideration being given to the religious and cultural worlds of the pupils. Research indicates that black children, who constitute the majority of those studying the subject, are deeply influenced by African religion. The comparative method offers a way of enabling pupils to utilize prior religious knowledge in the process of examining other world-views.*

In a seminal paper delivered at the 1990 Congress of the Southern African Biblical Studies Society, Ferdinand Deist raises important questions about the role of Biblical Studies in state schools (Deist 1991). He suggests that the epistemological assumptions of those who construct its policy and syllabi are informed by a Western Platonic philosophy, and argues that the way in which the Bible is imposed on those from an African background is tantamount to cultural imperialism. Pedagogically this results in the subject becoming 'irrelevant to pupils from a background differing from that of the planners' (1991:32).

Deist's argument rests on an academic examination of so-called Western and African philosophies using studies produced by adults. He points to the inadequacy of this method and calls for empirical research into the conceptual world of black and white youth (1991:42).

Two recent dissertations written in the Faculty of Education of Fort Hare University make decided progress in this direction.

#### 1. The religious attitudes of high school pupils in the Ciskei

Nandiswa Kili (1988) sets out to test the hypothesis that the official version of Christianity taught in state schools is significantly different to the religious

tradition of the pupils. She relates how she was influenced in her choice of a thesis topic by teaching experiences where pupils strongly disagreed with the syllabus content from the perspective of African Traditional Religion. The survey she designed sets out to examine the religious attitudes of high school pupils in the Ciskei. Some significant results of a survey involving 212 pupils are as follows:

- 152 are professed Christians, 61 not.
- 174 attend church services occasionally, 24 regularly, 16 never.
- 180 believe in the Resurrection, 32 do not.
- 200 believe in ancestral spirits.
- in 192 cases customary rites are performed at home, and the pupils approve.

On the basis of these statistics it is concluded that the philosophical disparity between the Christianity of the syllabus and the religion of the class is an important contributor to the 'lukewarm or indifferent attitude' to the subject (1988:145).

A subsequent survey designed by Adamson Mxekezo also tries to explain why the official Religious Education syllabus is not taken seriously in many schools in the Ciskei (Mxekezo, 1991). During the period April 1989 to April 1990 a total of 360 standard eight pupils were interviewed. They were from 18 schools in rural, peri-urban and urban areas. By means of random selection 20 pupils from each were invited to participate. Interviews were also conducted.

Many of the results of the earlier survey are confirmed. While 61% believe the Bible to be the Word of God, 60% believe in the influence of ancestral spirits and support the practice of observing traditional rituals. Furthermore, the pupils indicate that 90% of their parents adhere to traditional religion in some or other form. Of the parents interviewed 80% profess a knowledge of traditional religion and 65% feel that traditional worship should be included in Religious Education. When teachers are asked, 'should Christians perform some of the traditional rituals?', 70% reply in the affirmative. Those believing in ancestors amount to 60%. When asked, 'is there a connection between ancestors and Jesus Christ?' 60% say yes, 20% no, and 20% do not know. Regarding their own views, 44% of the teachers surveyed say they are 'devoted Christians' and 44% are 'Christian but also upholding certain tenets of traditional Xhosa religion'. On the question of the use of African Traditional Religion to explain the Bible, 37% indicate that they do.

When a survey shows that 60% of teachers are in favour of abolishing the subject and 54% of pupils say that they gain nothing from Religious

Education, the subject is clearly in a state of crisis. This has been confirmed by Edmund Satekge's research into the teaching of Religious Education and Biblical Studies in Black high schools (1989, 1990). His survey of 390 pupils and 40 teachers in Department of Education and Training Schools reveals significant problems ranging from untrained, unmotivated teachers to overcrowded classrooms.

As an experienced teacher and inspector of schools, Mxekezo is aware of these problems when he comes to this conclusion (1991:5):

The entire situation is seriously aggravated in that the Ciskeian child is actually exposed to a dualism. At home he is taught the traditional religious philosophy based on ancestor veneration, while at school he is compelled to listen to biblical stories as prescribed by the syllabus. The important didactical principle of historical continuity is violated thereby.

Mxekezo's research indicates that even though many teachers are not familiar with the details of the syllabus, they believe that they are expected to teach from the Bible. Furthermore, teacher training and the prescribed text-books present a European form of Christianity that takes little account of the religious world of the pupils. The call made by Kili and Mxekezo to the sound pedagogical principle of enabling pupils to move from the known to the unknown has been echoed in the writings of some Biblical Studies lecturers in tertiary institutions.

## **2. African Traditional Religion as a means to a better understanding of the Bible**

Referring to an interview with Professor Ephraim Mosothoana of the University of Transkei, Peter Flint (1987:186) points out that

... Africans do not object to studying the Old Testament, but to studying it in a way developed, controlled and maintained by Western scholars.

Flint argues that the modern Enlightenment paradigm, within which most biblical scholarship operates, needs to be made relevant to people's lives by a greater emphasis on contextual issues. Thus,

... more attention would then be given to the life customs and institutions of Ancient Israel on the one hand, and to modern social, political and religious conditions on the other.

He continues:

This does not constitute a repudiation of the scientific approach, but would curb the hegemony that textual and redactional criticism, structuralism, et cetera, seem to exercise at the present time (1987:206).

In a series of articles, Professor Jasper Burden of Unisa (1983, 1986) and Dr M G Swanepoel of the University of Venda (1990), argue that the common world-view shared by Africa and ancient Israel can greatly facilitate communication of the Old Testament.

### 3. Religious diversity

The emphasis on continuity between the world of the Bible and a so-called 'African World-view' raises an important question. If we are consistent about the need to construct a curriculum that incorporates the values of a particular community, does this mean in South Africa that we are committing ourselves to a set of parallel curricula? Although he emphasizes the need to take seriously the world-view of the pupil, Deist cautions against an approach that would 'draw up separate syllabi for different groups of people or particular geographical areas, for that would amount to (re)creating windowless cultural gardens that will make communication in this country impossible' (1991:43).

What the research of Kili and Mxekezo establishes is that there is a far greater degree of religious diversity in classrooms than is generally recognised. Although a recent census may have 78% of the population in the category 'Christian', it is clear that within that definition there is considerable diversity. Furthermore, the boundaries between Christianity and African Traditional Religion overlap considerably and are often blurred.

### 4. Towards a comparative method

Parallels between African religious culture and the biblical, particularly the Old Testament, have long been evident in South Africa. The affinity that Africans felt to the ancient Israelites led to a widespread blending of biblical tradition with the African (Oosthuizen 1991). The first biblical scholar to use the parallels effectively was Bishop John Colenso. He writes of the Zulus (1862:xxi):

...(their) mode of life and habits, and even the nature of their country, so nearly corresponds to those of the ancient Israelites, that the very same scenes are brought continually, as it were, before their eyes, and vividly realized in a practical point of view, in a way in which an English student would scarcely think of looking at them.

Parallels have been explored by several African scholars, such as John Mbiti (1978) and Temba Mafico (1978). South Africans Ephraim Mosothoane (1988) and Jasper Burden (1983, 1986) have worked in this field in recent years. Both are accomplished biblical scholars who believe that research on the Bible is enriched by an exploration of the similarities. They are part of a long tradition in biblical scholarship which insists on the validity of the comparative method. This involves beginning with what is more accessible to study and then moving back to the Bible to see what the two different worlds have in common. One thinks of the pioneering work of Hermann Gunkel

(1917) in utilizing not only Babylonian myths, but more recent European folktales. More recently, the rise of social scientific approaches to the Bible has brought with it a greater degree of precision, as in the work of Thomas Overholt (1986), who compares Hebrew prophets to sacred intermediaries in more recent cultures.

The comparative method, however, has often been over-utilized, and there has sometimes been a failure to recognize not only the similarities, but the differences between religious traditions (Talmon 1978). An unwillingness to take differences seriously has been a feature of some of the work that has been done in the field of African Traditional Religion. The majority of those in Africa engaged in this task have their training in Christian theology (Westerlund 1985: 57-60). The result, for the academic study of African religion, has been a tendency to overemphasize similarities between Traditional Religion and the religion of the Bible to the point where the distinctiveness of each is in danger of being lost (Horton 1984).

The comparative method, carefully used, can however provide a means of expanding horizons. For example, the notion of sacrifice in ancient Israelite religion could be viewed from the perspective of Traditional Religion. While differences are noted, such as the fact that in Africa the ritual involves the ancestors, similarities accelerate understanding. A pupil with first-hand experience of having witnessed a goat being slaughtered on behalf of a woman wishing to bear a child, should be in a position to appreciate similar narratives in the Bible. The exercise of comparison will have provided information about both religious worlds. A pupil with no experience of such rituals could nevertheless be made aware of the religious heritage of fellow citizens, and thereby be equipped to understand the rich variety of religious tradition in Africa and in the Bible.

## **5. Conclusions**

There can be no denying the importance of the pedagogical principle of moving from the known to the unknown, the familiar to the unfamiliar. In the teaching of the Bible it has been ably demonstrated by Kili and Mxekezo that account must be taken of the religious world of the audience. Their research, however, also reveals that there is considerable religious diversity within each classroom. Furthermore, account must be taken of Deist's argument against restricting each group to the narrow confines of its own belief system. He rightly insists that it is possible to discover a common humanity at the same time as allowing and respecting differing views.

A judicious employment of the comparative method offers a way of both utilizing the prior knowledge of students and exposing them to other world-views. The academic study of the Bible has a great deal to gain from interaction with the religions of Africa.

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