

## THE BIBLE AND THE STRUGGLE (FOR POWER) \*

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### Abstract

*After, in the first part of this essay, contextual theologies are defined, theologies are grouped together which seem to be different, but which are in fact all, generally speaking, contextual in nature. Then misunderstandings about and differences between contextual theologies are analysed. Finally, in a focus on the use of the Bible, the problems of contextual theologies' readings of the Bible are discussed.*

### 1. Introduction and definition

Understanding the Bible in its context is a well known activity which for a long time has been prescribed to its readers as an essential code to decode its message. But this activity has become highly suspect in recent times and is, we are told, in dire need of incisive correction. It is superseded by 'contextualization' which integrates the Bible in contemporary society and which once again is a precondition for understanding it properly. Contextualizing has, like spirituality<sup>1</sup> a dominating trend in contemporary theology.

In the first part of this essay I shall investigate this new development by discussing what contextual theologies are. I shall group theologies together which seem to be different, but which are in fact all contextual in nature. I shall then analyse the differences between them. In this overview the problems in reading the Bible in a contemporary context will be illustrated.

Contextual theologies all claim that their programmes are fundamentally in line with the message of the Bible, that they have an explicit Christian cha-

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1. These are, incidentally, not two mutually exclusive topics, as some seem to think. Cf McGovern (198:83ff): 'Controversy over issues about Marxism, social analysis, and political readings of scripture has created a distorted image of liberation theology. In terms of quantity, especially if one examines liberation theology in the 1980's, writings about liberation *spirituality* far outweighs works in all the areas that arouse debate. I would clearly designate spirituality as *the* dominant theme of contemporary liberation theology. This spirituality involves both a call to follow Jesus in working *for* and *with* the poor, but also profound reflection on what all Christians can learn about God *from* the poor.' Spirituality may provide us with a special perspective on poverty.

racter and that they depend on or reflect a relationship with God. In terms of Liberation Theology, Boff (1984:2, cf 25) writes,

At the roots of liberation we find a spirituality, a mysticism: the encounter of the poor with the Lord.

At stake here is a religious experience.

These theologies furthermore want to respond concretely to matters of the day. Christians must display a faith which effectively eradicates the misery of the poor. This means that they aim towards transforming society. Liberation Theology is one example of how the Bible is understood by theologians who want to relate it to a present day context. They criticize the church and traditional theology for focussing on historical information and harmless activities without effectively opposing unjust structures. In some cases, they allege, the churches contributed to solidify and promote unjust structures.<sup>2</sup>

This struggle against injustice cannot be compared to past opposition of the church and theology to oppression. Contextual theologians claim a unique place in history.<sup>3</sup> Gutiérrez therefore remarks (1973:13) that,

... theology of liberation offers us not so much a new theme for reflection as a *new way* to do theology.

Assmann, referring to the inextricable link between Liberation Theology and the South American political situation, observed that

Latin American theology is not 'part' of theology. It is an entirely new and original sketch or blueprint of theology.<sup>4</sup>

This new character of contextual theology is explained by Sobrino (1984:10ff) in terms of the history of modern thought. He referred to two phases in the Enlightenment: the first phase, to be associated with Kant, brought about the liberation from dogmatic authoritarianism. In this first phase theology was engaged in the hermeneutical enterprise, seeking to understand the meaning of faith in a situation in which this meaning had been obscured. No consideration was given to the rôle of theology in transforming reality. The second phase, closely linked with Marxism, sought after liberation from

2. Cf Miguez Bonino 1984:4-6; Rowland & Corner 1990:35ff.

3. Boff 1984:3: 'In times gone by, the church was bound to the dominant classes, and it was through their mediation that the church reached out to the poor, to whom the dominant classes were giving "assistance". The presence of the church was "assistentialistic", paternalistic. The church came to the aid of the poor, it is true, but made no use of the resources of the poor in instituting a process of change.'

4. Min 1989:5 quotes the remarks of Ratzinger in which he described the radical new nature of liberation theology. Despite its radical new character, one should not overlook the remarkable resemblances between contextual theologies and certain nineteenth century theologians. How 'new' contextual theologies are, is therefore a matter of definition and perspective. The old and strong roots of modern political theologies have been discussed in a lucid article by Bammel 1984, 10-68. Cf also De Villiers 1986; Bussmann 1985:142-145.

wretched conditions of the real world. According to Sobrino this phase only started with the work of Liberation Theologians in South America.

In this theology, the liberating function of theological understanding does not consist in explaining or giving meaning to an existing reality or to faith as threatened by a particular situation, but in transforming a reality so that it may take on meaning and the lost or threatened meaning of the faith may thereby also be recovered (Segundo 1984:15).

This phase in theology is new because it aims to transform reality and wants to fulfil an alienating rôle with respect to an oppressive society. This implies that theology must be focussed on praxis, one of the keywords in contextual theology and perhaps the most characteristic feature of authentic contextual theology.

In practical terms this praxis is deeply political<sup>5</sup> in its transforming of society. It is primarily a movement with mundane and worldly aims directed towards societal structures. It is this structural nature of contextual theology which is foundational for an understanding of it. A mere glance at names of trends and models like, for example, Black Theology, Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, Minjung Theology, Political Theology, Political Hermeneutics, Theology of the World, Theology of Revolution (cf Bammel 1984:62-63; Smith 1985:1) aptly illustrates the involvement of these movements in contemporary society and its political nature.

This political understanding of praxis was initially nuanced in a specific way: Boff, for example, regarded politics as having to do with basic values, aims and means to regulate the general wellbeing of society, matters which they consider as part and parcel of theology. To some contextual theologies, therefore, involvement in politics (as it is defined here), to some extent implies taking up a metaposition which transcends a particular ideology and sectional group, and which reflects a general activity or area in which she is closely involved by definition of her identity and existence. A destructive theology which identifies with the power games of a particular group is rejected. For these theologians, theology and the church differ from political parties.<sup>6</sup>

Recently the link between theology and politics was progressively strengthened and theology drawn into the political debate in an unprecedented manner. Mosala, for example, wrote about Gottwald's 'revolutionary' work, that

... it exploded the myth that Biblical Studies is an ideologically neutral activity. Serious biblical scholarship no longer admits the poverty of the view that there is any approach to the Bible, academic or devo-

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5. Cf, as an example, the explicit remarks of Goba 1986:60 : 'Black Theology is a way of thinking and acting by black Christians as they attempt to discover the political implications of their faith in a given situation.'

6. Verweyen 1985:92; Bussmann 1985:90. This does not imply neutrality or an attempt to avoid controversy. The transformation of society often requires the oppressors to be challenged and demands of the Christian to be willing to suffer in the struggle for liberation.

tional, which has no political implications. The question is not whether or not one's biblical scholarship has a political agenda; the question is which political agenda is inscribed in one's scholarship ([1991]:1).

It is no longer a matter whether the church or theology *also* has a political agenda in addition to other concerns. Everything the church does is political. The church in herself is not neutral. Her very being affects politics and has a political nature. That is why the church has to weigh specific political programmes like Liberation and Black Theologians do when they, for example, extensively contrast their work with Western capitalism and hegemony.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Diversity

Although contextual theologies share common assumptions, presuppositions, features and concerns which mark them as a unique and new development in theology (cf De Villiers 1986; McGovern 1990:xv-xvii),<sup>8</sup> they differ as soon as they address societal matters concretely. It is not always easy to postulate a unity or coherence between contextual theologies, if only because they focus on different issues and problems, or because they are so deeply embedded in different societies and cultures. But this does not come as a surprise, because it is the very nature of contextual theology not to create a 'universal' truth.

But these differences are not always in line with the aim of contextualization. Groups with the same theological and political orientation in the same society and context can differ incisively. Only the naive reader, for example, will conceive of 'Black Theology' as a monolithic development. Except for the expected distinctions between South African and American Black Theology, there are striking differences among South African Black Theologies.<sup>9</sup> In Black theological circles in South Africa, for example, Mosala's sharp criticism of many black theologians. Mosala 1986 and 1989, as well as Goba's reference (in 1986:65) to Boesak's dangerous ahistorical remark that the Christian faith transcends all ideologies, ideals, groups, nations etc. is indicative of a divide among those who as group found a strong commonality in their opposition to the *apartheid* system.

These differences are not about secondary matters, but exist on the most basic of issues. It is not without reason that the editors of the second volume of Black theological essays wrote,

Whilst agreeing that Black Theology is a theology of the oppressed and exploited black people the conference (on Black Theology in 1984)

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7. Cf further below. This politicising of theology and the church is paralleled by the politicising of many societal activities. There are many examples of how culture, sport, entertainment, etc. are progressively politicised.

8. Cf De Villiers 1986; Min 1989:39.

9. The crudest example is to be found in Goba (1986:61), who rejects 'even black ministers who collaborate with the existing political system of *apartheid* and so-called independent states' and claim that they are doing Black Theology.

recognised the *divergences* and convergences *in the premise from which black theologians theologise*. It was agreed therefore that a way be opened to allow creative black theological reflection and action *irrespective of ideological differences*, to avoid a paralysis in the movement of black theological ideas.<sup>11</sup>

There are also, for example, strong differences among proponents of Liberation Theology, when, for example, some of them accept dialectical materialism, while others would reject it. Some concentrated, especially in the beginning, on distancing themselves from traditional theology and on the need to focus on real issues. Others preferred to nurture a close relationship with base communities and immerse themselves in the lifestyle of the poor.<sup>12</sup>

That all these differences produced variant readings of the Bible confirms that there is not a uniform way of contextualizing the Bible. In some cases this is to be expected, because of the different ideological presuppositions at work. In other cases, Christians would be surprised to find that theologians who share exactly the same political and societal context, still do not read the Bible the same way. More light will be shed on this matter in the following sections.

## 2.1 Misunderstanding contextual theology

In addition to these different approaches towards contextualising the Bible, a further factor contributes to the confusion of speech on contextual theology: there are Christians who naively appropriate these theologies and do not fully appreciate the basic issues which are being debated in them and on which divergent positions are built. As with all new and popular developments, contextual theologies are, once again like spirituality, taken over uncritically or understood superficially, if not plainly wrongly.

One of the reasons why contextual theology is not properly grasped, is because it overlaps with popular religious concerns. Lay Christians associate easily with the call to take praxis seriously, or with the statement that the Gospel relates intimately to the poor. Often this overlap causes critics or disciples to misjudge how sophisticated contextual theologies really are. The

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11. Mosala & Tlhagale 1986:xviii. Secondary italics.

12. McGovern (1989:xv-xvi) refers to the use of value judgments which are used by critics to distinguish different types and currents in liberation theology. In the 1970's one of the major critics of liberation theology, Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, contrasted a current of liberation theology (judged good) that based itself on the Bible and church teachings, with a current (judged bad) that based its theology on Marxist analysis and practice.

Assmann (1984) wrote an interesting article on the various Christologies in Latin American theology. He illustrates how differently Christ has been portrayed by different groups in Latin American countries: in Chile, a 'Christ of the Coup' was created to justify the right-wing coup to depose Allende. Leftist groups in contrast, emphasised Christ and his resurrection, and apply Easter Christological metaphors to the fallen freedom fighters by saying 'Che lives' (Assmann 1984:127-130).

long history and advanced character of, for example, Liberation Theology and its developed and critical reflection often go unnoticed.<sup>13</sup>

One of the definitions of contextual theology, given by Goba (1986:60), stresses its reflective nature:

Black theological reflection is a critical reflection on the praxis of Christian Faith, one which participates in the ongoing process of liberation with the black Christian community ... Black Theology is a way of reflecting about our faith as we engage meaningfully in the struggle of our people.

These two poles of reflection and of involvement are often found in descriptions of contextual theologies. What may have been a *cri de coeur* taken up by theologians, has without doubt grown into a full-blown theological activity. The many publications<sup>14</sup> on contextual theology are good indications of what Boff called the concern with theoretical questions which provide the theological know-how by means of which one can do serious theology:

It is a sign of autonomy of a stream of reflection when it can develop its own method and become aware of its scope and its limits (Boff 1984:29<sup>15</sup>).

Contextual theologies should therefore not be mistaken for yet another practically orientated theology. The sophisticated nature of contextual theologies is clear when one sees how, for example, Liberation theologians, like many other contextual theologians, are multi-faceted in working with historical critical approaches (cf Füssel 1984:15-16, 24), with advanced insights from philosophy of history (Von Jüchen 1984) and other disciplines (McGovern 1990:35ff; Mosala 1989). But these facets and methods find their coherence in the hermeneutical and theological framework which determines contextual theology fundamentally, as the following discussion will indicate. It would be a fatal mistake to regard the focus on praxis and the political nature of contextual theologies as indications of intellectual simplicity or to underestimate the challenges inherent in them.

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13. McGovern (1990:62) remarks that while 'awareness of conditions in Latin America and commitment to change may precede questions about God's revelation, critical reflection constitutes liberation theology as theology proper'. This critical reflection is discussed in one book after the other.

14. Min 1989:7 refers to the phenomenal, continuing production of many of these theologians.

15. Note the remarks of Boff on how he became more and more involved in theoretical reflection because of his fear for theological immediatism: 'This attitude would surely throw up a definite obstacle to the construction of a consistent discourse, and praxis itself stood in the gravest need of precisely such a consistent discourse. It was as if praxis were laboring under a "theoretical oedipal complex" which projected the rigor of intellectual discipline as a kind of castration of native, untamed thought, threatening to incapacitate its primitive, instinctual ebullience and thrust' (1987:xxiii).

After this general discussion of contextual theology, I shall now group contextual approaches in terms of their relationship to the Bible: the populist understanding of contextual theology will be distinguished from the more technical, advanced and radical approaches. The final section investigates the ideological framework of these theologies and asks what problems it generates for readers of the Bible. In all these sections the problems of reading the Bible in new contexts will be illustrated.

## 2.2 Populist Contextual Theology

A common understanding of contextual theology is that it addresses practical and relevant issues in the society of the readers of the Bible. Faith, it is said, is more than a belief in historical information in the Bible or a discussion about doctrine. The Bible relates to society and should not, almost incestuously, be locked up in itself. According to this view Christians are called to be involved in societal issues, like politics, human rights, ecology, liberation of minorities and disadvantaged peoples. An ivory tower theology which looks inwards, focussing on theological topics and avoiding politics, is unacceptable. There is a strong focus on praxis in the sense perhaps of what was traditionally understood as 'good works', but with the fundamental difference that they are now seen as more than individual virtues.<sup>16</sup>

There is a more advanced form of this populist contextual theology in which some societal analysis with preference for the 'Marxist' model is attempted. This model is applied to reveal structures responsible for creating oppression. It consciously takes the societal situation of the reader of the text into consideration. Rowland & Corner (1990:22) writes that,

For this reason (to understand a text today), H-G Gadamer's principle of a 'fusion of horizons' is important to the liberation theologian, who will want to consider not only the socio-economic context of the writer but also that of the readers/interpreters, those who make the labourers in the vineyard (like the good Samaritan and the prodigal son) into markers belonging to different languages and cultures.<sup>17</sup>

The striking aspect of this approach is that critical reflection on these political, societal models and hermeneutical principles is seldom found among

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16. This remark is confirmed by Rowland & Corner (1990:44) who compares Liberation Theology's reading of the Bible with Evangelical readings and comment: '... the difference from the naive Evangelical reading is the communitarian setting and the avoidance of a narrowly individualistic "religious" reading. The setting for the reading is not primarily the inner life of an individual Christian, but a world of poverty, disease and death in which good news comes to offer hope and a path to life. The story is that of the people of God as a whole, in which the historical perspective dominates and the oppression is not confined to the world of the spirit, but is to be found in the structures of society which keep the poor poor and maintain the hegemony of the rich'.

17. On the necessity to analyse the readers of a text systematically when interpreting a text in its own context and for a modern context, cf De Villiers 1989, 23.

these theologians. In addition there is often a naive understanding of economics and politics which underlies this approach (cf the discussion later).

### 2.2.1 The role of the Bible in populist contextual theology

In this popular understanding of contextual theology the Bible is explicitly seen in two ways. On the one hand it is read in an intuitive way, with a 'first innocence'. In many cases, and especially in the base communities, it means that the community, having reflected on their own situation, then read 'the Bible'. Not only is the reading direct, non-technical, but the notion of Bible is equally untested and used in an uncritical manner. The assumption is clear: the Bible is authoritative.

On the other hand the Bible is appropriated as a source book, providing a 'solution' to societal problems. In, for example, reflection on fulfillment,

People tell stories about those who have sought money, or pleasure, or power, and examine the results ... The example of Jesus Christ, whose life was one of self-giving (is brought up). True human fulfillment is found not in isolation but in service to others, especially in community (Berryman 1987:39).

The open and easy movement towards the Bible as authoritative source book, peaks when the Bible illuminates the reader with its answer. An example of a session with peasants, is given by Berryman 1987:38-39: the nun, having asserted the dignity of the participants, begins the session with an open-ended question:

'Is there evil and injustice in the world?' People nod or say yes, but then there is silence, so she encourages them to bring up examples and they tell stories of political graft or other forms of injustice. With probing questions she gets them to examine some of these examples, and the discussion ranges over what injustice means. After forty-five minutes or so she says she would like to show an example of injustice from the Bible and slowly reads the narrative of Cain and Abel. The conclusion is that injustice is rooted in what the Bible calls 'sin' - that is, when human beings refuse to care for their brothers and sisters and even go so far as to kill them.

In some situations there is only the occasional theological input, but even where theological input is strong, the use of the Bible is similar.<sup>18</sup>

An analogical relationship between Scripture and modern society is created. They argue that there are certain key motifs in the Bible which provide the

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18. A description of this is to be found in the remarks of Rowland and Corner (1990:2) when they discuss exegesis in Latin America: 'We have tried to include both the sophisticated "materialist" exegesis which looks at the socio-political dimension of the text in its original context as well as the reading prevalent in the Basic Christian Communities which relate the biblical stories and images to contemporary struggles for justice'.



solutions to modern problems. The issue of violence, for example, can be solved by looking at renunciation or legitimizing of violence in Scripture. Christians would then act likewise or in similar vein. An illustration of this position is to be found in Alfaro (1985:5):

Jesus praxis is liberating. The gospel presents Jesus as a poor man in his birth, the living of his life, and his death. He is in solidarity with the poor and the sinners, defends their cause, and proclaims the coming of the Kingdom. The present Latin American situation also justifies using the historical Jesus as Christology's departure point. The situation there is similar to the one in which Jesus himself lived and acted. Jesus' story and the story of Latin American people mutually illuminate each other (cf also Bonga 1982:64-65).<sup>19</sup>

The interplay between Bible and context and how it is structured, is not methodologically or theoretically defined. There is no explanation why particular passages are appropriated and chosen, except that it reveals seminal motifs like God's love for the poor or His liberation of his people or that it somehow moots similar themes, words or thoughts.

These groups would overlook the special nature of the biblical texts, the way they exercise authority, their mutual coherence and differences, their genres, the nature and development of ancient societies in contrast with modern ones, the gospel reports about the person of Jesus and other problems which decisively affects the moral use of the Bible. Typical of this approach is the remarks of McGovern (1990:62) that

... critical reflection (which) constitutes liberation theology as theology proper.... may begin, as we have seen, with 'suspicion' about the ways in which the Christian message has been traditionally interpreted. Or it may simply proceed from the question: 'What does the word of God have to say about the poverty-oppression of the poor and their longing striving for liberation?'

But it is not as easy as this. Is the Bible a model, analogy, paradigm or a source book of solutions, for modern problems? How does the Bible speak to us? Why is it that the more we read the Bible in its own context, as contextual theologies want us to do, the less it seems to say to us today? Why is it that its historical particularity seems to affect its relevance? Craddock (1988), discussing the influence of post-modernism on biblical interpretation, cites the example of a Christian who visited Palestine and found that the

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19. Rowland & Corner 1989:13-14 refer to the example of women who, having discussed their own situation, reflected on the birth of Jesus in poverty and described their own experience of poverty. They discovered that the birth of Jesus taught them more about their own human dignity, given to them by God, which then acted or functioned as the motivation for concrete action against the unjust structures. '(T)hese women [were] fired by a sudden consciousness of their own worth, of their identification with Jesus Christ ... went on to discuss what they should be doing about the high food prices, about how a particular chain of shops had cornered the market and was overcharging ... etc'.

Gospels lost much of their meaning to him because of what he experienced there.

It may be helpful to return to the remark that in these populist readings a simple equation between ancient and modern societies is uncritically assumed. Bauckham (1987) drew attention to the importance of this mistake in pointing out the progressively different nature of societies in biblical times, i.e. from the first, primitive groups in which the king as hunter would provide for his subjects to the economically more sophisticated society of Israel and the Roman empire. Biblical texts should be read against the specific historicity of its social context and they should not be transposed into a modern society without taking into account that the growth in societies continued. Genesis 1:26 which refer to humanity's dominion over animals, would have meant only one thing to the first readers of that verse, namely that they had to tame, hunt and farm animals. In our modern society, where species of animals are threatened, repetition of this obvious meaning would be disastrous: dominion of humanity over animals would today mean to protect them from becoming extinct (Bauckham 1987:10-16).

### 2.3 Technical Contextual Theology

The same commitment to relevance is to be found in the work of Contextual Theologians in the technical sense of the word. By this description I mean that they reflect theoretically and technically about contextualization. I shall therefore capitalize the description of them as Contextual Theologians in the following discussion in order to indidate their uniqueness. In a positive sense they also want theology to concentrate on practical issues and to be relevant. But on the issue of the rôle of the Bible there are fundamental differences between them and the previous groups of 'intuitive' contextual theologians.

#### 2.3.1 The situation as point of departure

For Contextual Theologians the point of departure is not an open interpenetration between Bible and context, but the situation. The interpenetration has a determined character. The social reality of a given country or group interpenetrates with the 'story of the people of God as set out in the Bible', not in the sense that they freely interact. The Bible functions in the rôle of mediator with potential input between the problematic situation of the readers as starting point and the solution to their problems on the other hand.<sup>20</sup>

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20. This is clear from the very beginning of contextual theologies, even when Liberation Theologians, depending heavily on Marxist analysis, employed their conflict model without reflecting explicitly on the criteria for the choice. In recent debate the special relationship between social sciences, societal analysis and theology has been carefully worked out, amongst others by arguing the priority of dialectical materialism, cf Min 1989:58-60; also Boff 1984:7 and the discussion about this later on in this paper.

Negatively, Contextual Theologians reject the notion that a primary, theoretical activity about the Bible can and should precede any action which is in line with the Bible. In fact, it is sometimes questioned whether the Bible can provide solutions for a specific issue. Here the societal analysis by definition precedes and determines the solutions. The reader of the Bible, searching for a liberating hermeneutic,

... begins with a critical appreciation of the history and culture of the hermeneuticians. It then moves on to an appreciation of the historical and cultural struggles of the biblical communities before finally confronting the signified expressions of those struggles in the texts (Mosala 1989:99).

Here at least two phases, the contemporary societal analysis and the historical societal analysis precede and determine the reading and use of the biblical text.

In some cases proponents give a philosophical explanation of this primary position of praxis: they reject what they consider to be the result of the influence of Hegelian idealism on Western thought.

How would an idealist approach to reality affect one's strategies and tactics in the arena of social transformation? The answer is obvious. An idealist strategist would have his primary focus on the mind, attempting to change people's ideas with the hope that once the ideas have changed, the mind would *ipso facto* change. As we have just said, this would be strategically logical because in the idealistic context it is ideas that are creative of reality (Sebidi 1986:23).

In opposition to idealism, materialism refer to social, material conditions as the producer of ideas.

So whilst an idealist strategist takes his point of departure for *human consciousness*, the materialist strategist takes off from the material or *economic relationships* between men (Sebidi 1986:24).

In addition it is argued, theologically, that the methodological necessity of starting with the situation is given with the conviction that genuine Christian faith should be efficacious. A historical survey reveals that the ineffectiveness of the church during many centuries to effectively change the lot of the poor resulted from a lack to identify the real causes of injustice by a thorough social analysis. It is on this crucial point that contextual theologies nowadays rely on social analyses. They argue that before the theological process starts, one needs raw material regarding the problem under investigation. Social models provide a precise analysis and description of this problem <sup>21</sup> (Min 1989:60-61).

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21. In this regard Liberation Theology would expect that theologians should not only rely on social sciences, but should be able to produce social scientific work creatively. At the same time they also stress that theology has an interdisciplinary nature.

### 2.3.2 Praxis as politics

Further nuances are to be discovered in the work of contextual theologians who apply societal models. Praxis, we saw, was fundamentally political in nature, but this political nature is narrowed down by describing authentic politics in terms of a conflict perspective on society and dialectical materialism. This adds a distinct economical character to the political analysis. This perspective is, for example, found in the work of Mosala.

Black theology needs a new exegetical starting point if it is to become a material force capable of gripping the black working-class and peasant masses. Such an exegetical point of departure must itself be grounded in a materialist epistemology that is characterized, among other things, by its location of truth not in a world beyond history but indeed within the crucible of historical struggles. The social, cultural, political, and economic world of the black working class and peasantry constitutes the only valid hermeneutical starting point for a black theology of liberation (Mosala 1989:21).

Good reasons are supplied for this specific political programme. Theologians refer to the kairological nature of their times, which requires that they focus on the most important problems of society. To some extent this preempts criticism of people like McCann and Strain who indicated that a

... central problem of practical theology is how to decide on the appropriate political programs (e.g., socialism vs. capitalism) and political strategies and actions to achieve such programs. The trouble with TL, that of Segundo and Gutiérrez in particular, is that it dogmatically opts for socialist praxis as the only form of orthopraxis without providing a procedural mechanism whereby such an option could be arrived at without violating the values of pluralism and tolerance. TL brands all other forms of praxis as heteropraxis and make absolutistic and exclusivistic claims for its own position. It does not allow theory, i.e., intersubjective rationality, to inform praxis, thus recognizing no genuine dialectic of theory and practice. Religious praxis is held hostage to the political strategies of whatever group happens to have the power to define it (Min 1989:43).

Contextual Theologians are aware of a reductionism and need not be reminded of the problem of absolutizing their perspective.<sup>22</sup> They argue that the *kairos*, the intensity of the struggle and the necessity to side with the exploited demand action and preclude neutral evaluation of models. This means that in their approach to the Bible, the technical contextual theologians would apply a hermeneutical key which is distinctly political.

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22. Cf Min 1989:39-40.

### 2.3.3 A new Bible

Technical contextualisations of the Bible are distinguished from other populist attempts by the 'new' Bible which they create. The situation analysis not only precedes the contemporary action of the Christian, but also fundamentally alters the understanding of the Bible. The Bible is no longer simply a collection of books known as the Word of God. The Bible is a book which reveals God's struggle against oppression. Only in so far as this happens, can it be called the Word of God. The new Bible is a Book about God's rejection of unjust structures.

This statement radicalizes a perspective widely shared by theologians when they say that new times and contexts would discuss new problems and discover new answers: McGovern, for example, remarks that because of new concerns, that is, the experiences of believing Bible readers, Liberation Theologians were led to new insights in the Bible.<sup>23</sup> He does not, however, postulate that this means a new 'Bible', that is a notion of the Bible which is radically different from traditional and populist understandings of the Bible.

### 2.3.4 The Bible as site of the struggle

The full implications of Contextual Theology only become clear from such discussion as the one in Mosala's works in which he strongly rejects what he calls 'a biblical exegetical approach based purely on theological affirmations'.<sup>24</sup> Mosala is a representative of a group of contextual theologians who consciously distance themselves from idealist theologians who, despite their political involvement, still operate within the framework of traditional theology by delineating political programmes from theological concepts and ideas. Mosala (1989:19-20), writes cogently:

An approach to the study or appropriation of the Bible that begins with the theological notion of the Bible as the Word of God, therefore, presupposes a hermeneutical epistemology for which truth is not historical, cultural, or economic. For such an epistemology the Word of God is pre-established. The political, cultural, economic, or historical relevance of this Word of God comes out of its capacity to be applied to the various facets of human life, and in this case of black human life. Its relevance does not issue out of its very character as a historical, cultural, political, or economic product. Because Boesak sees the Word of God as above history, culture, economics, or politics, he resorts to a mere contextualization approach in biblical hermeneutics, which he rightly perceives as nothing new but simply the proclamation of the age-old gospel.

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23. 'More and more theologians have also recognized that theological reflection throughout the ages has been prompted by human concerns in a given epoch' (McGovern 1990:62).

24. Cf for example Mosala 1991 and 1991b.

The result of this approach is that the Bible is understood by Mosala in terms of the struggle as a key category.<sup>25</sup> This leads to the rejection of those passages in the Bible where oppressive structures are in tact and solidified. By placing these texts in their historical, economic, cultural and social contexts, one will discover the moments and structures of falsehood, which contradict true liberation.

The problem with the contextualization approach is that it conceals the hermeneutically important fact that the texts of the Bible, despite being overladen by harmonizing perspectives, are problematical - if only because they are products of complex and problematical histories and societies. By this I mean that as products, records, and sites of social, historical, cultural, gender, racial, and ideological struggles, they radically and indelibly bear the marks of their origins and history. The ideological aura of the Bible as the Word of God conceals this reality. A black biblical hermeneutics of liberation must battle to recover precisely that history and those origins of struggle in the text and engage them anew in the service of ongoing human struggles.

According to these contextual theologians the Bible is not uncontaminated by human ideologies and does not consist of a universal truth which as the Word of God can then be given a new face in a new situation. A fundamental shift takes place here: the Bible itself is unmasked as a site of struggle. Only the naive reader will be able to talk in an unqualified sense of the word of the 'Word of God', as if everyone knows what it means and if such a matter can be discovered when the layers of interpretation have been peeled off.

A closer analysis soon reveals the problems inherent in this perspective. The Contextual Theologians cut out the contaminated parts of the Bible on the basis of how they understand their own situation and themselves. To the critical reader of contextual theologians, it is not always that easy, especially when one considers how, in the case of Black Theology, the struggle is not a homogenous phenomenon. The 'struggle' means different things to different groups, to such an extent that deviation from the basic ideological commitment can lead to very different readings of the Bible and to acrimonious debate.

From this it is clear how the struggle as hermeneutical key or factor is determined by ideological convictions which are in no way determined by biblical language, metaphors, convictions or contents. Mosala can also write,

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25. A fundamental aspect of my argument is that 'the black struggle for liberation' is a basic biblical hermeneutical factor ... Thus the search for biblical-hermeneutical weapons of struggle must take the form, first of all, of a critical interrogation of the history, culture, and ideologies of the readers/appropriators of the biblical texts. The key category in this process is that of the *struggle*, because struggle is the motive force for human societies. Furthermore, one can avert the danger of a romantic and uncritical embracing of one's history and culture by invoking this notion of struggle to determine the configuration of forces in black history and culture.' (Mosala 1989:8-9).

But whatever choices are made between the various discourses of the struggle, those choices will at least root the struggle to some measure in black history and culture, and doing so will provide the weapons for reading the Bible in genuinely liberating terms for black people in South Africa (Mosala 1989:98).

Although this statement seems to allow for diversity and differing options, this does not really happen in practice. I have quoted above the stinging description which Mosala gives of the sterility of purely existential immersion in social affairs of biblically inspired persons [1991]:1. His description of some black activists is even more stinging:

On the one hand, black theology represents a revolutionary rhetoric against social discrimination and oppression. On the other hand, it is the mechanism through which black theologians try to deal with an identity crisis occasioned by their exclusion from the privileges of white culture despite their secret admiration of and class qualification for it. This conflict between a critique of oppression and a hunger to occupy and control the institution of power that produce this oppression has affected black theologians choice of biblical hermeneutical tools.

And according to him, it is because of this assumption that South African church leaders and black theologians on the side of the struggle, found that they have no (political) task after February 1990. He bitterly attacks the continuing 'activist self-immersion in the struggles of "the poor"' which is now the latest focus of the churches: it is a political populism, grounded in the liberal democratic rhetoric of the Freedom Charter with the new slogan of non-racial democratic united South Africa. It practically leads to the abandoning of the

... painful process of having to work out a new theology of struggle that seeks to contribute to the restructuring of the social relations of monopoly capitalist society (Mosala [1991b]:6).

Given these strong emotions, it is abundantly clear that fundamental issues are at stake. But it is also evident that these issues relate to political, non-biblical material which then incisively affects contextualizing. It is an open question how legitimately a set of non-theological motifs and convictions can be allowed to play such a seminal rôle in the interpretation of the Bible. The Bible is once again manipulated (and a 'Bible' created) by submitting it to an interpretative key which in some way overlaps only formally with it, if at all.

I do not find it problematical that Mosala indicated the struggle for liberation as a biblical hermeneutical factor. It is a valid point in our country and it is an important biblical motif. But this phrase, which has a metaphor-like quality to it, loses its liberating power when it is integrated in a specific political programme to gain partypolitical power. This provokes one in asking again the question

Are we not establishing non-theological criteria for deciding the degree of validity of the historical language of faith? Why call critical reflection on historical experience 'theology' when it is already being done, perhaps more competently, by sociologists, historians, political scientists, social philosophers, and others? What makes this sort of inquiry theological? (Assmann 1975:59).

This question, when it is applied to the reading of the Bible, has not yet been answered. Assmann refers to the Bible as the product of historical interpretations of criteria and finds much truth in a friend's observation that there is only one Bible, the sociological bible of what one sees happening here and now as a Christian. The problem therefore is how much Bible is left under the sociology.

### 2.3.5 Deifying dialectical materialism

The struggle as hermeneutical factor is even more problematic in the light of the parameters in which it is allowed to function, namely dialectic materialism. Contextual Theologians outrightly reject the only other model they discuss, i.e., functionalism because of its practical consequences of developmentalism (i.e. development is effectuated at the cost of the people, and generally against the people) and progressivism (i.e. progress benefits only some strata of the population, marginalizing broader sectors). Functionalism

... does not succeed in making society function with humanly admissible and bearable relationships in terms of justice and participation. The social tax of inequality levied by modern progress is immense, and is paid by the common masses (Boff 1984:7).

There are two problems with this approach. The first one is that the Bible factually becomes a handbook for dialectical materialism in the sense that it provides confirmation, illustrations or material for the application of it.

On the one hand this approach to the Bible represents an important shift in understanding of the nature of the Bible. If the Bible is merely a sounding-board for an existing set of ideas, it loses its critical function. If the struggle becomes the operative word, the *principium cognoscendi* both in terms of the Bible and reflection on the Bible, the Bible simply confirms what we already know. It is then used exclusively as a weapon in the struggle, instead also of a guardian and overseer of the struggle.

This is not a particularly profound insight and point of criticism. It has been repeated often, especially under the notion of politicizing the Bible. My problem here is of course not that the Bible is related to practical and political issues, as indeed should and must happen. The problem is that the hermeneutical key and the 'Bible' reflect and consist of political concerns of political readers. The Bible is reiterative, it merely confirms what is already known. Political notions and keywords become a canon within the canon and is allotted normative status.



The second problem is that this preference for dialectical materialism relates theology and the Bible to an economic model which is experiencing a deep crisis. There can be little doubt that the close links between dialectical materialism and the history of socialism in Eastern Europe discredited that approach almost beyond redemption. It is, in fact, the exclusive focus on dialectical materialism as an economic perspective which may present Liberation Theologians with the most serious crisis in its history. There are indications that they are taking the developments in Eastern Europe seriously because of the grave threat to their very existence. This existential threat is so real because of the way in which dialectical materialism has obtained almost divine status. They are moving fast towards a major rethink of economical models, especially in the light of the history of the rather limited debate about and knowledge of societal and economic models. The contingency of dialectical materialism, its restrictions and limitations and its history has never really been topics of rigid debate.<sup>26</sup>

An example of this new developments is to be found in an announcement of a conference to be held in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in July 1992. There is in it a reference to Michael Novak's remark that,

So few theologians or religious leaders understand economics, industry, manufacturing, trade and finance.

The theme of the conference is 'God and the market place', investigating

... the relationship between contemporary religious thought and practice and the claims of contemporary globally triumphant capitalism.

### 2.3.6 Reductionism

Perhaps the best illustration of how reductionist such a hermeneutical key is, is to be found in the frustration felt by black theologians after 1990. Much of this frustration has to do with the fact that after the victory over the hated *apartheid* system, the existing hermeneutical key became redundant. Even Black theologians themselves have realized how this situation is in stark contrast with popular indigenous African religions.<sup>27</sup>

Ngubane (1986:88), writes:

From all that has been said above there is no doubt that the Independent Churches have on various theological issues flung down the gauntlet for Black Theology or any other theology, for that matter, to pick it up.

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26. It is even more problematic when the roots of dialectical materialism in the nineteenth century and the pre-industrial relationships of Western Europe in which it was embedded, are ignored. We know that the world is much more complex now. This criticism does not imply that activism is right, that capitalism is fine or that it is possible to claim the liberation of the poor without demanding, for example, restitution of land, redistribution of wealth, equality between sexes, etc. The Bible often demands structural liberation of the oppressed.

27. Black theologians openly write about the fascinating popularity of African religions. Cf Motlhabi, 1986:37-56; Ngubane 1986:71-90 and Mosala 1986:37-56.

Their theological contextualization is 'down to earth', and they grapple (sic) with different facets of existential issues in a theological context. The greatest challenge offered Black Theology by these churches, I think, is the need for Black Theology to undertake self-examination and self-definition. Is it only concerned principally with the social aspect relating to oppressive situations created by discrimination on the basis of one's skin colour (Manas Buthelezi 1972)? If so, it is situational and it has no lasting home among us, for if the situation changes, what then? Or is it more comprehensive, concerned not only with oppressive societal issues, but also with cultural and philosophical issues? If so, it has a better chance of permanence even after the disappearance of the oppressive societal structures. If the Independent Churches supply 'raw material' for Black Theology, how does this theology use this material?

The African churches are so popular because they are providing in the complex and extensive religious needs of people (which includes politics). African religions are total in character, and exactly because they avoid reductionism, retains their strength and experience consistent growth.

There is a lesson to be learned here. These religions reflect the same dynamics of the Christian Bible, which has many faces. The biblical concept of liberation is without the slightest doubt deeply religious, although it clearly affects political relationships. But it does, at the same time, transcend political perspectives and relate to many other facets of humanity and society. While Strecker in criticizing materialist exegesis, clearly depends on an idealist frame of mind to state:

... daß die Christliche Wahrheit nach neutestamentlichem Verständnis zwar in sozialen und politische Gegebenheiten konkret wird;

he is more correct when he adds, that the New Testament

... jedoch nicht in diesen aufgeht und ihre Eigentlichkeit gerade in der kritische Distanz gegenüber der Absolutsetzung der immanenten Wirklichkeit besitzt (Strecker 1980:162; cf also Galilea 1984:93-101).

This criticism should not be interpreted as a rejection of political readings of the Bible. But we should escape the clutches of absolutizing a perspective on the world and humanity which is radically political. It is therefore with much joy that one notices how liberation theologians themselves have come to realize that the Bible contains a mass of perspectives generated by and given in many different contexts. To some extent this was an answer to early criticism of reductionism:

At the outset, liberation theologians seemed at times to present new interpretations as giving the true message of Christianity; they did so in part because justice-liberation themes have become lost in the ways the Christian message came to be interpreted over the centuries. More recent works in liberation theology acknowledge the incompleteness of some liberation themes in giving a full picture of revelation. Thus the

Boffs, in noting the special perspective of liberation theology (scripture viewed from the perspective of the oppressed) add: 'We must say straight away that this is not the only possible and legitimate reading of the Bible.' Liberation theology stresses themes that speak to the poor, 'but not to the exclusion of everything else ... They may not be the most important themes in the Bible (in themselves), but they are the most relevant' (to the poor in their situation of oppression).

It is clear that liberation theologians are wary of a reduction without sacrificing the necessity for relevance. With these remarks by Liberation Theology the criticism of reductionism, and to some extent the problem of politicizing the Gospel is answered. But it is clear that it is an insight which is not shared by all contextual theologians.

### **3. The Bible and power**

It may come as a surprise that contextual theologians who share the same orientation and concerns, can be so sharply divided among themselves. Sometimes the reasons for these differences can be found in theological, moral or philosophical problems and solutions discussed and used by them. But often there are deeper reasons for these differences.

#### **3.1 Creativity in interpretation**

These deeper differences relate to the fundamental fact that all understanding is creative. Every reading of a text in a powerful way creates a new text. Modern theories of communication and post-modernism as a reading strategy has proved that understanding has little to do with unveiling eternal truths, hidden in a text, waiting to be midwived by the eager eye of the reader. One of these reasons for this is that it is essentially a social event, linked to the context in which it is produced. The readers and their social baggage contribute decisively to the physical text they read (De Villiers 1984). They consciously or unknowingly frame the text with their own context. The interplay between text and context is in itself so powerful that it consistently creates a new text.

Theology has long ago indicated how such creative readings are found already in the Bible. Good examples of creative readings is to be found, for example, in the Gospels, where Old Testament texts are used differently from their original meaning (cf Messianic texts and Genesis 3:15) and when the evangelists wrote very differently about the Jesus tradition in terms of their context.

#### **3.2 Power struggles in the Bible**

But there is still something deeper behind the differences among Contextual Theologians. The history of exegesis reveals how often biblical texts themselves were critically modified by generations of Christians. This was not

merely because they creatively developed new systems of thought. The law, circumcision, temple and slavery were abandoned because they were seen as cultural and contextual particularities within the biblical times themselves by authors like Paul and Luke. The modification of Jewish institutions in Christian texts happened by appeals to Hebrew Scriptures. This already was mostly determined by a polemical struggle of the early Christians against their Jewish opponents and represented an attempt to wrestle the power base of the Jews from them. It will not be difficult to illustrate how power struggles lead to other drastic changes and to the generation of many Hebrew Scriptures. The power struggle which Mosala (especially 1989) delineated in his exegetical work, is but one of many examples.

All acts of communication, also in the Bible, reveal a struggle for power. Accepting this does not necessarily affect the notion of the Bible as 'Word of God' or does not imply total relativity. It reflects their cultural specificity and how deeply they are embedded in their context. But one should realize that more is at stake than mere cultural specificity. It is part of the real humanity of Scripture if one accepts more than such a specificity and teach that it 'is *conditioned* by the social and political context in which it arose'.<sup>28</sup> This radical insight confirms that there is a greater distance between Scripture and ourselves than we usually assume. Boff remarked how Scripture

... offer orientations, models, types, directives, principles, inspirations - elements permitting us to acquire, on our own initiative, a 'hermeneutic competency,' and thus the capacity to judge - on our own initiative, in our own right - 'according to the mind of Christ,' or 'according to the Spirit,' the new, unpredictable situations with which we are continually confronted. The Christian writings offer us not a *what*, but a *how* - a manner, a style, a spirit (cf Min 1989:67).

With this widening of the hermeneutical gap comes the further realization that there are no easy answers and that the 'Bible' we so often hold in a grasp of power, is often nothing but our own ideologies and idolatries.

We progressively realize, like our mothers and fathers, that, seen from one perspective, the individual viewpoints in biblical texts are human and limited. This forces us, in the search for the greatest wisdom, to avoid being overpowered by one perspective and to be dominated by it. The different power struggles must be compared. Each perspective needs to be countered with other perspectives in the canon. This cultivates an attitude of humility, of listening, instead of dominating.

Reading the Bible in our own context in a radically new way is risky, but it continues the freedom the biblical authors had and which was never given up in the early church. In exercising this freedom and in the awareness of how even the biblical text is deeply embedded in power struggles, it becomes

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28. Cf the salient remarks of Bauckham 1987:13.

necessary to read each powerful grasp on Scripture in terms of the totality of Scripture itself.

### 3.3 Power struggles in readings of the Bible

But one should continue beyond the biblical texts themselves by discussing the power struggle which takes place in modern readings of biblical texts. Contextual Theologies from the very beginning drew attention to power when they claimed that traditional theologies can be understood only by determining who wrote these texts to whom and with what purpose in mind.<sup>29</sup> They were not doing anything new, but depended on an insight of what has become known as the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Contextual Theologies are correct when, rejecting neutral thought, they point out its political implications.<sup>30</sup> They rightly reveal the strong influence of idealism on Western theologies and convincingly revealed the power of the Western context on traditional theology. African theologies, for example, will therefore have to be different than those coming from a Western European context. But these new theologies are not merely an application of European theology, of giving a black appearance to an essentially white matter. If this would be the case, it would keep the African mind enslaved and continue the domination of European ideologies. Contextual Theology radical rejects this and promotes the empowering of Africa by establishing an essential link between an African context and the Bible. The point here is the word 'essential'.

The effects of such contextualizing work are tremendous. The biblical message of God's empowerment of the poor transforms those who have been exploited when that group speaks for itself.

Für ein jahrhundertelang unterdrucktes Volk, das man nie zu Wort hat kommen lassen, bedeutet allein schon, daß es (jetzt endlich) das Wort ergreifen kann, einen ersten (Schritt zur) übernahme von Macht und zur Gestaltung seines Schicksals. Die Bedeutung der kirchliche Gemeinde übersteigt ihre religiöse Dimension und erlangt so ein hohes politisches Gewicht (Verweyen 1985:91-92).

To be able to articulate the Gospel in one's own context is more than a theological activity. It is a powerful act in which the powerless ones are empowered to think, speak and act for themselves, freed from enslavement and domination. It is in the end a restoration of human dignity.

There is, however, a short distance from empowerment to renewed domination. This problem is a reality if one considers that one seldom, if at all, finds

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29. Cf Sobrino (1984:9) who writes: What interest motivates theological understanding? Why do theology? This implies another question: For whom and from whose standpoint is the theological understanding done?

30. That it allows structures of injustice to continue unchallenged.

a comprehensive self criticism of Contextual Theologians which could reveal illegitimate grasping of power in and behind their own acts of communication. What we need in our theologizing is therefore not only an analysis of society, the Bible itself and its readers, we also need a site outside the struggle to reflect on it. It is different from regressing into neutrality, because the distancing implies only a momentary suspension in order to be properly equipped. This momentary metaposition is decisive, because it will allow us to reflect on the theological and moral nature of the struggle and our attempts to concretize it in specific programmes.

It must be, for example, possible to ask Mosala questions about his description of the struggle and his own rôle as spokesperson for labourers. Questions about the identity of these labourers and about the history of his economic model, as well as about the nature of the struggle are imperative. One needs to know whether and how any other perspectives in the Bible could make Mosala think twice about his own programme. Is his own hermeneutic exposed to the same kind of healthy and brutal censorship to which he exposes the Bible? If he is, how is he going to determine what is acceptable criticism? These are questions which may, for example, lead to a position where in a given situation a certain form of struggle can be regarded as destructive and conflict as highly undesirable.<sup>31</sup>

One does not expect from those involved in an existential struggle for elimination of oppressive structures to be overtly reserved about their own programme. Because of the very nature of the struggle, the points need to be made forcefully. But because of the danger of domination and of abuse of power, the struggle and reflection on it, need moments in which they are tried, tested and redefined. Where this does not happen, the struggle itself takes on a divine nature and becomes an idol.

### 3.4 Theology and the struggle

But at this point one needs to moot the issue of the nature of theology also. Here the reflective activity of theology as a discipline becomes crucial. It is given in the nature of theological reflection that it should be able to reflect not only critically on the struggle, but also on its own identity.

What is written in the heat of the struggle to function as weapon, cannot be regarded as theology. It is either preaching, teaching, proclamation, prophetic speaking or whatever other description we use for applied religious texts and activities. In theology we take up a metaposition, *without questioning, abandoning or ridiculing the struggle*, to reflect also about what theology itself should be. Contextual Theology as an activity will have to reflect on its own nature. An example of this reflection is to be found when Ogden correctly, to my mind, rejected the simplistic notion of theology which is operative in the

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31. Krüger 1978 gives a lucid description of the relationship between religion and social order in which he discusses different options for the transformation of society.

criticism of contextual theologies against their predecessors. He warned against the bondage to the oppressed replacing the bondage to the oppressors, and asked for theology to retain its reflective character. This includes the ability to distance itself from the matter under discussion and to think about itself and its nature. This could, for example, lead to the following remark about what theology is:

What is necessary is reconceiving of the very task of theology from the rationalization of positions already taken to the critical reflection on such positions. A 'radically free' theology is free 'from' all positions so that it may be free 'for' all positions. Theological reflection is free to *result* in positions reflecting solidarity with the oppressed, as does Ogden's own reflection, but it is not in such solidarity that theology should *originate* (Min 1989:41 <sup>32</sup>).

Such reflective thinking and openness about theology, will affect the way in which the Bible is read. It will allow for other hermeneutical factors to be taken seriously in the interpretation of the Bible and society or for widely accepted perspectives to be rejected. It will also lead to reflection on other tasks of theology.

### 3.5 Power through the Bible

Let me add a final note, especially as an addendum to the discussion of our freedom and responsibility to interpret the Bible creatively in a new context. It is often difficult to understand exactly why Contextual Theologians refer to the Bible in their critical reflection on liberating praxis. It is, of course, true that some theologians do so as a matter of strategy in order to activate the believing masses and that it has no generating power in moral reflection at all. I find nothing in Mosala's work, and for that matter, in the works of most Contextual Theologians, to think that they adhere to such crude thinking.

If, for example, one assumes that God reveals Himself as a loving God who sides with the powerless, this article of faith assumes the character of universality which is then structurally and practically implemented in programmes of action (not necessarily political). Talking about God in this way, reinforces our dependence on the Bible and underlines the authority of the Word. This perspective makes me understand why Boesak described the Bible as above all ideologies.

One of the problems of contextualizing is to be obedient to the Bible, to allow it to retain its primary position, to correct our ideologies, to provide us with new perspectives on our contexts. Without this, Christianity loses its character. Our freedom to contextualize does not mean that we have lost our bondage to the Bible. Freedom exists in our total dependence on it. In this sense we retain our link with the Bible as the foundation of the church.

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32. It is important that this does not imply a presuppositionless theology. Cf Min 1989:41. Note also that Ogden distinguishes between theology as a vocation and as critical reflection.

Practically this would mean that our contextualization is also intricately bound with the faith and understanding of other Christians. Contextualization of the Bible is never solipsistic. It is always an ecumenical activity, done in the Church for the Church. Just as we need to read the Bible in its totality, we need to read it within a community of believers, always aware of the possibility of going astray and of worshipping idols.

#### 4. Conclusion

Krüger (1978:9), writing about the relationship between theology and society, asked for understanding

... for those who speak, if they speak, with much more reserve, surrounded by a deeper silence.

I think he was asking for more than a forbearance based on a variety of experiential models in the Bible. The deeper silence surrounding reluctant and doubting Thomases relates to the immense problems of using the Bible as a (source) book for moral action in the world, to the grave difficulties involved in judging the situation of contemporary Christians in a just and reasonable manner, and to many other problems in making ethical decisions.

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